authority of the Interior Minister to “inventory and gather in suitable warehouses the objects of science and art suitable for public instruction.” The overwhelming number of historical genre paintings in the early nineteenth-century museum illustrates the historical and historically edifying value invested in museum artworks. In the Revolutionary Museum, art and the polis keep in close collaboration. Art is thought capable of concretizing the people’s political identity; it contributes to the shaping of the nation by showing edifying scenes of its history. The mobilization of art in the service of politics is typical of the de-autonomization of artistic material in revolutionary times, when art participates directly in the reinvention of history, not simply as a document, but as a living historical force (the de-autonomization of art is typical of revolution, when history itself behaves like art, inventing itself). This explains why, to the avant-garde, only a revolution could guarantee the integration of art and praxis. This also explains why, when a revolution settles into a political status quo, it is bound to repress the very art on which it relied for its momentum: as Lenin turned into Leninism, so Russian Constructivists were silenced.

As the turmoil of the Revolution gave way to the Restoration, so too the status of art in the newly revamped Louvre changed. Hitherto a political tool, art now became a mere esthetic object. Jacques-Louis David remodeled the Louvre on the principle that the teaching of art alone ought to be the essential mission of a museum. No longer is the museum to be a seedbed of political fervor. Art is demobilized and put under the scrutiny of historical sciences. The new Louvre Museum (the one in which Robert’s painting was exhibited) chose the study of art, and art alone, as its primum mobile. In Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins the people, the anonymous stragglers, roam over the museum ruins, utterly ignorant of the remaining artworks: art no longer concerns the political destiny of the citizenry. It seems history itself is a ruin, a thing of the past. Estheticizing history itself, the museum exists after the cataclysm, after the end of history and art.

Robert’s painting only has the artist pay attention to the artworks. The museum perhaps confirms the exclusively esthetic relevance of art. By insisting that the Louvre’s mission be founded on the teaching of and about art, it effectively sealed off art, making it autonomous. This esthetic detachment, however, does not mean the exclusion of history pure and simple. The new museum cancels art’s involvement in historical praxis but then introduces history into the work of art, only this time as a historiographic element. Art is no longer the force of history but a bearer of its representations. In other words, art begins to represent what is left of history. The purely esthetic gaze involves the historiographic gaze, Robert implies. Museum art is a ruin, namely, the appearance of history as image, as self-distance. Robert’s painting depicts the ruin that the work of art becomes in the rarefied air of the museum. Ultimately the ruin in Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins is the painting itself; the shock experience of historiographic alienation is the esthetic appearance of art.

Framework

The autonomization of art does not mean that art breaks free from historical determinations but that historical determinations move from the level of content to that of form. The work of art is no longer asked to push the dynamic of history. Instead it need only comply with historiographic coding. Art as historical praxis diminishes while art as historiographic discourse expands. Form becomes the cause of art’s integration in the discourse of art history: curators often favor artworks whose form illustrates historical theses about chronological evolution of styles, genres and morphologies, while excluding those with no clear historical attachment. Thus the transition between the Revolutionary Louvre Museum to the Restoration Louvre Museum follows a paradoxical exchange: the direct involvement of art in the political and historical construction of the age meant that the artistic form of the work of art, if not its representational content, was relatively free from historiographic scrutiny; whereas the upholding of the esthetic divide between art and historical praxis means that the artwork’s form is laid open to historiography, to the point where historiographical considerations determine the artworks’ esthetic relevance.

In the process, as Valéry once put it in “Le Problème des musées,” Venus becomes a document: “We are becoming scholarly. In matters of art, scholarship . . . appends an unlimited library to the great museum. Venus turns into a document.” Art’s autonomous character joins forces with historicism: indeed the historicizing lay-out of the museum galleries
is based upon the properly esthetic features of the work of art, i.e., upon their autonomous form. Ironically the museified autonomy of art which initially expels historical praxis from art winds up insuring the supremacy of historiography over art. Thus, to complete Valéry's thought, Venus becomes a document, not by surrendering directly to history, but by fleeing to the ether of pure form.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the museum follows the historicist imperative to arrange the artworks according to sociohistorical principles. The museum is laid out like a journey through history, down a brightly lit path winding its way through schools and styles, national characters and chronological markers.

This is what lies behind the debate over the museum's crowdedness that raged in the early twentieth-century artistic world (right around the time of the avant-garde's onslaught against the museum). This is also what prompted the Louvre to adopt a more streamlined and sparse model of presentation. Thus speaks Maurice Donnay, académicien, at the turn of the century:

After lunch, I went to the National Collection to look at paintings. When will painters understand that there is nothing worse, and more lethal to a painting, than the company of other paintings. . . A frame is not enough to isolate the painting.66

The officer of culture finds himself in the paradoxical position of protecting works of art against the institution in charge of art's sanctity. It is as though the fetishization of art in the museum eventually turns against the museum; such fetishization now demands absolute autonomy, even from the museum. As a result of having postulated the unique, sacrosanct essence of the work of art, the esthete is led to defend it against art itself.

