

DeVane Lecture Discussion #15, May 3, 2001

AK Welcome to the very last of our Thursday afternoon DeVane Discussions. I was recalling, walking over from the Law School this afternoon in this brilliant late spring, early summer day, with the heat and the sunlight, recalling that impossibly distant January afternoon when I trudged over to Battell and the sun, I think, had already set. In any event, I remember it as dark and gloomy and cold, and here, we have made it all the way to the sunny uplands of the late spring. I am delighted to be here this afternoon with my friend, Chip Benson, the Dean of the Yale School of Art and to have a chance to discuss with him, and with you, some of the fascinating and far-reaching questions raised by his lecture on Tuesday. I thought I would begin by putting a really big question to you, which you're free to disregard entirely, if you choose.

CB I would hope you would at least try to embarrass me.

AK Well, let's see where we go. It's not a question which is raised directly by anything that you said in the lecture, but I found it kind of rolling around in my own head as I listened to you talk—and it's this. I'll put it very simply. What's the relationship between art and democracy?

CB You notice I left art out. It crept into the lecture a little bit. I couldn't resist saying that the Velasquez painting was a great piece of art and the Karsch was a terrible piece of art. And that really was a technical slip. I probably shouldn't have brought in art at all. But there it is. But that came in because art is something I'm deeply interested in. I can't answer the question without trying to define art because it seems to me that's the place we could begin. Maybe I should ask you your definition of art before I give mine.

AK I'm much more interested in hearing yours. I'm a mere lawyer, used to picking holes in other people's definitions. You're an artist and therefore qualified to speak.

CB A piece of art, to me, is something physical that we make which makes something clear that we can make clear in no other way. And the artist, to me, is someone who has something that they want to express—perhaps not a personal thing but simply something they've understood about the world and the way it functions. And the only way they can express that and make it clear is to make a physical object to embody the understanding. So, to me, a piece of art is, first and foremost, a container for something that comes out of the artist. And then, implicit in that is the assumption that the artist is doing it, not just to make it understandable to him or herself, but also to hand it to somebody else. So there's a premise in there that it fundamentally goes out of the artist into an object and has the potential to go on to somebody else. Therefore, art is a subset of pictures because my definition of pictures is they're something that we make in order to alter the person who looks at them or uses them. So I think, in the scheme of things, as far as social relationships or society, I think art is just a particularly potent and difficult to define subset of the whole picture.

AK Let me elaborate the motive behind the question. What you've said makes perfectly good sense to me but, of course, there are some works of art or attempted works of art which are hugely more successful than others.

CB And probably having nothing to do with their intrinsic quality.

AK But there are really beautiful things and then less beautiful things and then many, many ordinary things which do not have this particular power to evoke or to convey or to illuminate. When I think of art, in some very naïve and simple-minded way, I think of an enormous collection of various sorts of things which share one property in common, which is that they all stand out, they all stand out against the background of ordinary things. And when we think about our democratic world and democratic citizenship, we think of people—many of them—who all stand more or less on a level plain and we're a little suspicious—maybe not even a LITTLE suspicious -- of political programs which have aesthetic premises.

CB First of all, I don't see art that way at all. I think if art stands out, as often as not it stands out because it's been promoted in some way. I think much of the art we know about, that is made in our time, we're only aware of because it's been very carefully promoted and put forth to people. So I'd discount it. And I think that, over long periods of time, the great art rises up and I think much of it might have been quite ordinary when it was made. So I think we have to talk about celebrity here. And we have to talk about this terrible thing in our society of wanting something or some object to be a celebrity. And I think it distorts and twists everything. And I think that art and its close cousin, craft, have always been very ordinary and have always been a vital part of society, and I think this great hierarchy of wonderful things standing out and being extraordinary, I think much of that is a false thing that comes from the way our society thinks about things and seeks celebrity and specialness. And it's an old trait.

AK You've got to be right about that. But once we've winnowed away all of the advertised things, there are great things. And isn't that an undemocratic proposition?

CB Absolutely. And if I'm going to be thoroughly politically incorrect, I'm going to say that one of the difficulties about art is that many people can't make a decent piece of art. And this delusion we have today that anybody can do anything simply isn't true.

AK This is actually, I think, one of the wellsprings of our appetite for celebrity because it satisfies the wish to think that I could be great too.

CB It ain't true. It was a terrible blow to me, as a young photographer, to discover that I couldn't be Robert Frank. I was crushed because here was this man who made this unbelievable body of work, and all I wanted to do was to be able to do that. And I was as incapable of that as I was of jumping up and touching the ceiling of Battell Chapel.

AK Is there something suspect about this wish from a democratic point of view? Do you see what I mean?

CB Are you claiming that all the truths in democracy apply to everything? Can't democracy function on one level and other things function on a different level?

AK Well, I'm not so sure. Democracy has about it a certain imperial tendency that wishes to extend its habits of equality to all realms of life . . .

CB Or certain activities. It seems to me there's an underlying notion that we are all equal in our right to be part of government, or part of the governing entity. Or at least we're equal enough to say who we want to have doing it. I don't see why that extends to mean that everybody should be able to make a piece of great art. It seems to me those are two very different things. Am I being bad now?

