

From:  
*The Society of Control*  
The Academy and the Corporate Public  
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# **Symbolic Capital Management**

*or what to do with the Good, the True, and the Beautiful*

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When I looked up the key word “culture” in Bartlett’s collection of memorable quotes, I discovered the startling phrase “When I hear the word culture, I reach for my revolver.”

I did not find the decidedly less militant phrase “When I hear the word culture, I reach for my checkbook,” that I had set out to research because it seemed pertinent to the topic of symbolic capital management. After my initial disappointment, I realized that the martial quotation I had found by accident was not without relevance and, in fact, complemented the one I was looking for.

The gun-toting speaker is one of the heroes of a play that premiered in Berlin on Hitler’s birthday, a short month after he had seized power in Germany in 1933.<sup>1</sup> The author, Hanns Johst, had earlier made a name for himself as an expressionist writer and poet. With a pledge of undying loyalty, he dedicated his new play to Hitler, and two years later, Johst was put in charge of the literature section in Goebbels’s propaganda ministry.

High culture was recognized by both the protagonist on-stage as well as the playwright’s new bosses as something to be watched, as potentially threatening and, if need be, to be regulated or even suppressed. However, as Johst’s personal career demonstrates, the new masters also recognized, as others had before and would do later, that the symbolic power of the arts could be put to good use.

The Medici in Florence already knew of the persuasive powers of the arts. But the relations between sponsors and sponsored have never been free of tension. The Inquisition in Venice, for example, was suspicious enough of Veronese’s treatment of the “Last Supper” to summon him before its tribunal. As a matter of fact, they were right to be wary of him.

Mistrust, hostility, an urge to ridicule or censor the arts are not foreign to our time. Nor are we unaccustomed to seeing them used as instruments for the

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<sup>1</sup> Johst, Hanns. Schlageter, Munich: Albert Langen/Georg Müller, 1933, p.26

promotion of particular interests. We hardly remember that only 40 years ago, abstract art was suspected by influential Americans as being part of a communist conspiracy, and that shortly afterwards, in an ironic twist, Abstract Expressionist paintings were sent to Europe to play a combat role in the ideological battles of the cold war. We have fortunately been spared the degree of fundamentalist fervor that calls for the killing of artists accused of blasphemy. But we have had our share of incendiary speeches in the hallowed halls of the U.S. Congress. One indicator of the intensity of the contemporary culture wars in the United States are the fortunes of the National Endowment for the Arts. As of today, Senator Jesse Helms and his cohorts have not yet succeeded in eliminating the NEA, even though the House of Representatives did vote in July to do just that. However, it is now a ghost of its former self, with a fraction of the budget it had in 1989, the year when the campaign against the NEA was kicked off. For good measure, Morley Safer, a Sunday painter and well-known TV-journalist, lectured the 31 million viewers of the CBS program *60-Minutes* in 1993 that contemporary art, the kind shown in museums like the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum, was nothing but a hoax.<sup>2</sup> Hilton Kramer, the neo-conservative critic from New York served as key witness.

Europe is not far behind. In 1995, the Austrian politician Jörg Haider counted on winning votes for his right-wing party by attacking contemporary culture. In response, the governing parties in Vienna have since been curtailing their support for the arts (in 1999 Haider was elected governor of the Austrian province of Carinthia). Also Jean-Marie Le Pen has been betting on a culture war as a strategy to enlarge his electoral base. He is not alone. The French press has devoted extensive coverage to a broad campaign for a *retour à l'ordre*, in which Jean Clair, of 1995 Venice Biennale fame, and Jean Baudrillard play major roles. After Baudrillard's photographs, presented in a Parisian art gallery, in *Galleries Magazine* and in a side-show of the 1993 Venice Biennale, did not receive more than a tepid reception, he thought of getting even with the art world, whose darling and guru he had been for more than a decade. Shortly before the 1997 French national elections, *Libération* published his latest diatribe against what he called the "nullité of contemporary art." According to Baudrillard, this "nonsense" is being kept alive thanks to a "conspiracy of idiots." However, the virtual sociologist sees a remedy: "The only real challenge to contemporary art can come from reactionary and irrational thinking, i.e. from fascism."<sup>3</sup> These examples, uneven as they are, and coming from varied historical periods and diverse social contexts, illustrate a truism of the sociology of culture: Art works

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<sup>2</sup> Safer, Morley. "Yes...but is it art?", 60 Minutes, CBS television, Sept. 19, 1993. Transcript: Burrelle's Information Services, Livingston, N.J