The paradoxical underpinnings of this concern also appear in Valéry's protest against the museum. Valéry dislikes museums because they compromise the unique status of the artwork (a status that museums helped to bring about). His visit to the museum is one of overwhelming confusion. The artworks' exceptional character, which is the cause of their selection, turns out to be severely compromised by their sheer numbers:

Something strangely senseless comes out of this grouping of dead visions. They jealously grapple for the gaze that brings existence to them. From every corner they are clamoring for my indivisible attention. . . . The sense of sight is harassed by this abuse of space in a collection and, similarly, intelligence is offended by this tight packing of important works. The more beautiful works are . . . the more apart they must stand. They are objects made to be unique by their creators. (Cières 1291–92)

Valéry stands in awe of the sacred uniqueness of the artwork; yet he thinks it so feeble a force as to be destroyed by the mere company of other works. In other words, the notion that the work of art is strictly autonomous in its particularity is good and valid so long as it is not practically demonstrated. The call to protect art against life leads to the call to protect art against art. The artwork's uniqueness turns into some foggy sublimity so singular that it cannot tolerate bearing proof of itself.

Protesting against the museum's crowdedness actually casts a doubt on the esthetic strength of artworks: they are no longer believed to be strong enough to stand up for themselves.

The conclusion that art kills art does not lead Valéry to doubt his faith in esthetic autonomy. Rather than imploding the category through an immanent critique of esthetics, he tries to shore up its weaknesses by harking back to an archaic connection between art and architecture, Quatremeré-style:

Suddenly I see a glow. A tentative answer comes to me, from the background of my impressions, and asks to be spoken. Painting and Sculpture, says the imp of Explanation, are abandoned children. Their mother, Mother Architecture, is dead. So long as it lived, it gave them a place, use and obligations. Their freedom to roam was denied. They had a specific space, a permanent well-defined lighting, their topics and harmonies. . . . So long as it lived, they knew what they were all about. . . . (Cières 1293)

Valéry calls for an enframing of the artwork that would be at once authoritative and natural: the artwork ought to be restored to an overarching architectural and historical context. Mother Architecture alone is capable of placing artworks in their right places. This analysis, carried out in the name of art's preservation, nonetheless winds up demoting art to an ornamental adjunct that derives its identity from context. In trying to save the artwork's nonsubsumable character from art, Valéry loses it to its contextual grounding, thus implicitly conceding the work's subsumability. In the
name of the artwork's sublimity, Valéry paradoxically espouses the touristic trend of contextualizing this sublimity in a manner quite antithetical to the sublime (for the sublime, by definition, breaks all frameworks). In the end Valéry betrays the work of art itself while trying to defend it. Had his critique of museums focused on the artworks themselves, perhaps he would have realized that an artwork's uniqueness is not a decorative product of its circumstances, but of the thrust of its formal originality.

Valéry's (untypical) disregard for the artwork in the name of Art can also be heard in Donnay's defense of esthetic autonomy. He declares that "the frame is not enough to isolate the painting." This statement invests the framework, that is, the context, with the power of delimiting art within its own space, a principle that thereby defeats any kind of limit whatsoever, since, in this case, isolation proceeds from context. What is art, the inside, is given over to the frame, the outside. Hence, again, in trying to rescue the work of art's uniqueness from the museum, the esthete must concede that art's uniqueness is accidental, a product of its surroundings. As the work of art is made dependent on its framework, it slips entirely into the slim margin marking it off from a context to which it becomes de facto tied. When the nonartistic world insists on the artwork's artistic autonomy, this autonomy is merely ideological; the assumption is that the context has the upper hand in its dialectic with artwork. So long as its context is something external to it, an artwork can never be heteronomous, for in this case the context remains undialectically other to the artwork. And no artwork can be genuinely autonomous so long as this autonomy is a product of context, for an autonomy manufactured from the outside is no longer autonomy.

During his visit in the museum, Valéry sees the paintings jockeying for his attention: they are incompatible, warring factions. Why should artworks be incompatible? Each work makes a claim so exclusive that it cannot be compared with others. It is therefore a weak singularity, one that does not dare prove itself. Perhaps the works share too much essence not to wish each other's death. They have been made, by the ideology of uniqueness, too much alike to be peaceful neighbors. Valéry writes, "This is a paradox: the more these gathered independent marvels become mutually antagonistic, nay enemies, the more they look like. . . . This painting, it is often said, kills the others around it" (Valéry 1291-92). Valéry understands, however indirectly, that the esthetic homogenizing of art is responsible for the discord among artworks. The esthete insists on the singularity of each artwork but also claims this singularity to be the essence of all artworks. Once singularity is asserted as an abstract principle indiscriminately applicable to any and all art, it reverts into its opposite, similarity, which condems the works to an all-out war for recognition. Modern museums have remedied this situation, but not by solving the esthetic contradiction responsible for it, but through expediency: artworks are held in private confinement and bare space is used prophylactically, as a cordon sanitaire separating each work from every other and all from the visitors. Trained by the syntax of presence and presentation orchestrated in museums, we expect the artwork's uniqueness to be signaled overtly. The modern museum has taken to heart Donnay's remark that the frame is not enough to separate artworks. The difference between artworks becomes abstract, almost a matter of faith. Thus cocooned, artistic uniqueness seems to convalesce, rather than shine, on the museum walls.

The frame was originally designed as a limit. Bulky, baroque ornate frames owed their existence to the tightly packed exhibition space. The more the frames encroached upon one another, the more they staked out their territory with flamboyant defiance. Only a limit that knew itself to be constantly threatened could need such display. The more its claim at protecting the artwork was challenged, the greater was the show the artwork made of its apartness. The fiery gilding and convoluted frieze of the classical frame reveals that art then belonged in a powerfully dynamic space wrought with conflict. The gold of the framing is the spark that flies from the clashing artworks. In this sense, the contentiousness of one artwork against the next became an object of beauty itself. The frame stood out esthetically, it created around the work an intermediary world of esthetic forms, of dazzling, efflorescent shapes. The gilded frame was an intimation of the experience of beauty. Not only did it say that art was transcendent but also that its transcendence was beautiful.

