

Thinking about Art – at Art School

Pierre Bourdieu

[S]ociology can be one of the most effective weapons to understand and defend art; not just art that already exists, as canonized within museums, but art that makes itself the most surprising artistic research, the most audacious, the most critical, the most free.

Pierre Bourdieu

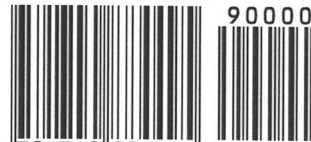



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*Translated by
Michael Grenfell*

Foreword

The French writer Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) first came to intellectual prominence in an English-speaking world through works on education and culture in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in books such as *Questions de Sociologie* (1984 translated as *Sociology in Question*, 1993) and subsequent works, he set out the breadth of his interests – language, politics, economics, fashion, intellectuals, religion, sport, philosophy, the media, gender, music, literature, science, etc.¹

In terms of culture per se, he is well known for his analyses of consumption patterns in French society as well as studies of museum and photographic practices: eg. *The Love of Art* (1966), *Photography* (1964), *Distinction* (1979). However, he also analysed and wrote about cultural producers; in particular, the literary field (for example, Flaubert in *Les Règles de l'Art* (1992) – translated as *The Rules of Art* (1996), and furthermore undertook extensive work on the French pre-impressionist painter Edouard Manet, to whom he attributed a 'symbolic revolution' that made a seminal break from the academic world of French art in the nineteenth century. Sketches of this first work

¹ For a range of introductory discussions, see Grenfell, M. (Ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2014); Grenfell, M., *Bourdieu, Language and Linguistics* (Bloomsbury, 2011); Grenfell, M., *Pierre Bourdieu – Agent Provocateur* (Continuum, 2004).

This is a translation of a discussion between Pierre Bourdieu and students at the École supérieure des beaux-arts de Nîmes. The talk took place in 1999 and was originally published as 'Questions for and with students from an art school that is challenged' in *Penser l'art à l'école* (ed. Inès Champey), Acts sud, Arles 2001.

The translation was made by Professor Michael Grenfell for use in a masterclass at the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra, November 2016.

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appeared in the 1980s, and was to be the subject of an extensive series of lectures given as his annual Leçon at the Collège de France between 1998–2000. As this was barely two years before his death in January 2002, this work is amongst his last public pronouncements (the lectures have been transcribed and edited and published in French in 2013 as *Manet: Une Révolution Symbolique* (English translation forthcoming). The study amounts to a detailed analysis of the French field of art in the nineteenth century, and explores the social conditions of artists' works. Consequently, however, it also deals with creativity and the nature of the creative act itself.

Bourdieu is known as a sociologist and he, too, frequently refers to himself in these terms. However, it is worth noting that he is also (and in this text) often critical of sociology and sociologists. In truth, as a scholar trained in philosophy, his is a highly philosophical form of sociology, with frequent references to the philosophers of the history of science (Bachelard, Koyré, Canguilhem) and metaphysical thinkers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, as well as Pascal (see *Pascalian Meditations* (1996)). For him, 'La Sociologie' was his brand of sociology – everything else was lacking in both empirical and philosophical rigor. Moreover, his own philosophical approach was formed in relation to the history of French philosophy, which very much situates itself within the European philosophical tradition

with its focus on metaphysics. A contemporary of Bourdieu, Jean-Paul Sartre, for example was preoccupied with the experience of modern (wo)man – their identity and the meaning of their actions. Bourdieu's work needs to be read very much from this moral perspective.

In his later life, especially, Bourdieu offered his *theory of practice* as a way of 'restoring to men and women the meaning of their actions', and thus as a way to objectify, and consequently somewhat move apart from, the social forces which acted on them.

In the following translation, Bourdieu offers this approach, and indeed tools of analysis, to a group of fine art students, although these conceptual 'instruments' would be equally pertinent to any active practitioner in a range of cultural fields. In this way, his sociology can become both a means of analysis of culture, and indeed part of the production of the cultural object itself. This perspective then leads to an implication concerning praxeological artistic practice and the nature of its output. It is essentially a reflexive stance, but again Bourdieu's reflexivity is highly philosophically charged. The roots of situating works of arts in terms of cultural space, content and form, go back to the nineteenth century (and beyond) with the emergence of a new relationship between the artist and their work, succinctly summed up in the phrase 'art for art's sake'. However, Bourdieu wants to frame this with his own 'new gaze', which he referred to as a *metanoia*

– a new way of looking at the world and the cultural products we create in it. This raises the possibility of a new ‘objective art’.² What is this? How do you do it? What is it like to experience it? The answers to these questions lay in the nature of aesthetics. To this extent, Bourdieu’s own critique of the founder of modern aesthetics – Immanuel Kant – leads the way. In this meeting with art students Bourdieu refers to all these topics, and suggests to them that his brand of sociology can be a useful means in defining themselves as artists and the way they operate within cultural fields.

Michael Grenfell

Translation Note

The transcription here is of a meeting Bourdieu undertook with students at the *École supérieure des beaux-arts de Nîmes* at the turn of the century. It therefore distils his thoughts on the topic of painting, the art field and the nature of creativity. In offering my own translation of this transcription, I would make the following points.

Most of Bourdieu’s major writings are now in print in English. Many of these are very good

translations. However, for me, as both a French scholar and someone who worked with Bourdieu over a number of years, I feel these do not always carry the spirit of his thinking and expression. I have therefore erred on the side of French expression and vernacular in my own translation in trying to capture the essence of his thought.