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard. "La conjuration des imbéciles," *Libération*, Paris, May 7, 1997.

do not represent universally accepted notions of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Whether viewed as uplifting, destructive, or nothing more than a profitable investment, depends on who looks at them. In extreme situations, as the quotation that triggered these thoughts suggests, culture is silenced with guns. Contrary to Kant's dictum of "disinterested pleasure", the arts are not ideologically neutral. They are, in fact, one of the many arenas where conflicting ideas about who we are, and what our social relations should be, are pitted against each other. Encoded in cultural productions are interests, beliefs, and goals. And, in turn, they affect what is at stake for us, what we believe, and what we strive for. Artists and arts institutions - like the media and schools — are part of what has been called the consciousness industry. They participate to varying degrees in a symbolic struggle over the perception of the social world, and thereby shape society. Pierre Bourdieu, one of the eminent contemporary sociologists of culture puts us on the alert: "The most successful ideological effects," he says, "are those which have no need for words, and ask no more than complicitous silence. It follows . . . that any analysis of ideologies, in the narrow sense of 'legitimizing discourses', which fails to include an analysis of the corresponding institutional mechanisms, is liable to be no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies."<sup>4</sup>

As our notions of the good, the true, and the beautiful, the classical triad, are contingent, endlessly negotiated or fought over, so the encoded meaning of cultural productions is not something permanent, comparable to the genetic code. The context in which they appear has a signifying power of its own. As the context changes, so does the way audiences respond. The same artifact can elicit rather varied reactions depending on the historical period, the cultural and social circumstances, or, for that matter, its exchange value. The phrase, "When I hear the word culture, I reach for my checkbook," could make us think that the speaker understands that high culture is an expensive enterprise which needs not only moral but also financial backing, and that he is willing to chip in. It conjures up the image of the altruistic private patron who has been the proverbial mainstay of the arts in the United States. However, the comment also has a cold, cynical ring. In fact, it was this ambiguity which led me to research its origin. With the help of knowledgeable friends I eventually traced it.

Like the "revolver"-quotation, this phrase is uttered by an actor. Jean-Luc Godard, in his 1963 screenplay "Le Mépris" (Contempt), puts it into the mouth of Jack Palance.<sup>5</sup> In Godard's film, Palance plays the role of a movie producer.

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. 1977, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Collet, Jean, edit. Jean-Luc Godard. No. 18, *Collection Cinéma d'aujourd'hui*, Editions Seghers, Paris, 1963. p. 140-142

Working for him is Fritz Lang, who plays himself as a film director. In the opening sequence, Lang and the producer look at rushes from the *Ulysses* film Lang is shooting. The scene of an alluring nude siren languorously swimming under water, prompts the producer to ask the director: “What will go with this?” Lang answers with a recitation of a passage from Dante, whereupon the producer jumps up in a rage, tears down the projection screen, tramples on it, and screams: “This is what I’ll do with your films!” When Lang mumbles something like “culture” or “crime against culture”, the producer cuts him off: “When I hear the word culture, I reach for my checkbook.” In effect, he pulls out his checkbook, writes out a check on the back of his attractive young secretary and gives it to the screen-writer, who pockets it, presumably with the understanding that he will rewrite the script.<sup>6</sup>

The parallelism of the two quotations is probably not accidental. Fritz Lang certainly knew of the outburst on the Berlin stage in 1933. What we know about Jean-Luc Godard suggests that he had heard the phrase too, perhaps even from Fritz Lang. It is fair to assume Godard not only saw a linguistic connection, but invented this scene as a parable that allowed him to link the violence of the gun with economic violence. Lang’s symbolic capital, i.e. his reputation as a film director, proves not to be a match for the producer’s economic capital, although the producer is nothing without Fritz Lang. Symbolic and economic capital constitute power. They are linked in a complex, often strained, and sometimes even violent but inescapable relationship. They are rarely equal partners.

In 1972, Marcel Broodthaers presented the Eagle Department of his Museum of Modern Art at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf. In his preface to the catalogue Broodthaers wrote:

As a foreign artist, I am glad that, for the purpose of an analytical (in contrast to an emotional) consideration of the concept of art, I was able to benefit from the freedom of expression in the Federal Republic. What are the limits to the freedom of expression an artist is granted? In practical terms, it is where the political leadership of a country draws the line. Therefore it is only natural that I express my gratitude to the chancellor of the Federal Republic, Willy Brandt.<sup>7</sup>

Such a catalogue statement is unusual. All the more did it intrigue me, as did the exhibition *The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present*. In his fictional museum,

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Broodthaers, *Museum: Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute, Vol I*. Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972, p.4.

