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*Timothy Van Laar, Leonard Diepeveen*  
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# ARTWORLD PRESTIGE

ARGUING CULTURAL VALUE



TIMOTHY VAN LAAR & LEONARD DIEPEVEEN

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**Timothy Van Laar, Leonard Diepeveen : Artworld Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Artworld Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A major step forward in the institutional theory of art but stops short of the finish lineBy John ArmstrongIn this short but meaty book the authors make what I think is a real breakthrough in our understanding of value in art. They embrace the so-called institutional theory of art put forth most notably by philosophers George Dickie and Arthur Danto and take it from the world of axioms and thought experiments into the real world, which is to say the real NY-centered art world of the last fifty years. (They have little if any interest in the broader world in which the art world exists.)They zero in on a central principle of the institutional theory of art, which is that the status of a work of art is not intrinsic to the work but is conferred by the artworld to which the work is

presented. They look at how this conferral works - who does it, when, and how. They stress that the process is collaborative (more exactly negotiative, if there is such a word), and that it involves advocacy for and against the work that ends in some form of consensus. They allow that the consensus may not be complete, that it may involve ambivalence, and, most importantly, that it may be reversed at some later date, so that a work may lose the status it was originally granted, or gain status that was originally withheld from it. They could have called the status conferred on a work (and occasionally withdrawn from it) simply value, but then they would have had to explain which of the various meanings of the word they did and did not intend in their usage of it. Instead, they choose a different word, prestige. Prestige is a primitive: we have an instinctive sense for it. It can be rationalized but doesn't have to be. The one intrinsic property it has is that it is desirable. And it's social - it's not merely something we want to have, it's something we want others to know we have. (A nice thing about prestige is that it's transitive. You can have prestige by having it conferred directly on you, you can have it by owning a work of art by an artist that has prestige, you can have it by knowing people who have prestige, and so on.) The term prestige as used by the authors names the exact thing in the artworld that everybody is aware of but nobody has found a really satisfactory way of talking about. To my mind the model of negotiated and periodically renegotiated value, grounded in desire and social dynamics, is the real breakthrough of the book. The first chapter, in which the authors lay out the model, is compelling, even exciting. But their real interest is not in the core model but rather in the kind of intellectual discourse that it engenders. (This is actually called out in the full title of the book: *Artworld Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value*.) Their real interest is in the rhetoric - the words, the tropes, the argumentational tactics - employed by those who want to confer or withhold value/prestige in a given situation. The orientation of the book is thus primarily linguistic rather than sociological. (Or economic; they rarely talk about money or the "market".) In the first chapter, as well as the following four (the last, though called a conclusion, introduces new material and is really a chapter in its own right), they consider a number of specific events which have caused people to argue about art. The main large scale developments they look at include the end of Abstract Expressionism, the return (or returns) to figurative painting, the rise of stylistic pluralism, assaults on painting by Conceptualists and their kin (united under the cry of "painting is dead"), the rise of feminism and what some would call political correctness in art, attempts to bring pleasure (including beauty and "the aesthetic") back into art, and coming to terms with outsider art. Examples of the specific events they examine are Greenberg's failed attempt to anoint Jules Olitski as "the best painter alive", Frank Gallo's fall from grace due to the belatedly perceived sexist nature of his work, the consternation caused by Phillip Guston's dramatic switch from abstract to figurative painting, Gerhard Richter's sustained parallel efforts in abstract and figurative styles, the difficulty of establishing a permanent place for American and German Neo-Expressionists, the eternally precarious status of David Hockney, and more (though not much for the considerations of pleasure and outsider art). The authors present the specific incidents not merely as things that happened but as things that people pronounced on as they happened, whether expressing approval or disapproval. They quote contemporary writings (mostly formal writings but also some interviews) on both sides, and note the ways the participants argue their positions. I am honestly not sure how much new there is in their analyses. A lot of it is standard rhetoric. Some points that I gleaned are: \* The standard term of praise for art is "serious". It indicates the artist knows what they are doing, that they have a purpose, that the work they are making serves that purpose. Importantly, seriousness is not tied to any particular theory or grand narrative of art. \* The artworld has an elite that you want to connect yourself to. The key characteristic of that elite is professionalism, meaning educated, possessed of specific knowledge (especially of art theory and art history), intelligent, and able to assess seriousness. \* If you are arguing a majority (status quo) position, be calm and hold to the high road. If you are arguing a minority (non-status quo) position, go for a dramatic strike that reduces your opponents' position to nothing (as "painting is dead!"). \* Avoid presenting the art you are promoting as being purely what it is. Represent it as being "about" something, or "quoting" something, or, at the very least, as being ironic. I'm caricaturing to some degree, but these really are the kinds of things they talk about. This is a good book, definitely worth reading. I think it could have been a great book, if only the authors had paid more attention to the full range of social behaviors that go into the negotiation of prestige and not focused so narrowly on purely verbal ones (which are seen as constituting "the discourse" but I suspect are often no more than after the fact rationalizations of things worked out in much more down to earth ways). I give it five stars for the first chapter and 3 1/2 stars for the rest, and 4 stars for the book as a whole.<sup>2</sup> 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Most enlightening analysis of the perplexing categories delineating the Western Art World By dominique de Gery This frank, direct analysis of the current attitudes in the western, American dominated art world is not for the faint of heart. It's aim is anatomical rather than judgmental, which can, at times, feel brutal. The authors have done a thorough job of identifying and describing the discourse and undercurrents of the art world's pluralistic structure, by describing three separate but unequal parts: Professionalism, Amateurism, and finally, almost as a postscript, Outsider art. "Artworld Prestige" addresses the issue of why the current erudite, art world elite have decreed not only painting but perhaps all Art as "dead". It covers the theoretical progression from the enlightenment, Duchamp to Sol Lewitt, Damien Hirst and Murakami-Takashi, comparing them to artist like David Hockney, who although popular and certainly respected in the Art World, still has a whiff of amateurism about his work. Timothy Van Laar and Leonard Diepeveen refer to an exhaustive number of important scholars, critics and art