AK Well, yes. But that's what I was hoping you'd do, so it's all working out. But let me push it one step further. What about the statesman who describes himself, as many have, as an artist of politics. Statecraft—the word itself suggests something of the idea. And, of course, there is greatness and ordinariness in this realm, too. We're talking now about governance and the work of politics. Shouldn't we be very suspicious of anyone who claims for him or herself the prerogative of the artist in politics?

CB Yes, but I feel the same way about people who claim the prerogatives of the artist in the art world. I view them with probably even more suspicion. I mean, the things we do require craft, they require learning craft skill and innate talent and innate gifts, right? They all require it. And I think of the craft of politics, rather than the art of politics. Art, to me, is linked in making this physical thing.

AK Elaborate—craft and art.

CB A piece of craft is something that you make that is predictable. You understand the outcome. When you set out to do it, you have a very clear idea of what is going to be made. That's also what you do when you're an illustrator. You deal in the predictable. You deal in something that is familiar. As

often as not, you're doing something again. When you're making a piece of art, you're doing something that you have never done before and you have no idea if it's going to turn out. You, in fact, suspect that it probably will not, as an artist throws away most work. A photographer throws away thousands of photographs. The painter covers millions of marks and only a small number are left for us to see. The artist is doing something that has never been done before and the artist doesn't know it can happen.

AK I cannot resist adding a platonic footnote to this. In *The Republic*, Socrates describes the making of a city, the making of a state, as an enterprise of craftsmanship, and he means this in just the sense you do—that the guardians who construct and then manage the constitution of the city look to the ideas as their blueprint, and then they work them into the material which are the human beings. Now what comes into this not at all is the idea of an artistry of politics and, in fact, for us, I think, the notion of the art work and of the activity of making art is very closely related to our concept of the individual, of the individual thing and the individual person making the individual thing, that it is induplicable...

CB Let's really say that what it does is it courts failure. The craftsman of state is terrified when courting failure, but the great ones have always had to do that. But the artist does that as a matter of course. I think we're coming into a time where more and more art, legitimately, is made by groups of people because, as technology becomes more complex, artists are going to embrace it and, very rapidly, the art is being made by large groups of people, like film. And still the best courts failure. Still the best stuff goes down a place we've never gone before and finds something out we've never found out before because the nature of art is that we make a physical thing that makes something clear that we can't understand in any other way. So there's no way to predict its outcome. Whereas the craftsman, carving a letter, has a very clear concept of the letter in mind and is executing that concept as well as possible. So there is a real difference. And the craftsman does a dance with the material world, and the craftsman always is courting a minor version of failure because the physical world will come and attack, which it does all the time. The perversity of the physical world ruins craft. And that's a little battle that's going on. But it's not like the one of the artist, where we simply don't know where we're going.

AK And everything is in jeopardy.

CB Everything is in jeopardy.

AK Would it be a wild exaggeration to say that the modern moral idea or ideal of authenticity, of living an authentic life which is truly your own, represents the transplantation of an artistic experience or an artistic ideal to the plain of life?

CB Sure, but we're kidding ourselves to think any of us can live a life that's truly our own.

AK But whether we can or not is beside the question.

CB Yes. If we could, we would be doing a thing very similar to art.

AK The interesting question, I think, is whether this is, for us, a regulative ideal, something we judge ourselves by so we say, "To the extent I don't live authentically, to the extent that my life is not a work of art, falls short of it, then I live incompletely or inadequately." To the ancients, that notion would have seemed either insane or unintelligible because the challenge of life was a challenge of craftsmanship and not of artistry. And of course, when you put it on the plain of artistry, the risk of failure is monumental.

AK But the artist has the great liberty of failing again and again and again. At some point we are finished with the thing so that we can fail again and again and, perhaps, occasionally succeed. Life is a one-shot deal. The other interesting thing that happens to the artist is that, the minute we finish something that's good, we're in terror that we can never do something as good again. And that comes from that. So you would think, you make a great picture, you think what satisfaction I'll have making a great picture. Exactly the opposite is the case. You say, "Oh, God, I could never do that again!" And so you're having a hard time all along. And as you look at the lives of artists, in many artists, there's a point where they find a way, through cleverness and experience, to stop taking the risks as their careers go on.

And so, often, an artist will go into a wonderful stage of productivity toward the end of their life, where, basically, they've figured out how to avoid the problems and they're cranking it out. I quoted Lincoln Kirstein talking about General Sherman, in the lecture, where I said that Kirstein always said, "Quakers make the best generals because they know exactly what they're doing." And Kirstein said another thing about Picasso. He saw the show at the Museum of Modern Art—there was a great Picasso retrospective, and the early work was on the first floor and, as you went up the successive floors, you got to later and later work. And he said, from the third floor on up, all he was doing was making currency, because he'd figured out how to get it to work out and look like Picasso. The same thing is true with Ansel Adams. The much teased and rundown Ansel Adams was an extraordinary photographer until he figured out how to get it to work, and then the work became stupid. And that happened when he was about 35. And he lived to be 80.