Broodthaers equates the power popularly attributed to the eagle with the aura surrounding art. He suggests that neither the authority of the state nor the symbolic power of art, interchangeably represented by the eagle in his metaphoric universe, are innate, god-given and universally recognized. Rather, like in the story of *The Wizard of Oz*, they are projections of power, social constructs, to which Broodthaers alludes using the term “ideology.” His catalogue preface implies that public analysis of the ideological underpinnings of power, like those of art, has political ramifications which may test a society’s limits to freedom of expression.

Indeed, museums — and exhibition ventures like *documenta* — are institutions which contribute to the shaping and promotion of the ideas that govern our social relations. Consequently, whether intended or not, as managers of consciousness, they are agents in the political arena. It is perhaps for this reason that Broodthaers paid tribute to Willy Brandt for having created a climate favoring freedom of expression.

In my view, however, Broodthaers may have overstated the power of the central political leadership in democratic societies and underestimated the degree to which local and regional powers, and powerful private individuals and pressure groups, are able to control the public discourse.

But Broodthaers was quite aware that power relationships in the world of symbolic capital were more complex than the catalogue preface, isolated from his work and other writings, seems to suggest. In fact, at the occasion of his entry into the art world in 1964 he unmistakably alluded to the connection between the symbolic value of art works and their exchange value. He also knew, of course, that the reputation of artists is subject to currency fluctuations and that the art market, like markets of other goods of fictional value, invite the manipulation of the price for which the ornithological commodities are traded.

On one of the four installation photos in the retrospective volume II of the Düsseldorf catalogue, connoisseurs of the German art scene of the 1970s can identify Willy Bongard, the inventor of the *Art Compass*. Annually, since 1970 and continuing today, this art stock market analysis has been published in the German business magazine *Capital*.<sup>8</sup> On the catalogue photo, one can discern that Bongard is carrying a copy of the first volume of the Broodthaers catalogue. He is looking to the left, in the direction in which a slide projector is pointed. However, one cannot see what is being projected. On the wall behind the

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<sup>8</sup> Bongard’s widow Linde Rohr-Bongard titled her 1993 installment “Kunst gleich Kapital.” *Capital* (Cologne) (November 1993), pp. 212-242

projector hangs a banner with a double-headed eagle as part of the coat of arms of Cologne, the city of the first post-war art fair. Reflecting on his own enterprise, this photo of 1972 seems to restate the artist's understanding that the symbolic and the economic capital of what Broodthaers, in 1964, called "insincere"<sup>9</sup> products, do affect each other. But contrary to the perennial suggestions of the *Art Compass of Capital* their respective ratings do not match.

In spite of his professed "insincerity", Broodthaers was not particularly interested in being a big player in the high stakes game of the art stock market. In his post-exhibition volume of the catalogue, he expressed with pride that he had plucked some feathers from the mythical bird. But he also acknowledged a degree of failure: "The language of advertising aims for the unconscious of the consumer/viewer; that is how the magic eagle regains its power."<sup>10</sup> Closing in a tone of resignation he described a world which, at the time, appeared to many readers to be the bitter fruit of a paranoid imagination: "Art is used in advertising with enormous success. It rules over bright horizons. It represents the dreams of mankind."<sup>11</sup>

Today, marketing is firmly established in museums as a high art. While sponsors usually underwrite only a small part of the costs of an exhibition, and never contribute to the operating budget, they have been gaining indirect veto power over programming in many institutions. Oblivious to what is at stake, and abetted by an equally insouciant press, the political class in Europe is shirking its democratic responsibilities by allowing or even advocating the de facto takeover of the institutions with which they, as public servants, have been entrusted. In a neo-liberal frenzy the museums that were built and are maintained by public funds are, in effect, being expropriated and made to serve business interests.

Like in the United States, where it is almost a given, exhibition programs in other parts of the world are increasingly determined by the degree to which they lend themselves to a positive image transfer for sponsoring corporations or, for that matter, the public relations needs of politicians. As a consequence, crowd pleasing, usually uncritical blockbusters become the order of the day, not feather plucking events. Under these pressures, programs with low entertainment value, and events planned with critical, analytic, and experimental ambitions fall victim to institutional self-censorship. The press, often in gullible collusion with the sponsors, pays little attention to less glamorous, and for that reason usually

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<sup>9</sup> Cit. in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Open Letters, Industrial Poems." *October* (New York)42, (Fall 1987), p.71.

