



machete

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The experience of the steal

In late 2007, Greene Naftali gallery in Chelsea showed Paul Sharits' 1970 short, *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* for the first time in a New York gallery. The piece (which comes with instructions on what to do in case that it causes a seizure in an audience member) is an intense set of flickering images showing several subjects going through epileptic fits. Standing outside the gallery, amidst the shivering smokers, underpaid artists, and donor elites, the sentiments uttered were nearly universal: Sharits made something real; this is the first art in a long time that has made me feel; *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* is completely unique.



Sentiments of unique real feelings (or perhaps just authenticity) are the postmarks of a melancholic modernity: they vouch for the validity and necessity of an object's circulation in a culture which is said to have lost touch with the capacity to experience. With a work like Sharits' (and indeed even before in essays by Baudelaire or Benjamin), the Romantic desire to re-enliven that sense of experience has been lost. Rather, what is sought seems increasingly along the lines of what we make call, to borrow a phrase, "temporary autonomous zones" of authentic feeling: the viewer is seized by a moment of passion he or she knows is no longer compatible with life outside the gallery space.

In such an artistic culture, it is almost impossible to imagine the scene related in Don Argott's new documentary *The Art of the Steal*, where an art handler is said to have been unable to move Van Gogh's *The Postman* because she had to put it down and weep at its beauty. Indeed, the scene betrays the remarkable – perhaps even defiant – romanticism the film portrays with respect to the fate of the Barnes Foundation currently in Lower Merion and slated for relocation to the Parkway by fall 2012.

The Barnes Foundation seems like a place more heard of than known about in Philadelphia, in spite of the controversy surrounding it for the past five decades (if not longer) and the undeniable importance of not only the collection but also its unique manner of presentation. In abbreviated form, the story goes like this: pharmaceutical millionaire Albert Barnes collected a massive collection of post-impressionist, cubist and early modernist paintings which he showed in Philadelphia in 1923 to unsuspected and undeserving critical scorn. Disgusted with the parochial tastes of the art establishment, Barnes housed his treasures out in Merion in a building designed uniquely to show his art. But he did not make a museum; he made a foundation whose purpose was purely pedagogical – to instruct both in the making of art and the experience of viewing it. (There is some consensus that John Dewey's work on pedagogic experience influenced Barnes, who in turn helped Dewey understand the value of the aesthetic.)

Barnes' attempt to make an air-tight will ensuring that his collection would remain thus,

that is, open almost exclusively for students as an educational experience more than a museum, and from which no art was ever to be moved, loaned or sold, has been slowly undone over the past 60 or so years since his death. Until 1981, a close disciple kept guard on the collection, but after then, the control of the foundation was given over to Lincoln College, an historically black college whose former president was a friend of Barnes and whose distance from the Philadelphia elite institutions no doubt tickled the eccentric collector. The main narrative of the film starts here, and it charts how the art dropped out of the picture and a series of ambitions, missteps and purported evil on the part of Philadelphia government (John Street, Ed Rendell, etc.) and Philadelphia charitable organizations (especially Annenberg and Pew), slowly undid Barnes' desires and successfully abrogated the will in order to bring the museum to the Parkway.

The film is tight, if amateurish, and it gathers in momentum as it unfurls its rather one-sided version of the story (it was, after all, funded by a committee seeking to keep the Barnes in Merion). In chronicling the history, however, the David and Goliath narrative of one millionaire versus several billionaires overlooks what is truly fascinating about the Barnes collection and its role in a contemporary art world. Granted, the film is a polemic and not a critical statement, and it is strong (though perhaps too strong) in that sense. But more work needs to be done in order to understand what the role of the Barnes foundation in contemporary art display might be.

For one, the film is structured on a high culture / low culture battle which Barnes' set up itself sought to undo. That is, in the film, the mass museum experience controlled by government elites is contrasted to the cultivation of taste and sensibility which the Barnes in its original set-up allowed. But one of the more fascinating elements of the Barnes collection is how we would pair, in a made up example, a gravedigger's shovel with a Cezanne painting because they both shared the same sense of line or background color. In telling the story of the foundation's fall, then, the film glosses over some of the in fact more radical potentials of what Barnes was trying to do.

Along the same lines, the abject hatred of the museum as a "mass medium", in Andreas Huyssen's phrase, neglects what Huyssen also called the "fundamentally dialectical" nature of the museum, which is to say, the mass experience offers as much potential as the cultivated elite one, and, similarly, the cultivated elite experience of the Barnes foundation in no way guarantees the actual experience sought after. The film fails to come to terms with the problem of this bare formalism possible in aesthetic experience.

