Three years ago, 60 Minutes broadcast a televised essay on the pretensions of the art world, with Morley Safer playing Gulliver and various art world figures playing Houyhnhnms. I happened to be watching that night, and, for the first few moments, I just sat there frozen, like a deer in the headlights. Then I realized that nothing was going on I didn’t know about. It was just the same old art world, and even though Safer’s piece was ruthlessly selective, it was not wrong. It was ignorant and uninformed about art, of course, but if this disqualified folks from commentary, a good percentage of the art community would be pressed into silence.

So I was cool with Safer’s jibes. Within the year, I had seen similar and even more acerbic pieces on the music business and the film world, and the members of these communities had somehow managed to maintain their composure. A great many of my colleagues, however, did not. They felt called upon to respond with self-righteous bleats of indignation and defense—no easy task since one could hardly attack Safer without seeming to defend the perspicacity of West Side collectors, the altruism of Sotheby’s auctions, and the gravitas of Christopher Wool. None of my colleagues quite rose to this challenge, I felt, and it occurred to me then that their pedantic squawk was not dissimilar to the aggrieved hysteria with which the French Academy responded to the father of my profession, La Font de Saint-Yenne, when he published the first Salon in 1737—a tract that is no less entertaining, ignorant, and ill-informed than Safer’s.

So I found myself wondering why the music and film communities could respond to bourgeois punditry with such equanimity while the French Academy and the contemporary art world went certifiably gaga. I came up with two answers. First, it was bourgeois punditry, and the art world continues to regard itself as a self-anointed aristocracy. Second, music and movie people are not in denial about the frivolity of their endeavor while the contemporary art world, like the French Academy, feels called upon to maintain the aura of spectacularunction that signifies public virtue, in hopes of public patronage. So here’s my suggestion: At this moment, with public patronage receding like the spring tide and democracy supposedly proliferating throughout the art world, why don’t all of us art-types summon up the moral courage to admit that what we do has no intrinsic value or virtue—that it has its moments and it has its functions, but otherwise, all things considered, it is a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do. We could do this, you know. And those moments and those functions would not be diminished in the least.
So consider the enormous benefits that would accrue to us all, if art were considered bad, silly, and frivolous. Imagine the lightness we would feel if this burden of hypocrisy were lifted from our shoulders—the sheer joy of it. We could stop insisting that art is a "good thing" to do—to do "good"—and classes to do it—on the grounds that they are too Protestant, too well-behaved, too respectful of our respect to effect any kind of delightful change. We could abandon the pretense of thoughtfully satirize, reconceive ourselves as the needly, disconsolate, and canon of Puritan taste with its disdain for "objects of virtue" and its cold passion for dissen-

We could just say: "Okay! You're right! Art is bad, silly, and frivolous. So what? Rock and roll is bad, silly, and frivolous. Movies are bad, silly, and frivolous. Basketball is bad, silly, and frivolous. Next question?" Wouldn't that open up the options a little for something really super?—for an orchestra on the dung heap that would seem all the more super for our surprise at finding it there? And what if art were considered bad for us?—more like cocaine that supplies us pleasure while intensifying our desires, and less like penicillin that promises to cure us all, if we maintain proper dosage, give it time, and don't expect miracles? Might not this empower artists to be more sensitive to the power and promise of what they do, to be more concerned with good effects than with dramatizing their own good intentions?

Simply put: What if works of art were considered to be what they actually are—friv-

olous objects or entities with no intrinsic value that only acquire value through a complex process of socialization during which some are empowered by an ongoing sequence of pri-


tate, mercantile, journalistic, and institutional investments that are irrevocably extrinsic to them and to any intention they might embody? What if we admitted that, unlike eighteenth-


century France, institutional and educational accreditations are presently insufficient to invest works of art with an aura of public import—that the only works of art that maintain themselves in public vogue are invariably invested with interest, enthusiasm, and volunteer com-


mmitment from a complex constituency that is extrinsic both to themselves and to their spon-


soring institutions?

If we do this, then we may regard the art world not as a "world" or a "community" or a "market" but as a semi-public, semi-mercantile, semi-institutional agora—an intermedi-

ate institution of civil society, like that of professional sports, within which issues of private desire and public virtue are negotiated and occasionally resolved. Because the art world is no more about art than the sports world is about sport. The sports world conducts an ongoing referendum on the manner in which we should cooperate and compete. The art world conducts an ongoing referendum on how things should look and the way we should look at things—or it would, if art were regarded as sports are, as a wasteful, privileged endeavor through which very serious issues are sorted out. Indeed, it is precisely the worthlessness and uselessness of art and sport that qualifies them for the discourse of value that surrounds them.

