

Food for thought

This exhibition has one outrageous and radical objective: to please as many people as possible. A cynical modernist will think this naive; a conventional pragmatist may think it vain. Yet, given skill and taste, an artist needs only a suitable strategy to achieve this objective. The exhibition visitor will judge skill and taste. Strategy is outlined here to free this artist from the charges of naivety and vanity.

To please as many people as possible a broad range of often opposing views must be reconciled. The most important of these is the intellectual/aesthetic dichotomy. Academic discussions on art can always be refuted by the common-sense rebuke "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like". The intractable positions typified as 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' can only be resolved by answering the unanswerable question "What is Art?"

The answer to this question is pleasantly irksome.

Mindless

In 1904 American psychologist and philosopher William James published *Does 'Consciousness' Exist?*¹ In it he denies that the object – subject relation is fundamental. "The distinction of mind and matter, the contemplative ideal, and the traditional notion of 'truth', all need to be reconsidered if the distinction of subject and object is not accepted...."² His view is consistent with scientific objectivity – there is no 'mind', only 'matter'. Three years after James abolished the subject from philosophy, Kandinsky abolished the object from painting. In 1910 a Futurist Technical Manifesto stated '...movement and light destroy the substance of objects.'

The art world went mad because modernism lost its 'mind'.

The severance of object from subject has far more destructive consequences than the conception of shocking art and unfathomable philosophy. The disaster of Monetarist economics, for example, is simply the loss of objectivity. The production of tangible goods and services has been replaced with profit by paper speculation. This explains why the greatest producer of capitalist commodities is Communist China³. Parallel absurdities can be found in almost any field of human endeavour: science, medicine, politics, religion, sport and especially art.

"Oh, painting bores me."⁴

Almost as soon as Kandinsky abolished the object from art, Duchamp put it back⁵. *Objet trouvé* is the affirmation that art had not only lost its mind, it had also lost its skill. Sophisticated intellectual posturing replaced craftsmanship. The division of high and low art was confirmed. Now, students go to Art School not to learn how to paint, but to learn how to defend their inability to paint. Modern urbanity is ugly but it's smart. Novelty is greater than aesthetics. "All art is quite useless."⁶

The division of object from subject is supported by the division of aesthetics from intelligence. To reconcile the intellectual/aesthetic dichotomy simply reunite object and subject. Painters, therefore, should paint objects.

Which objects might please as many people as possible?

Food

'...consciousness is almost completely pre-empted by hunger.'⁷

Food sits at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs. Eating is a pleasure universally understood – more so than any other ecstasy; sex, sport, drugs or religion.

And yet the subject of eating is removed from its object – nutrition. Expensive restaurants offer a ‘dining experience’ rather than sustenance. Haut-cuisine is ridiculed⁸ for the same pretentiousness as ‘high’ art. A McDonald’s hamburger contains so few nutrients and so many preservatives that it cannot be defined as food. The lack of nutritional objectivity produces phenomena that range from life threatening (anorexia, obesity) to the merely irritating (celebrity chefs). Modern cuisine is as fatuous as modern art.

Modernism is the new Conservatism

‘Modern’ typically describes art in which the traditions of the past have been thrown aside in a spirit of experimentation.⁹ This spirit is now exhausted. There are no more traditions to throw out. Yet, the contemporary art world seeks to conserve the modernist tradition of rejecting traditions. Modernist convention has become government policy through Arts funding and education curricula. Commercial galleries sell imitation Rothkos and Pollocks, furniture warehouses stock abstract paintings matching the colours of their lounge suites. Contemporary art - performance ‘events’ and video installations - aim to defy traditions that don’t even exist. ‘The art for our time’ is anachronistic almost as soon as it is created.

If contemporary art is out of time, then one might best look forward by looking at the past. Perhaps it is time to reject the tradition of rejecting traditions.

Painting is one of the oldest human traditions. It is prompted by one of the most human of desires: the urge to imitate.

Mimesis

‘If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish.’¹⁰

Mimesis is any act of imitation. Mimesis can be unconscious (dreams, visions, memories, reflections, and fantasies) or conscious (games, fiction in film and literature, and art). Mimesis can emulate the existing world (documentary film, still-life painting) or a non-existing world (science fiction, surrealist painting). Play is mimesis. Children’s games, toys, dolls, models etc are mimetic. Learning is mimetic.

‘...nothing is so difficult as defining art... In fact, nothing is easier - the job can be done in three words: art is mimesis.’¹¹

Validity

While modern art is no longer dominated by mimesis, modern culture is. Berlusconi is an imitation statesman. Afghanistan is an imitation democracy. Greece has an imitation economy. A Big Mac is imitation food, Facebook has imitation friends, Internet pornography is imitation sex, and modern artists imitate each other.

The relationship between real and imitation is parallel to the relationship between object and subject. The idea that unites these notions is ‘validity’. An object is validated by its subject. Reality is validated by imitating it. Art imitates life because art validates life. Validity renders the intellectual/aesthetic dichotomy pointless and trumps vanity and naivety.

The most sinister of modernist traditions is the Artist’s Statement – The Manifesto. Art is not validated by issuing declarations. Validity is granted by the viewer.

Das Fest

This exhibition has one outrageous and radical objective: to please as many people as possible. The tactic to achieve this is threefold.

Restore the pleasure in imitated things,
Reject the tradition of rejecting traditions,
Reunite object and subject.

'...through imitation we learn our earliest lessons, while all take pleasure in the things imitated'¹²

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¹ <http://psychclassics.asu.edu/James/consciousness.htm>

² Bertrand Russel, *History of Western Philosophy*.

³ John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards*.

⁴ Terence Koh, interviewed by Tenzing Barshee for *NZZ Das Magazine* 30 May 2008.

⁵ *Fountain*, first exhibited in 1917, is a urinal purchased from a hardware store. Duchamp's answer to the question 'What is Art?' is 'Something you piss on'.

⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

⁷ A. H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*.

⁸ see Mr Creosote, *Monty Python and The Meaning of Life*.

⁹ Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*.

¹⁰ René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*.

¹¹ Stefan Beyst, *Mimesis and Art* <http://d-sites.net/index.htm>

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*