One of the most painful moments of the film occurs as we are being taken around a Sotheby's auction by art dealer magnate Richard Feigen in a sectioned titled "Barnesworthy." The shots here consist of Feigen looking at paintings about to be sold for millions of dollars and, without any explanation, saying they are not good quality. This is a bad Cezanne. This is a mediocre Matisse. Barnes never would have bought this. Et cetera. The absurdity of a powerful art dealer dictating taste in the name of the economic value of art while at the same time criticizing museumization is completely lost on the film's makers.

Is this really the radical democratic potential of the Barnes Foundation that the film thinks it is necessary to preserve? Is the elite cultivation of taste and banal concepts of art appreciation and economic value really what is at stake in this collection? If that were the case then sure, why

not, let the museum be moved. I have no more sympathy for the elite Main Line families now trying to save the Barnes than the city elites trying to funnel in money for tourism. The film presents a false dichotomy where everyone, at least in my eyes, is wrong.

In framing this piece with regard to the Sharits, it is another element of the Barnes that I want to bring out and which seems to me worth saving. Whatever we might say in favor of his work, Sharits' piece is readily accessible. Although seeing it large in the gallery space is certainly different, one can get a strong, perhaps even more intimate sense by watching the video on UbuWeb. Experience the Barnes collection, however, is difficult. It can take a few weeks to get tickets; by public transit it is practically an adventure; the spacing and juxtapositions of the aesthetic layout are rich and demanding. There is, in my opinion, nothing wrong and indeed much good about this. A bare formalist desire for accessibility is no more radical than one for high culture or taste. If unique, real feelings are desired, and if, for some of us, the violence of Sharits' aesthetic experience is not always sublime, the Barnes may offer one of the few alternative experiences of art. Moving it to the Parkway, even if the spatial layout is kept, will unalterably change the experience of the place – the difficulty of the journey, the lack of a café or retail shop (which the new site boasts it will have) add something to the space that the art alone does not.



Let me frame this one final way. Boris Groys has recently argued that the value of the museum is its historicity in an age of pure presence and futurity. The value of this historicity for Groys is the relation to the past it enables, as well as the valuation of novelty and difference it makes possible. But what is missing in Groys' argument is an understanding of the differential experience that the modern museum provides. The Barnes is absolutely unique as a living repository of way of engaging with artworks. One may agree or disagree with that method, but what we lose with the Barnes is an arrangement of desires between art, pedagogy and deep democracy which hardly still exists and which, in its own time, was far from hegemonic. Mind you this is not my belief in aesthetic experience or artistic engagement, and there are elements of it about which I am deeply skeptical – either in how people speak about Sharits or the Barnes collection. But art deserves to be looked at and thought about in different ways than what the museum, gallery or internet allows. The fact of a place which still seeks to elicit such an experience seems worth saving.

- Avi Alpert

The Seductive Subversion of Plausible Artworlds:

There are two different kinds of static between Philly and New York, either static cling or electroshock. Philadelphia (being mostly a college town with many BFA and MFA programs) suffers from an annual brain-talent-drain when the spring semester ends and the recent graduates realize that their student loan payments are immanent and that they will soon be screening calls from collection agencies because they can't find reasonable income within their chosen fields of study. Philly does not have the financial infrastructure to support even a fraction of its hungry and emerging artists. New York does. It's that simple.

If one wants to get a taste of folks fleeing the city, they should try to catch the outgoing Chinatown bus on a Sunday night. There, one will witness a scene of passengers struggling to get on the bus, crowded and pushing one another while screaming to their loved ones to hold onto their hands tightly. Scanning the crowd you will find small children crying silently in terror and even perhaps a transvestite brandishing a small hammer over her head claiming that the next person who pushes her is 'going to get it.' The would-be passengers are desperate and seemingly panicked as if the bus were the last interstellar spaceship to leave a planet that's about to explode.

Many recent graduates leave Philly in a similar manner. Of those that leave, some come back when they realize that the grass is not really greener, and that this city is actually a place where one can have a real art scene/community outside of the imperatives of the market. Philly is a place where artists and curators can produce conceptually ambitious projects and still be within the visibly malnourished margins of the mainstream art world.

Philadelphia has made some incursions into the New York scene, with notable local artists having shows in reputable New York commercial galleries. Philly also provides an outpost of Urban Outfitters inspired youth culture that churns out wheat paste posters and spray paint graffiti for blue chip galleries such as Deitch projects. The city of brotherly love is the farm league for the Gotham city art market.

Along side this cross-over phenomena, there are curators and artists who want to remain in the city and bring international recognition to its homegrown cultural production. There are local communities of artists who are the antenna of the region's populace that attempt to articulate what is actually happening here beyond the stereotypes

of Rocky or It's always Sunny in Philadelphia.

