

ROMANCING THE LOOKY-LOOS

by Dave Hickey

(from his book, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy*)

It is a cloudy spring night in the mid nineteen seventies. Waylon Jennings and I are sitting in the shotgun seats at the front of his bus, slouched down with our heels up on the chrome rail, watching the oncoming highway between the toes of our boots. We are leaving Atlanta after a tumultuous concert, about two weeks into Waylon's breakout concert tour. I am along to write a piece for a magazine about Waylon's ongoing transformation into a pop star—although, at this point in the tour, Waylon himself is somewhat less than sanguine about his rising status. Not that he's doing anything to deter it. He's just not particularly enjoying it.

“They think you just get up there and sing your songs,” he is saying, addressing the highway. “They think it's just a one-way deal, but it's not like that at all. Because you start out playing for people who are just like you. That's the only place you can. You play for people who come from where you come from. They seek you out in little clubs because they understand what you're doing, so you feel like you're doing it for them. And if you go wrong in these clubs, you know it immediately. And maybe you want to go wrong. That's your option, but you know it when you do it. Then one day, you're not playing for people like you anymore. You look out there, like I did tonight, and realize that you're playing for people who want to be like you, and you can't trust these people. Because to them, whatever you do, that's you, and that's cool. Which would be okay *except!*—even though all these people want to be like you, you don't know who you are anymore, because it was the people in those little clubs that gave you that understanding in the first place. God knows where they are tonight. Sitting at home, probably. Pissed off at me. Listening to Willie Nelson records.

“So what do you do?” I ask.

Waylon shrugs and grins. “Right now, hoss,” he says, “it's completely out of my hands. I'm looking at those people out there, but I don't know what I'm seeing. And they're watching me, too. But they don't know what they're looking at. My best guess is that they'll keep on loving me till they start hating me, or their Waylon duds wear out. Because they already hate me a little, just because I'm me and they're them. That's why they always go on about how talented you are. Because they hate you. Because if they had this talent, they would be you. The fact that you've worked like a dog, lived like a horse thief, and broke your mama's heart to do whatever you do, that don't mean diddly-squat. To them, it's talent. Supposedly, you got it, and, supposedly, they don't. So eventually you're bound to disappoint them.

“My real people, they get jealous because their girlfriend thinks I’m cute and try to kick my butt. They get envious because singing pays better than roofing and try to kick my butt. But, basically, they understand that I do this job for them—that I’m up on stage with my Telecaster, sweatin’ in the lights, coughing in the smoke, and trying to hear the monitor—that they’re sitting out there all cool and comfortable with a bottle of beer and a bowl of peanuts. So when this all blows up. I’ll just go back and do that, find out if I’m still me.”



A month or so later, I find myself standing at the bar in CBGB’s on the Bowery with Lester Bangs and David Johansen. We’re listening to Tuff Darts, who are playing their official “teen anthem”:

What this world needs is a lot more girls!
What this world needs is a lot less boys!
What this world needs is a lot more NOISE!
(Noise ensues.)

When the noise subsides, Johansen tilts his head and nods theatrically toward the door. Lester and I turn to watch as a limousine load of uptown trendies file slowly into the back of the club, settling their coats on their shoulders and waving smoke away from their nostrils with frantic little gestures.

“Who dat?” Lester says.

“The beginning of the end,” says David Jo, “Spectators.”



My dad called them “looky-loos.” He would come home from playing in some bar or listening to someone else play, and Mom would ask, “How was the crowd?” If those in attendance were not up to his standards, he would say “looky-loos.” Or sometimes he would just mutter “civilians,” which meant the same thing. We all knew what he meant: Civilians were nonparticipants, people who did not live the life—people with no real passion for what was going on. They were just looking. They paid their dollar at the door, but they contributed nothing to the occasion—afforded no confirmation or denial that you could work with or around or against.

With spectators, as Waylon put it, it's a one-way deal, and in the world I grew up in, the whole idea was not to be one of them, and to avoid, insofar as possible, being spectated by any of them, because it was demeaning. You just didn't do it, and you used the word "spectator" as a term of derision—not as bad as "folksinger," of course, but still a serious insult. Even so, it wasn't something we discussed or even thought about, since the possibility of any of us spectating or being spectated was fairly remote. It is, however, something worth thinking about today, since, with the professionalization of the art world, and the dissolution of the underground cultures that once fed into it, the distinction between spectators and participants is dissolving as well.

This distinction is critical to the practice of art in a democracy, however, because spectators invariably align themselves with authority. They have neither the time nor the inclination to make decisions. They just love the winning side—the side with the chic building, the gaudy doctorates, and the star-studded cast. They seek out spectacles whose value is confirmed by the normative blessing of institutions and corporations. In these venues, they derive sanctioned pleasure or virtue from an accredited source, and this makes them feel secure, more a part of things. Participants, on the other hand, do not like this feeling. They lose interest at the moment of accreditation, always assuming there is something better out there, something brighter and more desirable, something more in tune with their own agendas. And they may be wrong, of course. The truth may indeed reside in the vision of full professors and corporate moguls, but true participants persist in not believing this. They continue looking.

