CHAPTER 3

The Function of Artists in Society

Starving Celebrities and Other Myths

The artist is not responsible to anyone. His social role is asocial; his only responsibility consists in an attitude, an attitude to the work he does.
The artwork comes into being in the artist's head, and it stays in the artist's head. There is no communication with any public whatsoever. The artist can ask no questions, and he makes no statement; he offers no information, message or opinion.
He gives no help to anyone, and his work cannot be used.
—Georg Baselitz

A few years ago, while teaching at the Glasgow School of Art, I noticed growing conflict within the new graduate program. At a critique, a sculpture student presented small ceramic figures, lumps of unglazed clay, their surface a record of her hand, complete with fingerprints, accidental gouges, spontaneous stretches and bumps. She arranged this row of Willendorf Venuses carefully, attentive to the space between them, the lighting, and their place on a long narrow shelflike pedestal. Each figure glowed with an aura of her touch and personality. She returned to her seat and quietly waited for a response to their magic.

A photography student leaned forward in her chair, plainly impatient, irritated. "What do these little statues have to do with anything? They're self-

indulgent, irrelevant—the kind of thing rich people decorate with." The last words a sneer, the photographer leaned back, frowning, folding her arms. A friend of the sculptor noisily turned toward the wall where the photographer's work was spread austerely across twenty feet of space. Text had been neatly painted on the white surface; black-and-white images, enlarged from the front page of the *Glasgow Herald,* documented the decline of the city's shipbuilding industry. She said, "Her sculptures express feeling, personal feeling that connects with people, that then becomes universal—not trendy political propaganda." Pointing at the wall, she continued, "That stuff isn't art, it's politics and sociology."

As the four instructors and the painter of *Jacob and the Angel* show, and as belief systems show, artists are a diverse bunch, and the things called art have an amazing and perplexing lack of commonalty. Through their artworks, artists are engaged in a profusion of social activities; they are involved with an enormous variety of techniques, materials, forms, and meanings. Their work rambles over a vast territory of human purposes. An artist such as Donna Cox, who uses supercomputers as her medium, visualizes complex mathematical formulas. Adrian Piper engages in social criticism through her aggressive performance art and video. Bill Carlson sells his complex sculptures of laminated glass throughout the world. And Brian R. Kelly accepts commissions from architects for murals, mosaics, and relief sculptures, works integrated into the surface and structure of buildings. Because of the types of work they do, the different social roles these artists assume may have more in common with those of scientific researchers, manufacturers, journalists, or cabinetmakers than with those of other artists.

When artists make choices about what they want their works to do, they assume a social role, become a particular kind of social agent. In recent history, artists have assumed a variety of roles in society, directing their work to very divergent social ends. These divergent goals can be best understood if they are traced to various sets of assumptions about the artist's role in society. It is important to ask what social role for the artist is shaped and defined by a particular action we call "art." Or, to suggest a chicken-and-egg situation, from what social role does a particular action originate?

Artworks serve many distinct social purposes, and the diverse functions that artworks can perform in a society are well known, even if they are not clearly articulated. And without stopping to think about it, we privately, or perhaps even publicly, attach some hierarchy of value to the ways artworks operate socially. Conscious recognition of these various roles and their own sets of assumptions about art is immensely important. For artists and audiences who may be working with different assumed roles, it makes for clear communication and effective evaluation.

FIVE SOCIAL ROLES

The construction of historical models or paradigms is a practical way of discussing the social function of artists.[1] Before reviewing these models of the artist's social role, however, we must make some disclaimers. The five models that follow are an incomplete list meant to address the current practice of Western art, although these models are appropriate to much other art as well. It is also important to remember that, although these models have evolved over time, none of them is extinct. All are actively present in contemporary art, and most artists develop a complicated mixture of them. In addition, references to their historical roots are oversimplified, and since they are portrayed as historical paradigms, it should be clear that they cannot be ripped out of a historical context and adopted by today's artist in the *same* form in which they originated. Nevertheless, it is clear that the various social roles that artists have adopted and developed throughout our history are present in the contemporary art world, where they merge, mingle, and collide. While each model has some readily apparent social benefits, each also has some weaknesses, ways in which this or that artistic role is myopic, self-indulgent, or, at times, harmful. These strengths and weaknesses, these roles in all their mixtures and blends, describe some of the tensions in contemporary art.

These five models are curiously subject both to an exaggeration of their qualities and an exaggerated *reversal* of their qualities. Both forms of exaggeration result in stereotypes about artists that could be constructed as a complete set of conflicting myths of the artist. Each model, then, is accompanied by two related myths, the one an exaggeration of the model's qualities, and the other an extreme opposition to some quality of the model. These caricatures, because they are extreme and simplistic, continue to confuse and mislead both artists and their public.

The Artist as Skilled Worker

The role of the artist as a skilled worker, craftsperson, or artisan is best exemplified by Western art from the Greco-Roman through medieval periods. Greek temple sculpture and vase painting, Roman mosaics, and medieval manuscript illumination were done by artisans of low social status who rarely achieved any individual recognition. In fact, many of these artists are known only by their works, and in art history texts are given names such as the Master of the *Saint Ursula Legend,* the Master of the *Virgo inter Virgines,* the Boucicaut Master. This type of artist is trained in a manual skill, does a specific, narrowly defined job, or solves a problem—not a problem recognized as intellectual, but a physical, formal problem. In this view of the artist's social function as craftsperson, notions of "mastery" and "masterpiece" originated. Ideas, plans, programs, and schemes are suggested by

others and then carried out by the artisan. Because of its direct dependence on patronage, its origins as a commission, the artwork is necessarily part of a shared system of communal values.

In fact, this dependence is the source of the major tension of values in this paradigm. On the one hand, the artist and artworks are socially integrated; they contribute directly and productively to the society. On the other hand, such work is by nature conservative, stressing continuity and rules. It does not develop a critical relationship to its society but instead reinforces the social consensus. Perhaps more positively, however, no cult of originality develops among such artists—after all, many of the ideas for the work are not even initiated by the artist. This kind of art is created to serve others' interests. Some see this service to others as another danger in this role: the artist is subordinate, dependent on another's agenda. Artists merely end up reinforcing the status quo, like Norman Rockwell, industriously meeting the agenda of the *Saturday Evening Post.* But this *serving* can be argued more positively: As skilled workers, artists are responding to clear social needs; their work has the utility and necessity of carpenters' and bricklayers' work.

