

The following interview with Amy Schmitter S was conducted by Alan Henderson H, at the Peter Robertson Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, February 21, 2007 and sponsored by the Visual Arts Association of Alberta.

I met Amy Schmitter at The U of A's Philosophers' Café where she threw out the question 'What, if anything, do we need to know in order to appreciate artworks?' The workshop was open to the public, which explains why I was there and I enjoyed it so much that I asked if she could spend some more time with me talking about philosophy and the arts. Amy Schmitter is an Associate Professor and Graduate Studies Coordinator with the University of Alberta's Philosophy Department and has been both a student and teacher of Art, Art History and Philosophy for the past 27 years, with a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh.

H You were born and raised outside New York City and you still have family living in Manhattan. Do you think this early proximity to such a dominant creative center nurtured an early interest in art?

S Probably, although I do want to point out that I grew up in New Jersey -- Which is still most known as being the home of Bruce Springsteen. Actually I was more interested in Blondie; Debra Harry was also from New Jersey . . . Both my parents were academics -- although they both had come from the Midwest and my father was a farm boy -- and when I was six, they had a sabbatical, and the way they did it was, (lucky people that they were) they just basically took about six months and traveled around Europe. This is when the U.S. dollar was still very strong, and you could live like a king in Europe -- and they did. My memory is that I got dragged through every single art museum in western . . .

H Dragged?

S . . . But I eventually kinda liked it.

H Well if you're six you're dragged I guess.

S Although, I don't really remember, to tell you the truth, but I did see an awful lot of art. I liked to draw and all that, like most kids like to do, but more than just the normal amount. What I really wanted to do was be an artist. When we were in Florence, we spent a fair amount of time in Florence -- actually, I got a little figurine of Michelangelo's David. It was this completely (you know) crappy little tourist thing. I hope my mum still has it because I still sort of treasure it. It was sold by the hundredfold for tourists. On one side, he had a nipple, and on one side, he didn't. I just remember being fascinated by this little figurine and I developed a real love for Michelangelo. I didn't want to be an academic --I wanted to be and artist. I wanted to be a fabulously wealthy artist, so that I could buy my own Michelangelo. That it was impossible now to buy a Michelangelo didn't figure in my plans. Also, I didn't like -- what do I call it now -- "non figurative" art. I liked art that looked like something recognizable, shall we say. I was going to be a fabulously wealthy artist who was going to show the world that non figurative stuff was -- you know -- crap.

H So that was your negative impulse, "I'm gonna show them."

S Yeah, I wanted to show them --and I wanted to buy my own Michelangelo. And then I had bigger plans; I was going to have my own private museum. It was just so I could have, like, my own Vatican.

H How is that working out for you?

S Really, those dreams were abandoned a long time ago -- I think at the time I switched to wanting to become an astronaut.

H **Your work** has taken in a variety of subjects: from the nature of emotions, the history of art, gender, mathematics, power and even our perception of wax. Is how we see something your focus rather than what we see? You talk about a dog.

S Yeah, that's in the LeBrun article I think [1], because philosophy takes a sort of meta-stance. It's about (you know) whatever . . . like Descartes on mathematics and Descartes on the perception of wax, which is fine -- that's also a way of talking about those things . . . That's why you can have the philosophy of whatever you like - the philosophy of X (insert subject here). If you do the philosophy of mathematics you may, or may not, be doing much mathematics. What you are doing is considering broad issues about the nature of mathematics itself.

H . . . How we think of it.

S But also what it is . . . It depends on what questions you ask; they're both legitimate questions. I think some of my work in the philosophy of art -- in some ways I prefer the term "aesthetics" for various reasons -- is actually more specific, object-centered, than a lot of philosophy of art is. I have the history of art background, so I've got this one article on the painting Las Meninas [Diego Velázquez, 1656] that I think is really about -- I mean, it's about a number of things -- but it's also concretely about the painting Las Meninas, and I've actually had some people ask me "well, is that philosophy at all, because your talking about a painting?" [2]

H . . . Suggesting that its art criticism or art history.

S I think that was a stupid question, frankly. I hope [the Las Meninas article] is at least art historically respectful, that I haven't violated some norm -- done something stupid that an art historian would be annoyed about. And it's not just about the painting I think it's about various other things -- like what it is to be a representation in general -- but it's also about the painting. One of the ways to figure out about the nature of representation is by looking at this painting that is a particularly canny self-reflective account of a certain kind of representation -- and look at what it says. So, some of this is the philosophy thing -- always taking a kind of meta-stance about how are you doing whatever it is you are doing -- but I hope I can also talk about what we see.

H And that's ok, you can do that?

S Yeah, I think so. There's this [review essay of mine], an extended article on a book, rather than a short review. The book is an art history book -- and it's a very bad book. It's a bad example of a kind of post modernist, post-structuralist, art history run amok. I think the author is enamored with the idea of doing theory with a CAPITAL 'T'. Say that in a kind of Monty Python voice too -- "T H E O R Y". [3]

I do philosophy and philosophy is a highly theoretical discipline . . . I mean philosophy is often the theory of . . . whatever. But this guy is an art historian -- that's what I'm saying -- I think he's a more than competent art historian. He knows quite a bit about artworks; he can say really interesting things about them, but he loves the idea of doing very theoretical stuff about "what am I doing when I look at paintings or when I do art history" -- or whatever -- and he's not very good at it; that's the trouble.

He sets up these very problematic distinctions between -- let me see, . . . He sort of goes on like this "We have no unmediated access to the object" -- he means the painting in this case, which is fair enough and true, I grant you that. He then makes this move: "all we can talk about is what we are doing when we are trying to get to the object". That's just a bad move and it's a bad distinction. I think that the best kind of theoretical art history is also true to the kind of philosophy of art that I'm interested in; the kind that talks about art works does both. I mean it can illuminate what you're doing in a way that also tells you about the things you're interested in.

H And that's where you think he went wrong?

S Oh, he went wrong in so many ways it's hard to count them all, but that was the beginning. I explain it better in my piece.

H But he's not the only one to jump into philosophy when it's not their field; Joyce Cary wrote a book to do with the philosophy of art that I enjoyed. I guess it could be scary when you do that, you could get caught off side.

S Right, I don't want to deny anyone pleasure doing what they feel they want to do. It got annoying when the guy started making pronouncements about what you can and cannot do . . .

H He wouldn't be the first on the topic of art . . .

S It's just that -- he didn't know what he didn't know and that always bothers me.

H **One** area that you are particularly interested in is the sometimes dynamic relationship of representation to its subject. Can you explain how a representation of a thing can change it?

S Ohh, that's a great question. I really like that. The cases where I give examples of that are really common-sensical ones -- I mean I don't think that it's a really strange claim. In general I'm interested in the way a representation can be "about" something else. It could be "how are these sounds coming out of our mouths about some proposition or about the world or making some claim". How can some paint on a canvass be about a cow, if you like, or an emotion or what-have-you? So Representation in a very basic sense is for one thing to represent, or at least to be about something else.

H This is a cow.

S A picture of a cow, which is after all a flat thing with, you know, markings on a piece of paper that somehow or other represents a cow. I only use the example of a cow because it seems so boring.

H It's a very good example for this province. Countless paintings and sculptures of cows, some very good ones...

