

# The Death of Modern Art

By James Howard Kunstler



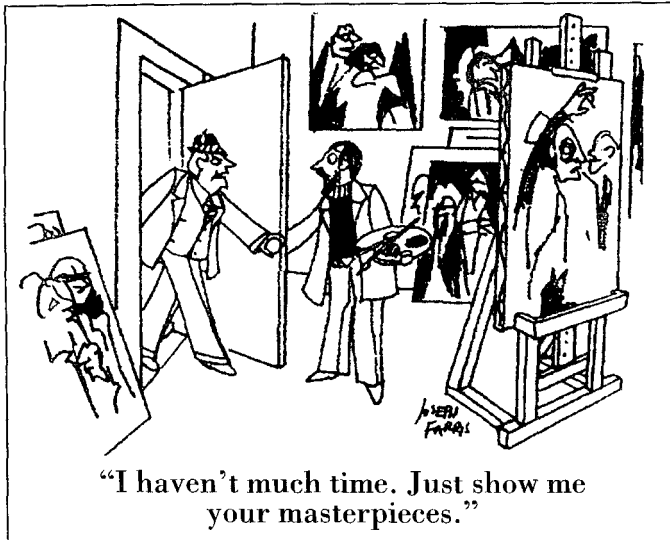
**"More vomit."**

A few years ago, when I was married to a charming, wealthy woman, we went around our town shopping for a house. Virtually all of the homes the realtors dragged us through were large, expensive, even historic, owned by doctors, lawyers, executives, and their upper-income brethren. I was shocked, though, to see what they had on their walls: mostly nothing except, by order of frequency, airbrushed yearbook photos of their kids, copper wall "pieces" of sailboats, fabric "landscapes" and similar banalities, various "folk art" objects constructed 20 minutes before sale, and some desultory museum posters. I don't remember seeing a single real painting.

I was dismayed by the sheer lack of interest in art. So many serious, professional people dwelling, despite the market value of their homes, in a sort of domestic squalor. The absence of art seemed to occur, I noticed, in proportion with the dissolution of families—a lot of these houses were on the market due to divorce. It was obvious, too, that all the discretionary spending money of these households had gone into cars, electronic gadgetry, computer paraphernalia, and other toys. But something else is also clear: Few people are moved enough by the art produced today to want it in their homes.

In our time, art no longer resides much in the upper-middle-class household. Where is it found instead? Well, in corporate

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boardrooms (though it is ironic that the executives who toil for these corporations usually live in expensive homes devoid of contemporary art). And in museums. Plus the art departments of universities that train museum managers. Art as a vocation having marched off into the metaphysical ether over the last century, art ownership has become a hermetic activity, not a popular enthusiasm.

To expect the people of one time to behave like people of another time may be silly. The American industrial plutocrats who bought Old Masters by the shipload hung paintings of the anguished Christ on the walls of their mansions for reasons far different from what the artists of 1573, or their patrons, may have had in mind. In many nineteenth-century bourgeois homes, paintings were a somewhat elevated form of decor, one-of-a-kind works, executed within certain technical conventions, for invoking beauty and truth in small doses. Truth and beauty are powerful forces, and middle-class people busy removing splens and probating estates can only be expected to absorb so much of them in their leisure time.

But over recent decades, art has altogether forsaken the invocation of beauty and truth as a governing objective. In the train wreck of culture and authority that the twentieth century represented, all the previous sortings of human meaning were abandoned, smoking in the ditch of history; what we have been left with is a trade in debris. That a lot of modern art looks like debris is therefore relevant—I am thinking specifically now of a Whitney Museum biennial exhibition of the 1990s, which included one "piece" that was a gigantic blob of fabricated plastic vomit, of the kind that used to be sold in Times Square joke shops when I was a kid, only ten times bigger. Modern art exhibits have become exceedingly political, with the angry women rampant and anathematizing all other modes of expression except their polemics.

