

[return to updates](#)

The Destruction of the Artist

the Chuck Connelly story



by Miles Mathis

Chuck Connelly recently posted [a documentary](#) about himself at Youtube, and I was sent a link to it by a fellow artist soon thereafter. It is this documentary that will take us into a larger discussion of the current art market.

Although I didn't recognize Connelly's name at first, I recognized his work immediately. Like most people who know of him, I remembered him as the invisible talent behind Martin Scorsese's short film *Life Lessons*, one of three films by bigname directors that made up the longer anthology film from 1989 called *New York Stories*. This is the one starring Nick Nolte as the artist and Roseanna Arquette as the model/student.



Chuck Connelly

I saw the movie when it came out. I was about 26 at the time, and had just entered the realist art market. I remember thinking that the paintings in *Life Lessons* were the only good thing in the anthology. The short films by Francis Ford Coppola and Woody Allen were weak [I am a big Woody Allen fan, so calm down], and although Nolte was good as usual, *Life Lessons* was also weak. Without the paintings, the film would have fallen into a heap, and it almost did anyway. I watched the film again last month, and my initial impression had not changed—except that it had become more pronounced. The film as a whole was worse than I remembered: Arquette was uniformly annoying and Nolte's character came off as unnecessarily pathetic. The script was dripping with false sentiment and slurpy romanticism, which Scorsese tried to tone down a bit with the edginess of the surroundings. But the art was still very impressive. That had not changed.

Most will find it surprising that I was impressed by Connelly's work in the film. They will think I don't like anything modern, but that isn't true. I like anything good, and Connelly's work is often very very good. Those who have pigeonholed me as a narrow realist should go back and read my papers again, especially those in which I praise Van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch, early Picasso, early Kandinsky, and so on. Remember, I was fired from the ArtRenewal Center for talking too much about Van Gogh and Munch.

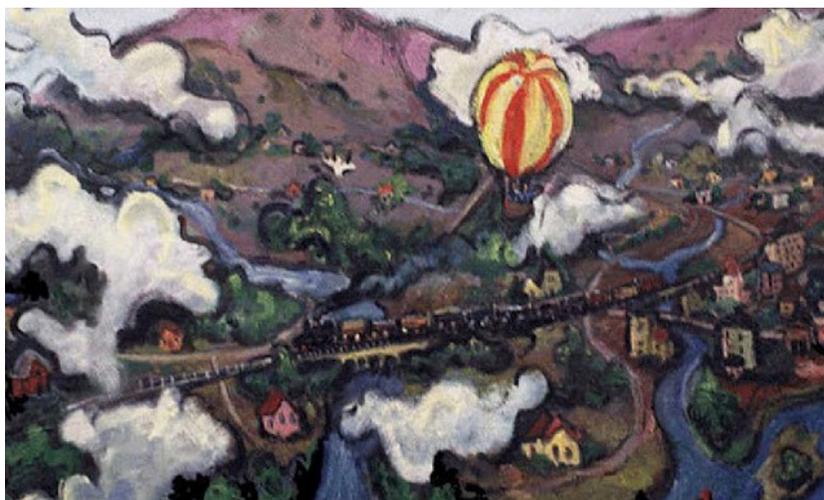


Anyway, I remember wondering who the artist was that was creating the works for this short film. I thought, “Leave it to a Hollywood director to find a living artist who is miles better than the famous people you constantly read about in the magazines. The others just try to be expressive, while this guy actually is. Which is probably why he isn't famous.”

Actually, he *was* kind of famous at the time. In the late 1980s he was doing quite well for a couple of years. He was the toast of New York, with major gallery openings, good press, and all that. But then he got crossways with the galleries. He also apparently didn't grovel enough at the feet of Scorsese, if what we are told is true (more on this later).

Which brings us to the documentary. It is called “The Art of Failure: Chuck Connelly not for sale.” It was produced in 2008 by Jeff Stimmel and aired on HBO in the summer of that year. It then won the

Emmy for best documentary in 2009. It isn't much of a documentary, frankly, and if it didn't have Connelly and his work in it, it would be worthless. I suspect the Emmy was given more for Connelly's work than for Stimmel's. The quality of filming and editing and so on is poor, and even worse is Stimmel's unstated prejudice against Connelly, which we can decipher most easily from the title. By artistic standards, Connelly isn't a failure at all, and those with some sensitivity can pick up on that even through all the negative commentary. Connelly is only a *market* failure, but of course that is a failure of the market. Connelly is not a salesman, he is an artist. If his marketing has failed, then we should blame the market and marketers, not the artist. As we find out later, he was paying these marketers about 95% of the sale price to market him. For that kind of cut, he should now be more famous than Tiger Woods.