AK Let me change the subject, ask you one further question and then we're going to open it up. Because it ought to be plain to everybody here, I could go on interrogating this man until the clock ran out and the sun went down. But in that beautiful little booklet that you prepared for your lecture on Tuesday, you remark at one point—I don't remember the exact words but it's something to the effect that with the invention of movable type came the possibility of making identical multiple copies of the same text that would convey the same information in the same form with the same prints and misprints, to king and commoner alike . . .

CB I said, "The wonder wasn't that it was multiple as much as it was that everybody got the same thing."

AK Elaborate on this. This is a moment of some consequence. Not just in the evolution of the technology of bookmaking but of civilization and politics. What's this all about?

CB We think about the printing press coming along and, all of a sudden, instead of there being a very small number of books made by hand—which might vary a little from one copy to the other—instead of that, all of a sudden the printing press can make tons of copies that are cheap. And, of course, we're bowled over by that because that's multiplicity. That lets us cover the world with printed documents. But that makes it easy for us to forget the really interesting thing which is, the printing press makes them all identical. So it means that, as that cheap widespread thing becomes dominant and spreads throughout the world, the king and the peasant both are using the same thing. And that was really something, that was astonishing, that that would happen. As pictures—which books fundamentally are, if you will accept my premise that all these little letters and number are pictures—as pictures have evolved technologically and books have evolved technologically, we stand on the brink of removing that great aspect of it because we begin to get to the point where we can give up the traditional fixed edition and we can tailor the data in a multiple publication for the specific user. And this is the thing that is so fundamentally corrupt in the advertising world, where they try to find out what Joe Schmo wants and they tailor the thing they give to Joe Schmo to get Joe Schmo to buy the thing. This is the picture of becoming interactive. This is the two-way picture. We're not giving up the multiplicity, but we're giving up the identity and that's a huge . . .

AK It's the loss of a common thing. Cass Sunstein, who teaches law at the University of Chicago has just recently published a book called *Republic.Com* in which he talks about the significance of this very phenomenon, the individual tailoring, at the recipient's end, of the newspaper, the magazine, the communication.

CB But we tend to forget that we never had that up until the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We had that with the invention of printing. John Gamble [University Printer], is this correct?

JG Yeah, pretty much.

CB That's when we got it, right? And when presses and movable type came along, this thing was created that we never had before.

AK So this will be the episode, these four centuries of commonality.

CB That's right. And then, there's this little piece of time where we've had it. The same thing is true with film. Film is this completely bizarre medium that's all based on silver photography. It's ridiculous that it would work. And it came along at the beginning of this century. It's going to disappear within a short number of years because the whole digital thing can do it better. And all the things that pushed the editorial structure of film, the difficulty of making it, all those things will dissolve as film can be made with a little camera that I can hold and look at you like this. So technology gives us intervals where we receive the gift and then what happens is we often move to another technology and we don't realize we're losing the gift that we had all along. And I think that's what happens when the fixed edition disappears. Fair enough?

AK Fair enough. The floor is open.

Q I wanted to return to what Tony called the "big question," return to pictures and democracy, which you did address. And, to make sure that I understand you right. As I understand, your thesis is that pictures, as you define them, don't have anything to do with democracy necessarily except that they're a means of organizing any kind of political society. And I was remembering actually, just on the way to Battell Chapel and I didn't have time to go to the library, that Hobbes begins Leviathan with a discussion of how we see. And Hobbes, not being exactly a proponent of democracy. Do I have your broad thesis right? That it's a means of organizing any kind of political society, whether it be democracy or anarchy or totalitarian?

CB Yes, I think I said that. I believe that. But that also doesn't mean it can't specifically be about democracy. In other words, I think pictures are social glue and I think they're the things that hold all social structures together. I think it can hold non-democratic and democratic. That's one of the reasons that I showed the swastika—the beautiful swastika—and its transformation—to try to make that point. But I think, at the same time, we can have pictures that are completely about democracy, like the \$5 or \$10 bill. Or the Declaration of Independence, which is a record outside of the human being of our democratic principles. So I think, yes, but let's not lose sight of the fact that they can be specifically about democracy, as well as being general for society.

Q So what you're saying is that pictures could be specifically about democracy, but democracy, as opposed to other forms of government, is not something that is necessarily peculiarly organized around pictures, anymore than any other kind. . .

CB I suspect that all forms of government beyond a certain population size demand pictures and couldn't exist without them.

Q In China, at least, until fairly recent years, pictures of Chairman Mao . . .

CB Of course, which all once were a photograph. They all evolved from some photograph and were transformed and replicated by the millions.

Q You said, earlier in your conversation with Dean Kronman, "Art which stands out is art which has been promoted."

CB I meant to say, "much of it."

Q You also said, "I was crushed, as a young photographer, to realize I was not Robert Frank," and I wanted to know how you knew you weren't Robert Frank.

CB Because my pictures stank when I tried to make them like his. Robert Frank went out into the world and he photographed people with a little camera, moving through. . . actually crossing America. It was one of the most extraordinary things he did. He had a Guggenheim Fellowship and traveled across the country and back. And he made a series of pictures that absolutely record the deepest nature of

America, certainly as I understand it. And I tried to work that way and I could never get the pictures to be holders of any believable content. Now, as soon as I took a camera and put it on a tripod and photographed in a slow, methodical way, usually with no people in the picture but rather objects and artifacts, I found that I was very, very good and they didn't look at all like Robert Frank and I make a lesser thing than he does. So I was not able to do the thing I loved.

