



THE DILEMMA OF THE NEW

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

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Celeste Bartos Forum

**The New York Public Library**

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We have a rebellion on our hands, I can tell. People clapping and wanting Michael Kimmelman to come up immediately. Well, you have me instead. My name is Paul Holdengräber and I am the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, otherwise known as Live from the New York Public Library. It gives me great pleasure to be here tonight to introduce the season ending, as it were. When the president of this great library brought me here, he said, “I want you to oxygenate the library,” or, as I like to say, to make the lions roar. What a season it has been, and what a year. I really started here on the Ides of March 2005. The Ides of March happened to be my birthday.

Of course earlier that year we had had several events, such as Jonathan Demme interviewing Steve Earle or Dominique de Villepin giving a talk about terrorism. I wanted to begin the season on a benign note. On March 15 is when it really began and in quick succession we had Jeff Tweedy with Lawrence Lessig and Steven Johnson, Robert Hughes, here present, with R. Crumb, an extraordinary and memorable evening. Chico Buarque with Paul Auster, a debate about torture, a conversation about Zorro with Isabel Allende and Elissa Schappell, Miss Manners with Bob Morris, Bernard-Henri Lévy with David Brooks, several evenings with the

splendid storytelling group The Moth, Eric Bogosian with John Guare, John Patrick Shanley, Adam Gopnik and his Alison, Harold Bloom, Philip Gourevich, Salman Rushdie, Miranda July, Howard Zinn, Richard Posner, David Margolick with Jeremy Schapp, an extraordinary evening with Maira Kalman performing an opera in the Reading Room based on *The Elements of Style*, (LAUGHTER) and we also had Jenny Holzer projecting on the façade of this library, further illuminating it. John Hope Franklin with President Clinton, First Lady Rosalynn Carter with Joshua Shenk, Jonathan Miller with Rebecca Solnit, a debate about Google was on stage. Those very groups that are now suing each other—we started on a very wonderful and civilized note.

And tonight we have the great pleasure of having Michael Kimmelman go solo. We mostly have debates between people, but this night Michael Kimmelman is going to give us an extraordinary lecture as part of the Robert Silvers Lectures. He's going to entertain and enlighten us. After "The Shock of the New" he will now speak about the *dilemma* of the New. Of his recently published book *The Accidental Masterpiece: On the Art of Life and Vice Versa*, which he will sign after some questions—and insist on questions—questions usually can be asked in about fifty-two seconds—rather questions than statements—Robert Hughes writes that "Kimmelman is neither a jargonist nor an art world nerd. He is deeply immersed in life, its pleasures, and the winding unexpected ways in which art puts you in touch with both."

What a year it has been. Please stay tuned for the upcoming season. A couple of teasers—on January 26, back again with Bernard-Henri Lévy with Tina Brown and others I cannot yet announce and on February 13 I will be holding a conversation here with the very great pianist Alfred Brendel. Join our e-mail list and get free tickets for upcoming events ahead. And now it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Paul LeClerc, the president of this great library called the New York Public Library. Thank you very much.

PAUL LeCLERC: Thank you Paul and thank you for bringing so much oxygen to the library. I didn't know there was that much oxygen available in New York to bring in the last year but you certainly have done it and for that I'm very, very grateful and I think all of those who love the LIVE programs are very grateful indeed. (APPLAUSE) If you love what we're doing, what Paul and his colleagues, are doing to LIVE and if you really care very much about these programs, I

want you to care as well about the New York Public Library itself. Become a Friend, because the cost of the tickets to these programs meets only a fraction of the actual costs. Becoming a Friend can cost you no more than—it can cost you more—it can cost you no less than forty dollars, but when you take the tax deduction what's left is not a whole lot more than the cost of a haircut at a good place in New York City. So do become a Friend of the Library. It's very, very important for us that the audience of LIVE becomes engaged in other kinds of ways as well in the Library.

I'm very, very happy this evening to be welcoming you on behalf of the library's trustees and staff to the Celeste Bartos Forum for the fourth annual Robert Silvers Lecture and of course this one will be given by Michael Kimmelman. Bob Silvers will have the pleasure of introducing Mr. Kimmelman, but before he does I'd like to say a few words of introduction about Bob Silvers himself, in whose honor this very, very important lecture series has been given to the Library. It is a gift that has been underwritten very generously by Max Palevsky, a philanthropist who shares our admiration for Bob Silvers. Mr. Palevsky couldn't be here this evening. I think this perhaps is the first of the four that he's missed, but his wonderful and very, very generous gift has made it possible for us to invite a constellation of literary stars, including Joan Didion, who gave the inaugural Silvers Lecture, JM Coetzee, Ian Buruma the two following lecturers, whose brilliance reflects the diversity of Bob's own interests and his unflagging championship of the arts, letters, and sciences.

I must tell you that Max Palevsky's first idea was to create in New York City a statue of Bob Silvers, a life-size statue, which all of us who know and love Bob and appreciate fully what he and the *New York Review of Books* do for the life of the mind in America and elsewhere would have to be tickled at the thought of a statue of Bob Silvers in some prominent place. Bob is, however, in addition to being very brilliant, he's also very, very modest. He said no, no, no, let's do something at the Library, and that's how this lecture series came into being. Were Max here I would say, "Max, let's think about both—a lecture series and a statue at some point for Bob as well." Mr. Silvers is of course the cofounder, together with Barbara Epstein, who is also here, in the second row, of the *New York Review of Books*, the publication that has been the standard-bearer for literary and aesthetic criticism for now more than forty years. But the years have not mellowed the *Review* at all. It is still the single best incubator for fierce opinions and peerless

insights that we have, and it remains a source of inspiration to thinking people the world over. Robert Silvers's commitment to the intersection of literature and scholarship is also evident in his work beyond the *New York Review of Books*. He is a book editor, an anthologizer, a translator, and an editorial advisor as well to *la Revista del Libri*, the first foreign-language edition of the *Review*. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and is—I'm very, very, very proud to say—is one of the most beloved and the most hardworking trustees of the New York Public Library, where he has been a trustee since 1997. He has been honored for his good works both in this country and abroad. In addition to being a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he has been named a Chevalier of the Ordre National du Mérite in France and a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor, the only legion that has never gone to war. I am delighted that this evening brings both Robert Silvers and Michael Kimmelman to the Library. Please join me in giving the warmest of welcomes to our hero, Robert Silvers.

(APPLAUSE)

ROBERT SILVERS: Well, thank you, thank you, Paul. Hearing those words we feel all the more a certain sense, which I've long had, that editors such as myself really are essentially middlemen. We're somewhere in between the writers that we admire and the readers we feel should read them. And we probably—if you have that idea of an editor, you probably should stay out of sight, in some middle distance. When Max Palevsky one day made the truly extraordinary suggestion that he did want to do something in my name I felt a small explosion of nervous resistance to this idea but then, in addition to being touched, I felt that an editor should do something to honor the writers that I've admired and to do so in a way that would involve the two institutions that have meant the most to me, the *New York Review of Books* in all of whose work I've collaborated closely and *crucially* with Barbara Epstein, and the New York Public Library, which seems to me the most admirable place in the city and the most important and most democratic source of the city's mind. So I have to say thanks to Max and to the Library for making this possible. I particularly regret that he cannot be with us tonight. Without knowing it, we were students at the University of Chicago at the same time. We both talk a lot about the curriculum of classical and literary and scientific studies that we all had to undertake there. He went on to teach philosophy, to be an inventor in the computer world, to build several remarkable collections of art—eclectic collections of art—and to sponsor major new buildings at

the University. And I know he was looking forward to hearing our speaker take on what seems to me one of the most challenging subjects I can think of.

As it happens we might have asked Michael to talk tonight about the *musical* situation, for he's a virtuoso pianist. He has given concerts right here in New York. In addition to being the chief art critic of the *New York Times*, he has been a contributor to the *Review*, to the *New York Review*, not only on such subjects as Frank Lloyd Wright and Alfred Barr, but on the playing of Richter, on the music of Mozart and Beethoven, the conducting of Toscanini. But it's as a writer that he has established an original voice of his own. A voice we hear in hundreds of articles, or maybe thousands of articles, he's written for the *New York Times*, that many of us have come to think of as a kind of indispensable guide in making sense of the exhibitions of antiquities, of Old Masters, of modern art and contemporary art that are a constant and often perplexing presence here. He was educated at Yale and Harvard in art history. But part of his originality seems to me precisely that he's been able to escape some of the assumptions of academic art history and approach the projects and the problems of artists from within the perspective of the artists themselves. We see this in his book *Portraits: Talking with Artists at the Met*, in which he would accompany such artists as Lucien Freud and Chuck Close and Bruce—Brice Marden and Henri Cartier-Bresson in seeking out specific works at the Met—Metropolitan Museum—and at the National Gallery in London and talk about them and take them as points of departure for their own thoughts. Reading that book, one feels that Michael has been able to collaborate in bringing out the sensibilities and the heretofore unstated conceptions of these artists in ways that have never been done before and probably will never be done again.