It is worth noting that even a ‘simple’ translation from French to English does not always carry the full ‘moral’ sense of words. For example, ‘problème’ in French is something more than ‘problem’ in English and ‘enjeu’ is not quite the same as ‘stake’ or ‘issue’, the word being made up of ‘en’ (in) and ‘jeu’ (game). ‘Reflective’ is also a poor translation of what Bourdieu understands as ‘reflexive’. So, there is often a dynamic and epistemological vibrancy in the French expression which is diluted in the English.

In this text, Bourdieu does refer to a range of French names and examples. I have tried to offer context elucidation by adding brief comments in footnotes as a way of explaining the significance of the reference.

MG

² For further discussion, see chapter 7 of M. Grenfell and C. Hardy, *Art Rules: Pierre Bourdieu and the Visual Arts* (Berg, 2007).

Pierre Bourdieu

**Questions for and with students
from an art school that is challenged**

I have asked Pierre Bourdieu to come because he gave lectures at the Collège de France in 1998–99 on the 'symbolic revolution' that Manet was able to achieve, lectures which themselves were based on others from the beginning of the 1980s, an extract of which was published in Les cahiers du musée national d'Art moderne in June 1987 (no. 19–20). It seemed natural that he would wish to talk to you about this artistic revolution, which lies at the base of modernity as we know it today. He replied that he would prefer to set up a dialogue and to find a format other than a lecture or a paper. In fact, he reacted as an 'artist' since the format of this talk defines itself in real time. Pierre Bourdieu plans to begin by replying to questions in his own way, then dealing with various points and, while setting out a coherence to the whole session, stopping at various times in order to discuss with you.

Inès Champey

I thought that in coming to an Art School which, as is the case of Nîmes and some others,³ is faced with a certain misunderstanding, and even a real hostility, I ought to try to find a less conventional and acceptable format than the traditional lecture; one more closely related to an artistic model – an intervention or ‘happening’ – in order to deal with the problems connected to the hostility with respect to contemporary creativity

³ The following note from Vincent Dubois offers some historical context to the sense of hostility referred to: ‘The higher education system in arts is rather complicated in France. The most important schools are funded by the central State (such as the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts), but there are also many local Beaux-Arts schools, as in Nîmes, funded by municipalities. During the second half of the 1990s a series of conflicts occurred between mostly right wing local politicians and cultural institutions. These conflicts were about both finance (local authorities cutting budgets), and aesthetic choices often regarded as too ‘avant-garde’, if not subversive, by these politicians. These local arts schools play an important role in the training of artists, and therefore these conflicts have had an echo in the arts field in general. They were interpreted as a symptom of a more general hostility towards contemporary art, and as a way to question the autonomy of artists.’ Vincent Dubois, personal communication 10/11/2016. See Vincent Dubois et al (2012) *Le politique, l’artiste et le gestionnaire*. Éditions du Croquant, Broissieux.

as it appears more and more frequently these days – and is shown in a letter from Paul Devautour, which I have just received about another School, the Art School at Épinal, whose very existence is threatened by its own local Council.

You sent me quite a lot of questions, which showed me some of your preoccupations. However, most of them seemed quite difficult to me. Some because they were too lucid, too simple in appearance, too easy to understand, so that we are in danger of not seeing deeper, more difficult questions that they obscure under their look of familiarity or even banality; others because they were too dense, and we might be tempted to discard them too quickly as lacking in meaning or even absurd, without seeing that they might hold real questions which, lacking the necessary instruments to express them, are not able to be asked.

What can I therefore do here, with you? I would have liked to have undertaken a real discussion and, in line with the Socratic metaphor of the *maieutic*, bring forth the problems that you hold within yourselves. I would like to help you become the *subject* of your own problems and, in this way, from your problems, to help really pose them instead of *imposing* my own. This way is quite the contrary to what most often happens, especially in artistic circles and art criticism, where there is a great deal of abuse of power which consists in imposing more or less fantastic theoretical problems and constructions on minds with little

resistance – some aspects of which I have seen in the obscurity of your questions.

That said, it goes without saying that, given the conditions in which we find ourselves – there is a lot of you and we do not have a lot of time – what I am going to do with you is certainly a kind of dialogue to the extent that I shall reply to questions and try to leave lots of time for your own responses, but a pseudo-dialogue no less, or, perhaps better, the beginning of a dialogue that you can continue amongst yourselves.

I shall begin by replying to questions as I have understood them. It seems to me that the situation in which the Nîmes Art School finds itself has, as it is being challenged (as one often says) encouraged doubts. An institution in crisis is more reflexive, more inclined to question itself, than an institution in which everything is fine. It is a general law: people in the world who are well have nothing to say to it other than what already is, have nothing very interesting to say to the world. The questions that I hear that are most interesting betray their meaning, which expresses itself, through them, and it is that which I would like to explain to you. You are here, present. So, you can correct, reinterpret, add to what I have to say.

Firstly, some questions which concern you as trainee artists, such as (Q.1) **What is the difference between a trainee artist (or an artist) and an ordinary citizen?** The question of the difference between a trainee artist, that

is someone who is in an Art School where there exists everything necessary for an initiation into art, even contemporary art, and the ordinary citizens of an everyday town, for whom none of this is obvious at all, let alone why an Art School should exist, is one of these very fundamental questions that you ask because you yourselves are asked it in real life.

