



Day of the Locust

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Without doubt the artwork of 2007 was Damien Hirst's diamond skull *For the Love Of God*. It is probably the first twenty-first century artwork. Well, the one that has been validated in the 'old' way anyway. Chris Crocker's YouTube "Leave Brittany Alone!!!" rant is probably the first twenty-first century work validated in the 'new' way: 13,796,498 views as of 17th December, 2007. That's eighteen times more people than visited *documenta 12*. Here, it's not cool to talk about stuff that is sampled on FM radio—things popular, really popular. Art is out of discernment right? Art is about transcendent meaning, quality, permanence, greatness. All those words that critics throw around like so many children's teething rusks to slobber over! "Great, yes, the greatest of the great! Yeah, yummy, yummy, yummy... slurp, slurp, slurp."¹ No, art's got to be around until way after we're dead—one hundred years old like good antiques. Brisbane artist Robert MacPherson once stated that "It isn't far from the walls of the art gallery to the walls of the junk shop" and recent art has seen the opposite happen. We've never had so much junk displayed as art. We've never had so many artists, so many biennales. So many individuals writing on blogs, posting on YouTube, going to art shows, buying art books, buying art, many children's exhibitions the whole world becoming one big middle class crèche! My God, what has happened? They've all gone quite mad viciously. It has to stop!

Meanwhile, back in the real world I want to quote from a recent text by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh:

Under present circumstances, it could only be expected that serious professional artists, progressive or conservative, would become increasingly desperate to find alternative institutional and discursive spaces to shelter their work from the violent impact of three forces that have dramatically altered every facet and fraction of artistic practice in the past ten years: digital electronic technology, the globalisation of capital, and the monolithic power of an industrialised art market that aspires to a fast and final merger with the music and fashion industries. A market that seems to have turned Joseph Beuys' prophecy that "everybody will become an artist" into a travesty with calamitous consequences. How is a traditional artistic subject with its latently aristocratic or manifestly bourgeois ego formations to respond to a situation in which locust swarms of international mediocrities claiming the status of 'artist' emerge now in greater numbers in a month than the total number of artists recorded in an entire decade up until the 1980s?²

This is the opening paragraph from an article about a stained glass window commission in Cologne Cathedral by the German painter Gerhard Richter. I must confess at first to having a relapse in my anger management program when I read this. Considering that the vast majority of 'new' artists are now coming from Asia and China, is it wrong to assume that it is they who are the "international mediocrities"? How did it come to this, I thought? How did modernism's dream for art of creating a universal language that would reach all get perverted into an attitude so ugly, and perhaps (unwittingly?) racist—a 'Barbarians at the Gates' mentality, people likened to "locust swarms"? Wasn't it obvious that when the world's most populous nations started to engage in contemporary art that a percentage of those billions of people would attempt to be artists, and that given the maths, this would mean millions of new artists and probably tens of thousands (or

more) of 'worthwhile' ones? After all, it's just human behaviour. It's what we humans do and we are doing it more and more; it's hardly going to stop. The 'American century' was last century and did Buchloh's comments exhibit a wider fear of the proverbial Twilight of the West?

However, on reflection I wondered whether Buchloh was also being intentionally provocative. Yes, his sentiments seem to hide behind the by now general blanket condemnation of the art market, but he also seems to have accepted that art itself has been "dramatically altered". The paragraph was complex and contradictory, which means it may also be very honest. And it is very challenging—whatever it is that is occurring at present. Any change, especially momentous change, inherently means people in positions of power will lose some, if not all of their power. There is no way around it. This is why conservatives (of all political hues) always resist change. Many know they cannot possibly stem the tide and that they and the ideas they have built their careers on and no doubt still passionately believe in, may be swept away or at least sidelined. It may have been how those opposing early modernism and who of us can name many of early modernism's opponents now?

In the article's second paragraph Buchloh goes on to mention "deskilling", the concept whereby modern art developed away from traditional mimetic depiction (realism and tonal painting) into abstraction and with conceptual art, away from the object altogether. This was seen in the early 1980s as being somewhat of a loss of power in contemporary art, because we no longer had such skills in our arsenal. Buchloh's inference though is that it is now just 'too easy' for just anyone to mimic the art effect. I suppose we must blame all those 'artless' moving image and found object installations, but can art really seriously continue to preach down to the great 'unwashed' and not expect them to actually start listening and then want to join in. Exhibit too many video works that mimic and aestheticise low-tech styles and of course up and coming smart kids will say: "Gee, I can do that. I want to do that." Get too many kids up in front of a video camera and then project their (huge) image up onto the wall to give them their "fifteen seconds of fame" (as in the current Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art Andy Warhol exhibition

Christian Jankowski, an artist's storefront studio in Dafen Village, 2007
to courtesy the artist

Party boy Corey Delaney Worthington on today tonight



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t that such a bid for increased entrance
ers—through audience interaction—will *not*
the way people think about art! The main
is for the current condition of contemporary
e obvious historical, sociological and (global)
mic, but many are also to be found both within
nism itself (its utopian yearnings) and within
velopment of the modern museum.