This view of the artist as a skilled worker is the pivot of two antagonistic myths that are very much a part of the public's understanding of artists. When the artist as skilled worker is idolized, we soon create its caricature: *artist as virtuoso.* Technique itself becomes the goal, and the flashier the technique, the better the work. Who has not been to an exhibition of realist painting and heard the viewers exclaim: "Look at all this detail!" "How does she do this?" "It must have taken a long time." In opposition to the skilled-worker model, we find another prevalent mythic role. This artist is a rule-breaker, a rejecter of any social integration. This is the myth of the *artist as anarchist.* Just prior to World War I, Dada writers and artists embraced this myth, relentlessly promoting both anarchy and themselves. Tristan Tzara begins one of his seven Dada manifestos, "Manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine," in this way:

> Dada is our intensity: it sets up inconsequential bayonets the sumatran head of the german baby; Dada is life without carpet-slippers or parallels; it is for and against unity and definitely against the future; we are wise enough to know that our brains will become downy pillows that our anti-dogmatism is as exclusivist as a bureaucrat that we are not free yet shout freedom—
>
> A harsh necessity without discipline or morality and we spit on humanity. Dada remains within the European frame of weaknesses it's shit after all but from now on we mean to shit in assorted colors and bedeck the artistic zoo with the flags of every consulate
>
> We are circus directors whistling amid the winds of carnivals convents bawdy houses theatres realities sentiments restaurants HoHiHoHoBang[2]

But these two extremes of virtuoso and anarchist, these myths, are not all that is left of this model today. The role of the artist as skilled worker persists. The Venetian glass artist Pino Signoretto has made work to the specifications of other

artists, such as Jeff Koons, whereby Signoretto's skills help realize an artwork credited to Koons. Professional potters who sell their work at art fairs, the painters of commissioned portraits, artists who make murals, mosaics, and stained glass for public spaces—these are all contemporary examples of the artist as skilled worker.

And the artist as skilled worker is around in another, more subtle form: *the artist as professional.* Professionalism has dominated all the arts in twentieth-century Western culture. A profession (whether that of artist, dentist, or lawyer) typically has the following characteristics: it is not seen as being the domain of amateurs; it has organized groups for members (such as the College Art Association); evaluating its activities and any accountability of its members are typically seen as being in the domain of other members of the profession; it has schools whose students are taught by certified members of the profession; it creates specialization and subspecialization of its activities; it employs a specialized critical vocabulary that is somewhat closed to general audiences; it sees its activities more as the function of a career than of a calling.

Most artists today share at least some of these characteristics of professionalism. Further, artists, with their historic attention to craftsmanship, teaching in the academies, and use of physical skills, have a natural affinity with professionalism, more natural than the practitioners of an art such as literature have. And professionalism is open to virtually all of art's social roles. Even an intellectual or a shaman can be a professional; only the naive artist seems by definition immune from professionalism.

The Artist as Intellectual

The artist's role as an intellectual became the new paradigm of the high Renaissance. Renaissance painters, sculptors, and literary humanists originated "the idea of the artist as an intellectual hero and the conception of art as the educator of humanity. They were the first to make art an ingredient of intellectual and moral culture."[3] Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, and Dürer are some of the better examples of this model. In this view, art deals with important ideas, and the artist investigates all areas of human knowledge and contributes to them. This model has a high estimation of the artist and values the "artistic personality": Artists are inventors and discoverers. Artists engage in theoretical and analytical pursuits. One has only to look at the sketchbooks of Leonardo to understand this paradigm.

Although the obvious benefits to this model are the ways it advances knowledge and art (as, for example, in the color studies of Josef Albers), the traditional danger associated with it is that of elitism. Twentieth-century artists have all wrestled with this problem. The critic Suzi Gablik begins her book *Has Modernism Failed?* with this very subject. She quotes American sculptor David Smith's declaration that "nobody understands art but the artist, because nobody is as interested

in art, its pursuits, its making, as the artist." To that she adds, "From the start, the mystique of modern art has always been that it is not generally popular, or even comprehended, except by an elite few."[4] For example, the conceptual art, minimalism, and serialism of the late sixties, which fit this paradigm, became so inaccessible to any general audience as to be solipsistic. The work became self-referential and art-about-art. Artists wrote and spoke in a language as turgid and forbidding as Wittgenstein's. As the history of conceptual art demonstrates, when art becomes so theoretical that the audience shrinks to a very select group, art can become an act of exclusion.

This paradigm of the artist as intellectual is a point of reference for two other deep-seated myths of the artist. Already in the Renaissance, it was not enough for these artist-intellectuals to be thoughtful philosophers—they had to be geniuses. The great myth of *the artist as genius* arose out of the high Renaissance, when values of individuality and intellectual property developed from the weakening guild system and disintegrating Christian culture of the Middle Ages.[5] Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550) was no small contributor to this exaggerated role. Vasari begins his biography of Leonardo:

> The greatest gifts are often seen, in the course of nature, rained by celestial influences on human creatures; and sometimes, in supernatural fashion, beauty, grace, and talent are united beyond measure in one single person, in a manner that to whatever such a one turns his attention, his every action is so divine, that, surpassing all other men, it makes itself clearly known as a thing bestowed by God (as it is), and not acquired by human art. This was seen by all mankind in Leonardo da Vinci, in whom, besides a beauty of body never sufficiently extolled, there was an infinite grace in all his actions; and so great was his genius, and such its growth, that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease.[6]

Moving away from the artist-intellectual, one finds a second prevalent myth: *the artist as naive innocent.* This artist is no intellectual but rather is a "natural" artist who may, of course, be a genius as well. This is the untrained artist, working away in ignorance of art history and technique and often in ignorance of contemporary culture as well. Perhaps the greatest modern example is Henri Rousseau. The poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire described his friend Rousseau as "the splendid, childlike old man" who "had the great good fortune to incarnate, as fully as possible, that delicate, ingenuous, elaborate naturalness, combined with playfulness at once knowing and naïve." According to Apollinaire, Rousseau "painted with the purity, the grace, and the consciousness of a primitive," a primitive whose "paintings were made without method, system, or mannerisms." Implicit in this myth is the belief that formal training would destroy the power of the naive artist's work. Apollinaire writes that if Rousseau "had drawn these touching allegories by an act of will, if he had drawn these forms and colors according to a calculated, coolly elaborated system, he would be the most dangerous of men, while in fact he is the

most sincere and most candid."[7] In the twentieth century, educated artists turn more and more to folk art, children's art, and the art of the mentally ill to understand this natural, unselfconscious creativity. And the work of naive artists, such as Grandma Moses and the Reverend Howard Finster, are hung in the most prestigious galleries and museums.