This question implies further related ones, some of which are asked and others which remain implicit in the questions you pose: 'What is an artist?'; 'How does one recognise an artist?'. This question is not quite the same as another that you have also asked, **(Q.2) What makes the difference between a true and a false artist?** Is an artist someone who talks of themselves as an artist or is it someone who others talk of as an artist? But, then, who are these 'others'? Are they other artists or people from his corner who believe he is an artist, who can believe that a Sunday painter is an artist? We see that the question of knowing who has the right to state that someone is an artist is very important and very difficult. Is it the critic? The collector? The art dealer? The clientele? The wider public? The 'people' (with or without inverted commas)? What is there to say? The 'people' do not speak about art (or even politics) as much as we get them to speak: politicians, journalists, all of them, notably when they speak of art and artists, make themselves the spokesmen of 'the people', speak *in the name of the people*. **(Q.3) How do you explain that this**

gives rise to so much aggressiveness in the town and local newspapers?

To speak in the name of the people, and also on behalf of the people, is to inject a *populist* response to another question posed by one of you **(Q.4) Who has the right to judge in art matters?** To this populist position, we can juxtapose another, just as heavy, brought up by one of your questions **(Q.5) Can an artist enforce his taste, create new artistic categories?** The elitist response consists in thinking that the artist is the only judge about art and that he is even within his rights to enforce his tastes. But, is this not to expose oneself to opposing judgements, each artist being both judge and jury? How can we possibly question the fact that people who have an interest in the game and artistic issues – artists, but also collectors, critics, art historians, et cetera – can submit to radical doubt the accepted tacit presuppositions of a world to which they are linked? Should we call on external bodies? **(Q.6) Who makes the value of contemporary art? Collectors?**

One thinks about a kind of Stock Exchange of artistic values created by a critic, Will Bongart, who published in *Kunst Kompass (Art Compass)* the hit-parade of the one hundred most quoted painters cited by a panel of collectors and critics. Bernard Pivot proceeded in the same way, for literature, by publishing the prize lists of authors most often cited by two or three hundred judges *chosen by him*. But, how can you not see that you fix the prize lists by deciding who will be

the judges? To say it more formally: who will be the judge of the legitimacy of the judges? Who decides in the final instance? One can think about the Art School or the State, which, in the social world, are, if one puts God in brackets, the court of final appeal when it is a question of certifying the value of things. (An example to help you understand: when a doctor gives a medical certificate, who certifies the one who certifies? The Faculty who conferred a diploma on him? By going further and further back, we end up with the State, which is this kind of court of final appeal in matters of consecration.) And it is not therefore by chance that, in the conflicts concerning the Art School of Nîmes, we find ourselves faced with the State.

You also ask **(Q.7) Why and how does one become an artist?** Another question – I am going to read it because it is interesting, but it is not a list of nominations! **(Q.8) Apart from desire for glory, what is it that produces the vocation to be an artist?** The desire for glory might be considered as a sufficient explanation and many amongst you might believe that sociology is happy with such an explanation because of its own interests. An explication, which explains nothing since it is visibly tautological. For the moment, I am not going to reply to questions, but will be content to shake them up so that they stop being simple words on paper. There are also a whole lot of questions on the Art School, the teaching of art **(Q.9) Are Art Schools necessary?**

In other words, does art have to be and can it be taught? This is a question which has given rise to a lot of debates at the beginning of the Third Republic, at a time when we were concerned to democratise art, with some people wanting to extend the distribution of access to the basic forms of artistic practice and get drawing going in the most outdated primary schools: others said, on the contrary, that art cannot be taught. It is an old debate, the prototype of which can be found in Plato: Can quality be taught? Can the best way of being a man be taught? There are those who think not, and believe only in hereditary gifts. Belief in the hereditary transmission of artistic gifts is very common: this implies that one is born an artist, that art cannot be taught and that there is an inherent contradiction in the idea of teaching art. It is a 'myth of the eye', which is given to some at birth, and means that contemporary art is immediately accessible to children. This charismatic representation (from *charisma*, grace, gift) is a historic product; it created itself in line with the constitution of what I call the artistic field, which invented the 'cult of the artist'. This myth is one of the principal obstacles to a science of art works.

Briefly, there is nothing trivial in the question as to whether art can be taught. *A fortiori*, the question of knowing if contemporary art can be taught, and taught in an Art School. Is there not something rather barbaric or absurd in the fact of teaching art, which cannot be taught,

in an Art School, especially this special sort of modern art, which is constituted in opposition to academism? (notably with Manet).⁴ The difficulty of the problem is made even worst by the fact that Art Schools are now a place of 'anti-academic academism', of a transgressive academism. **(Q.10) In the universities, in the Art Schools, the done thing is to step into the breach of contemporary art.** In other words, Art Schools expect those who attend them to be interested in an art constituted against Art Schools. The times when Manet questioned his teacher Couture are finished. In the faculties and schools of fine arts today, we make a space for what Manet set up against the Académie. It is a little as if Couture asked Manet to be anti-Couture. I shall return to all the questions.

The second large group of questions are questions which are asked of you as a result of the situation in which you find yourselves:

(Q.11) Is there a future for painting?

(Q.12) Is the use of new technologies simply a fashion?

(Q.13) Does the effectiveness of the artist exist?

⁴ Bourdieu is referring to the nineteenth century art establishment in France which insisted on a certain academic training in the craft of drawing and painting. From the seventeenth century, artistic production in France was controlled by artistic academies, which organised official exhibitions. Manet is seen as the first to break away from this approach and assert the autonomy of the artist.

(Q.14) Can the artist have a political role?

(Q.15) Does art have a revolutionary potential?

(Q.16) Is artistic independence with respect to economic and political power possible?

(Q.17) Does art have to have a political role?

