

COURBET' S EXHIBITIONISM

BY

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In a letter to his patron Bruyas, Courbet described his vision of the show he planned to mount for the 1855 Universal Exposition: "From here I can already see an enormous tent with a single column in the center; for walls, scaffolding covered with canvas, all mounted on a platform; then the employees, a man in a black suit minding the office, opposite the canes and umbrellas, then two or three ushers. This will really be enough to make Paris dance on its head. It will be without question the best comedy that's been played in our times; there are some people who will get sick over it, that's for sure". Across the letter he sketched a tent. In reality, as a newly discovered photograph shows, Courbet's pavilion was rectangular, not a tent at all, and this drawing, appearing across an unpublished letter, was a private fantasy rather than a public fact. And yet the public did apprehend his gesture, even without benefit of his drawing. On reading his letter today we might well wonder: Who would laugh at this comedy, and who would get sick over it? What was the nature of Courbet's exhibitionism"? A word entirely relevant, as we shall see, to the contemporary discourse surrounding this artist. By placing in context the various aspects of Courbet's endeavor as they appeared to his contemporaries, we can gain a more profound sense of the reasons for which he was both praised and damned in his own time.

Although the negative criticism which first greeted Courbet's work has been taken by modernists as a paradigmatic example of the persecution of the avant-garde artist by an uncomprehending public, I have argued elsewhere that Courbet in 1855 was actually supported by the professional artists' periodicals. *La Revue universelle des Arts*, *La Revue des Beaux Arts*, *Journal des Arts*, *L'Artiste*, all either praised him or were sympathetic to his plight. The most savage attacks in 1855 came from critics and caricaturists working for periodicals of the conservative right, such as A.J. Du Pays and Qulenbots in *L'Illustrationj*. Nonetheless, as this negative criticism has always taken center stage, it is important to explore the nightmare vision that Courbet presented to aesthetic and political conservatives.

state. The issues embodied in Courbet's gesture, Individualism, Self-confidence, Defiance, Genius, are all qualities, which define the modern - usually male - hero. They are also, however, qualities which define the self-made man of early capitalism, the entrepreneur.

This latter referent has been largely ignored by art historians, but both interpretations, defiant hero and entrepreneur, should be explored, for in the nineteenth century, they were by no means mutually exclusive.

To begin to see Courbet's exhibitionism as his contemporaries' would have seen it, we will have to understand first the exhibition structure as they saw it, second, traditional exhibition sites as they understood them, and third, the decorum of exhibitions at that time, for Courbet's gesture could only assume meaning against the commonly accepted fabric of expectations and procedures. In giving the broad outlines of these issues, it must be stressed that, although I am here focusing on the negative contemporary opinion held various attitudes, both positive and negative, towards each.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the major event in French exhibition practice was the Salon, the annual, sometimes biennial exhibition of contemporary art. Until the 1789 Revolution, it had operated as a monopoly, controlling French artistic life and careers. Only members Of the Academy could participate and alternative exhibitions were suppressed. The Academy had been founded and was maintained as the Government agency in charge of aesthetics: its members received salaries and studios, and State commissions were originally reserved for them. Academicians had, however, elevated their status from that of artisans by rejecting all hints of commerce and so, in the Academic Salon of the Old Regime, artists did not exhibit works for sale but "consented to show to a limited public some pictures commissioned in advance for a specific destination". *Although* in reality many Academicians worked in a variety of modes, this elite attitude towards art production survived well into the nineteenth century, defining one pole of the spectrum of attitudes towards exhibition practice. That pole can be summed up in the word *exposition*; in both English and French it preserved the connotation of a didactic, morally instructive show. The word *exhibition*, on the other hand, while meaning in English simply a show, assumed in nineteenth century France a pejorative connotation of ostentation and immodesty. A commercial enterprise, such as a shop window display, would be an exhibition, as would personal behavior we today would label exhibitionist. This negative attitude towards anything commercial derived from traditional aristocratic disdain for commerce, which, in the nineteenth

century, was identified with England, the leading commercial power among nations; hence the pejorative use of the English word *exhibition*. Needless to say, conservative critics described Courbet's 1855 show as an "exhibition" and not an "exposition". Courbet himself provoked this by heading his own catalogue *EXHIBITION ET VENTE* meaning "Exhibition and Sale", a title more fitting for a display of furniture or rugs than of high arts.

