



High and Low Revisited

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Another Perspective

High and Low Revisited

Ivan Karp

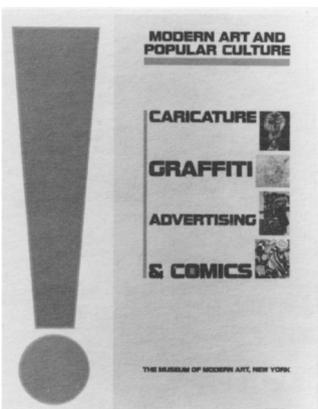
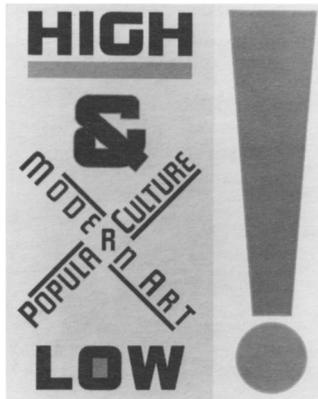
We cannot experience art outside of society. Both maker and viewer bring to art works attitudes, beliefs, and definitions through which they interpret and experience not only art but self and other, all of which are embedded in social worlds. The social nature of our artistic and aesthetic judgments is such that when we use inherently evaluative categories such as “high” and “low,” we inevitably produce debate and confrontation, agitation and unrest.

Conflict is not always a bad thing, particularly when it brings to the surface hidden assumptions through which we govern our lives. The conflict surrounding the recent Museum of Modern Art exhibition “High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture,” presents a transparent moment in which we can view the social and ideological context in which the arts exist.

Much can be gleaned from the show’s exhibition catalogue. Its front cover design cleverly intertwines the two elements of the subtitle, “Modern Art and Popular Culture,” giving priority to neither one. The rear cover, however, tells another story: how a typeface that Aleksandr Rodchenko made into a graphic design for a book of poems resurfaced on the cover of an exhibition catalogue on modern art—an example of a contemporary artist’s appropriation of different media to open up the arts to new potentials (fig. 1). Although the catalogue asserts that such acts of appropriation work both ways, the exhibition’s examples ultimately show that the “real” significance of the relation between modern art and popular culture lies in what the former does with the latter.

The exhibition generated an immense amount of publicity and an almost equal volume of controversy, which generated additional publicity. The critics’ reactions were as intemperate and extreme as the publicity was far-reaching. This was the show to be loved or hated. It was extolled as a breath of fresh air, a brave gesture that opened up the stuffy art world and its grand dame, the MOMA, to new objects and influences. Obviously this was a definitive moment in which the contrived hierarchy and pristine modernism on which the art world thrives were being challenged within the very precincts of its institutional bastion, the MOMA. Or were they? Perhaps this was just a fake and hypocritical display of openness designed to evade criticism. After all, some critics contended, the selections were rather conservative, social content was downplayed to celebrate the artists’ adoption (appropriation?) of visual forms, and the really innovative media such as film and television were excluded. Wasn’t the MOMA up to its usual challenge of defining the direction of art for the rest of us? Art Spiegelman’s witty cartoon in *Artforum* summed up many of the criticisms and also managed to show the quality of personal pique that permeated the discussion (fig. 2).

If the curators were criticized from the Left, they were unequivocally savaged from the Right. Once again the MOMA had let us down. This exhibition, they charged, refused to make judgments and failed in its mission to elevate our taste. By setting second-rate trash next to great works of art, the MOMA and its willful curators had only confused the public.



- 1 Steven Schoenfelder, front and back covers of the exhibition catalogue *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), after a 1923 design by Aleksandr Rodchenko



Believe It and Nod!

PREPARATION H

SHRINKS HEMORRHOIDS

THIS POPULAR 1903 SUBWAY AD WAS YEARS AHEAD OF ITS TIME! NOT ONLY DID IT INSPIRE PABLO PICASSO'S FAMOUS PORTRAIT IN 1906, BUT IT THEREBY INFLUENCED AN ENTIRE GENERATION OF CARICATURISTS!!

GIANT OSTRICH
in N.Y.C.

...LAYS A BIG EGG, BUT NOT VERY NOURISHING!

M O D E C U L T U R E
P O P U L A R A R T

?

BRAIN TEASER
SINCE ART IS A SUBSET OF CULTURE, HOW CAN YOU COMPARE APPLES AND FRUITS?!

