

## Art without Audiences

"Simple Hearts: An Address regarding the Consequences of Supply-Side Aesthetics" by Dave Hickey, in *Art Issues* (Summer 1998), 8721 Santa Monica Blvd., Ste. 6, Los Angeles, Calif. 90069.

The art world has grown to massive proportions in recent decades, thanks to the largesse of the federal government, major universities, and public and private foundations. But something vital is missing: an actively engaged public, contends Hickey, a columnist for *Art Issues* and a professor of art at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The museums and other institutions exhibiting contemporary art have become indifferent to what their audience thinks. Since the works of art "are presumed to be valuable by governmental fiat, by executive decision," he says, the public's opinion of them has been rendered superfluous.

This is a profoundly mistaken approach, Hickey argues. It is the beholders, not the artist, who give value and meaning to works of art, who see that the works are remembered, because they *want* them to be remembered. By disenfranchising the beholders, the National Endowment for the Arts, the universities, and the rest of today's artistic "support systems" have isolated artists from the broader culture. As a result, Hickey asserts, the practice of art is dying. "Art stops mattering to the individual citizens of the republic and begins to fade from public consciousness, where it *must* live. And it is fading today, as a consequence of . . . an obsession with origins, intentions, and production—an obsession with the people who make the work, their personal egos and identities, and at the expense of those citizens who might invest it with value."

The art world, Hickey maintains, was led astray in 1972, when President Richard

M. Nixon took what had been the modest National Endowment for the Arts created four years earlier and initiated its "substantial, ongoing expansion," transforming public art institutions into "the arbiters and primary providers of contemporary visual culture to the nation." Simultaneously, the government phased out tax credits for donations of art to public institutions, making it less attractive for patrons to buy works of art.

"By expanding government largesse to artists and art institutions while reducing governmental incentives for commerce in art," Hickey writes, "Nixon effectively shifted the focus of art discourse from its consequences to its causes—creating a situation in which art was much more likely to be made and much less likely to be sold." By funding museums and other institutions, Nixon "made possible government-regulated venues in which this art (which wasn't going to be bought) could be exhibited." Before long, this "publicly funded art world began to conceive itself in opposition to the world in which secular commerce in art took place." Contemporary artists became increasingly isolated and irrelevant.

But the situation is changing, he believes. "The government is tiring of funding art about which no one cares."

In the meantime, Hickey has a suggestion for the artists, critics, and educators who are supposed to be above commerce: "If we are really as selfless and public-spirited and committed to art as we say we are, let's just give it away, as a public service."

## OTHER NATIONS

### *Poland's Shocking Success*

"Miracle on the Vistula" by Elizabeth Pond, in *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 1998), CSIS, 1800 K St. N.W., Ste. 400, Washington, D.C. 20006.

In 1992, after two years of "shock therapy," Poland was reeling. Real wages had declined 20 percent, gross domestic product had fallen 35 percent, exports to the imploded Soviet Union had dropped 90 per-

cent, and unemployment had climbed to 12 percent. When ex-Communists emerged victorious in the 1993 general election, the message seemed clear: the radical plan to shift rapidly from a command economy to a