

# I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts... But There Is A Need For A Realignment

## *Part 1 and Only 1*

"Everyone in the art world is super-desperate for the next cool thing."  
—Don Carroll, co-director of Jack the Pelican Presents, Williamsburg, NY

"Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)"  
—as sung by Kenny Rogers

The current state of the visual arts in the Bay Area is unsustainable. Not solely because the low and middle end markets have nearly collapsed, but philosophically. A lack of self-awareness has created a drive to foster an art scene that feeds no one, but costs everyone to participate, becoming simply an event, a spectacle, and not at all a movement. Alas, there is no revolution underfoot. And, a divide is growing: on one side are the compulsory hugs, tall-boys and street set metering out a mechanistic existence through compulsory exhibition of cool images, while the on the other are the powerbroker, friends-only, establishment network serving up socially relevant events in the name of art deemed valid via limited support by the academy...and on both sides there appears to be a blindness as to why—beyond self-serving means—is there value to anyone making artwork today.

The debate of how Art is necessary in any real practical sense (besides completely vain interests on the part of the artist) boils down to applying—then accepting—levels of *value*, whether economic, spiritual, intrinsic, applied...and often all of the above. While most casual art viewers can be self-satisfied with the use of the terms "good art" and "bad art" as applied value judgments (based on *gut reaction*), this only satisfies superficially. And, a gut reaction isn't in itself faulty...but it exists without either a historical or academic relation—for example: your gut reaction can be seriously impaired after drinking—so lets try and separate the street party circus as well as the walk-in-the-park/meal-as-art events from an actual debate on value, and purpose.

"It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident."  
- Theodor Adorno

To begin, let's speak to the value of an artworks *relative utility*. That is, what good does the artwork itself do? Can it cut tomatoes and aluminum cans like a Ginsu knife? Can it provide 3,404,000 articles (and counting...) of information like Wikipedia? Can it raise your blood pressure and dilate your eyes? Again, what purpose does Art have beyond a historically autonomous existence? If, as Robert Smithson has said, "utility and art don't mix," and visual pleasure *via*

displeasure is a dead alley (read: shock), and with the current explosion of new art, art objects and art production without any increase in the economic backbone to support it, then Art needs—desperately—a realignment...a realignment away from street-level academic schlock that implies a newfound renaissance in creativity hidden amongst elitism mired in fake fine art illustration...or simply poorly trained hands and minds.

Dig the forth paragraph: I'm calling to realign the system—the endless drive from the academy, the DIY art space, the blue chip gallery to produce and show, produce and show—to once again take a backseat to a working system of experience and debate that is based on fairly universal qualities, something akin to knowledge or experience gained through sensory *aesthetics*.

Look to the un-cool. Remember metaphor? Remember the value of slow time passing? Remove entertainment from art. Remove that fake-ass Red, Yellow, Blue artist's color wheel. Trust your eyes. Trust your body in relation to the art. DO NOT JUST COPY YOUR FRIENDS! Quirky isn't necessarily good. 5, 10 or 100 versions of the same subject does not make it more interesting...nor does it mean you're a success because you sell them. Remember history. Challenge reality, not just your drunken psychedelic 80's steam punk emo garage rock hipster trust fund ghetto mash-up. Make art from what your mind *can't* invent through cleverness!

Artists of the Bay Area need to initiate critical conversations on artwork. Technology has allowed us to replicate images over and over again, and language has suffered. The limit of text characters in Tweets are actually limits in capacity! Generate a considered response, and present that in the face of the maker. If not directly in the galleries, then on the blogs. If not on the blogs, then make Facebook useful for a change. For if there is no conversation to be had, shouldn't we just take the art off the wall?!

The conversation needs to begin with aesthetics. Aesthetics as a value system for Art is free from the casual "good" and the "bad" labeling of artworks. Aesthetics deal with the nature and expression of beauty, laws of perception and artistic expression *that is pleasing*. Pleasure is a subjective value of course, but it neither sets off any sort of limiting nor segregated value system as long as we allow freedom of choice. And, since Western democratic values *are* based on this supposed freedom of choice (listen: *See How We Are* by X ), to return to the application of aesthetics as a condition for viewing, understanding and researching Art, one must first identify and condition themselves to accept a subjective yet *indifferent* desire with the Arts.

I won't define any one simple viewpoint here, but in using the term *indifference*, I mean to define it as a desire to achieve goals, without any set, predetermined or pure means to an end. A crass way of saying it is "Art is *pointless*," and defining it as such—admitting it as such—frees Art from utilitarian shackles allowing Art to

become an *addition* to necessities of life—art is an added bonus to living. Therefore, as it remains unnecessary to the simple act of living, we shouldn't have to put up with all the crap out there on display.

Even in our modern era, Art continues to fluctuate between high-class/middle-class/low-class/no-class interpretations of necessity—just compare the Museum of Modern Arts of the world—their collections and for what reason it has been collected—to any metropolitan or industrial zone where the taggers and bombers are taking to the tracks to paint their names, their portraits and claim their minor stake to the land. There is a war going on, to establish the right to determine value. Where a literal monetary value associated to artwork is concerned, Art has only been available to the rich. But in my argument, I choose to separate the word value from money, in order to allow people who can't afford artwork to participate in the debate.