Q How do you decide if it's a lesser work? Minus promotion as a factor.

CB I don't know. You make a judgment, right? You look and you look and the more you know it, the more the great thing moves you, and the more you know the thing you make that's poor, the more it bothers you.

Q So it's completely subjective.

CB Oh yeah, it's subjective. No rules. James, if there were rules, then I could create a construction where the thing could be predictable. So I can't have rules for it. The only thing I can do is look at the thing and somehow try to gather what the thing tells me. Completely subjective.

Q This is a follow-up of the Judge's question. What is your impression then of state sponsored art? Like much of the art that they did in the Soviet Union that was supposed to be the paradigm of democratic virtues as opposed to capitalistic virtues.

CB I think if anybody sponsoring art is dictating its form or content, then the art is in trouble. But I think that there can be great civic art—for instance, the art that came out of the Mexican Revolution. There were extraordinary pieces of fresco painting and drawing. So I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with the civic art, but when it's sponsored and when there's a group of people or a feeling in the air that dictates what its form and content can be, then for me it becomes completely degenerate and uninteresting and not something that I'm attracted to. So I'm suspicious. I think, basically, the good artists are anarchists who, I hope, have the sense not to tear the buildings down but to have their anarchy be in their art so that there's the anarchy of the mind that we can address and see without society crumbling. And I think that the idea of sponsorship and direction runs absolutely counter to that.

AK But it's not just a question of direction. If the state says, "Here's some money. Do a thing. And we leave it to you to decide what kind of thing to make or to do." But the spirit of the thing that's made is patriotic—that is to say, it's meant to convey a public passion, a civic mood or mind. Then it is essentially—not on account of anyone's having given directions or dictates about what to do but because of the passion that informs it-- not an anarchist's thing anymore. And so, is art like that?

CB I think it may or may not be good, but I think it's in a dubious climate.

AK It's under some cloud of suspicion and it needs to prove its case.

CB Absolutely.

Q I was wondering why, in some of your photographs of the war—particularly in Vietnam—you didn't sort of preface them—maybe with Goya's "Horrors of War," or maybe with Picasso's "Guernica," to show the continuum.

CB I only didn't do it because I tried to have that section of the lecture be primarily photographic. I kept it as a stream of photography until I stopped and went to Breughel with the one exception of the two war posters. But, of course, there's a great tradition of pictures about war.

Q If you had a caption to put on the photo of the execution, what would the caption have been?

CB Oh, God! I don't know. I don't know. I have to say I'm never too interested in captions on pictures because, usually, what they are is they're an effort to find a way to describe the thing in terms other than itself. You see, as an artist, I believe the picture describes it. And what the caption often does is, the caption says, "This is what is happening." And I don't want to know that. I want the picture to tell me what's happening.

Q Do you think that picture actually told what was happening?

CB The picture, of course, is completely false. The picture is a fictional account. We don't know what's happening, but that particular picture is so overpowering to us in what it describes that we imagine it, rather than being told. I think, in point of fact, my understanding of the origin of that picture is that the person who is being shot had just killed the family of the man doing the shooting. I believe that's what's given as what took place. But I don't care. All I care about is the picture and the way the picture moves me without someone telling me how to be moved. Is that OK?

Q Yeah, except that for those of us who ran around that particular area during the '60s in harm's way, if the man had, indeed, been a North Vietnamese Intelligence Agent and killed some people and was about to report back some locations and he was executed for it, a caption . . . If you said, "Execution of a Spy" as opposed to "Execution of a Simple Man Being Taken Advantage of by the Forces of Power," it changes the whole impact of the subject, does it not?

CB I think that a caption would have its place in a record of the time, but as a piece of art, to me, I would rather not have it. I agree with you completely.

Q I understand. Except that, right now, with the digital equipment and everything we have now, one of the things that I'm concerned about in terms of democracy, a picture is no longer worth a thousand words, is it?

CB No, I don't think I ever said it was. But a lot of other people did.

AK I do think that, with respect to this question of truthfulness and falsity, that there is a difference between the way in which we are in the habit of receiving photographs and other works of art. Take the famous Goya painting—the execution scene that's in the Frick. And you look at this and you know, of course, that this is literally a depiction of the scene and the artist has put certain things in and left certain things out. . .

CB And 400 years ago, people viewing it might not have known that. They might have said, "Oh, my god, this picture evokes the world so clearly. It must be true." You just could not spring from the vine this much.

AK Perhaps. But for us, certainly, the photograph carries with it a certain ersatz . . .

CB Not to photographers. The photographer has no confusion about the fact that this thing is completely fictional. We would never imagine that it was reality. And, thank heaven, now, we have the computer to come along and make it clear that none of it is reality. So everybody is beginning to understand it. We, in the School of Art, we have a photography program and we have a graduate crit that meets on a weekly basis. And we're always trying to bring other artists who practice other mediums in to participate in the crit. And every time we bring someone in who's not a photographer—not every time, most times—we spend two hours trying to explain to them that the photograph isn't reality, because even artists who are used to looking at art are confused about this. They think that there is some trace of the world in the photograph. It isn't so. It just plain isn't so. It's a fictional object and we should all remove any idea from our head that it's something other than that.

