

# HOW TO BE A CRITIC: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO 'ARTBOLLOCKS.'

***Brian Ashbee offers some tips on how to play the theory game - and win.***

'A picture is worth a thousand words. Vision is primary, according to this view, and language secondary. But not any more - not, at least, in the visual arts, where the experience of the work is often meaningless without the critical text to support it. This is especially true of much installation art, photography, conceptual art, video and other practices generally called post-modern. Why **are** these forms so dependent on theoretical discourse?

Traditional arts, up to and perhaps even including the abstract art of the 1950s, involved the construction of a relational model of the visual world. A picture. An alternative strategy to modelling the real, and much favoured today, is simply to **appropriate** it. This typically involves the use of actual objects - not images but the thing itself. Gerhart Richter makes the point in a note from his private journal of May 5 1990 - and he is not wrong when he traces the impulse back to Marcel Duchamps:

*The invention of the ready-made seems to me to be the invention of reality; in other words the radical discovery of reality, in contrast with the view of the world **image**...since then, painting no longer **represents** reality, but **is itself** reality..*

So much of the art of the recent past can be seen as attempts to get away from mere images, and confront the viewer with the real. But the attempt may well be doomed because it seems to me that art based on appropriation of the real requires language to make it meaningful in a way that art based on picturing the world does not.

Take the first case of appropriation in the history of art, Duchamp's ready-mades, mentioned by Richter. The urinal of 1919, signed by Duchamps 'R. Mutt', is not a model of the real world, nor is it a picture; but what it **is** modelling, and subverting, is the **art** world. This is not art to be looked at; this is art to talk about and write about. It doesn't reward visual attention; it generates text. In that, it is the model for much art since the 60s, which we have come to call post-modern: art as a machine for producing language.

And if post-modern works of art, typically based on appropriation, require a sustaining network of theoretical discourse to make them accessible, then the question arises of who is to provide that theoretical discourse? Is it to be furnished by the curator, the critic or the artist?

The art world is teeming with professionals -curators, critics, journalists and many others - who are in the business of imposing their own narratives on the practice of artists, manipulating, for their own ends, the primary product that artists produce. It's a situation analogous to that of the food industry where the primary producers of food, the farmers, are relatively powerless compared with the big supermarket chains, whose buying power enables them to drive down prices in the name of consumer choice, but it reality to enable them to make vast profits. In the food industry, the primary producer is in a weak position. As in the art industry. If you are a farmer producing milk, you have few options. What you need to do is to study the concept of Added Value. That is, you don't just produce milk, you turn it into something more valuable: you process it further, into organic yoghurt, say, then find your own market and sell it direct. Artists, too, can add value to their basic product if they can further process and package it; that is, if they can impose their own narratives on the work, finding a literal space for its exhibition, and a theoretical space for its reception.

Where the art world differs from that of food retailing is that the art market is not a free market. It's rigged; hugely distorted by the presence of public subsidy - the grants and funding available to organisations and individuals deemed to be producing 'significant' work. To get access to this, it's even more important that artists create the right theoretical discourse to surround their work.

The acknowledged masters of these new black arts are the ex-Goldsmiths' fixers, Hirst and Maloney. Martin Maloney's story is well-known, but like an old morality tale, grows in the re-telling. He left Goldsmith's college in 1993, aged 32. He turned his flat into a gallery, including his bathroom and kitchen - which he called Lost in Space, where he showed the art of friends and contemporaries which, like any shrewd popular journalist, he branded with his own name: Wannabe Art. This, he maintained, showed a reaction to the aggressive, in-your-face qualities of Young British Artists, offering a return to 'sweeter, more beautiful and hand-made values'. Maloney's message was that this was the new direction art was going to take. He wrote an essay for the Sensation catalogue, in which he appeared to praise many of his predecessors from Goldsmiths'

while working away to foster awareness of the new movement which *he* had created. Maloney persuaded Charles Saatchi that he, Maloney, was a genius, and Saatchi became an avid collector of the new work - with the current exhibition of 'The New Neurotic Realism' and a catalogue with a painting by Maloney on the cover. The ICA, keen to get in on the act, mounted an exhibition of the new work, also featuring Maloney, with the swinging title 'Die Young Stay Pretty.' What Maloney appears to have done, in effect, through his influence on Saatchi, is to engineer change; to invent art history through hype. But it may not be quite that easy; in five years, 'The New Neurotic Realism' will probably be completely forgotten. It's already clear that Maloney's skills do not lie in painting; only a marketing genius could have achieved success with work of such embarrassing ineptitude.

Saatchi, and the system of which he is the most visible symbol, is obsessed with novelty, always on the lookout for, or rather creating, tomorrow's trends. In this, the art market is the perfect embodiment of late capitalism, and manifests the same built-in obsolescence as, say the automobile industry. But the car industry is also driven by technological improvement; there is no real possibility of improvement in the arts; and change - which may be for the worse as well as for the better - is often an illusion created by the entrepreneurs and marketing people, like Saatchi and Maloney.

