

Review

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Saying So

by Sue Scott

IN THIS POST-DUCHAMPIAN AGE OF ART CRITICISM, are writers and critics held hostage by the notion that anything is art simply because the artist says so? Has our role been limited to offering analysis rather than opinion regardless of style, medium or any type of redeeming visual quality of the art? Must we accept the idea that everything is art and simply offer judgment based on that assumption?

The philosopher Arthur Danto noted in *After the End of Art* that we live in a time "of deep pluralism and total tolerance. Nothing is ruled out." He is careful to qualify this statement by saying it is true "perhaps" only in art. This deep pluralism is certainly part of the problem in our defining the parameters of "visual Art." Most other disciplines: dance, theater, music, film, employ certain structures which are utilized to some degree even in the most extreme examples of these disciplines.

In our century, many visual artists have abandoned any and all structure, both formally and conceptually. Visual artists, seeking to create something fresh and different, have accepted virtually anything as an art material. But, if there are no formal structures in place, there can be no dialogue with history. If anything goes, then there are no rules either to follow or rebel against. Consequently, art critics have no established parameters by which to judge these works of art.

For example, how can I, as a critic, discuss the artistic merit of stacked cases of Budweiser, hermetic displays of medical instruments or a hairball placed (thrown? drifted?) in the corner of a gallery? I can talk about the intent of the artist and how each work relates the artist's biography, but addressing the visual quality leaves me in a quandary. Most often, artists supply voluminous explanatory materials and information about themselves and their art to accompany their exhibitions. It seems more and more that artists who work with found or unorthodox materials are all too willing to offer in-depth explanations of their work. Ironically, these explanations are usually much more complex and interesting than the work of art itself. I am often left with an intellectual understanding, but any sense of mystery has been excised from their work.

It is the presence of mystery and conundrum that makes the work of historical artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns so fascinating and, thus, timeless. Even Paul Cézanne, usually discussed in formal terms, layered his paintings with puns and visual games. Some younger artists like Suzanne McClelland, Frank Moore and Beverly Semmes have a command of their materials while blanketing their work with meaning,

often obtuse. Their art cannot be explained with a bumper sticker like so much of the art we see today, but the underlying structure and concept that drive these artists are present in each work. Each is richer because of the artists who preceded them.

CLEMENT GREENBERG WAS BOTH, AT CERTAIN points in his career, the most powerful and most vilified art critic of our century, perhaps of all time. One of the major reasons for both his power and vilification was that he reveled in taking a stance. "This is good art, this is bad." "This is art, this is not." People hated him because he was willing to draw a line in the sand. For critics of my generation, the sand has been getting pretty deep, so drawing a line feels more like digging a trench. Or your own grave.

I met with Greenberg a decade ago to discuss an exhibition I was working on entitled *Washington Color Painters: The First Generation*. He had been intimately involved with the movement, particularly in his support of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. In the course of our conversation, he asked about other projects I had worked on and I mentioned an exhibition that included Ed Ruscha. I showed him a transparency of a painting I had recently helped to acquire for a museum. "That's not art," he told me. End of discussion. I remember being frustrated and angry, because in his mind there was no room for discourse. How could he sit there and say what Ruscha made was not art? (Needless to say, he did not lend any paintings to my exhibition.)

I think about that experience often when I walk into galleries and see naugahyde pillows on the floor, a paper towel decorated with glitter and tacked to the wall or a gigantic ashtray full of cigarette butts. Do I have the right to say that what I am looking at is not art? Or at the very least, not visual art? Are we as critics missing something, or are we too gutless to call bullshit, bullshit? History is full of examples of critics denouncing artists or movements, only to be proven wrong as those artists change history and take their place in the pantheon of the great. Certainly, this is on our minds as we look at new work — not wanting to be labeled neo-conservative on the one hand or left in the dust on the other for failure to recognize genius. Often, by the time a critic arrives on the scene to review an artist, the artist's work has been bought up by all the major contemporary collectors, etc. Not that this should make a difference, but when there is a certain "buzz" surrounding an artist, sometimes the "buzz" supersedes the individual visual

experience, leaving writers and curators scrambling to reconcile the art with the spin.

IF WE COME TO ACCEPT THE NOTION THAT everything or anything can be deemed art, by what criteria do we judge it? When we look and talk about painting or sculpture, are there not, at least, certain formal principles we expect an artist to have an awareness of, even if s/he chooses to ignore them? Even Marcel Duchamp, who spawned the conceptual art movement, said that an artist's studio should serve as his laboratory. He realized the importance of time spent developing ideas and making them real in the work. He spent the last thirty or so years of his life working on a single work.

Sadly, what we see today are too many artists bypassing the laboratory and going straight in search of fame. But this has nothing to do with the topic at hand. Or does it? Because, it seems to me, that it is due to the current state of affairs in the art world that this question is even being considered. Too little time is spent developing meaningful ideas *and* the ability to execute them. Too much time is spent trying to come up with something sensational and shocking rather than seeking to create something that is timeless. How many more photographs of naked trailer park families do we have to be subjected to at art fairs and galleries around the world?

