

The Stuckists

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An open letter to Sir Nicholas Serota

As the opening of the new Bankside Tate nears, Billy Childish and Charles Thomson, co-founders of the anti-Brit Art, pro-painting group, The Stuckists, critical of Sir Nicholas Serota's directorship of the existing Tate Gallery - which has included the £700,000 purchase of thirty-one basalt blocks (art by Joseph Beuys) - address some pertinent issues for consideration in his future purchasing and exhibitions policy.

Shock of the New, or Yawn at the Obvious?

Any poor soul who comes to contemporary art looking for vision, truth or simply just a way ahead is going to be very, very disappointed.

Post Modernism, our 'official avant-garde' is a cool, slick marketing machine where the cleverness and cynicism of an art which is about nothing but itself, eviscerates emotion, content and belief. Never before has a movement that proclaims itself to be leading the way trailed so far behind the wishes and concerns of the society to which it considers itself superior.

Since the 1960's there has been a paradigm shift towards decentralisation, spirituality and a new respect for natural laws. Post Modernism's febrile introversion hasn't even noticed this taking place and instead continues to peddle glibness and irony in its vacuous attempt to appear dangerous and fashionable. People don't want out of town supermarkets, they don't want GM food and they don't want conceptual art.

The idiocy of Post Modernism is its claim to be the apex of art history - whilst simultaneously denying the values that make art worth having in the first place. It purports to address significant issues but actually has no meaning or being beyond the convoluted dialogue it holds with itself. Art's value comes from the level of vision and insight possessed by the artist. This

is an ever-deepening process. The priority of the Brit Artist, however, appears to be the maintenance of his or her media kudos in the art brat pack. This level of consciousness is reflected in the superficial, lazy and gimmicky nature of their work.

The making of art informs much of its meaning. Art that isn't made or paid for by experience has no meaning. In 1915 the Dadaist joke was urgent and outrageous: as a statement of Post Modern irony it is dull beyond belief. If there is any innovation and vision in post-modernism, it is in the field of art marketing.

God died in western art sometime during The First World War, and, although it was good fun knocking him off his high horse, watching the art brats of today kick him whilst he's down is somehow less amusing (especially whilst their dealers, like upmarket used-car salesmen, stand in the shadows, wearing their Gucci uniforms, clicking their calculators and whispering into their vulgar cell phones). The work these puppet masters promote we classify as 'car accident art'. For the only audience it attracts is one lured by morbid curiosity.

The founders of Dadaism would deplore the conformism and lack of courage shown by these latter-day pretenders. You can't help feeling that Saatchi's insipid sensationalism would make Duchamp wish that he'd never ever exhibited his piss-pot in the first place and had become a water-colourist instead.

The dreary objects and cliched assemblages of the latest 'art stars' litter the floors of our galleries competing to bore us with their profound obviousness. Meanwhile the critics perform ludicrous mental gymnastics in order to say something about things about which there is nothing to say because they are about nothing.

It should be pointed out that an everyday object e.g. a bed, in its normal environment, i.e. a bedroom, must always remain only bed. Indeed it would still be only a bed even if it were displayed in a department store window or thrown into a canal. Furthermore we assert that the hapless bed would remain no less of - yet no more than - only a bed if it were suspended from the top of the Eiffel tower or somehow landed on the moon. It seems that the said bed ceases to be only a bed and somehow becomes

art when placed in the 'contextualising' space of a gallery. We deduce that the credit for this stupendous metamorphosis should therefore be credited to the gallery owner. In today's art world it is the gallerist who performs the miraculous transformation of the mundane into a work of genius!

Let us now consider what happens to such an object in this unfortunate situation, taking perhaps the 'artification' of a brick instead of a bed for the sake of variety. In its former life the brick had no meaning - only an existence and a potential function (most usefully as part of a wall). As it is now no longer merely a brick but a work of art, and as art by definition is an activity of meaning, some meaning must be found. A curator of interpretation appears on national television and pronounces the brick to be a symbol of the artist's disadvantaged upbringing in Birmingham. A leading critic could equally as well see it as a dialectic on feminism. A gallery visitor, in turn, might perceive it as a minimalist refinement of Carl André's famous rectangle.

In actual fact, because the brick is 'about' nothing, it can be about any damn thing you like. This makes the special art object completely redundant, as the same imaginative process can be achieved just as easily by opening one's eyes in any environment and focusing on the first object in sight - the logical progression of art into life will have been fully realised and the need for art completely extinguished. Well done!

This shows both the ridiculousness of a school which subscribes to these practices and the fallacy of continual 'progress' in a linear art history. Far from being the pinnacle of achievement, Brit Art is less industrious, thought-provoking and meaningful than the average display by a local amateur art society.

Painting, with its translation of inner experience into accessible and recognisable images, has a depth of resonance and mystery that is as essential to the human psyche as food and water is to the human body.

Pigment is integral to man's self-expression. The painting of pictures has endured since the Lascaux caves, it brings us to an immediate confrontation, recognition and emotional

engagement with our potentials and limitations. It is only by daring to communicate with this honesty that we meet our true selves.

A painting by Delacroix, a water colour from an adult education class or a child's drawing, will always identify themselves as art, even if found discarded in the street. We call this 'the ism of what things is'.

Whatever its context a painting remains a painting. Similarly a dead shark remains just a lifeless fish, whatever its context. And no matter how much the gullible may pay for it today, Post Modernism is destined for the dustbin of history, whereas the making of pictures will always be central to humanity's knowledge and understanding of itself.

Billy Childish and Charles Thomson
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