You are asking a sociologist, I am not forgetting, and there is a question on sociology; **(Q.18) Is sociology not a critical response to aesthetics?**

This question, like most of the ones you ask, come from, it seems to me, a tacit definition of sociology, which places it in the order of the collectivity, of statistics, of large numbers, of the wider public. It is, I have to say to you, the most common definition, the most trite, the most 'general public' – although it remains in the head of most philosophers, who have contributed a lot in spreading around and popularising this crude idea, yet see themselves as separate and distinct from sociology: I am thinking for example of Heidegger and his famous text on 'one',⁵ where the question is of statistics, of the average, the commonplace and, tacitly, of sociology; it is the most common picture in artistic circles (and philosophical) which, taking itself to be on the side of singularity, uniqueness, originality, etc., feel themselves obliged to scorn, in fact in truth to detest, sociology as a resolutely 'crude science', and to get away with professing their own distinctiveness. We can understand that with such an image of sociology, you can only

⁵ *Oneness, the 'they', 'we'.*

see a sociologist as a sad man, even detestable, who necessarily puts himself with a bad lot, with the *Midi libre*,⁶ popular criticism, and against the artist, the singularity, the exceptional, truly freedom itself. You have a bad image of sociology but I have to say, in your defense, there are a lot of sociologists who give you justification... But, here today, I have come to try to give you a better idea of sociology and help you discover that, contrary to what bad sociologists and a lot of others want you to believe, sociology can be one of the most effective weapons to understand and defend art; not just art that already exists, as canonised within museums, but art that makes itself the most surprising artistic research, the most audacious, the most critical, the most free. There you are, that is the thesis that I am presenting. I state it before you. I am not cheating.

Let us have a first break here so that you can ask questions.

Question: I would like to know the definition you have of the word 'artist'?

PB: An artist is someone who other artists say is an artist. The artist is he whose existence as an artist is up for grabs in the game that I call the art field. The art world is a game in which the question of knowing who has the right to call themselves an artist, and above all to say who is

⁶ A populist newspaper.

an artist, is in play. This is a definition, which is singular and has the advantage of escaping the trap of definitions, which one should never forget is at stake in the art field. It is the same in all fields. In the art world that Manet turned against, there were instances of evaluation. The State was the final judge, operating to evaluate the quality of a work of art and its producer. In other words, a *nomos*, a principle of view and of legitimate classification, a legitimate point of view on the world, guaranteed by the State (it was necessary to paint the world including certain subjects, old subjects and contemporary subjects could stand as old, like in Asian countries, etc.). This is why Manet's revolution, although purely artistic, was a political revolution at the same time, in terms of the way the State was involved behind the leading painters, the Salon and the Jury of the Salon.⁷ Today, since the 1980s, in France, the State once again plays the role of Central Bank of artistic legitimacy, but without having so much as restored a 'craft' monopoly and also leaving the door open for truly 'transgressive' artists (which merits the most ferocious criticisms from supporters of the 'conservative revolution' in art). I shall leave my response there, otherwise I am going to get involved in everything I have to say to you.

⁷ As above, the so-called *salons* were official exhibitions of painting selected by an official jury, or committee of the Academy.

Now, with elaboration, I am going to return to the questions you asked in the manner in which they came to you – stronger, more precise, less academic – so that they touch you more directly. I will do this before passing on to the third part of my talk, where I shall try to give you some instruments to respond to these questions (instruments that I have begun to use in the reply that I have just given).

You have all asked yourselves about the status of contemporary art, about the challenge to contemporary art, about the crisis in contemporary art, about the crisis in the belief in contemporary art. Taking one form with another, I have reformulated the question: the crisis in art is perhaps a crisis of belief, to which artists have probably contributed.

I said at the beginning that if a science of art or, more simply, reflection on art is so difficult, it is because art is an object of belief. To make myself understood, I might say – this has been said a lot before me – that the religion of art has in a certain way taken the place of religion in contemporary Western societies. For example, behind the famous title of Malraux's *La Monnaie de l'Absolu*,⁸ there is this religious metaphor: there

⁸ André Malraux was a French writer who was nominated by President de Gaulle after the Second World War as Minister of Cultural Affairs. Famously, he created a series of Maisons de la Culture (Art Centres) aimed at 'cultivating' the French populace.

is 'the absolute', God, of which art is the small change. There, armed with this metaphor, or rather this analogy between the art world and the religious world, I shall come back to what might be called the crisis in contemporary art and, more precisely, to the problem of the Art School which preoccupies us and which one can think of by analogy to a large seminary. As in the case of the large seminary, those who go to Art School where 'art priests' are trained are already believers, who, already separated from the secular by their special belief, are going to be reinforced in their belief by the acquisition of a competence outside of the everyday which will give them a feeling of being legitimised through their familiarity with art works. The sacred being what is separated. The competence, which is gained in a large art seminary is everything that is needed in order to pass without sacrilege over the border between the sacred and the profane. You probably think that I am saying abstract and speculative things, but I am going to give you a concrete example that will show you that I am not just theorising for the pleasure of it.

We published in the journal *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* (1983, 49: 2-28), ten years ago, an article from Dario Gamboni about a sort of social experiment, which took place in a small town in Switzerland, Bienne, which had bought works of contemporary art which they exhibited in public places. One fine day, the road sweepers and the dustbin men took away the

works of art thinking them rubbish. This raised a process that is very interesting concerning the question of how to know the difference between waste, rubbish, and a work of art(?) A real problem. There are artists who work with rubbish and the difference is only obvious to those who possess the relevant principles of perception. When we put art works in a museum, it is easy to know the difference. Why? The museum is like a church: it is a sacred space, the border between the sacred and the profane is signaled. By exhibiting a urinal or bicycle handlebars in a museum, Duchamp wished to point out that an art work is an object which is exhibited in a gallery; an object about which one knows that it is a work of art because it is exhibited in a gallery. You know by entering an art gallery that nothing goes in there unless it is a work of art. This is not obvious to everyone. In a questionnaire on art work, the results of which were published in *L'Amour de l'Art*, I undertook quite exciting interviews with people for whom this ontological transformation that art work undergoes by the simple fact of being in a gallery, which means a sort of sublimation, does not work: there are people who continue to have an erotic view of the nudes, or a religious view of Mary holding Christ's body or the crucifix. Imagine someone kneeling in front of a piece by Piero della Francesca for example. They would be in danger of seeming mad. As philosophers say, they are committing a 'classification mistake': they are taking as a religious work, appropriate for

one religious group, a work quite appropriate for another group, in another field, another game.