AK But that is a harder thought for ordinary non-practicing artists to get out of their head.

CB That's right. It's a long-term source of confusion. I should have it tattooed on the back of my neck—"Photography is fiction," so everybody who looks at me.. Or perhaps on my forehead.

Q I was struck in your conversation to open this discussion at this analogy that developed between the making of art and the making of a good life according to our ideal of what a good life is.

CB This was Tony who said that—not me.

Q Nonetheless, the analogy went by way of the ideal of a unique life of which one is the author, and likewise, as that is our ideal for a good life, a work of art is supposed to court disaster by pursuing something unique and inexpressible any other way. But what I start thinking immediately is that there are qualities of mind that the fine artist possesses which leads him to, many times—maybe not all the time—successfully negotiate that challenge, making a good piece of art.

CB That's a big sentence and you have to say it again. There are qualities of mind that help the artist negotiate . . .

Q The challenge of making a good piece of art.

CB I have to stop you there because what you're doing is you're seeing in the context of the mind and, you see, this is one of the things that is plaguing our society today. We all think it's about the mind. Art's only partly about the mind and when I'm in a bad mood, I'll say it's only a little about the mind. It's about what the mind and the flesh and the physical tool and the stuff of the physical world can produce, all rolled up together. So, go on. I just wanted to jump on that.

Q I won't modify the form of the question but I'll keep that in mind.

CB I just want to make the point because the point is critical, I think, to what you're saying.

Q So you take a great photographer, and he makes a series of unfolding choices in the course of making his great photographic work of art. He decides where to take the picture, how to set up his equipment, he decides when to actually snap the picture, he decides how to develop it in the dark room. Each one is a series of choices which, made well, will culminate in a good piece of art and, made poorly, will culminate in a bad one. Now, you said there was an analogy between good art and a good life. Maybe there's an analogy between good artistic judgment and good judgment as to how to lead life. And if you could develop the topic of good artistic judgment...

CB No. First of all, that's not how you make a piece of art. What you've described in the making of the piece of art—and I'm not trying to be difficult—but you've described the most simplistic possible version of making a piece of art. We're continually making choices and the choices are made certainly not on a conscious level. They're made on a visceral level—often in a reactionary way. But above all, when we're artists, what we're doing is we're grappling with this understanding of something that we cannot make clear without trying to make this physical thing. We never think of the choices. When I'm walking around with a camera, I don't think of all the choices I'm making with the camera. I look and see what the dickens is happening. And I say, "That's not right, that's not right," and I keep doing a series of things to try to get it to be right. As a photographer, my particular approach to it is that the thing in the world is a gift coming to me and I'm having to midwife the birth of that gift. And it simply is not done with rational faculties that are choice, choice, choice, choice. It's done on a much more out-of-control level than that.

AK Why isn't that an exact description of the challenge of living?

CB It might be. But the challenge of living, you see, doesn't have this lumpen object at the end. It's what I'm interested in. See, I'm interested in this thing that embodies the process that has an end.

Q It seems to me you're underemphasizing music. Music, just like life, is splayed out over time. It's a continual . . . You don't have that lump of . . .

CB But it ends and the musician has a tendency to do it again and again and again.

AK Life does, too.

CB But we don't have a chance to do lots of them. So music has the finite quality, to me, of a piece of physical art. It is a piece of physical art. I don't buy the art life parallel. I don't buy it. It bothers me.

AK I know why it bothers me. It bothers me because it encourages a certain romantic extravagance in living which is often bad for the person living the life and almost always bad for the people around him or her.

CB That's great. And the other thing, as an artist, as often as not, the physical thing I'm dealing with comes in and ruins it. Comes in and wrecks it. And it fails. So I don't buy the premise.

Q Could you just talk about one sub-issue then? Pretend it's unrelated to the question I was asking. What makes one artist good and another bad? What's the difference?

CB Their work.

Q What's the difference in them that leads them to make the work?

CB I have no idea. How could I possibly say the difference between a good artist and a bad artist? All I can do is I can try to grapple with talking about what might make one piece of work good and make one piece of work bad. I'm not trying to avoid it. I don't know how I could possibly say that. I mean, artists, like most of us, are flawed, messed up. They're the wrecks of humanity. And by some miracle, this thing comes out and is made. So I couldn't possibly pass judgment on them or be clear about them. I wouldn't know how to do it.

AK Josh, I think, would be happy to shift from artist to work and invite you to just talk a little bit about your own standards of judgment. This may be too abstract a way of putting a thing. Let's talk about photography. This is something that you're obviously intimate with. When you look at photographs—the photographs of your students—how do you sort them out into the really excellent ones, and the good ones, and then the ones that just . . .

