LYNNE Munson's heartfelt description of the decline of "the fine arts," as they were once known, makes grim reading. In *Exhibitionism: Art in an Era of Intolerance,* she traces the appearance since the mid 1960s of what might collectively be called a "Manifesto for a Democratic Art." This new aesthetic declares that painting, literature, theater, and classical music were not the true arts of democratic America but the moribund remnants of an old authoritarian, bourgeois, capitalist, materialistic art that expressed the values of exploiters.

The real artistic energy of modern democracy is to be found in what the obsolescent fine arts once scorned as "kitsch" or "pop art." Deconstruction made this "people's art" intellectually respectable by providing it with an aesthetic that broke down the barriers between the arts and other human activities, emptied out the traditional sense of reality by finding "absence" in "presence" and "presence" in "absence," and politicized art at its roots. In the old fine arts, the artist was an autocrat, standing back like God and paring his finger nails, as James Joyce put it, while the audience groveled before him—always HIM, not HER—and tried to understand his cryptic and sacred meanings. But the new democratic art erases the difference between artist and audience, master and slave.

Photography, movies, television, comic books, amplified rock music, graffiti, collages, advertisements, and performance art: These satisfy far better than the old authoritarian fine arts the prime democratic value of "the Many." Technology, not the painstaking craftsmanship of high art, enables everyone to participate in true democratic art. It doesn't take much time to go to the movies, and no special skills are required to understand and judge them. With cameras becoming cheaper, people can

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† Ivan R. Dee. 228 pp. $27.50.
even make their own movies and act in them, digitize them, and distribute them online. The same for rock and rap music and for photography. Everyone can play. The most democratic arts are the participatory, “interactive” arts, which technology makes possible for everyone.

Democratic art’s basic principle is “Art is what we say it is, not some objective reality.” When Karen Finley dances naked except for being doused in chocolate syrup covered with alfalfa sprouts to indicate sperm, that’s Performance Art, though the Ballet Russe may not want to have anything to do with it. When Andres Serrano dunks a crucifix in his urine to create Piss Christ, that’s Political Art showing the triumph of individual vitality over religious institutions, death, and suffering. When a chimpanzee daubs colors on a canvas, that’s Gonzo Art, sometimes called Natural Art.

An old-fashioned artist trying to paint in the realistic mode of Edward Hopper or Winslow Homer will appeal to the “High Art” of earlier times for justification, but there is no longer any such thing as “High Art.” It literally is history, as is all the out-of-date, elitist aesthetic furniture that went with it—the creative imagination, genius, composition, beauty, structure, symbolism, and so on. There is only art, the things that the people choose to admire and call art, and a pile of bricks or a plastic bedpan fit the bill as well as (or better than) Michelangelo or Shakespeare.

In her study of democratic art, Munson foregrounds the social supports of these arts rather than their actual practice. Art is no longer defined and made in the studio, it would seem, but in the social institutions that were once considered only support activities. Politics and the National Endowment for the Arts, the museums and their exhibitions, the auction houses and the galleries, the teaching of art history in the universities—these are the places where “true art” is defined and found in our time.

At its beginning in the mid 1960s, the NEA supported painters and sculptors who were concerned primarily with the composition of art work. But by the 1990s, the public money was being given to people who tied sticks to themselves and walked up the Westside Highway to demonstrate Puerto Rico’s divided views on independence, or who made a trail of ink drops from Hayley, Idaho to Cody, Wyoming. If you have been wondering why Jesse Helms is fuming, you should read Munson’s eye-opening description of how the NEA has spent its money.
Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, and Serrano are only the well-known scandals.

The museums, except for the Met and the Chicago Art Institute, have closed down their many-stepped and becolumned classical entrances to avoid intimidating the public and suggesting that art towers above life. Inside, once you have worked your way through the coffee bars and the souvenir shops, you will no longer find the traditional progression from the Greeks to the present, with its story of European dominance in the arts and the progress of the creative imagination in a long series of masterworks. Instead, you may first enter a collection of tribal—not "primitive"—art, or even a mixture of everyday objects—quilts, snuff boxes, jewelry, masks, photos—that are meant to remind you that painting and sculpture are no longer the primary arts, only two among many activities, and that European art is only one strain among an infinity of actualities.

The Harvard History of Art Department and the Fogg Museum have long been at the center of the art world, with the museum supplying a rich collection of masterworks in which the students were trained as connoisseurs. Today, the students seldom look at the pictures in the museum, which functions as an independent art gallery. And the offices of the art department have removed to another building, where the students study a variety of unlinked topics ranging from photography to art theory. Painting and sculpture have been dethroned, and the study of art has shifted from the objects themselves to their political, social, or psychological causes and effects. The professors of art—"history of art" is now a derisive term, Munson points out—look so seldom at paintings that they often get their facts about them wrong, while Harvard students have acquired a reputation for ignorance of the art objects.

Munson discusses in passing many artists who continue to be primarily concerned with the media they work in and with the construction of their works. But these artists seem to live in an artistic backwater while all the glitz and action belong to the collectors, professors, grant givers, exhibitionists, and scandal makers. In this world, insofar as they are interested in anything other than money and notoriety, new art dictators pay attention only to art's environment and its social locus. The days of close concentration on the work of art, in painting as in literature, seem to have passed, and in its place we have an interest in some larger context of which it plays a mere part. For all its relativism—"Art is whatever we say it is"—this postmodern conception of art is, as Munson notes, intolerant
of older views and ferocious in its tyranny over the present. Like so many of the political systems of our time that govern in the name of freedom and the people, our postmodern art, in populist disguise, is driven by the lust for power.

MUST we accept this relativism, wandering toward an endless future of change that has no meaning and no direction? Not at all, though we are surely never going back to the high imperium of Western Renaissance and Romantic art. Art is a historical, not a Platonic reality, and never repeats itself exactly as it changes over time. But art, like our other major social institutions, does have a history, and that history offers a series of possibilities from which to choose what we consider the best and most useful kind of art. We will always, of course, argue over what the best and most useful art of the past has been, but the historical argument takes place in the meaningful terms of what did happen and what was done. And who, looking at the evidence before them, can doubt that Michelangelo and Shakespeare define a much more interesting and useful conception of art than do Electrobang and an icon of the Virgin Mary painted with elephant dung?

Just because a cultural category like art is socially constructed does not mean that we need to live in an infinity of relativism, defining it in any way that someone wants. Our choices are anchored in their history. Traditionally, the best art in the West has been the paintings, statuary, architecture, and literature that are distinguished by the skill with which they are made, and by the insights they offer into our common life. Something meaningful to say, and a powerful style that says it, would seem to be the true art of the Western world. Homer and Titian, not copies of Campbell Soup cans or a pile of bricks randomly arranged, still reveal what art can be for us.