After the 1789 Revolution, the Academy had lost its monopoly over the Salon, which was then opened, in principle at least, to independent artists. Nonetheless, the Academy continued to maintain that it was degrading to make a direct appeal to the public to sell pictures, and that true artists did not produce easel paintings but worked on commission for Church and State. The young Courbet made his entrance to the Salon during the troubled years of the 1840s when the Academy controlled the Salon Jury, rejecting works by artists even as prominent as Delacroix. By the 1848 Revolution, out of eighteen paintings Courbet had submitted to the Salon, only two had been accepted.

The 1830s and 1840s were the years in which conservatives began to criticize the Salon in language that continued throughout the century as an infallible indicator of conservative politics. Ingres stated repeatedly: "The Salon is no longer anything more than a bazaar, where mediocrity displays itself with impudence"! E.J. Delecluze, the leading conservative critic, echoed his sentiments: "The Salons in the Louvre have assumed, more and more each year, the character of a bazaar, where each merchant is obliged to present the most varied and bizarre objects in order to provoke and satisfy the fantasies of his customers". Art historians have largely ignored the significance of these code words: exhibition, market, picture shop, bazaar (*exhibition, marche, boutique de tableaux, bazaar*) pejorative words never used by critics supportive of what we call the avant-garde.

Conservatives believed that art was inherently aristocratic and elitist and that, under a democratic political regime, mediocrity would reign. Education, they insisted, was the only legitimate purpose for art, history painting its only legitimate vehicle, and Academicians its only legitimate practitioners; the habitus of such art was the church, the public monument, the museum or the aristocratic private gallery. The enemy for them was the bourgeois preference for art as decoration or as commodity. Such art, they felt, was trivial and commercial, only fit to be sold at bazaars and market places. Their language was anachronistic, however, for, as capitalism developed, the site of art distribution became increasingly the commercial art gallery or the auction

house. Through this politico-aesthetic language, of bazaars and picture shops, of mediocrity and aristocracy, a political system (democracy) and an economic system (capitalism) - was being criticized. Courbet, through his 1855 show, symbolized both institutions. It is clear that in 1855, the two poles of the Salon were; on the right, elevated, academic exhibition as close as possible to the ideals of history painting and the Ancient Regime. On the left there was the popular Salon, full of independent artists striving to appeal to the public in order to sell their work. But if, in fact, the other pole from the aristocratic closed pre-Revolutionary Salon was to be the open, somewhat democratic and independent Salon, where does that place Courbet's pavilion? When conservatives referred to a bazaar, they were both exaggerating and speaking metaphorically. Courbet intentionally produced the very image of their nightmare, but not the quaint, sentimentalizing imagery of a bygone epoch, of *marche* and *bazaar*, but in the contemporary world of burgeoning mass culture and commercialism – the art exhibition as store.