CB Well, it's complicated. First of all, the ones I'm interested in are almost always the ones that don't look like anything I've ever seen before. That's almost the criteria that's the most interesting. Then there's a whole layer of technical issues that might make a piece of art—like a photograph—fail. And, as a teacher, I take great pleasure in the fact that I can say, "Oh, god! If you hadn't made this mistake, there was, possibly some whole other thing that could have taken place." So because I'm a tech head, I tend to look too much at that. The other thing I'm interested in is I'm interested in a student putting up a body of work . . . Mary puts a bunch of stuff up here and Henry puts a bunch of stuff up here, and they've both gone to the same corner of New Haven and they've photographed it with the same camera, and they look completely different. And so I'm always astonished by the fact that I understand something of the essence of Mary and Henry coming out in the work. You see, Josh, I'm trying to grapple with your question. I'm beginning to see inherent differences in the people that come out because the work never looks the same. People can't make their work look the same. So those are the things I'm interested in. And also, I have to say, I'm very interested in the internal drama of the piece of art because that's the thing that attracts me and pulls me in. You know, we can have chili with too much pepper and it burns our tongue, or we can have a bland soup of chicken stock with no salt, and one's dramatic and one isn't. And the same thing is true with visual art. Things grab us and pull us in. And I always want the sensuality of that. I want the seductiveness of the drama in it.

Q I'm not sure if this question is well formulated but one of the things that I guess I wonder about is if it's possible to think about the making of art by a community of people as connected in any way to the democratic process, particularly in this country. I have always been intrigued by quilts and quilts as a gathering place, typically for women who both need to do something practical, but also make art. And one of the truly amazing gifts in my life is that I'm part of a group of women who got together when our children were born and have been together now for more than a decade and we meet every other Wednesday night and some people get together every Monday night and make things. But we've made several quilts together for particular occasions and we've done other kinds of art together. And it's very enriching and one of the things that really struck me in your writing was your talking about the hand and that as kind of a tool that perhaps is less employed now, or at least its role is changing. I guess what I'm wondering is if you have any intuition, as an artist, about where art has been in the making of democracy? And given the state of things in our society now -- we've had bowling alone time here in this series -- I don't know how many people gather anymore as part of an everyday activity of regular folks who don't think of themselves necessarily as artists. I don't have any sense of the history of that in this culture in any broad way, and I don't have any clue about the extent to which that kind of activity goes on now. And yet I treasure it.

CB First of all, I probably have implied that I think art is a singular activity and I certainly don't believe it. For me, as an artist, I make things largely by myself. I happen to always be using tools that many, many other people have made that have made my art possible. I think, more and more, groups of people make art and it's great. And I think making a quilt is that. And I think a quilt can be a simple piece of craft, or it can be a great piece of art. It can be both things. And I think that about film. There's more and more cooperative stuff that we do that ends up with a physical result. The hand is interesting, which is the next thing you talked about. The hand is interesting to be because the hand, to me, is this median that stands between whatever this thing is in the head and this lumpen physical world out of which we make stuff. And I'm absolutely in love with the fact that whatever is up in here can flow out through whatever is here, after I train it and modify it. And it can do things that are quite remarkable or it has the potential to do things that are quite remarkable. I think a lot of that is disappearing. And it's one reason I jumped on somebody—Josh, I guess—about fixating on the mind so much, earlier. I think we're becoming a society where the hand is slipping away. And I tried to say this in the little booklet, probably, more than I did in the lecture. And we just have to face the fact that we're using a whole bunch of other very responsive tools that carry stuff out and that make things—that let us make things together. The third thing, it seems to me, you're talking about is how group art perhaps might relate to democracy. And I don't know. I have to fall back on the same thing I said earlier, which is it seems to me that all social structures are completely predicated upon pictures. And art is a subset of that group. I think art is a small little category within the broader category of picture. And of course, there's much art that isn't pictures. And I feel very confident about the role of pictures in democracy. I don't feel so confident about the role of art in democracy. So I'm unclear about that. Is that an adequate answer?

AK I want to come back, though, to the disappearance of the hand. This interests me very deeply. I'm unclear about where the balance of your thinking and your feeling on this question lies. At moments, you speak as if this is, of course, a tremendous thing that's happening, and tremendous in its implications. But whether it's good or bad. . . Of course, in some ways, some things are lost but other things are gained.

CB I don't think I've said it's bad. I think I've said it's sad, to me. Sad to me because I'm this old guy who can't change.

AK Why are you so cautious and first personal in that judgment?

CB Because the world is a river . . .

AK Yes, but why don't you say, "It's going in the wrong direction"?

CB Because I don't think it is.

AK It's not just how I see it, it's how it's going. This is a terrible thing, the disappearance of the hand.

CB I certainly do not believe that. The world rushes by us. We're born. We're hopelessly stuck in the mindset of our upbringing. And what happens is, as we get older, it rushes by us faster and faster. We talked about this, but this group hasn't heard it, but the TAs have heard it. I think the world is getting better and I have a brother who thinks the world is getting worse. And he's convinced that the whole thing is going to hell, and I'm convinced that everything is improving.

AK Who do your parents think is right?