S Yeah, well, I was also thinking of those Dutch paintings of cows and things like that. Yeah, I'm also interested in -- maybe "things" isn't the right word -- "entities" that require a certain kind of active representation. The example I use of this is power, political power. This is not my own thought this is a thought that comes from a really interesting French thinker Louis Marin. Political power is not simply force . . . its force put in reserve and recognized as such. You have to recognize it in order for it to be powerful.

H Threat.

S Exactly. If you're thinking of it in terms of a coercive power a threat ain't a threat unless it's recognized, as such. The thought here is that power -- which I think is completely real; it's not like some fiction from somebody's imagination. It is real. The Political state has a lot of power -- power in its ability to get things done. But that power will only work if it's recognized as power, and that's one of the things that representations will do. In representing this thing as powerful you require that it be recognized as powerful.

H I'm a sculptor so what I'm thinking of are these incredibly powerful large images of the North Korean leader . . .

S Yeah, yeah; it doesn't have to be like a Stalinist form of power, but that's a very, . . . that's a blunt example.

H I'm thinking in very simple terms; power is big. These are very big sculptures of the leader I guess that would say "this guy has a lot of power". The bigger the dictator the bigger the sculpture.

S Kim Jong-il . . . Its not like he himself, personally, as an individual, is a very powerful, he's a little shrimpy guy you know...

H . . . Although if you lived there, I get the impression, He's very powerful in your life . . .

S Yes, of course, he's powerful because of the social structure surrounding him, which require that people recognize him as such, so that they cooperate. If everyone stopped cooperating with Kim Jong-ill he wouldn't be very powerful -- he'd just be a wimpy little guy.

H I don't want to throw metaphors into your mouth but with him as a modern example, I mean we live in the modern era, and so it's bizarre when you think of it, but this is like opening your Jansen [art history text] and seeing the Pharaohs and that . . .

S . . . Yeah, yes that's absolutely right . . .

H . . . You see a very similar -- I mean it's the same thing, isn't it. He's got the art making representations, which you say changes his power to whatever degree.

S Well I think that it actually makes it power. Art doesn't do that all by itself, but it's part of the devices that call forth recognition, and that recognition is an indispensable part of that kind of power. I think an easy example is money. I remember a famous philosopher at Stanford, a really funny guy [John Perry]. He said one time he was about to teach a class, and he got a call from some crazy guy who'd gone off his meds, who said he had this great philosophical insight: He had reached into his pocket and pulled out some money and realized it was only paper. And that's absolutely right, but it's also money. The reason paper money functions is it's recognized as such.

H That's all money is; it's just a representation.

S The real thing is constructed by the representation, but that doesn't mean it's an illusion . . . It's not magical, right. They [representations] create things that have as much right to be considered real as anything else, but would not exist if it weren't for the representations and whatever else is necessary for bringing them into being.

H And some things are just representations; they're just symbols.

- S Yes, that's right, money you know . . . (whips out a 5). This is a piece of paper, of course -- I don't deny that -- but it's also, it genuinely is a five-dollar bill. I don't mean that if you drew a picture of a five-dollar bill, then suddenly - boom -- you have a five dollar bill, . . . I don't mean that . . .
- H . . . if you do a very good one, then they come after you. And they take that very seriously.
- S . . . you're not in the position to actually produce the representation either. You have to be in the right position to do that. So that's money, which has got its own bizarre system . . . In a different system -- which because it's more directly under the control of single individuals -- you find things like in the Baroque period, the representation of royalty, the power of the king.
- H The system has to have its representation.
- S Yeah, I think that's exactly right. You would not have the power, which you do have, were it not for these representations of power, which are partly constitutive of the power which they represent.
- H **There are** also the mechanics of comprehension. Nick Zangwill, the author of The Metaphysics of Beauty, called your work in The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism [4] on representation a "Classy presentation and Interesting angle". In it you present two notions of how we perceive art, one notion sensory the other intellectual. Some people say these two concepts contrast with one another. Is it our gut, or our head that determines our reaction to art -- what's your take on this?
- S That's very nice of him to say that. . . . Right, what I meant was that there are two notions of what a representation is that don't contrast, but also that they were both incomplete and wrong. There's a kind of simple minded [approach to explaining this], what I would call the "baldly naturalist" -- which is an expression I pick up from elsewhere [John McDowell] -- that holds that there's something about the way the picture acts on our sensory system -- cow picture . . . stuff happens to eye (with brain connected to eye) that's very similar to when you see a cow.
- H Pictures of clowns make you happy or scared, depending on the person.
- S Well that may be fine but its even more interesting, this view holds that it's literally what's happening in the nervous system is...
- H ... no control from the will at all...
- S ... where there's a core underneath it all that is kind of unaffected by your knowledge and your being imbedded in other human relations, like the fact that you might speak a language. And for this reason people who take this view often really like animal experiments. And so...
- H The animals are stupid us.
- S Animals are stupid us, exactly . . . or well, animal perceiving systems are just like our perceiving systems. I want to . . . I'm not going to argue with anyone about their pets. I'm sure their pets are very brilliant pets, or even, you know, Koko the gorilla. But on this view it seems like pigeons, . . . "oh look pigeons peck at pictures of other pigeons. They must see how the pictures represent pigeons".
- H It's a little difficult to ask them what they're doing.
- S You get these weird behavioral things in front of this picture, and "oh look, that's how we can see. This represents that [for the pigeon]."
- H This also supposes that they're not thinking.
- S That's why I say pigeons, rather than Koko the guerrilla, or your dog because -- you know, I mean - because there's not a lot cognitively going on with pigeons.
- H That's a little harsh on the pigeons, isn't it?
- S Arthur Danto uses the example of both pigeons and sheep. He says sheep are notorious for being dumb, so that's why he likes to use them, because they're such dumb animals.
- H They'll work for scale.

S [laughing] So there is that whole side of things to the debated about representation -- and there is one of the more famous examples the work of Ernst Gombrich in the book Art And Illusion, which a lot of people have read -- and then there is another side, which often use analogies with language. What they're interested in is certain kinds of formal and purely conventional relations between the word and its reference. Obviously this is conventional -- "bench," "chaise," "settee," you know, there are all these wildly different words that would point to this kind of a thing, what we are sitting on.

What I wanted to do was to find a kind of a middle ground, where I say, look there really is something perceptual: you see what the work is about, in a certain sense. Its, if you like, activating or mobilizing your perceptual systems, but our perceptual systems are completely imbued with the kind of human abilities we have -- they're not dumb.

H So, it might not be possible -- even if you liked the idea -- to separate the two.

S Um, yeah, I think that's right. On the other side, people tend to forget that language is perceived too -- visually, if you are reading, or orally, if you are hearing -- or if you are doing braille, by touch -- but it's always taken in perceptually. One of the points I want to make is that our perception, human perception . . . is not dumb; its shaped by the fact that we have linguistic abilities and cognitive abilities. There's no getting at some stupid core. I think that was your example, the dumb perception beneath it all.

H I'm trying to think of something, Neanderthal, I'm trying to think of something that's just, imbecilic -- a sort of gut reaction like . . .

S What you might think of -- and a lot of people do it this way -- is something like pre-linguistic babies in cribs: "They are perceiving just the way we are, but then they learn to get language, and they learn to get concepts, and the whole thing". This is . . . I don't think this is true. I mean, I don't know; I don't remember what it was like to be a baby.

H Probably easier to ask the sheep.

S Yeah, exactly. I suspect that a baby's perception is probably a "buzzing blooming confusion" to fit it in a great term that's not mine. The world must be this mass of chaotic sounds and things that . . .