Such transcendence bespeaks a historical state of consciousness that still believed in the concrete possibility of the ideal. Today this ideal has fallen into disrepute. Social criticism has exposed the alliance of idealism with repressive state machinery: the ideal was a promissory note for the individual who had nothing to hope for from earthly justice and happi-
ness, a sublimation of suffering. Yet, precisely in marking itself off, the ideal also showed there was a possible world outside the one upheld by the status quo. As such, the transcendence of art was also a critique of the status quo, a quiet indictment of the empirical world of means and ends. The golden frame clearly marked off the separateness of art, not as something necessarily powerless and removed, but as hopeful and defiant. There is a similarity between the gilded ornateness of the traditional frame and the drum roll announcing the trapeze artist’s dazzling jumps: both were intimations of the extraordinary, the dangerous and the superior. The gilded frame spoke of an art uncowed by the pressure to blend in and keep quiet. Brush and loud, the ornate framework upheld the utopian promise of art above and beyond the material reproduction of existence. By comparison, the utopian space of art today looks sheepish: it seems to imply that art’s transcendence has become an abstraction, something unfathomably distant, almost too ethereal to manifest itself. In the credo of esteticicism, the work of art is a singularity, an island of subjectivity in a world immune to its claim. As soon as the singularity of the art becomes an esthetic abstraction, the frame loses its purpose. Because it becomes useless (because it is never crossed) the frame slims down to a bare outline, and is sometimes even absent. Suspended on a long stretch of wall, the work floats in spacelessness. Any frame that may still adorn it is merely vestigial—decorative prop or historical nostalgia. Art’s difference, if it seems, has given up the fight against the social totality: it retires into the charthouse of a silent, neutralized isolation.

Baudelaire’s poem “Le Cadre” (The framework) seems to articulate the transition between the gilded frame of yore (which bespoke an intensely differential experience of art) and the modern self-effacing frame (which relates to prophylactic confinement):

Comme un beau cadre ajoute à la peinture,
Bien qu’elle soit d’un pinceau très vanté,
Je ne sais quoi d’étrange et d’enchanté
En l’isolant de l’immense nature. . . .

As a beautiful frame brings to a painting,
Of a lauded master made,
Something strange and beguiling
By bracketing it off from immense nature. . . .
laire an everlasting object of fascination. The crowd, like the museum-
framed artwork, embodies the dialectical construction of individuality,
the publicness of isolation.

By contrast, the modern gallery fetishizes the artwork's difference to
such a degree that it endangers the difference itself. To uphold the differ-
ence of art (its frameless, boundless, utopian floating in bare space) is to
wreck its real difference, which is difference from all affirmation, even the
affirmation of difference itself. The utopia of art is real in Baudelaire be-
cause it is not yet ideological. It borrows from the intense publicness of
the classical frame only to turn it into a sublime principle, thus unlock-
ing the ambiguity of art's publicness in the midst of publicness itself.

The debate concerning the esthetic framing of art has evolved into
an artistic concern. In many a contemporary artwork it is the subject and
material of the work itself. This shows that the museum has moved inside
the work of art or, correspondingly, that the work of art has taken over
the space of its estheticization. Frank Stella's frame paintings represent
just such an effort at pulling the enframing of art into the work of art
itself. Knowledge of the artwork's heteronomy (its bordering on the
world) is here the artistic matter itself, something debated in the work of
art. In a true dialectical fashion, the outer moves inward. In the same
stroke, the work of art turns itself inside out, its entire space is occupied
by its border with the outside world. The work of art becomes its own
marginal difference from the world and from the space of art itself: it is
an endless negotiation between the two, the antagonistic interzone of
their entanglement. Stella's work is the dialectic tension between auton-
omy (which is consumed by the outer frame) and heteronomy (which is
drawn inside the self-defined, self-involving frame of the work of art).
Neither inside nor outside the frame, the work of art merely takes place in
the space of difference between the world and art.

In bringing the frame into the artistic space, Stella concretized the
vague anxieties concerning the publicity of art. Those anxieties have crys-
tallized on the frame: the history of framing art no doubt contains the
history of the anxiety concerning difference: it is about how we stand be-
fore art and where art stands in our life. Once again it may prove worth-
while to reawaken the ghost of the museum's ancestor in order to ap-
proach this question. Reenter the Kunst- und Wunderkammer.