CB They're not around anymore so I don't have to worry. Oh, they think he's right, of course. They're older than he is. I'm not willing to say that it's bad. It seems to me that, when I look at art, it seems to me that there's work made in the past that's overwhelmingly better than work that's made now. There's greater work coming out of the past than I see coming out of the present. But the work that exists that comes from the past has been filtered by time. It's been filtered by this very complicated thing of people collecting and discarding and, the house burns down, what do you run and get? You run and grab that thing. So there's a tremendous force working over a long period of time that has made the great things stand up and be around. And who knows, maybe out of the detritus of our time, these things will surface, but I don't see them now.

AK Maybe you suspect that things are getting better in the sense that people live longer, they live more comfortably, pain recedes further to the margins of everyday experience.

CB But maybe the thing they make is fundamentally less interesting.

AK But we live in a world of trash and junk in which the really wonderful things are rarer and rarer.

CB Awfully good trash and junk! There's some really good stuff.

AK But we live in an age of happy, contented, painless mediocrity in which very few things of interest and beauty will happen.

CB Well, 500 years ago, we lived in the age of mud, you know.

AK And there were startlingly beautiful things at the end.

CB There were a very, very small number made by a very small number of people. We can argue this both ways. I don't know what's right about this. And I think I'm very open minded to not be screaming that it's terrible that the hand disappears, but for me, rather, to view it as a personal kind of nostalgia that is a reflection of my own limit. I think that's pretty mature.

AK I think I'm in agreement. You're very grown up. But if there were a button that said, "More pain, more art," or "Less pain . . ." you'd press the first button in a minute.

CB No question about it. More pain, more gain. No question about it.

AK No, I don't mean that. I mean that button number one says that "the world will be filled with contentment, physical well being, people will live to an age that would have been unthinkable, they'll have comforts they could never have imagined. But real art—the wonderful things—will dwindle down to a trickle. In the other world it will be, relatively speaking, a torrent, but there will be pain and suffering and the life expectancy of the average human being will be 35." You'd push the first button in a minute. It would be the right thing to do, and so would I. But you would do it with a sense of sad loss.

CB Let's talk about why, OK? And we're moving quite a ways away from democracy, but the thread has been tenuous at best today. One of the very difficult things that I had to figure out, through necessity, was that the only things I ever did that were any good were things I did when I had no choice in the

matter. Turned out that this thing about choice is just nonsense. You have choice, you waste it. You don't work hard, you don't put yourself through unpleasantness, you don't do that deep self modification that is required for anything of meaning to happen, I believe. And what happens now is we have this thing called art and art now is somehow put in the context of being the self indulgent thing where the artist has the right to figure out what it is. This is absurd. If someone was making a painting 300 or 400 years ago, they had somebody who was going to be furious if the painting didn't look right, and yet the person making the painting was full of artistic impulse. And what they did is they had to figure out how to make the great thing that the idiot would love. So they were in a position where they had no choice and they were working up against tremendously difficult things that opposed them. And what happens when you do this is you go through and you change yourself deeply and you give up choice, you put it in a very narrow little place, and you try to stick it into the thing. Well, I think we have a society now where people tend not to do that to themselves anymore. And I think we have a society that believes that we actually can be fairly relaxed and achieve something great, and that's ridiculous.

AK Is our society shallow precisely on account of the multiplication . . .

CB Shallow, but it's a big pond, and there's probably more water in it.

AK I think that's true, too, but let me finish the thought . . . Shallow on account of the multiplication of choice.

CB Fine. But don't make the shallow so negative.

CK It's comfortable, it's warm. It's like a tepid bathtub.

CB Yeah, there's a lot of it. You don't drown. It's great. I can stand up all the time, keep my nose above the water.

Q Everybody's a critic. You mentioned this notion that there's a sort of fallacy that there's an inherent democracy in art. Everybody can make a good piece of art, potentially.

CB I said that was not true.

Q You said that was not true, right. And I think it's even more not true for the critic. I think our real problem is not that we think everybody can make a good piece of art. I don't think that that's a notion that we really suppose to be true. I think our problem is that we assume that everybody can be a good critic of art when, actually, good criticism is maybe even less of a craft and requires more spiritual genius than the act of . . .

CB I'm sorry to barge in, but the minute I hear the phrase "spiritual genius," I'm extremely suspicious. I might agree with you, but I think that it's probably just as hard to be a great critic as it is to be a great artist. So I'll agree with you. But I'm not going to say one's harder than the other. I don't know enough about the specifics to say that. But go on. I'm sorry.

Q I would agree that it's a difficult comparison to make. But, in a sense, just one illustration is that if the artist requires a certain manual ability, if the hand is as important as the heart and the mind, the critic is operating on a sort of different plane of consciousness. What he's doing is purely a cerebral exercise. I don't think that's the best illustration of this sort of spiritual genius that I'm talking about. But maybe another one is. And that is that what the artist does is not necessarily democratic. The ability to make art is not democratic and the function that the artist performs is not democratic. The critic has an important function, I think, in democracy in the Arnoldian sense. It's to inculcate sort of an aesthetic perspicacity because, without that, art becomes sort of worthless, doesn't it?

CB No, it doesn't become worthless, but it might be nonfunctional for the group.

Q It exists in a rarefied world of . . .

CB Let's not call it rarefied. Let's just say that it might only exist for a very small audience. But what the critic potentially can do is the critic can potentially make it accessible to more people and make whatever wisdom might be residing in the art or lack of it accessible to more people. So I agree with you completely.

