

“Art” is dead! Long live *art*!

by Mark Alan Anderson

At what point does the act of “art making” conclude and a work-in-progress become elevated to the exalted appellation of “Artwork”?

Some might argue that an artwork is *never* finished and that any given work is under constant change, either through environment, material or physical manipulation by the artist, or re-evaluation by the audience. Duchamp recognized this when his construction *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* was inadvertently broken in 1936, some twenty-one years following the “completion” of the piece. Delighted at the spider web texture of stress fractures, he had the work sandwiched between two new panes of glass and declared the work “completed by chance.” Duchamp understood that the kindred processes of art making and art viewing are under constant scrutiny and an ongoing succession of change.

Case in point: When Louis Armstrong sang in *Black and Blue* that he was “white inside,” his audience – black and white alike – thought nothing wrong with this sentiment. It was considered an entirely appropriate sentiment for an “inferior” black man to have inner aspirations of being on par with the far “superior” white man. Yet a mere seventy-odd years later, contempo-

rary audiences can listen to this song and gasp in disbelief. The lyric embraced by social attitudes so pervasively embedded into the American psyche is now virtually impossible to defend.

Art making – and thus, art *viewing* as well – is therefore, subject to the whim of context. Director John Waters expressed this concept well in his 1998 film *Pecker*.

Pecker is a young artist with a camera, probably unfamiliar with – but certainly *of* – the Dianne Arbus school of image making, in which “culturally challenged” archetypes are depicted living well outside mainstream American society. Pecker is challenged, both in his artistic expression and in the ethics of his art making, when the *context* of that art making undergoes a sudden and dramatic change: He is discovered by “The Art World.”

The Art World elevates Pecker to an august realm of privilege by designating him as an “Artist.” John Waters makes it clear that such status is not an attribute Pecker has sought out or even something that he *wants* – Pecker is happy making his art. But the title has been thrust upon Pecker by The Art World, an anthropological oddity whose greatest interest seems to be in the acquisition of fresh meat. Initially, at least, the title of “Artist” is also

encouraged by Pecker's own community, a world peopled with individuals who equate "successful art" – *real* art – with various material benefits: money, fame, sex, and stature.

But as with most things, success comes readymade with a price tag. Herein lies Pecker's dilemma, because as an "insider" or a part of the community, he is privy to those life snapshots of which his art is comprised. This all changes as Pecker is propelled into the limelight and given fame, money, and stature. (It seems that only Pecker's best friend acquires sex as part of the bargain!) When no one except Pecker himself saw Pecker as an artist or took his art making seriously, he remained a part of his community.

The context changes as Pecker, *The Artist*, becomes associated with the New York Art World, a group one might charitably characterize as "art tourists." They are outsiders, vicariously visiting Pecker's world through his art, in much the same way as they might a foreign and exotic land. When this happens, Pecker is no longer *of* the community, but *outside* his community – and a culture which demanded nothing of him as an art maker comes to crave *everything* of him when it begins to identify him as an outsider. He is suddenly viewed with suspicion ...and not a little contempt.

How ironic then, that the community who adopts Pecker – The Art World – is equally gluttonous in its desires, demanding more, more, more, and ever more. A world now aware of Pecker, *The Artist*, attempts to dictate and drive the content of his art making. Pecker, the art maker – *not* The Artist – seems to be the only person capable of awareness at this fundamental change in the expression of his art, a change so evident to him that it has rocked his ethical world.

"It's all *shit!*" he exclaims in exasperation to his agent. Rory is less a representative of Pecker than of The Art World and she is mollifying in her response that Pecker's work is simply

"evolving."

Context bears great importance to the subjects of Pecker's artistic expression as well. A community that initially enjoyed Pecker's images is disturbed to discover that they've been placed under a magnifying glass and microscopically examined and dissected by a world of outsiders. The spotlight forces upon them an unwanted and unwelcome self-awareness. Like animals in a zoo, they are scrutinized as curious oddities.

Pecker, in the role of Artist, has fallen prey to an idea – in this case, George Dickey's idea that *art* and *artist* are defined by The Art World. To his everlasting credit, Pecker identifies a flaw in Dickey's circular argument: Art may indeed be defined by The Art World, but the theory never clarifies what characteristics determine how The Art World gets formed in the first place. So Pecker, whose only interests are in art making, rejects The Art World and creates instead, an art world of his own, in which, indeed, art is what the art world says it is. Hence, "Art" is dead (a merciful patricide indeed.) Long live "art"!

Irony is piled on top of irony as Pecker finds himself in a position that enables him to stand context on its head: His work does, indeed, evolve – this time with Pecker in the role of an outsider looking in. Pecker invites his community to "travel" with him as art tourists, vicariously enjoying and exploring the exotic grotesqueries of ...The Art World.

Thus, as Pecker has discovered, art is a matter of context, both in art *making* and in art *viewing*. Context has a profound effect on how we make and view art. It explains how Leni Riefenstahl could, as her *Guardian Review* obituary stated, create such a beautiful "monumental, hypnotic account of the 1934 Nazi party rally in Nuremberg which glorified Nazi pageantry and deified Adolf Hitler, earning her a place in film history and the status of post-war pariah." Context reveals to us how this

film can simultaneously be viewed with appreciation of a visual aesthetic ...and with horror. An awareness of context forces one to realize that there is not, and never can be, one single viewpoint – and that, in fact, personal viewpoints are, by their very nature, plastic. It is this very fluidity and plasticity of stance that allows us to enjoy the musical expression of Pops Armstrong singing in *Black and Blue*, or the slapstick humor of an animated character named Inky, with or without celebrating the pejorative racial undertones of the song or the cartoon.

Recognizing that fundamental changes in context take place over time, from one location to another – and may even be predicated upon who one is with at the time a work of art is viewed – forces each of us individually, both as art makers and viewers of artworks to constantly re-evaluate not only the artistic expression, but also the ethics of the art and of our own personal philosophies as well. Being aware of context, forces us to examine what we believe an artwork to have meant at the time of its creation, what it means now, what it meant in the interim, and what it might have meant in the process of art making. We're forced to examine who we are as viewers, who we've been, and who we just might be five minutes from now as we rethink— through context – previously held notions of what "Art" is.