SO WHAT DOES CONSTITUTE A WORK OF VISUAL art? To my mind, first and foremost, it must be visually interesting. This speaks to individual tastes, of course, but it is amazing how much consensus you can find. Good works of art sing (sorry to use a non-visual analogy.) It stands on its own, independent of the hype that surrounds them.

It should be original, not derivative.

Third, it must have a transformative effect, one that takes you beyond pure matter. Painters (with the exception of Arman who used the tube itself) take paint from the tube and make it something else on the canvas. Pat Steir paints the elements, and her waterfalls work because there is an exchange of energy — the paint becomes the water falling, but the water falling is only paint. Katherine Bowling looks to the landscape for inspiration, but again there is an exchange between allowing the paint to exist in its pure form while becoming a representation of nature and light. Bryan Hunt takes bronze and emulates the movement of water or the wind; Ursula von Rydingsvard hacks and

stacks cedar four-by-fours, but her end result is anything but a pile of lumber. If you're claiming to be creating an environment, then transport me, too. Judy Pfaff can take bizarre combinations of materials, but when one looks — or more to the point experiences — her environments, one doesn't experience her materials; Pfaff addresses organic growth, movement, color, light and some surreal or unreal experience.

An artist using industrial materials should infuse them with new life. Mark di Suvero works as much with movement as he does with steel. A younger artist, Sharon Loudon, uses rubber tubing and glow-in-the-dark dental tubing for her installations. But what you get is the humor of the tubing which has become anthropomorphic or the sensation of swaying fluorescent fields, both beautiful and ominous in its connotation.

WHAT ELSE? MYSTERY. THE BEST, THE most enduring art has a quality of mystery that is almost indiscernible. By this, I mean that the viewer doesn't completely grasp what is going on at first take. Or if they do, it's elusive and layered. The most interesting artists are those who aren't quite sure themselves what is going on with their art. Or they figure it out once it is completed, not before. It is a process that is in flux with the artist's psyche, and this is something that is more organic than pre-planned.

Along these same lines, a work of visual art should be conceptually layered. Amy Sillman recently told me it took her a year to work out an idea for one painting. And this came through in the work, I think because one can see the complexity of her hybrid language, the emotion and the autobiography, no matter how simple the images may appear. I've written two essays on the work of Jane Hammond. I could write several more and they would all be different because her work is conceptually complex. Hammond often deals with surrogates, and as a result, her works can be taken both at face value (visually) and as metaphor. There is no single reading. It is autobiographical, it is feminist, it is humorous, it deals with society, the art world and the world at large. Above all, it is visual and the concept is woven into the way the imagery relates one to another.

I think it is fundamental that the work of art stand on its own, that the explanation (or the important context of "the gallery") is not essential to the viewer's appreciation. Again, this may sound like stating the obvious, but, if you remember the Whitney Biennial from 1993, almost every installation or environment needed a didactic panel.

Why couldn't the works chosen stand on their own? Because they couldn't, and that was the problem with that exhibition. And back to the trailer park family.

Okay, so now I know it's the artist's family, that he started out photographing them as studies that he would then paint, but that along the way some dealer pointed out they were more powerful — or should we say more graphic and sensational — as photographs. Yet as photographs, there is nothing left to the imagination. Maybe what we are seeing is the idea still in formation. Maybe he needs to get back into his laboratory and complete the creative process. But will he do that as long as these photographs are being lauded?

FINALLY, THERE IS THE ISSUE OF BEAUTY, WHICH for me as a curator and critic is essential. It was the critic Dave Hickey who first spoke to the importance of beauty in this decade, and it is something I have thought about a lot in terms of the art of our time. I don't necessarily mean, and I don't think he did, that it is *glamour*, or beauty just in the classic sense. It can be a beauty of materials or a tough beauty. *My Blue Lake* by Kiki Smith is one of the most beautiful prints I have ever seen, but this flattened 360° landscape of her face is aggressive, difficult to look at. But also stunning. It has all the criteria I've outlined above. It's visually interesting, it is transformative (the face is the landscape, the landscape is the face), it is mysterious, it is conceptually layered, and it is beautiful. It becomes even more interesting when you find out it is the artist's face and that it was taken with a one-of-a-kind camera found in London that photographs objects in the round, but that is not essential to our understanding or appreciation of the work.

I have talked to a number of people — not just writers and artists, but people on the periphery of the art world — about the idea of defining "What is Art?" And by the end of each discussion, we usually come full circle. The full answer is as elusive as the full question. We carry too much historical baggage to clearly delineate what is and isn't art. If you want to take a stance like Greenberg did with me, where do you draw the line? It's okay to use dental tubing, but not paper towels or glitter?

The answer lies not with material but with intention. But this is not a revolutionary idea, it has been subsumed into the very fabric of the contemporary art world. And if the qualities outlined above seem broad or subjective, that is the point, because the act of creation is, after all a subjective act. And ultimately, so it is the process of criticism.