And in his recent book, the book we have right here, *The Accidental Masterpiece: On the Life of Art and Vice Versa*, he does again something I've never seen done as interestingly before. He introduces and he explains, as the critic Richard Dorment put it, "a variety of figures whose lives have been touched or changed or even *destroyed* by their immersion in art." Some of these are obsessed collectors, such as Dr. Hicks, who in collecting and arranging thousands of light bulbs, created a remarkable and disturbing experience of his own. Then there's Frank Hurley, the Edwardian explorer, who brought back from Shackleton's expedition to the South Pole supremely beautiful pictures that in all the rest of his years he was never again able to equal.

Indeed, as we read this book we find that we are really in something like a book of wonders. He writes, for example, that Chardin's compilation of little facts makes for us as true a record of the value of seeing the world in all its details as exists in the history of art, and then he says what Chardin's views of brown crockery and dead rabbits did for the eighteenth century, the art of the American artist Wayne Thiebaud, with its gumball machines and pumpkin pies, may do for us today—they have the aura of loves lost and too fondly recalled. “Do for us today”—the words suggest a question that many of us have asked ourselves about the art of our time and I think of no one whose views about it I would rather hear than our speaker tonight, Michael Kimmelman.

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Good evening. First let me say it's an incredible honor to be here at the library and thank you Paul LeClerc, and Bob, I don't know what to say. I'm humbled to be associated with you in any way at all. The *New York Review* is one of the great things of our civilization and I thank you for having me here. So. And also thank you for putting on the first slide. That was very nice of you. I wait for that sculpture. I will review it. I was with Cartier-Bresson once in the Pompidou in Paris—I thought maybe if I start by dropping names I'll get your attention. Actually, as Bob had mentioned I had worked on a project to talk with artists in museums and I had arranged to talk to Cartier-Bresson in Paris, to go through the Louvre. Since the Seventies he had stopped, more or less, taking photographs, at least officially so, and he spent his time every day going across the street to Louvre where he would draw—he would copy Chardin and other artists there, and I thought it would be interesting to go to the Louvre and see what he thought of artists. And so I got in touch with him through someone else. And he said, “Listen, you know, I never, ever do interviews. I couldn't. I just—I don't do interviews.” In fact he was notoriously, as you may know, he was notoriously camera-shy. He went to the ridiculous attention-getting lengths of holding up his diploma when he got an honorary degree at Oxford so the cameras couldn't see what he looked like. And he made quite a fuss of that. He said, “You know I never do interviews. I couldn't possibly do it. If you come to Paris we can talk, but it's not an interview. I don't do it.”

So I said, “Okay, that's fine,” so I flew to Paris and went to my hotel and got a copy of that morning's *Le Monde* and of course there on the front page was a huge interview with Cartier-Bresson. (LAUGHTER) And we met and we were going to the Louvre but, you know, this is

France, so of course the Louvre was on strike. (LAUGHTER) And for man whose most famous book was translated into English as *The Decisive Moment*, I had never seen anyone quite so indecisive. He said, “Well, what would you like to do?” I said, “I don’t know. Whatever you’d like to do.” And he said, “Let’s go to a Chinese restaurant,” so I said, “Okay, that’s fine.” So we went to a Chinese restaurant around the corner.

I took out my little notebook and tape recorder, and he said, “No, no, no, this is not an interview, just a discussion among friends,” and so I said “Okay,” and I put it down below and then we began to talk a little bit and every time, you know, some little *bon mot* popped into his head, he sort of looked over the table, like: “You’re not going to take this down? What are you doing?” (LAUGHTER) But eventually we ended up going to the Pompidou. So this, by the way, as you may know, is one of the great photographs by him from the 1930s. And it was in Spain, and it was his genius, you know, to see what other people would *never* see. This extraordinary expression of the boy in his ecstasy as if he’s in some spiritual reverie against that amazing wall was actually done, of course, by Cartier-Bresson, who had noticed that when the boy was playing with the ball and tossed it in the air and waited for it to come down, he looked like that. So the ball is up there and out of it was produced this incredible image. Anyway, we went to Pompidou and he took me immediately to look at this, which is a self-portrait of Bonnard, a late Bonnard. And he said something that I’ll always remember. He said, “You know, the thing is that Picasso didn’t”—Cartier-Bresson of course had taken great photographs of Bonnard late in life—he said, “The thing about Picasso was he could never understand Bonnard because Picasso had no tenderness.” I thought that was very beautiful and I also was struck, because at that time I really didn’t understand Bonnard, and you know art history had written out late Bonnard. He seemed like a kind of Impressionist after the fact, and so serious art people didn’t take him seriously, and here was this great, great artist who took him profoundly seriously, and that was eye-opening in an important way for me—it was—and it opened my eyes to Bonnard, but in general to sort of thinking outside the box, as they say.

Then we went into another room where he drew he was drawing a little—he was drawing a Matisse, a portrait, leaning on his little shooting-stick, and then he came out of the room, and he saw a little family sitting on a bench there—a mother, and a father with a small child leaning on

his shoulder, sleeping on his shoulder. And Cartier-Bresson walked straight up to him, the couple, and he said, “That makes a very good composition,” he said, you know, “Not her,” and he went like *this* right in her face. And she was completely startled she had no idea what this guy was saying—not *her* but the two of *them*—and he sort of held up his hands like this and released the shutter and then walked away. I mention this because it was a lesson to me in keeping one’s eyes open. He was a great artist who had ostensibly stopped taking photographs but he was always looking, and looking on his own terms, and seeing for himself, and in turn teaching me to do the same thing. And I think it was in general a lesson of how we experience a work of art and can each in our own way, according to our attunement in *that* moment and reflecting a sort of openness of mind.

It was of course—this is the great puddle jumper—it was this openness that allowed him to take this great classic image. Puddle jumpers were very common in that day, but only Cartier-Bresson could have seen that magical instant when the reflection of the man, *here*, is mirrored in the poster of the dancer. And this was taken outside the Gare St-Lazare, so it was a train station where you had the reference to the track and the Brailovsky, who was a pianist, but it just looks like “railovsky,” and then the circle, made by the jumping, that’s reflected in the pieces of metal, and it just go on and on and on. It’s why other photographers seem to hate him so much for his genius.

This argument about keeping one’s eyes open reminds me of one other story I wanted to tell you. It was about going with Kiki Smith to the Metropolitan Museum. She took me to see these pre-Columbian gold pieces and they’re in these cases facing the Park and she said, “Do you notice, by the way, how they vibrate? They’re sort of—it’s the rumblings from the subway, when the subway goes by,” she said, “the jewelry rumbles. It moves a little a bit.” You know I’m a good reporter, so like all reporters I pretended that I knew exactly what she was talking about and this made perfect sense notwithstanding that there isn’t a subway within a mile of the Metropolitan Museum. (LAUGHTER) So I said, “You know, of course, I see exactly what you’re saying,” and she said, “Well the thing is, you know, that it puts” her in mind, she said, “It reminds me,” she said, “of those Survival Research Laboratories that take dead animals, like cats, and reanimate them, by motorizing their limbs, like Frankenstein, or Jesus, or Osiris.” And I said, “Okay.”



(LAUGHTER) And of course what she was she was talking about was her own work, which was about animating sculpture. She was doing figural work, and this idea of seeing these objects as *alive* was very important to her.

We then went to look at this big Chinese room. As you know, there's these huge Chinese paintings, and they're next to these Bodhisattvas, and I thought she would talk about her interest in the work itself—Chinese art history—and she said, “This room has fascinated me for years.” I'm sure you all know this room—this is the huge room of Chinese art at the introduction to the Asian Galleries. And I said, “Why is that?” and she said, “You know, I've never figured out how you can put a sculpture next to a painting,” because these Bodhisattvas are standing next to the painting. And it turned out that the next show she did—this is a work by her called *Girl*—was very much based on these fifteen years she had spent going to the Met and looking at this particular room, which you would never know from the work, but it was essentially about a sculptural problem, how to place a sculpture in front of a wall of drawings. So again, you know, it was a reminder to me that the museum, and art itself, can be an open book that we write it as we choose, creatively and for oneself.