For some working and within or on the edges of the margins of the wider market, the struggle is worn as a badge of honor. This scrappy attitude has nestled its way into two curated projects whose organizers are attempting to historicize and delineate the social, economic and political conditions for the existence and perpetuation of the reductive dialectic of margin and center.

Sid Sachs, the curator of the Rosenwald Wolf Gallery, has been developing the *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968* for the past four years or so. In this exhibition, Sachs has re-inscribed a convincing vision of Pop art where the women who played integral roles in the scene were sidelined by the art world's emphasis on the contributions of their white male colleagues. Sachs re-contextualizes the works of these women

Another curatorial project at the Basecamp gallery is *Plausible Artworlds* organized by Scott Rigby. Like Sachs, Rigby has been developing this project for many years. Rigby presents works by artist/practitioners that have purposefully remained aloof to the larger commercial art circuit. The show is a form of research and the creation of an archive of those various resistant practices that have been popping up and persevering in many cities throughout the world. The project consists of Rigby conducting weekly skype conversations with different artists that he is interested in. *Plausible Artworlds* has a sizable online Skype following, and does not actually need to have a physical site for the participants to meet. Sitting through one of these conversations, I didn't feel like the primary audience, but only a 'residual' spectator. Many of the artists and groups presented in this project are activist and/or conceptual artists that see commerce within



in a manner that forcefully argues that they set up many of the terms and formal configurations of Pop art, and that the men in their circle borrowed their ideas as well as literally exploited their labor.

The exhibition is a strong argument that is made with minimal wall text and lots of good art. The show looks amazing, and it is refreshing to see curatorial work that allows the art to speak for itself.

Histories are written by the victors, or those that have the power, cunning and charisma to do so. The history of art is a 'history of barbarism,' and Sachs has used his resources and drive to construct a counter narrative that performs a corrective gesture in the spirit of Walter Benjamin who claims that 'in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it' and that 'Only the historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.' Sachs is not only protecting the dead or overlooked artists by carving out a place for them in the canon, but is re-animating many of the artists' works by instigating a reconsideration of the gender struggles of the era they working, and situating it in relation to our present moment.

the gallery system as highly flawed. In response, many of the *Plausible Artworlds* participants have developed networks of alternate venues and shared ideas. Rigby sees the gallery as an event space where the participants in the show can discuss their thoughts about how to facilitate an open and inclusive shared culture.

Both of these exhibitions provide well-researched meditations on the edges of the established artworld and the highly problematic and contingent social/power relations that let a few in, and keep the rest out. Sachs makes a demand to reinsert the excluded into the canon of art history, where as Rigby reaches out to the 'tune in and drop out' art communities that are working in opposition to the dominant commercial artworld. It seems appropriate that both exhibitions are in Philadelphia due to their awareness of the permeable and shifting boundaries of the margin. It seems that the role of the *principled* outside observer has been internalized into the long-term projects of both curators. This vantage point is one of real strengths that can be drawn from working within this strange and interesting city.

-Holly Martins

PACKOFRATS



is pro-life.

Ah, humanity!

To be a human being, isn't it great? Upright walking, smooth talking, ejaculate effusing, civilization machines! We're the ones up in the Garden of Eden naming the animals and shit because God said we could, "Oh, you wanted to be a possum? Too bad! You're a fucking dolphin, live with it! What, do you need me to quote Genesis 2:20, dolphin? Yeah... I didn't think so dolphin nigga..." Yup, human beings baby! We got everything! We got our fucking Sistine Chapel, the motherfucking Taj Mahal, Michaelangelo's bomb ass Pieta, the literary oeuvre of John Grisham, the Great Pyramid of Giza, and humans even invented magic sex pills like Cialis that can keep even the most flacid and useless cock harder than Wolverine's adamantium skeleton. SNIKT!

It sure is a blessed thing to be a human being person, that's why it bums me out when these evil, bourgeois, pro-choice advocates want to kill humans before they even get a chance to be a human, before they even get a chance to jump out of a vagina, get a social security number and ruin their credit score. These anti-human humans say that unwanted human babies will have a harder life on planet Earth and it is with the utmost conviction that I must disagree with them. Nay, I say! Nay! Why, there are plenty of opportunities on planet Earth for these so-called unwanted human people to fulfill the potential of their destiny. Why, who's gonna grumpily slap together my cheeseburger at McDonald's? Well, not no motherfucking W.A.S.P., I tell ya. Or who's gonna catatonically tear my ticket stub and mumble "Theatre 6." upon my entrance to my favorite cinema to see the current Harry Potter film? Or who's gonna solicate donations for UNICEF on street corners when I just want to make it to McDonald's for that fucking cheeseburger without being harrassed about starving children in Mogadishu, and why can't kids in Mogadishu just accept paypal like everybody else when they need some quick cash? Or, when hooliganry rises to a fever pitch in the land, who will compose the dull minded ranks of the police that will come down upon the skulls of the people with unbridled and unreasoning force? I'll tell you who'll do these things: those babies hitherto assumed to not have been born: the "Should've Been Abortion Babies", the true backbone of civilization! The toilet cleaning, Subway™ \$5 Footlong sandwich making, Staples™ working at, roadside cleaning crew a part of, email spam falling for, Da Vinci Code in awe of, mouth breathing, slack-jawed, Army joining because there ain't naught to do in Muleshoe, Oklahoma, biological equivilant of cole slaw on the side, type motherfuckers. Should've Been Abortion Babies, unite and take over! Or at least unite and watch a bootleg of Dane Cook doing stand-up! I know that's your shit!