Let us also consider another article from *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* (1994, 105, pp. 71-74) where I report on a study I made at the church of Santa Maria Novella de Florence⁹ where there are grouped artworks in front of which common people (women) stop in order to pray (these are sculptures or paintings in the very realist style of Saint-Sulpice; for example, a statue of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus, on which is hung a rosary) because they were then able to respond to both their aesthetic and religious needs; while cultured people pass by without seeing, ignoring them, suppressing them as a psychoanalyst might say, or despising them, and going on to the consecrated canonic art works, as part of the visit prescribed by the tourist guides. Each one makes their group separate.

I shall come back to the unconscious iconoclasm of the Bienne dustbin men. Not having the necessary categories of perception, not having the signal that a museum gives, they commit a kind of barbarism, a 'classification mistake', similar to the one a woman who might go to put a candle in front of a fresco of Filippino Lippi or Domenico Ghirlandaio.

Therefore, the sacred work loses its 'man of sorrows' status, as a religious picture requiring

⁹ A large church in Paris began in the C17 and including a large quantity of neo-classical art.

religious reverence – kneeling, kneelers, candles, rosary – due to the fact of it being placed in a museum or semi-museum which some churches now have become, such that we can call this other form of piety a cult of art. We see why the place of exhibition is so important; as many artists who respond to public orders discover at their expense (an extreme example being Richard Baquié whose work, placed in the Malpassé quarter of Marseille between 1987–88, was vandalised, repaired, re-vandalised and finally taken down). These artists have, with full force, come up against the same problems that you have put to me. First, they come into contact with the ‘natural’ power of politicians (especially with decentralisation these days) who, accustomed as they are to pandering to the common tastes, tend, as with people on television, to take a popular vote as the first choice in aesthetic preferences (and political as well). Used to the privileged space of the gallery, where they can count on the docility of a cultivated public; that is to say, predisposed to recognise (in all senses of the word) a work of art, they are not prepared to directly challenge the assessment of the wider public – i.e. the people who never will have come into contact with the art work if it had not come to them, in their familiar universe, and who are in no way prepared to appreciate the art work as such – and to give them instruments of perceptions, of appropriate decoding. If artists make an artwork which is forgotten, because it is insignificant, or too familiar, they have lost, because they have

given in; if they make a noticeable work, that is ready to make itself noticed, they risk rejection, in truth iconoclastic destruction. Briefly, not being able to count on the objective compliance of the gallery who are the first to call such things kitsch, that is art works *displayed* as ugly and rubbish, as having an artistic intention (of parody, of humour, of destructiveness, whatever), they are confronted with an impossible test: to show the outcome from a large universe of ten centuries of experimentation to new eyes (in the strong sense), or naïve eyes, that are totally without the necessary instruments of recognition.

A contemporary artist, Andrea Fraser, plays with this distance between the sacred and the profane; between artworks, and the schemes of perception they require, and the ordinary object, which is offered at first sight. She makes pretend museum visits, where she takes a group of visitors and she stops with them in front of the museum security sign, commenting on the harmonious space of the lit boxes which are placed along the surface of the wall and which relates to the architecture of a row of columns. She therefore brings to mind the categories of perception produced by the entire history of the art world that it is necessary to have in order to understand what is happening in this world somewhat apart, where rubbish can be made up to be art works.

What does one learn at Art School? One learns the reasons to like art and a whole lot of techniques, knowledge, savoir-faire, so that one

can feel both inclined and able to legitimately transgress the 'rules of art' or, more simply, the conventions of the traditional 'craft'. If Duchamp was one of the first to make big transgressions in terms of the status of artworks, of the functional use of museums, etc., it is because he was a kind of goldsmith, he played with the rules of art like a chess player, like he was a fish in water in the art world. In opposition, very precisely, to Douanier Rousseau who was an object painter (as one says 'feminine object'), who did not know whether he was transgressing or not. A 'naïf', in effect, is someone who transgresses rules that they do not even know. Just like the Church, as Weber argues, defines itself by 'the monopoly of legitimate manipulation of sacred goods', Art School gives you access to the legitimate manipulation of cultural or artistic sacred goods; you have the right to say what is and is not art – you can even, like Andrea Fraser, blur the sacred border between art and non-art and become ecstatic in front of a security sign. In other words, in the art field, as in the scientific field, you have to have a lot of capital to be a revolutionary.