I began—I hope you'll excuse me—with these vignettes. I like vignettes. A vignette was a formal invention of Romanticism, which recycled and altered all sorts of old forms. You know, Caspar David Friedrich turning landscape into a religious painting. And Romanticism also did away with the separation, the barriers, between the arts. Schiller talking about the musical effects of poetry and Schumann trying to integrate literature into music, and it blurred the distinctions between major and minor genres and tragedy and comedy and nature and human affairs. I don't want to push the comparison too far, but for the purpose of this evening I wanted to exploit the spirit of the Romantic vignette as a way of talking about contemporary art here and there.

The Museum of Modern Art, as you know, has celebrated its first anniversary just recently, and announced that they had an attendance of 2.65 million people. If you've ever been there you've probably felt like they were all there when you were there. Sort of like being in the Cherry Hill Mall at Christmastime and about as charming, I must say. (LAUGHTER) Now about a decade ago, three dealers—Pat Hearn, Matthew Marks, and Morris Healy—opened on the same snowy

February night on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street in Chelsea, that was otherwise a wasteland. And today there are probably three hundred galleries or *more* in Chelsea. And that's not to mention all the other stuff that's going on these days. The art fairs—there was one last week here, this one in Miami, Basel Miami, where everyone goes to drink and make money and look at art, too. The most recent auctions, as you may know, raked in huge new records in contemporary and modern art.

How—this is the question—how to square new art's clear popularity with the fact that so many people find it hard to fathom? I'm always asked what's the next thing, you know, "Where is art going now?" The implication is that art is like pop culture, that its subject is what's new, that its interest is in fresh product, fresh names, but also that it is progressive—that it is going somewhere in particular and that there is a center and a periphery, a mainstream. I think it was Clement Greenberg who institutionalized the word "mainstream" in modern art criticism in 1943, writing about late Chagall. This is *The Juggler* from that year, by Chagall. Greenberg said, "Chagall's art turns from the mainstream of ambitious contemporary painting to follow its own path. It is pungent, at times powerful, but opens no vistas beyond itself." Greenberg was, in other words, writing *off* Chagall to promote his own idea of a very different mainstream. This is Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*. Greenberg believed that art would descend into a kind of fun and games, what Duchamp, in a different context, called "retinal flutter," if it didn't have some guiding principle. This meant of course *Greenberg's* guiding principle. He said, "The nonrepresentational or abstract, if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental but must stem from some obedience to a worthy constraint." "True artists need to be conscious," he said, of what he called "inflexible obligations." What were these obligations? "Let painting confine itself to the disposition, pure and simple, of color and line," Greenberg said. So truth to form, truth to materials.

Like most religious faiths, this one promised clarity and a happy future for an art world that was seemingly more and more chaotic and hedonistic. The alternative was a kind of anything-goes philosophy, you know, a free-for-all, or so Greenberg and his friends warned. By the way, I should say clarity was not so bad for collectors and dealers, who, like anybody who puts their money somewhere, want some assurances about the investment, and we shouldn't forget that Greenberg himself worked for dealers for a while. He was on contract to French and Company, so in his case religion wasn't too bad for business either. Among his disciples, Michael Fried, like Greenberg, became in the Sixties a champion of certain kinds of artists—Stella, Morris Louis, Olitsky, and Ken Noland—and the enemies

back then were Pop and minimalism, which weren't concerned, as Greenberg and Fried saw it, with the material conventions of the work of art but with the circumstances of its interaction with the spectator. The bugaboo became what Fried famously called "theatricality." "The success, even the survival, of the arts," he wrote, "has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatricality."

And one of the enemies, one of the representatives of theatricality, was Donald Judd. This is the—this is the room of his milled boxes in Marfa, Texas. Of course one of the great things about art is that it just refuses to behave. Critics can tell it what to do but good artists just don't listen. They're always zigging when they're told to zag. You know, the art magazines are always telling you that "painting is back" or "drawing is back," as if that makes any sense, and it never really does—they never really go away. But the Greenbergers wanted to claim that they were protecting art from a materialist workaday world. They were grounding it in a new and progressive science of formalism. Artists just didn't want to ask—didn't want or ask for such protection, and so they went their own way, making Pop and minimalism the most influential movements of the postwar years and relegating Greenberg's beloved color-field painters, some of whom of course were extremely fine, to the sidelines. The result, Greenberg said, would be mere entertainment, and he warned that criticism minus their agenda was also just solipsism, it was a kind of floating subjectivity without standards.

I think when nobody listened some of the true believers became very inward-turning and martyrlly and sort of created a rear guard of naysayers against what was the new mainstream, which they had tried to establish, but which they felt had betrayed them, so they began to preach to each other and to likeminded artists and art lovers. But another great thing about the art world is that it can accommodate all sorts of groups, including nostalgists, for whom almost all art of the last forty-five years isn't really even art, and there are galleries and publications and readers and collectors that exist for them—in Chelsea—and that abide by their standards and show often wonderful art. This is William Bailey, who just had a recent show a few months ago at Betty Cunningham's gallery in Chelsea. Art has actually become many things now, clearly without a center, in the absence of which there is no single movement that is progressive. At the same time, art does continue to operate in a zone of its own making, answering more or less as it chooses to popular taste and causing people to ask the same essential questions. You can claim that the only art that really matters is painting, but that claim has no basis in fact—it's a private opinion. I think to use the phrase "anything goes" to dismiss the whole current art scene is actually a rather cheap way of

sidestepping the difficulty of *making* art at a time when artists no longer have the luxury of placing themselves in opposition to a clear and specific status quo.

Consciously or otherwise all artists now must respond to the problem, you know, that Duchamp raised with his infamous urinal, when he walked into a plumbing equipment manufacturer in Lower Manhattan in 1917 and inserted this in an exhibition and called it *Fountain*. He posed the question which then couldn't be unasked: "What is the difference between a urinal and a painting or between a painting *of* an object and the object itself?" And today, you know, this urinal is institutionalized, which obliterates to some extent its original function as a challenge to museum art. But I think its basic effect remains, and that it is that while there is no longer an avant-garde, at the same time saying there is only one proper response to the question "What is art?" has become both extremely incurious and incorrect. Whether we like it or not, Duchamp has redefined modern art as a way of looking. I actually find this liberating. I know it's galling to people because it all seems so vague. "Where is art going?" People want answers, they don't want questions. I think we're more comfortable in general with verbal and visual ambiguity, and because it's so popular today, more people expect art to be accessible in a way perhaps people didn't expect when there weren't huge lines at museums and crowds in galleries.

The public sees artists who want pop status and they see technologically spectacular cultural productions, pop productions, like the ones that Pixar produces. This is in a preview of the MOMA's upcoming Pixar show. And some people scratch their heads and wonder, you know, "What does art now aspire to," whether it isn't just second-class pop culture. And it's a good question, but I find it funny how we want art to be not simply another branch of pop. That is we want it to be novel and unfamiliar and somehow longer-lasting than pop, but then we can be bothered when we walk into a gallery and find what's there unfamiliar and unconventional and off-putting and hard to grasp. The fact is that art doesn't have to explain itself or to conform to any ideology. It can be a social agitator or an easy chair. If history has taught us anything over the years, I think it's that critical divides, which are very useful polemical tools, don't really make much private sense in the long run. You can admire Rubens and Poussin, you can admire Delacroix and Ingres, you can admire Matisse and Picasso. And you can admire Matthew Barney, even, and Bonnard. We are now free to exercise our personal will and there's every reason to admire art as artists do, as I think Kiki Smith and Cartier-Bresson did, and that's why I mentioned them, across eras and styles outside art history, the way—by the way—we can read Joyce and Garcia Marquez

and Hemingway and Nabokov for our own purposes without feeling that one preference negates the other.

I mentioned Barney—I wanted to tell you a little bit about him because I remember seeing the first of the Matthew Barney films and I couldn't make heads or tails of it, and thought he was just sort of nuts. But I remember thinking, in the way that art can do, that there was something about it that bothered me and I wanted to understand better why I thought I didn't like it. And so I got in touch with him and decided to watch him make the next of the films he was then doing. You know he made a series of five films, all called *Cremaster*, and, in typical Matthew fashion, out of order, so the film that he was up to was Number Two, although it was in fact I think the third or fourth film in the series. And I spent a year watching him do this. There was of course a lot of press about Barney and there was a lot of resistance to it. I think in part because there were these high production—or seemingly high—production values which made him suspect, as if he was being immodest or as if he was making *movies*, which somehow was not the right thing to do—that it seemed cheap. And yet the movies were not *clear*, as if it would have been better to have had a movie with a clear plot. Anyway, I went to see him, and he started to explain what *Cremaster Two* would be about and I had no idea what he was talking about. And he would explain it very calmly, as he does, in this rather impossible-to-understand way, and about a year went by and over time—I guess it was like a Moonie thing—eventually began to think that I really understood it. (LAUGHTER) And I certainly did begin to understand some things, the way Matthew was taking aspects of Seventies art, aspects of performance, issues of gender, issues of post-minimal sculpture, the translation of documentary photography into independent artworks. Self-mythologizing. I'm here also thinking about the way in which Judd and others presented themselves. The way in which a film can act like sculpture in a sense, moving around objects, choosing views, panning, circling, and so forth. But above all the whole refusal to privilege any particular kind of work over another. I thought that was very interesting and I liked the private vocabulary, but above all I liked the images. I thought they were very beautiful. And I thought it was interesting that we accept other kinds of abstract art, but found Barney very difficult.