Accepting the Lesson of the Worst



To paraphrase Bill Hicks, Satan is getting his cock sucked on the regular these days. The central clue would be the black worm of jism spilling from the lips of all too many of today's critics. The marauding stench dripping from newsprint across the nation, like an overfull belly, enters the nostrils and quickly makes its way to the brain, softening the cerebral cortex, enabling a general readership to confuse noxious drivel with critical acumen, vacuity with sound judgment. Yet, one would hardly know it, since inanity regularly parades itself as thought within a culture that prides itself on the willingness of its average citizens to resign themselves to getting ass fucked with a frequency that would melt a lead pipe.

I wish that the high priestess of the NY centered art world provided a stellar exception to this piteous rule, but alas, like all priests and priestesses, she in the final analysis councils resignation. As we have learned from Nietzsche and Breton, or if one prefers the more contemporary words of Alain Badiou, a priest or a priestess is not merely "a clerk for established religions," but "anyone for whom rebellion is no longer an unconditional value." Priests and priestesses are a dime a dozen these days. And yet art should, despite all its foibles, remain a potent exception to the rule of resignation. Even if it now seems laughable to the urbane to speak of art and rebellion in the same breadth; even if the legacy of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde is indeed threatened by the prevalence of "intellectually decorous" (to borrow one of Smith's truly insightful formulations) art that today unthinkingly dabbles in its codes; it seems to me necessary for art to affirm their principled conjunction.

This, I dare say, puts me at odds with Roberta Smith, the NY times critic who has recently thrown her substantial institutional weight behind a (re)turn to "art that seems made by one person out of intense personal necessity, often by hand" over-against an art she loosely labels, post-minimal, "whose visual austerity and coolness of temperature" is "dispiritingly one-note." The willingness and candor with which Smith takes stalk of the current artistic conjuncture in "Post-Minimal to the Max," February 14, 2010, is no doubt refreshing. It is also rare indeed to find a critic so eager to excoriate New York's museum

culture and curatorial elites for producing a homogenous brand, reinstalling an unquestioned "master-narrative," and engendering what she fears as a post-minimal consensus.

However, if there is indeed a discernible post-minimal consensus, it has little to do with what was originally at stake in the critical break with minimalism. And I dare say, that it has little to do with the works that she is now labeling post-minimal. The fault lies in her own judgment. The production of such a consensus as a theoretical object depends, it seems, upon the ability of her own aesthetic gaze to isolate crude and abstract formal generalities that traverse what would otherwise be divergent artistic orientations. Are the concerns of Orozco, Sehgal, Horn and Fischer really identical as Smith would have it? Her interpretation of the post-minimal implies that nothing more was at stake in the critique of minimalism, and that is to say modernism, than a merely *stylistic* set of concerns.

It should be clear now why I find her position so odious. Why she joins the pantheon of figures such as MC Hammer, Debbie Gibson and Rick Astley who have fallen to their knees before Satan's scaly member, whose compliance, according to the great Bill Hicks, have lowered the standards of the earth. She is perhaps all the worse since she cloaks her stupidity in critical refinement. For it is no easy task to discern why her own manner of judgment is responsible for engendering the very object she proposes to criticize and thus also the kind of master narratives she supposedly is interested in opposing. Her historical blindness to the antagonisms that animated the neo-avant-garde are not only shared by the "intellectually decorous" practices she now rightly criticizes, but her discourse makes them possible. She thus seems to be chasing her own tail. Yet, this chase only gets started by her initial reduction of the historical stakes of the critique of minimalism to a combat between styles. Thus rather than perceiving difference within a divided field, she sees homogeneity.

This belies the fact that her concern with post-minimalism being a new "big-box chain featuring only one brand" has *little* do with the problem of chains or brands, and *everything* to do with *what* is being sold. In other words, she wants a different product. In this case, she wants a different style.