Why is the discussion of contemporary art so confused these days? And why do some sociologists play a perverse role within it? If the critique of contemporary art is so difficult to fight against, or even to understand, it is because we can call it a *conservative revolution*. That is, a restoration of the past, which presents itself as a revolution or a progressive reform, a regression, going back-

wards, which presents itself as progress, as a step forward, and which succeeds in making itself seem as such ('the' paradigm of 'conservative revolution' being Nazism). So good that, through a paradoxical overturning, those who fight against the regression seem themselves regressive. The conservative revolution gets itself admitted into the artistic and cultural space because, even more than in economic matters where the needy are always aware of what they lack and the doubling of these needs that encourages a return to the past (for example, with the loss of worker rights), the 'cultural poor', the cultural needy, are in some ways deprived of awareness of their deprivation. Briefly, regression can present itself (and appear) progressive because it is agreed to, ratified by the people who, in principle, are the arbitrators of what is popular: who will tell you what is popular, if not 'of the people'. Or by sociologists, at least if they make use of their scholarly instruments; instead of being happy, as some are, to hang on to questionnaires to say the opposite to what I have been saying and to give scientific legitimacy to a *popular aesthetic* which invokes the tastes of the people in order to condemn contemporary art and, above all, the state aid given to this art most notably through the museum curators. (I have to say I would have a lot of trouble in recognising myself in what critics and 'sociologists' would have me saying here and there; by taking various separate works, they have me taking up either populist – *Distinction, Love of Art* – or elitist –

the *Rules of Art* – positions; and putting them together, they find contradictions which are really the product of their incapacity to take account – *at the same time* – of the conditions of production of artistic demand, tastes, and the conditions of the production of artistic producers, the logic of the field of production, and artistic supply.)

In fact, in order to understand what happens in the art domain, and the arguments on contemporary art (Q.3), it is necessary to *hold together* (instead of separate) two lots of established scientific facts: on the one hand, the unquestionable fact of the unequal distribution of cultural capital (of which artistic capital is a particular kind) which means that all the social agents are not inclined or ready to produce and consume art works; and, on the other hand, the fact that what we call the art field, this social microcosm inside of which artists, critics, and connoisseurs, etc. discuss and struggle about the art that some produce, and others comment on, distribute, etc., increasingly won its independence, during the nineteenth century, from the world of the market, and instituted a growing break between what happens in this world and the ordinary world of ordinary citizens. In *La Distinction* I quote a text from Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish intellectual from the beginning of the twentieth century, which strongly criticises the art of his times in the name of the idea that artists have broken the vital link which unites them with the people. But, I could have also quoted Caillois

who defended 'the human figure' against Picasso.

Paradoxically, conservative revolutionaries invoke the people in order to put in place regressive programmes for art, supporting themselves with the philistinism of those not in the know (which today brings to mind media ratings) or the half-educated, or, in order to state things more simply, the unquestionable social fact that the people do not like modern art. But, what does this sentence mean? For the moment, I shall leave to one side the question of knowing what we understand by 'the people'. What does it mean: 'they do not like modern art'? It is that they do not have the means of getting into it, they do not have the code or, more precisely, the instruments of knowledge, the competence, and acknowledgement, belief, propensity to like as such, a purely aesthetic regard, what is socially designated as of value – or having to be valued – through its exhibition in a museum or a specific gallery. Like the dustbin man of Bienne, they do not think either good or bad, they do not have the perceptive classificatory schemes; they have not imbibed as taste the *nomos* which I was speaking about earlier, the principle of vision and division which allows for *differentiation*. What one calls *taste* is very precisely the capacity to *differentiate*, between sweet and sour, modern and old, Roman and Gothic, between different painters, or between different ways of painting, and, secondarily, to approve of or denounce preferences. And, the shortage, the absence, the

lack of classificatory schemes of differentiation leads to an indifference, much deeper, more radical than the simple lack of interest of the blasé aesthete. To say, of members of the people, that they do not like modern art, is rather stupid. In fact, it does not concern them, they have nothing to do with it. Why? Because nothing has been done to build inside them a *libido artistica*, a love of art, a need for art, an 'eye', which is a social construction, a product of education.

In *The Love of Art and Distinction*, I showed (I believe I might even say demonstrated) that the artistic disposition which allows one to adopt a disinterested attitude in front of a picture, the pure, purely aesthetic, and artistic competence, that is, the entire knowledge necessary in order to 'decipher' an art work, is strongly correlated with the level of education or more precisely the number of years of study. In other words, what we might call the 'eye' is a pure justificatory myth, one of the ways for those who are in the position to be able to differentiate in art matters to feel themselves justified by nature. And, in fact, the cult of art, as with religion in former times, offers privileges, as Weber said, 'a theocracy of privilege'; it is even probably the most excellent form of *sociocracy* for individuals and groups who owe their social position to cultural capital. This is the way to explain the violence that analysis brings out when it shows up all that. The simple fact of pointing out that what is seen as a gift, or a privilege of special souls, a sign of having arrived,

is in reality the product of a history, a collective history and an individual history, gives rise to an effect of desecration, literal disenchantment, of demystification.

There is therefore, from one aspect, the fact of the unequal distribution of the means of accessing art works (for example, the more we go towards the contemporary, the higher up is the social structure of the audience: for example, the museum of modern art has a more 'cultured' clientele, to be brief, than the Louvre); and, from the other aspect, the fact that the world in which art is produced distances itself from the common man by its own logic. The break, which is probably very old, became dramatic from the moment when the art field began to turn in on itself and to become reflexive; where one is involved with an art which requires, in order to be seen and appreciated, that one understands that the object of this art is art itself. Quite a large part, and, in my opinion, the most advanced, of contemporary art has no other object than itself. The most exemplary example is probably Devautour whose exhibition object is the act of exhibition, the act of putting together an exhibition, the act of composing a collection, the critical act, the artistic act itself, in a totally reflexive piece of work, which has no other object than the art game itself. We might offer other examples...