Fortunately, the art world isn't quite as homogenous as it seems. We may be in a situation that mirrors that of the 19th century. Most of the art that was deemed important then, which was exhibited in the annual salons and written about in the newspapers, is now forgotten. The art which has proved historically significant was produced outside the system, in opposition to the academic establishment; these painters only survived thanks to a bourgeois public that bought small pictures to hang on their walls.

Since the 1960's, we have witnessed the complete institutionalisation of the avant-garde. Our major institutions are devoted to cutting edge art. Apart from a brief flurry of expressionist painting in the 80s, most of this has been in the areas of conceptual art, photography, video and installation. This is the work that people in power in our public institutions deem to be significant. It gets written about, funded and shown. It is the Official Art of our time.

There is a vast quantity of writing used to support this work, loosely based on the misunderstood and ill-applied work of French philosophers, which is used as a smokescreen to hide the poverty of many of the intellects which support the work, and the poverty of much of the work itself. But in spite of this widespread propaganda, the cosy consensus which appears to rule our public art institutions is fundamentally flawed, and for several reasons. Firstly, the work remains unpopular with the gallery going public. Secondly, it only reflects a small fraction of what is being produced by artists in this country. And thirdly, this work is not bought by private buyers, except Saatchi. Finally, It is overwhelmingly dependent on public money. The work that *is* bought by people to hang on their walls often belongs to other traditions, varies widely in style but often shows the continuing vitality of modernist, as well as figurative and landscape traditions in this country. It is this work - largely ignored if not despised by the organs of State Art in this country - that Art Review does much to keep before the public eye.

What artists must do, whatever the tradition to which their work belongs, is to reclaim the theoretical space in which it can be appreciated. Take the game into the enemy camp and play them at their own game. How? By using their own tools against them. And their favourite tool is language.

## **ARTBOLLOCKS: THE SECRETS REVEALED**

Writing about art appears difficult, but all the difficulties melt away if the new writer will observe a few simple rules.

### *THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE*

Any uncertainty in you, the critic, can be hidden by neatly attributing it to the work. You can't decide whether the work is naff, or charmingly naive? Then say *'it hovers between woeful inadequacy and unaffected poignancy'*(Martin Coomer, *Time Out*, Jan 20.) You can't make up your mind if Pollock's paintings fit or don't fit with their time? Then write that *'they seem at once to embrace and reject the entire sweep of artistic production (of their time)'* Jeffrey Kastner, *Art Monthly*, Feb. 99) Paradox is the name of this game - a verbal flourish which papers over the cracks in your argument.

### *GREAT ART*

Steer clear of this. '**Great**' is definitely out, except in '*I thought your show of pig's bladders attached to Victorian bone china was **great!***' Greatness smacks of elitism, all those white male old masters. Today, young artists aspire merely to be cool, so compliant critics wishing to suck up to them and be invited to their parties should be careful not to burden their young shoulders with excessive praise. Safer by far to avoid value judgements. Safer all round to follow the judgement of the market, or fashion, which is now the same thing: 'Ron Mueck is represented by Anthony d'Offay, therefore he is perceived as a great artist.' (Fernando Mignoni, of Christies' Contemporary Auctions, in *Flash Art*, Feb. 1999)

#### THE COMFORT OF MEDIOCRITY

If you want to be a successful critic, whatever you do, don't *criticise*. To make value judgements smacks of elitism (see above, Great Art.) Except for charming eccentrics like Brian Sewell, few experienced critics speak out against an artist's mediocrity and incompetence - perhaps because it reassures them about their own: '*The photographs of Ulf Lundin are almost entirely devoid of visual interest... It is...their very mediocrity, their monotony and their emptiness that attracts us.*' (John Tozer, *Art Monthly*, Feb.'99.) This journal seems to revel in the more dismal manifestations of post-modernism, which puts its unfortunate reviewers in something of a spot., desperately trying to find something positive to say: '*Didensen's video is very likeable mainly, I think, because of its desperate aimlessness.*'

#### NOTHING TO SAY AND SAYING IT

No photograph is so boring, no painting so bad, or no installation so insignificant that the critic cannot, with good will and imagination, detect some post-modernist strategy in its sheer banality: '*Three photos...I can't even remember what they were of, which is probably the point.*' (Martin Coomer, *Time Out*.) If incoherent, then '*the work invites a construction process undertaken by the viewer as much as that of the artist*' (Francis McKee, quoted in *Art Monthly*, Feb. 99).

#### CONDITIONALS

These lure readers up a cul-de-sac of verbal nuance and leave them stranded in dense fog. Martin Coomer, again, is a master: '*Martin Kippenberger's drawing takes on more significance than it should.*' '*Michelle Fierro's paintings ought to be unlikeable;*' *her doodles are 'a strategy that could easily add up to nothing and nearly does.'*

Whew!! Narrow escape, Martin!