*[T]he world fascinates me. It's so nice,
whatever it is.*
Andy Warhol

g in *The Australian* newspaper, art critic
tian Smee wished that the QAG had been
“discerning” in its selection of Warhol’s
.³ But this desire is to miss the point of
ol’s universal optimism completely. Warhol
t about discernment or any narrowing down
h. Excuse my own pop psychology, but to me

Warhol represented a radical form of inclusion,
born partly out of his sense of exclusion at being
the child of poor Slovakian immigrants; looked down
upon in fine art circles for being a graphic artist and
gay (sometimes ‘flamingly’ so). Add his apparent role
as a practising Christian of more liberal beliefs (yes,
they do exist) and we see Warhol waging a small war
not so much against the mainstream (who he sort of
co-opts to his cause), but attacking the critical avant-
garde’s own conception of itself, acting in autonomy
from the outside world. And it was an attack, I
believe, based in sublimated anger. Warhol’s genius
was to be able to harness his innate optimism as a
weapon against the avant-garde status quo in a truly
populist way. No mean feat even for an adman. It is
now forgotten that Warhol’s 1970s work (the dollar
signs, the celebrity portraits) was despised by most
art insiders. So it’s not that Smee’s attitude is exactly
wrong. Smee obviously feels that a pyramidal power
structure of taste and aesthetic discernment is needed

for a true appreciation of art. It’s just that I doubt
people want this from Warhol. The public wants th
optimism. They love Andy’s big ‘Pop Shop’ just as
he intended them to. They love it exactly because it
doesn’t talk down to them, doesn’t remind them of
other aspects of life that stress them. In short QAG
GoMA’s show releases them.

As Brisbane writer Rex Butler has stated: “The new
GoMA, with its populism, its kids’ activities and its
wide open spaces on to the outside world, is the ide
place to undertake (a) rethinking of Warhol and th
consequences for twenty-first century art.”⁴ Many
at first didn’t much warm to the first architectural
model for the new Gallery of Modern Art in Brisba
It looked like a big shed, or at best a convention
centre. But now this seems to be one of its attractio
GoMA feels accessible and inviting; it reminds me
the new extension to my local shopping centre—ve
similar architecture.

to the way in which the Queensland Art Gallery come to this populist juncture, I doubt there is any actual grand plan. It seems to be a group effort over many years, where the growing success of the *Asia-Pacific Triennials* and school holiday exhibitions aimed at kids resulted in them becoming permanent fixtures of the institution, which then influenced the architecture of the new building where there is a designated permanent space for children's exhibitions). Although one would have to say that the last *APT5* owed maybe too much of its success to the hoopla surrounding the new building, it is now the gallery's task to reinvent the *APT* for the twenty-first century.

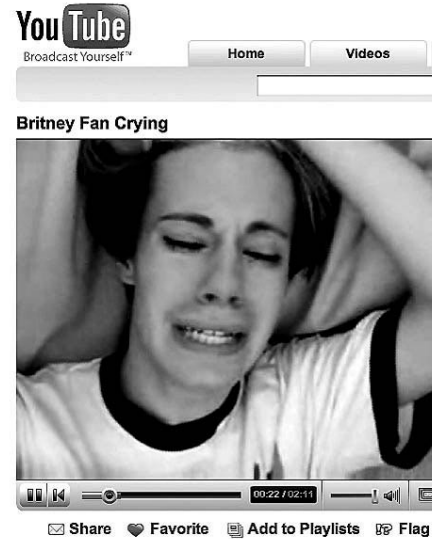
I write this as a sixteen-year-old kid in Melbourne all over the news and dubbed a new Paris Hilton Lindsay Lohan, because a 'mini riot' with police occurred after a party at his house while his parents were away. Corey Delaney, became an instant star (in fifteen seconds), not so much because of the party or the attacks on police, but because of his attitude of seemingly uncomprehending defiance (and his dress sense; in short his 'attitude'. Like an instant movie happening in real time, Corey seemed both self-aware and not, making it up as he went along, knowing just when to be open and when to pass it over to my friend for comment". Who needs Hollywood scriptwriters, who go on strike anyway? This was the real deal? Like Chris Crocker and his Cousins and that tattoo, our immortal Britney and the very mortal Anna Nicole-Smith (and now Sarah Palin), we really are naming the wrong people contemporary artists of our culture. However, in an age of changing mass-aesthetics and a kind of new post-democracy, it is also possible to position Corey as the ongoing (and centuries-old) privileging of the individual, the sovereign self. And here one could note just how many critics of the rise of the individual have as the underpinning for their criticism an adherence to traditional organised religion. Even the most leftist leaning thought has a kind of puritanical edge, derived largely from religion. Think about it.

