

An Argument

“Marble-heavy, a bag full of God”

—Sylvia Plath, “Daddy”

Before an object occupying space can be understood, the cultural conditions of the space itself must be carefully considered. As much as civil codes and legislation function to define the terms of their constituents’ activity, the limits and legibility of objects are defined by the cultural dynamics embedded within their location. Whether we are speaking of aesthetic bodies or political ones, external dynamics establish the ideational terms of that which resides within them. In this way, the rights of objects, or the rights that a viewer bestows upon objects, are a corollary to the rights we afford their makers. If an object—in this case, a sculpture—is an extension of the status of its maker, then the potential of that object’s intellectual sovereignty and authority also run parallel with the perceived cultural standing of its maker.

Depending on the variables of economic conditions, cultural and physical setting, and groups and groupings of peoples, this position may or may not hold over time. Statuses shift, circumstances change, powers invert, and rights, in their broadest sense, appear to be more fluid across history, swapping, contracting, expanding, and so on. However, there are some constants with regard to matters of objects and space. Societal binaries determine those who have been selected to possess and dispossess the power, agency, and rights accompanying the very concept of location and the right to control, fill, or define it.

It is here that gender, and the notion of “for men, by men” plays a particular role in carving the contours of social and political systems that have assigned the ownership and custodianship of space—both private and public—across time. It is this constant, and the lens through which the sculptural object is considered in relation to notions of sovereignty and potential agency, that is the focus of this essay.

The Master Architect and the Genius

The concept of dominion—from the natural world being man’s rightful domain, to all division, extraction, and construction thereof being his lawful demesne—sets the foundation for a “power over” society that can appoint rights rather than regard them as inherent. By forming systems of value, and establishing limited rights for those enduring an absence of suffrage, “power over” models have gendered space and objects to the advantage of the already powerful. Here the concepts of the Master Architect and the Genius become reflections of male superiority, operating as a meridian for man’s achievements and setting the needle to one side of the gender scale.

Although the gender of leadership in Western cultures has varied over time due to bloodlines, those granted the authority to design, plan, form, and fill space have remained predominantly male. From Constantine’s *solidus* to Haussmann’s *arrondissements*, those

who create space also control values, and those who control values form the systems (both cultural or monetary) of valuation that determine power. Therefore, space equals power, and its occupying objects—its architecture and artworks—point to a value system assumed in the transforming and filling of that space, whether that gesture is as grand as a boulevard or as minor as a flourish, as functional as a coin, or as extraneous as an embellishment.

By necessitating that a select few be granted the authority to design, form, and propose objects of permanency that exceed measurements of skill and technical exactitude, the concepts of the Master Architect and the Genius serve as necessary benchmarks to uphold a closed system of valuation. Here, mastery, in all its permutations, rules over patrons and onlookers alike. The limits set within a “for men, by men” system control perceived value and broker opportunity across both physical and immaterial locations. Where the concept and concrete roles of the Master Architect and the Genius are unconditionally sovereign, all others become limited by circumscribed rights and restrictive social status.

The Sovereign Object

The practice of sculpture has historically posited an object that operates in a realm separate from, and above, all others: a self-regarding form capable of transcending time and defining thought. Deeply mythologized and masculinized, sculpture’s historical investment in “the Genius” has resulted in it being one of the most misogynistic platforms in culture. Operating as a sort of proxy, sculpture often is defined by the body that made or conceived it, and is routinely valued on the condition of gender. This form of valuation does not immediately concern itself with limiting visibility or determining the market in a traditional sense; instead, it is committed to controlling a far more complex system that precedes either: the exchange of intellectual relevance and cultural worth.

The degree to which a sculpture is able to affect and determine the future it is meant to inhabit has been tethered to the status of its maker. Further, the concept of gender binarism (in itself a problem within all object valuation) has been a preoccupation of sculpture, causing the elevation of masculinized and hetero-normative behaviors to be pushed towards a hyper-male bravado in order to create a culture of alpha-object fetish. Under these conditions “the Genius” begins to approximate Nietzsche's starkly binary superman, with form becoming a kind of individualistic super-sculpture. Here, not only do the limits set within a system of “for men, by men” cordon off the other, but the terms of engagement required for anyone to take part in the dialog narrow to expressions of grandeur and varied configurations of power-over aesthetics.

Against Limitation

Due to the weight of its monetary valuation, art has begun to lag behind social progress, leaving the viewer to look elsewhere for the challenges once afforded by the discrete artwork. The atomistic effect of art-fair culture, alongside alpha-object fetish, has transformed art’s human scale into a corporate iteration of the global. Once-intimate spaces capable of presenting the artist’s theses have been placed on spatial steroids, while

simultaneously being diminished to tertiary events that occur between global conferences. Where a radical limitlessness could once be proposed and conveyed to an audience capable of thinking through and archiving experiences, a dwarfing effect of the viewer has occurred, transforming the onlooker to a mere audience member, and the idea of art to something synonymous with a Hollywood franchise—the spectacle of a spectacle.

This vastness does not hold greater opportunity. Rather, it is a limiting mechanism that relies on societal preconditions to receive and convey meaning to the viewer, transforming the space where one could be challenged into a space where one is meant to be awed, entertained, and delighted. This distraction-as-culture defies concentration and creates an audience of uniformity; much like Siegfried Kracauer’s assessment of Berlin’s Picture Palaces a century ago, fair and fetish culture create a homogeneity in which “everyone has the same responses, from the bank director to the sales clerk, from the diva to the stenographer.”ⁱ

How is change enacted? Change must begin by shifting the position of the viewer. If we, as viewers, continue to subscribe to the status of the maker rather than taking the risk of receiving the object as it appears and speaks to us, then we perpetuate our current condition. The market cannot be singularly blamed; it relies on an archaic structure and patriarchal narrative to inspire investment, making all of its inhabitants relinquish their individual subjectivity in order to promote profit. There cannot be “genius” moving forward, unless the viewer frees her- or himself from the constraints of fair culture, alpha-object fetish, and the conditioning of a power-over society.

To emancipate sculpture, the viewer must abolish the internal pattern of imposing specific expectations on either gender. We must question binarism, with Millsian precision, in order to out the harm it does, and we need to build a broader and more informed model of value. If sculpture is to affect and determine the future it is meant to inhabit, we, as viewers, must undo the gendered vernacular and afford its makers personhood without regarding gender as subject, lens, or power. At this late stage, it is up to viewers to author their personal relations to space and object if they wish to see the change that lies in front of them.

ⁱ quoted in Inka Mülder-Bach, “Cinematic Ethnology: Siegfried Kracauer’s *The White Collar Masses*,” *New Left Review* 226 (November–December 1997): 52.