

Art

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George Barber

Interviewed by Maria Walsh

Art Pilgrims

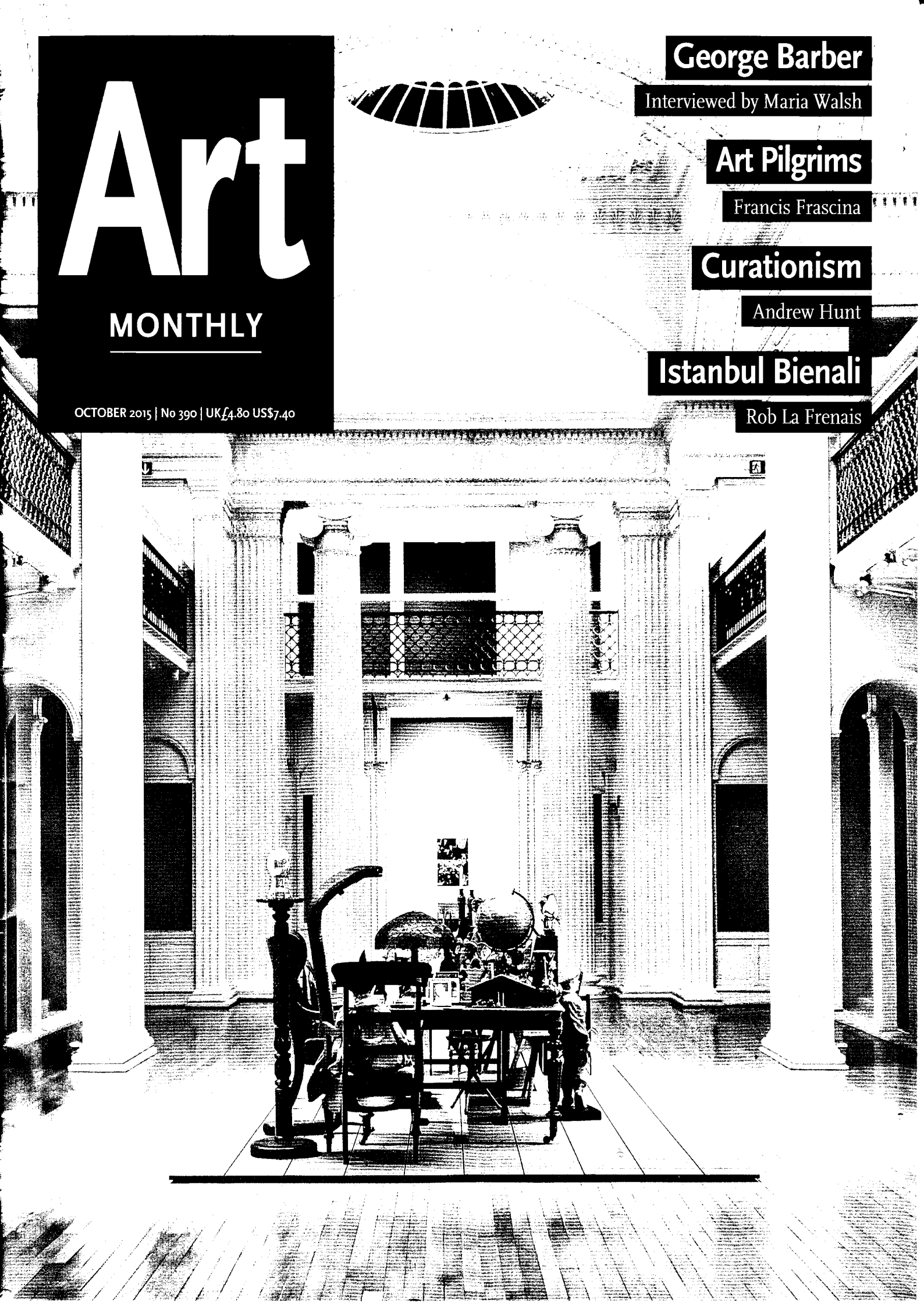
Francis Frascina

Curationism

Andrew Hunt

Istanbul Biennial

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BOOKS

Dave Beech: Art and Value – Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics

Art and Value examines art's economic exceptionalism through the theoretical frameworks of classical, neoclassical and Marxist economics in order to question the established wisdom on art's relationship to capitalism. Dave Beech contends that there is a peculiar convergence in the pronouncements by both mainstream economics and Marxist cultural analysis that 'art is, always has been, or has recently become nothing but a commodity'. Beech's wager is that this assumed certainty of art's commodification is all too often simply asserted rather than 'sufficiently tested'.