By the way, I had a little episode I just wanted to briefly tell you about. It was here in what's basically the Bonneville Salt Flats, which occasionally flood when runoff from the mountains (they're over here, basically) come down into the Flats. This year, that happened, which turned out to be advantageous for

this film. Barney had built this arena made out of salt, a kind of bullring, in the middle of the Flats, way out from the nearest road. One evening, I was being driven back. There's a rather difficult path that you had to drive through, where the water was shallow, to get you back from there to dry land. And I was being driven back by an idiot, basically, who just was talking on his cell phone and had no idea where he was going and went sort of over this way. And so we found ourselves, of course, stuck. And I was just so mad for being in the car with this moron that I volunteered to get out and walk, through the water, to the road, which I could still see, which must have been a mile or two or something and, of course, you know after a little while I found myself somewhere over here or over there or something. The water had now risen up to my waist—it had been low before—and it had become pitch black, so I found myself in a sea of blackness. Ice water. This was December. And I couldn't see the car behind me any longer, and I couldn't see the road in front of me, and I thought, "This is the *stupidest* way to die." You know, "What is that obituary going to be?" (LAUGHTER) You know, "Art critic dies watching this ridiculous film being made in Nevada." Anyway, long story short, I finally made it to the road. I remember walking out of the pitch-black sea and Chelsea Ramirez was there—I think Chelsea is actually here—and I don't know whether she would say this, but I thought the expression on her face was what you would expect if you were standing on the beach—and this happened in December—and you saw a man just walk out of the water. And I talked to some of the people who worked for Matthew after that. And they all described to me these death-defying, near-death experiences. You know, climbing proscenium arches in Budapest and jumping off piers here and there. And of course Matthew would climb elevator shafts and he would jump off bridges and things.

And I sort of thought that was an interesting metaphor because a lot of Matthew's work, it turns out, is really about art as *effort*, that the creative process is itself effort, and that we as viewers of it should be making some effort, too. Art does not need to come to us. We need to make some effort to go to it, too. I thought that was an important lesson, and I was also interested, when his show was at the Guggenheim, how many young people seemed to grasp that fact very easily, where others seemed to feel that Matthew needed to make himself explicit, as if the obscurity of the film was automatically a problem, whereas it isn't with other kinds of highly rhetorical art forms.

Of course the great example of public art that involved a physical engagement on a personal level, maybe not drowning, and perhaps a little bit of megalomania, was Christo's *Gates*. I just wanted to

mention it because really, here, I am talking about the slow absorption, in the absence of an avant-garde, of very difficult brands of art into a kind of popular public discourse, and I think that Christo was a wonderful example of this, even if you regard him as a kind of conceptual kitsch. I still think that it was very interesting the way in which a mass public was able to grasp the basic issues of conceptualism through Christo. Conceptualism, a kind of mind-numbing category for those people who are not in the art world, was instantly understood by people who were talking about Christo. It's useful to remember, by the way, that Christo was a Bulgarian raised under the Soviet system and so I think brought and brings to his work an idea of a kind of utopian grand public art for Everyman, but without the Mother Russia statue, translating it into a kind of ephemeral, abstract art that requires the persuasion of the public through an open political process, and that process *itself* is part of the art. In addition to which, of course, he understood that people would be able to see that ephemerality, everyday materials, engagement with the real world, all this could be part of the language of art. And people could decide whether they liked it or not, on their own, as individuals.

I myself kind of liked it much more than I expected when it happened. I thought it was very beautiful, the fact that this was discussed in a common way, in the newspapers and on the street. And then I went back and forth. You know, people talked about whether the fabric was ugly, and whether he was just a self-promoter, and whether the Gates were elegant enough or not. But I thought it was amazing that we had moved a conversation about aesthetics and the role of art into everyday language. I think the art world is bothered by Christo, among other reasons, because he didn't have anything to do with the art world. He completely sidestepped the art world and went straight to the mainstream media, and people understood that and responded to it. When Christo came to New York in the late Sixties and Seventies, that was about the last time that anybody probably used the phrase "avant-garde" without irony. That is, "avant-garde" to represent not simply a historical construction but a really genuine plausible belief system among artists, a role they can imagine playing. I recently asked Paula Cooper, you know, "What's going on now?" and she said, "I haven't the slightest idea." And, I mean, I think that's pretty much a response that many people would give. It's a more global art world. That's clearly true. You can see that in New York. New York is still a market capital, but it's not a place where artists feel they need to *be*. I mean, artists whose careers were associated with New York now often *live* elsewhere or live here only sometimes.

It was interesting. The upcoming Whitney Biennial is organized by two foreigners and will have a lot of foreign artists in it—probably to reestablish the Biennial as an exhibition like other international surveys. But I almost thought it was more interesting that the last Biennial included a work by Yayoi Kasuma. This was a room you walked into—perhaps some of you remember—with water and mirrors. It was a mirrored room and you were in it one at a time and it had lights in it. And I thought that was interesting because she is a Japanese artist, Japanese born, and nobody thought twice about it, this idea of the internationalization of the art world I thought was signaled by that at the Whitney. The Whitney at the moment, as you may know, has a Richard Tuttle retrospective. Tuttle, by the way, in mentioning the recent art auctions—a Tuttle sold at Christie’s last month, one of these constructed paintings, for \$402,000. These are these sort of nonsense signs in these kind of offbeat colors. The lines are quavery, like the drawn lines which he used to make them. That actually wasn’t a sales record for Tuttle, because MoMA paid over a million dollars for his early *Twenty-six Letters*, which—this is at the entrance to the Whitney’s show—and these are these hand-shaped tin sculptures, like children’s blocks, again, in nonsense symbols.

I mentioned nonsense twice, because his wife, Mei-mei, says that about 95 percent of what comes out of Richard’s mouth is completely nonsensical. It’s just that other 5 percent that’s really, really good, you’ve just got to wait for it. I did a talk with Richard once at the Metropolitan Museum, and I—we had been sort of talking about art that was there, and I said to him, “Listen, Richard, you know we only have a little while, you’ve just got to focus. People are sitting there. You just can’t, you’ve got to figure out what we’re going to say.” So he said, “Okay that’s fine I will definitely do that I promise.” So we worked out what we were going to do. We were first going to talk about this *Kouros*, which he had something to say about, which was rather peculiar but interesting, and he said, “Yes, we’re going to go there. Okay. I know what we’re going to do, that’s fine.” So we get up on stage. He for some reason wanted podiums on opposite ends of the stage, like the old Crossfire, you know, on *60 Minutes*, and we get up there and I said, “Okay Richard, let’s begin, and so what do you make of this *Kouros* that’s in the collection?” and he said, “You know, I was very nervous before I got up here.” “Oh, well how are you feeling now? Are you okay?” He said, “Well the thing was that I couldn’t calm myself down, so I was wandering around the galleries.” He was saying this of course in front of everybody. I said, “Well, I hope you’re feeling better, and I’m glad you’re here, and about the *Kouros*. . .” He said, “Well the thing



is this, I just ended up in the Netherlandish paintings galleries.” And I thought, “Oh god, here we go.”  
(LAUGHTER)

He said, “I was just looking at those pictures, trying to calm down, and I stopped and I saw this one. I stopped in front of a Memling.” I didn’t have it up at the time, but this was it. And I said, “Ye-ah,” and he said, “And I just kept staring at it, and I was looking at this and I found myself doing what the guy is doing in the painting, and I just started to do this, rub my hands together like this.” I said, “Okay . . . and why do you mention this?” And he said, “The thing is, I realized that’s what he’s doing.” And I said, “What is he doing?” “Well, he’s just calming himself down.” (LAUGHTER) I said, “I think he’s *praying*.” And he said, “No, no, I mean, I know he’s praying, but the thing is, he’s also calming himself down. There’s an incredible sense of *peace* and equilibrium.” I tell you this, and I don’t know if this will have this effect on you, but as in the cases of Kiki and Cartier-Bresson, it was sort of an off-the-wall remark and I have *never* been able to look at a devotional picture again (LAUGHTER) without thinking that these people are extremely *calm* and that that *is* what that painting is about—he’s absolutely right.