And in the last instance her only justification for that preference cannot even appeal to what ol' man Kant once called taste; it rather concerns her palett, what Kant would have dismissed as the *agreeable*. For Smith the critic is no different than a sommelier responsible for pairing the appropriate art object to the desired mood; art no different than a lifestyle; artistic production a species of self-expression; the art object no different than the commodity. Her ultimate point is not to say that she dislikes what she is calling post-minimalism. Au contraire, she finds perfectly agreeable the Whitney's recent staging of exhibitions of Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner and Robert Matta-Clarke (the fore-fathers of post-minimalism). But as she says, "That's not the point. We cannot live by the dematerialization—or the slick rematerialization—of the art object alone."

And should we not respond, "But what's the difference, since the very terms of your debate seem to divest such aesthetic decisions of any of their principle stakes." Her rejoinder perhaps, "Some styles are better palliatives. They allow one to all the better accommodate the worst in life. I don't mind a little dematerialized art and some slick rematerialized art, but I want this heady aesthetic balanced out with something warm, perhaps soothing like Lois Dodd's "Sunset," something that can enchant." It may be old fashioned. But I too am allergic to any relapse into magic, anything that refuses the lesson of the worst.

At bottom, is this not what art for Roberta Smith becomes? A refusal to accept the worst? A potent mechanism to keep at a safe distance the grim picture of culture under capitalism? Reading Smith makes one long for the reactive vitriol that gushed from the gifted pen of Clement Greenberg. Rather, we are left with his lobotomized avatars that have thoroughly dispensed, unwittingly I should add, with his principled even if flawed legacy.

Our age is indisputably barren. We no longer have Greenberg's certainties. For the artist today there is no Ariadne to weave a thread through this labyrinth of despair and the complexities implied by our aesthetic decisions. Yet, there is little doubt that we artists and critics cannot accept forms of judgment that do nothing other than resign oneself to a world by pretending that meaningless distinctions (differences between styles) in fact mean something. Rather than a resigned happiness whose correlate is the veritable industrialization of positive thinking (cruelly and economically dissected by Étienne Dolet in this issue's Margin of Utility) and the deification of all forms of consensus, we must find the courage to accept the worst.

Should our art enable us to go merrily to our offices with a contented nod of the head?

My answer. Invoking if I dare the now potent and vast legacy of negation too often forgotten even if often invoked. NO

