

POST-OBJECT ART: IS IT WICKED OR IS IT A REVISION OF OUR CONCEPTS?

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In discussing very recent events in the visual arts the main difficulty is to give them some kind of structure, in terms of which the separate manifestations make sense.

The art historian's structure is usually chronological, with a strong presumption that later objects or events relate causally to earlier ones. 'Cause', in this connection, is a pretty elastic concept that will accommodate both influence and contra-influence.

'Cezanne *influenced* the Cubists', so it's said, 'but the metal sculptors of the nineteen-sixties *reacted against* Moore's vitalism and organicism'.

To play this game one needs a relatively extended timespan, and a reduction of the range of concurrent activity to a relatively narrow 'main- stream' in which only one significant thing happens at a time - or two, at the most. For the art of recent years neither of these conditions is satisfied. We don't have a long, simplifying perspective, and it is only too clearly apparent that a great many different things are happening at once.

A way out of the difficulty is to insist that both effects - the temporal compression and the confusing variety - are mere accidents of the close-up viewpoint. In time there will be a historical perspective and there will also be a sifting of events into the important and the trivial. Some people even say that they know already which are which.

Unfortunately these are very often the writers of the history books and the buyers of museum collections, so that their prospect of being right is very good. They are already fixing up the evidence of their own prescience.

I should like to see whether recent events can be made to fit persuasively into a pattern that does not rely on a linear succession of stylistic changes, like biblical begatting; that accommodates the extraordinary variety, and even goes some tentative way toward explaining it. One might choose to begin with **Marcel Duchamp's** 'rendezvous' proposal for generating works of art by appointment. As he put it himself, round about 1914:

by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date, such a moment) 'to inscribe a readymade' - the readymade can later be looked for (with all kinds of delays). The important thing is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It is a kind of rendezvous.

In fact, there is something wrong with the term 'post-object', that isn't quite corrected by changing the term to 'non-object' or 'anti-object' so as to get rid of the suggestion that one *style* supersedes another as hard-edge and colour painting superseded abstract expressionism. This suggestion isn't absolutely wrong, for the fact is that post-object art, systematically thought out, has a historical location in our own time, and a logic obtained by questioning the assumptions of a previous time and substituting others.

Post-object art is not a style, but it is a phenomenon that students in the 19th century, say, would have had little opportunity or motive to study.

Let me proceed by offering a paradigm of *object* art, by drawing out some of its features, and then by making the contrasts that show up in *post-object* art. **Henry Moore's** *Knife-edge Two-piece*, 1962 (fig. 1) is as clear a case as one might find of an art object, in the following senses.

First, it is a *public* object, contrasted with private or idiosyncratic phenomena and appearances. Everyone who looks at it will see the same thing. Now this is not the case with, say, psychochemically induced imagery. People who put themselves into abnormal states, by whatever means, are likely to give different accounts of what they perceive, even though they seem to be looking in the same direction, toward the same public object. Emphasis on idiosyncracies of perception, in which objects play little or no part, provide a somewhat precarious basis for one variety of post-object art. Evidently there could be no appeal to arbitration in cases of dispute about the excellence of 'works' like these!

Being public is an important part of the traditional idea of the nature of an art object. So – for the visual arts at least – is being *physical or material*. And the **Henry Moore** is made of most tangible bronze. The **second** object-feature in terms of which we get a possibility of contrast, then, is physicality or materiality. And there is a range of contrasts, through insubstantial materials, like foam or smoke or coloured gases, to the non-material works of pure imagination that may somehow be specified but never physically realised. To exemplify this kind of thing one might nominate a work by **Robert Barry** that was exhibited (if that's the right word) in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1969. It is from his 'Psychic Series', and it goes like this:

EVERYTHING IN THE UNCONSCIOUS PERCEIVED BY THE SENSES BUT NOT NOTED BY THE CONSCIOUS MIND DURING TRIPS TO BALTIMORE DURING THE SUMMER OF 1967.

