

Artistic Insights

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Susan Paterson

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Artistic Insights

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Abstract: The arts have traditionally been a vehicle for the artist's creative voice. But is this changing? How does the art viewer enter the artist's world of meaning? Or is meaning increasingly becoming the property of the viewer? Has the order changed to witness the consumer becoming authority and the producer becoming a slave to the consumer market?

Keywords: Artistic Practice: Producing Arts Form, Insights: To Perceive with a Given Authority

ON MAY 23rd 2008 police seized 20 photographs by the Australian artist Bill Henson which were to go on display at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Paddington Sydney. The controversy raged over Henson's nude images of 12 and 13 year old children. New South Wales police raided the gallery with the elite Child Protection and Sex Crimes Squad under the apprehension that the artworks broke the child pornography laws.

Bill Henson is an internationally renowned artist, who has exhibited world wide. Henson's work has always had an opulent feel of past times and places and yet they are contemporary in their visions of sublime landscapes with a trembling human presence. He is very much inspired by classical European painters and Caravaggio is one of his favorites. His manipulation of hue and chiaroscuro, recall both a painterly and yet mysteriously rich atmosphere. Henson's haunting images leave the viewer with an emotional connection. The nakedness of the figures has more to do with vulnerability and the helplessness of humanity; they are metaphoric rather than factual. Henson constructs imagery of another world; he has the gift of being able to lead the viewer into a dramatic imaginary landscape of myth and fairytale.

The artist described his photographic aims as:

.. I'm interested in that tender proximity, that ineffable, fragile, breathing closeness or presence which photography can animate while, at the same time, allowing no possibility for any familiar connection with the individuals in the picture (Smee, 1996).

Henson's photographs have always raised eyebrows and puzzled viewers who are uninitiated to the artist's world of symbolic imagery. It is the artistic insight of an artist so deeply involved with portraying the aesthetic canons of "high art" which bamboozles the everyday viewer. Henson is literally on another planet to the viewer. Ironically he became vulnerable to those who chose pragmatic attack rather than intellectual enlightenment.

How far can an artist take the viewer into his imaginary world, particularly when they are uninitiated in reading art aesthetically? The boundaries of art practice has always been the territory of artists, it is a world of mystery and the imagination, and it takes a trained eye and insight into an artist's intentions to understand their artworks fully. Art critics are employed to help the public understand the meaning of artworks and to explain their artistic context and aesthetic orientation. There are many different ways of reading artworks and

this is determined according to particular aesthetic canons. Feminist writers would argue that art history has been presented with a male dominated aesthetic orientation, yet even here there are differences if you consider how Croce or Bell may have interpreted artworks. In essence the perception of art is largely personal and subjective, but it is foolish to disregard the aims of the maker of art works.

Many contemporary artists use their artistic voice to challenge authority, and if we reflect on past history they always have. Artists such as Banksy raised the heckles of the British police with his forthright imagery which lampoons authority, he even chose to challenge the Israeli/ Palestinian security fence by painting it with views of freedom. The arts have traditionally been a vehicle for the artist's creative voice and often this voice is challenging, alien and hostile. However artistic freedom, this license to challenge, has been generally respected in democratic societies, but times appear to be changing as those who are not qualified to perceive with a given authority are abusing their power with personal attacks and acts of violence. A picture may have a thousand meanings, but it does not spew bullets and threatened with prison cells. Pictures hurt no one! A book can be shut, and a viewer can turn away from a haunting image or leave a gallery, cinema or theatre. Artworks are voices of the other, but they are non violent and largely peaceful comments.

What happened to Henson is not unfamiliar. Andre Serrano's "Piss Christ" caused international outrage in 1989 and the Brooklyn Museum of Art was involved in lawsuits in 1999 when it came under fire from the Catholic Church and the New York City Mayor for exhibiting Chris Ofili's "Holy Virgin Mary". What these issues point out is that the traditional position of art practice as a challenging intellectual pursuit, has changed so that now art is supposedly only safe, when it is a mere decorative commodity.

What has changed in society that an artist or intellectual can be terrorized for having a particular point of view? Why can't the art viewer enter the artist's world of meaning? The line between art and popular imagery has been blurred with the increase in electronic traffic and this has meant that meaning has increasingly crossed into the territory of others, thus becoming the property of the viewer. Now everyone is a consumer of imagery and everyone has a right to comment. Indeed the police also waded into the cyber world with their challenge to an international Web site which published Henson's images. This problem is not unfamiliar, as we all witness events where some countries block websites, and interfere with the personal mobile phone coverage of citizens.