-Ludwig Fischer



TEST I

1 Complete these words, using all the letters contained in this grammatically incorrect sentence:

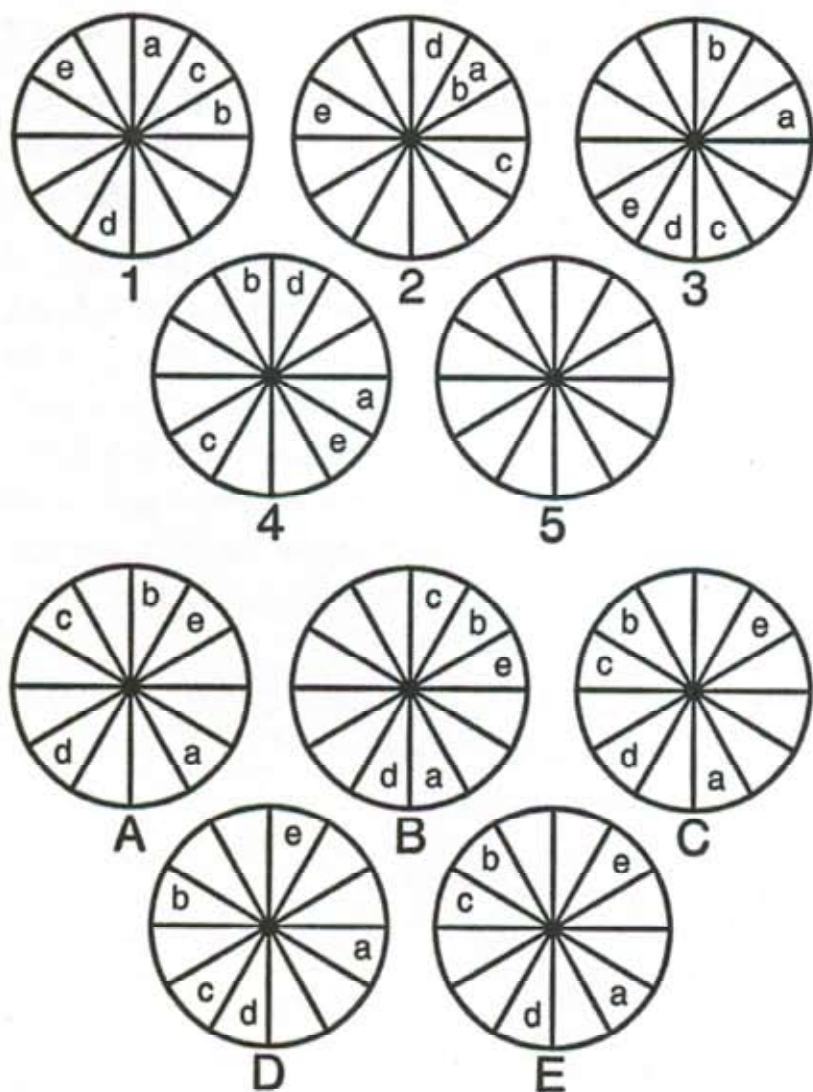
HERE IS TEN FAT CATTLE

(A) - E - R - S - M - N -

(B) - R - N - P - R - N -

(C) - O - T - N - N - A -

2 Which of the lower circles should take the place of number 5?



3 When a dart lands in an even number, the next throw lands it in the second odd number clockwise.

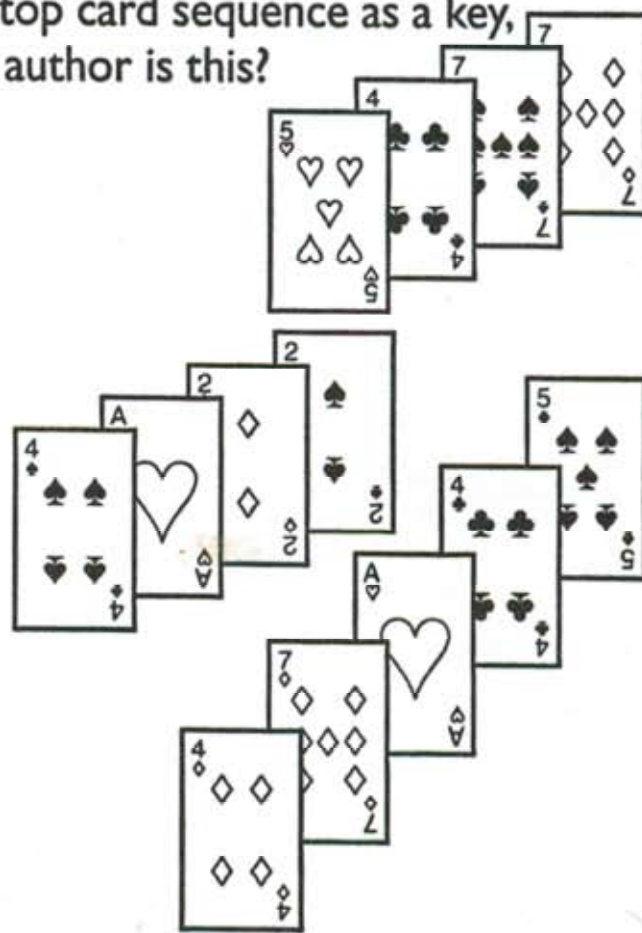
When a dart lands in an odd number, the next throw lands it in the third even number clockwise from the previous throw.

As you can see, the first dart has already been thrown.

Four more darts are to be thrown. What will be the total score of the five darts?



4 Using the top card sequence as a key, what famous author is this?



Margin of Utility

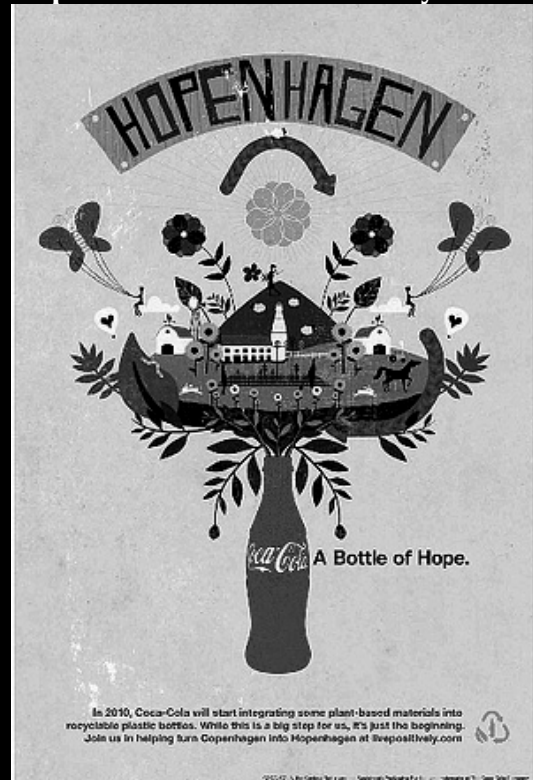
HOPE IN A BOTTLE

"The absurd hero's refusal to hope becomes his singular ability to live in the present with passion."