To place Courbet's 1855 show, we must understand how rare any individual shows were in France. The most common examples of these events were the posthumous shows organized for recently deceased Academicians and held in prestigious locations such as the École Normale Supérieure itself. Galleries at this time were still picture shops displaying and selling a variety of work by a variety of artists. Artists occasionally held their own shows in their studios, as David did in 1799 and Horace Vernet in 1822, but, by being held in their studios, these shows preserved the dignity of high art events, even when they were intended as protest. Courbet's 1855 show has always been identified with this tradition, a protest against the Exposition Jury's refusal of his two major pictures, *The Artist's Studio* and *A Burial at Ornans*. And yet even before he submitted his pictures to the Jury' he had informed Nieuwerkerke, the Intendant des Beaux-Arts, that he was hoping to mount a private exhibition to compete with the Universal Exposition, and he had dropped several hints to his patron Alfred Bruyas that such a show (which he wanted Bruyas to subsidize) was in the offing. One could argue that he anticipated that his pictures would be rejected, but it must also be acknowledged that he very much wanted, from the beginning, to hold this show and to hold it on a site identified with the distribution of art and not its production. In other words, to hold it as a commercial enterprise. Indeed he had already made two previous attempts in this direction in 1850; in Besancon and in Dijon, the first in a market hall, the second in a house that also held a cafe. In both cases he had plastered the town with posters advertising his show and had charged a fifty-centime admission fee. Riat quotes him as feeling that the peasantry of Ornans had

thought he was an idiot because he had let them see his works for free, "which evidently proves it's silly to have a kind heart, for it merely deprives one of funds without enriching others in spirit or purse. To be free, people want to pay, so that their judgment won't be hayed by gratitude. They are right. I want to learn and I'll be so ruthless that I'll give everyone the right tell me the most cruel truths".

This leads to my second point, the issue of a suitable location for art exhibitions. The annual Salon took place in the Louvre until 1848 when, evicted from the museum, it began a nomadic existence. Pressure had begun to mount in the 1830s to evict it from the Louvre, mostly coming from conservatives who felt that art, which increasingly rejected tradition, had no right to partake of the elevated provenance associated with that museum. The Salons of 1849, 1850-1852, were held in the Tuileries Palace and in the Palais-Royal. 1853 presented artists with the worst disappointment of all, for that year's Salon was held in temporary buildings surrounding the Imperial furniture warehouse at Menus-Plaisirs in northern Paris. During these years there was continual talk of suppressing the Salon altogether; Ingres actually recommended such a course when he testified before the 1848 Commission Permanente des beaux-Arts: "In order to remedy this overflow of mediocrities, which has resulted in there no longer being a French School, this banality which is a public misfortune, which afflicts taste, and which overwhelms the administration whose resources it absorbs to no avail, it would be necessary to give up expositions..." Rumors and uncertainty ran rife through the artists' community. Would there continue to be a Salon? If so, where would it be held? The very future of contemporary art seemed to be at stake during these years, so Courbet's carnival tent would not seem very funny to those who feared that contemporary art might end up exactly there.

Art galleries as we know them were still in their infancy in the first half of the century. In 1843 the critic Louis Peisse wrote: "Outside the Louvre there would no longer be a Salon, there would be only picture shops". Galleries were then indeed picture shops selling, indiscriminately, art supplies, curios, and small pictures from the lower categories of art - genre, landscape, and still life. The common conservative complaint that the Salon had become a bazaar or a picture shop showed that, in fact, these institutions were seen as the only alternative to the museum. So the two poles on the exhibition spectrum were the Louvre, for expositions of educational, historical art, and the picture shop for exhibitions of commercially viable, decorative art. And yet art dealers at this time were not interested in bold entrepreneurial initiatives, such as the