That is my central thesis here, and I shouldn't even have to be here driving it home for the thousandth time. And I wouldn't be, except for the fact that no one seems to get it. I researched commentary on the internet, and found that 99% of it or more was predictably misguided. Very few seemed to have learned the "Life Lesson" from this documentary, or from the hell that Connelly has lived through.

Stimmel films Connelly at his worst, since, like a Jerry Springer show, that is more titillating. We see him drunk, chain smoking, yelling at his poor little wife, and so on. And for some reason, Connelly plays along. He didn't ask for a clause allowing him to edit anything out, didn't tone it down when the camera was on him, didn't scale down the booze. Some will think it is because he is trying to create a Van Gogh image, to help sell paintings, but that is obviously not the case. It hadn't worked for two decades, why would it work here? No, Connelly isn't acting, he is just being himself: a tragically open character who is lacking the walls and self-defense mechanisms most normal people take for granted. Whether he has chosen not to build those walls or whether he can't is not really the question. Even he may not know the answer to that. But what should be clear is that this character is the same character we see in the paintings. He can be so expressive *precisely because* he hasn't built the walls. His paintings are open because he is open, and if he protected himself better, his paintings would look protected, too, like most other people's paintings.



No one seems to get that. They think he is self-destructive. I read that over and over. Which is why I purposely titled this paper "The Destruction of the Artist." Connelly hasn't *self*-destroyed. He has been destroyed, very successfully and with malice aforethought, not only by the galleries, critics, clients, and fellow artists, but also by Stimmel and those now commenting negatively on Connelly's character. The entire milieu has conspired to destroy Connelly and all like him. We keep hearing that Connelly is his own worst enemy. But every time we hear that, it is coming from the dirty mouth of someone who is a much greater enemy to Connelly than he could ever be to himself.

To see this with more detail, let us study the interviews in the documentary. The first person we hear from is Mary Lou Swift, an art dealer. The first thing that jumped out at me was her statement very early on that Connelly had been "given the opportunity to have his talent be recognized." On a quick hearing, that sounds pretty innocuous, but if you read a little more closely, you realize how false that wording is. It implies that Connelly was lucky to be given an opportunity to exhibit by the galleries. He is a beneficiary of their grace. This is insidious, because it plants the idea in your mind that the galleries are the primary entities in art, and that the artists are just lucky to be allowed in. But of course that turns the truth on its head. Logically, the artist must be primary entity of art. The galleries are just a facilitator of a sale. To prove this, I ask you to name an artist from the 19th century. Most of you will be able to name dozens. Now I ask you to name a gallery or gallery owner from the 19th century. Only those who have studied art history closely will be able to name a few. As a matter of art or art history, galleries simply aren't important. It is the galleries that are interchangeable, not the artists. It doesn't matter what galleries Corot or Courbet was working with. What matters is the paintings that were created.

continued below



But Mary Lou Swift can't seem to get that simple idea through her skull. Later she says that gallery owner Annina Nosei is “one the most important people in the history of art.” Really? As important as Michelangelo and Leonardo? Without ever creating a work of art. Imagine that. That's sort of like saying that the Manhattan Steinway dealer is as important in the history of music as Mozart or Beethoven. The ignorance of these dealers is only surpassed by their self-obsession. Simply from these interviews, any sane person can see that Connelly's worst enemy is not himself, it is the dealers he had the misfortune to know.

Then we hear from art dealer Eduard Doga, who is the first to say in the documentary that Connelly is his own worst enemy. He says, “There is nobody who did more damage to Chuck than Chuck.” But Doga goes on to admit that Annina Nosei would go to Connelly's studio—while she was his dealer—give him \$500 for a painting and then resell it the next week for \$10,000. Doga tells us Connelly was crazy to be offended by this. He tells us that all dealers do that. Nosei was “helping him develop a market.” According to Doga and Swift, Connelly should just feel lucky to be given the opportunity to sell, at any price. He should bow down to the dealers and kiss their feet and thank them for screwing him over.

