

BY SEAN LOWRY

Originally presented at the Artspace symposium *aesthetics, anti-aesthetics, non-aesthetics, new aesthetics*, 12 September 2008

# Beautifully unresolved: after the aesthetic/ anti-aesthetic dialectic

Any notion of the aesthetic (including its antithesis) is still bound to be frustrating. Once considered indispensable as a form of critical reflection, ideas related to aesthetics are still strangely impossible to pin down. Although an artwork might potentially be considered from many points of view, aesthetic consideration has somehow seemed separate (even within a narrow consideration) from a work's perceived social, ethical or commodity value. There is of course never one notion of the aesthetic, but rather many disparate, criss-crossing, negating and intertwining ones. The anti-aesthetic, which like its many slippery sister ideas within critical theory, contained no independent essence. It was of course always defined against that which it was said to be other to. From Dada to so-called anti-art, to various so-called

post-aesthetic constructions, this sense of otherness was less a wholesale rejection of the idea of art than a rethinking of its definitions and parameters. It has of course long provided a means with which to describe the degraded, abject, corrupted, exhausted, overlooked, accidental and incomplete. For many, the idea of the anti-aesthetic is problematically linked with a concern for socio-political change and human agency. At any rate, and despite the claims of its various factions, it is probably reasonable to argue that the now expanded problem field of contemporary art exists as a consequence of the unresolved tension between its antithetical constructions.

Was the perceived dichotomy between art as a form of aesthetic experience and art as a form of social transformation ever really worth sustaining? Surely they both

only provide for part of the story. Does art not exist as an interface for certain forms of human expression precisely because it can communicate ideas that exist outside of more conventional forms of language or expression? It is ultimately no less antithetical to pit the aesthetic against the social than it is to expect or refuse beauty or contemplation within social content. It is much the same with the idea of humour or entertainment in art; the presence of one does not necessarily invite or negate the presence of the other. Good and bad art both is and is not humorous, beautiful, ugly, boring, or entertaining. If we do indeed exist within a post-movement, post-disciplinary era, then we must be capable of transcending the factional residue of the aesthetic versus anti-aesthetic dialectic.

The so-called common-sense usage of the term aesthetic – i.e. whether something is beautiful, or possesses properties that are particular to beauty such as elegance, grace, etc. – has of course long been discredited. Even within this usage, construing aesthetics in terms of sensuous pleasure soon becomes inadequate once we consider such things as mathematical equations, which of course do not rely upon sense perception. Were we to restrict ourselves to sense perception we would have no need to introduce any ethical dimension to the question of aesthetics, for we all know that the beautiful can be as mean spirited as the ugly can be virtuous. But once we determined a virtuous act, character or idea to be beautiful, even our common-sense determination was starting to tie itself in knots. And this was only the beginning. Broadening our determination to include formal and referential elements,

coupled with the possibility that aesthetic value might be attributed to a work that is not necessarily an experience of pleasure (such as a response to rape or genocide), we then somehow arrived at a cynical form of satisfaction located in exercising one's cognitive abilities within a damning aesthetic judgement of its absence. It was then only with a degree of embarrassment that we would ever actually own up to any sense of aesthetic pleasure. It is as if something stirred within us that demanded a more serious justification.

For some, aesthetic merit can exist despite ethical defects, whereas for others they are inseparable (think *Triumph of the Will* or misogynist hip hop). For others, moral improvement can lead to potentially undermining the aesthetic value of a work (do you prefer dirty and morally flawed rock or hip hop to its politically correct incarnations?). At any rate, we have developed a plurality of aesthetic values, of which aesthetically relevant ethical qualities are only one kind.

Although Duchamp famously and retrospectively claimed of his readymade strategy in 1961 that his choice 'was never dictated by aesthetic delectation', and although an artwork may be conceptual or metaphysical in its philosophical structure, it is obviously a mistake to immediately suppose, that, as a consequence, such a work might not *also* remain open to aesthetic interpretation. We can now interpret a work's significance against a shifting balance of symbolic, strategic, perceptive, technical, cognitive, social, political, semantic and ideological concerns.