Thus, while spectators must be lured, participants just appear, looking for that new thing—the thing they always wanted to see—or the old thing that might be seen anew—and having seen it, they seek to invest that thing with new value. They do this simply by showing up; they do it with their body language and casual conversation, with their written commentary, if they are so inclined, and their disposable income, if it falls to hand. Because participants, unlike spectators, do not covertly hate the things they desire. Participants want their views to prevail, so they lobby for the embodiment of what they lack.

The impact of these participatory investments is tangible across the whole range of cultural production. It is more demonstrable, however, in "live arts" like music, theater, and art than in industrial arts like publishing, film, and recording. Because in the "live arts," participatory investment, as it accumulates, increases the monetary value of the product. You increase the value of an artwork just by buying it, if you are a participant. Thus, you will probably pay more for the next work by that artist you buy. You do the same if you recruit all your friends to go

listen to a band in a bar. If all your friends show up and have a good time, you will almost certainly pay more at the door the next time the band plays. But that's the idea: to increase the social value of the things you love, and the extra bucks are a small price to pay. They are next to nothing, really, compared to the value of forming a new, eccentric community, or compared to the pleasure of having one's views prevail.

One of the things I feel best about in my life is the tiny part I played in convincing the Artist & Repertoire people at Warner Brothers Records to sign George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic to their label. I mean, all that fun and funk, borne upon the Mothership, zooming out across the republic—and even though I only contributed to the talk around the office, it makes me happy just to know that I participated. This sort of pleasure, however, is totally alien to the mind-set of spectatorship. The butterfly effects of cultural eccentricity are of no interest to spectators; they either consume, or they critique. They are all right with the way things are, or they know exactly what's wrong with it (incest wishes, capitalism, both, etcetera).

Beyond this hegemony of corporate and institutional consensus, however, beyond the purview of uncannily lifelike blockbusters like Jurassic Park and the Whitney Biennial, everything that grows in the domain of culture, that acquires constituencies and enters the realm of public esteem, does so through the accumulation of participatory investment by people who show up. No painting is ever sold nor essay written nor band booked nor exhibition scheduled that is not the consequence of previous social interaction, of gossip, body language, fashion dish, and telephone chatter—nothing transpires that does not float upon the ephemeral substrata of “word of mouth”—on the validation of schmooze. Everyone who participates knows this, and knows, as well, that it doesn't cost a dime. You just show up, behave as you wish, say what you will, and live with the fleeting, often unexpected consequences of your behavior. At this bedrock level, the process through which works of art are socialized looks less like a conspiracy than a slumber party. The whole process, however, presumes the existence of artists who are comfortable with this tiny, local, social activity, who are at ease with the gradual, lateral acquisition of constituencies and understand that the process can take place anywhere and, if successful, command attention everywhere. The musical vogue of Prince and his entourage, of The Allman Brothers Band and their compatriots, and of Seattle grunge testify to the efficacy of this process. It only requires artists who would rather socialize their work among their peers, horizontally, at the risk of Daddy's ire, than institutionalize it, vertically, in hopes of Daddy's largesse. These, I fear, are fewer and farther between.

To cite the case at hand: I was visiting a group of young artists in Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago. They were obviously bright, ambitious people who were doing interesting work. Unfortunately, they could hardly speak—could not even converse like human beings—for sputtering their anger and outrage at the “fucking *Los Angeles Times*,” which had refused to provide advance coverage for their forthcoming “totally bitching underground rave-performance event.” And, silly moi, my first thought was “Why would you want it in the *Los Angeles Times*?” In my vernacular, “underground” meant just that, and “rave-performance event” meant dope, nudity, and loud noises. Demanding publicity from the *Times* for such an event seemed about one step up from asking your mom to bring her friends from the garden club.

But I didn’t say this. (Nor did I quote Waylon and suggest, “I don’t think Hank done it this way.”) I said, “Hey! It’s a rave. It’s supposed to be fun. Invite your friends and word will get around.” They just looked at me, kept on looking, until one of them said, “But all of our friends are artists. We want real people.” Thus I entered a brave new world, and all I could think was, “What have we done?!” Because there I was, face to face with a generation of well-educated and expensively trained young artists whose extended tenure in art schools appended to the art world had totally divorced them from any social reality beyond it. The friends they drank beer with after Sophomore Lit, the people they dated in high school, the guys they played soccer with, were but fading memories, lost to them now out in the hazy world of bourgeois America. Now, they were artists, in the art world, and their artworld job was to make art. And my art-world job, they implied, was romancing the looky-loos on their behalf, now that the *Los Angeles Times* had screwed them over.