Tuttle’s early works included these little hand—palm-sized—little paper cubes with cut-outs. They’re like little children’s origami, which was kind of riffs on Donald Judd’s heavy metal boxes, but they were in reverse, and he also made these vanishingly faint pencil lines drawn on a wall, which he would then trace with florists’ wire. He’s drawn it already, and now here he is tracing it. And then when lighted, it would cast a shadow. There’s the wire, the drawing, the line I believe is there, and the shadow-cast line, and so creating a third line. And these are at the Whitney show which by the way is on the thirtieth anniversary of the last Tuttle retrospective there, which completely polarized a very different art world.

Back then Hilton Kramer, my predecessor in this job, one of them, completely missing the boat about Tuttle, wrote the following. He said, “One is tempted to say that so far as art is concerned, less has never been as less as this.” (LAUGHTER) It’s a good line. “Work so spare could hardly be called major,” he said. I mean, this is as if Kurt Schwitters had never existed. So small size, delicacy, ephemeral materials, all these were signs of weakness. And, of course, this was against the backdrop of a lot of huge paintings and sculptures—I show you here Newman’s picture at the Modern, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*—and all of this industrial-sized sculpture, earthworks, and so forth. “Mr. Tuttle,” Kramer went on, “has for some years enjoyed an underground reputation as a minimal artist. On the base of this

exhibition, I think it would have been wiser to leave that reputation underground.” So Hilton acknowledged a community in this remark, it’s interesting, a community, an “underground” separate from the museum world that Tuttle, he felt, had rudely invaded. He was right, in a certain sense, although he was wrong, Tuttle was the real thing.

There was a downtown community back then. Philip Glass used to say about the *New York Times* that the *Times*, you know, had covered the music world, but it had to draw a limit somewhere, it couldn’t cover *everything*, so the *Times* decided to draw the limit at 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and nothing below 14<sup>th</sup> Street was there, was covered in the *Times*, which did, of course, change eventually. But that was speaking to this idea of a downtown community. I will remind you that in ’75, the time of Tuttle’s last show, you had Castelli and Weber and Sonnabend and Emmerich in 420 West Broadway, in Soho, Paula Cooper was there, but there were just a few galleries, really, of any significance at the time. Much of the real action happened in artist-run spaces, nonprofit places, and of course Soho had developed organically, as a light-industrial neighborhood, where artists settled for these big, flexible lofts. It was exactly the opposite of how Chelsea has come about, which was a top-down process. The loft law was passed in ’74 and that made it possible for artists to live in these commercial spaces. You’ll be pleased to know that at the time the average rent for a two-thousand-square-foot loft was two hundred dollars a month. But I think it’s also interesting how much of that art back then actually flirted with the law. You had artists living in spaces illegally. Today the art world is just so packaged. It’s sold like every other business. Like the movies and pop music. Then, you had artists living in these spaces illegally. Not just that, they were also *making* works, often illegally, in these spaces. I’m thinking for instance of Gordon Matta-Clark cutting through an abandoned West Side Pier. This is a work he called *Day’s End on Pier 52*. And also David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo taking over a different pier and then all the street art, which ultimately ended up as graffiti.

I also think, looking back then, it’s sort of interesting to see connections *across* kinds of art which were considered vanguard art, which were considered quite different. The way for instance, here Rauschenberg with *F-III* and Golub let’s say with his *Gigantomachys*, and even Smithson with his *Spiral Jetty* all shared what the critic Max Kosloff called “a similar premonition of civic ruin.” I think conservatives were simply unequipped or unwilling then to engage with most new art and with its eccentric materials, its irony, its examination of the border between high and low and its Dadaist

comedy, and felt that most of it was just nihilistic, exhibitionistic. But the 1960s and 1970s were also the last moments when big new movements arose, conceptualism, minimalism, and their offshoots like earth art, and they were addressing looming questions about art's fundamental role. Did sculptures need pedestals? Could fluorescent lights and the spaces those lights occupied be considered sculpture? This is Dan Flavin's work at Marfa. Might a hole dug in the desert, a hole making a *space* created by the *absence* of something, in this case dirt, might that hole itself be a sculpture? This is Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* in Nevada. Could lead tossed in the corner of a gallery be sculpture? This is Richard Serra. And was the action of tossing itself, in the way that theatrical performances are considered art, might that be considered art? Might other actions, pure provocations, be considered art?

I was struck, after 9/11, when Stockhausen outraged so many people by calling the attacks on the Trade Towers the greatest work of art ever. He was actually echoing a thought that Breton had said years earlier, which was that the simplest surrealist act would be to shoot a revolver at random in a crowd. As you may remember, in 1971, the artist Chris Burden actually had himself shot. It was a performance, if you wanted to call it that, the revulsion of which was the essence of its claim to be art. He also by the way had himself crucified to a Volkswagen. He was pushing provocation, its embrace of disdain to its logical or actually illogical extreme, and I think he realized that saying he was crazy wasn't sufficient to dismiss the work because private pathology could itself be the stuff of art. Down that line of attack, you would then say that someone like Artaud, for instance, couldn't possibly be making artistic drawings, because he was insane. It's also interesting that at that time, a patron class was just emerging, one that would really transform the art world by the Eighties and would cause my pal Bob Hughes in 1984 to presciently warn of what he called "a new porousness of the barrier which separates the language of disinterested evaluation from sales talk." A development that has created "Artworld, the cultural equivalent," he said, "of Disneyland." And that *was* happening. You know, the market was now being flooded with money, there was a new affluence and a new popularity. And this widening public was slowly diluting the historic dichotomy between "us" and "them," between "uptown" and "downtown." Pop culture was incorporating Pop Art. This was of course troubling for many artists.

Ad Reinhardt, for instance, was extremely disturbed, because he thought he was making the most objectionable art around. He found it horrible that people actually wanted to buy his paintings—so many did. Donald Judd was particularly upset because in the competition to be the most difficult he heard that

people found Hans Haacke's exposures of slumlords in New York much worse than his boxes. And anyway, this was, as I said, the context in which Tuttle was received by skeptics in '75, when I think he seemed like another kind of provocateur, just making works that were so small and simple that in a way they did for sculpture and painting what Burden did for performance. I myself have come to love these things, the good ones anyway, because they're about a kind of private engagement with materials. They're not sentimental, but they're *real*, they have a kind of honest interest in physical matter. And I think that has come across over the years and that's why he's been more warmly received lately. It's a kind of attempt to nudge minimalism towards personal touch and private speech, which I think is the spirit of the moment and it's about sort of addressing the ecstasies of paying very close attention to little incidents in life but also a reminder that modern art does *not* depend on certain materials, but on a certain way of looking at the world, a formal sensibility.

It's very odd that we would consider colored dirt smeared on a piece of cloth to be art—that's painting—but we're somehow deeply disturbed that he took a three-inch piece of clothesline and nailed it in the middle and on both ends to a wall, as he did here. This is his *Rope Piece*, which was particularly offensive to people, in the '75 show. You were meant to notice all sorts of things about the way the rope was interrupted by the nails, and so forth. I wonder if it would make a difference whether the cord—if the cord were say carved out of ivory, or marble, whether that would make it more palatable. Then there would be an element of craft. This is a work by Robert Gober, a handmade version of a sink. Anyway, that makes it a thing that not anybody could do. But, really, craft is inseparable from intent. That clothesline piece isn't about manual dexterity; it's about *perceptual* dexterity, sculptural space, about how a small disruption of an unbroken field will reconfigure the entire wall. The Duchampian effect, in other words, was to alter the contract between viewer and artist, making the object reside, you might say, somewhere in between the two. And of course, this is the great version of that, Manzoni's version of his own canned excrement. I think Duchamp's refusal of these certain conventions of art-making inspired what you might consider a new kind of interplay among artist, object, and viewer that has become, as Tuttle illustrates, central to what we often find the most discomfiting in a lot of art.