Following the influence of two key figures, Duchamp (with his contempt for hand

and eye) and Walter Benjamin (with his reflections upon reproduction), and after almost half a century of aesthetic cleansing (in response to Greenberg, et al.) together with a *theoretical* cleansing of class and privilege and various announcements of death culminating in the constipated critical discourse of the 1980s, a consensus appears to have been building for some time that although this was the ‘cleansing that we had to have’, it is now time to move on. But to where? There is surely no need to throw all the babies out with their bathwaters. Instead we have looked to the spaces in between.

Whether finally celebratory or apocalyptic, the rally call of the ‘post’ was easy to proclaim and difficult to argue with, given the battery of theoretical artillery that has until relatively recently carried so much prestige. But finally, perhaps as a paradoxical consequence of its very success, the ‘post’ was doomed, primarily because it conceded the point (despite its critical aims) that there was nothing left to do. It was finally a heavily overdetermined thesis, having far less to do with the state of art than with a heavy atmosphere of theory. In short, it discounted what artists actually do – the practice of thinking through making (I am of course considering ‘making’ in all its expanded and post-conceptual variations).

After postmodernism, many artists found it difficult to sustain the paradoxical conviction that there were even any small ‘t’ truths to discover within a discourse that denied the very existence of truth. The failure of both modernism and postmodernism to accurately define or account for the conditions and functions of art caused many artists to adopt an

ambivalent attitude towards both. Artists could now start to assume a ‘vantage point’ over all the ‘contrary information witnessed in the post-war period’, and, as a consequence, start to ‘merge’ or ‘implode a variety of different strategies and epistemologies’.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence of the dilemma of post-subjectivity that preceded it, the ‘as if’ dilemma would limit the return of subjectivity to face value. Following the demise of ‘truth’, ‘objectivity’, ‘soul’ and ‘subjectivity’ under the premise of the prefix ‘post’, self-conscious art was capable only of reintroducing such concepts ‘as if’ they were still possible.

But have the trans-subjectivities and relational aesthetics that replaced the ‘post’ simply become an ‘as if’ utopia, still aware of a second handedness, yet carrying on regardless? Art and criticism produced under the premise of ‘as if’ demands an amalgamated approach to established polarities, one that does not reject subjectivity wholesale, and, at the same time, remains conscious of the weight of history. Art can never be reduced to either a dry cynical exercise of negation, or to a naive utopia of subjectivities, without inviting contradiction. Once accepted as being simultaneously original *and* unoriginal, aesthetic *and* anti-aesthetic, formal *and* social, strategic *and* poetic, it became possible to regard ideas related to appropriation and the ‘post’ as merely acquired tools within art’s ongoing evolution rather than as foregrounded and exhibited ends. Historical and ironic distancing can therefore be considered more as a means of production than as that which actually constitutes the work. For many contemporary artists, these polarities

are now givens, no longer opponents but rather companions. But are we once again finding that ‘successful’ innovations and reactionary shifts are all ultimately reducible to tools of production and/or style?

There is clearly no longer one dominant or uniquely relevant theory or tendency, nor much common ground between theories or tendencies. Every attempt to forward a critical totalitarianism masquerading as an antidote or utopia has fallen prey to paradox. From the extension of the idea of site-specificity into the social sphere, to ideas such as relational aesthetics, the globalisation of culture wars, to the endless permission now granted in advance for variations of the ‘anything goes’ edict of post-Duchampian art, fragmentation has dispensed with the possibility of unified opinion or style. For Nicolas Bourriaud, it was no longer about ‘creating meaning on the basis of virgin material but of finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production’.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, ‘the artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions.’<sup>3</sup> Now reminiscent of the delusional expressions of individuality created within information capital, Myspace/Facebook customisations and personalised playlists, the paradox of generic individualism has even reduced the artist to a mashing cobbler of the endlessly unrepeatable one-off.

As part of a general repositioning of the experience of art within the realm of the lived and the everyday, we have witnessed further subtle shifts within the consideration of works in terms of how they operate within an experience as ‘carriers of meaning’. When we see detritus presented as

art, we now ask ourselves; is this allegory or evidence? The legacies of Duchamp et al. now have even more factions. According to Benjamin Buchloh in 1994, the question as to whether a framing of art history in terms of authors and anti-authors has become ‘utterly futile and methodologically unacceptable’ needs to be considered together with the possibility that ‘Duchamp and his legacies simply do not constitute a sufficiently substantial – existentially and aesthetically complex – visual culture’.<sup>4</sup> Wishing to resist ‘lapsing into a melancholic call for old conventions of representation, types of artistic subjectivity, and models of aesthetic experience’, Buchloh nonetheless warned that in continuing to expressly focus efforts on avoiding this fallacy, the question as to whether the legacies of Duchamp had finally fallen short of their potential should not be ignored.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the interesting part of the problem field is floating somewhere in between and inherently unresolvable. It is certainly a bittersweet time to attempt to make art. Never before has there been more to graze upon or more facilitating infrastructure to draw upon, yet conversely, less chance that anyone will ever care or notice.