The artist as intellectual remains a relevant paradigm in contemporary art. The work of Joseph Kosuth, for example, continues this role. Consider his early *One and Three Hammers* (Figure 3.1). This 1965 work consists of a hammer, which is set between a photograph of a hammer and a photocopy of a dictionary definition of a hammer. In his highly conceptual artworks, Kosuth explores theory, philosophical issues such as epistemology and ontology, and language. Many of the artworks consist only of words; the art is no longer an object, but an idea. As Kosuth himself claims, "It is impossible to see my work. What is seen is the presentation of the information. The art exists only as an invisible, ethereal idea."[8] More recently, the 1995 work *Unpacking My Library,* by Buzz Spector, connects the theories of Walter Benjamin and his ideas about collecting with Spector's own meditations on the relationships of books and art, texts and images, relating public history and private memory. The work consisted of 4,051 books, the artist's complete personal library, arranged in order of height on an uninterrupted shelf, completely circling the gallery. Or consider his *Freeze Freud* (1992), the complete works of Freud embedded in a 700-pound block of crystal clear ice inside a glass-doored supermarket freezer case (Figure 3.2). It provocatively raised questions about authorship and identity and how the complete output of a writer is the "body of his work."

The Artist as Entrepreneur

By the time of the Baroque period, an art market directed toward most social classes developed. Free from the patronage of the church and aristocracy, the artist looked to the rising middle class for support. In the seventeenth-century Netherlands, this art market was so well established that works were bought and sold for investment purposes. The Dutch genre painters epitomize this new model of artist as entrepreneur, an independent agent living off the sale of artworks. In some cases, such as Rubens, the artist is immensely successful, employing a whole workshop of artists to turn out pieces done under his supervision. In the marketing of artwork, a personal style becomes very important: it identifies the product and helps control supply and demand.

This paradigm of the artist as a kind of businessperson has some obvious strengths and weaknesses. The artist's independence is clearly beneficial—the artist is free to develop ideas and objects. But of course, this benefit is balanced by the fact that these objects must be bought and sold, and that they must necessarily be *objects*. And herein lies the new control: Instead of having to please the church and aristocracy, artists have to please the market. For example, look at the bankruptcy

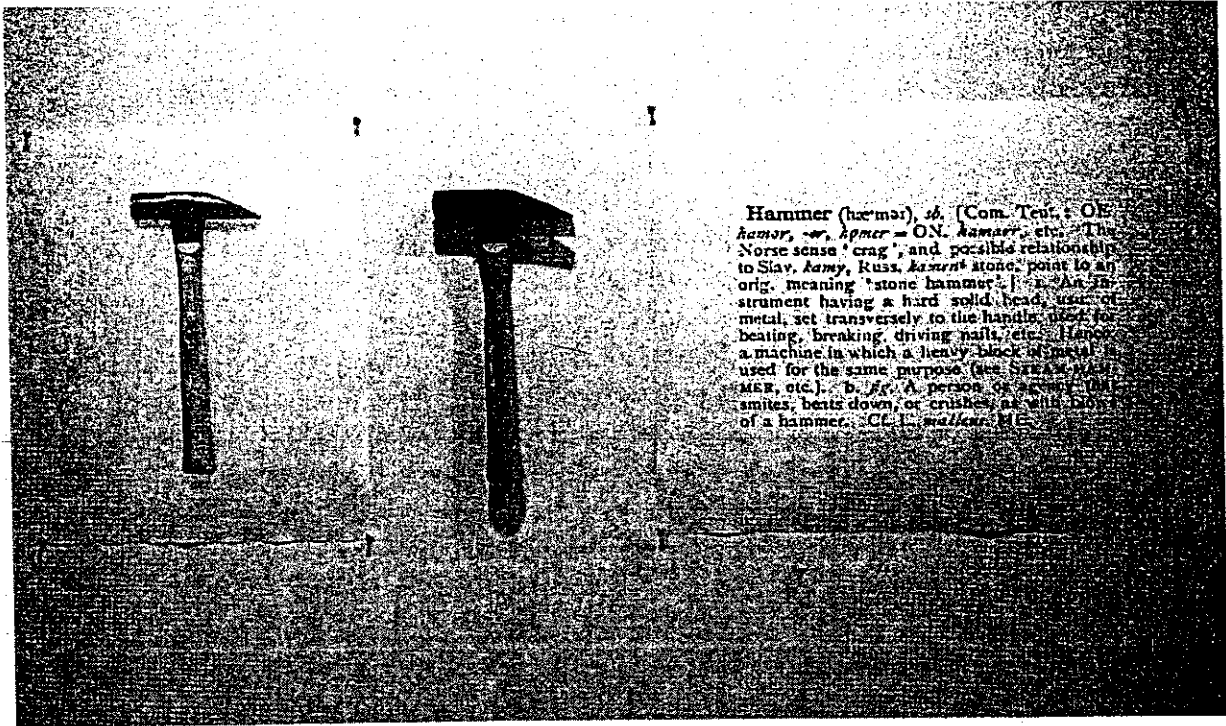

Figure 3.1 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Hammers* (English Version), 1965. Hammer, photograph of a hammer, photostat of the definition of hammer, 24" × 55 3/8". (© 1997 Joseph Kosuth/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