theorist, to analyse the Artworld's movement away from beauty, pleasure and an appreciation for the technical or material aspects towards a reverence for self-referential theorizing. In its relatively few pages, this book has managed to include an impressive number of need-to-know contemporary players. Ultimately, however, I was left with the rather depressing conclusion that the art world mimicked the contemporary social/economic American system too closely for comfort. While it is a demonstrable truth that prestige is conferred democratically by the many upon the few and rare, the mechanisms here describe an elitist stratification. Although the artistic dialogue has progressed, art is still very much tied to the material world by the nature of its patronage. This book has a great deal to offer students, collectors, art enthusiast and scholars, whether through its thoughtful and comprehensive definitions, or its list of sources and examples.

Why does the artworld often privilege one cultural form over another? Why does it grant more attention to reviews in, say, *Artforum* over *ARTnews*? And how can an artist once hailed as visionary be dismissed as derivative just a few years later? Exploring the ever-shifting estimations of value that make up the confluence of artists, critics, patrons, and gallery owners known as the artworld, Timothy van Laar and Leonard Diepeveen argue that prestige, a matter of socially constructed deference and conferral, plays an indispensable role in the attention and reception given to modern and contemporary art. After an initial chapter that develops a theory of prestige and the poignancy of its loss, the book looks at how arguments of prestige function in systems of representation, various media, and art's relationship to affect. It considers twentieth-century artists who moved not away from, but toward figuration; looks at what is at stake in the recurrent argument about the death of painting; examines the decline and an apparent return of sensual pleasure as a central attribute of visual art; and concludes with a look at the peculiar function of prestige in outsider art. Illustrated with artwork by David Park, Jorge Pardo, Gerhard Richter, Anish Kapoor, Cecily Brown, Howard Finster, and others, *Artworld Prestige* provides an engaging guide to the changes, debates, and shifts that animate aesthetic judgments.

"In clear, lively prose, the authors have crafted an original and compelling field guide to the higher realms of contemporary art criticism and the way it confers or denies the halos of prestige. The vantage point they take enables them to illuminate some startling values, dogmas, and blind spots that lie hidden within familiar art world discourse."--Carol Duncan, author of *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*"In a series of nicely described case studies, the authors show how understanding prestige involves analyzing the most obdurate terms of modernism and postmodernism: self-awareness, relevance, theory, difficulty, irony, pleasure, seriousness, professionalism, the instability of meaning, and the refusal of sense. This will be a very helpful book for anyone struggling to understand how the artworld produces its unpredictable judgments."--James Elkins, author of *What Painting Is About* the Author Timothy Van Laar is Professor of Art at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is the coauthor of *Active Sights and Art with a Difference*. Leonard Diepeveen is Professor of English at Dalhousie University. He is author of *Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem and The Difficulties of Modernism*.