promotion and marketing of a trademarked product, namely the one-artist show. Courbet, then, with his one-artist show, was an innovator of marketing techniques for art in the early capitalist period. In several letters to Buras, Courbet bragged about how profitable this show would be: "I'll gain 100,000 francs in one shot", he wrote, and later "I'll be considered a monster but by all predictions I'll make 100,000 francs". He'll sell his livret (pamphlet) he writes. He'll make money on checking canes and umbrellas. He's even having photographs of his paintings made so that he can sell those too. I think we should listen to him, for only then can we see both what he intended by his gesture, and what his conservative contemporaries loathed about it: Courbet was the new self-made man. Nineteenth century France had many such: Benin, who founded *Le Journal des debates*, in France. It was only because of David's great celebrity, and the extreme curiosity that his work aroused, that the public accepted a practice that is repugnant to all our French customs. Although this mode of exposition succeeded in that David earned 20,000 francs, he was harshly criticized, and ever since no artist has dared try it again". In the heated polemics accompanying the introduction of admission fees at the 1855 Universal Exposition, the standard objection was to stress that, under the longstanding policy of "noblesse oblige", a benevolent state owed to its citizens free access to those institutions considered spiritually and morally uplifting, such as churches, schools, libraries, public monuments, and expositions. Charging admission fees, it was feared, would lower art exhibitions to the level of popular entertainment, like theatres. Courbet, however, blatantly moved art into this sphere of commercial entertainment and self-promotion, with his pavilion advertising his own name "G. Courbet", as prominently as did the bold red signatures on his paintings. Charles Perrier, the critic for *L'Artiste*, commented "everyone has seen Monsieur Courbet's poster with its huge lettering plastered over the walls of Paris, next to street performers and quack doctors, inviting the public to come and pay a franc to see his exhibition of forty pictures of *his own work*. Bertall's cartoon "At the end of the Universal Exposition, Courbet! awards himself some well-merited honors", criticizes the artist both for commercialism (the receipt box is prominently displayed) *and* for immodesty (he is awarding himself a laurel wreath). The critic Ernest Gebauer attacked Courbet in 1855 thus: "M. Courbet, not satisfied with having eleven pictures in the Universal Exposition, indulged himself by setting up his own special exhibition a few steps from Palais des Beaux-Arts". In other words Courbet's show manifested the requisite commercialism, ostentation, and immodesty, which defined it as an *exhibition*.

In addition to the commerce of the picture shop, Courbet's 1855 show also recalled the outdoor fairs, the immediate predecessors of the resolutely non-commercial, dignified Salon exhibitions. These lowly antecedents to the Salon continued to be an unwelcome memory of the past in the collective memory of Academicians and conservatives in general; hence their criticism of the Salon as a bazaar. Joined to this, however, was an even more frightening spectre of the future: the commercialization and commoditization of art that, they feared, would happen under capitalism. In other words, to conservatives Courbet's show represented the worst of both the old and the new systems of art distribution. For us today it is less shocking and more laudable to see Courbet raging against an unjust State than to see him making a crassly commercial gesture. But to nineteenth century conservatives, it was the disturbing commercialism of his gesture rather than its political content that was shocking. After all, in 1855 the political opposition came from both left and right; with the repeated revolutions and counter-revolutions which had shaken France since 1789, almost everyone had had a taste of being in the political opposition at some time.

II. Courbet's Exhibitionism as Carnival

Although I have been reading Courbet's exhibitionism as a function of capitalism and the new economic and social order, this should be underscored by a second level of interpretation which compounds the first: Courbet's exhibitionism as carnival. If the Louvre, the Palace of Kings, represented the aristocratic tradition, and the Palace of Industry at the Universal Exposition represented the challenge launched by capitalism, then Courbet's pavilion can be seen as disruptive of both orders. Carnival, of course, did exactly that. Carnival, the period from Twelfth Night (6 January) to Ash Wednesday of each year, culminating in the revelry of Mardi Gras, celebrated the world-upside-down, the reversal of the normal order of events. It was filled with feasting and drunkenness, dancing and orgies, masquerades and street theatre. Inversion was its basic premise, satire and parody its means: the lowly were raised up and the mighty were abased; social, political, and moral order could be safely transgressed. Carnival during the 1830s and 40s had become increasingly political; no one had forgotten that the February Revolution of 1848 had taken place during Carnival and that the two events had been intertwined in a grotesquely surrealist spectacle: carnival processions turned into mob riots,

carnival floats into insurrectionary wagons. Napoleon III had certainly not forgotten and his 1855 Universal Exposition, far from having a carnivalesque atmosphere, must be seen as the very antithesis of that, rigidly controlled and organized. This fact is important in order to understand the contrast presented by Courbet's pavilion. At the very entrance to that Exposition, it fulfilled the carnivalesque function of deflating the pretentiousness of the mighty. And his gesture was indeed understood: *Le Figaro* described Courbet's pavilion, facing the Palais des Beaux-Arts of the Universal Exposition, as "Guignol's theatre next to La Scala of Milan.., that is, the Punch and Judy show, a satirical and subversive institution of popular culture, juxtaposed to its antithesis, the high art opera house.