It also coincides with this institutional shift, this explosion of galleries and the infatuation of museums with contemporary art. I have to say this is a very interesting thing. There is so much interest now in all museums in contemporary art. These are works from *Greater New York*, the show that was at PS1 this

summer and which really pandered to the Chelsea market and its kind of pedophilic inclination. But it's very interesting that there are so many kinds of museums now which accept the idea of contemporary art as essential to their program. Back in the Fifties, critics like Greenberg and Rosenberg and others were really on the barricades arguing against tremendous institutional opposition, and that put criticism, I think, at the front. And nowadays by the time most art gets to me it's been packaged and sold and critics come really at the rear end, either to ratify what's been marketed or to ironize on the whole process. The consequences are, you know, obviously more artists in play and a great deal more mediocrity. But, you know, most literature is bad, most television, most movies, most new music. I think we're a visual culture deluged by images, and we're somewhat more alert to how we and they can be manipulated but we're not so sophisticated when we look at art, and I think it partly has to do with a combination of money and lofty expectations. You know, you walk into a place like the Met or into these white-box galleries. This is one of my favorites, this is Paula Cooper's gallery and that's a picture of Paula Cooper by Robert Mapplethorpe painted by Rudolf Stingel. And you know these are like chapels, you have the chapel in the front and then you have in the back the room for commerce. I think Peter Schjeldahl used the phrase "Eros and Mammon." These mutually repellent but also mutually dependent spaces which encapsulate capitalist culture and account, I think, for the particular glamour and repulsion of this art scene. That much of what is shown is minor, or worse, really shouldn't be surprising, but I think it's the discrepancy between art and setting, topped by all the cash that's now involved, that can make what's really natural seem like a scam. What has been lost, of course, by the absorption of art into more popular culture, with its infatuation with the new, and with youth, and what's marketable, is some of the power that used to be accrued by being on the margins, of being a true outsider looking in. I think that now art is less a separate sphere of culture than a kind of uneasy, sometimes desperate to please, sometimes unwilling, subset of a larger culture, which means it can more easily overshadowed by, or mistaken for, other types of entertainment and without its clear oppositional role, which gave to new art an implicit political function, it becomes much more a private, individual matter, a question of personal choice, like other consumer enterprises.

And I think there's no better indication of this shift toward consumer choice and private will than the absorption of what really is one of the most difficult brands of modern art into the mainstream via the form of the modern memorial. I'm talking about minimalism's absorption in particular, which, as you may have noticed, has become the kind of default language of public remembrance today. Minimalist

forms I think have become that—this is from Maya Lin’s Memorial in Washington—because they’re perfect backdrops onto which we can project our own private desires and beliefs; they’re kind of blank slates—or mirrors—for personal inscription, suited very much to a kind of post-ideological age. I wanted to explore for a little while exactly how this happened. You know, it used to be that monuments were commissioned by kings and queens and dukes and so forth and they expressed official tastes and, you know, if you had Michaelangelo doing your art you could be sure that you would be remembered after your death if you were a Medici. But democracy in the modern era altered the situation dramatically. Official art in a democracy requires consensus opinion, an aesthetic common denominator, but modern art by its nature is about one person’s vision, and the idea of a consensus is rather antithetical. So modern art has had its various priorities. It may be about its own materials. Memorial art is something else. It’s supposed to be therapeutic, redemptive. These are obviously different things. Modern artists love ambiguity and irony. Monument builders don’t. Modern artists are comfortable making anti-monuments. This, as you know, is Claes Oldenburg’s giant sculpture of a clothespin in Philadelphia. The Oldenburg sculptures imply that what we share today as a society is no longer a set of common ideals or heroes, the stuff of traditional monuments and memorials, but a bunch of everyday household objects and consumer desires. “The notion of a modern monument,” Louis Mumford wrote, more than sixty years ago, “is a contradiction in terms. If it is a monument, it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument.”

I won’t belabor the whole story of the Oklahoma bombing memorial right now, but briefly, as you may recall, people in Oklahoma wanted it to be everything. It was supposed to be a place to mourn, a place that warned against terrorism, a symbol the terrorists hadn’t won, a forum for social debates, a history museum, a place people could come to hear music. “The goal was nothing less than the civic transformation of anyone who visited,” Edward Linenthal wrote, in a book about it. He said, “This is what people have come to expect of memorials at the end of the twentieth century.” And in fact everything about the memorial, as with Ground Zero, became a subject of debate. The word “murdered” for instance, some of the survivors didn’t want the word “murdered” because there was a woman named Rebecca Anderson, who rushed in, trying to save people, and she was killed, so she hadn’t been murdered. A family didn’t want the word “hope” presented anywhere in the memorial, because they said that they had lost hope. The final design called for this row of bronze-and-glass chairs, like tombstones, representing the 168 people who died, and also for an exhibition about terrorism. Of course the

memorial turned out not to be a very good civics lesson at all. There's very little in it about how Timothy McVeigh came about, or about the spread of guns. And Oklahoma City has the distinction of hosting the world's biggest gun bazaar, so you can now visit the memorial and then buy an AK-47.

From our perspective, I want to stress two things. One that the Oklahoma memorial is minimalist, or minimalistic in its design, and I'll remind you again of Judd's Marfa, but also that it commemorates ordinary people, something so obvious and commonplace now that you probably would take it for granted, but something that memorials did not always do. You'll recall that Rodin, in the nineteenth century, when he built a monument to the Burghers of Calais, caused quite a fuss because the commission had called in fact for him to memorialize only *one* of the burghers, the richest man in town. He decided to make a monument showing *all* of the burghers, who had been ordered out of town by the king—this was an incident in the fourteenth century—with their heads and feet bare and their halters around their neck and so forth. They were expelled. He showed them all, and he made them all life-size, grouped as a square, looking not heroic at all, but rather gaunt. People thought it was extremely graceless. People said it looked like criminals, not martyrs. Rodin said this was the point—it was about the leveling of the human condition and conveying through the way that he presented the figures that people were equal. It was a related point really about the ordinariness of heroism. In other words, Rodin was bringing the masses into proximity with his heroes by eliminating highfalutin allegory, stressing the real. These burghers were real men, plain people. And I think this monument ushered in the idea of a public memorial on a *par* with the public.

You leap ahead in time. Postwar artists of course increasingly distrusted monuments, especially after the Nazis and the Soviets had used them to promote totalitarian ideas. Oldenburg, as I mentioned before, was making these mock-heroic civic sculptures that were very Pop and very funny. They reflected a kind of public skepticism. They were monumental in the sense that they were very big, but their themes were anti-monumental. Maybe the most famous was this one he made, called *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*, it's at Yale and it's this giant phallic lipstick. During the Vietnam War, people compared it to a warhead, and it had been partly inspired by something that the philosopher Marcuse said, that “a really subversive monument would help to bring society as it existed to an end. People,” Marcuse said, “would thereafter refuse to take anything seriously, neither their president nor the cabinet

nor the corporate executives. There is a way in which this kind of satire, of humor, can indeed kill. I think it would be one of the most bloodless means to achieve a radical change.”

Several years later, this concept of the anti-monument became the basis for a very remarkable Holocaust memorial in Germany. The artists Jochen and Esther Gerz were commissioned during the mid-1980s by the city of Hamburg to make a monument, which they called *Against Fascism, War, and Violence, For Peace and Human Rights*. This is it. They were offered actually a leafy site in a park, but they chose instead this pedestrian shopping mall in Harburg, a rather dingy suburb of Hamburg, with a population mainly of Turkish guest workers and blue-collar Germans. The monument consisted of this column, about forty feet high and three feet square. It was a hollow aluminum pillar, with a layer of soft lead on the outside and a stylus, it's steel, so that anybody could write on the pillar. And as people filled the bottom part of the pillar it would be lowered into the ground and this would continue and continue until finally the pillar would be entirely written on and buried. Here it is lower down. So the monument was unveiled in 1986, and it vanished in the ground in 1993. Like Oldenburg, the Gerzes were making a Dadaist statement, but they were also, I think, trying to find a serious way of making monuments at the end of the twentieth century that had none of the overtones of traditional memorials, which they associated with fascism, especially in Germany. Their monument was really temporary, ambiguous, participatory, and allegorical only if you thought of the pillar as a metaphor for the Jews who were made to vanish. Some Harburgers saw the pillar as a chimney, but the allegory was anyone's guess. You could project onto it what you wanted. The Gerzes talked about “a black knife being slowly plunged into the country's back.” As you can imagine, people wrote all sorts of things on it. Stars of David and swastikas. The visual analogies have probably already popped into your head between the Gerzes' pillar and any number of minimalist sculptures. I'll show you here not the Gerzes' pillar when it was buried but Walter de Maria's work of 1977, which preceded this, called *Vertical Earth Kilometer* in Kassel, Germany.