This just proves that dealers are the worst enemies to art, artists, and art history it is possible to imagine. Art history has been destroyed in just his way. It is the simple explanation for why art is now so bad, why it is all but extinct. The galleries have purposely destroyed the real artists through these predatory contracts. Any artist with any self-respect will not be screwed like that, which leaves the scab artists that will. But scab artists are neither talented nor expressive. You can't get real art out of a team of hacks, no matter how much you promote them.

Back when art was healthy, artists commonly got 75 to 80 percent of the sale price of the art. Study gallery contracts from the turn of the century (19th c.) and you will find that galleries normally asked for 20 to 25%. After the first war, that went up to 33% in the big cities. By the 1970s, that had gone to 40%, and by the 1990s it went to 50%. Soon after, it went to 60% in the big cities, at which time the galleries could see they didn't even need a contract. The artists would let them get away with anything. All young artists now have to concede to being screwed for a couple of decades, in hopes that they will

eventually reach a level of fame that will allow them to renegotiate for some degree of fairness. Doga is correct: all top-rank dealers do this, as far as they can. As we now know, Connelly was getting 5% from Nosei. She was taking 95% of the sale price. This means that all artists are now scabs, and that they have no self-respect. That is why they aren't really artists. They are slaves to the galleries, and the artwork looks like the sort of work you would get from such people. It is soulless, plastic, pinched, and deformed. In this way, the galleries have successfully destroyed both art and the artist. Connelly was the last resister in an age of no resistance.



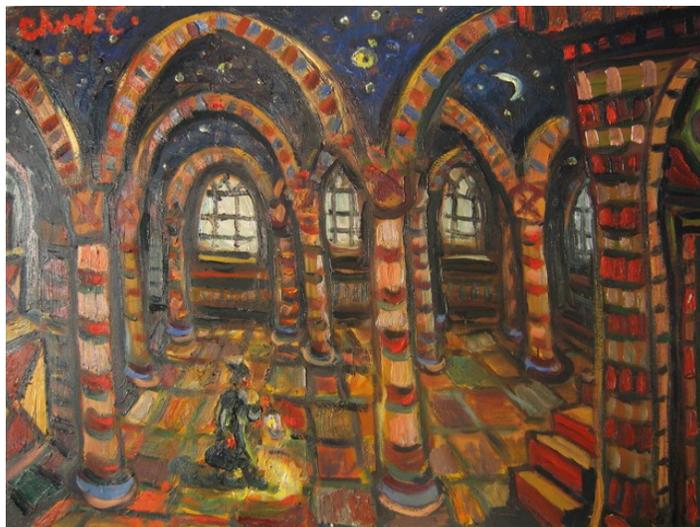
In realism, it is even worse, since there is no level of fame in realism that compares to the avant garde. The realist artist *never* reaches a point where he or she can renegotiate based on fame. Just ask Richard Schmid. This is also becoming true in the avant garde, where galleries are coming to prefer the turnover model for living artists. For decades, the avant garde produced very famous artists, because that was the best way to get prices very high. But with very famous living artists, you can't continue to take 95%. Many dealers have found it more efficient to drive the recently dead artists into the high prices, keeping the living ones in a mid-range, where they are more controllable. The galleries wish to keep living artists in fear of being replaced by other living artists, and they can do that only by keeping the prices down. The galleries don't really like the Schnabels and Hirsts, because these artists can sell at auction, pushing the gallery out of the loop all together.

But back to the documentary. We are told that Connelly also made the mistake of “lambasting” Scorsese. Mary Lou Swift tells us that Connelly “basically said Scorsese was a terrible director.” Both Swift and Matt Garfield—Connelly's “patron”—tell the same story, clucking their tongues the while. Swift says, “and that was the end of Chuck Connelly,” as if he got what he deserved. But being the skeptic I am, I actually read what Connelly said in the newspaper, and it wasn't anything like that. What Connelly said was,

I thought the script was cliché and mundane. It was nothing to die over. It wasn't *Raging Bull*. But the script was perfect as a skeleton for the actors and director. It just held the movie together.

I wouldn't really call that a lambasting. For one thing, Scorsese didn't even write the script for *Life Lessons*, Richard Price did. And Connelly can't be calling Scorsese a bad director, since the implication there is that *Raging Bull* is a great movie. Scorsese directed *Raging Bull*, as everyone knows. Besides, Connelly is just telling the truth. *Life Lessons* is cliché and mundane. Connelly is actually being nice, since the film subtends the cliché. It is not only cliché, it is false. This just proves my contention that artists are now slaves. They are not allowed to have any personal opinions, no matter how tame or obvious. If they step out of line in the smallest way, they are ripe for destruction. The market will chew them up on purpose, spit them out, and continue to relish the wreck decades later, as we see here with these dealers and “patrons.”