Therefore, the expectancy of the 'wide public', which is inclined towards a kind of academic structuralism – it applies to art works, in the best

cases, categories of perception produced and put in place by the previous times, that is Impressionism these days – can only distance itself even more from what artists are offering who, taken by the logic of the field, continually question the previous art's common principles of production. One can rely on the report of this gap, as some sociologists have done (as well as some TV 'philosophers'), to denounce the avant-garde explorations in the name of 'the people' who pay the subsidies for an art which does not interest them (and, really scandalously, that is even imposed upon them in the roads) and also in the name of the traditional 'craft' of painting and 'visual pleasure' that a spectator receives (but which spectator? Not necessarily the Bienne dustbin man). One can even take on the appearance of courageous anti-conformism by denouncing the allegedly dominant progressive-modernist *doxa* and the museum-market international coalition which favours a small minority of international artists who can 'hardly hold a brush' to the detriment of excellent French artists (what about national art?) marginalised by 'official new art'. For the most crafty, one can even denounce subsidised subversion, and all forms of anti-academic academism which made the modern revolution possible, from Manet to Duchamp¹⁰ and beyond:

¹⁰ As above, Manet (1832-1883) was a French painter who acted as a kind of link between the old academic tradition of French classical style and the new realist/

I am speaking about all those interested and calculated recurrences, opportunistic in a word, of the ruptures which have already occurred.

All that in the name of an aesthetic populism, which, by being based on a poorly understood sociology of the reception of art works, condemns avant-garde explorations, the true sociology of which it does not understand. Specific revolutions, of which Manet's was the prototype, happen one might say, *against* 'the people', against everyday taste, against the 'wider public'. And, critics or conservative sociologists have a lot of fun in invoking the people in order to condemn a necessarily 'unpopular' or 'anti-popular' subversion (which is, as in Manet's time, to say 'anti-bourgeois' first of all, because the force of the conservative revolution in terms of art comes from the fact that it expresses before everything else the unease and distaste of the museum and gallery bourgeois public faced with avant-garde explorations). And that, above all, at a time when a tradition of artistic revolution set itself up (at the heart of the art field) and when one could disguise a pure and simple condemnation of the revolutionary intention (artistically) by condemning the imposture, in the style of Jean Clair,¹¹

impressionist approach. Duchamp (1887-1968) was a French/American artist and a founder of Surrealism and Conceptual art.

¹¹ b. 1940 – an all round art critic, writer, essayist in France, ex-Director of the Picasso Museum in Paris

the great expert, which means in some way that one never completely knows if he is denouncing the imposture of modern art or the imposters who give authority to art images in order to obtain subsidies and consecration (Q.2).

It is necessary, having got to this point, to deal with the problem of the relations between art and politics, about which you have asked me (Q.14, 15, 16, 17), or, more precisely, the conservatism¹² in art and the conservatism in politics. In fact, what is difficult to understand – and this is true both on the right and the left – is that some politically progressive work (in terms of content and explicit intention) can be aesthetically conservative while other works deemed politically ‘neutral’ (formalist) can be aesthetically progressive. That quite evidently comes as a result of the independence of the art field. The conformity of transgression (Q.10), which is so frequent these days in the art and literature fields, takes up ‘good causes’, politically correct, but aesthetically conservative. Everything that I am describing (to which one needs to add the strategies of those who adopt the exterior signs of avant-gardism in order to produce effects of kitsch subversion) contributes to blurring the boundaries between art and non-

and member of the Académie Française. He condemns modern art and its negative effects on the European artistic tradition.

¹² Conservatism here is really used in the sense of ‘reactionary’ – status quo.

art, between conformism and subversion, and therefore contributes to a crisis of belief.

Question (inaudible) on the role of curators.

PB: It is necessary to examine individual cases. Simply, I think it is important to know – this comes from the theory of field as an independent universe – that the politically subversive is not automatically aesthetically subversive and vice versa. This structural mismatch makes possible a certain number of particularly perverse double game strategies, which makes critique and interpretation very difficult. If life is so hard these days for art and literary criticism, it is largely because a whole lot of writers and artists know enough about the history of art and literature in order to know how to copy a cynical and opportunistic way of giving the appearances of avant-gardism – this is one of the perversions, the possibility of which is central to a universe devoted to permanent revolution (for example, such an opportunistic painter might show nude portraits of two influential critics at the Venice Biennale...). Where the game of imposture is very advanced, as for example in the case of philosophy, there are those who know how to copy a philosophical posture so well that they seem more philosophical than the philosophers.¹³ I will not name names, because, unfortunately, you probably only know

¹³ Jacques Derrida?

those and it is not worth me giving them publicity. And, similarly, there are all sorts of people who are quite knowledgeable about the uses of art in order to make choices about avant-garde appearances. For example, this critic of *The Monde*¹⁴ who constantly defends conformist art is eager to celebrate the painting of a French artist with an Arab name (stylised people, sober pathos, which the artist describes as 'Beckettian'). He therefore pays tribute, as Americans say, to a 'politically' correct value.

Question: You have been speaking about the eye, the fact that one appreciates a work of art through the eye...

PB: I shall reply by referring you to a book entitled *L'Oeil du Quattrocento*¹⁵ in which Baxandall studies the social genesis of the categories of artistic perception in Quattrocento.¹⁶ From it, one must take the idea that the eye is a social product, and that it is 'inhabited' by socially constituted principles of view and division (varying according

¹⁴ A French daily newspaper similar to *The Times*.

¹⁵ This text was published in French by Gallimard, after first appearing in *Actes de la recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 1981, 40: 10–49.

¹⁶ Baxandall: an English American art scholar and writer. Quattrocento: the contraction of *mille-quattrocento* – that is the fifteenth century in Italy which, following the middle ages, was the centre of the first Renaissance.

to gender, age, period, etc.), about which one can give a sociological account. In the same way, I try, working on Manet, to describe the academic eye that Manet destroyed. The 'pretentious' eye has been swept away by the history of the art field, but one can still demographically count on this kind of orthodox bourgeois view (much more than 'popular'¹⁷) in order to dispute the outcome of the independent exploration of art. Such is the ambiguity of the Musée d'Orsay.