Art is a surprisingly effective optic through which to envision the discipline(s) of economics and its limits – ie what is exceptional to it – as Beech previously explored in his article 'The Art Anomaly' (AM370). Classical economists such as Adam Smith, Beech observes, 'establish economic laws, in part, by showing what is exempt from them, and art is one of the key exceptions'. Neoclassical economics, however, could be characterised as a version of what Mark Fisher terms capitalist realism: the attempt to rationalise everything through the price mechanism of the market, describing anything exceptional to its own modes of calculation as irrational. Rather than distinguishing the economic from the non-economic and differentiating historically specific economic forms, 'mainstream economics has a history of formulating the widest possible definition of its discipline to incorporate all social systems'.

For Karl Marx, who Beech turns to in the second part of the book, the point is 'not to address the general question of what is or is not economic, but whether a certain type of production corresponds to the capitalist mode of production'. The western Marxist tradition, Beech contends, failed to evaluate art's own mode of production, instead opting for sociologically inflected descriptions of art's 'subsumed' existence within capitalist society, through terms such as commodification, culture industry and spectacle. As Beech points out, however, for Marx, the category

of subsumption was specifically connected to production and labour; Marx famously contrasted the 'unproductive' labour of John Milton writing *Paradise Lost* 'in the way that a silkworm produces silk' with the 'productive' wage labour of the hack writer – productive of 'surplus value' for a capitalist.

The absence of art's relationship with productive capital is further explored through art's anomalous dealings with merchant (dealers and gallerists) and finance (art as an asset) capital. It is exceptional in itself that art's metamorphosis into a commodity occurs (if it occurs) in circulation not production (Milton sells his product for £5, Marx says). Art, at first sight, seems to share the characteristics of a luxury good, but Beech demonstrates that art has an anomalous status here too: Hirst's \$15m stuffed shark, for instance, 'is technically inferior to comparable stuffed animals'.

Significantly, for Beech, cultural economics 'has not managed to explain the factors that determine which works appreciate and which do not, nor ... why the value of artworks appreciates at all', with economists such as William Baumol arguing that they 'float more or less aimlessly'. Beech decodes the 'apparently wild prices of artworks' on the secondary market, which he argues is not 'a floating crap game' but instead is 'determined by the changing circumstances of the artwork itself vis-à-vis the esteem it is held in by the art community'. Beech recognises the 'fanciful' ring of the suggestion that 'the prices of artworks are determined by reputation', but goes on to provide a comprehensive account of how art value is driven by the labour of 'non-purchasing consumers of art' (scholars, critics, curators), with an important condition that this labour is 'independent from the economic interests at stake' – one example being the 'lot notes' at an auction.

The political stakes sometimes remain subterranean in *Art and Value*, yet the tension between the market and art manifests itself historically in two key shifts in state policies towards the arts, investigated in two chapters titled 'Exceptionalism after 1945' and 'after 1966' which include an important reassessment of Keynesian theory and economist Richard Musgrave's notion of a 'merit good'. Both, for Beech, provide attempts to construct an 'alternative type of sovereignty', a political public sphere of alternative values, to oppose market 'consumer sovereignty'.

It is impossible in the hackwork of a review to do justice to both the nuanced and wide-ranging arguments set forth in *Art and Value*: each chapter merits a careful engagement (a particularly incisive chapter offers a critical dissection of post-Fordist theories of art and capitalism). The consequences for rethinking art's relationship to capitalism (and its politics), as well the collision between the economic and non-economic more broadly, I think, are far-reaching. *Art and Value* is definitely – what's the word? – exceptional. ✪

Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, Brill, 2015, 392pp, €139.00, 978 9 0042881 4 0.

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Michael Craig-Martin: On Being an Artist

Let's immediately vent my sole reservation regarding Michael Craig-Martin's extraordinary *On Being an Artist*: it is overlong. So, for example, although the Dublin-born, US-educated, long-time UK-based artist offers an invaluable first-hand account, as a Yale undergraduate, of Albers's colour course – with its surprising, equal reliance on theory and intuition – the second, third and fourth chapters covering the same subject wear unnecessarily thin. And Craig-Martin's terse, powerful thinking hardly requires padding: 'To be an artist, you have to make yourself vulnerable in exactly the ways most people spend their lives trying to avoid.' Make no mistake, there are passages where *On Being an Artist* – combined collected writings, memoir, mentoring advice, an history-theory book – positively quakes with brilliance. In 'On the three stages of twentieth-century art', Craig-Martin singlehandedly reconceptualises the whole of modernist art history, reconfigured into three defining moments: the radicalisation first of form, then materials and finally content. In his pragmatic, pro-individual views about schooling ('Most art schools prepare students for a world that does not exist and never did') the author articulates what was uniquely valuable in UK education – now being irreplaceably lost

through test-oriented policies. Hugely talented young artists can be 'very bright but in ways schools cannot measure and therefore disregard. A good art school can transform the lives of such students', he asserts. Upon reading that important and generous point, I set the book momentarily aside and applauded.