H There is no meaning to anything . . .

S Even an object, to get a stable object in time . . .

H So, how could you make art for babies if babies see no meaning in anything?

S Well its not even clear that they see things, you know, in some sense of the word "things." I wish I knew more about it (child psychology); there probably is some very good stuff done in child psychology about the development of perception. It seems clear that human babies are wired so they start with remarkable abilities. They can pick things out in their environments, but it takes some time getting, you know, moms face -- the parental face is one of the first ones. Just things like tracking their own body -- knowing what's their body and what is not -- is something that develops over a long period of time. Then there is that sense of stable objects, and that those objects can be duplicated in something like a mirror -- that's an incredible developmental leap, and I suspect that sheep and pigeons are incapable of doing that. I don't know about chimps, or guerrillas, or whales, or some smarter animals.

H A person might wonder "well, who cares why would I even be interested," but it seems to me if you could show that this was something that's below conscious thought, then I guess it could be universal. So art could be universal. Everybody could see the painting of the apple in the same way regardless of their own society.

S I think that's probably not true . . . We have remarkable capacities that we can develop and train -- I certainly don't want to underestimate the abilities of humans to learn new things. We can learn new languages, for godsakes, that's amazing. I think my point is this: it's a kind of remarkable perceptual ability -- and it's genuinely perceptual -- to be able to look at a representation of this picture and see something in it. Actually I'm tempted to cite Richard Wollheim, . . . to have the kind of "representational seeing," to see in the picture the thing that it represents.

H . . . Which you don't think animals have . . .

- H If they do it would be different. I'm going to be a bit agnostic about that. I don't think you get it from just some sort of brute perceptual ability that you think of as something that might be shared by humans and animals.
- H We're social animals, like wolves or something similar, but we are social animals at a much higher level. So the facets of all these sorts of social calculations that a human being makes is a big part of what makes art desirable for people. When somebody sees artwork it's an incredibly complicated . . .
- S I think it's remarkable, forget interpretation, or reading off an artwork, or any higher levels of it, . . . but just seeing artworks actually does mobilize some really sophisticated human abilities -- perceptual and conceptual. In a way, that might undercut the thought that it could be universal. The fewer abilities that a thing mobilizes, the more likely it is that more things will have them. But I suspect that these are abilities that people -- humans who aren't brain damaged -- have the ability to at least develop. Perceiving artworks is not dumb: it's conceptually and developmentally rich.
- Getting back to the question of language, I don't think that pictorial representation is just like language. The abilities that we use in -- I'm not even talking about making artworks -- just in recognizing them. I think it might require some sort of language to have those abilities. But it doesn't mean that they're linguistic abilities. It just means that you have to have a language to have those abilities. It might be even more complex than linguistic ability.
- H So, it comes from the same place as our skill with language.
- S Or at least its enabled by our skill with language, in a broad sense yes.
- H I'm going to pull out this quote by John Perreault. Contemporary art is, he says "Art that is serious, ambitious, well thought out and thought provoking". That's what contemporary art was, and I notice he said thought provoking.
- S Don't get me wrong . . . I mean, when you are dealing with art, there's some art that's just dumb, and there's some art that's intelligent.
- H Dumb but enjoyable . . .
- S I'm not a fan of, for instance, Renoir, for a whole load of reasons, but one of the reasons is [his work] seems so dumb. His son was a very smart film maker but August Renoir, the painter, strikes me as, you know, the dumbest of the impressionists, and I don't like him for that . . . You can use some sort of a value term for artworks like "dumb art," "smart art," or whatever -- and I prefer the smart, for the most part. But just the very capacity to even recognize an artwork as an artwork -- well, sorry, you don't even have to go as far as that -- to recognize a representation as a representation (there are representations that aren't artworks, and maybe artworks that aren't representations), but even this -- which is a more minimal ability, I think, than to recognize an artwork as an artwork -- requires a huge battery of abilities.
- H When I was younger, I used to try and point for dogs (pointing) "over there," and what I noticed is that they always came and sniffed the end of my finger . . .
- S Yes, oh that's a great example.
- H . . . and that's why I don't bother to point for dogs anymore, it's pointless.
- S One thing that humans as a species seem to be able to do is to practice what's called joint attention. Babies do it apparently; so if you are looking at this interesting object over here, the baby will see that you are looking at that and turn and attend to this object -- hence "joint attention;" you attend jointly. Apparently, no other animal does this -- except for (maybe) dogs.
- H . . . Which, again, are very social animals.
- S I think another thing about a representation to be a representation -- as opposed to simply seeing things in other things, . . . we do this all the time; we can look at clouds and see castles and faces and so forth. You don't think of a cloud as a representation. You need to -- in some minimal sense of the word -- see that it's intended that you're supposed to see it as a representation.
- H If I see that cloud as a castle and you don't, is that still a representation just for me?

- S I wouldn't think of the cloud as a representation. I mean you're seeing something in the cloud, but I don't think it's a representation. When you call it a representation, and you include this kind of social element in it, you can get a norm that's built in so there is something you are supposed to see in it. It's supposed to be a representation and you're supposed to see it as whatever it is -- and you can get it wrong.
- H I was going to say, because if you draw your hockey hero in your high school art class, and people think it's a duck, maybe it's a representation, but it's a failed one -- I don't know?
- S Not only can the person seeing it get it wrong you can do this so badly that it fails to be the representation you want it to be, or it can be a bad representation of what you want it to be.
- H Now that happens a lot with people who aren't that great at draughtsmanship, but it happens an awful lot with very high end artists who -- I'm not talking here of a representation of a thing, but of a concept, they're trying to represent - umm - their mothers hatred for their father, or something complex. I'm trying to think of something complex, and nobody gets it -- people standing in a gallery, and nobody has any idea of what it's supposed to be. That's extremely common, and it's to be avoided, I guess, for most artists.
- S It gets far more complicated in those situations than the kid who has no status trying to draw something, and nobody knows even at the most minimal level what the thing is supposed to be -- nice try, but it's a terribly bad or even failed representation.
- H It's uncomfortable for the viewer and uncomfortable for the artist.
- S Well especially if everyone's like "what the hell is it?" When you're talking about someone who is an artist, presumably -- you said trying to represent something complex -- you might have layers of representation. You might have a scene of like cows (we'll get back to the cows). The first layer is, you know, marks on canvas, and if it's a painting, they represent -- in some sense of the word "represent" -- a bunch of cows in the field. And everybody gets that. but as a matter of fact, the cows have this kind of symbolic account, where actually the correct interpretation is his mothers hatred for his father, because his father was, you know, deeply traumatized by a cow when he was little and - or whatever. You might get one level right and yet miss the point.
- H Maybe, it could be these threads of connection that somehow don't survive, in this case, leaving the farm. Nobody else knows these symbols that are particular to this artist.
- S If it were so private in that way, how could you get it right?
- H Some viewers are put in that position. So these would be failed representations, unlike the money we talked about earlier.
- S It's a funny thing. If somebody becomes an artist, they have, . . . I think that by calling them that, you've given them a kind of status that the kid who tried to draw the hockey player and failed doesn't quite have. Which means in some ways they have a somewhat privileged position in saying what it's about where you take their word for it, perhaps. I say "somewhat" because I don't think it's overriding. You can still say this artist really failed to do what they intended. I have lots of examples of paintings that have seriously failed in this way.
- H If John Cage says that this period of silence is, he frames it and says this is art, then I guess then the next question is did he succeed.
- S I think the question of whether he succeeded becomes a very long-term question. It's not simply . . . does this little group of people fail to get it, but in the long run, do critics and audiences over time take this as a certain standard of interpretation for how to deal with the work. And this is partially because it's the work of John Cage. His other works have established the status for himself. For one thing, your willing to invest a lot more work trying to figure out what the hell it's about -- to see if you can get it right -- than in the case of the kid and the hockey player drawing (or failed drawing).
- H **That** brings me to a question that I didn't think we had time for, but it was this question of sophisticated and unsophisticated viewers. Not only can you be a good or bad artist, but are you a good viewer or a bad viewer - or is there such a thing? If you are aware of all of John Cages work prior to this, then maybe it makes perfect sense that he'd make so many minutes of silence into a work of music, but if you weren't aware, the new work wouldn't make any sense to you. You would be a bad viewer, or listener, if the term is even possible.
- S Absolutely - although on the one hand, I don't want to say that an artist can get away with absolutely

anything . . . that whatever they say goes.

