

NOTES ON BATAILLE'S CONCEPT OF APROPRIATION AND EXCRETION, and ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE FIXED INTERPRETATION OF WORKS OF ART

The method of art making in which the interpretation of the work is entirely determined by the artist is a relatively new concept. This particular approach may be seen as one that directly opposes modernism. As meaning ceases to become ambiguous, the idea of a center (god, science, universality of experience) is driven from the work.

In the past, a work's ambiguity has often been seen as strength, for two reasons:

1. In modernism, this ambiguity was said to have lent the work Autonomy. By not relying on an existing pre-ordained set of signs in order to make a statement (in the sense that language does) the work separates itself from and declares itself independent of the existing world.

2. In post-modernism, ambiguity is sometimes seen as a metaphor for the lack of certainty as to the truth of commonly agreed upon meanings attributed to signs or symbols.

Modernism's reliance on the presumption of the universality of all human experience in certain absolutes is a reliance contingent on faith. Such a method of art-making can never dwell in the concrete reality that is the world. Post-modernism's assumption that communication is impossible fails to recognize the reality of the discourse through which we understand ideas as they are presented to us.

Both of these ideas rely on a belief system that holds art's role in society as a purveyor of mystic truths. These truths may be metaphysical, social, and cultural.

Both bastardize the clarity of their message through the vapid valorization of ambiguity.

If, as Bataille proposes, the two dominant modes of human interaction are indeed appropriation and excretion, then artists, in



order to communicate or represent the world in which they live, must acknowledge this and act accordingly.¹ The artist who presumes to create original artworks is doomed to a series of mute, incommunicative gesticulations, like one who has suddenly lost his voice. These are the gesticulations of the artist who attempts to communicate broad universal truths. The viewer recognizes this attempt and unconsciously substitutes his own ideas for the ones the artist has intended. Two deaf old men conversing with each other make all the gestures, little nods of understanding, pauses in speech, and signs of recognition that people who understand one another do, but it is merely the hollow shell of a conversation that they are carrying out.

A work of art may fix its interpretation, and thus attain clarity, by utilizing signs as they have come to be understood by a particular audience. By locating this combination of sign and audience there is a possibility of communicating without egregiously altering meaning. Taking signs whole and unaltered into a work is appropriation. The re-presentation of these signs is excretion.

In the 1960's the group of artists known as the Vienna Actionists executed a series of performances that carried the idea of transgression in art to an unprecedented extreme. The artists Gunter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and Otto Muhl used blood, self-painting, animal sacrifice, self-mutilation, and sex in an iconoclastic and self-destructive way that was more often ironic and humorous in its associations (particularly in the cases of Brus and Muhl) rather than spiritual. The extremity of their transgressions have made subsequent attempts at transgression in an art context seem pathetic. For the contemporary artist, it is no longer possible to create transgressive work through physical or sexual violence, since these extremes are everywhere in our popular culture and have lost their transgressive quality.

After the death of art, (was it ever alive?), what options are open to the artist that he

may continue his practice? I suggest the one-liner as a possible solution to this problem. The one-liner makes use of both appropriation and excretion simultaneously as it evades the essentialism inherent in the Grand Idea. In its combination of appropriated elements, the one-liner functions as a stepladder towards its own multiple implications. Each person's reaction reveals something of both the joke and themselves. In the same way that a joke provokes different reactions based on the context in which it is told, an artwork reflects back each viewer's particular perception. In this way the object asserts itself and may stand in judgment even as it is being judged. However, there is a problem with this game-like system of art-making and art criticism, in which the shuffling of variables is of primary concern.

Herbert Read, in his essay 'Psycho-analysis and the problem of aesthetic value'² attacks the Freudian psychoanalytic view of art as a reductive vehicle for a subject. Instead, Read argues for a more formal evaluation. Without this focus on formal concerns, Read points out that the conceptual gesture would be little more than a game itself, a useless diversion. Art must bear some relationship to real lived everyday experience. But how? The experience of art calls into question any notion of the real. In our suspension of disbelief before a work of art, what had once seemed concrete reality begins to crumble. Bataille says of poetry: '...starting from the moment when this unreality immediately constitutes itself as a superior reality, whose mission is to eliminate (or degrade) inferior vulgar reality, poetry is reduced to playing the standard role of things...'³

I believe there is yet another solution to the problem of ambiguous meaning, and this is to expand our definition of art to include objects that have no meaning at all. Specifically, objects that were not created with the intention of becoming works of art.

Art that serves a purpose, i.e., is not useless, renounces its status as art and becomes

merely applied art. ⁴ Although it does not necessarily follow that all useless things are art, I believe that the intention to create a real thing and its subsequent failure could also constitute a work of art. I refer to a real thing in the sense that art and real things are often identical in appearance. ⁵ Heidegger referred to these failed pieces of equipment as present-at-hand, meaning that they made themselves ostentatious through the frustration experienced at their attempted use. ⁶ Heidegger found this ostentation to be bland and boring, but is art so different? The object in question would possess a number of interesting qualities. In some ways it would resemble a kitsch object by carrying with it the history of its own debasement. But it would also be linked to the performative in that this would be a compressed physical history of debasement rather than a cultural one. It differs from the readymade in that it is not a functioning real thing made useless by its declared status as art. More likely it was made useless by poor design or craftsmanship. Whereas the readymade could be put back into use with little effort, the new type of object is dead to the old world of useful things and may only go on living in its artificial zombie-like state as a work of art. It differs from a camp object in that it is not a failed work of art, it possesses no such glamour. As a failed real thing it is difficult to surpass its unintentional banality. Broken machines and crumbling architecture are like blind spots in our vision. Memory glosses over them as if they weren't there. Because of their invisibility, they are the haunt of crime and this makes their banality ominous. The laughter that accompanies the failed real thing is a cold and heartless one.

NOTES

1. Bataille, Georges. 'The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to my Current Comrades) (1929-30)', in Allan Stoekl (Ed.), Bataille, Georges. Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

2. Read, Herbert. 'Psycho-analysis and the Problem of Aesthetic Value'. The Forms of Things Unknown: Essays Toward an Aesthetic Philosophy. New York: Faber and Faber, pg. 76-93.

3. Bataille, Georges. 'The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to my Current Comrades) (1929-30)', in Allan Stoekl (Ed.), Bataille, Georges. Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pg.97.

4. Richter, Gerhard. 'Notes, 1988'. The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, pg.170 . Here, Richter is referring specifically to art objects that function in a practical way, be it socially, politically or even culturally; graphic design for example.

5. Danto, Arthur. 'Works of Art and Mere Real Things'. The Transfiguration of The Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pg.3.

6. Heidegger, Martin. The Origin of the Work of Art .