5700 A TICKET!
GIVE IT TO THE HOME-LESS WHO LIVE RIGHT NEXT TO THE MOMA!

GRAFFITI, 1990. Blood on Brick, (28" x 52"). Anonymous. Note the powerful calligraphy.

CHOP SUEY.

BORGES IMAGINED A CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIA THAT DIVIDED ANIMALS INTO "A-BELONGING TO THE EMPEROR, B-EMBALMED, C-TAME, D-SUCKING PIGS, E-SIRENS, F-FABULOUS, G-STRAY DOGS, H-INCLUDED IN THE PRESENT CLASSIFICATION, I-FRENZIED, J-INNUMERABLE, K-DRAWN WITH A VERY FINE CAMEL HAIR BRUSH, L-ETC, M-HAVING JUST BROKEN THE WATER PITCHER, N-THAT FROM A LONG WAY OFF LOOK LIKE FLIES."

THE HIGH AND LOW SHOW IS ORGANIZED AROUND SIMILAR PRINCIPLES!

© 1990 art spiegelman

MISSING!

ART SPIEGELMAN	ALL HIS FRIENDS
JOHN HEARTFIELD	GEORGE GROZ
MILT GROSS	JOSE POSADA
TOULOUSE-LAUTREC	VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY
HANS HAACKE	EDUARDO PAOLOZZI
JIM NUTT	KOMAR & MELAMID
REGINALD MARSH	THE WPA
FRANS MASEREEL	KENNY SCHARF
ETC. ETC. ETC.	YOUR NAMES HERE
HARVEY KURTZMAN	ALL OF CINEMA
CINDY SHERMAN	BARBARA KRUGER

2 Art Spiegelman, *High Art Lowdown*, cartoon published in *Artforum* 29 (December 1990)

I doubt whether the curators, Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnick, really intend to overthrow the modernist canon or challenge the authority of great museums. Definitions of modernism have always depended on demonstrating that the path to abstraction, which is the movement's greatest achievement or its worst flaw (take your choice), is also a tendency exhibited in multiple settings in everyday life. To some, the show's breath of fresh air may have been a bit stale, but at least the radical Right of the art world could be assured that it was not a deconstructionist hurricane.

If the exhibition was interesting but not revolutionary, why the fuss? Specifically what is at stake in a show that defines itself in such starkly hierarchical terms as "High and Low"? Why were so many reviewers outraged and so many threatened? The answer lies in the choice of terms in which the exhibition advertised itself. *High* and *low* are fighting words, and the disputes they generate have been with us forever. Consider some of the substitutes that Varnedoe and Gopnick used in their catalogue. *Popular* and *elite* are obvious. At other points *sacred* and *profane* were invoked.

The catalogue's justification for such distinctions, however, is instructive. The category of "high art," the authors argue, is relatively unproblematic. It is art with a genealogy, a "lineage," or history. It is the "primary material with which any history of art in this century must contend." And it invokes "a consciousness of the traditional 'high' ceremonial religious art enshrined in places like the Louvre" or, the curators imply, the MOMA, its contemporary successor.¹ So much for any threat of artists biting the hands that feed them.

"Low art" is described as a more problematic category. Once considered "inferior," it has been "revalued" by those modern artists working in the "grand Western traditions." Even here, however, the curators draw the line. In an apparently unconscious echo of Enlightenment bigotry and ethnocentrism, they chose not to examine the most "naive" forms of popular culture: neither "the carvings of tribal cultures, for example, nor the playroom drawings of children, nor the imagery created by the insane . . . nor the art of rural folk limners or visionary amateurs." They restrict themselves to "forms and styles associated with urban culture in industrialized nations" and to artists who have as their primary social and psychological characteristics "self-conscious, streetwise, or commercial" goals of "creation."²

As an anthropologist I am as predictably outraged as the curators were predictable in their assertions. I wonder what my African craftsmen friends would think about claims that they do not produce for the market, have no traditions on which they draw, or do not make aesthetic evaluations. Actually, I know what they think: they make jokes about how they are defined as "primitive" and know well the difficulties they encounter in asserting the dignity of their art. But as the curators of "High and Low" tell us, that is a topic for another discussion.

What is intriguing in all the definitional exercises, whether undertaken by the curators or their critics, is that global, totalizing categories used to define an entire world and its history inevitably exhibit a tendency to break down. "High art," the catalogue informs us, is divided into sacred and secular varieties, and it may be that only religious art is really "high." "Low art" is lumped into the self-conscious kind, having an affinity to "high art" of the nonreligious variety. The work of unmodern, untrained rural visionaries is thus cast into an asylum with the insane.