The twentieth century was a kind of nervous breakdown for western civilization. In art, it brought us extreme abstraction resulting in a tendency to replace conscious awareness with strictly personal symbolism—precisely the same thing that is most characteristic of mental illness in individual human beings. This process can only be understood if one accepts that civilized humans long shared a consensus about what constitutes reality—with plenty of room for interpretation and originality within that consensus, which in the best of cultures is nec-

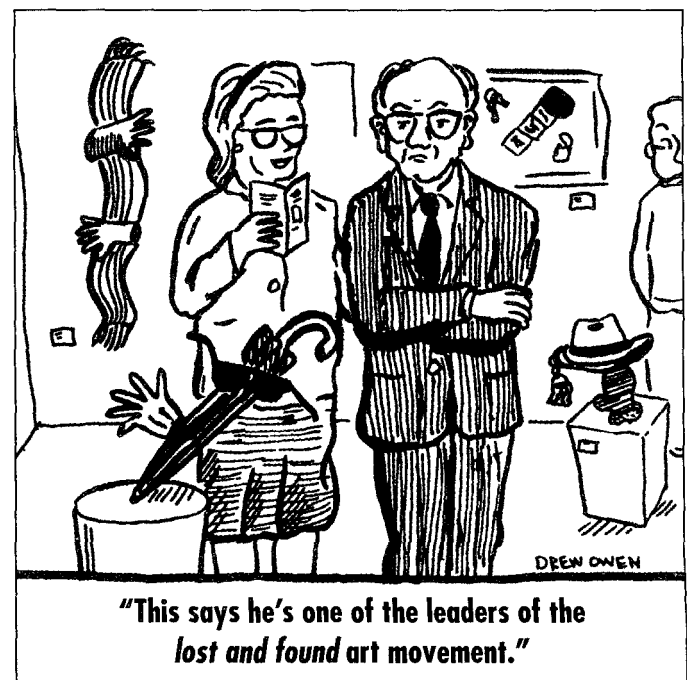
essarily broad and cosmopolitan, admitting and successfully integrating many points of view. The consensus about truth and beauty was robust in the years preceding World War I, and hence many beautiful paintings and sculptures were produced using the artistic forms of the era—technical art conventions also being a product of consensus among those who practice art.

A return to mental health in the sick usually entails a reconnection of the individual to the consensus about reality. This permits that individual to function socially. Modern art has not so far been able to make that return trip.

After abstraction became established as the norm in art practice and art academia, another distorting element entered the scene: extreme narcissism, an excessive preoccupation with the self, a malady that in the case of the art world and its denizens went miles beyond garden variety self-absorption into extreme grandiosity. Add to this the diminishing capacity of Americans to distinguish between show biz and reality, between celebrity and achievement. (This, after all, was Andy Warhol's chief subject matter, a technician of fame for fame's sake.) All this culminates in a nation whose response to calamity is often the herding-together of teddy bears—an operation that, in recent decades, could easily be accepted as "an art installation."

My personal sense is that the Modernist racket is utterly played out. We are entering an age of global strife and national austerity in which truth and beauty will be essential survival tools. We've had enough cultural pranks and party tricks to last ten generations, and I expect next a stark reaction against all the deliberate nonsense of recent artistic production.

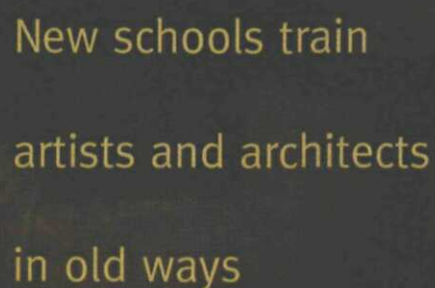
Only a nation as culturally obese as America in the second half of the twentieth century could afford to discount truth and beauty to practically zero. Soon their value will revive as we seek meaning in lives lived much closer to the bone. It's getting dark up here in Western civ. It's time for artists to get used to it—and get serious.





# Teaching Tradition

By Catesby Leigh



New schools train  
artists and architects  
in old ways

"Reflections" by Jacqueline Capp.