H Sometimes it seems like that.

S That's why I say a somewhat privileged position, not overridingly so. If artist X says this work, the point of it is . . . whatever, and there is absolutely no way you could ever see that in the work, then I think they're wrong, but there is always the possibility that there has been a failure on my part, that I have failed to see it in the work. That could just be my failure, so you can never have a complete test one way or the other.

H It does bring in separate audiences, the concept of separate audiences to the viewing of art.

S I do think that -- going back to the point about perceptual abilities -- they're not simple. I think they are things that we can develop and develop not just by seeing things, but by knowing stuff as well . . . Knowing more about John Cage.

H Having this large catalogue in your head might tell you that this painting you're looking at, that you've actually seen 30 of these in the last year, it's not that special. Of course, someone might look at it, who has not been exposed to this large catalogue, and they've never seen anything like it and "that technique is fantastic: it blows me away . . ."

S You find out it's just derivative copying of something that, yeah . . .

H . . . Which might explain this problem you see in the newspapers, a lot -- the complaints against the elitist artwork. It's perhaps, . . . it's not that there are two different languages, but that there really are two different cultures. One has already moved away from something, while the other hasn't even encountered it.

S It seems to me in some ways that this is why I'm interested in saying even the perceptual abilities to see something as a representation (much less as an artwork) are really sophisticated. I think once you allow that . . . I don't see any reason why you can't say, look, you can get more and more sophisticated abilities -- and that's valuable, . . . I think that's good. What's annoying is when you get -- in the name of this kind of anti-elitism -- where the newspaper critic forbids you to enjoy this work because you know too much about it, . . . you're some sort of degenerate, sophisticated type, you know, like, "how dare you!" I really like Marcel Duchamp, but you wouldn't even see them as artworks, if you didn't come with a certain knowledge of the history of art. I don't mean to say you need an art history degree, but some knowledge . . . And, of course, if you didn't see it in a gallery you would have no reason to think it's an artwork. That's what I think is so witty about it. Placement is all here, with Duchamp's work. You might say context is all, but in this case, literally, placement.

H This is for my mother. My mother always wanted to find a place where everybody's, where it's ok for everybody. So it's alright to like very detailed paintings of the hockey players of your favorite team. That's OK. And it's probably just as OK to like a dead rabbit hung up on cords above an art galleries video projector. Both are OK maybe or is one inherently more OK than the other?

S I don't want to forbid anybody their enjoyment, I really don't -- except when it runs against someone else's enjoyment. But on the other hand, there is no moral obligation to be interested in art, although you'll probably be a boring person without it, there are lots of things that are good to be interested in, but you're not morally obligated to be interested in them. But if you are, then it seems to me that somebody that has developed perceptual faculties and knows about the history of art and spends a lot of time looking at artworks . . . their view is probably most likely going to be worth a little bit more than somebody who kind of stumbles in off the street: "Oh pretty," or "Me like."

H It makes their experience richer for them.

S If they're interested in artworks -- in what makes for a good artwork -- then their view would be worth more. You don't have to be interested in that.

H Gee, I hope you can un-forget too. I hope that you can sometimes take off the volumes you take around with you and go back to that simpler time. Maybe you can, maybe you can't . . .

S I don't think you should romanticize it too much either, or else you lose capacities for esthetic pleasures of various kinds . . .

H The more taste buds the better?

S Yeah, that's right. The idea that you get actually more sensitive in a very literal sense -- like you said the more taste buds the better -- unless the only thing you have available to you is McDonald's, if you're robbed of the ability to exercise these capacities.

H What interested you in the work of the photographers Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine?

S They're just two very good examples of the relationship of representation I was calling "aboutness". Sherrie Levine is OK; I find Cindy Sherman really interesting for some other reasons that I don't go into in the article [4], but in both cases there's this really interesting relation of "aboutness," Sherrie Levine even more so, especially if you take the actor Edward Weston photographs - torsos. If I remember correctly, she kind of framed the shot and took a picture of the picture. But, if you put the two next to each other you would not be able to distinguish between them.

H Like the painters of the early seventies who painted paintings of photographs so accurately that they cancelled themselves out of existence - in a funny way.

S But at least there, the medium is different. If you put the two photos up, you could not tell the difference . . .

H Other than she tells you that she did it

S Yes that's right. What I was writing about was . . . what is the subject matter of this photograph? I don't think it's a torso -- it's Edward Weston's photograph, right, the photograph is about Edward Weston's photograph. It's even in the title, Untitled (after Edward Weston); she's not making any mystery of it. And here's the other thing -- this might sound like it contradicts what I just said -- I think once you know that, you can see it. It changes your perception of it.

H Like these illusions that you look at in posters, once you see it you can never un-see it.

S Well, you could un-see it, if I took it and put it in a pile with a bunch of other photographs and mixed them all up -- if I could somehow fool you about which one it was -- that would be one thing. But I think of the knowledge of the photograph's subject as an addition. I think that seeing it in that way is an addition -- that that bit of knowledge isn't robbing you of some better way of seeing it. It's enabling a way of seeing it that you didn't have before -- and so you've gained a sort of perceptual ability that you didn't have before.

H And shifted into a whole different room of context.

S Right.

H And with Cindy Sherman, she's not taking exact copies of something: she's mimicking them.

S Yes, and that's what's so interesting, and there's not one thing she's mimicking; she's mimicking a type, you might say, because it's these "Untitled Film Stills" which of course is the title (I wonder whether what's "untitled" is the "still," or the "film?") The fact that she is always the model is really interesting too.

H So she's got an agenda there other than a love of those kinds of thriller movies or whatever it happens to be.

S No, because it's not just like looking at the movies, but it does surely invoke that type.

H And again, it kind of blooms these different contexts -- quite a few of them, actually, at the same time.

S One of the things I find interesting with her (I didn't talk about it in this article) her work in the untitled film stills in general, but some of her other work I also like. It's very rich with citations of other artworks. She did these Renaissance-like portraits, where she made prosthetic things for herself -- like prosthetic noses and this and that -- and then she photographed herself, as if it's some Renaissance portrait, but in this giant "Cibachrome print" with that incredible sharpness.

H But they're not representations of the period so much as representations of her.

S Yeah, well it's both -- it's layered. With the film stills, one of the things I find interesting -- and I don't have an explanation of this; it's just a fascinating thing -- is that they really do look like they're from movies. Apparently, people have said this over and over again: they say "oh, I know what movie that's from." Well, they're not from any movie. She's not replicating any particular scene from a movie; that's why I say it's a type.