It now seems impossible to return to an unmediated reflection of the world or any real or socially progressive agenda. Instead, art is left floating somewhere between social commentary and self-reflexive fiction, between public and private spheres, and, finally, between an engagement with and a suspension of belief in the idea of art itself. With no other option at hand, many artists have returned a quasi-expressive playful enthusiasm to their practice that falls short of declaring a belief, but

that also refuses the cynical negation of possibility implied within constructions centred around the post. Jean Baudrillard once suggested that the attitude of the post-Warholian artist is essentially agnostic because 'we no longer believe in art, only in the idea of art (which is of course no longer aesthetic)'.<sup>6</sup> For Baudrillard, humans are 'secretly' agnostic.<sup>7</sup>

Although the word 'agnostic' is generally applied to someone who rejects the idea that it is possible to 'know' whether gods exist or not, its literal definition, 'without knowledge', is also applicable to a range of untenable intellectual problems. Now positioned in a doubly paradoxical moment, a moment *after* the projected 'end of history', artists are now both historically distant and increasingly ambivalent to the aesthetic/anti-aesthetic dialectic. Freed from the influences of millennial projection and retrospection, the paradoxical limitations of belief versus disbelief dichotomies become clearer. For the believer, art still serves as an index of culture in general. For the non-believer, art is now equalised with the culture it once claimed to index. From an agnostic perspective, on the other hand, both 'art' and 'anti-art' remain equivalently contestable propositions.

Despite the many nuances of his work, the legacy of Duchamp is most significant for resituating emphasis from that of 'making' to that of 'choosing'. Various post-war formations are retrospectively responsible for enacting this shift by making Duchamp their exemplar. Now, after a long series of battles, 'choosing' and 'making' can be attributed a relatively equivalent value. In other words, both exactly

produced *and* appropriated elements can have a role within the development of new meanings. Given that the language of reconstruction has overtaken ironic strategies of quotation, and given that quotation and repetition are habit, forms of artistic production whose trajectories find their beginning rather than their end in ironic estrangement can now potentially be constructed upon their foundations.

Ultimately, this tension, between the value of 'choosing' and 'thinking through making', remains unresolved. Perhaps it is as a consequence of this tension that contemporary cultural production maintains its momentum. This doubly paradoxical moment, now historically advanced from the end of history, with irony as its starting point rather than as its exhibited end, is not about fence sitting but rather an acknowledgment of the beauty of uncertainty. It is about accepting that there might actually be some merit on both (or all) sides of our battles. Rather than refuting the possibility of originality outright, we have rebranded it as possible but unlikely.

Like any theoretical rebranding, there is nothing new about the agnostic model. It does however invite a review of its precedents through the lens of the present. According to John C Welchman, it is clear that the 'antagonism between original and copy is rarely present as an absolute antithesis';<sup>8</sup> and that 'the most provocative art' and 'convincing criticism' is that which refuses 'the absolutes of this polarity'.<sup>9</sup> For Arthur C Danto, the inevitable amalgamation of antithetical projections such as gesture and appropriation can be seen in Gerhard Richter's 1960 painting

*Abstract Expressionist Coca-Cola Bottle*.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Swiss artist John M Armleder: 'Maybe I don't care enough about UFOs, but I know that UFO skeptics are not my friends.'<sup>11</sup>

Although its ironic or apocalyptic tendencies have softened, the legacies of the 'post' are still apparent. For all its contradictions and empty rhetoric, it is clear that postmodernism has made a contribution to the way art is interpreted that cannot be simply retracted or forgotten. But at the same time, it is also evident that our cynical detachment from sincerity, experimentation and subjectivity has also lost steam. It is as if artists want to believe again but can't quite bring themselves to. With no other option foreseeable, we get back to the job at hand, 'as if' it is still possible or somehow relevant. For the agnostic, our former oppositionalities are similarly limited in their ability to accurately describe and account for the diversity of contemporary cultural production. To continue in the naive hope that heroic possibility will again be made possible seems no less clichéd or unthinking than to maintain a cynical negation of the possibility of innovation or poetry altogether. Art that can confidently poke its head above this landscape must display an awareness of this contradiction without being constipated or consumed by it.

