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When it comes to choosing between *The Jersey Shore* and a Fellini film, more people will choose *The Jersey Shore*. Same with hip hop lyrics and a modernist poem, or street graffiti and a piece of postmodern video art. Should we care that fewer and fewer people care to be challenged and inspired by the images, stories, and music they consume? In advance of social critic Camille Paglia's visit, we asked people who think about arts and culture the following question: Is there still a place today for "high" art?

OCTOBER 24, 2012

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**TOBY MILLER**

There's always a place for high art—but those places change



There is no high art. There are only times, places, and people that proclaim it.

Many locations promote the notion of "high" art in contrast to popular art:

- museums (positioning "high" art in the permanent collection)
- galleries (gearing shows toward people with aesthetic knowledge, the tastemakers, rather than the wealthy patrons)
- film commissions (deeming certain movies, and not others, worthy of support as works of art)
- literary festivals (featuring authors loved by literary critics rather than young readers)
- law courts (pronouncing works erotic, not pornographic)

And these definitions change.

Think of William Shakespeare, the 16th and 17th century dramatist. His name stands today for high culture and an obligation to study uplifting work. But Shakespeare, as an entrepreneur, was riotously successful with the popular, alphabetic classes of his time.

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IN THE GREEN ROOM**Hoping That The Best Is Yet to Come**

Think of Diego Rivera, the 20th century muralist. His work is featured around the world—and talked up by Mexico City *taxistas*. The place for his high art is partly in their cabs, and partly on walls across the Americas.

The “place for high art” is as contingent as it has ever been. It relies on times, places, and people decreeing that something fits the category, and something else does not—in ways that will always be contradictory.

Every attempt to define high art in absolute terms falters.

But whatever high art means, it certainly doesn't look like our contexts

In the Green Room with Healthcare Expert Paul Starr



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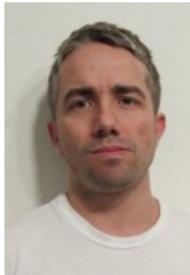
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Toby Miller is a Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Riverside. His latest books are *Greening the Media* (Oxford, 2012—with Richard Maxwell) and *Blow Up the Humanities* (Temple, 2012). You can follow his adventures at www.tobymiller.org.

WILLIAM POWHIDA

Not if “high” art means expensive art



I may not think I make “high” art, which I associate with the Modernist tradition of the Avant Garde, but it is still another form of “high” art in the tradition of institutional critique. But the aesthetic tradition of Modernism is being revived as a style that has been called “Neoformalism.”

Work that relies heavily on the history of Modernism, like that of my fellow artists at a prestigious summer residency, is a particular challenge for me. Working in the style of a historical avant-garde does not constitute a new avant-garde itself. It has always seemed to me like hollow mimicry or aesthetic regurgitation. However, neoformalism has emerged as a market favorite with the attendant high prices.

After a number of long discussions with my fellow residents, I began to recognize that they had a desire to be avant-garde in the historical sense: that of rejecting bourgeois aesthetic values. Most people still like language, narrative, and representation, so abstraction and formalism still have an appeal to artists who want to challenge these preferences.

One of my fellow artists made a clear point about the need for complex, difficult art by saying that all museums should be free—provided that they presented esoteric art, not blockbuster shows meant to entertain the public. What he was arguing for was a place for “high” art in society, art that doesn't pander to the tastes and preferences of the “bourgeois” or middle-class. His seemed to be suggesting that art, whatever form it takes, should be difficult, resist easy interpretation, and force people to question their assumptions and values. It made me want to re-think my own notion of “high” art as something elitist or inaccessible to the public. For some artists, high art appears to be an aspiration: to do things no one is asking for and perhaps no one wants to see, because it does not simply confirm previously held views. Of course, unpopular art can also justify itself as “high” without being any good, but, historically, some of the “best” art has indeed been ahead of the public's understanding.

Unfortunately, I can't separate high art from the high prices associated with it. While this may be seen as a conflation of aesthetic value and economic value, I don't believe we can simply separate them. While the residency was most certainly a kind of vacation from the normal pressures of life, artists operate in the same globalized economy where austerity budgets are discussed alongside with record prices for Gerhard Richter abstractions. I can't help but define “high” art through the lens of Richter's own neoformalist abstraction and his record-setting prices. “High art” often seems like a synonym for “millionaire's art.”

The avant-garde has never been defined by aesthetics alone. Social and

political concerns are part of the equation. Artists must be prepared to challenge the social and political values of the ruling elite, the people whom they may also hope will pay incredibly high prices for their art. There is too much room for the Modernist nostalgia of neoformalism in the homes of the 1 percent.

As for me, I would like the litmus test for “high” art be not a particular style or price level but an ability to disrupt the status quo and that challenges culture. That is what I consider “high” art, and there’s not enough of it.

William Powhida is an artist based in New York. He is represented by Postmasters Gallery.

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