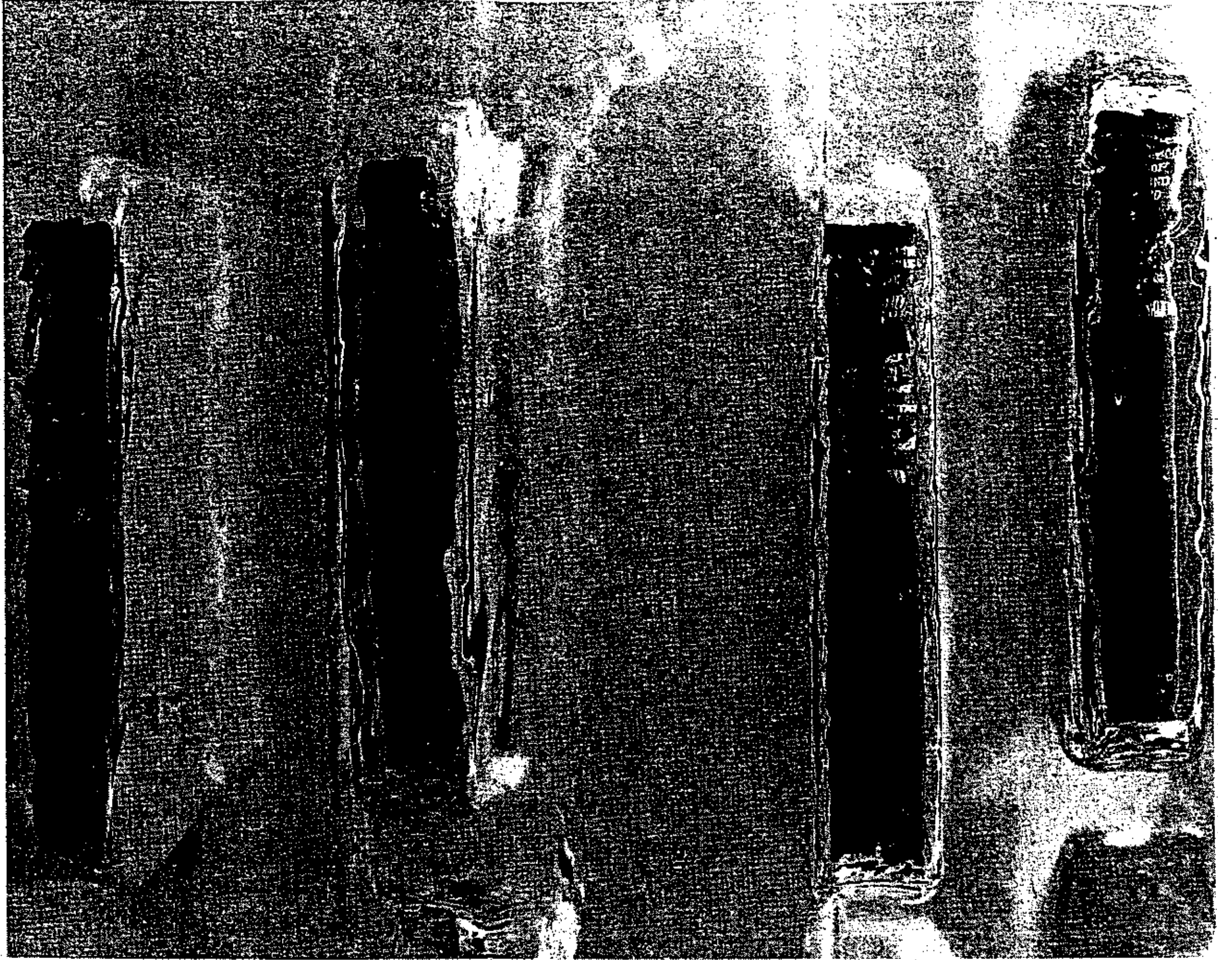

Figure 3.2 Buzz Spector, *Freeze Freud,* detail, 1992. Installation. Books in ice in freezer cabinet. (Artist's collection. Photo © Adam Reich.)

of Rembrandt, the poverty of Frans Hals. The artist becomes only too aware of the demands of selling, and these demands affect every aspect of the work's production—from its materials to its subject matter to the beliefs it promotes. This is the danger of commercialism, the tailoring of aesthetic decisions to the tastes of the buyers. As the critic Lucy Lippard states about art at the beginning of the 1980s, "The illusion of the new, like that of obsolescence, is fostered by competitive commercial interests."[9] The market, more than creativity itself, encourages the process of changing fashion.

This independent, entrepreneurial artist is perhaps more interested in fame than any other of the artist types is. Personal celebrity helps sell the artworks. And here is the origin of another of the great mythic artist roles: *the artist as independent hero*. These artists are courted by the press, the government, and art institutions. Rubens defined this role, David perfected it, Picasso lived it completely, and Warhol parodied and exploited it to its highest level. In fact, Warhol's art was about this myth. But side by side with this caricature of the artist is another: *the artist as economic failure*. This is the myth of the starving artist. No artist has been more completely stereotyped into this role than Van Gogh, painting soul-haunting masterpieces while bleakly eating mealy potatoes in a dingy hovel. Countless artists simultaneously envy the famous misery of Vincent and the heroic celebrity of Pablo. They forget that during an artist's lifetime the two roles are mutually exclusive; only at death can they possibly merge.

Who are the entrepreneurs of today? For the best examples, look through the back-page advertisements in *ARTnews*. But, of course, in our economic system, most artists participate to some degree in this social activity. Keith Haring and Mark Kostabi made interesting additions to it: Haring with his own commercial distribution network, Kostabi with his production techniques borrowed from industry. Perhaps the most breathtaking example of an artist-celebrity-entrepreneur is Helen Frankenthaler, selling her image as a famous artist to Rolex to help them peddle watches. The full-page color ad, which ran in *Art and Antiques*, concludes: "'I've explored a variety of directions and themes over the years. But I think in all my painting you can see the signature of one artist, the work of one wrist.' And on that immensely talented wrist, Helen Frankenthaler has chosen to wear a Rolex."

The Artist as Social Critic

The nineteenth century saw the first major emergence of the artist as social critic. In this model, art is a means of human liberation, a tool in the struggles against injustice, a way to transform the world. This model developed out of the French Revolution and the romanticism of the early 1800s. By the end of that century, many artists were taking the role of alienated expatriate, a kind of prophet who stands outside society. Perhaps evolving out of the earlier myth of the artist as independent hero, this role has artists setting their own values, values very much apart

from those of the society at large. So, starting with the revolutionary social criticism of artists like Goya, this model develops through the defiant bohemian artists of early-twentieth-century Paris to the postmodern social-activist artists of the present. These artists create new visual languages in order to reject particular social and aesthetic conventions.

What are the attractions and problems associated with this paradigm? These artists, like many other people, are outraged by injustice and see their artwork as a vehicle of change. But this social relevance often runs counter to values embedded in other models. For instance, art that is directed at specific current issues often lacks the marketable eternal beauty the artist-entrepreneurs seek to imbue their commodities with. Some artists will accuse socially critical works of didacticism or a lack of the kind of ambiguity essential to art. In the extreme, socially critical artists are accused of doing sociology, not art.

For example, the predominantly textual works of Hans Haacke make little attempt to operate within the tradition of the aesthetic object; instead, primarily through text, they expose hidden (and perverse) power relationships, particularly relationships between museums and big business. Haacke's 1974 *Manet PROJEKT '74,* initially intended for the exhibition "Art Remains Art" at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, illustrates the tensions produced by such art (Figure 3.3). Haacke's work consists of Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus*—owned by the Wallraf-Richartz—and a series of panels placed next to it. Haacke's general outline for the project proposed that these panels would include text that would "present the social and economic position of the persons who have owned the painting over the years and the prices paid for it." These panels create the work's power and its danger. Haacke is aware of these complexities; he argues that a major difficulty in making this kind of socially critical art is the constant threat of co-option by the system: "One of the problems one faces, when one has become aware of the interconnectedness of the art world and the social world at large, is how to function without, in effect, affirming power relationships with which one does not agree."[10] The relevant power structure in the case of the *Manet PROJEKT '74* was the museum's board of directors. It objected to Haacke's final panel. In it, Haacke listed Hermann J. Abs, the person who had acquired the Manet for the museum, citing Abs's nineteen positions on corporate boards of directors and his questionable history during World War II. The letter of rejection sent to Haacke by the directors of the museum argued, "A museum knows nothing about economic power; it does, indeed, however, know something about spiritual power."[11] In this arm-wrestling match between art as sociology (as a wielder of power) and art as eternal truth, eternal truth wins.