Because art doesn't matter. What matters is how things look and the way we look at them in a democracy—just as it matters how we compete and cooperate—if we do so in the sporadic, bucolic manner of professional baseball, or in the corporate, bureaucratic manner of professional football, or in the fluid, improvisatory manner of professional basketball. Because finally the art world is no more a community than Congress is a community—although, like Congress, it is in terrible danger of becoming one and losing its status as a forum of contemporary values. Works of art are the candidates. They aspire to represent complex constituencies. So it is important that the value of art, as art, remains problematic—that none of us are disinterested in its consequences, or involved just for the "good" of art, which is not so. So consider these three benefits.

First, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, works of art could fail by failing to achieve a complex constituency—or by failing to sustain a visible level of com-


mitment and socialization—and this failure would be public and demonstrable, since every-


one involved would be committed to their own visual agendas and none to the virtue of "art." Such failure, then, would constitute an incentive to quit or to change—with the caveat that works of art with any constituency at all may sustain themselves in marginal esteem until, perhaps, their time has come. The practice of maintaining works of art in provisional esteem simply because they are works of art and art is good, however, robs artists of the primary benison of mercantile civilization: certifiable, undeniable, disastrous failure.

In warrior cultures there is no failure. There is only victory or death. In institutional cultures there is neither failure nor success, only the largesse or spite of one's superiors.
Failure, however, is neither death nor the not-death of institutional life; it is simply the failure of one's peers (or the peer group to which one aspires) to betray any interest in one's endeavors. And there is no shame in this. In fact, such failures constitute the primary engine of social invention in Western culture, because they mean that you are wrong or that your friends are wrong. If you suspect that you are wrong, you change. If you think your friends are wrong, you change your friends, or, failing that, become a hobbyist. There is no shame in this, either.

Second, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, art professionals, curators, museum directors, and other bureaucratic support workers might cease parading among us like little tin saints—like Mother Teresa among the wretched of Calcutta—and our endeavors would be cleansed of the stink of unctuous charity. Because if everyone's involvement in the frivolity of art were presumed to be self-interested, these caregivers would have to accept the obligation of taking care of themselves in pursuance of their own ends, and if these ends were just to hang around with artists and put on shows out of which nothing can sell, they could finance these purportedly public-spirited self-indulgences themselves.

This being so, artists, critics, and dealers, who get paid by the piece, could stop parenting their self-appointed parents by donating their production to be flitted away or auctioned off by the support systems that supposedly support them—thus eroding the market for the work donated and almost certainly insuring the need for continued charity. Having said this, of course, we must remember that presumptuous demands for theatrical gratitude by self-appointed caregivers are not local to the art world; presently, they are the plague of this nation. The police complain that citizens don't support them; museums and alternative spaces complain that artists don't support them; radicals complain that workers don't support them; feminists complain that women don't support them. Nobody will do anything for anybody anymore, it seems, without a big hug in return. Yet, if such voluntary care constituted genuine advocacy, these demands would not be made. Thus, when they are made, they may be taken as self-serving and ignored. Making and selling and talking about art is simply too much fun and too much work to be poisoned by that perpetual begging whine: "We're only trying to help!"

Finally, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, I could practice art criticism by participating in the street-level negotiation of value. I might disregard the distinctions between high and low art and discuss objects and activities whose private desirability might be taken to have positive public consequences. As things stand, my function is purely secondary unless I am writing or talking about work in a commercial gallery exhibition. Otherwise, I am a vestigial spear-carrier in aid of institutional agendas. In commercial galleries and artists' studios, of course, the value of art is problematic by definition; and in these spaces, dealers, collectors, critics, and any other committed citizen who is willing to risk something enter into an earnest colloquy about what this silly, frivolous stuff might be worth.

If I praise a work in a commercial space, then, I invest words in it and risk my reputation. In doing so, I put pressure on the price by hopefully swaying public opinion. If I praise an exhibition in an institutional space, however, I am only confirming public policy. And since no art is for sale, I am really doing nothing more than the institution itself: giving the artist "exposure" (which should be a felony) and reinforcing the idea of art as a low-cost, risk-free spectator sport when in fact it is a betting sport. Thus my institutional bets are nothing more than fodder for grant applications and résumés—a fact that becomes clear when I choose to test an institutional exhibition, since, in doing so, I am questioning the fiduciary responsibility of expending public funds on such an exhibition and undermining the possibility of future funds. This, I have discovered, is taken very seriously indeed, although it has nothing to do with investing art with social value and everything to do with art's presumed, preordained virtue and the virtue of those that promote it.

So I'll tell you what I would like. I would like art to be bad, and I would like to see some art that could not be construed as anything else. I would like a bunch of twenty-three-year-old troublemakers to become so enthusiastic, so noisy, and so involved in some stupid, ignorant, and destructive brand of visual culture that I would feel called upon to rise up in righteous indignation, spewing vitriol, to be mean the arrogance and self-indulgent disgrace of the younger generation and all of its artifacts. Then I would be really working, really doing my thing, and it would be so great! Never happen though.

Dave Hickey's *Sample Hearts* appears regularly in *Art Issues*. It is a column devoted to unfashionable enthusiasms, unlikely objects of desire, and other phenomena held in mysterious esteem by the author and chronicler of his observations.