My intention here was to look at QAG/GoMA's upcoming piece exhibition, the *Asia-Pacific Triennial*. I could write on how the *APT* should operate in an age of changing mass-aesthetics and a kind of new post-democracy. The last *APT* seemed content to just present some 'art from the region'. While there were some standout artworks (e.g. Ai Wei Wei's), there is no real attempt to make any real 'call' about the state of regional culture 'now', how the rise of Asia both confounds capitalism and democracy (China's rising middle class seems very linked still to those in the league with the ruling Communist Party). I could suggest that the *APT* look at the phenomenon of the Chinese village of Dafen in Shenzhen—famous for its painters, whose assembly line-like mode of work plays a "notion of painting as production... pushed its conceptual outer limits".⁵

The *APT6* could exhibit an acceptance that many Asian artists and cultures harbour few of the West's demarcations (paper thin anyway) between the market and the art object (most Chinese artists happily consign works to auction straight from their studio). Many writers and artists are increasingly engaging with the phenomenon of Dafen—the German conceptual artist Christian Jankowski's 2007 collaborative project with the village's painters is one recent example. The *APT6* could revisit Takashi Murakami's radical mode of working, whereby extraordinarily expensive artworks made for the fine art market promote everything from cheap mass-produced anime figurines to skateboards to Louis Vuitton (and vice versa).⁶ Or look at the amazing mutation of punk rock in Asia—in Java, and also China, where somehow Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel are seen as radical. In fact *APT6* could just give itself completely over to under 25s! No, that would really be radical... but it will never happen. We must remember that the Warhol exhibition was presented at GoMA precisely because he is a safe historicised bet.

Bets aside and my jaded cynicism checked, I still think that QAG/GoMA seems the best place for the 'new age' of art to be explored. *Video Hits 2004* curated by Nicholas Chambers and Kathryn Weir is still one of the most prophetic and underrated exhibitions of recent years. Overall, what is refreshing is that QAG/GoMA, like Corey, seems to have partly made things up as they go and it has worked for them. It looks so fresh and is popular largely because they genuinely have a non-judgmental and group approach. Sure, local artists get short-changed, but hey! this is Queensland ("if you have three lives spend the third one in Queensland!"). Ultimately to over-analyse is to kill off the very thing that attracted us to art in the first place. I'm all for Warhol's universal optimism and the public's taste or lack of it. It's the best rebuke (or wedge) to the status quo any day!

*Pursed-lipped McKinnon, clearly frustrated when Corey refused her repeated requests to remove his huge sunglasses and offer an apology on the show (A Current Affair), went in for the kill, adopting a school ma'am tone to suggest to the boy: "Go away and take a good long hard look at yourself." But before she could cut the link, the boy shot back: "I have, everyone has... and they love it."*⁷



Notes

¹ "... [A]sked by overseas acquaintances to nominate Australia's great modern artist, I have always said Williams, with Nolan a close second. There are other great painters: Ian Fairweather, Olsen, Grace Cossington Smith, John Brack, Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale, Jeffrey Smart, Sam Margaret Preston. But none quite delivered that unique combination of felt, universally relevant subject matter and truly original idiom. Fairweather great though he was, looks a little too arcane; Olsen, also great, a little loose. Of course, if it does come down to Williams and Nolan, the winner is, we don't have to choose. We can have them both." Sebastian 'Painting by Numbers', *The Australian*, 27 October, 2007: 004

² Benjamin H. D. Buehler, 'Gerhard Richter: Cologne Cathedral', *Artforum* December, 2007: 306–09

³ Sebastian Smees, 'Too Cool for School', *The Australian*, 22 December, 2007

⁴ Rex Butler, 'More Than Just a Pop Sensation', *The Australian*, 30 Nov 2007

⁵ Philip Tinari, 'Original Copies', *Artforum*, October, 2007

⁶ Scott Rothkopf, 'Takashi Murakami: Company Man', in @MURAKAMI (catalogue), Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, New York: Rizzoli International, 2007

⁷ Andrew Hornery and Alex Tibbitts, 'Reality TV Version of Neighbours Instant Hit', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January, 2008