- H Its accurate-ish.
- S That's right. There has to be something in the photograph that's doing that. I think there's something about the composition. Sometime I would like to put my finger on what it is that's making everybody that is knowledgeable about movies -- you have to have a certain kind of cultural knowledge -- to go "oh yeah, . . . from this movie."
- H These are two artists who are very conscious about representation.
- S I use them not because they're my absolutely favoritest artists (although I do like Cindy Sherman a lot), but because they're such good examples of what I was talking about. They're easy in that you don't have to do as much work on explaining that they're about representation in one way or another.
- H **Another** two characters you've taken a concerted interest in are René Descartes, the seminal philosopher, and the influential French painter Charles LeBrun. Descartes was a generation older than LeBrun, but both had a large impact on their fields in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Does this period, the age of classicism and the baroque have a special attraction for you?
- S Well actually the main thing I work on in philosophy is the history of early modern philosophy -- which is particularly the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries -- and I work particularly with Descartes . . . I think I originally got interested in Charles Le Brun -- who incidentally is not a very attractive painter; I mean . . . I find him interesting in a number of ways, but I don't find him to be the greatest of artists. He's no Velazquez. . . Las Meninas, also has a (if you like) "propaganda" value, but it's a much cannier painting than anything LeBrun ever created.
- H Were the impulses similar between Velazquez and LeBrun?
- S Some of them I think. Velazquez was ultimately more interested in painting. Velazquez spends more of his time painting than anything else (although I'm not an expert on either of their biographies). Velazquez has had more of what art historians are interested in -- which is influence -- because he's a better painter. Velazquez was a much better painter. LeBrun was a much better (certainly a much busier) administrator, and power-monger. Seriously if you asked me if I would rather live the rest of my life with Las Meninas or the entire work of LeBrun, I would have no problem saying I'd prefer Las Meninas.
- One of the reasons so many cutting-edge painters of the nineteenth century turn to Velazquez is because he's compositionally [complex] and the ways he handles paint are just amazing. And that's another reason he probably couldn't handle the kind of power LeBrun did . . . you can't copy Velazquez in the same way. I'm not saying he didn't train students; he obviously did. But you can't quite standardize and industrialize Velazquez. There's all those wonderful things where you get up close and you can't see what the hell its about, and you step back and it snaps into place. Just the luminosity of it, and a whole host of other things. Plus, I think that Las Meninas is deceptively -- in some ways, it looks a lot simpler than the decoration LeBrun did for Versailles; there's a lot less stuff in the painting, but it's an incredibly constructed work. It's fascinated people for hundreds of years and nobody (except for me) has figured out what its about [laughing]. That's the article I published awhile ago [2]. I think I'm actually happy with what I say in it. I don't think I'd take back anything I say in it now.
- The schtick is . . . what is the correct viewing position for the work. Because the thought is -- the way the work is constructed in something like single point perspective -- you can determine the viewing position. That will determine a lot of other elements in the work. I think I'm the only one who has gotten that right -- what the perspective structure is -- which I think is ambiguous. And that's important . . . With LeBrun I find him very interesting because I worked on him, but I don't think anyone would find him very loveable. It wasn't meant to be loveable actually. He's very alien, I think, really.
- H Well, there's two things to him. There is LeBrun the painter; there's also Charles LeBrun the, umm, influence on art.
- S Yeah, and that's a very good point to make. He would probably be almost forgotten as a painter if it were not for the fact that he was one of the founders of the French Academy, and this kind of grand theorist, and so forth. That's what originally got me interested in him. The (originally literary critic but now) art historian Norman Bryson once described him -- as several other people have done -- as the most Cartesian of painters. The reason why is that in a series of lectures in front of the Academy, the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, he's talking about the expression of emotions in art (so there's another thing that I'm interested in). For LeBrun this is a vehicle by which the kinds of narratives of paintings are expressed through what he calls

"general" and "particular expression" -- facial expressions and bodily movements, but facial expressions in particular. He wanted to make himself seem like a learned guy, so he gathered up all of this material that had been produced by intellectuals over the past fifty years about the emotions and their expressions. One of the things he draws from heavily is a work by Descartes called The Passions of the Soul. He also draws from a number of other works, and it's quite clear that he doesn't understand Descartes. I don't think he cares.

H So, that wasn't the drive; there was another agenda there for him?

S Well, he wasn't really a Cartesian. I think he was just using it to make himself seem like a learned, smart guy.

H OK, name dropping maybe.

S Name-dropping yeah, well, this is particularly important in this period -- as earlier in the Italian Renaissance -- because the position of the artist was very unstable, and they'd been trying to distinguish themselves from craftspeople. These are very set social positions. If you were a craftsman, you would join a guild and your production would be monitored and controlled in a certain way, and you could never . . . you'd be in a certain class. The forming of an academy rather than a guild is crucial step in trying to change the social position. The academy that LeBrun founded was the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. There were, by the way, dozens of academies founded at the time. It's partly an attempt to consolidate state power. You form all of these academies that are under the crown; they actually have a lot of power. They were art clubs, they did art education, and they also controlled manufacturing.

H This is under Colbert, with Louis the fourteenth as the sun king.

S Yeah, exactly, exactly. But there were academies of every kind, . . . scientific academies, . . . there was, of course, the Académie française -- which was one of the first -- that regulates the French language (where we don't have one in English at all). There were, you know, academies of coin collectors, and maps, and this and that.

H So it's a France developing a real notion of itself.

S But it's really an attempt at state control, because they had economic control. They controlled both training and production, although not completely. What we think of as the visual arts became split between either craft production (for the more "lowly" forms), or for the higher forms you come under the banner of the Academy. This is very important to your status. I mean, you could not be counted as a gentleman if you were a craftsman belonging to a guild. That meant you were a craftsman, a manual worker.

H You could not get a commission for work at Versailles if you weren't through the academy recognized, and LeBrun stood on top of that valve, you might say.

S He's the "Tsar," if you like . . . the situation of artists in Italy was a little bit different because the Renaissance had happened -- and had happened earlier -- and you didn't have a centralized nation-state.

H Which was more interesting to you about LeBrun. Was it this one aspect of power, state control, church and state propaganda? Whereas today a state would poo-poo the notion that they are using propaganda, at that time they were very open about its use in spreading the faith and the fame of the king. Was it this influence in the world of art, or his own artwork; both have to do with representation?

S Here's the thing: LeBrun was there right at the beginning, in France, it happens earlier in Italy -- that's the beginning of where the artist is trying to create this position that did not exist previously, where you'd just have been craftspeople. LeBrun is a real canny politician and strategist, and so I think he managed to sell the whole idea of the academy and gain power for it -- for it and for himself. Primarily because he could tell at first the advisors to the infant Louis the Fourteenth (and later Louis himself), that this was going to be a way to consolidate royal power.

H Did it work?

S I think so. LeBrun himself didn't do it but it was part of an entire project . . . This is the rapid development of extremely efficient and centralized nation-state under a central place and power, the king. This is a time when a number of nation-states develop in a number of places in Europe: the British one, the Spanish too, but they develop in some different ways. In the paper I was looking at, well, the notion of representation in it too. I actually find two somewhat different notions of representation, and how they're consolidating a certain kind of royal power -- a centralized form of art that is really centered on the body of the king ("body" understood pretty broadly).