So, contemporary art now possesses, by historical definition, an important differentiation founded within its ability to reflect not only on history but also upon the so-called end of history (which of course now has a history of its own). Just as Roland Barthes became the authoritative author upon the death of the author, the

paradoxical claim that art history is over is now part of art history. The contemporary artist, if he or she survives the muddle-headed confusion of art school, invariably faces misunderstanding, indifference and ultimately a sanctimoniously bittersweet feeling of failure. It is hard yet rewarding to maintain momentum within a discourse founded upon a mistrust of truth. In finally admitting that we do not 'know', we resort to the agnostic position. Perhaps all that is finally intellectually and emotionally defensible is that we still do not *know*.

The art world remains an abstract entity. Art remains a projected factional consensual existence. Convolutional nonsense for some still serves as an expression of the inexpressible for others. Like philosophy or physics, art can sometimes present speculative forms of enquiry at the coalface of new knowledge. Historically, these are forms of thinking that have anticipated rather than inhabited the 'isms' that invariably follow. New forms of interdisciplinary knowledge no longer seem to initiate 'isms'. Perhaps that is a good thing. The theorising of art production must acknowledge both the idea of thinking through making *and* any contextualising information that stands outside of the work.

For Nietzsche, humanity, by way of its 'error' became 'so deep, delicate, inventive as to bring forth such blossoms as religion and the arts'.<sup>12</sup> At least some of us wish to continue indulging that contradictory yet consensual 'error' that is art. Art is a narcissistic and schizophrenic activity, even, paradoxically, within its own attempts at self-reflexive redemption and denial. An awareness of its contradictions coupled with a sense of poetry that now finds it's

beginning rather than its end in ironic estrangement can certainly facilitate the production of more 'errors' and 'carriers of meaning'. The paradoxical relationship between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic remains *beautifully unresolved*.

#### NOTES

1. Ashley Bickerton, quoted in D Robbins (ed.), 'From criticism to complicity' (an edited transcript of discussion between Sherrie Levine, Pater Halley, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton and Philip Taaffe, which was moderated by Peter Nagy at Pat Hearn Gallery, New York, 2 May 1986), *Flash Art*, no. 129, Summer 1986, p. 46.
2. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2002, p. 17.
3. op. cit., p. 20.
4. Benjamin Buchloh, *October 70*, Fall 1994. Reprinted in M Buskirk and M Nixon (eds.), *The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews, Round Table*, October Books, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, p. 3.
5. op. cit., p. 4.
6. Jean Baudrillard, 'Warhol: snobbish machine', trans. Julian Pefanis, University of Sydney, Department of History and Theory, 1999, unpublished, p. 6.
7. ibid.
8. op. cit., p. 7.
9. John C Welchman, 'Introduction, global nets: appropriation and postmodernity', in *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s*, G+B Arts International, Amsterdam, 2001, p. 53.
10. Arthur C Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, University of California Press, 1992, p. 145.
11. John M Armleder 1993. Quoted in [http://www.artspace.org.nz/shows/99\\_3.html](http://www.artspace.org.nz/shows/99_3.html), accessed 17 July 2005.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Aphorism 29', *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Penguin Books, London, 1977.

MAY 2009

JASPER KNIGHT  
THE HOSPITAL CLUB  
24 ENDELL STREET / LONDON

JUNE 2009

THE HORN OF PLENTY: EXCESS AND REVERSIBILITY  
PARA/SITE ART SPACE  
4 PO YAN STREET / SHEUNG WAN / HONG KONG

JULY 2009

YINJAA BARNI PROJECT  
ALL AROUND YOU: ROEBOURNE EDITION  
CHALK HORSE / SYDNEY

supported by The Australia Council for the Arts

NOVEMBER 2009

MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM  
CHALK HORSE / SYDNEY



1/2doz.



# CHALK HORSE

94 COOPER ST SURRY HILLS NSW 2010 (02) 92118999  
WWW.CHALKHORSE.COM.AU