

## Of Ourselves and of Our Origins: Subjects of Art

ART CRITICISM

Can we speak sensibly about what we like about art?



Peter Schjeldahl giving a talk at the Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis (1999)

*This essay is an edited version of a lecture given at the School of Visual Arts in New York on 18*

*November 2010, as part of a series organized by David Levi Strauss and sponsored by the MFA Art Criticism and Writing Department.*

At a time when art is being publicly gamed to exhaustion, can we speak sensibly of what we like about it, deep down? The short answer could be: 'Well, sure, why not?' Thank you and goodnight! But put it this way: can we make any significant difference by speaking of what, deep down, we like about art – a difference in the world or even just in the special purlieu of art? And to do it 'sensibly', meaning both reasonably and in a way that others can feel.

Franz Kafka was asked if he saw any hope. He replied: 'There is infinite hope, but not for us.' The long answer to the question is: Not really, things being as they are. People talking in public about art today may speak from their bleeding hearts, begging indulgence from their listeners, or else make chess moves with the clichés of some or another academic discourse or prevalent babble, intimidating or benumbing possible dissenters. But it seems to me – I won't try to prove this, so you can agree with me or not – that our culture's bridges between individual experience and shared meaning are pretty thoroughly blown up. We can look at the river – current things, current events – from one side or the other, from the heartfelt or the rational. In between, we're all wet. Some of us try to enact exceptions to the rule, and maybe sometimes we do. But they never seem to catch on or to go anywhere.

However, we can always do our best with what we've got. I suggest starting with a pronoun that I'm throwing around: 'we'. It's a dicey word in a democracy. It presumes an agreement where none is proven or can be proved, without taking a vote. In critical writing, it is a rhetorical stratagem, a seduction with aspects of being a fantasy and a trick. But when a writer gets away with it – that is, when readers don't think to object – it is kind of sublime. It has interesting powers. I'm going to talk about it.

Pronouns are the little locomotives of rhetoric. As an 'I' type of writer, I model my experience, inviting you to try it on and see if it makes you feel slim and attractive. I use 'you' a lot, too. Some writers still use the politely formal pronoun 'one' to rope in the reader. But most of us prefer the pushier but bouncier 'you', at least here in pushy, bouncy America.

When a writer folds 'I' into 'you' to make 'we', he or she projects a world of common values. Call it civil love. (You've noticed that I just used the politic 'he or she'. Call that civil justice.) The 'we' is

make-believe. We – if you'll pardon the expression – do not inhabit a world of civil love. But guess what? We can pretend that we do.

An educated common sense of the last three decades holds that all art is rhetorical and thus a game of pretenses and/or of exposing pretenses. This view is basic to the gaming of art. In fact, all art can be seen that way, but not usefully, if anyone's experience matters. It ignores the fact that good art happens to us in ways that knock us out of our educations. Good art evicts intelligence from its left-brain command centre into other parts of the brain, and of the body. It does this by some or another touch or twist of beauty, which can't be conceptualized but only undergone, like a beneficent seizure.

However, all art criticism, tagging along behind art, inevitably runs on pronoun-driven fantasy. That's the fun of it. The seriousness of it, as of art, is its difference from the misery that engulfs most of the non-art, non-make-believe, actual world, most of the time. Art criticism, like art, should furnish something more and better than we can expect from life without it. What might that be?

Henry James isn't among my favourite authors. I like his brother William a lot more. However, a mysterious short story by Henry with a wonderful title, 'The Great Good Place' (1900), is peculiarly apt here. An overburdened man is somehow transported to an unremarkable, even rather dull, but friendly hotel or club; it's a little monastery-like, at an unknown location. It refreshes him. His life back home improves. Was it a dream? It's not clear in the story. It doesn't matter.

I love James's phrase, the Great Good Place: I think everyone has one. Yours is tailored to your particular sorrows and contradictions, which it soothes and resolves, and mine to mine, which it soothes and resolves. The humour, and the wisdom, in James's story is that the protagonist's haven has nothing in common with an Arcadia or a Utopia, nothing orgiastic or exalting. No dreams come true there. That's in the nature of Great Good Places, I believe. They are not projections of our wishes. They are registrations, perhaps quite humble, of what we lack. They aren't exciting. They are, however, greatly good.

Every religion propagates a corporate Great Good Place, open to all by means of special avowals

and rituals. If you're irreligious, you don't escape wanting that. Only, your want tends to be lonesome and blind.