More recently, Mike Kelly exhibited a disquieting work at the University of Chicago, a piece called *Pay for Your Pleasure* (1988). It consisted of a hall lined with forty-three banners depicting famous "geniuses," great thinkers of Western culture, and culminated in a naive-kitsch self-portrait, *Pogo the Clown,* painted in prison by the mass murderer John Wayne Gacy. Referring to a traditional portrait

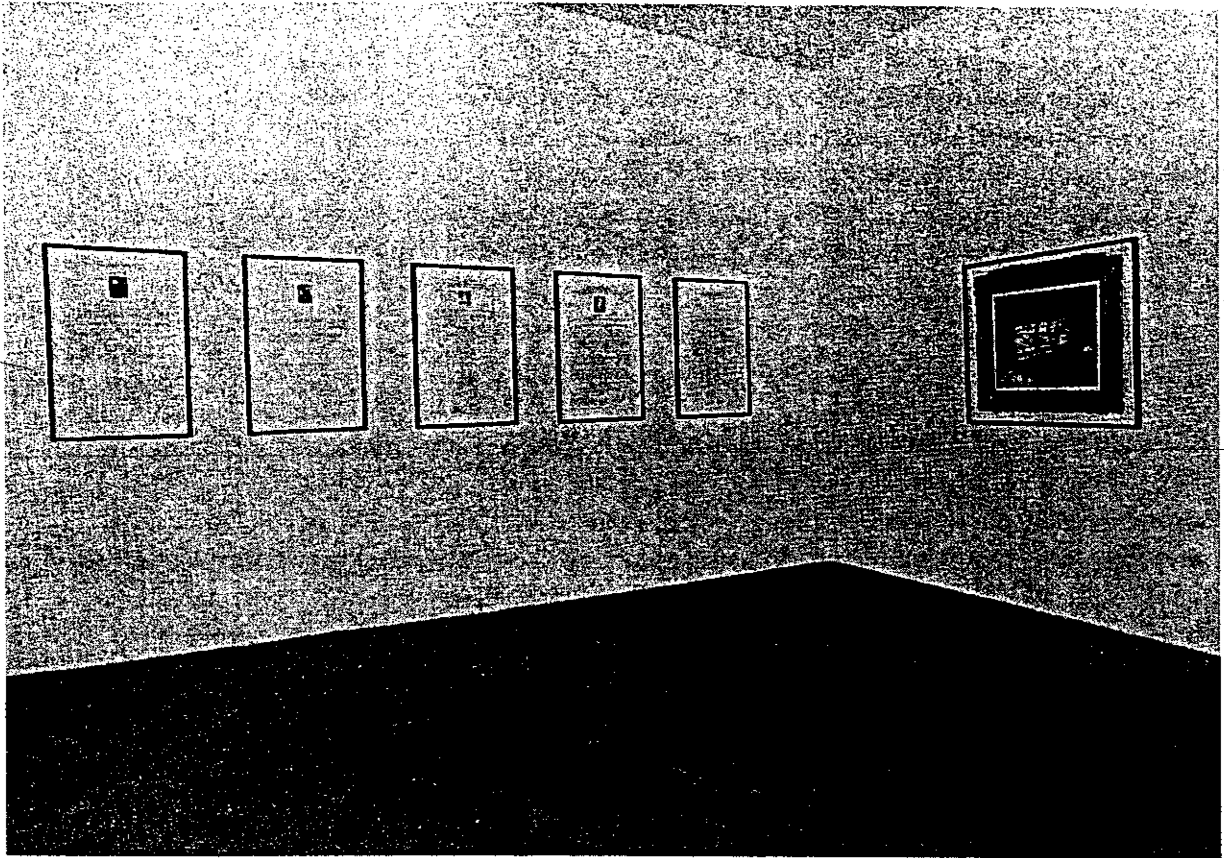

Figure 3.3 Hans Haake, *Manet PROJEKT '74,* 1974. Ten panels, each 20½" × 31½", color photograph of Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus,* with frame (actual size), 32¾" × 37".

gallery, the work questioned the relationship between art, culture, and criminality.

This paradigm of the artist as social critic can also be taken to extremes. One of the great myths is *the artist as social outcast,* as exile, as bohemian. This myth has its roots in Renaissance individuality, but came to its climax with nineteenth-century romanticism and its emphasis on the inseparability of art and life. These artists make a social statement not just with their art but with their lifestyle. They are either internal émigrés, living in but staying aloof from their culture, or they flee like Gauguin to remote cultures. But as the art historian Arnold Hauser says, "both are the product of the same feeling, the same 'discomfort with culture.'"[12] At the present, this myth of the artist as social outcast is more pervasive than any other. Paradoxically, the attempt at social nonconformity among art students is so predictable as to be the established rule.

But this paradigm of the artist as social critic also has its evil twin, its negative construction. This is the myth of *the artist as social parasite.* A major rhetorical function of this myth is the devaluing of artists' activities—usually by groups threatened by some artist's social criticism. This denigration knows no ideological bounds; it is a kind of common slander, a general slur to minimize the importance of artists and therefore their criticism. In this caricature, artists make no real productive contribution to society; rather, in their self-indulgent excesses, they sponge off the society at large. This attitude is common in the ongoing fights over the National Endowment for the Arts budget legislation.

In 1984, Lucy Lippard wrote that in contemporary art "there is a renewed sense of the power of culture to affect how people see the world around them."[13] This perception that art has the ability to change the world ensures that the model of the artist as social critic remains prominent in today's art world. Martha Rosler, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Thomas Lawson—the list seems endless.[14]

The Artist as Social Healer

Some artists believe their work can express transcendent truths that accomplish social healing. They try to operate as priests, mediating between people and the harshness of the physical, social, and spiritual environment. In this role, artists have an important function as leaders in social, political, and religious rituals.

The best historical precedent for this is the shaman, what educator/aesthetician Edmund B. Feldman describes as "a combined sorcerer, healer, priest, psychiatrist, magician, artist."[15] This model is rooted in a prehistoric role that is not primarily, by Western standards, artistic but religious. Thus it is a role that is first of all concerned with human relationships: to others, to nature, to God. It attempts to mediate these relationships and to create a healthy future. But the term *shaman* translates uneasily to contemporary society. Most contemporary artists who indulge in shamanic rituals do so without any supporting community in which these works

function. They are merely engaged in pseudo-rituals, operating out of no shared system of belief. Further, the objects that historically have resulted from shamanic or other ritual activities are not art objects in any modern, traditional, Western sense. These things should not be merely contemplated for aesthetic values while ignoring their purpose, their ritual context. So in the model of artist as social healer, the term *shaman* should probably be understood as metaphorical.