- H "I'm entrusting you with the most precious thing in the world, my fame", is something [the king] was supposed to have said.
- S The building of Versailles . . . Versailles, I argue is an extension of the royal body. What is unusual, I think about the French nation-state is the degree to which it is centralized in a particular place, which is Versailles . . . it becomes the capital transformed into spectacle.
- H Didn't they come up with certain criteria's of good art -- very "scientific". And these drawings of emotions, they were really lacking in emotion weren't they?
- S They're very strange . . . LeBrun treats the whole face as a kind of map, so he divides it up into zones. There's a kind of neutral base, and then these expressions are added and he atomizes emotions in the same way. "Hope" is a combination of desire and fear, and this and that. So, you get little parts put together to show the way the emotion is put together. One of the curious things is hope, because hope is a "mixed" emotion. So Lebrun has actually got these preliminary drawings where he's drawn dotted lines across faces, so you can see this . . . because hope is a mixed emotion, one part of the eyebrow is showing one thing, and the other is showing something else. So you've got the eyebrow working in this sort of sine curve. It's impossible -- there's no contortion of face that could do this. It was a code, and if you had the decoder book you could learn this . . . you actually can get a kind of understanding, because he's given you the code book. You have to bear in mind what he thought the purpose of his works was. He's interested in these grand-scale history paintings, where you are going to get a narrative that will give you a moral lesson -- usually about how great the king is. So back to that propaganda if you like.
- . . . Sometimes I think that the more interesting of his works are the ones that escape that purpose. He's got some really wonderful use of colour that there is no real motivation for, in his understanding of how artworks work. As a matter of fact, he is often considered to be the anti-colourist, but some of his colours are really beautiful. There's this long standing debate in French painting between the line and colour . . . or drawing as opposed to colour, and he's on the side of the drawing but actually, his use of the colour is really nice.
- H Its all rules, rules, and more rules.
- S Yes, but his use of colour actually escapes that in a way. Here's one of the things I argue about in that article about two notions of representations. On the one hand, there's all these bodies that LeBrun thinks will carry the weight of the narrative and will be encoded with these various codes, which you can decipher if you have the code book . . . The figures become like letters: you're supposed to read them off, and then be done with them. That's why I think they're kind of boring. Except when you come to -- like you do in various works of his -- the body of the king. In early works of LeBrun, there's a series of Alexander paintings; so it's the body of Alexander the Great, as a stand in for Louis the Fourteenth. But later in Versailles, you have portraits of King Louis the Fourteenth -- and Louis the Fourteenth doesn't signify anything other than himself, right? So you don't get the coding of the body there; you get some coding of it, but not nearly as much as the others. You get this kind of centrality, like this is just what it is - a kind of weight and opacity to the representation of the king's body - because the king's body doesn't signify anything other than itself, whereas the others are all pointing towards his body. In thinking about this it doesn't, as I say, make for the most lovable or pleasant art. But if you think about it in terms of a kind of representation of power and propaganda use, it's really pretty effective. It's just that it's going to be very alien to us, because that kind of power structure is gone.
- H Who was the intended audience and did they have the "code book"?
- S The answer to that is yes, and its Versailles. So who goes to Versailles? Well, Louis the Fourteenth gathered pretty much all the nobles he possibly could, under one roof, to keep them busy.
- H . . . And the nobles would have been aware of this theoretical work on art.
- S Yes, at least that it existed, if nothing else. All of Versailles was filled with this sort of thing -- one of the biggest threats to centralized royal power at that time was the baronacy, the aristocracy who would have thought of themselves as centers of political power, who could vie with the king. It's a kind of genius of Louis reign that he collected them all in one place, so he could keep an eye on them, and then keep them busy; sometimes with deciphering these signs and symbols of all kinds of things around the court. So, it was a really remarkably baroque court, because there was all this spectacular display.
- H Is "decadence" the right word for this?
- S I don't think I would call it "decadence" -- it's a spectacle . . .

H It's all incest, it's all within this family of . . .

S It sort of is. If you think of it politically, it keeps them all busy with things that aren't going to disturb the power structure as it exists.

H So, this is propaganda that isn't meant to be broadcast.

S Well, it's broadcast to those whom you are most concerned with. I think there are probably interlocking circles of publicity. So, you have (you know) what's happening in Versailles -- a symbol most people would see from miles around. You would also have spectacle in parades and some of the more public things. And this is something some historians have suggested -- the importance of what you are not allowed to see. Being excluded from the proper audience is an important feature of all this. I think Versailles is a good example of this there is the inside and the outside right. The outside is going to be visible to lots of people who would never see the inside. Its propaganda, if you like, but it's a very clever multi-layered propaganda, and there's different layers -- different audiences. Imagine now you've got the mounting of a public spectacle and you're truly powerless -- you're the peasant stuck in Paris, or something like that. You see this thing, knowing you are excluded from it -- that there is a code, and you don't know what it is. That's an important bit of propaganda to remind people in that situation that they are not part of [the in crowd]. There's real power there.

H And knowledge is power; it represents power, but I guess it's power in itself as well.

S One of my favorite people on this topic of power in that early seventeenth century is Thomas Hobbes who says that "knowledge, however, is but slight power." Well "knowledge is power" comes from Francis Bacon -- who's two generations before Hobbes -- so this is Hobbes's reply to that. Knowledge is slight power, because it's -- and this is not to be taken terribly seriously -- because knowledge is only recognizable by other people. He means genuine knowledge, not just the appearance of it. Genuine knowledge is only recognizable to other people who also know - and there aren't very many of them [laughing]. But he also says friends are power and reputation is power . . . which gets back to LeBrun.

H Was he a self-made man?

S What do you mean by self-made? There isn't such a thing at this time.

H Was he, were his mommy and daddy rich? Was he in that class?

S No, you wouldn't have been an artist if you were. If you were really wealthy (or more importantly aristocratic, class is not just a matter of wealth) you would not have been working for a living.

H So this is really deadly serious stuff. He really made a career for himself . . .

S . . . it's like what LeBrun is doing is moving from a position where what he would have been doing is something like a plumber, with the social status of a plumber . . .

H To being like the dean of the university.

S In a situation where class really matters, he's creating -- carving out -- a situation where he can be, like you said, the dean of a university. Not just the dean of a university, the dean of a university who also gets to, . . . is almost like a minister in a cabinet -- a real political position. He got to control the king's artwork, and he had all sorts of these positions . . .

H So, say, sculptors like Coysevox or Girardon were either in or out on his word.

S Yeah, he had all sorts of positions: he founded this academy; he was the director of the Academy for a long time; he directed the manufacture of the Gobelins tapestries; he was the first painter to the king; he also controlled the royal collections -- you know, on and on and on . . . it's amazing.

H So, in our terms in this province he would be the AFA [Alberta Foundation for the Arts] -- His own department, essentially, with all that that would imply.

S I know. It was an amazingly powerful position to be in.

H Did he, and those around him, have a real effect on the art of the era?

