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