Ever since Meyer Shapiro's brilliant article of 1941, "Courbet's Popular Imagery", we have been aware of the relationship between Courbet's art and popular images. I would like to take that a step further and propose that Courbet's interest was not just in a generalized popular culture of Epinal prints and the customs of the rural bourgeoisie, but, with his instinct for the "most complete expression of a real thing", Courbet focused on the most subversive and threatening aspect of popular culture, and the only one that had both political over- tones and a revolutionary history, namely carnival.

The political carnivalesque informs Courbet's 1855 show. When Courbet wrote that his show "will really be enough to make Paris dance on its head", his statement conflated the two major features of carnival, revelry with the image of the world-upside-down. The fear that Champfleury described as the conservative response to Courbet's show ("It's a scandal, it's anarchy, it's art dragged through the mud, it's a fairground spectacle") was identical to their fear of carnival when all social order was transgressed. Taxile Delord, in *Le Charivari* described Courbet as a carnival barker shouting to artists to follow his example and abandon official expositions. Gavarni drew just such an image of this popular carnival type as the introductory plate of "Les Debardeurs".

Daniel Stern (Marie d'Agoult) published an account of the invasion of the Tuileries in February 1848 that gives the flavor of Carnival/Revolution where masquerade and parody combine. Daumier's cartoon of the Paris gamin (street urchin) on the throne is based on this incident. She wrote: "The children dress themselves up in velvet robes, turn the golden drapery fringe into belts, and pieces of tapestry into Phrygian caps. The women pour over their hair the perfume that they find on the princesses' tables. They rouge their cheeks, cover their shoulders with lace and furs and decorate their heads with sprays of jewels

and flowers. They deck themselves out with a kind of burlesque taste parodying extravagant dress". Compare this to Courbet's *Young Ladies of the Village*, criticized by Du Pays in *L'illustration* as "the most anti-picturesque, the most unpleasant thing in the world: the pretention to elegance flaunted by the common people". Even in conservative critics' frequent attacks on Courbet as the "apostle of ugliness", one can read the world-upside-down, for ugliness was the reversal of beauty, which to conservatives was the proper sphere of art.



Young Ladies of the Village, Salon 1852

I am proposing that, if we look at Courbet in the light of carnival, we can better understand the hysteria his works provoked in conservative circles. Parody and inversion assume a new and sinister dimension in the raucous *Return from the Conference* featuring drunken priests, or the oversized *Beggar's Alms* that the critic Chesneau claimed represented France. Courbet constantly reversed the traditional hierarchical relationship of pictorial category to size. In paintings such as *The Stonebreakers*, *The Grain Sifters*, *After Dinner at Ornans*, ordinary people are elevated to a size and status traditionally reserved for gods and

heroes. Parody and inversion proved more subtle, though equally disturbing, in *A Burial at Ornans*, whose enter is the void of death, and whose red-nosed beadies seem to mock the solemnity of the event.