<sup>10</sup> Marcel Broodthaers, *Museum: Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute, Vol.II*. Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972, p.19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

underfunded projects, because they are not touted by a big publicity machine like the one that corporations often pay for at the same rate as the sponsored events. In effect, the public is given the impression that only blockbusters are worth seeing. It stays away, at other times. Caught in a vicious circle, the financial health of institutions that take risks and are governed, above all, by professional criteria are endangered by poor box office figures. Public officials are tempted to mistake high attendance figures as a sign of curatorial excellence that deserves being rewarded when institutional budgets are set. Eagles mutate into parrots.

Since the arts are no longer seen as the pastime of “effete snobs,” and, in effect, have become fashionable and integrated into today’s entertainment culture, public relations experts are convinced that the association with culture improves their clients’ standing in the arena of public opinion. Without studying sociology, the P.R. wizards have understood high culture’s symbolic power. They know it is the aura that matters. The instrumentalization of the good, the true and the beautiful by business interests is to affect favorable tax rates, trade rules, health, safety and environmental legislation, as well as labor relations. And it is to subtly dissuade elected officials and the press from scrutinizing corporate conduct and to deflect public criticism.

A PR-man from Mobil Oil once explained his company’s rationale for supporting the arts: “These programs build enough acceptance to allow us to get tough on substantive issues.”<sup>12</sup> One of the Mobil ads on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times* put it more bluntly: “Art for the sake of business.” This includes, according to Alain-Dominique Perrin, the CEO of Cartier, to “neutralize critics.” Monsieur Perrin is an enthusiastic practitioner. In an interview he confided: “Arts sponsorship is not just a tremendous tool of corporate communications,” he crowed, “it is much more than that: It is a tool for the seduction of public opinion.”

Art institutions, in turn, have learned to woo prospective sponsors with attractive packages and to assure them, as the Metropolitan Museum did: “The business behind art knows the art of good business.” For the CEOs who had no taste for word plays, the museum spelled out what it meant: “Many public relations opportunities are available through the sponsorship of programs, special exhibitions and services. These can often provide a creative and cost effective answer to a specific marketing objective, particularly where international,

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<sup>12</sup> D’Argenio, Raymond. “Farewell to The Low Profile”, address to the Eastern Annual Conference of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, New York, November 18, 1975, typewritten manuscript, p.3.

governmental or consumer relations may be a fundamental concern.”<sup>13</sup> Art professionals now use their colleagues in the development office as a “reality check.” Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, is certainly a connoisseur in these matters. He has no delusions: “It’s an inherent, insidious, hidden form of censorship,” he admits.<sup>14</sup> But the imposition of the sponsor’s agenda not only has an effect on what we get to see and hear. Mr. de Montebello’s president at the Metropolitan Museum explained: “To a large degree, we’ve accepted a certain principle about funding that, in passing through our illustrious hall, the money is cleansed.”<sup>15</sup>

His suggestion that the sponsor’s money is dirty came in response to a question about his Museum’s collaboration with Philip Morris. The world’s largest maker of carcinogenic consumer products also happens to be the most conspicuous corporate sponsor of the arts in the United States and increasingly so in Europe. But not only of the arts. Philip Morris also gives hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Jesse Helms Center in North Carolina, a museum designed to celebrate the right-wing Senator’s vision of America. And Philip Morris sponsors the Bill of Rights. As contradictory as this may sound, it makes perfect business sense. Jesse Helms was instrumental in breaking down trade barriers against the import of American cigarettes in Asia, the one market of the cigarette industry that is still growing. And he battles untiringly against tobacco tax increases and efforts to protect the public from the health hazards of smoking, which annually leads to the death of 500,000 Americans. In 1989, the Marlboro men paid the National Archives \$600,000 for the permission to “sponsor” the Bill of Rights in a two-year \$60 million campaign. The campaign was designed to frame the cowboys’ arguments against smoking restrictions as a civil rights issue. Their support for the arts is to build constituencies and to keep the lines open to the movers and shakers in the media and in politics. When the New York City Council deliberated in 1994 over restrictions on smoking in public places, Philip Morris threatened to stop sponsoring cultural programs in the City and to move its headquarters to more hospitable environs. Nevertheless the City Council passed the restrictions. The company’s bluff was called. It stays, and continues to believe in the business rationale of sponsoring art events in New York.

California’s penchant for discouraging indulgence in carcinogenic pleasures probably was also the reason, in 1995, for Philip Morris to sponsor the exhibition “1966-1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art” at the Museum of Contemporary

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<sup>13</sup> The Business Behind Art Knows the Art of Good Business, leaflet addressed to corporations, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, undated, (approx. 1984).