- S Oh absolutely, and the royal academy too, I think it's still in existence. Some of its practices continued for an incredibly long time too, and the kinds of theory and practice that LeBrun developed as well.
- H To this day?
- S Well not so much. Actually I met Lou Rydman [former curatorial assistant and coordinator of the collection move, The Art Gallery of Alberta]. . . she had done all this work on the history of the French Academy. She had this website for the Academy [5,]. I gave a talk at the AGA, and she came out -- and it was bizarre, because she actually knew much more about the Academy than I did, for sure. She had this really great website covering the various prizes that they gave out in these really weird prize competitions. The way they set them up was really bizarre. Every year, two, four years, the Prix de Rome competition would . . . basically have the winner be sent off for four years to study in Rome. The competition was where the five finalists were locked in a room for a week and had to produce a painting on some theme they were given. And they had to be big historical themes . . .
- H It sounds like a game show.
- S It does -- it's like a reality show. And the themes are really bizarre. These obscure stories from, I don't know, something or other . . . There are some bizarre paintings [in museums today] that very possibly could have been done for one of these competitions.
- H **A historian** has to pick and choose subjects and then make some sense of it all, giving a particular work context. Do we get a very accurate picture of the history of 'Art' from historians and critics?
- S Depends which historian and critic you talk to doesn't it?
- H I guess it does 'cause there's quite a few. Do you think we have a pretty good idea of what happened? We could use the period we've been talking about as an example. Some things might fall off and never be talked about again, but were enjoyed at the time . . . If you're telling a story of the baroque in France it might be a swell story, but there was no story at the time -- there was no meaning to it all . . . like today - what's the meaning of life today and of art today? Maybe there is none, but it makes a better book if there is a story to it.
- S Maybe there are multiple ones. There's probably no real fact of the matter, so telling a story enables you to be able to make sense of things. I think that's genuine knowledge. But there is more than one story. Some do it a lot better than others do. But there is probably another way of putting it together and making sense of it that is just as legitimate. The cases where I think it becomes pressing are where -- I'm interested in things like feminist art history -- is where the story you told ends up excluding people . . . again doing political things that are problematic.
- H So art history is a representation, and it changes the thing it talks about.
- S That's right, and helps create it to some degree too. I'm mostly concerned with when you get, for instance, a way of telling the history of art that excludes lots of people, like women, or people from a certain class, or whole nations or chunks of the world. And it maybe that -- as some people have argued -- the whole notion of "Art" (as opposed to "stuff" you make that you can look at") is already built in to doing that.
- H So the term "art" itself is warped.
- S Its "loaded," shall we say. I don't think that this means that it necessarily has to be . . . umm, I think it's open to people to wrest it and reshape it as they see fit. It probably is true, for instance, that a lot of the production of women has been marginalized, because of the distinction between "art" and "craft." And its been relegated to the status of craft. The kinds of things where women would have had access to the materials -- then those materials get counted as "craft."
- H Do you think it's that conscious?
- S No I don't think it's conscious -- that it's some kind of evil patriarchal conspiracy out there, . . . it's much . . .
- H But it did happen.
- S Yeah, I say that as a sort of simple way of putting it. Because it goes back and forth. This is the ugly underside of LeBrun's attempt to carve a certain kind of space for himself by elevating the notion of art and the artist. It helps to have a contrast. Having said that, though, for myself, I'm not a real fan of crafts. I really don't like "crafts" -- I still think it's called "crafts" when you go to the craft fair --and I really don't like them very

much, especially when they're very "tastefully done" -- very "authentically" -- then I really dislike them. . . .  
Though I can recognize that the notion of craft is loaded with all kinds of notions, like class and sexist . . .

H There really isn't much distinction [between art and craft] other than, . . . but I don't want to get into that whole conversation . . .

S It seems to me that it's open to feminist artists to appropriate and reshape the notion of art as they see fit -- which is what a number of feminist artists did. They did things like reshape what painting was by incorporating things like bits of materials that didn't go with painting into it. Anyway, my point is just because the split has happened this way doesn't mean you're stuck with it -- you can reshape it, as I've said, in some ways. There is also the action of remaking the conceptual space in which you work -- which is often done by the kind of objects you make.

. . . Just because there are lots of things that are problematic about the way the notion of art has developed doesn't mean I simply want to discard it. I want to reshape it.

H **From reading history**, I'm always struck by how unlike the job of artist is today, as opposed to the olden days. The concept of artist as individual, of almost religious stature, seems very new. Do you find that it is a new notion?

S Yeah, I think so. There are at least two notions in it (. . . again this is something that an art historian would know more about than I do). But I don't think I'd be saying anything controversial when I say that there are these two moments: one is in the time of the Renaissance in Italy, . . . slightly latter elsewhere . . . that attempts to elevate art and the artist above the level of a handicraft. It's really changing the social class system. This is not a vague thing -- remember, these are class systems that are very set, so there are really concrete things that help there. The other is . . . a kind of late eighteenth, early nineteenth century romanticism that . . . you've already got the notion of the arts in general, as a more liberal arts pursuit compared to a handicraft. The comparison in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance is to compare the visual arts to stuff like mathematics, architecture, poetry.

H Professions.

S Yeah what we'd call them today but really they were the liberal arts, the freeing arts that a free human being and a gentleman could practice. Then in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century you get also this notion that the artist not merely as the learned gentlemanly person but as the individual with the, you know, curly lock across his brow who nobody really understands.

H The super-deep spiritual, or semi-religious figure.

S I wish I knew more about this. I think it's hooked up, for instance with the notion of the sublime . . . which was considered one of the primary aesthetic values that artworks could have (they could also have moral values, pedagogical values). The main aesthetic value, as was said, before was beauty. And then you start developing in the late eighteenth century, the notion of the sublime -- which is not the same as the beautiful. It means a whole...

H The church is losing power over people at this time as well, so maybe artists are just picking up the slack? Is that the modern list of saints -- you know -- Picasso, Pollack, I wonder . . .

S I don't know. Actually I must say I really hate that notion. I find it . . .

H . . . Which one?

S The solitary genius nobody understands. It seems so adolescent.

H Yeah, yeah it does: 'oh, Fritz the Cat -- you're so deep'. I don't know if you remember that scene? [6]

S [laughing] Well it's the kind of thing that in my experience, nineteen year old boys just love . . . They like to read the philosophy of the period I'm talking about, or perhaps a little bit later, and they think -- they're wrong -- but they think . . .

H . . . The art schools were filled with that. [maybe they still are I'm old now so I wouldn't know].

S Oh, I'm sure. Beginning philosophy majors who are attracted to a certain kind of philosophy . . .

H You don't actually have to explain anything, that could be it, I don't know . . .

S That's right. There's a kind of laziness, like "I'm great, and I don't have to do any work about it."

H Well, if you can establish that you are great that, that's something, you're set.

S But you don't have to establish it -- because no one will understand you, anyway. When it's an expression of adolescent angst it can be kind of endearing, even when you want to laugh at it. But when it becomes just an expression of pure laziness -- "well, that way, I don't have to do any work" -- that's just annoying.

I don't know if you know the group 'King Missile' -- they're very alternative, and I think they disbanded some time ago. Anyway, they're very funny and they have this great song called "I'm a sensitive artist." I played it the last couple of times I taught the philosophy of art (which I don't teach all that frequently). I'll play it on the first day of class, because it's completely sarcastic, . . . It has this little monologue about how "I'm the sensitive artist, and I knew I was sensitive at the age of two, . . . I've stopped going to galleries, because I can't stand it, because there are people there, and they don't understand me, because I'm too sensitive." [7]

H [laughing] If you can't go to an art gallery because you're too sensitive then you might as well go to the moon, there's nothing left for you down here.