But the unintentional product of this classificatory exercise is telling. The narrow world of artists, curators, collectors, and museum audiences is no longer exempt from a similar form of categorization. Artists, curators, and the like are inevitably classified with all sorts of folk who are "high" and "low." The MOMA and its curators have opened up a Pandora's box of heterogenous species, including the religious and the secular, the tribal hoards and



3 Charles-Nicolas Cochin (?), *A Critic at the Salon of 1753*.
Engraving, frontispiece to Jacques
Lacombe, *Le Salon* (1753)

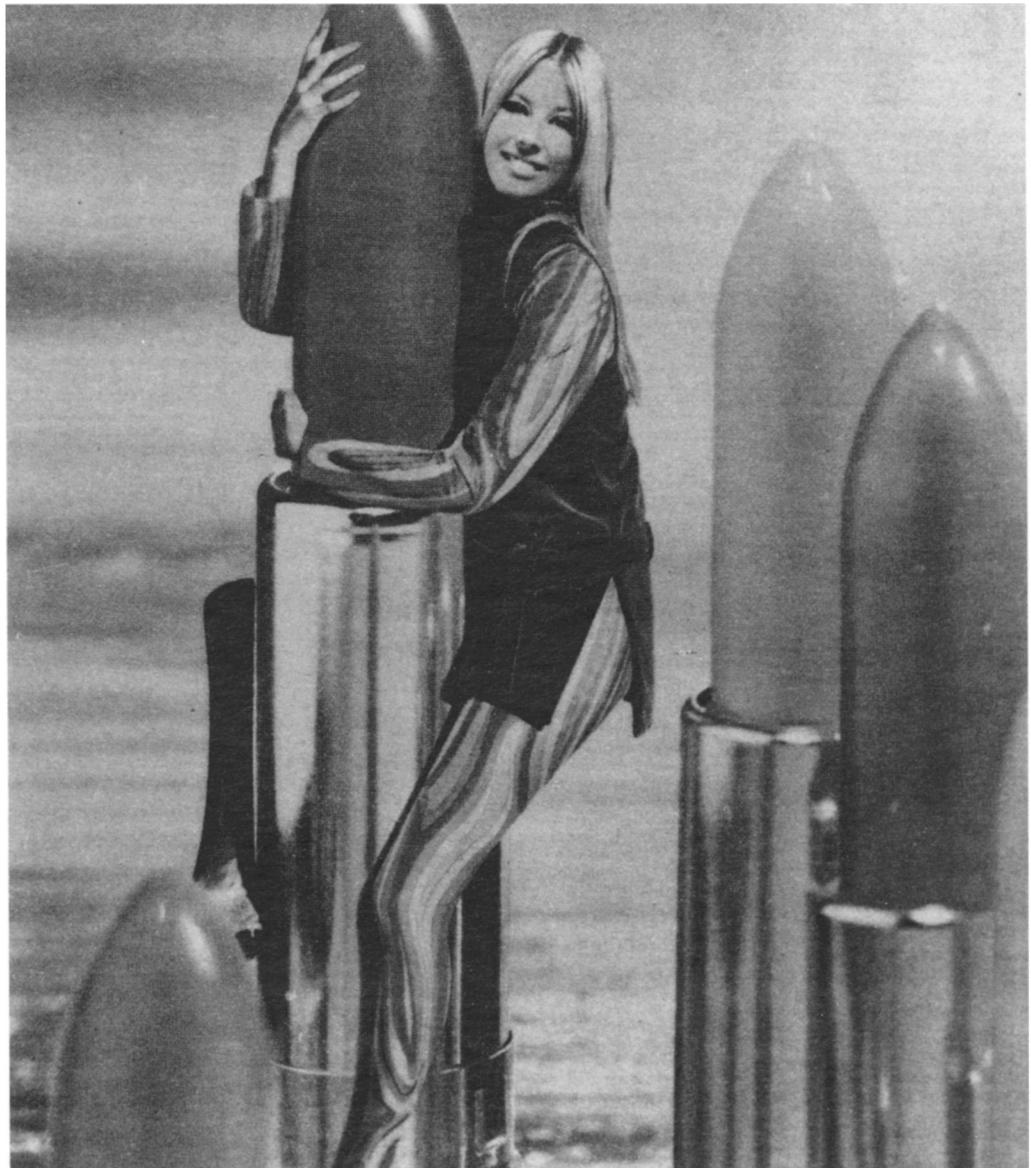
and art-lovers were suddenly faced with a new entity, the public, which came not only to appreciate, but to judge as well. Attitudes toward this public were both puzzlement and ambivalence, even panic. Who should speak for the public became an anguished question, and was the public to be allowed to speak for itself? In the salon, high and low folk, or, in the local jargon, *noblisse* and *roture*, got together in the same physical setting but were fundamentally opposed. Out of this conflict emerged the very terms *connoisseur* and *amateur*. A major difference, however, was the social ranking of artist and critic. Artists were generally associated with everything that was high, and critics often with all that was low. Charles-Nicolas Cochin's evocative *A Critic at the Salon of 1753* captures the