Furthermore—and again—we must move beyond the discussion or statement that "Art is good for you," as "good" for you is a value judgment related to utility, therefore unacceptable. To take hold of this return to a public use of the philosophy of aesthetics with indifference provides at least one answer to a question put forth by Flaubert when he defined Art in his *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*: "What use is Art since machines can make things better and quicker?"

Aesthetics, dependent on our sensory reactions and filtered through our indifference to any related utility to the art object, as a judgment system, would include both the high and low, minimal and expressive forms of Art witnessed in all categories of art-making, essentially *declassifying* artworks value from what they are (Is it painting? Is it drawing? Is it sculpture, new media, new genre?) in order to valuing what artworks *mean* through the individual's perception (e.g., being enthralled by a previously unseen image, overwhelming presence of physical form, cutting and sly humor built into non-iconic and unclassifiable prose/poetry texts). But aesthetics goes no where without candid response, a back and forth, a willful debate.

If everything under the term Art is then to be considered through a system of aesthetic debate, you might start to ask: is there anything left to be excited about? Would there be cause to demand the "aesthetics of the aesthetic," a high theorizing of classifications, re-classifying art again within utility, making art once again comparable to useful value, and will utility always return—in the end—to any discussion of art? Without objective criticism, one could argue, where do standards and communication allow us to agree, disagree and/or debate? Or, one might ask the question: "Don't pure subjective rules for viewing Art lead to one subjective view becoming 'better' than another?"

The answer is found in having the position of indifference when viewing art. Indifference allows for the *impersonal, formal* response to critique. All critique should be interpretive; all critique would be a growing, expanding view of

relationships related to a communication between viewer and artwork. Indifference, as the counter-balance to pure subjective interpretation, is the filter to in which to absorb useful subjective insight, and to allow full dismissal of *un-pleasurable* viewpoints. The critical feedback-loop should naturally be this way. If artwork itself is not utility, therefore providing no *solution*, only a perspective on *something*, then the relevance of art does not have a commodity or usefulness upon which to base overriding truths—it is interpretation of aesthetics that is indifferent to the power of anything but the one-on-one, art-to-viewer relationship. In short: all responses welcome...

But maybe what it comes down to is that more artists need verbal skill and self-critical honesty. If you're not engaging in anything more than your small circle of coolness, what really do you mean to accomplish? Can you not see your null-result existence determined through decades of free wheeling post-modernist thought that you've absorbed subconsciously through exposure to the academy? I quote Hank Willis Thomas: *"people are so intensely afraid of selling out that they either don't have the motivation to push their work to the next level or they're too stubborn. They would rather their 500 friends know that they are the shit than to have the world kind of be affected by their work, and be considered a sellout or have their authenticity diluted."*

Take social networking as a parallel. You're meant to feel part of something...while seriously physically disconnected from your "friends." Do you feel "part of something" when out on First Weeknight Art Walk, amongst the throng? Do you feel part of something when standing in front of this painting, that sculpture or next to that running video? Do you ever speak in a hushed tone: "I could do that..." But why is it your inner voice isn't saying: "I can do *better* than that!" A revolution can't begin unless you start taking a side...

In this small wish for a realignment to making, viewing and discussing works of art, somehow more artists, curators and administrators will begin to give better attention and service to being critical, to be expressive as well as active in generating cause and debate to really understand works of art, and the seemingly unrelenting drive to continue to produce more of the same. There is no doubt of a general lack of critical debate in Art—you will find this the prevailing attitude going around literary/cultural circles—and that is, in one opinion, because the value of aesthetics *as well as* the non-indoctrinated individuals voice is *undervalued* in contemporary discourse, a discourse that is highly controlled by certain aligned powers. The interpretation of artworks by the voice of the masses is undervalued precisely because too much reliance is placed on the pre-validation of artwork by curators who have chosen it for display, the few avenues of public debate in the region (and mostly online), and the tightly controlled grant system. Curators are unfortunately overly supported in their contemporary position to value-judge artwork and artists...and the judgments exist not via any documented philosophy, but politically—curators care too much about their position as cultural conditioners, and their "job" of arranging art is often less

about the artworks' aesthetics as it is about the curators' hierarchical position in the art world. I feel able to make these comments, for I have many times taken on the role of curator, and see that any pressure I put on curators to improve their awareness and position is just as relevant and necessary for myself (and, I am not alone: read Anton Vidokle's *Art Without Artists?*). And while I personally might maintain a certain level of subjectivity in a curatorial role—as I do in my role as an artist—I attempt The role of curator is to provide a context for debate, not dictate nor entertain...and as much as possible, not to exclude.

Even though there is so much to see in the Bay Area visual arts, there seems so little to gain, aesthetically. Without any movement or manifesto-based philosophy to drive a realignment towards honesty behind debated value—or even a multitude of differing philosophies in constant debate—art is becoming akin to busy work, and even yes, dare I say it, a hobby. It can be fun! Everyone can do it! In today's reality, an artist statement is far from an adequate philosophy, existing more as a pre-determined filter for the art experience. Where is the editing? A web site isn't a portfolio—it is a reduced and insufficient representation of what once was. Where is the editing? An exhibition of artwork seems no longer a visual manifesto or a conscientious risk, it's become an excuse to drink and pat each other on the back, acknowledging that everyone is having a good time...or are they really?

-SB – Oakland, CA 2010