

Adrian Rifkin  
**Artistic  
Education of  
the Public**

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*Artistic education of the public.* If the same motif has not been treated in a hundred different ways by various masters, the public never learns to get beyond interest in the material alone; but once it has come to be familiar with the motif from numerous versions of it, and thus no longer feels the charm of novelty and anticipation, it will then be able to grasp and enjoy the nuances and subtle new inventions in the way it is treated.

—Nietzsche, “From the Souls of Artists and Writers”

If what Nietzsche writes in *Human, All Too Human* has some value for us, maybe it's to do with how we can twist and pervert it slightly to ask a question about what we have been doing over the years—the years we all spent in art school. For if the artistic education of the public is an effect of art's own unfolding and infolding, of the repetitions that alone give rise to differences, it's not easy to come to grips with what exactly art education is, other than that it isn't artistic; or that the art student is not the public, or is from an element of the public whose artistic education has so completely failed that s/he wants only to engage in those repetitions that allow for these observations to be made. So over the years in art education—and this is its singularity—we've been repeating ourselves in a succession of new beginnings, or beginnings that we at least hope to be new, without ever hoping too much, beginnings that inevitably set out from something already well underway.

In some ways it is a terrible fate to be so cut off from the spectacle of art that you see it as your task to make it over the rough terrain into being seen—a task that requires all your judgment. It's a profession, but it is also a sentence—a sentence to engage in life with a certain seriousness, whether you feel that it is serious or not, because you engage in showing things and in a *making visible*. I don't know of any more serious seriousness, even when it skips and hops, or dances. If this is a responsibility, it really is an odd one, as it straddles a relation to the obvious—what is already there will in any event

be seen or felt or heard, and to the arcane. Whatever you do, even if it passes almost unnoticed, prepares for some adjustment of and in the world and the ways it will appear.

It's an alibi, also, if things are getting too hard, and this alibi becomes more evident when the economic structures of luxury—these consumers of art for artistic pleasure—are collapsing around us daily. Nietzsche again:

To aspire to honour here means: "to make oneself superior and to wish this superiority to be publicly acknowledged." If the former is lacking and the latter nonetheless still demanded, one speaks of *vanity*. If the latter is lacking and its absence not regretted, one speaks of *pride*.<sup>1</sup>

All this is frightening enough; first you have an education that is, above all, not artistic. And then you have the art world—which is very often an artistic world—which demands both pride and vanity as attributes of what it recognizes as art, and of the person who makes it. Here is another question about how education unfolds in the peculiar relation between art and its publics. The tension between the idea that anyone can be an artist, and our knowing that only a few individuals wish to be one, is quite different from that between the idea that not everyone is prepared to see art and its place in the world, and our knowledge that so many are ready to declare themselves art lovers. For a start, art outlives art lovers, but artists do not—they are born together and die together. In this way, art and the artistic finally belong together, and it would be vain to think otherwise. Here, in the graduate exhibition, we—you—have ridden this vanity like a tiger in supposing that, despite all the odds against us, we can overcome everything that is artistic, and on top of that, we rode this tiger as if it were nothing more than a lightly tripping fairground animal.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "From the Souls of Artists and Writers," in *Human, All Too Human*, trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 90.

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