- Albert Camus

Amidst the advertizing frenzy around 'hope' in the depressing era of post-Obamaphoria, it seems appropriate to reflect on the emotional landscape that dominates contemporary American culture. More specifically, it is worth inquiring into the political relevancy of emotional imperatives and the ways in which a cultural and social milieu imposes a certain framework of acceptable and identifiable emotions. For the purposes of this column, I would like to concentrate on two particularly salient features of our emotional environment: the cult of positivity and the culture of depression.

Hope and the Cult of Positivity



The Obama campaign's choice of hope as one of its publicity catchwords has since saturated the advertizing industry and become a staple of commercial manipulation. One of my favorite examples, which I touched on in last month's column, is Coca-Cola's Hopenhagen campaign during the failed climate talks in Copenhagen. One of their posters reads, "A Bottle of Hope," and had a scene of pastoral euphoria sprouting from a bottle of Coca-Cola. Not only did this push the organic/all natural advertizing frenzy to a point of utter absurdity, but it paradoxically summed up the Obama phenomenon: a bottle of black charm was packaged and sold under the ambiguous promise of hope... What is unique about this sentiment, of course, is that its existence depends solely on the beholder, and it can persist in the face of any facts that prove it wrong. In short, you can always hope, despite how bad things may look. That's what Coca-Cola unwittingly reveals: hope is such a subjective, faith-based sentiment that you can hope for such absurd things as green pastures blooming from a bottle of carbonated corn syrup (or economic, social and political justice being born

rom the election of a suave, multicultural, militant neo-liberal).



The marketing logic of hope, founded on blind individual faith, was undoubtedly successful, in part, because it tapped into the cult of positive thinking that has come to dominate contemporary American culture, saturating its mainstream media venues and imposing itself as an irremediable ethos in the workplace and public sphere. It is for this reason that the success of the hope campaign should be related to the flagrant rise of self-help positive thinking over the last decade or so. Indeed, the self-improvement industry—now a colossal enterprise including books, CDs, DVDs, seminars, coaches, etc.—grossed \$5.62 billion in 2005, up from \$3.35 billion in 2000. It is a remarkable token of cultural depletion when the ballooning self-help section of major bookstore chains often functions as the beacon allowing the curious reader to find the philosophy section, which is usually situated in the ostentatious shadow of the happiness charlatans.

The dominant logic of the cult of positivity should remind us of Marx's critique of religion: regardless of how bad or difficult things are, you can turn everything around by simply thinking differently! Barbara Ehrenreich has provided a trenchant account of this logic by succinctly summarizing the more than one million Google entries on "positive thinking": "Dieting? Robert Ferguson, the 'Master Weight-Loss Coach,' tells us, 'With a positive attitude you can do, have and be everything you want in life!' Bereaved? You can put the fun back in funeral by replacing it with a 'celebration' of the deceased's life. Need money? Attract it to your wallet with positive mental affirmations, such as: 'I love having money. . . . I am open to receive money. I give generously to myself and others. I am generous. I feel great about all the money I spend. Note: Be SPECIFIC about amounts of money [you require].' Cancer? See it positively, as a 'growth opportunity,' and hopefully not just for the tumor. [...] Laid off? Forget the economy and concentrate on reconfiguring your attitude, as explained in the 2004 bestseller *We Got Fired! . . . And It's the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us*" (<http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/hope.htm>).

The cult of positive thinking more or less discretely aims at hijacking our emotional nexus through apparently benign imperatives: "Don't worry, be happy!" "Look on the bright side of things!" "The glass is half full!" While there is nothing wrong per se about actually being happy, the moral imperative to act happy or to think positively is bound up with a highly questionable etiology. It reduces political, social, economic and psychological problems to a single common denominator and roots them in an identifiable cause: the individual psyche. Moreover, it isolates individuals from their context and encourages them to look away from their immediate material existence, to ignore the current state of their lives, in the name of a 'shiny new attitude' about their decrepit state: "Are you angry because you lost your job? Are you disillusioned politically? Are you socially shunned because of the color of your skin or your sexual preference? Well, turn that frown upside down and look on the bright side of things!"

This emotional hijacking is not only utterly inane; it's politically dangerous. It turns citizens into passive agents with commercialized feelings who are uninterested or unwilling to change their situation. Indeed, they are trained to think that there's nothing wrong with it! The major message of positive thinking is precisely that it's not the situation that's the problem: it's your way of looking at it! This can lead to severe cases of blaming the victim: "Do you not have guaranteed access to health care because you can't afford private insurance? Look on the bright side: at least some people do!"

What ever happened to "get angry"? What ever happened to this primal political passion that is the nemesis of the status quo and the archenemy of the joyful circus of 'new attitudes'? What ever happened to saying, "yes, I'm fucking unhappy about the world I'm living in"?

Unhappy, or Depressed?