And maybe that is my job these days. Maybe it’s just old fashioned of me to think that young artists should bring their own stuff with them into the art world, and bring their own friends, as well, simply because democratic institutions (even frivolous ones like the art world) respond to constituencies of people, not objects. That’s why I still endorse Peter Schjeldahl’s advice on how to become an artist: “You move to a city. You hang out in bars. You form a gang, turn it into a scene, and turn that into a movement.” Then, I would suggest, when your movement hits the museum, abandon it. Your demure emblem now adorns the smooth state—resides in the domain of normative expression, its status greatly magnified and its rich social contextuality effectively sterilized. Whatever happy contingencies fluttered around it disperse, as it departs society and enters “the culture,” where it must necessarily mean less, but to a lot more people. It’s spectator-food, now, scholar-fodder, so you may safely stick a fork in it, tell yourself you’ve won, and go to your room.

In recent decades, however, changes in American institutional life have made this scenario exponentially more difficult to pursue. First, Richard Nixon's expansion of the National Endowment for the Arts in the nineteen seventies has, over the years, effectively transformed the institutional art world into a government-regulated industry dedicated to maintaining a strict consensus of virtue. Second, the extended adolescence imposed on art students by lengthy tenures in graduate schools has effectively isolated them from the peers among whom they might discover their true, new constituencies. Third, the massive consequences of *Frampton Comes Alive* in the record industry and *Star Wars* in the movie industry have instituted a reign of consensus in the world of commercial entertainment, as well—a quest for a consensus of desire, dedicated to producing “blockbusters” that please everyone, every time.

So, young artists find themselves confronted with two smooth juggernauts, one dedicated to a regulated consensus of virtue, the other dedicated to a calculated consensus of desire, neither dedicated to the more elusive and redeeming consensus of virtue and desire. Nor is there any reason to suspect that this will change, beyond my wishing that it would—and what do I know? Maybe young artists like the art world the way it is. Maybe they are willing to undergo extensive indoctrination in order to adapt to it. And if they do adapt, well maybe the art world will truck in looky-loos for their performances. I don't think so, but it could happen. If it does, the idea of art as a social practice may be declared officially dead, along with the idea that the practice of art in a democracy, under optimal conditions, is a game played by voluntary participants within the textures of the larger world—a game without rules, coaches, referees, or, God help us, spectators.

Without that liberating ideal, we will be left with a ritualized cultural exchange in which artists and objects, selected by professionals, submit themselves to the vagaries of casual, public spectatorship in officially sanctioned venues. We will divide the world into “artists” who have been trained in special schools, “spectators” who will admire the consequences of this training, and salaried “support workers” who will select the product and deliver it to market. In the popular arts, these spectators will support the artist by buying a ticket, or a CD, or a paperback. In the “fine arts,” spectators will buy tickets too, but the ticket will not be construed as support for the artist, but as support for “the arts,” which is to say, as a contribution to the salaries of the support workers who facilitate our public spectatorship. With the suppression of wicked commerce, then, fine artists will be required to support themselves otherwise than by their work, and the practice will be restricted to those who can.

This world would be fine, too, and possible, if art were nothing more than the production of sanctioned professionals, but it *is* more—and less, as well. It is a mode of social discourse, a participatory republic, an accumulation of small, fragile, social occasions that provide the binding agent of fugitive communities. It is made in small places and flourishes in environments only slightly less intimate. So, even if your art ends up in a museum—even if your “underground rave-performance event” ends up in the *Los Angeles Times*—even if your band ends up playing coliseums—you may be assured that what is being glorified in public splendor is just the residue, a mere simulacrum from which disinterested spectators may infer the experience of participants. This is why those works of art that enter the public domain without participatory constituencies are instantly recognizable as pale impostors, as institutional furniture purporting to represent constituencies that have yet to materialize. Waylon put it best that night on the bus: “When I play a little club,” he said, ‘I’m playing songs for people I know. Up there in the lights in front of a stadium crowd, I’m just playin’ Waylon for strangers.”

About the Author

Dave Hickey has written for most major American cultural publications, a great many minor ones, and some publications that are not cultural at all. He was owner-director of A Clean Well-Lighted Place Gallery in Austin, Texas, and director of Reese Palley Gallery in New York. He has served as Executive Director for *Art in America* magazine in New York, as Staff Songwriter for Glaser Publications in Nashville, and as Arts Editor for the Fort-Worth Star-Telegram. In 1989, SMU Press published *Prior Convictions*, a volume of his short fiction, and in 1993, Art Issues Press published *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. Hickey received the Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism in 1994. He lives in Las Vegas with his wife Libby Lumpkin and their dog Ralph the Beagle. He is currently Professor of Art Criticism and Theory at the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

[Any mistakes in this reproduction are my fault.—hester]