



Foster, Hal. "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996
 annotation by Brandon Hopkins (Theories of Media, Winter 2003)

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In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster investigates the goals and practices neo-avant-garde art movements and their relation to modernist movements such as dada, surrealism, and constructivism. Chapter 6 of his book, "The Artist as Ethnographer," deals specifically with what Foster dubs the "ethnographic turn" in art of since the 1960s.

Foster's argument is in part guided by his opening reference to Walter Benjamin's "The Artist as Producer." Favoring the aesthetics of constructivism over that of *proletkult*, Benjamin argues that the *proletkult* artist's identification alienates the proletariat by putting the author in a position of ideological patronage, and that the artist should instead commit himself to solidarity with the worker in his or her material practice. Foster compares the aestheticization of politics in fascism to the capitalization of culture during the Reagan era and argues that the neo-avant-garde's reinscription of institutionalized representations resulted in a new paradigm structurally similar to that presented in Benjamin: the artist as ethnographer.

The focal points of Foster's investigation are the politics of alterity and institutions of art, especially those of the bourgeois-capitalist tradition tending to favor exclusionary definitions of art, artist, community, and identity. He posits that the site of political transformation is always perceived as being elsewhere, in the repressed other—for the modern artist in the proletariat, for the post-modern artist in the post-colonial, the subaltern, the subcultural—and that perception of this elsewhere is distorted by a *realist assumption* (that the other has an authenticity lacking in the self) and a *primitivist assumption* (wherein there is a mapping over of the other, such that the here-and-now self is superior to the there-and-then other). The artist must resist the tendency to project political truth onto this constructed other. Yet though the practice of self-othering is important to the critical practice of art, Foster warns it can lead to self-absorption, ethnographic self-fashioning, and narcissistic self-refurbishing.

Foster claims that anthropology, the science of alterity, has become the lingua franca of artistic practice and critical discourse: culture is read as text and texts as microcosmic cultures. Though this model is intended to undermine the authority of the anthropologist, it may actually reinforce it by positioning the anthropologist as the expert reader of culture-as-text. Foster shows how the model operates in the art world—both in art's critique of its own institutions (the studio, the museum, the gallery) and in its ethnographic investigations of the cultural other. He concentrates especially on site-specific art (noting that a site may be special or temporal, a community or an institution, etc.), and examines a variety of problems that arise when art tries to follow the ethnographic principles of participant-observer. Foster's coverage of these issues is exhaustive, but the main thrust of his argument is that reflexivity is essential for the artist, lest he over-identify with the other in a way that alienates and compromises it.

Foster weighs the value of too much distance against that of too little and concludes with a call for parallaxic works that attempt to frame both the artist and the other and those that explore the discursive breadth and the historical depth of their object. Reflexivity, parody of primitivism, reversal of ethnological roles—subversions of the dominate culture—potentially release the artist from self-contradiction, ideological patronage, and cultural arrogance. Since they call into question the assumptions of many kinds of artistic representation or critical discourse, Foster's observations and arguments are relevant to the investigation of any "object," from social groups to institutions and information networks to media.