their kinfolk, the rural craftsmen. Even the two issues everyone scrupulously avoided, class and race, have asserted themselves. Having let them out of their container, the curators stoutly tried to pretend that they are still contained, possibly caged. Issues of form predominated in the discussion over issues of society. Unfortunately for Vardenoe and Gopnik, it's much easier to let strange beasts out of a cage than to lock them up again.

As I said, these disputes and the categories that generated them are not new. Many societies have hierarchically organized categories of high and low, which suggest other associations, some more obvious than others—superior and inferior, dominant and subordinate, refined and base, civilized and primitive, good and evil. What these associations insinuate is that the high and low distinction is intimately associated with notions of power and control, with ideas about who should be entitled to have a voice and who should be silent. Perhaps these associations are more than appropriate in the art world. No museum employee I've ever encountered claimed that museums were democratic institutions. Yet is there something more involved than simply a great museum's characteristic claim to be a bastion of connoisseurship?

Thomas Crow's remarkable study *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* describes the conflicts associated with the origins of the salon exhibition.³ He shows that this was a controversial moment in which artists

- 4 Claes Oldenburg, *Notebook Page, Clipping #322: Lipstick Advertisement, in a British Publication*, 1965. Clipping on paper, 11 x 8 ½ in. Collection of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, New York



dominant elitist attitude (fig. 3). Critics were simply not refined. But they claimed to speak on behalf of the public, which gave them power.

Even more important, however, was the elite's profoundly ambivalent reaction to the critical powers of that low entity, the public. Untutored and without skill and refinement of judgment, the public had natural powers of discrimination no longer possessed by the educated yet alienated elite. Thus one writer could condemn the vulgar public even as he asserted that "this populace . . . is the judge of the truth of natural appearances, and all pictures . . . are made to be judged by the eyes of the people."⁴

This attitude expresses the underside of the high and low distinction—the suspicion that the low are better endowed than the high, that *their* values are more natural and truer than all the refined judgments of artist, curator, critic, and collector, precisely because they are not in touch with the "grand Western traditions." This submerged belief may be an even greater source of discomfort in the art world than the elitist values overtly claimed

by the use of the categories of high and low. Little wonder that so many of the producers of the so-called low arts had to be excluded from MOMA's exhibit.

This ambivalence associated with high and low is the story line omitted in the controversy over the exhibit. By disregarding this ambivalence, a critical element in the history of modern art has been ignored. Modern art is not only a movement that opens up the perceptual possibilities in representation by exploring the formal qualities inherent in the primitive and the popular. As writers as diverse as John Berger and Robert Goldwater have recognized, modern art began as a political gesture directed against the definition of high art that ruled the art world.⁵ Modern artists mined the popular and the primitive not only for new forms but also for crude and vulgar resources that could energize them to resist the high arts as they experienced them. The early modernist attraction to Freudian ideas about the unconscious and sexual as a source of energy, for example, can even be perceived in some of the contemporary works in the *High and Low* catalogue, such as Claes Oldenburg's *Lipstick Advertisement* (fig. 4). Oldenburg's own attitude about modern art is surely more favorable to low works of art than to high: "I am for an art . . . that does something other than sit on its ass in the museum."⁶ This rowdy element went unacknowledged in MOMA's elegant and refined exhibition and the surrounding debate. But then, that's the trouble with low folk. Invited as guests, they just won't behave.

Notes

- 1 Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 15.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 15–16. The exhibition catalogue's introduction carries the curators' apology for excluding folk and primitive artists, presumably because they were the subject of the earlier MOMA exhibition "Primitivism in Modern Art."
- 3 Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 4 Louis-Sebastian Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, excerpted in Crow, p. 20.
- 5 See John Berger, "The Primitive and the Professional," in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), and Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
- 6 Claes Oldenburg, quoted in Arthur Danto, "High & Low at MoMA," *Nation* 251 (26 November 1990): 655.