I want to add another visual connection between the pillar reflecting German public sentiment and Maya Lin's memorial, which reflected, very purposefully, the faces of the people who came to see it. Lin talked specifically about the reflective black granite wall as a kind of mirror. The point, she said, is to see yourself reflected in the names. So you can see the gradual transformation of late modernism's most abstract, perhaps most difficult, language, minimalism, into its opposite, something democratic,



personal, and sentimental. This is of course the populist brilliance of the Vietnam Memorial, which comes straight out of Richard Serra's vocabulary. Here is the Memorial—Maya Lin's work—and here are two things that Serra did. This is a work called *Pulitzer*. This is a work called *Shift*. Lin combined the theatricality and essential ambiguity of minimalist abstraction with the most literal kind of descriptive device, that is, a list, which represents every person who died in the Vietnam War, not through some generalized image of a soldier holding a gun or a flag, but specifically by name. She grasped two things. The value of naming and the nostalgia inherent in what you might call the modern memorial sublime, the way minimalist art, precisely because of its stripped-down elemental forms, evokes a kind of lost grandeur.

The approach of the Vietnam Memorial was carried forward in other memorials as well. There's the one in Vienna by Rachel Whiteread in a gingerbread square called the Judenplatz and it's really just an eggshell-colored minimalist block, about twelve feet high and twenty-four feet wide. And of course there is now the memorial designed for Ground Zero by Michael Arad, which, since its acceptance as the winner in an open competition, at the insistence of the jury, has been "greened" by the landscape architect Peter Walker. The original plan called for an empty plaza and two voids where the Twin Towers had been, with waterfalls in the voids and an underground museum. If Lin's memorial looks like some of Serra's work, Arad's looks even more like a part of Michael Heizer's *Northeast, Southwest* from the 1960s, which, perhaps only coincidentally, was installed, to lots of fanfare, at Dia's museum in Beacon not long before the competition for Ground Zero. It consists of these four big vertigo-inducing steel holes cut into a concrete floor, up to twenty feet deep, in the shapes of a wedge, a cone, part of an upturned cone, and a double-stepped square, which is exactly the shape of Arad's design for his waterfall fountains.

I have to just stop to say that when I first saw these—if you've been there you know—they're incredibly scary things because you're standing over this abyss. And Michael Goven, who's the director of the Museum—I said, "Michael, how are you going to do this? People are going to be scared out of their wits. People could *die* falling into these things." He said, "You know, we've looked into this and you'll only die if you fall into one of them. The others, you could break a leg or something, but you wouldn't die. The double square, for instance, you would strain your knee or something."

I think it's interesting that those Ground Zero voids explore the same idea of negative sculpture that Heizer devised there. In this case, too, Heizer's work depends on a certain kind of necessary scale and abstract simplicity. We'll have to see, at Ground Zero, whether the addition of trees and water dilute the work or not. I think the point is that the best modern memorials have come to exploit this open-endedness of minimalism, with its allegorical pliancy, to embrace a range of public feelings. We live in a diverse, divided culture which, like the art world, eludes consensus. And memorials act like mirrors of our openness and also our changing sense of history. They don't resolve problems, but I do think they are intended to keep them in the public mind. In a sense, that's what art is meant to do too, not answer things but ask questions.

I wanted to end by saying that I think in a curious twist of fate they've also perhaps made it easier for people to appreciate some of the same art from which they derived. Heizer is an example, but I think the other obvious example is Serra, who, as you know, of course not so long ago was considered the most unbearable and unlovable artist around, and his work, of course, was carted out of the plaza downtown, and now he's become one of our most beloved artists and the transformation has something to do, I think, with the absorption of his language into popular culture. This is a work which is now in Bilbao but was for a while installed, as you see here, in Naples, where it was hugely popular, exactly the opposite of what had happened to the work downtown. It's a spiral, which you walk into and it became a gathering place in Naples. It's since moved to Bilbao and I think Serra's installation at Bilbao in this impossibly huge room at the Guggenheim there in Spain is really one of the great works of the past half-century or so. And that's Richard standing there. In fact the work I've just showed you from Naples, which was carted to there. I think that the interesting thing is that this whole installation rejuvenates abstract art, pushes it to a whole new level, partly because it's humane. It depends on individual perception, individual discovery. I realize that's an odd remark to say about Serra, whose work was considered so aggressive. But this has to do with this idea of our personal attention to these works, and our ability to make of them what we choose. There was an interesting remark he made when he was in Kyoto once. He said that looking at art there in the temple gardens was "very different," he said, "than looking, say, at Renaissance art, because the whole process of understanding the gardens involved," he said "your participation, observation, and concentration based on movement." He said, "It was primary for my development, seeing those gardens."

And that's exactly what you have here in Bilbao. These eight sculptures, two here, this snake, which had been there, and then several back here, in this very oddly shaped room by Frank Gehry. *How* you move through this work is really what the work is about. What the spaces look like inside, where they close you off, and the spaces are private and psychological and tight, and then outside, where the spaces are public, social, and open, and how the shapes work against the architecture. Even sound is a factor in these works, where you hear your footsteps, at certain places, there's echoes. These works are very much about your movement through them and your experience in that moment. There's no single path, no prime vantage point, you either get the work or not by moving through it. And you—everyone makes up their own experience of *how* they move through it, at different speeds, stopping at different places, retaining certain impressions and overlooking others. People talk about the size of this work, but of course, in fact, the work is really, like Heizer's work, about the spaces they create, not about the objects themselves. It is, in a sense, a kind of negative sculpture. The spaces close in on you, they cut off light, they bulge outward, and then they end in these extraordinary openings, these like arenas or bullrings or fields that kind of come as a surprise as you've walked through these spirals or ellipses, and you suddenly come on these openings, like through here. And I think it's very important that you *cannot* keep these shapes whole in your mind. You can't retain definite mental pictures of any of them. In effect, you can never see them whole, not from *any* angle, so that what you have is really a series, an accumulation of fleeting impressions.

Serra's work, in other words, despite its enormity, shifts the focus from sculpture as object to the viewer as subject, which is where we began, and as such they are I think not a bad metaphor for the cultural moment right now. During the Sixties Judd stressed the integrity of sculptural objects made of industrial materials, whose meanings were meant to be fixed and instantly present. But then Serra and Smithson and Nauman and others came along, and enlisted time and movement and the time it took to walk through the work, and past the work, and Bilbao I think is the culmination of this transformation to a new sort of drama. Not just drama in the sense that the sculptures are striking, but also in the sense that they are *temporal* experiences. They refresh Fried's old bugaboo about theatricality, and turn it on its head, make it a virtue. Because these works unfold like plays or films. They withhold and control the disclosure of information until the climax, in this case, the inside spaces, which you can't see until the end—they're like surprise endings. As I said at the beginning about Cartier-Bresson, standing before the

Bonnards, we experience these works each in our own way, according to our attunement in the moment as private monuments to our openness of mind and our willingness to see.

Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: I wanted to thank you all for coming on this incredible cold snowy day. I'm very touched you're here. I'll take a few questions about anything. I'll answer questions about anything really, up to a point, if there are any?

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Craft and intent. What I was saying there was that I find it interesting that people talk about—Chuck Close was the one who said to me about the magic of painting, basically what it is, is colored dirt smeared on a piece of cloth. I found it interesting that we accept the idea of painting, materially, as being made out of something, in other words, not very significant. But then we look at a lot of art like Tuttle's, which is made of cheap materials: florists' wire, plywood, and so forth, and that somehow becomes a sign of its non-art status. What I was saying about the cloth piece was that—I think that's what stops a lot of people. If they saw it as a kind of *netsuke* Japanese thing, a beautiful little carved object made out of ivory or stone, it might be okay. But the fact that it's made out of humble material like that stops people and makes them think it's really nothing. But I think in that case it's not about material. It's about a kind of sculptural intent, and I was saying that in general, craft, that is all kinds of art-making, is inseparable from the intent to which it's placed and that's obviously true with painting, but I meant in the case of something like the clothesline to consider it not a work of art because it's made out of a material like that seems to me to just ignore what the intent of that particular work is. That's all I meant there.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: I'm not quite sure I interpreted that question, but I will say this—that I think I meant what I said late in this process, that most art you see is just terrible, and there's so much of it out there now. It's like the old Jewish joke: the food's terrible and the portions are so small. (LAUGHTER) This is just sort of like the reverse. The stuff is so terrible and there's just so much of it. I don't find that terribly interesting as a fact. It's grueling to walk through Chelsea. I didn't go to this fair and I generally avoid fairs. Fairs have become very much the kind of main attraction of the contemporary world because there's just this money involved. People mistake money for value in art, and they're not the same thing. In the 1980s the Japanese collectors were spending insane amounts of money for third-rate Impressionist pictures—and, by the way, the market for that has just, just barely come back now. That was never about the value of that art. Chelsea to a large extent is now dictating what happens at these fairs and the fairs dictate what's often written about and written about in the magazines. I've really basically been trying to argue here for the idea that while this may be true, while much of what we see may not be very interesting and while there isn't a clear through-line as there perhaps seemed to be in the Fifties and even into the Sixties, there is stuff out there of very different and interesting sorts. One needs to make the effort. That's why I mentioned the case of almost drowning watching Matthew's work—I find myself moved by all sorts of things unexpectedly, it just requires some effort. And by *all* sorts of things, I mean I love Chardin, but I also find interesting work like Tuttle's, which in a way couldn't be more different.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Place of beauty in art today? A few words? Let me think. Let me see if I can answer that question by just saying, this is a subject that comes up a lot now. As if beauty had gone away and it has been recovered. This is one of those wonderful marketing tools of art. There wasn't beauty and now we've got beauty and we understand it. I think it only makes sense in that there was a lot of rebarbative, almost penitential, work in the early Nineties, preachifying political work that was very hard to take and it was exemplified by the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which is often called "the political Biennial" and I remember writing about it, "I hate this show." In retrospect it was probably the best Biennial in a long time. I think after that there was an effort to say, "Listen, we still want beauty." I see this in a different way. Beauty