Just think of it this way: what if Van Gogh had been caught in a similar situation. Say Van Gogh had worked with Bouguereau on some project, when Bouguereau was still more famous than Van Gogh. And say Van Gogh had been asked about the project, and he had said that it was cliché and mundane. Would we think it fair if Van Gogh had his career ended over that? Would we gloat and say that he had it coming?



From personal experience, my guess is that Scorsese didn't really stoop to destroy Connelly. I doubt that Scorsese is small enough to get offended by so little. More likely he just forgot about him. These rich and famous people are extremely self-absorbed, and they have their own projects which take up all their time. They don't have the time or inclination to promote artists, beyond using them as backdrop painters. I have had dozens of connected people tell me they were going to talk me up or connect me to others, and then do nothing. People are mostly talk, whether they are rich or poor.

No, I suspect that Scorsese is just used by these dealers as a goat to cover their own machinations. Scorsese didn't destroy Connelly, since he was never in a position to do so. Those who were in a position to destroy Connelly were the big-city dealers, and we can see for ourselves that they did it because he didn't bow low enough to them. Connelly was caught up in the century-long war of dealers against artists.

Connelly gets in the only true words in the documentary, as we would expect. He says, “dealers hate artists.” And from the interviews with dealers, we can see for ourselves that is true. Nosei clearly has no respect for artists, since she will screw them over and destroy them with no least remorse. And

Swift and Doga hate artists as well, since they will gloat over their troubles in the ugliest ways. For all these dealers, the artist is just a mass of soft tissue to be squeezed and exploited, then tossed aside. No one takes the side of the artist here: he is on his own, a guppy swimming in a tank of sharks, and when he is chewed up, that is just the way things are. He had it coming because he didn't do exactly what he was told.

Which brings us to the complaints in the documentary about Connelly's ego. After watching the film, I would say he has too little ego, not too much. He still doesn't believe in himself as much as he should. But let us say for the sake of argument that he was very confident of his ability, even cocky. So what? Why do they hold it against him and not against Julian Schnabel, who doesn't even have the charm or sense of humor of Connelly? I don't remember Connelly ever comparing himself to Giotto or Picasso, as Schnabel has. Connelly only thinks he is better than Schnabel, and anyone with eyes can see that is true. Schnabel is just a fat fuck with no discernible talent.



He has never created a decent work of art, much less a great one. He is phony through and through, which is why he ended up in Hollywood, the phony magnet of the universe. Connelly should consider it a blessing he was dumped by those people. Which means this hubbub about Connelly must be more misdirection. Connelly's problem wasn't that he thought he was great or that he was difficult in some way (since Schnabel was always even worse), so it must be that Connelly refused someone sexual favors or refused to be raped contractually. We may assume that Schnabel was allowed to have a big mouth because behind closed doors, with the owners present, he was a mouse. He gave Mary Boone and Leo Castelli what they wanted, although we can only guess what that was.

And it isn't only galleries who will exploit and destroy artists on purpose, it is also clients. Matt Garfield manages to look even more crass and slimy than the art dealers interviewed, and that is no mean feat. The documentarian Stimmel does some things right, and the best thing he does is get Garfield to spend some time on camera, where we can see his true level. Connelly can blame his worst moments on the beer, but Garfield doesn't have that excuse. At his worst, Connelly is a childish drunk, but at his best he is a genius. Garfield is the same at his best and worst: a plastic businessman who, without his ties to Connelly, wouldn't be remembered for anything. It is not Garfield who is doing anything for Connelly, it is all Connelly propping up Garfield. Garfield has now made it into the

history books as a pathetic footnote and gadfly of Connelly. Garfield will be remembered in the same way as that Florentine administrator who complained that David's nose was wrong, but at least he will be remembered for something. If he hadn't bought some of Connelly's paintings at a criminal discount, he would be nothing more than a temporary mannequin for his ties and suits, remembered only by his tailor and his coffin builder.