So maybe you end up in the art world. There is no shortage of lonesome wanderers around here. We are not exactly lost sheep, because we probably ran away from our original flocks on purpose, but you can hear the bleating in every bar and Starbucks in town, not to mention online, night and day. You might even become an art critic who hankers to hopscotch from an 'I' and a 'you' to a 'we' on the occasion of some perhaps communicable epiphany. The sound of 'we' can be that of someone's Great Good Place bubbling to the surface. There it may display a pleasing iridescence before, very quickly, it pops and is gone.

The 'we' that I envision is not political. All politics mobilizes the word 'we' in tandem with another word: 'they'. It has been said that politics begins with the naming of the enemy: an opposed party, nation, class, tribe, race, religion, sex, age cohort, movement, coterie, or body of opinion. Politics feeds on identities.

Identities start fights, whether we assume them ourselves or impute them to others. Assuming and imputing are the same move, logically. To say that I'm such-and-such has no meaning unless somebody else is so-and-so. Maybe we get along and maybe we don't. If we get along, it's often because both our groups agree in hating another group. Naming the enemy isn't just the start of politics. It's the daily drill.

Identities jam signals from Great Good Places. They forestall the best kinds of art and writing. Gertrude Stein wrote a terrific lecture on this point, 'What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them?' (1936). She said roughly that art's ideal, its spiritual engine, is entity, something that exists not in relation to anything but as its own sole thing. Entity occurs, she said, 'while identity is not'. If any 'we' could form around that occurrence, it would be one that likewise stood on its own, with no corresponding 'they'. I am here to say that such a 'we' does occur. I bet you've experienced it, and that probably you're not sure what happened when you did. It's kind of crazy, this 'we'. It is as fleeting and mysterious as certain subatomic particles – maybe the quantum kind that can be in two places at once, as I read somewhere. (Art and science might be parallel lines that converge in stupefaction.)

Now I'm throwing around another pronoun, 'it' – indicating something that is not a you or an I, but that could indicate personhood or anything else, absolutely anything at all, that is taken to be real, including unreality. It-ness is what we want, if we want masterpieces.

I expect arguments against my disparagement of politics in art. The arguments will prevail – I will surrender – if they make it a matter of politics being more important than art. In fact, a moment's thought will confirm that most things in life are more important than art. Art is only and merely wonderful, sublime, terrific, joyous. Useless.

Months ago, when I started to think about the question of what we like about art, I immediately decided that the answer would entail a reading of Wallace Stevens's 'The Idea of Order at Key West' a great old Modernist warhorse of a poem that was written in 1934. I didn't know why. A friend of mine said the idea reminded him of the Andy Kaufman stand-up routine where Kaufman reads aloud, at hilarious length, from Ernest Hemingway, in the persona of a nerdy immigrant kid who has just been turned on to literature. That made me mad, and embarrassed. But then I thought, Hey, I'm that kid! Who isn't that kid, if a lover of any art?

I also thought of my hero Charles Baudelaire, more than 150 years ago, advising everybody to always be drunk: drunk, he said, 'on wine, on poetry, or on virtue, as you prefer'. Wine is dangerous to some of us, and I for one live in terror of people who are drunk on virtue. That leaves poetry.

Besides, it's nice when discussing art to have an actual great work of art at hand to remind us of what we're talking about, if we are talking about anything. So here's one:

The Idea of Order at Key West by Wallace Stevens

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
The water never formed to mind or voice,  
Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,  
That was not ours although we understood,  
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.  
The song and water were not medleyed sound  
Even if what she sang was what she heard,  
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.  
It may be that in all her phrases stirred  
The grinding water and the gasping wind;  
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.  
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.  
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew  
It was the spirit that we sought and knew  
That we should ask this often as she sang.  
If it was only the dark voice of the sea  
That rose, or even colored by many waves;  
If it was only the outer voice of sky  
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,  
However clear, it would have been deep air,  
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound  
Repeated in a summer without end  
And sound alone. But it was more than that,  
More even than her voice, and ours, among  
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,  
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
She measured to the hour its solitude.  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,

Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
Why, when the singing ended and we turned  
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,  
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

I think it's safe to say that nothing in recent writing or art reaches this level of beauty and intelligence, so confidently, let alone with such total mastery of form: iambic pentameter laced with dactyls and intricate webs of rhyme, but almost conversational in tone. I wish that more artists and writers were still, or again, actively envious of greats like Stevens. But it seems that creative envy at that altitude is beyond anybody's capacity now. Artists and writers are not at fault. You can't play a hand of cards that history hasn't dealt. Stevens, like his contemporaries William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane and Marianne Moore, was dealt kings and aces: an imperative to Americanize modernity and to modernize Americanness – full blast, right away.