Question: You do not think there is a discernible eye a priori?

PB: That is a very difficult problem. I cannot stop myself from thinking that if you bring up this question which is probably rooted in memories of your philosophy classes on perception (what, in what we perceive, is the outcome of intellectual construction, what is the effect of sensibility?¹⁸) It is because you want there to be something which is not reducible to social categories and categorisation. I say this to you without any spitefulness. But, I think we always have to keep in mind the principle of reflexivity. When you ask such a thing, ask yourself if it is not because you would like it to be like that. The sociologist is an annoying type because they spend their

¹⁷ Working class.

¹⁸ Philosophy is taken by most six-form students in France as a complement to their studies.

time raising the curtains on you, kicking away the stool, the stilts, taking away your boots, even the ground under your feet. This is what makes sociology sad, but it is not sociology that is sad, it is the social world. I am here thinking of a very picturesque metaphor that Freud uses somewhere: it is of St Christopher carrying Christ on his shoulders who is carrying the world. Freud asks: but on what do the feet of St Christopher rest? The sociologist finds that a lot of things that we believe are natural, more or less according to our position in the social world, according to our dispositions, many of these things are historic, in other words arbitrary, they exist but they could have not existed; they are contingent. I refer you to my book *Pascalian Meditations* (1997) where I quote a lovely text in which Pascal goes in search of the ultimate foundation of the author of the law and, by going further and further back, arrives at the pure arbitrariness of the beginning, the 'truth of usurpation'. Art gives us the possibility of discovering a lot of phenomena of this sort. There are a lot of categories, which are not founded in nature, and, in any case, if one wishes to universalise them, it is not in nature that one must look. Well, that is the sadness of sociology. This sadness, sociology shares this sadness with contemporary art. In effect, what contemporary art does by allowing itself to be continually put into question, is to ask the question of what there is under the artist's feet of St Christopher. That is why, when beginning, I said to you that there

is nothing that can defend contemporary art better than sociology: if we have the courage to take it to its conclusion, for our own world, the questioning under which we place others and to bring out for ourselves the earth of certainty that we have under our feet, sociologists are also those who have to face up to the drama of not having an Archimedian point,¹⁹ a point on which one can rest (which does not signify that, as one sometimes believes, they are rather condemned to relativism).

Here, I might refer, after Freud, to Mallarmé,²⁰ who, in a famous, and obscure, text, entitled *La Musique et les Lettres*, reminds us that that there is no essential beauty, no 'beyond' the literary world in which is produced the collective belief in beauty, pure *fiction*, which one has to continually demystify. (You will find a commentary of the Mallarmé text, which is important in order to understand the anxieties which surround contemporary art, in *The Rules of Art*.) In opposition to the Hölderlin-Heideggerian tradition²¹ and the

¹⁹ A metaphor: Archimedes's principle indicates that the upward force that is exerted on a body immersed in a fluid, whether fully or partially submerged, is equal to the weight of the fluid that the body displaces and it acts in the upward direction at the centre of mass of the displaced fluid.

²⁰ French nineteenth-century writer and poet who wrote in support of the early impressionists.

²¹ Bourdieu here refers to the 18/19th-century German poet Friedrich Hölderlin and the 20th-century philo-

mystical cult of the 'creation' and the 'creator' as being unique, exceptional, without history, with which we have unduly set off, Mallarmé sees artistic acts by which artists offer the question of the social foundations of artistic belief, of the roots of the artistic 'fiction' in the belief which is engendered at the heart of the art field.

There is no essence of beauty; and artists, of all the producers of symbolic goods, are those who have advanced furthest in the direction of reflexivity concerning what it is to do what they do. The reflexive intention is older in the plastic arts²² than in other arts, and if today's artists have problems with society (Q.3), it is partly because they pose questions to society, about their own existence, the social bases of their existence, and, in a sense, they are very close to sociologists (Q.18). If we offer them the problem of their justification to exist, it is because they ask it themselves; they hold the sticks with which to hit themselves and, in some way, they collaborate with their own contestation.

To quickly conclude, in this third part, I would like to try to give you some tools, which

sopher Martin Heidegger; both pertain to a transcendent – semi-divine – attitude to creativity and the artist as connecting with the source of higher being, a highly idealist stance which is common in German literature, and indeed contemporary attitudes to talent, etc.

²² Art work which involves the physical manipulation of plastic material: molding, sculpture, ceramics, etc. Bourdieu probably intends 'the visual arts'.

I believe are useful in order to understand how the art world works. This world is a social world amongst others, it is a microcosm which, with the macrocosm, obeys its own social laws. That is what the word 'autonomy' means: it is a world which has its own law (*Nomos*), in which there are social issues, struggles, power relations, accumulated capital (a famous artist is someone who accumulates what I call symbolic capital which is capable of producing symbolic and economic effects; a famous critic can make the value of a work of art; an expert, who is mandated to say what is true, or not, can make social miracles, transform one thing that has no value, which was in an attic, into a priceless work). But, everything that occurs in this field – capital, struggles, strategies, et cetera – has *specific forms*, original, which are not necessarily of value in other microcosms and the social macrocosm in its entirety. For example, struggles are essentially symbolic struggles, mobilising symbolic instruments, words, forms, et cetera; and their intent is the accumulation of symbolic capital, credit, which can throw into debt, discredit, those who are already 'in credit'. We might then say such and such is 'finished', '*dépassé*'.

The field is like a game, but one invented by no-one, that emerged little by little in a very slow way. This historical development is accompanied by an accumulation of knowledge, of savoir-faire, of techniques, procedures, which makes