The Decline of Subject

Donnay's comment that "the frame is not enough to isolate the
painting" is representative of the esthetic mood that prevailed over the re-
designing of museums everywhere in the twentieth century. Sparseness
was everything. The modern museum takes seriously Valéry's complaint
that grouping artworks together is injurious to art. These curatorial scrup-
ules led to the decision to exhibit only a portion of the museum's overall
collection at any given time and to lay out the galleries in such a manner
that artworks do not impinge on each other (this was the intention of
the Beaubourg Museum, which, using moveable partitions, wanted to
custom-design a "privacy" around each artwork). By the 1930's, the Louvre
had finally discontinued the "en tapisserie" style of juxtaposing pictures
from top to bottom of the gallery walls. Since then, a minimalist esthetic
has prevailed. It opposes the earlier, seemingly more indiscriminative, habit
of covering an entire wall with paintings. The blithe jumble of the pre-
modern salon of paintings is now regarded as slovenly. It took roughly a
century for the museum to make the earlier "cabinet of paintings" style
look outlandish and shocking to modern taste. This change explains the
feeling of cultural estrangement one might experience in looking at "cab-
inet d'amateur" genre painting. Such painting, still common in the sev-
enteenth and eighteenth centuries, speaks of a different experience of art's
publicity. The salons painted by Saint-Aubin on the occasion of the yearly
art show in the eighteenth century reflect the old miscellaneous style,
where every inch of the walls is covered with assorted canvases in an im-
possibly crammed display. "Cabinet d'amateur" painting seems to leave
no choice to us (patrons of the modern museum) but to gaze in bewil-
derment. In looking at the display, the eye shuttles restlessly between the
detail (the individual painting nearly obfuscated) and the whole checkered
tapestry. The gallery is supposed to stand as one panoramic display; yet no
synthesis is seemingly possible between the individual work and the jum-
bile. Our eyes blink. We are finally forced to concede the truth of Valéry's
reaction: "They jealously grapple for the gaze that brings them existence.
They clamour for my indivisible attention from all sides" (Ceuves 129).

We are almost grateful when, as in David Teniers's Kunstкамmer
painting, The Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm in His Gallery at Brussels (1651),
the painting includes the figure of the collector in the center of the picture; he provides the focal point on which to anchor the disparate jumble. Ownership, we understand, unifies the clutter: the only thing these paintings all have in common is their owner. Man stands at the governing center of art, the only punctum which, in Teniers’s painting, provides depth in a world of surfaces, a deus ex machina that turns the sum of parts into a whole. The problem of art’s publicity is solved anthropomorphically: the subject’s ownership domesticates the autonomy of object. Valéry’s dilemma of synthesizing the warring claims of separate works is solved by the human figure, just as all tensions in the kingdom are finally appeased in the monarch.

By the same token, however, the subject is no longer absolutely distinguishable from the object. Teniers plays on this ambiguity by framing the collector amid his collection, the door frame acting as a picture frame around the subject. Whereas Teniers’s other Kunstкамmer paintings set the collector clearly apart from the canvases, this particular one depicts the collector on the same scale as most of the larger characters in his paintings. The collector disappears into his collection. The human figure synthesizes the collection at the level of intellectual projection; yet at the level of perception, in the display of painted forms, the human figure joins the collection. He to whom the collection belongs, belongs also to the collection.

This reciprocity points to an entanglement of subject and object found only in ownership. This, at least, was Benjamin’s idea about ownership: “The phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter.” 85 Is the decay of the private collector a decay of ownership? Bourgeois mentality in its early phase valued accumulation and ownership as the mark of social fulfillment. The early bourgeois subject saw the world in terms of possession and nonpossession. It never occurs to Crusoe that the island on which he has just been stranded can be anything but his dominion. He relates to his objective environment first and foremost as an owner, thereby transforming it into an extension of himself as subject. That is why an attack on any part of the kingdom was construed as an attack on the king’s body, that is, against the
sacredness of subject-object. By contrast, the owner in advanced capitalism is a mere plenipotentiary. From the president of a democratic nation to the private homeowner, the individual is just a manager of resources that, thus objectively defined, can be passed on to the next competent person. No longer to be eternally possessed, but rather to be grabbed and disposed of, the object loses the glow of familiarity that ownership gave. Subject and object are no longer bound together by sentimental ties. Already in Balzac, the miser is somewhat of a vestige: the infantilism implicit in his hoarding conjures up images of a precapitalist world of hunting and gathering. Likewise, to Benjamin, the collector is a relic of the immanence between subject and object occurring in precapitalist ownership.

With the decline of ownership comes also an increased alienation between subject and object. Something that may account for the aloofness of art in the modern gallery is the fact that it does not belong to anyone, not even to the museum trustees who sometimes approach artworks as sound investment. No doubt the emancipation of art from ownership means that art can begin to stand on its own, its artistic integrity no longer overshadowed by the collector’s prestige. That art is not to be “had” agrees with the emancipatory thrust of art. On the other hand, the separation of art from ownership contributed to the autonomization of art and the frigid division of subject and object. Today the subject no longer has a place in the space of art, except one that is strongly marked by exteriority. Looking at art has become synonymous with being an intruder in the realm of art. If we have qualms about the crowded walls of Archduke Leopold’s gallery, it is because we, as esthetic subjects, have been trained to occupy an estranged position toward art. However socially repressive it was, ownership made for a far less stark dichotomy between subject and object. As such it replicated the experience of art itself: in the artwork subject and object do not contemplate each other at a distance but constantly exchange positions; this is the dialectic of creation that, in the successful artwork, braids subject and object almost seamlessly. That the space of art has become resolutely discontinuous from the observing subject seems to indicate an estrangement between subject and object that perhaps exists even at the level of the individual work of art itself: this is what is known as the de-anthropomorphization, or dehumanization, of art in modern times. If the modern artwork looks so remote on its deserted stretch of museum wall it is also because it plays out the division between subject and object (hence the not-so-naive response that modernist art “does not speak to the viewer”).