You may well protest that this is not only an insubstantial work of art, compared with the Moore, but a private one as well. I am not, of course, arguing that post-object art is always contrary to the object paradigm in just one respect. Indeed, much of it goes against tradition in several respects, but the contrasts that I am now drawing are at least contrasts in the nominated respects, and they may well afford contrasts in other ways as well. A **third** characteristic of object art is that it has a certain independence or autonomy in relation to its viewers and their participation in the work. We could call it observer-in dependence or, better, participant-independence. And the strongest contrast is given by happenings in which participation is essential, such as **Hermann Nitsch's** *Lamb* (fig. 2) in which a symbolically crucified animal was violently dismembered by the participants. And the precise contrast that I am now attending to, between this and object-art, might be spelled out by saying that whereas works like the **Henry Moore** are so person-independent that they would continue to exist, and continue to be works of art, if everyone walked away from them, the participatory art-event cannot stand the withdrawal of its audience. The people and the happening are not independently autonomous, as the sculpture and its viewers are independently autonomous.

Nitsch's *Lamb* provided, one must suppose, a kind of emotional catharsis for the participants. In another happening one sees a more explicit social comment presented rather in the form of a morality play for the benefit of the spectators than an

experience for the participants alone. I quote from **Dore Ashton**, in the February 1971 issue of *Studio International*:

Bayrack had taken a block through, lined it with pristine white paper. As the spectators gathered, he flooded the paperlined street with a sea of real blood, and in that already smelly gutter he unloaded a mess of entrails. Gradually, he let loose some large rats who scrambled into the pile of entrails. Then there was a cortege of mommas with their babycarriages who left the scene. Next (and this scandalised the spectators more than the blood and guts, I suspect), a nude running, and a public lovemaking scene, followed by a staged fight between a black and white, and by a soundtrack in which American military marches alternated with Hitler Jugend songs while confetti filtered to the bloody street.

This was a carefully planned critique of American society, in which **Bayrack** fed his aghast viewers a homeopathic dose of the real poisons infecting them: the debasement of human relations in 'mechanical lovemaking, the carnage so unreal because so distant; the increasing divergence between the ideals mouthed by us all, including the artists, and the practical affairs run by the Washington oligarchy. For most of the spectators, the hideous smell of death was totally unfamiliar, as was the unabated series of gross tableaux. I'm sure Bayrack was not sorry they were so outraged.

A **fourth** characteristic of visual object-art is that it has traditionally always been *visible*. The purity of this simple and perhaps necessary principle has been compromised, of course, by such combinations as the colour-organ that invokes another sensory mode *as well as* the sense of sight; but the idea that one might have a visual art that is only at most incidentally visible is recent and radical. In **Vito Acconci's** work *Room Situation (Proximity)*, 1970, for example (fig. 3) the artist stands too close to exhibition visitors for their comfort, and may do so behind their backs with comparable effect. Or the art-work may consist in filling a room with ultrasonic waves (as **Robert Barry** has done) so that the condition of visibility is entirely eliminated.

I suspect that this is going too far – but I offer the objection only semantically, not artistically. There is every reason to applaud the artistic impulse to explore neglected modes of apprehension and their potential for an art form. I am simply uneasy about assimilating such things to the tradition, or topic-region of *visual* art, unless they connect, somehow, with the characteristic sensory mechanism of sighted people. Those scented herb gardens planted for the pleasure of the blind may well be works of art, but they are surely not works of visual art – unless, of course, they happen to be works of visual art as well.

A **fifth** characteristic of object art is of uniqueness, or originality – in one of its senses. When a dealer says that he is offering you an original **Cezanne** he means that it is the one and only token of its type actually made by the artist himself, and not a copy, a facsimile or a reproduction. Moreover, the value of works of object art in general (and I mean the aesthetic as well as the cash value) is often supposed somehow to reside in the singularity and uniqueness of the physical token – perhaps in the inimitable stamp of the artist's very own hand.

Some art, as a matter of fact, is exceedingly difficult to imitate, and may even be, at any rate for practical purposes, inimitable. All the connoisseur's elaborate fuss about authenticity is built around the concepts of uniqueness and inimitability in visual art

objects. And the contrasting idea – the idea that some works of art if not them all, are in principle presentable in unlimited numbers as identical tokens – is the animating force behind one form or mode of post-object art.