#### BANALITY, THE CRITIC'S FRIEND

There is no aspect of the work of art, however banal, that can't be 'spun'. Paintings, in a gallery? How unusual: '*Ramirez's occupation of real space turns his gallery into a space that frames his painting.*' Wonder why nobody thought of that before? (Grady T. Turner in *Flash Art*, Feb. 1999)

#### IN GALLERY SPACE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM: SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is a great help to the critic - as long as it is totally misunderstood. Earlier critics had to battle with terms like symbol, icon, image, form, structure, colour, tone, drawing, composition (they do sound quaint, don't they!) - terms with a precise meaning. Happily today, for the busy critic, everything is a signifier!

Use of such terms, however inappropriate, gives a sparkling intellectual gloss to the dullest sentence, such as this (John Slyce in *Flash Art*, Feb.1999 ): '*It's not too absurd to say that Ofili is breaking down one coded chain of signifiers of identity through the construction of another code that uses the same parts.*'

It is, John, it is.

Now that the contemporary artist has been consigned, by great thinkers like Baudrillard, to dumbly recycling the bar-room sweepings of our electronic culture, awkward notions like style or content are subsumed by the handy catch-all term '*discourse*' or (even more laughably) '*philosophical discourse.*' This gives a spurious seriousness to the most banal recycling of third-hand imagery. A useful catch-all formula can be applied to all of this work, which I freely offer here, without charge:

*X's work wryly deconstructs popular notions of gender by...*

*mockingly subverts stereotypes representation*

*cunningly disrupts archetypes /style*

*innocently parodies conventions / sexuality*

*intelligently appropriates the mythology commodification*

*undermines strategies /identity*

followed by a nod at whatever images or objects are assembled. Installation art, in its frequent inconsequentiality, tests the critics resources to their uttermost, but it's a pretty safe bet that it will involve '*fractured narratives*' (no one would dare to produce a coherent narrative for fear of being intelligible or even entertaining), '*documentary evidence*'

(documenting is a much safer strategy than representing, which requires skill) and '*biography and autobiography*' (a useful bi-polar term here, applicable to any man-made objects.)

### **THE GOLDEN RULE**

The most basic rule in constructing artbollocks is: don't write facts or opinions; these are too easily challenged. Write concepts. Any concepts. A work of art must have some physical manifestation, a medium (paint, objects, text etc.); it is made by, and for, someone (and we all have minds, and bodies.) So it is a safe bet that **any** artwork can be said, with perfect justice to be about any of the following concepts:

*memory*

*sensation*

*the body*

*the spiritual*

*the medium*

*perception*

*culture*

Which of these you choose is entirely a matter of fashion or personal taste.

But that 's only the beginning. Say we choose The Body (usually a safe bet.) To state, baldly, that

*Bacon's work is about the body*

is a simple idea, clearly expressed. **This will not do:** our goal, as aspiring artbollockers, should always be to reach an empyrean realm of pure **unintelligibility**. So we blur that embarrassing clarity of thought by introducing a bi-polar opposite: the work is not just '*about the body*'; it's about

*'corporeal absence and presence.'*

Then (neat trick, this) **any and every** work of art will be relevant as **either there's a body in it or there isn't!**

This dodge, useful enough to the critic, is even more valuable to the curator looking for a catch-all umbrella concept to cover a disparate body of work.

However, the statement is still dangerously intelligible, so clearly needs further work. (See below.)

### **MASTER ARTBOLLOCKS: THE ULTIMATE TEST.**

The ultimate challenge for the critic is to concoct an argument that can be applied, with apparent relevance but total unintelligibility, to any art work whatever. If you can substitute (say) three artists as different as

Francis Bacon, Don Judd and Gillian Wearing **and** the sentence still seems to make 'sense', then the artbollocks hot-air balloon has truly taken off. Consider the following model, for which I am indebted to Lewis Biggs (Ian McKeever, *The Shape of Time*):

**1. 'McKeever's paintings operate in the space between a subject and a non-subject'**

Much can be learned from this extraordinary sentence. Try the test mentioned above:

*Bacon's figures |*

*Judd's boxes |*

*Wearing's people |            operate in the space between subject and non-subject.*

It works! How is this achieved? The trick is once again in the pair of opposed concepts: these act like gateposts through which any precise meaning can make good its escape. As we saw above, with *'the presence or absence of the Body'*, they are also, by definition, all-inclusive, so can with perfect justice, be applied to any artwork whatever. A second example: *'June Redfern's paintings hover between nature and culture.'* Is there **any** landscape painting that doesn't? (Bill Hare, *Contemporary Visual Arts*, No 21.) Here's another: *'It is quite possible that Monet's paintings are about life and death.'* (Tim Hilton, *Independent on Sunday*, 24. 1. 99.) Yes, life and death. What else is there, Tim?

The inventive reader will have seen how this formula can be applied to a wide range of opposites: representation, non-representation; emptiness, plenitude; etc. If the concepts suggested still seem remote from the artwork they are supposed to describe, then this can be neatly turned around in the following way:

**2. 'McKeever's paintings refuse to situate themselves in the space between a subject and a non-subject.'**

This second version, I think you will agree, makes just as much sense as the first, although it means **the precise opposite**.

I rest my case.

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