In the Kunstkammer, the collector stands in the midst of art: he shows that the space of art can be inhabited, that it is immediate to the human world. No invisible wall cordons off the subject from the artwork. Certainly, the sense of familiarity with art in the Kunstkammer stems from historical conditions, the fact that art then hung in the living space of those who collected it. By contrast, today’s prudish estheticization of art so pervades one’s experience of artworks that to bridge their remoteness is to be either an iconoclast or a felon. The modern museum leaves a
choice of attitudes that comes down to either obsequiousness or ob-
quiousness overcome. This shows a sentiment toward the object that the
most resentment. In the modern gallery, the object is enshrined as a
fearful god who has won the battle against the subject. Meanwhile the
subject, who fears his turn is next to become a social automaton, a mod-
er unit of production, bows respectfully. How different it is from the
civilty of the aristocratic connoisseurs in Watteau’s L’Ete (1721). Unencumbered by petrifying distance, the visual is
are part of a more general art of living that includes the arts of dressing
of conversation, and of seduction. This familiarity toward art, however,
shows no iconoclasm. This perhaps is the closest we can come to the re-
ciliation of art and life which the avant-garde dreamt of. To us, the
scene in Watteau’s painting looks like the blissful age prior to industrial-
zation, when the subject was still unaware of the formidable ascendency
the object would be capable of exercising over that subject. Today one can
no longer befriend artifacts in this manner; industrialization has imbued
objects with an aura of aloofness and supremacy quite beyond the sub-
ject’s control (the whole industrial apparatus of mass production stands
behind them). Thus we either respond to them with resentful boorish-
ness, by casually breaking and disposing of them, or fearful worship, by
cooling every waking hour to secure them.

In comparison with Watteau’s scene at the gallery, nineteenth-cen-
tury representations of the space of art depart sharply from the casual
portrayal of art and social life commingling. The place for art is now of-
icialized: it fulfills a ritual of separation between subject and object. The
museum is a place where the subject goes to contemplate and study art.
Both attitudes conform to a mode of passive alienation that perpetuates
the separation of subject and object. For one thing, the museum is de-
igned to discourage any relation, except for exclusion, between the vis-
itor and the artifacts.68 The subject is asked to participate in his own neu-
tralization: the gaze is first and foremost repression of the desire to touch.
The museum trains the subject to abrogate his primitive craving to en-
gage his surroundings actively. The museum teaches compliance: in giv-
ing up touching and accepting the abstraction of gazing, the individual is
meant to relish his own repression and sublimation. This came with an
impressive bureaucratic apparatus. “The Golden Age of museums” wit-
led the implementation of a pervasive cultural plan overseeing the or-
ination of museums throughout France.67 Those museums whose disor-
ners smacked of the country store or recalled the premodern cabinet of
allation were chastised. Uniform policies and guidelines enforced a ra-
ionalized and compartmentalized presentation of artifacts. A state com-
ission insured that the same standards of esthetic reception applied
everywhere. Increasingly, pets, bags, and walking sticks were confiscated
at the door. The visitor had to observe religious silence and self-restraint
in those same galleries which had previously been the site of unchecked
al ebullience.68 Holding court or conversations in the galleries became
subject to ridicule and sanction. For fear of being thought a philistine, the
bourgeois acquiesced to his own silencing. Sacralization of art goes hand
in glove with the neutralization of individualistic behavior. The en-
thronement of the artwork entails the desubjectification of subject, its
ormalization. The bourgeois order liberates access to art, yet does this
on behalf of individuals who ought to hold themselves in check. The
quasi-religious atmosphere in the museum is thus one where the subject is
actually taboo. Individual behavior is allowed only in a highly sublim-
ated, idealized form. In any case, the stately, sacrosanct presentation of
the artworks basically leaves no choice but that of submission to author-
ity (of history, of the state, of knowledge, and so on). Thus, even in his
hours of leisure and relaxation, the subject is entreated to participate in
his own self-abnegation. Bourgeois leisure in the museum is as much a
prohibition of pleasure, that is, of the sensuous, self-willed subject, as
bourgeois work.

The ideal visitor in nineteenth-century representations of the mu-
seum is, accordingly, the copyist. Countless images of the museum repres-
tent the esthete silently studying and copying a single artwork. The copy-
ist embodies the ideal museum subject, marked by focus, exclusiveness,
and, most of all, obedience to models. The esthetic singularization of the
artwork thus entails the neutralization of the bourgeois subject who is de-
ined by his power of self-abstraction, compliance, and exclusive focus on
a single object. These are the skills drilled into the modern worker, who is
rewarded according to his ability to specialize. The modern subject too is
autonomized, mostly for the sake of production. Like the museum arti-
fact removed from all context, the bourgeois subject acts monadically in
his social existence. The subject's estrangement from others finds an analogy in the idea that artworks ought not to touch, that they ought to stand clear of each other's path. The moment Leopold-Wilhelm's gallery becomes every citizen's museum marks the moment when art begins to scream against its collective presentation. In other words, the work of art begins to behave like a fiercely individualistic monad when its appointed viewer becomes a monad himself. This monadism of the modern subject, however, is a sham, a slogan. For the modern visitor is synonymous with anonymity. It is no longer Leopold-Wilhelm facing us, but the faceless people, the faceless individual turning aside, the black-coated nobody who stands for every body. The modern individual is one who insists increasingly on his individualistic apartness even though, in the last analysis, this individualism is what individualizes him the least, what is least particular about him. The museified work of art, like the alienated viewer, cannot stand the presence of other artworks and becomes a unity that cannot even prove its uniqueness. The decay of the social idea of community is collusive with the esthetic intolerance toward the crammed display of the Kunstkammer.