In 1967, Bruce Nauman made a spiraling neon artwork which, perhaps facetiously, stated "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" (Figure 3.4). The age-old myth of *the artist as mystic* is the more extreme statement of the paradigm of the artist as social healer. Many modern artists have directed their work toward transcendent, spiritual goals and exemplify this particular mythic role: Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman are a few. According to Newman scholar Thomas Hess, when Newman spoke or wrote about his work "it would be in terms of absolutes, the Sublime, the Tragic (words that demand capital letters which, in conversation, he invoked with his index finger pointing to the sky, palm turning inward, the characteristic Augustus Caesar gesture)." Hess goes on to explain that in viewing Newman's work, the spectator has a spiritual experience:

> The spectator, like the artist himself, would encounter these metaphysical forces through the medium of the painting in a mysterious, perhaps empathetic, perhaps archetypal contact. . . . From the artist's and the spectator's comprehension of the experience emerges insights to the Tragic and the Heroic—a meeting with Absolutes, with the spiritual.[16]

Suspicion of the healer and magician, and perhaps some actual evidence, has developed into a notion of *the artist as charlatan,* the trickster, the fraud, the quack. For example, the artist who most often has been labeled an artist-shaman, Joseph Beuys, has also been frequently accused of being a charlatan. These charges question the truth of Beuys's account of his formative war survival experience, the subject of so much of his work. According to the legend that Beuys promoted, when as a German pilot in World War II he was shot down over the Crimea, he was saved by Tartar nomads who wrapped his wounded body in healing swaths of fat and felt. This incident became the material and subject of much of Beuys's work, such as *The Pack,* a Volkswagen bus followed by twenty sleds, each one loaded with felt, fat, and a flashlight (Figure 3.5).

The role of artist as social healer can take many directions. Consider the contrasting examples of Anselm Kiefer and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Kiefer, a German artist, makes objects that fit comfortably into a Western tradition of painting as autonomous object, but they are objects that deal with German history and that synthesize the past and its metaphors of devastation into the hope of regeneration. Suzi Gablik says Kiefer "is one of the few artists working today who opens up the vision and ideal of apocalyptic renovation and makes the effort to regain the spiritual dignity of art."[17] Ukeles has been the unsalaried artist-in-residence at the

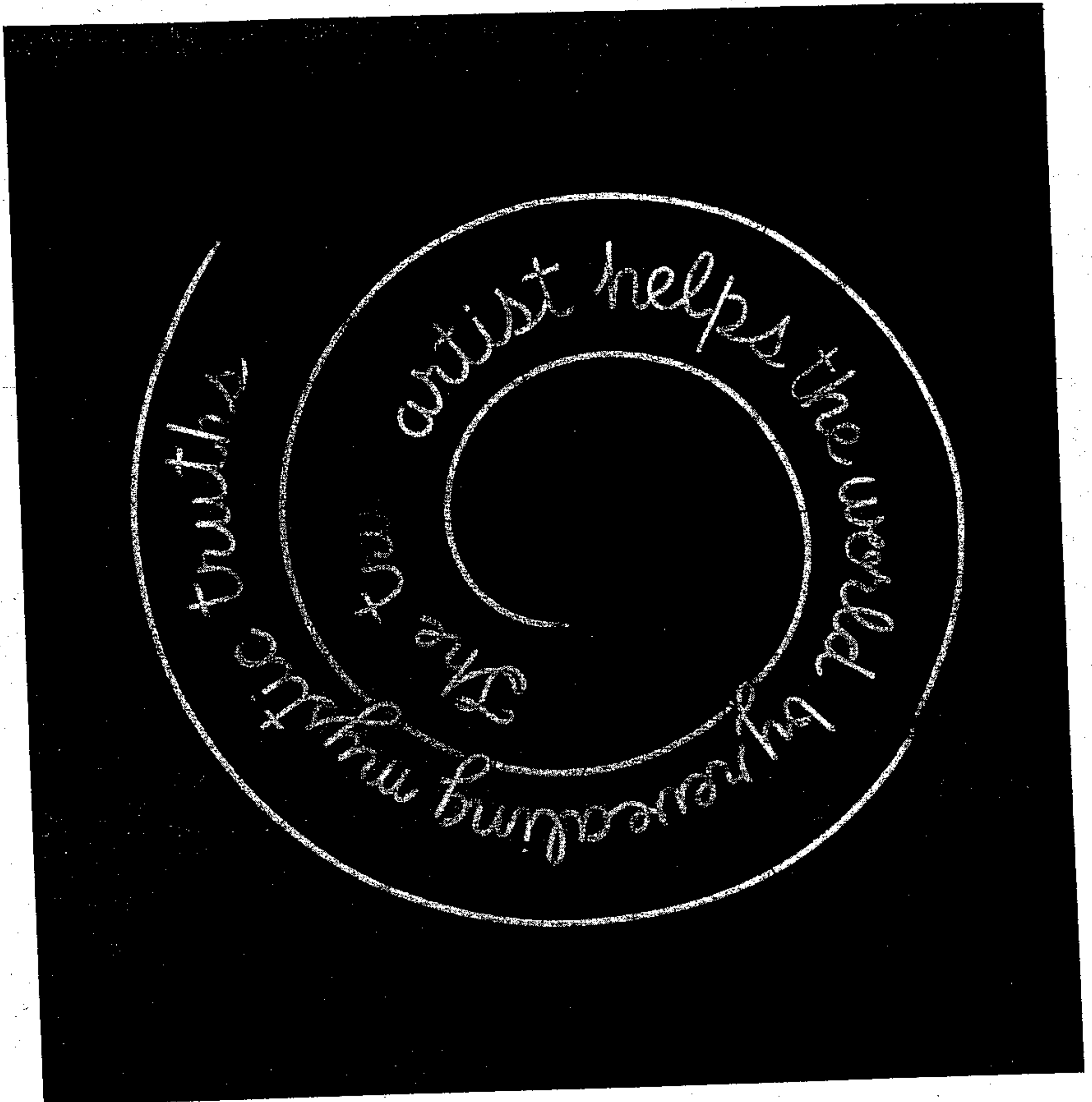

Figure 3.4 Bruce Nauman, *Window or Wall Sign*, 1967. Blue and peach neon tubing, 59" × 55". (© 1997 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York.)