It would seem that artistic imagery is now open to the scrutiny of everyone and artists' works are becoming the free property of the masses whether they like or understand art or not. The order of art is under attack because of this free for all image market opened up by the digital revolution. Arthur Danto heralded in 1996 that Art was at an end, and that traditional notions of aesthetics, could no longer apply to contemporary art where in fact nothing should be ruled out. He suggested that art was in a period of deep pluralism and there was total tolerance for anything. However Danto did not foresee the backlash of this tolerance. Certainly artistic freedom of speech may indeed be almost dead and this may explain why artists remain incognito if they want to challenge the orthodoxy, particularly in matters religious, political or politically correct. Banksy and the Guerilla Girls are examples of artists who prefer to remain unknown, least suffer Henson's fate of public humiliation, shame and threatened prosecution for having a point of view different from others.

The tensions lies with new media meaning and marketing. Artworks are now the free property of the consumer as the world wide web changes how images are delivered and how

art works are read. Any artist who wishes to challenge the orthodoxy does not care a fig for what the consumer wants. However the reality is that they will become more and more vulnerable to public scrutiny when their artworks are used by the marketing tool of the web. There is no doubt that reactionary consumers are definitely asserting their power and authority over the artist's voice to such a point that we are witnessing those who would call the police to close down an exhibition. Do the same people call the police to take Eminem's music off the airwaves? Do those same people ban the language used by writers such as Peter Carey?

Controversial art has always played an important role in the history of civilization. What the reactionary politically motivated consumer is in fear of, is the artist's power to potentially influence millions of people. Indeed the Beatles music changed the attitudes of a generation of British children, uplifting them from the working class doldrums and inculcating them with a positive "all is possible" mindset. Lennon's words *Imagine all the people living life in peace, yoo oo oo, you can say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one...remind us of this period in time.*

The politically motivated consumer of the 21st century stakes the claim as authority even if he or she is completely uneducated in matters artistic. It is evident that the aesthetic door has not been opened for these characters. No educational source has taught them to think critically and in open minded ways, or to respect that art may indeed be a different language. More over, there are those whose ideology is such that they do not want this door to be opened, because they use the arts their own way to do their own inculcating. Throughout the world we are noticing that education is becoming high jacked by various closed minded groups who inculcate their own peculiar values through spurious methods including indoctrination, bullying and punishment. Artists and intellectuals who are true to the creative spirit, will always demand the right of freedom of speech, but unless they learn to protect themselves, they will continue to become targets for unscrupulous gangs of vigilantes.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida used the intellectual strategy of difference to encourage the examination of power relationships in society (Derrida in Easthope and McGowan, 1992). An examination of difference in socio-cultural 'values' in education encourages students to take a philosophical approach to critical thinking. This is exciting, as it points out the variance of human perception in different historical and cultural contexts. Truth in contemporary science is different from the scientific truth of the past. Truth in Renaissance art is different from truth in Post-modern art. Truth in Christian and Islamic religions, differ between different sects and creeds of Christian and Muslim peoples, as it does in all religions.

The Arts when delivered by qualified intellectuals help society to explore and challenge personal, racial, political, social and cultural issues. As Dominic Dromgoole, the artistic director of the Oxford stage company stated in response to the Birmingham riots which closed the play *Behzti* by Guurpreet Kaur Bhatti in the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in December 2004, because it portrayed violence against women;

Now, more than ever, it is theatre's role not to be bullied by religious or ideological sensibilities. Now that various forms of fundamentalism are queuing up to close the shutters on the windows of enlightenment- and Sikhism ranks a great deal beneath Christianity for potent offence at this moment- it is more important than ever that theatre finds various ways of saying no to the various blind yeses that are so ardently promoted (Dromgoole, 2004).

By challenging mainstream perceptions and increasing cultural understandings it would seem that arts education can help to minimise fears and strengthen national stability by encouraging individuals to understand “other” peoples’ cultural beliefs and values. The artist has a right to challenge orthodoxies, they do this in non violent ways. There is no excuse for violent reactions to the artists intellectual challenge to reflect upon values, as violent reactions move the challenge from the intellectual realm of the artist voice into the gutter of raw uneducated emotion. Violence is evidence of untempered emotional intelligence.

In times when knowledge is swamping the world through the media, human interest in factual truths is diminishing. People are hungry for the human “drama” to be a theatre played out on the television screen, computer and mobile phone. The “theatre of war” has become a menu for a blood thirsty consumer appetite, as we witnessed during the Iranian elections, to nae but one example.

What is the real difference between this new media image spectacle and what an artist once voiced in the past? Not much, for the average consumer, but for the art connoisseur it is the aesthetics, which is missing. In deed the media is providing a theatrical menu for a bloodthirsty consumer. Perhaps one could argue that some artists want a piece of that same market and will lure in the interest of the consumer by providing the world with edgy images. Henson may be playing this card and his confiscated art has undoubtedly increased the value of his art, but considering the evolving history of his photographic imagery perhaps he wanted no part in this style of drama.

As artists, art critics and art educators, we can all take note of the boundaries between the consumer market and the art world. The artist can choose to either remain in the cloistered world of high art or run the gauntlet by entering the more lucrative market of the mass media. When the artist enters the latter he or she must be prepared for the potential consequences such as in the Henson case. Indeed we witness the increasingly violent consequences of journalists all over the world who step into the real theatre of war.