If you're not in Happyland with everyone else, singing and dancing like a munchkin in the magical land of Oz, then there's a good chance that you are... depressed. Indeed, approximately 30 million Americans are on anti-depressants, at an annual cost of 10 billion dollars.

It is rather fascinating that the etiology behind medicating depression is the same as that of the cult of positivity: if someone is depressed, there must be a cause, and that cause is most likely to be found in their individual psyche. In the case of depression, the cause is usually considered to be bio-chemical and beyond one's control, whereas in positive thinking it's all about "changing your attitude." This etiology has the unfortunate consequence of de-socializing individuals and isolating them from their context. In the case of depression, the medicalized approach encourages us to ignore things such as unemployment, political disillusionment,

social frustration and spiritual depletion by simply concentrating on bio-chemical factors that can be conveniently manipulated by pharmaceuticals (at a price).

It is worth noting in this regard that “in more than half of the 47 trials used by the Food and Drug Administration to approve the six leading antidepressants on the market, the drugs failed to outperform sugar pills, and in the trials that were successful, the advantage of drugs over placebo was slight” (Gary Greenberg, <http://motherjones.com/print/16481>). The pharmaceutical companies did not publish the unsuccessful trials (the data was obtained through the Freedom of Information Act), which is not surprising because it suggests that the medicalization of depression purports to isolate factors that cannot be isolated from larger contexts. What is even more fascinating is that “both placebo response and drug response for antidepressants have steadily increased over time” (ibid.). This suggests that the shrill marketing campaign of antidepressants has itself had a placebo effect by helping lodge it in people’s minds that “there is hope... hope in a bottle.”



The medicalization of depression encourages us to look away from larger causes. It isolates the individual, and more specifically bio-chemical balances in the individual’s brain, from the social, political and economic situation he or she is in. It suggests that if people are profoundly unhappy and without hope, the source of this depression must be within them (and treatable, for a price).

Overmedicated, Under-Enraged Citizens are not only formed by overt ideology, they are also sculpted as sentient beings by a hegemonic emotional framework. In contemporary America, you better keep a smile on your face, even if it’s a medicated smile. The last thing anybody wants is a lot of angry citizens.

- Etienne Dolet

Machete Interview with Cornel West

Second Installment

The Flickering Light of Performative *Paideia*... in the Night of the American Empire

Gabriel Rockhill: How do your movements across different media of communication and various disciplines relate to the tradition of critical theory? Do you see your work as embracing a similar objective, i.e. a critical engagement with society that breaks down the boundaries of the disciplines and questions traditional modes of communication?

Cornel West: I think in many ways it’s similar. Adorno and Benjamin provided a poignant analysis of the cultural industry and the former put forward an unbelievable philosophy of music, even though of course I disagree with him on jazz. But Benjamin and Adorno mean much to me, and not simply because they traverse the disciplines so smoothly and with such intellectual agility, but also because they understand—as I experienced it—the centrality of the catastrophic, of the traumatic, of the monstrous, the scandalous, and the calamitous so that the starting point is really the effects of a catastrophe on a mainstream that seemingly is functioning smoothly. And so I identify with those two in a very important way when it comes to early 20th-century views, and of course for Adorno till the 1960s. But I must say the difference here is that I am also a participant in and not simply a critical theorist of culture. I released a CD in 2001, *Sketches of My Culture*, and another in 2003 entitled *Street Knowledge*. In 2007, there’s my new CD *Never Forget* with Prince—it’s the first time ever Prince has allowed his music on a hip hop CD—, Andre 3000 of Outkast, Dave Hollister, and others. So you see, I’m a participant in cultural creation, not just a critic as it were. Critics can of course be creative in their own ways, but it’s very different when you’re actually producing the very things that the critics themselves are going to be talking about and trying to make sense of. And this is even true

in some ways as well in film, such as in *The Matrix 2* and *3*. I think one difference would be that I understand *paideia* as tied to the performative, but the performative here is not to be reduced to mere amusement and entertainment, it’s to acknowledge enactment, bodily enactment as well as intellectual enactment in the name of still trying to shatter the sleepwalking, to awaken, to unnerve, to unhouse people, that Socratic function that Adorno performs.

GR: In addition to being a participant in cultural production, you’re also a militant. Is this part of the performative element in your work?

CW: Absolutely! I think that the performative as bodily enactment and intellectual enactment has everything to do with trying to exemplify a certain sense of urgency, a certain kind of state of emergency that we find ourselves in. And, most importantly, I think it also tries to highlight the energy requisite for the kind of courage we need, the courage to think critically, the courage to be empathetic and highlight the plight of the most vulnerable in our society and world and the courage to hope, to be alive, to point out light in darkness, the courage to keep the candle flickering in the night of the American Empire.

- Transcribed by Emily Rockhill

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