Q The artists in society play this sort of glass bead game, to use one of my favorite metaphors from literature and one that's sort of diametrically opposed to the Socratic notion. And the critics translate that into something that people understand and that whole function, that mechanism is obscured when everybody thinks that, unlike in other tendrils of society and politics, that they have the discernment to make a value judgment, a critical judgment about art when that's not necessarily the case. I mean, in so many areas of life, we're perfectly willing to cede authority to the experts, but in art I think we all feel like all bets are off, it's fair game. Is that a mistake?

CB Yes. One of the troubles is everybody thinks art is something that we all should be able to immediately, instinctively understand, and I don't believe it's true. I think a piece of art is as hard to understand as a formula and I think the more we understand about art, the more we can get out of it and the more we learn from it. So I don't believe that art is something that is intrinsically accessible to everyone, which, I think, is what the question is. I don't believe that at all. I believe that parts of it are in the same way that parts of language are accessible to everybody. I mean, I can say, "Duh," and maybe everybody knows what I'm kind of expressing, but if I make a complicated sentence and if I make it in a different language, a lot of people won't understand it. You can't expect to come up to a piece of art and get something out of it without knowing something about art or the culture or the medium. I just don't think it works that way. I think one thing the best critics do is they act as educators, to educate people about the mediums and about art and that, I think, improves the ability of people to understand it and interact with it. I'm giving the critics a very noble role here. I basically think they're people who talk about something which, by definition, they know nothing about because they haven't had a hand in the making. I don't think I'm saying something bad, am I? I think I'm probably saying something you will agree with.

Q And I'd want to push you further, to say, to admit, to concede that the function that the artists performs is, in a very real and profound way, antidemocratic. A critic tries to reverse that.

CB I'm not going to say that. I don't think it's fundamentally anti-democratic. Why do you say that? It seems to me that often it turns out that it's very elitist.

AK The artist works in a sphere of exclusivity and the critic, as it were, gears that down to . .

CB But the person making the video on the TV, they're making something for the masses. That's a perfectly legitimate thing to be doing. I just think it depends on the art we're talking about. If we're going to say writing is art, we make it for a big audience. No, I'm not going to agree that it's anti-democratic. I think a lot of it is very private. And I think a lot of it is made by the artist for a very small audience. I'll agree with that completely. But I don't want to make a sweeping generality about this thing I love, that it's anti-democratic. I will say the terrible thing which is, everybody can't do it. And so it's fundamentally elitist. I mean, people are given different talents and, you know, I can't do Robert Frank. I will say that. But let's not condemn it to being anti-democratic. Is that OK?

Q That's fine. But who was condemning? Certainly not I.

AK Where does the prejudice, if that's what it is, that the work of art ought to be immediately available and intelligible . .

CB . . . and I get furious with students who produce work, the nature of which is to be a riddle, to make me embarrassed that I don't understand it. I think it's intolerable to do that—bad behavior. And I think artists have been very guilty of that. But I think that the other thing artists have done is I think they often have been very clear about expressing something that nobody wants to hear or see. I think that's made it unpopular, too. So I think there are different things that have brought that down on them.

AK It is interesting that, in some respects, art and the experience of art has become for us a common meeting ground that religion once was but isn't anymore except within bounded communities of faith. So we all worship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Sunday afternoon, if you know what I mean. It's an experience which is meant to be . . . You encounter something which is out of the ordinary, which is meant to awaken feelings or turn the mind. . .

CB And it's meant to represent the best of culture.

AK The best of culture, and to touch off some spiritual—I think that's the right word—some spiritual train of feelings or of thoughts or whatever. But of the nondenominational, secular variety.

CB It's interesting, because he's describing imagining the object to be completely non-democratic, and you're describing it in ways that draw us together. So it can go both ways.

AK It's the Sunday crowd before the Pieta. This is going to be the very last question. . . We have time for one more.

Q This issue we've been sort of dancing around with the last few comments, but you said that the artist in the old days had to make something that was both great and conformed to the need of the patron.

CB I think the artist was a workman in service to a commission or to a need. I think art had a commercial underpinning that was based on it being needed for a very prosaic role in society. And I think that's disappeared now.

Q I was wondering if it disappeared or if it hadn't been diffused, that now the patrons are every person who has access to a \$5 video rental or a print of a piece of modern art and whether that has made the needs of the patrons, as opposed to the capacity of the artist to make great art, has that changed the balance?

CB I don't think that's what changed the balance. I think what changed the balance is that an idea has come along which I think probably started 150 or 200 years ago in Europe somewhere, an idea has come along that the artist has the right to decide what the art is. And I think that's the thing that changed it. It might be that we could trace it to the Renaissance where the cult of the artist came along. The cult of the artist didn't exist, as far as I know, before then. So that's the change, to me, that has altered it. All of a sudden, my students think it's about that. What a stupid idea. It's not about them. It's about what you make. The artist is not important. The thing that's important is the thing made.

Q To put it bluntly, is democratic art worse art?

CB No, I'm not going to say that.

AK And he shouldn't say it, either. Chip Benson, thank you so much. This was really wonderful.  
[Applause]