Estheticizing the Bourgeois

That the work of art is intensely individual, intensely its own, is no longer proven by putting it into contact with other works. Art in the modern gallery is a monad removed from the space of contention and division, a vox clamens in deserto muffled by great distance. The modern gallery's notion of individuality is one of alienation: the work of art, like the individual in the public sphere, is asked to keep to itself. Even the content of the work of art is deemed to be the product of such deep individualism that the only proper mode of dealing with it is to isolate it as something sui generis. The work's individuality is no longer put to the test by placing it alongside other works; it is enforced de jure. The modern work of art mirrors the alienated state of individuality in advanced industrialism, an individuality taken to be self-evident but which cannot prove its reality. The historicist and estheticist purification of museum walls points to the ideology of the individual in the public sphere. As a public space, the museum puts forward an allegory of the social space in which individuality—the "frame" that appears when beings are brought in contact—has become an ideological token. The work of art speaks as something fiercely particular, but behaves like the bourgeois individual whose particularity ("originality") has atrophied from disuse because, in fact, it is a statement of conformity.

By contrast, the artworks in the Kunstkammer sought neither consolation nor estrangement from one another. They were true public subjectivities, that is, singularities that emerged out of their publicness. In nearly touching, the paintings had their separation in common. The singular artwork was not singular because it had been declared an idol; its singularity emerged out of the density of those nearly interlocking frames. Inasmuch as there was almost nothing between two canvases but their difference, this difference stood out as being the product of the works themselves. Their difference was negotiated, actively communal, antagonistic rather than apologetic (as in the ideology of art's apartness). Similarly, only in a society where individuality is challenged instead of enforced (through suburbanization of behavior), does it prosper. An individualism that has its sanctity handed to it is feeble and hollow. It bespeaks a social totality in which true individualism is taboo. The incommensurability of the work of art, as of the individual, is excised the moment it is enshrined for its own sake.

The estheticization of art thus parallels the estheticization of the bourgeois subject. It neutralizes true individuality under pretense of its defense. The standardization of museum behavior which began in the late nineteenth century—silence, unhampered mobility, absence of chatting, eating, prolonged stopping, and so on—results in the depublicization of the artistic experience, but also the depublicization of the viewing subject. Even in the public sphere of the museum, art is meant to be consumed privately. Just as the work of art basically keeps quiet on its lonely stretch of wall, so the individual in the public sphere is asked to behave monadically. One never has to behave so privately as when one is in public. The bourgeois social sphere has all but reversed the meaning of individuality and publicness: the public arena is where the individual is asked to be extremely repressive of public expression of the self, of publicness; and the private sphere is where the individual is free to behave openly with his or
her environment, that is, to behave publicly. The right to be an expressive
public subject has been transformed into the obligation to be private
about it. Individuality is the tacit acceptance of doing away with any
demonstration of individualism. Individuality has thus been estheticized
in other words, it has become publicly ineffectual. (The private sphere
also is affected by the repression of individuality in the name of its pro-
tection. In letting the individual have his or her publicness only in the
private setting of home, one's privacy is unavoidably scarred by frustra-
tion and nostalgia. The idyllic character of home, of one's privacy, comes
from the nostalgic reminiscence that such privacy was once free to be
public.)

The museum stands for the esthetic privatization of the individual.
The privateness of the museum visit is duplicated on the museum walls,
where the intensely particular (the work of art) is asked to keep to its
own. The museum realizes in relation to art the ideological feat per-
formed on the subject: the muzzling of individuality by overindulging it.
Artistic uniqueness becomes ideological, the forced imposition of a pious
aura around the artwork. Marc Chagall perceived quite well that the neu-
ralization of the artwork on the bare wall somehow implicated a neutral-
ization of the individual. This is what he expressed in response to the re-
vamping of the Louvre:

I don't care much for that big dusting-up at the Louvre. It is unrecognizable. I
loved those paintings tightly scrambling over the walls all the way to the rafters.
Everything was vertical, and intimate. But the present tendency is to hang one
painting on the wall. I am told what to see, everything is signaled. Thus isolated
and shown off, the painting tells me: 'respect me.' I, for one, liked to search and
find."

This wish ("search," "find") is that of the individual who once found amid
the clutter of the cabinet d'amateur the opportunity of discovering a piece
that would have significance for him alone. The value of the artwork was
heightened by the experience of its discovery. The "cabinet of painting"
museum suggested an artistic experience in which singularity was not
given immediately, but emerged out of dialectical involvement with pub-
licness. The publicness of the artworks, as Chagall sees, was an opportu-
nity for encountering art on a dynamic basis. The single artwork emerged
out of intimacy with other works, out of the publicness of art. In actively
extracting the work from the many, Chagall experienced an engagement,
discovery and even invention of the work of art. Finding alone the one
object that would outshine all others, the old-style museum-goer exercised
the individuality of his publicness. The discovered gem said something
about the viewer who had discovered it: by contrast, the overexposed art
piece of today's museum says something to the museum-goer—"view me,
respect me." The viewer's reception of the work is a standardized and styl-
ized attitude to which he is forced to conform. The false (that is, ideologi-
ally manufactured) individuality of the artwork artificially singularized
on the bare wall parallels the ready-made, abstract individuality of the
museum-goer: one size fits all. The sacralized artwork screams at the vis-
itor in the voice of repression of individuality (all under the pretense of ac-
commodating the individual's private consumption of artworks). And it
is the repression of art, disguised as protection of art's particularism and
of the individualism art stands for.