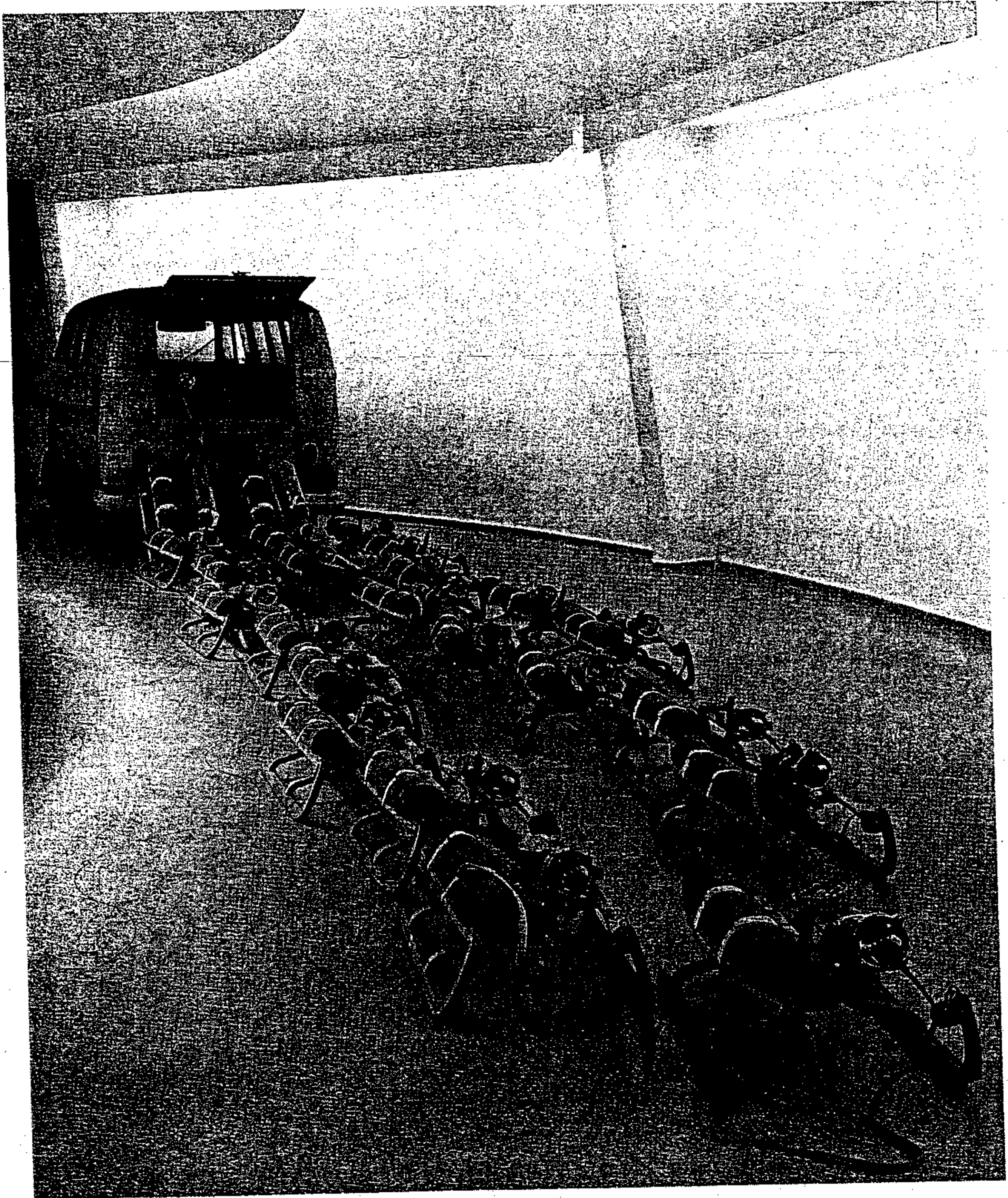

Figure 3.5 Joseph Beuys, *The Pack*, 1969. Volkswagen bus with twenty sleds, each carrying felt, fat, and a flashlight; dimensions vary. (©1997 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photograph by Mary Donlon © The Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, New York.)

New York City Department of Sanitation. Her performances and installations are an empathetic affirmation of the sanitation workers. In another article, Gablik says Ukeles's work "uses shamanic means in a modern way. We can see how the model of a shaman strikes at the roots of alienation—in merging her consciousness with the workers, she converses with them, learns from them, and becomes one with them."[18] These artists share strong overtones of a healing role and a priestly mediation, Kiefer with the tragedy of modern Germany, Ukeles with the day-to-day humiliation of sanitation workers.

In 1993, the Chicago collective Haha created the work *Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare* for Sculpture Chicago's "Culture in Action" project (Figure 3.6). Haha organized and set up a hydroponic garden in a storefront. This garden served as a center for AIDS issues, where the metaphor of the garden as a nurturing place created a space where an overwhelming social problem could be approached in a nonconfrontational way.

IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL ROLES

For the art community, what are the implications of looking at art and artists in terms of social roles? First, if we recognize that all of these models are present in contemporary art, then we are obliged to distinguish these various social activities when we either make or evaluate art, even though they can be mixed together in different combinations. Each model has specific and unique goals, and therefore specific and unique obstructions and difficulties. Some evaluative criteria may be common to all, some unique to one. Work done on supercomputers to visualize complex mathematical formulas has evaluative criteria far different from those of socially critical performance art and video. But what about the less obvious differences between laminated glass sculptures and mosaics? Here the artworks themselves do not announce their differences; a fuller understanding of the works' uses and these uses' relations to the artists' intentions is necessary. In all cases, however, one cannot properly evaluate artworks if one is not clear on the social actions out of which they arise. Furthermore, the social activities themselves should be open to critique. Are we free to assume that all of these models are equally valid for contemporary art? Should we promote some as more worthy than others? What are the criteria? These questions must be dealt with openly, explicitly, not camouflaged by unexamined assumptions of personal taste.