The practical roots of the unlimiteds and multiples movement go back, of course, to ancient techniques like etching and engraving, press-moulding for terracotta and the casting of bronzes. There are some techniques of object art that do not, in fact, deliver up an original unique token, as painting and carving do, so that the challenge to the criterion of uniqueness has precedents available, as well as recourse to new socio-economic arguments about the artificial preciousness of art. The **Henry Moore** *Two-piece* is already a multiple (probably from a very small edition of about eight) and **Lilian Lijn's** *Liquid Reflections*, 1966-7 (fig. 4) is available in unlimited numbers. Evidently it is no longer necessary, if it ever was, for a work of visual art to be a unique physical token.

A **sixth** characteristic of object art is the tendency it has to be hermetic, self-sufficient or context-independent. A work such as the **Henry Moore** is ideally seen without any special reference to its physical context or environment. If it happened to be badly sited, too close up to a wall, or in a cramped space, then the proper reaction for the spectator would be to try to ignore the context. The art-object's surroundings are almost irrelevant to appreciation – unless they are a nuisance. And even then the background is *aesthetically* irrelevant. When you transfer your piece of object art from one place to another you do not, ordinarily, transform the object. Which isn't to deny that things may be well or badly placed, or hung.

This self-sufficiency of the art-object is expressly inverted or denied by the sort of art that looks for a relationship with its context, and that can not be transported arbitrarily from place to place without loss or even reduction to meaninglessness. For example, **Christo's** curtain (fig. 5), placed across Rifle Valley Colorado, could not be taken down and removed to a museum without absurdity.

A **seventh** characteristic of the object, not sharply distinguishable from that of context-independence, is the tendency that visual object-art has been shown to be discrete, unified and compact. *The Knife-edge Two-piece* is perhaps less discrete, unified and compact than one of **Brancusi's** eggs, but it is still perceptibly one thing, in one place. A good deal of recent art has been, contrastingly, extended either in time or in space, or both, often to the point where not all of it can be perceived at once. **Noel Hutchison's** *Aesthetic Noughts and Crosses* (fig. 6) is extended both spatially and temporally –although not so much as **William Vazan's** *World Line* in the **Power Gallery**. The other parts of this work are in art galleries all over the world, and they consist of reference lines on the floor marking the direction to the next gallery, often located in another country.

So much for the discrete art-object and the distributed or extended 'post-object'. An **eighth** characteristic of object art is its permanence, its immutability, its enduring character. And obviously this characteristic can be negated in several ways. Kinetics, for example, rely on change for their effect, and there is nothing that is radical or novel in principle about this. For something that looks more like post-object art in the stricter chronological sense, one ought to contrast the ephemeral rather than the merely animated with the permanent and immutable. And there are plenty of examples. **Joan Grounds'** fire sculptures, for example, shown on the front cover, are

in some ways very like some works of object art but they are *not* going to last. The lifespan of an ephemeral work may be only a few seconds, or it may be weeks or even months –although if it spins out so long the difference between permanence and impermanence gets blurred.

Even the pyramids, one supposes, won't last for ever. For an example of a medium-timespan ephemeral work one might take the **Optronic Kinetics** group's *Cubed Tree*, 1971, (fig. 8) that was installed in Ku-ring-gai Chase, without any publicity, and lasted about a year before all or most of the cubes fell off. It will be several years before all trace of the occurrence is wiped from the world's memory, apart from the photographic and legendary record.

Some things are even shorter-lived, and some of them may have a very tenuous as well as a brief existence. As **Gilberto Zorio** said: "I place a sheet of paper, on which I have written with invisible ink, on a hot metal plate, for a few moments I see the phrases that could also be a death sentence".

Sometimes the ephemeral character of a work of post-object art is very crucial to its meaning. Such a work that seems to me to have great dignity and profundity, is the Australian **David Smith's** *Entropy*, 1971. In it, the word 'entropy' is written in the sand on a Cornish beach, and of course it will be washed out with the next tide. There is a metaphor in this already, for what could be more ephemeral than words written in sand? But there is a special twist to it – a density given to the metaphor by a device of inward self-reference. The word 'entropy' carries our idea of the contrast between order and disorder, chaos and structure. A beach of newly washed-out sand, after the tide has retreated, is a high entropy system with one region very like another and nothing structured in it. David Smith's effort of organisation, before the tide came, can be seen as embodying an intricate structure of ideas, with all the history of rational imagination standing behind it. To gather together out of the chaos of the universe just those ordered marks that signify so complex an understanding, is itself an event of immense improbability – and to allow it to be translated with one movement of the tide into an order of high probability is a most potent device of art.