In the modern museum, the work's difference becomes an idyll, a
discourse that knows itself to be false. The deserted architectural land-
scape of the modern museum, where works are set off as far as possible
from each other, is too contrived not to remind us of the cluttered world
it wants to avoid. Now that any shop commands at will the admiration
previously reserved for the cornucopian Wunderkammer, isolation and
minimalism become virtues—an exorcism of the commodity. The mu-
seum assumes the appearance of a monastery to avoid being mistaken for
a mall chock-a-block with mass-manufactured goods. Whereas a leisurely
stroll through the "cabinet d'amateur" was acceptable, in the modern mu-
seum it would look too much like the stupefied response standardized in
the shopping arcade.

Recent artistic production indicates that art seeks to escape the rar-
efied atmosphere of the modern museum. This is apparent in, for in-
stance, the works of Andy Warhol, which embrace serialization, hence
multiplicity, in their very substance. The modern work of art favors series,
and openly manifests its belonging to a sequence of other artistic works.
Accordingly the painting is best exhibited serially, along with other paint-
ings from which it differs all the more for its being intrinsically bound to
the series. The modern work of art then does not demand to be set apart
as a matter of right, just because it exists: on the contrary, it conceives of itself as a member of a series, a member that derives its singularity from its being in difference with other paintings. The serial work of art overcomes de-individualization, not by preaching the gospel of the single in commensurable work of art, but by mimicking it. By focusing on the same gesture in every work of art, the contemporary artist looks for dissimilarity in similarity itself, a dissimilarity that bursts forth from the series and makes each element distinct enough to risk being mistaken for each other. The work’s difference comes from its being in difference, from the indifference that may strike the eye as one steps into a modern art gallery. The effect is not so unlike that of the Kunstkammer: one does not know which one to look at, or whether they are all to be looked at collectively. Neither way is correct by itself. Rather their collective difference, their dissimilarity in the midst of collectiveness, is a resistance to abstract compulsion similarity, a resistance that is possible only where there is true difference.

The image of the Kunstkammer remains for us somewhat of a puzzle and a regret. The strip mall and department store have spoiled whatever enjoyment one could have taken in the crammed collection. Estheticism is the bad conscience of the mass market and, even when cheerfully championed by pop art, this bad conscience is not so easily forgotten. It seems as though estheticism cannot be given up without declaring the defeat of art in the face of the industrial leveling of all existence. The religion of art-for-art’s sake began not so much to make up for the secularization of art and social life in modern times, but to rescue art from the trivialization of objects and object-making. To question the singularity of the artwork is to undermine the difference between the artwork and the commodity, a strategy that only a very shrewd ironist, like Warhol, can attempt without canceling the very idea of art altogether. It is in any case significant that Warhol did away with the idea of artist, and even of the individual, when he renamed his studio “the Factory” and began turning out artworks in the same way Henry Ford produced cars. The serialization of art, modeled on that of commodities, suppresses the individual who takes refuge in estheticism’s claim for the individuality of art. The contemporary gallery, with its stylishly sparse environment, shows that postmodernism and pop art have to some extent overcome the faint-heartedness of estheticism.

Flaubert captured the uneasy conscience of modern artistic reception in a way that still seems relevant today: the collector in “Bibliomanie” who sacrifices his entire collection for the acquisition of one single object. Here, esthetic fixation on the single artifact rules out the idea of the museum itself, of the publicness of art. But there is also the chaotic universalism of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s encyclopedia. Their museum unleashes a satiety of miscellaneous objects tumbling over a world where hardly anything is not worth collecting—indeed, a world that is its own collection. The stories of “Bibliomanie” and Bouvard et Pécuchet sketch out the two dead ends where esthetic thought corners itself: the impossibility of presenting absolute singularity without destroying it and the anomaly of a desingularized, desublimated world. Nothing or chaos; the sublime or its grotesque liquidation.

The Identity in Question

“Museums,” Carol Duncan writes, “can be powerful identity-defining machines.” The museum is an identificatory powerhouse, a builder of community, “a political resource whereby national identities are constructed.” Thus the creation of museums in the nineteenth century is tied to the rise of nationalism and the forced identification of individuals with a civic, national character. Already in 1815, the return to Antwerp of paintings confiscated by France during the Napoleonic campaigns prompted the type of public rejoicing and triumphant parading formerly granted to royalty. The people saw their national heritage, their collective identity, embodied in artworks. This assimilation of cultural heritage and national identity undergirded the creation of museums. A visit to the museum henceforth became a way of paying ritual respect to a collective identity, mostly prefabricated and handed down to the people whose observance of a cultural agenda was dictated from on high. To this day, the museum is a totem invested with the authority of the great historical ancestor giving his blessing to the cultural politics of the current regime. In the museum, France is no longer simply a geopo-
litical entity. It is a mythic body, an emanation of the wisdom and reason of history itself.