comes in a lot of different forms in art and often it can be the beauty of an idea. A lot of things that have come to interest me about a lot of kinds of conceptual art is its humane beauty. It has nothing to do with, isn't, in fact, even a physical thing. But I find much art beautiful that isn't even physically tangible or isn't terribly—doesn't try to be physically beautiful. There is a great deal of skill today. It's not true that people no longer know how to draw or paint. Art students are trained to the nth degree to make exquisite drawings, and there's a tremendous amount of painting skill. It's not about skill. That kind of beauty is shallow beauty. That's done because there's an endless market to sell such things. But I think beauty is something much more significant than that.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: The thing about the motorcycle show—I'll answer your question—that I found very interesting. Walk in the Museum of Modern Art and there's a helicopter hanging there. There's always been a helicopter hanging in the Museum of Modern Art. They've collected cars. One of the great things about Alfred Barr, the genius, was to recognize, it grew out of a whole idea that he'd adopted from the Victoria and Albert or the Old South Kensington Museum, this idea that craft—not just craft, but I mean industrial objects and everyday objects of design were part and parcel of modern art and modern culture. We somehow accepted that all this time the Modern could collect cars and collect motorcycles and whatever and then suddenly then go up to the Guggenheim and it's this extreme offense to high art. Look, Tom Krens has done *unbelievably* ridiculous things, including building that ridiculous room which after all these years finally he filled with something okay, in Bilbao. His philosophy about that museum is that you build a building, it's almost unusable for art, and it doesn't matter because people will just go to it whether there's anything in it or not, which is true. About a million people go to the museum all the time. But that show actually I sort of thought was—it wasn't the most uninteresting thing. Some of those motorcycles were rather handsome. It became a parody—he would move it around the globe from one stop to another—but I didn't find the motorcycles themselves unbeautiful objects in the same way that I don't find many design objects. Barr's successor, Rene D'Harnoncourt, had a wonderful remark. He was once in a department store in St. Louis, selling what were then called the Good Design Shows that the Modern did, with the

Merchandise Mart in Chicago, and he was asked, “What are you doing here selling—trying to promote the Modern in a department store?” And he said, “For every person who can’t understand a Mondrian or a Rietveld abstract painting, they can understand an Eames chair or a Breuer chair, and once they get that, that’s their entrée, then they’ll be able to understand the rest of modern art. It’s all part of the same thing.” And in that spirit I understood the motorcycle show.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: In fact it is true that that museum—one of the things that has been going on at the Guggenheim which is quite admirable is that he’s found a way, and other people there have too, to turn over that extraordinary building, which by the way is really the classic first example of the museum building as the destination in and of itself. I think out of that has grown all of this crazy architecture of museums, in which it’s very nonfunctional or there’s no collection but the building is the site. Krens understood that the right space, in its idiosyncrasy, was an interesting space to make use of, and has turned it over to artists who know how to make some interesting use of it. Barney was a good example.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: You want to disagree with me about the Serra piece downtown, yeah.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: I understand what you’re saying. I think in fact and—this is what I was saying—and I think their muteness, their ability to act as mirrors, as reflections, is precisely why I agree with you about that. They have become a kind of default language, but they also have implicit in them in their scale and form something of a kind of monumental sublime. There’s some implicit idea of a great space. And one feels that when you’re out seeing Heizer’s *City* or *Double Negative*, or minimalist and post-minimalist objects, and even in Judd’s Marfa.

The thing about downtown I think was that that language, which then seems so—there are many reasons why that didn't work downtown, and I understand that completely, and it has a lot to do with just the nature of public art in New York, too. But I suspect if that you were to install Serra's spiral in that same federal plaza downtown, that while there would be a lot of protests about it, that there would also be a very different reaction than there had been fifteen, twenty, maybe it's twenty-five years now.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Well, it doesn't matter what *he* thinks it's about. I think my point was that you have this extraordinary situation, in which a lot of kinds of so-called extremely difficult art, the Sixties and Seventies conceptualism and the case of Christo, even, and minimalism, has now in the absence of a genuine "us-them" avant-garde has been kind of infiltrated into popular language, our everyday notion of art in ways where it's sort of unconscious. I don't think Richard would agree with what I'm saying. I don't think that Richard cares whether people would like his spiral in the Federal Plaza. Though I do think he finds it somewhat ironic that he's become this incredibly lovable artist, that you have moms pushing baby strollers through these spirals, when twenty-five years ago he was sort of Public Enemy Number One. I think a lot of that is just that we have caught up to a certain extent with some of the language. As I was trying to say at the end, in a sense backwards. That language influenced things like the memorials—Maya Lin—and in turn those kind of spaces have accustomed us to more of this kind of work, more of *his* kind of work.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Nonsense, no, no, no, not nonsense, but unusual, yeah.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: (IN PROGRESS). . . choose anecdotes which would. I think precisely the opposite of nonsense. I was genuinely affected by what Richard Tuttle said. I



thought that *was* something. It said something about that picture in the same way that I thought Kiki Smith's observation about that room, about that Chinese room, opened my eyes to a way of looking at a museum. This is what I was trying to talk—to suggest, that artists help us see outside art history and the art history textbooks and the kind of nonsense that now occupies art history classrooms.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: No.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: I find many artists—the cliché that artists are not articulate is insane. Richard Serra is an unbelievably articulate man and knows exactly what he is doing and is almost absurdly articulate. Wayne Thiebaud is an incredibly articulate man, who, by the way, spends a lot of his time teaching. Most artists, I find, are profoundly articulate. Even in ways that are unconventional, but interesting. Cindy Sherman is a good example. She is not really good about explaining things in a way we think art historians are supposed to do, but I find her deeply observant. I don't buy into the idea that artists are sort of—what I meant to say was that their example, as a creative process of looking, is very useful to us.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: One more, Mr. Hughes, yes.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Yeah, I think about that all the time.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Well, you know.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Okay, sure.

(QUESTION IS INAUDIBLE)

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN: Wow, what a possibility. It isn't the first thing I would do if I were king for a day, by the way. With limited powers . . . this is it? Wow, that's pathetic. I want to say this. I went to graduate school when art history was changing, and it was becoming, now, much more theory-based. I actually went there because I had studied history as an undergraduate and I sort of thought maybe there was a way to ground the study of *culture* in serious history and not in sort of connoisseurship or something. And so when I was at the Fogg, Tim Clark was teaching there and there was just the beginnings of this idea of theory. And it seemed useful, but I realized that I was not learning how to look at a work of art. I had no idea—I wasn't at all trained how to do that. And since then I left there really having had to conduct my education in public—I certainly am and was—and it's because I really felt this profound failure of art history, as it had come to be taught, to deal with the object, to deal with real artists, to deal with *language* as something that should be clear and clean. You're the great example of this. I was talking about some of this earlier. Art writing—great writers used to write about art because art was a great subject. Tolstoy and Proust and Baudelaire and Diderot, these were *writers* who found art a good subject. The academy has taken over the field of art writing and it turned it into almost—they've marginalized it. This is my final word about that. I sort of became, well, I was very depressed, by the time I left graduate school, about this fact. I do believe that students are a little like artists, when I said they always zig if you tell them to zag. I may be wrong about this, but I think that smart people, as students, will react against that. I think—I like to believe that there will come out of this people who refuse—because, after all, the field does continue to change, that there will be coming out of this people who really feel that art is more important, more relevant to life, which it is, rather than just to the small group of, you know, academics, who write for each other and maybe out of this will come some change. At the moment, it's almost painful. It's as if art is

only of interest to a small group, and I just don't believe that's true. Thank God there are writers like you around, though.

Thank you very much.