I should like to turn, finally, to a **ninth** characteristic of object art from which post-object or anti-object art can be generated by reaction. It is this: object art is supposed to be elevated above common things. It is supposed to be superior to natural objects and to other artifacts, and this intuition is expressed, both literally and metaphorically, in the use of the pedestal. Works of art like **Henry Moore's** are elevated objects.

The precise form of reaction against this idea will depend on the reason that stands behind the notion of art's elevated stature. For example, the idea that art is concerned with fine stuffs finely wrought is inverted or negated by working with commonplace substances in a way that eliminates traditional skill or subtlety of handling. Mud and cheese and sand and heaps of coal or old rags have been offered in an art form that has been called 'art povera' – poverty art. Art is certainly taken out of its frame and brought down off its pedestal by proposals like these of **Lawrence Weiner's**, that you may construct for yourself if you wish. There is no need to pay gallery prices for:

One standard dye marker thrown into the sea.

An amount of paint poured directly upon the floor and allowed to dry.

Three minutes of forty pound pressure spray of white highway paint upon a well tended lawn. The lawn is allowed to grow and not tended until the grass is free of all vestiges of white highway paint.

One square limestone slab of arbitrary thickness.

One sheet of brown wrapping paper bonded evenly with the edges to the top surface of the limestone.

One hole in the ground approximately one foot by one foot by one foot.

One gallon of water-based white paint poured into this hole.

Post-object art is so various that very little can be said about the whole of it except that it seems to be lively everywhere in a multitude of forms, some of which have not even been mentioned in this essay – ecological and systems art, body art and the range of activities confusedly designated 'conceptual art' that requires separate discussion.

Attempts have been made by many conservative thinkers, especially perhaps those associated with museums and the practice and habits of mind of objectconservation, to resist post-object art almost as if it were wicked. Sometimes it is said that the new activities are without 'quality' – in other words, that they are bad art and do not deserve attention or respect. Of course, this has been said so often in the 20th century, about new things, that the voices of doom are no longer so intimidating as they once were.

More serious, because the claims are not always wholly without basis, are the allegations one sometimes hears that post-object art is neither good nor bad nor indifferent art – it is simply *not art*, and ought therefore to be discouraged. But this is surely wrong: artists should never be discouraged because they may be making some kind of conceptual error, but should rather be encouraged because they may be playing a part in the revision of our concepts.

To put it a little differently: arguments that post-object art is *not art* will have to be very much more specific as to kinds, very much more explicit in premises and reasoning and generally very much more persuasive than they now are before we shall be justified in helping to generate a hostile climate of public opinion against a whole range of contemporary art. The concept of art is very far indeed from exhibiting the hard, simple clarity that might encourage us to believe we can see plain transgressions and reason ourselves into the justifiable rejection of our misguided artists and their inadmissible works.

On the contrary. If we are disposed to argue with our artists we ought to do it walking alongside, not standing in their way.

Suggested Reading

Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1968). Udo Kultermann, *Art-events and Happenings*, London, (1971). Kynaston L. McShine, *Information* (exhibition catalogue, MMA) (New York, 1970). Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, (New York, 1968). Cassou, Ragon et al., *Art and Confrontation*, (New York, 1968). Germano Celant, *Art Povera*, (New York, 1969). Alan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings*, (New York, 1965). Michael Kirby, *Happenings: an illustrated Anthology*, (New York, 1965). Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos*, (New York, 1967). Theodore Roszack, *The Making of a Counter-*

culture, (New York, 1969). Gregoire Muller, *The new avant-garde: issues for the art of the seventies*. (London, 1972).

Source: Current Affairs Bulletin, Vol 49, No 9, February 1973 p275-282 (Dept of Adult Education, University of Sydney)