S [laughing] He "makes work that nobody understands because they're not sensitive enough." In the background, they have this one guy doing "SENSITIVE" [and here Amy resorts to a muted bellowing] "SENSITIVE . . . SENSITIVE" . . . Anyway, I play this on the first day of the philosophy of art class and tell them that I just want to make it clear that if anyone is in here that thinks they are a sensitive artist, I'm going to laugh at you.

H Do they fall out of their chairs at that point?

S I always wonder if any will get up and leave, in a huff you know . . .

H You don't understand me neither. [laughing]

S It's one of the reasons, by the way, that I won't touch the subject of creativity when I teach the philosophy of art.

H It's too [whistles], . . . too out there?

S This idea that there is this, this characteristic you might have of being creative -- which is, remember, not the same thing as being a hard worker or . . . Lets put it this way, I don't think that there is a single quality called "creativity" that crosses over all sorts of different fields, . . . and whatever there is, there's way too much emphasis put on it. There is nothing like hard work.

H . . . you're not at all interested in isolating some sort of creativity gene?

S No, people talk about creativity like "Oh, I'm going to look at Einstein, because he was really creative in physics, and so-and-so because he was really creative in music, or fashion design, or whatever."

H Everyone wants to find the door that this stuff falls out of.

S The magic bullet, where does this stuff come from, yeah.

H **Artists** often bump into terms like, "emerging", "contemporary", "craft", or "realistic". Does the language of art get in the way of a clean understanding of the subject, or is language bound up in any serious investigation of it?

S I don't think that language, as such, prevents you from doing anything. Language is very flexible. People can get trapped into a set of concepts and terms that blocks them. It's not language as such that's at fault there, but that they aren't doing something right. Language may not be the only, but it is the primary medium of thought.

H To write is to think.

S I think so. It certainly is what enables it. I think language is enabling, but language is also very flexible.

H We were talking about LeBrun and you get this sort of rigidity in any industry, if you want to call it that. So [you feel] it's not the language's fault, but the rigidity underneath it that's the cause?

S Yeah, I think that's a good way of putting it. In some ways this is my job; I make up concepts and terms when something doesn't fit. I'm partly in the business of making new concepts or adjusting or tweaking the concepts that we've got and the words and the language that express them.

H **With** spending so much time looking at art, writing about it, does it ever occur to you that this philosophy thing is an art in itself?

S Yeah, when I was an undergraduate, I had this whole thing about how the philosophy, . . . that it was the art critic actually that makes the art work. I'm not sure now, maybe that's a bit strong . . .

H Well there's that "second city" that, I think Steiner in the eighties, George Steiner, and this notion that art criticism is getting in the way or vying for importance with the actual art -- criticism being of little or no importance in comparison.

S Doesn't Tom Wolf, The Painted Word, have something to say about that -- you needed a theory on artwork, or whatever -- which didn't strike me as a bad thing, . . . I was like "yeah that's great!"

H **What** is it that gets you going?

S When I was little I wanted to be an artist -- actually it's kind of disappointing -- up until my early twenties, I drew constantly, painted too, but drew constantly. And I kind of stopped doing that. I don't know why, and it's, . . . it's not physically as comfortable as it once was. I just can't get, -- I'll doodle, but that's about it.

Since I've got my (no longer, but once) very top of the line digital camera I've been . . . I just love it. The thing takes pictures by itself. I'm actually going to get a medium-format printer, so that I can print out big versions. I have to admit in some ways this is, . . . it's the completely lazy art form. There's not a lot of craft involved . . . The camera is so easy that I hardly even touch it; it really does, -- I swear to god -- take pictures by itself.

H **Any** guilty pleasures of your own?

S Oh god yes -- do you mean artistic ones? Lets see, what have I got at home, -- I've got a giant ceramic rooster from Mexico that's painted bright red. I call him Rodrigo Rooster; he's about yay big. I like him, because I found him in a place where there were a hundred just like him -- it was folk art by the truckload. I don't like crafts or folk art, unless it's by the truckload. I don't want it to be authentic; I want it to be a knock-off. I also have some wind up sushi; it's so cool. I have tuna "sushi" that goes in circles.

H I've heard that sushi sculptors make an awful lot of money in Japan.

S . . . No, it's not like that: it's a wind up thing; it's plastic. I spent about two weeks in Japan and absolutely adored it, partly because I ate my way through the country. Japan is this place with the most refined aesthetic, which permeates every aspect of life -- and it's also the place that's given you "Hello Kitty" -- you know ultra-kitsch. I think there's a real connection there. After seeing all these refined temples and things, after awhile, you're saying "Give me some kitsch, my head will explode if I do not get some kitsch, in bowls, right now"

H **Why** do we make art and why are we attracted to it? . . . I mean why should we bother -- why would human beings as a species spend their energy making art?

S Because it's fun. And why should we bother learning more about art is ultimately, for me, because it's more fun. It's more fun to know more about stuff.

H It just makes life better.

S It makes life better, yes. You don't make that your goal when you are producing an artwork; you want to produce a good artwork. It's interesting -- there are political issues, for instance. Getting back to something you said before about the Art Gallery of Alberta [a letter to the editor of the local paper, which said the monies spent on the new art gallery were better spent on the homeless in the city]. I'm very glad that they're spending money on it, but if I was a policy maker, . . . and you have this level of money and what you are going to spend it on, . . . I think there are real questions about whether you are going to spend it on a homeless shelter [or an art gallery]. On the other hand, a life without any arts would probably be pretty barren. It's

- remarkable how often very impoverished people will make a huge effort to have something, to make something, or to look at something . . .
- H You used the word fun; obviously that's a very large word.
- S Fun is important. Fun is an important thing for human life, and humans have a right to fun. "Pleasure," if you like, but pleasure comes in many different forms; some are more immediate and direct than others. Art is typically a very rarified kind of pleasure, but probably all the more pleasurable for that fact. And hey, it beats advertising. – [to a passing Peter Robinson] You must be closing up. [PR "We are, pretty quick, in just a few minutes."]
- H Ok, that's it; thank you very much for lending us this space. [PR "No that's alright, absolutely."] And of course, thank you, Amy Schmitter, for taking the time for this.
- S Not at all; you're very welcome. -click-

### Footnotes

- 1 Representation and the Body of Power in French Academic Painting," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 3, July 2002
- 2 "Picturing Power: Representation and Las Meninas" from *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1996
- 3 "The Verificationist in Spite of Himself," Review Essay of K. Moxey, *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox and Power in Art History*, in *History and Theory* 42, October 2003, pp. 412-23  
  
Moxey, Keith. *The Practice of Persuasion: Paradox & Power In Art History*, Cornell University Press, 2001.
- 4 "About Representation; Or, How to Avoid being Caught between Animal Perception and Human Language" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (Summer, 2000), pp. 255-272
- 5 [www.culture.gouv.fr:80/ENSBA/ensba.html](http://www.culture.gouv.fr:80/ENSBA/ensba.html)
- 6 *Fritz the Cat*, 1972 written and directed by Ralph Bakshi, based on the comics of Robert Crumb.
- 7 "Sensitive Artist" by King Missile off the album *Fluting on the Hump*, Shimmy Disc 1987  
[www.asklyrics.com/display/King\\_Missile/Sensitive\\_Artist\\_Lyrics/31438.htm](http://www.asklyrics.com/display/King_Missile/Sensitive_Artist_Lyrics/31438.htm)  
or go to you tube to hear the song: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-kHB2fWUS8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-kHB2fWUS8)