Later on, we get Mary Lou Swift back on to give us the ten-second armchair psychoanalysis of Connelly, the sort of psychoanalysis we have gotten from art history majors of Van Gogh for over a century. She tells us Connelly drinks because he is miserable, with a glint in her eye. Yes, Mary Lou, you were there firsthand to witness the destruction of something much greater than yourself, which I am sure is the greatest thrill you will ever experience. We are also told that Connelly has romanticized being a drunk, implying that he drinks mainly to look like Jackson Pollock. That's right: he doesn't drink for the same reason everyone else drinks—because it dulls his pain. No, he drinks as an artistic pose. By this logic, Van Gogh also drank his absinthe mainly as a pose. Not because it tasted good and dulled his senses, but to look more like Courbet or Millet to himself. Brilliant analysis from Swift, surely one of the great scientific minds of her generation, maybe of all time!

Immediately after that, Connelly himself tells you how it is, why he must act like he does. It is because he has so much emotion bottled up that even the art won't suffice. The music doesn't do it, the art, the drinking, he still has more. But can someone like Mary Lou Swift understand that? Of course not. She hasn't felt as much emotion in her whole life as Connelly feels in two hours. She can't feel the emotion, and therefore can't see it in front of her. For her and most of these people “in the arts”, Connelly is no different than a thousand other non-talented phonies. You can tell her there is a lot of emotion in a painting, and with someone famous like Van Gogh she might believe it, just to go along; but she can't *see* it for herself because she has never *felt* it. We see this in outtakes from the documentary, where she admits Connelly is talented and gives the Santa HoMo painting as her first example. That is a tip-off that she has no eye, since that is not one of his best. I suspect he would admit that. It is mainly a joke painting. She doesn't really *know* why some people think Connelly is a genius, so why should she defend him? Swift is the sort that is awed by the business prowess of Nosei above all: how could she comprehend Connelly?

But these are the sort of people who run the artworld. They not only don't know the first thing about technique, they don't even know the first thing about emotion—this while promoting expression! They are blind to every last thing about art, having neither feeling nor talent nor an eye nor a basic goodwill to the idea of art. Having any of these things would prevent them from exploiting the artist to the fullest extent, so those at the top of the field are actually the *least* sensitive. As with every other field of endeavor now, the standards are completely inverted. It is as if we had given a test to every person worldwide, to see who had the least sensitivity to and comprehension of art, then put them in control of it. If we did that, we would have precisely the market we have now.

After that, we give a test to everyone worldwide to see who has the least native artistic ability and the least sensitivity to emotion and truth and subtlety. We then install the winners as top artists. If we did that, we would have precisely the market we have now. Then we give a test to everyone worldwide, to see who has the least logical and analytic mind, and the least integrity and the least concern for the truth. We then put them in control of science. We then give a test to everyone worldwide, to see who has the least amount of altruism, the least integrity, and the least fellow feeling, and we put them in control of politics. If we did that, we would have people like Rumsfeld and Cheney running things, and guess what?

And you wonder why Connelly drinks? I don't think it takes a psychiatrist to figure it out. Connelly drinks because, like the rest of us, he finds himself in an inverted world, where nothing makes sense. He finds himself a natural artist in a world where art is controlled by the grubby iron fists of non-artists. He finds himself a feeling person in a world of very little feeling. Like the rest of us, he is brought up as a child to expect some level of fairness, but as an adult he finds almost none. He is brought up on sports, where the fastest person wins; but in real life, it doesn't work that way. Merit is only an empty word, and in most fields it is a ghost. Like the rest of us, he is taught that the cream rises to the top, but the reality is that the cream in most fields is fake and full of air, like CoolWhip. In art, it is even worse, since art isn't even CoolWhip anymore: it is more like licking an old battery.

Some people can change fields, but not Connelly. He is a born artist. You might as well ask a hawk to begin spelunking for a living or a cat to begin giving surfing lessons. But it doesn't really matter: Connelly has done the work and that is the bottom line. The paintings are in the world and nothing can change that. From the perspective of the Muse, everything is good and as it should be. She does not care whether Connelly drinks or not, or sells or not, or whether he rises to the top or not. Her concern is that the paintings get painted, and they have. And a successful Connelly may have painted less or worse, we don't know. This may have all been planned to get the most out of Connelly.

Connelly can't change the art world, but he can be easier on himself. He should sit in his studio, surrounded by his work, and be very satisfied. To paraphrase Lao-tze, it is not ultimately the fruits of your work that are important, it is the work itself that is important. The painting is what it is, and has the same value no matter what price is on it. If Van Gogh's paintings had *never* sold, they would still be the same paintings, and we can say the same thing about Connelly's paintings.