<sup>14</sup> “A Word from our Sponsor”, Newsweek, New York, November 25, 1985, p.98.

<sup>15</sup> Wallach, Amei. “Keeping Corporate Funds, In the Name of Art”, New York Newsday, August 8, 1990, p. II 2.



Art's Temporary Contemporary in Los Angeles. This investment was not an unqualified success. A number of the artists in this survey exhibition of so-called conceptual art, discovering as late as the show's opening, that Philip Morris was its sponsor, protested vociferously and managed to have the national press amplify their anger. Adrian Piper withdrew her works when the Museum was unwilling to substitute them with a work commemorating her parents, who both died from smoking related diseases. The case of Adrian Piper demonstrates that artists risk losing access to the public and foregoing participation in the public discourse, if they don't want to lend their work and their name for the promotion of corporate interests — in this example of a company whose products killed the artist's parents. The non-representation in large survey-shows can jeopardize the recognition artists receive when history is written and, of course, also the prices for which their works are traded.

A few months after MOCA's abduction of artists into Marlboro Country, Sol LeWitt, one of the MOCA protesters, rejected a major commission from the Guggenheim Museum when he learned that the survey show *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* for which the commission was intended, was sponsored by Philip Morris. The exhibition opened without him.

Fearing that the awareness of the health hazards of smoking with its attendant legislative consequences may eventually also hit Europe, Philip Morris is busy developing preemptive strategies. Again, the arts are to play a supportive role. In Germany, the company held a competition for art exhibition organizers. The impresarios were invited to submit proposals for the exhibition they always wanted to do but could not for lack of funds. Philip Morris promised to pay for the winning dream project. Covering all bases, Philip Morris, astutely, chose artists to be the jurors. In contrast to Sol LeWitt, several prominent artists were happy to lend their names to the tobacco rescue mission as jurors. Jochen Poetter, the director of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne was the lucky winner. His exhibition had the engaging title "I love New York!" It had only one problem: the reviewers did not love it. A quick look into art magazines of recent vintage suffices to recognize that the fashion industry and the art world have entered into what appears to be a symbiotic relationship. While fashion and its promotion are treated as high art, art institutions have become eager partners of the apparel industry. Although Oliviero Toscani has not yet been invited to a solo show in Jean-Christophe Ammann's Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art, as he has in other art venues, for many years a taste of the brave new world of Benetton has been a part of the filling of Ammann's Frankfurt art cake. Ammann also invited Karl Lagerfeld and his models for an exclusive performance. The Frankfurt municipal collection served as a stylish back-drop.

In 1995, as commissioner of the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale, he moved to the cutting edge. Together with the cowboys of Philip Morris, he invited Hugo Boss to sponsor Germany's showcase in Venice. The late Hugo Boss, like the architect whom Hitler commissioned to give the German pavilion a martial face-lift, was a Nazi party member in good standing. Politically correct, he had made a living as purveyor of SA and SS uniforms. The apparel industry is also close to the heart of Thomas Krens, the director of the Guggenheim Museum. Appropriate events have been staged under his roof, and an international art prize and galleries of the museum have been named in honor of the uniform manufacturer Hugo Boss. After a 1998 motorcycle rally on the ramps of the Guggenheim, sponsored by BMW, an exhibition to honor Giorgio Armani is planned for the new millenium. The Guggenheim's predilection for German partners culminated in 1997 in a joint venture with the Deutsche Bank Unter den Linden in Berlin.

Meanwhile, Jean-Christophe Ammann, who does not have a business degree like Krens, is struggling mightily to match the New Yorker's visionary schemes. He is campaigning vigorously for a change of the German tax laws and proudly proclaimed: "We want to become part of the "philosophy" of a corporation." He also plans (in competition with Christo) to turn the entire facade of his museum into an advertising billboard. Designs for a Coca-Cola and an American Express shrink-wrap exist already. Hans Hollein, the museum's architect came up with a wise alternative. He proposed that advertising messages are to be tattooed on the director's forehead.

Since corporate contributions to museums are tax-deductible, we, in effect, pay for the campaigns that are to influence how we live and what we think. We underwrite the expenses of our own seduction. This strategy succeeds as long as we are convinced that we get something for nothing — and believe in "disinterested pleasure."

Broodthaers chose as the first illustration for Volume II of his post-exhibition catalogue, the gold-framed painting of a castle nestled in a romantic mountain landscape. He supplied the following caption: "Oh melancholy, brittle castle of eagles."