The opening contents page enticingly lists 48 wide-ranging topics: 'On Marcel Duchamp'; 'On taking risks'. Readers' enthusiasm might dip, however, when turning the page they face 103 further short chapters: 'On coming out'; 'On my wall drawings'; 'On the Renaissance'. I hesitate to recommend *On Being an Artist* – a weighty 300-page tome with a svelte and perfectly formed 200-page buried inside, screaming to get out – to a budding artist, who might flag during the repetitive and dated chapters about abstraction and miss priceless career advice: 'Real opportunities come rarely for an artist, and when they do they should be grasped with both hands before they slip away. Opportunity does not wait.' But, actually, since finishing the book I do nothing but recommend it: to the clueless real-estate developer, hoping to pass off an unsellable cubicle as an 'artist-in-residency' programme, please read Craig-Martin's honest account of his formative Cambridge residency. To the worried father, fretting over his daughter's desire to apply to art school, I quote Craig-Martin verbatim: 'Most people who end up as artists rarely feel they had an option.'

He has brainy observations on other subjects too, like religion ('Ex-Catholics often seek alternative belief systems that are similarly comprehensive; Catholics frequently make good communists'), science, architecture and design: the modernists' 'form follows function' dictum has collapsed in the digital age, since mobile phones gain additional unexpected functions with every new app and yet never alter their rectangular tablet form. Studiously jargon-free, his tone of uninflected clarity grows familiar,

like the reassuring monotone of a family doctor – a sensation for me enhanced owing to Craig-Martin's spooky, deadringer resemblance to my childhood pediatrician. I wish the whole book were written with the tightly edited pace of 'On the student Damien Hirst', previously published in the 2012 Tate exhibition catalogue, with its terrific tale of the eager BA student serving champagne at an Antony d'Offay vernissage, slipping into the blue-chip art world brandishing a drinks tray. 'People think that Damien [and] his contemporaries were cynical careerists. Nothing could be further from the truth.' This is Craig-Martin at his best: astute, informed, telling art history as eyewitness. His words prompted my recollection – as an art critic in the 1980s – that the yBa's decaying cow heads and stinking kebabs spoke of a point-blank rejection of collector-chasing art in the painting-heavy decade, pursuing instead what Craig-Martin calls 'a dynamic bond of mutual competitive support'. 'Of all the arts none has a more highly developed and pervasive sense of community than the visual arts,' he writes. 'Few romantic ideas about art are more misguided than that of the isolated genius.'

Craig-Martin often seems bent on setting the record straight, for example hailing former colleague Jon Thompson as the true visionary behind the Goldsmiths miracle. Candid revelations include the almost shocking admission, from someone so prominently associated with inspirational teaching, of gradually feeling 'trapped in teaching'. Above all, the author transmits his unshakeable belief in art: 'For artists, a work of art is not primarily an object of connoisseurship, a historical or cultural record, or a commodity. It is alive, a living reality.' Any scaremongering claiming that art is dead or in need of salvation is always unfounded – as his visiting tutor Philip Guston once put it: 'Art takes care of herself.' Ultimately, *On Being an*

Artist is a user's manual in helping art to take care of itself.

A mild disclosure: when during the 1990s-2000s I was commissioning editor for a publisher, I stared each day at a fading post-it stuck over my desk on which I had timidly scrawled, 'Michael Craig-M – a book about teaching art?'. Somehow I never gathered the courage to act upon that idea, and contact the artist to propose a book. Maybe I was intimidated by Craig-Martin's formidable presence – former students still speak of him in hushed voices, awed by the impressive intellect amply demonstrated here. Maybe it was my irrational association of Craig-Martin with childhood top-up vaccine jabs, but I stupidly failed to invite him. So I was especially pleased that Art/Books produced this long overdue, handsome volume. But, given that I had never summoned the nerve just to email him, when faced with a manuscript from the *éminence grise* of British art, would I have found the guts to trim it? 'Great stuff Michael, but what say we slice to max two paragraphs that eventless story about your doomed foray into journalism, unsuccessfully trailing Christine Keeler, OK?'

Perhaps my complaint over wordiness is moot, and *On Being an Artist* is 'overlong' the way the *I Ching* is 'overlong'. Sprawling, brimming with intelligence, Craig-Martin's book gathers a lifetime of artistic wisdom, a treasure for us to dip into at random like magpies plucking out gems: 'The best way to come to an understanding of art is to spend time with it. Art is its own best teacher.' ■

Michael Craig-Martin, *On Being an Artist*, Art/Books, 2015, 304pp, £22.50, 978 1 9089701 8 3.

GILDA WILLIAMS is a writer and lecturer at Goldsmiths College, London.

INSCRIPTION

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