Finally, questions need to be asked about the grand myths associated with each of these paradigms—those heightened exaggerations and those shadowy, reactive stereotypes. Are they true? Are they useful? Or does the uncritical acceptance of them hinder the social actions of artists? The virtuoso, the genius, the independent hero, the social outcast, the mystic, the anarchist, the naive innocent, the economic failure, the social parasite, the charlatan—all of these myths potentially do a

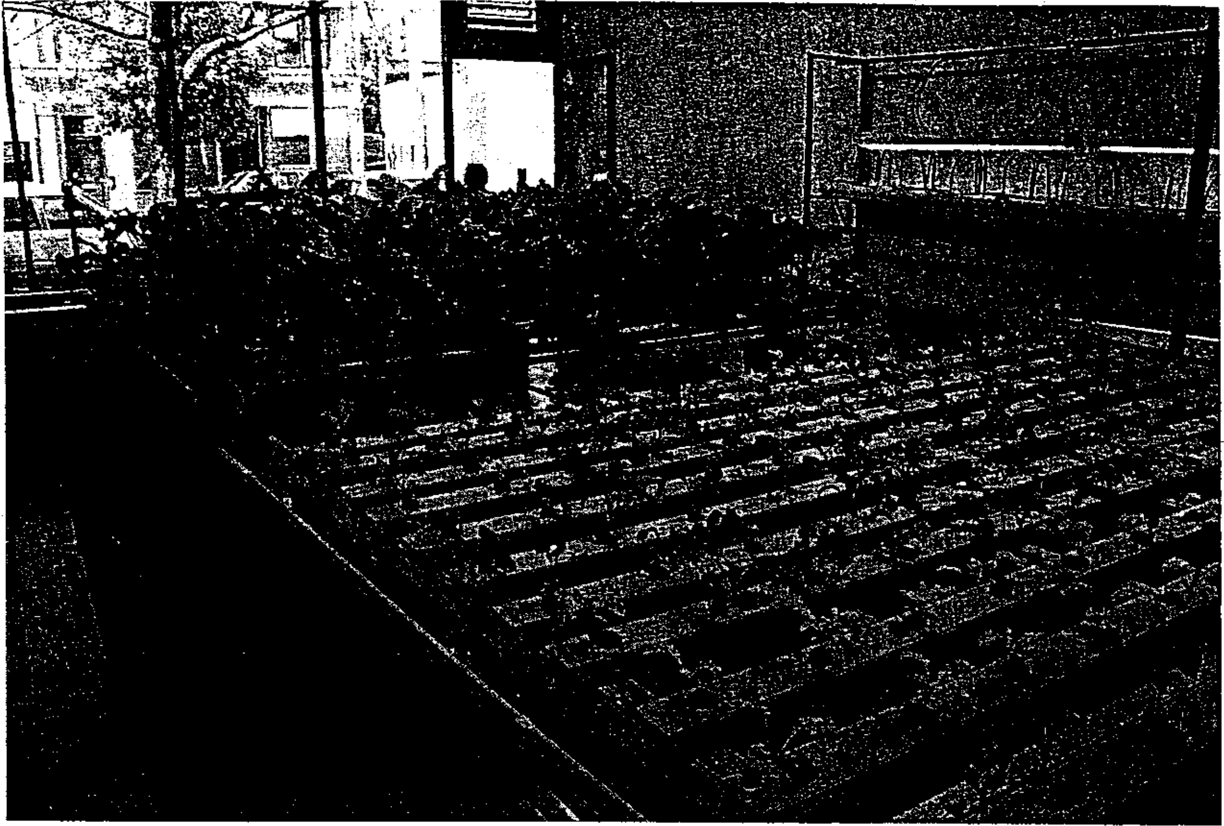

Figure 3.6 Haha and Flood, *Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare,* 1993. Sculpture. (© John McWilliams.)

disservice to artists. For example, when artists complain about their low income, they resent the response that artists are supposed to suffer. *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and *Lust for Life* may be good stories, but their contribution to these mythic understandings of the artist have not helped. Since these myths are so deep-seated and so widespread and so at odds with what *real* work demands, how do artists convince others that artists participate in society, that their activities are social activities bound together with the work of others, that their work is relevant?

The myths draw attention away from what artworks can achieve by focusing too much on the artist, and even then, they are as easily used to dismiss artists as to praise them. But even worse, they undermine the very activity of artists by stereotyping their actions and then directing these stereotypes back at artists, with the consequence that artists too easily adapt their lifestyles and their work to these myths. The creation of these myths is an act of cultural appropriation, a process of abstraction in which, as Hal Foster explains, these myths then serve as "substitutes for active social expression and as alibis for consumerist management."[19] The myths, in the end, encumber and begin to regiment what artists do, and then the work is further caricatured, controlled, and either shoved aside or reprocessed back into more myth.

Artists are engaged in social actions. These social actions are extremely diverse, and the works produced by them are directed toward a multiplicity of ends. Stereotypes to the contrary, artists are not so different from scientists working on bird migration, reporters for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* Amish cabinetmakers, or manufacturers of bedside reading lamps.

NOTES

1. In the following, we have relied on a number of works by others, including Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951) and Edmund B. Feldman, *The Artist* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982), although most of what we have to say here has grown out of discussions in graduate and undergraduate seminars. Our choices of historical models and their labels bear a superficial resemblance to much of Feldman's historical outline, but our purposes are somewhat different. Feldman traces the evolution of artist types "to demonstrate continuity and change among artists—in training and work, in cultural function, in patterns of patronage, in social recognition, in personal ambition, and in economic reward" (vii). We are interested in how a set of historical models of artistic roles can describe the tensions in today's art world, how they reveal the various conflicting myths of the artist that are prevalent in our time, and how they each demand their own criteria for discussion.
2. *The Dada Painters and Poets,* ed. Robert Motherwell, Documents of Twentieth-Century Art series (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951), 75.
3. Hauser, 340.

4. Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 12.
5. Hauser, 327.
6. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston Du C. de Vere (New York: Abrams, 1979), 778.
7. Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters: Aesthetic Meditations, 1913*, trans. Lionel Abel, Documents of Modern Art series (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1949), 39, 40. "The Douanier," *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews, 1902–1918*, ed. Leroy C. Breunig, trans. Susan Suleiman, Documents of 20th-Century Art series (New York: Viking, 1972), 336, 339, 348.
8. Quoted in David L. Shirey, "Impossible Art: What It Is ('Thinkworks')," *Art in America*, May 1969, 41.
9. Lucy R. Lippard, "Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock: A Long Review of 'The Times Square Show' by Anne Ominous," *Artforum* 19 (October 1980), 54.
10. Quoted in Jeanne Siegel, "Hans Haacke: What Makes Art Political," *Artwords 2: Discourse on the Early 80s* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988), 68.
11. Quoted in *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), 118–33.
12. Hauser, 891.
13. Lucy R. Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 341.
14. Leon Golub says, "Everybody knows artists don't change society, but that's too easy a way to put it. Artists are part of the information process." Quoted in Jeanne Siegel, "Leon Golub: What Makes Art Political," *Artwords 2*, 61.
15. Feldman, 2.
16. Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 16–17.
17. Gablik, 124.
18. Suzi Gablik, "Deconstructing Aesthetics: Toward a Responsible Art," *New Art Examiner* 16 (January 1989), 34.
19. Foster, *Recodings*, 168.