More recently, museums have awakened to the repressive dimension inherent in the idea of national institutes of art. Just as the museum was once a powerful tool of neutralization, it can also act as a no less powerful agent of emancipation. In the last decades, curators have made room for counterhegemonic exhibitions which give voice to the voiceless. Identities are claimed for those trampled by the march of the World Spirit. The museum now cries mea culpa. No longer does it cater to the abstract citizen consumer, the so-called civilized subject who viewed alternative cultures as primitive, infantile cases of arrested development. The museum's task is now to foster the dignity and recognition of overlooked communities, to look for an identity that suits the multiplicity of identities in a heterogeneous society. The museum's self-critique extends to its mode of exhibition. The ecomuseum is an answer to both the problem of hegemonic culture and the lack of authenticity attributed to artifacts in museum exhibition. In many instances, the ecomuseum functions as a locally operated community center that not only preserves the past but also actively promotes consciousness raising, public participation, and economic and social development. The museum has evolved from the role of guardian of the past to that of patron of present local life. There, art is not to be contemplated reverently but engaged, discussed, even touched, created, and exchanged. Through the ecomuseum, consciousness reawakens to the necessity of integrating art and artifacts with the praxis of existence.

There are examples of tribal museums which, operated by the indigenous people themselves, exhibit art in a manner consistent with traditional modes of displaying the potlatch and tribal properties. In such instances, the museum acts as a "ceremonial house," rather than the hall of dead culture. The museum's involvement in mediating community identity is carried to the point where it lets itself be mediated by these identities. The Western idea of collecting historical knowledge and art is reinterpreted according to the local understanding of history and art. In such cases, the museum becomes nearly indistinguishable from the ways of life: it is the ceremonial space of the potlatch, a vivid participant in the community's self-creation. Ownership, which had not been seen since the
though it is true that there is no individual well-being without the dialectical interaction of the group, identification demands of the individual that he or she surrender the experience of self-individuation, that is, the very dialectical principle that binds the individual to the group as it separates her from it. The empowerment that cultural identification promises is a generalization: it necessarily cuts across, perhaps even annuls, the manifold contingency of personal experience. Once made into a fetish, identity undermines the very individuality it purports to support. Celebration of identity becomes joyless and sinister when it insists that dignity exists only inside the law of identification.

This is not to embrace a mood of postmodernist laissez-faire that would blithely throw all identity out the window. But it points to the fact that, however celebratory it is of alternative identities, the museum still involves forming political constituencies by means of alienating modes and techniques. That the seat of museum power has changed hands, from the mandarins of high culture to sympathetic curators of living excentric cultures, does not mean that the oppressive structure of identity creation has been altogether reformed. If only because the museum visitor is addressed as a public, he is asked to identify with an abstraction, a disembodied and truncated sublimation of himself. Even cultural difference, when it is made into an object, a fetish, reverts into its opposite: compulsive identification with difference actually stifles difference. The proof is that the social status quo has accommodated itself quite well to the claims of cultural diversity coming from the left side of the political field. While museums and university curricula celebrate multiculturalism and counterhegemonic identities, affirmative action programs, the rights of individuals against corporations, and the principle of social justice are losing ground in courts of law. That the cultural establishment is intent on preserving museums and educational institutions, even when those are ostensibly opposed to that same establishment, shows that the museum still acts as a neutralizer. Cultural difference is sublimated as a thing of culture, an object of exhibition, a principle of abstract identification. And abstract identification, or sublimation into culture, is agreeable to the political establishment. The fixation on cultural authenticity and identity can be synonymous with oppression because it abstracts the individual and demands of him compliance with an ego-ideal. It creates an individual whose gratification is tied up with his degree of absorption in group identity.

To be sure, the community's direct involvement with the choice and contents of museum exhibitions has transformed the museum into a place of contention and revision that, in theory, militates against the idea of the individual as a product of identification with authority. Yet it is still arguable whether the ecomuseum and the diversified community museum can avert the trappings of the traditional museum. The ecomuseum re-embodies the image of the ideal citizen as subsumed by canonical culture; but it does not do away with the fetish of identification which, on the contrary, it ratifies with the discourse of authenticity and "empowerment." True empowerment of the individual, however, entails the resistance of the individual to cultural and political assimilation. Otherwise it remains as oppressive as the obedient identification promulgated by the traditional museum. It is noteworthy that the idea of the community-based ecomuseums in Europe actually got off the ground during the most authoritarian days of twentieth-century history: it originated with the activist folk museums created by the Vichy regime, the network of homeland museums (Heimatmuseen) in Nazi Germany, and Mussolini's Museo di Roma.101 By promoting "roots" and identifying the individual with a folksy, contextualized, and locally meaningful culture, these museums advertised culture as compulsive identity formation. The old Quatemarian idea of exhibiting objects in situ with an eye for "authenticity" once again came into vogue (the idea was to "bring displayed objects to life by displaying them in context . . . i.e., by reconstructing the setting from which they had been extracted").102 Excessive identification with culture stultifies individuation, turning it into a static essence or blood-and-soil substance rather than an emancipatory and creative activity.

This is no doubt a lesson to the ecomuseums of today, which, touting difference, make difference into a cultural fetish, hence a piece of reification. Shifting the focus from canonical culture, the museum must also strive to avoid the ideology of immanence and absorption into any culture.103 One of the museum's tasks today is to debunk the sacrosanct aura of culture which it is partly responsible for establishing. By doing this, the museum would prove itself more attuned to the art it exhibits: isn't art, in the last resort, a resistance against the sanctity of culture? Does
not art incise culture, break it? The museum’s responsibility is to upset and not only cajole, the cultural status quo and the very notion of cultural identity, which has proven to have dangerous affinities with authoritarianism. But this can only come through a radical critique of identity. Perhaps, like art, the museum ought to become a site of resistance to the sanctity of identity itself: it would then perhaps become truly cultural, that is, on the side of invention.

Bringing the Museum Home: The Domestic Interior in the Nineteenth Century