The aesthetic issues related to the defence of the freedom of the artist voice, is that the uneducated public have different requirements. Suzanne Langer sums this up well.

The sign is something to act upon, or a means to command action; the symbol is an instrument for thought (Langer 1979, p.63).

There is no doubt that those uneducated in reading art from an aesthetic viewpoint will take a photograph of a naked adolescent as a sign of something “evil”, rather than a metaphorical symbol which may simply be an instrument for thought.

Knee jerk reactions in Australia are not new. Emeritus Professor Donald Horne described us as once being a nation of pragmatists with sheep’s brains (Horne 1988, p. 5), and one often described as having a “cultural cringe”. In our short history many intellectuals and artists have been literally run out of the country, as anti-intellectuals systematically attacked university academics in the arts and humanities who applied for funding grants through the Australia Council and the Australian Research Grants Scheme. Professor Donald Horne (1988) reminds us;

...it is easy to get hold of almost any grant and quite fairly make fun of it, or attack it as extravagance, or as an example of intellectual or moral depravity- unless one has understanding of how essential experiment and diversity are to the intellectual life of

a liberal- democratic society....They became a reminder of the period when some applicants for arts support in Australia were vetted by politicians on the basis of ASIO reports. They even have echoes of demagogic barbarities such as the great burning of books. It is as if one threw intellectuals into the street, to be jeered at by a mob inflamed by false rumors (p.14).

It is intriguing that two decades later Australian authorities are still displaying the same response to art. But one must note that in these changing times, even international communication is fueled by such rumor mongering attitudes. The media has blurred the boundaries of truth, and research tells us that most visual consumers cannot separate fact from fiction (Paterson & Topaz, 2006). This uncritical approach to information transferred via the electronic media, has created fear which has led the late 20th and early 21st century to the brink of destruction. War is caused by the emotional malaise of fear, supported by separatist attitudes. Power hungry war lords use media images as weapons on the uneducated masses, who cannot decipher truth from propaganda. The reporting of facts through the electronic media is faced with a moral dilemma, where does the ethical responsibility lie when there is money to be made in a competitive and blood thirsty market.

From an educator's point of view, it would seem that art in the 21st century must play a significant role in education in all societies to encourage people to think creatively and critically for sustainability. The exploration of arts and cultures aims to open minds to how the world's civilisations were constructed and how people of those civilisations lived harmoniously with different belief systems. Beliefs and values come in many shades of grey. In a positive sense the world has been and can be a colorful place, full of respect for difference if people took the time to think before they condemn the innocent.

Education plays a significant role in giving spectators the tools to read visual images within appropriate discourses.

Perception of facts are altered when a viewer comes with a loaded intellectual lens, this may be driven by a lifetime of ideological inculcation. One perception may give birth to a Feminist perspective, another may give birth to an Environmentalist perspective, these perspectives become discourses. In other words, the way we critically analyse images, both still and indeed the moving images of the media, will rely upon a frame of mind, a frame of vision or an ideological discourse. If we choose to use an 'artistic' discourse, we offer the insight of the artist's intentions, and the context the art work is made in, that is, the socio-cultural perspective offered by the time and place in which the artwork was made. As educated connoisseurs of art, art critics offer a different interpretation of the meaning of artworks than the media or the general public will. However as the media largely controls the communication of our world we can ask: Has the order of art changed to witness the consumer becoming authority and the producer becoming a slave to the consumer market?

It would seem that in such times the consumer is asserting authority over what is art, and the tactics attempt to bully the artist to remaining silent for fear of suffering the consequences. The artist is both slave and victim. Bill Henson was not prosecuted for child pornography because his photographs did not show children in any sexual context. This scandal pointed out how the abuse of power can easily silence those who once viewed their career as one which can legitimately challenge the *status quo* of meaning and break boundaries in the pursuit of creative excellence. If art imitates life, then attempts to gag the artist and intellectual only recall for us images of horror. We live in dangerous times on our small planet and

we are all vulnerable if power is not administered in measured, ethical, educated and intellectual ways. If the artist is not able to speak with imagination, reflection and empathy, if the unethical use of power remains unquestioned, undebated or unchallenged, it may take generations for life to return from the dark ages to a renaissance.

Indeed the answer to the conundrum of truth in meaning, lies in the education of individuals to decipher with open and critical minds, the communications we are offered by the mass media, all too often manipulated to sensationalise and sell stories within a propaganda discourse, to make the “drama” a menu of fantasy and economic sustainability.

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Dr. Susan Paterson has been a visual art educator for more than 30 years. She has worked in Art Schools and Universities in Australia and the United Kingdom. Her research has focused on creative approaches to curriculum and pedagogical design in the visual arts in China, Australia and the United Kingdom. Her interests include the development of culture through art practice.

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