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Cultural backwash

On the muddied state of art and identity.

Politics, the late Andrew Breitbart remarked, is downstream of culture. In other words, the nature of a society's culture influences the nature of its politics. So if you care about politics—those communal arrangements that, in Aristotle's summary, conduce to the good for man—you will also care about culture. What should we think about the state of our culture? Should we be happy about the state of those institutions that we have entrusted to preserve and transmit the cultural aspirations of our society? Human beings are creatures who exist in perpetual tension between what they are and what they would be. Which means that the answer to that second question will always be No. The imperfection, the longing, that is at the heart of the human condition bequeaths us perpetual dissatisfaction. Still, there are differences to be noted, distinctions to be made, and it is clear that some eras enjoy a healthier, more vibrant cultural life than others.

When we look around at the institutions that define our culture—our families, our schools and colleges, those communities devoted to the arts and entertainment, those that are devoted to formulating our public self-understanding—what do we see? A full analysis or phenomenology of our cultural institutions would fill a book, or many books. But the yeasty political environment we inhabit is mirrored by a curious (to speak softly) cultural environment. Here are a few snapshots.

On January 19, Mary Katherine Ham reported in *The Federalist* on a cultural hall of mirrors. Back in 2014, Ivanka Trump, now the new First Daughter, had posted on Instagram a picture of herself getting ready for an event. She sits in a white robe, iPhone in hand, in front of a mirror while a stylist does her hair.

Enter Richard Prince, an Artist™ whose medium is "appropriation art," i.e., other people make the stuff, he "appropriates" it, exhibits it, and gets paid for it. An exhibition of work (it would not be quite accurate to say "his work") in 2014 consisted mostly of enlarged versions of other people's Instagram pictures. If you are wondering how appropriation—Communist regimes call it "expropriation"—differs from simple theft, you are not alone. As Ms. Ham notes, Prince, a certified "Controversial Artist," has been sued by artists whose work he has stolen, er, appropriated. But if Prince displays an imperfect appreciation for the distinction between meum and tuum, he seems to have a lively appetite for lucrum. For a fee of $36,000, Ivanka Trump commissioned Prince to make an enlarged version of her own Instagram selfie. She then posed in front of the picture and posted

it on Instagram. “There’s post-modern and poster-modern,” Ms. Ham observes, “and then there’s postest-modern.” You might think that $36,000 was rather a steep price for printing an enlarged copy of an iPhone photo, but de gustibus non disputandum etc. Artist finds patron. Patron pays artist. The world continues to revolve.

We now move to Chapter Two. It was a dark and stormy night. It was, in fact, the night of November 8, 2016. Then it was the early morning of November 9. Donald John Trump confounded all the clever people and won the U.S. presidential election. The clever people, as we’ve had occasion to note, were very unhappy about this. Richard Prince, being an Artist™, is *ex officio* a clever person, so he, too, was unhappy. Richard Prince does not like Donald Trump, so he officially expropriated his appropriation and tweeted a picture of his picture with the declaration “This is not my work. I did not make it. I deny. I denounce. This fake art.” In another tweet, he noted that “The money has been returned. SheNowOwnsAfake.”

> Can an artist utter a spell and rob an object of its value?

Back in the 1950s, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley inveighed against what they called “the intentional fallacy,” the idea that the meaning of a work inheres in its author’s intention. Most observers agreed that their argument was conclusive, but they hadn’t bargained on the brazen declaratory sabotage of Richard Prince. Humpty Dumpty famously told Alice that a word means just what he wants it to mean, neither more nor less. “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Even Humpty Dumpty might be taken aback by Richard Prince’s prestidigitation. He proposes not merely to bend the meaning of words to his will, but the ontological status of objects. This selfie is just a selfie. But that one, indistinguishable from the first, is accorded the magical status of art. A token of that status is the 36,000 smackeroos that someone paid for it. But the money is not essential to its identity.

> The stream of culture has become positively toxic.

But how about an artist’s moods? What if he decides he doesn’t like a customer? Can he utter a spell, like a character from a Harry Potter tale, and rob an object of its status as art and, consequently, its monetary value? I suspect that Mary Katherine Ham is correct in speculating that Ivanka Trump is not too concerned about this contingency, and I agree that it would be splendid indeed if Richard Prince’s intended ontological demotion had the opposite effect, according the photograph super-artistic status as one of the very rare works that has undergone the double magic of appropriation and (pardon the neologism) unappropriation. Like Ms. Ham, we “would enjoy it very much if Prince’s disowning added to the value.”

> If the value of his art is its meta-commentary on modernity and pop culture, then didn't he just add another layer of art by commenting yet again in the context of the biggest confluence of pop culture and politics the country has ever seen?

An excellent question, and we await the opinion of the judges.

Meanwhile, it is worth savoring some of the entrepreneurial possibilities that this artistic poseur has opened up. Apparently, Prince has disowned his work from the 1970s. It's not, he has declared, part of the canon of Richard Prince. For the most part, Ms. Ham reports, galleries keep his early work out of their exhibition announcements in order "to avoid copyright entanglements with an artist whose oeuvre is a web of intentional copyright entanglements."

This is where the possibilities get delicious. Ms. Ham asks us to imagine a post-post-modern artist (or, between us, just a *méchant* prankster) who gets hold of some of Prince's disowned work and decides to host an exhibition of "Richard Prince Works That Annoy Richard Prince." It's a recognized category, and, as Ms. Ham notes, Ivanka's portrait should be front and center. Of course, she adds, "someone would have to have access to hip Manhattan digs to host such a thing, a lot of money, and a dedication to vengeful trolling necessary to spend it on this. I can't for the life of me think of anyone like that." Ha!

So where are we? "This is a tale of a celebrity selfie," Ms. Ham writes, "which became an artist's copy of a selfie, which became a valuable piece of art before it became an artist's political comment on the copy of a selfie of a celebrity who is now a political figure, who has yet to comment on his comment." And here's the punch line, or part of it: "[W]e are asked to believe this is all very important and powerful. Who can blame the American public for having trouble knowing real from fake anymore?"

Another good question, and one that brings us to our second snapshot, a scene from the much-heralded "Women's March" last month. It's not only in the art world that fakes, untrammeled narcissism, and silly political posturing are out of control. The tendency of revolutions to devour their own is a well-documented phenomenon. And the hypertrophy of identity politics seems to accelerate the disease. So it is that a cadre of disgruntled "transgender activists" objected to the anatomical composition of the Women's March. Things were pretty simple for the author of Genesis—"male and female created He them"—but our self- and sex-obsessed age has rendered that handiwork provisional. The issue, you see, is "biological men who identify as women." This cheery group objected to the abundance of "white cis women" who paraded "too many pictures of female reproductive organs and pink hats." We, too, objected to the display, but for a decidedly different reason. For us, the issue was not that the multitude of females who assembled to protest had created a "dangerous space" and sent the "dangerous message" that "having a vagina is essential to womanhood." No, for us it was another triumph of coddled self-obsession. It's a vertiginous world, full of "non-binary" individuals who do not "identify" as either male or female. "For 20-year-old Sam Forrey," for example, "a nonbinary student in Ohio, and their [sic] girlfriend Lilian McDaniel, who is trans, there had been other warning signs that the

Women's March might be a dangerous space for them." The world is such a dangerous place, full of "genital-based womanhood" and other signs of oppression. Andrew Breitbart was surely right that politics is "downstream from culture." We'd only add that the composition of that stream has become positively toxic in recent years.

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