Return from the Conference, 1862, Destroyed



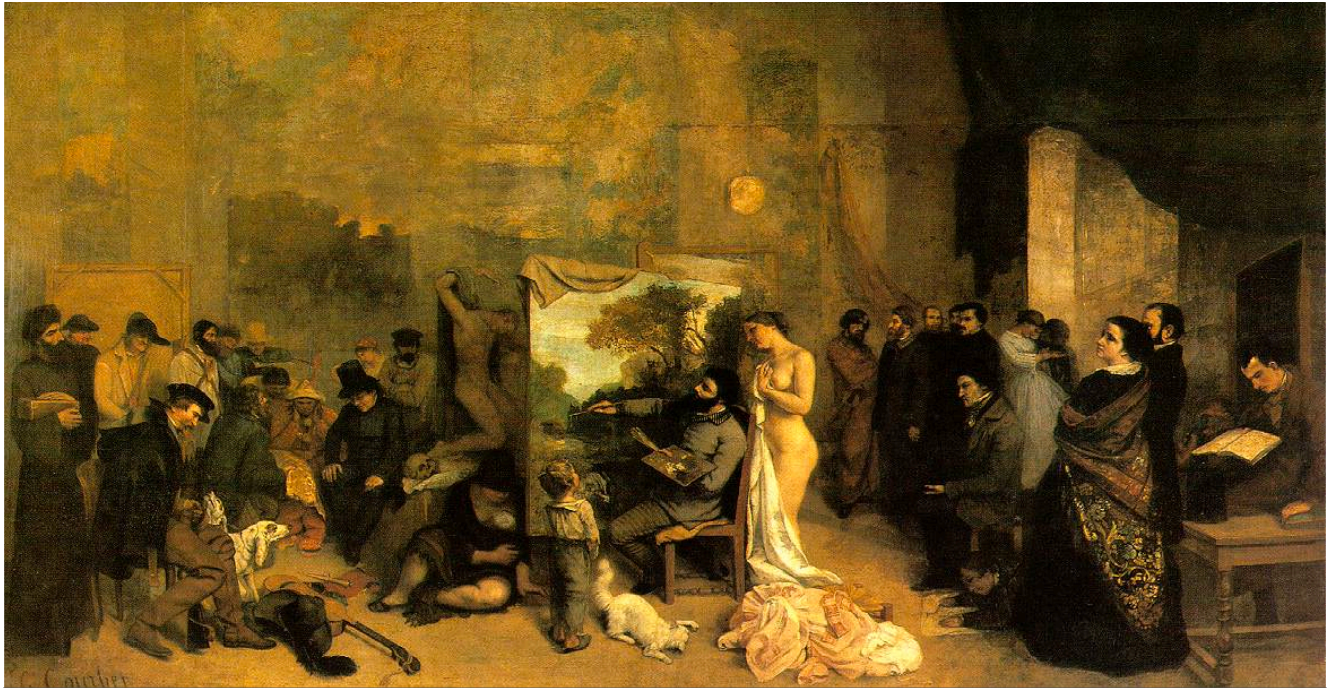
Beggars Alms, 1868. Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries.



A Burial at Ornans, 1849. Paris, Musée d'Orsay

In the light of Klaus Herding's reading of *The Artist's Studio* as an *adhortatio ad principem*, the traditional exportation to the ruler, Linda Nochlin has recently

suggested that we might also read this as world upside-down, with the "normal" order of the world reversed: the monarch must now listen and learn, while the artist wants the benefit of his example to the ruler.



The Artist's Studio, A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic (and Moral) Life,
1855

Carnival existed at mid-century as a constellation of attitudes and modes of behavior. Courbet knew just how to exploit, under the guise of humor, the threat that carnival still contained. He created works that, like time bombs, would explode in politically and aesthetically conservative circles.

To his conservative audience, Courbet's 1855 show was certainly an *exhibition*. He travestied every aspect of high art practice, ostentatiously and immodestly, and did so with publicly avowed commercial intent. His contemporaries saw Courbet the carnival barker presiding over a disturbing vision of the world-upside-down, parodying the high, the mighty and the respectable; at the same time, they saw the spectre he presented of the "future of art", in the capitalist commodity system. For to true nineteenth century conservatives, the coming of the new bourgeois economic and social order was the world upside-down. What looks like a contradiction to us today was, in fact, a single nightmare vision in 1855; the defiant hero and the entrepreneur.

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