The Beats and John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara ratified their success. Abstract Expressionism and then Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein did the same with painting, and jazz and blues and then rock and roll did it with music. Watershed moments like those don't happen very often. An abundance of good art is being made today. It's just not good for a lot that matters, in the reality-altering way that great art seems to. This is even more the case with criticism. The present sheer quantity of smart art writing is unusual, in my lifetime. But, similarly, the writing is not smart about very much. Critics now are good at answers. We're short of good questions. This is a matter of how the world is. The world isn't raising questions in forms that individuals can very well lay hold of. We might conclude that the world hates individuals, but that would be to flatter ourselves. The world doesn't care.

I would like to be proved wrong tomorrow, when I come across new writing that is brilliant in itself, compelling in its comprehension of our lives in common, and suggestive of fruitful attitudes and actions – a game-changer. But I won't bet on it.

Our part of the world is droopy these days, isn't it? Prevalent are moods of frustration, senses of insufficiency and piled-up disappointments. The worst thing about this is that it conduces to despair, which conduces to bullshit. Bullshit is a time-honoured way of disguising voids of meaning and of getting by in life by getting around people, because who cares? I would like to think that some of us care or, at least, might act as if we care and see where that goes. Call it moral make-believe. Make-believe has nothing in common with bullshit, by the way. It requires absolute honesty. Ask any little kid.

Here I shift gears from philosophy to rant.

You know great poetry by how it sounds. You recognize bullshit the same way.

Among excellent younger critics now is Ben Davis. He recently diagnosed a tell-tale language in the style of today's run-of-the-mill art criticism. It's a reflex to characterize, and even to congratulate, new art in terms of what it is 'responding to', 'being interested in themes of', 'reflecting on', 'being concerned with' – and I would add, 'interrogating', 'challenging', 'subverting' and so on: mental monkey tricks. Then there's that horrible word – I wince every time I read it, and I read it a lot lately – 'practice'. Artists don't make works any longer. They maintain practices. Like dentists, only less honourably. Or like musicians trying to get to Carnegie Hall. When do you stop practicing something and do it?

These lines of bullshit perform obvious social functions. For example, they posit tidy professional communities – identities based on job descriptions – in which everybody is busy with his or her little practice, or with commenting on each other's practices, in little ways. Cynicism has gone so far as to come back around as weird innocence: nobody here but us practitioners! Invite us to your parties. Hire us. Extend our grants. Give us a kiss. Amidst the industrious hum and chatter, it's unlikely that anyone contemplates someone singing by an ocean, unless during a rock concert at the Jersey Shore. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

To beat up on a specific example, we live in the age of an educational abomination from hell: the Artist's Statement. An Artist's Statement is a batch of required thinking which purports to be about the inspired doing of something, but which replaces it. The art-schooled art world is mad for intellectual hooks. These leapfrog from an idea, sail clear over the sweat and bother of actual creation, and land in forensic analysis, which some dismal pictures or objects have been devised to illustrate. A hook may get you into the art game. It will also digest you. You will then be excreted out, at best as fertilizer for next year's crop of Artists' Statements. More likely, you will have been just another silly fart, dispersed on the breeze.

Attention artists! Perhaps you employ language in your work. You may be highly literate. But you don't have to say what your art means or even is about. Furthermore, don't do that. It's my job. You make the stuff. Let critics talk about it. Making is superior to talking, so you have the better end of the deal. I try to be big about that. For your part, keep your eye on the ball, which is not a ball of talk.

I'm thinking of those of you who are on the young side. The future is yours. I'm on the old side and running out of future. This slackens my interest in what's new. When I go to look at art for pleasure now, it's to the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Frick Collection. My 'we' is yellowing around the edges. Any 'we' that has near-term potential must be one that tastes right in your mouths, when you say the word.

To conclude: ourselves and our origins, the origins of a 'we' that is worth some dedicated pretending. I am not speaking for artists here. Any artist who makes a difference constellates a 'we' but doesn't belong to one, except in the occasional, lightning-strike way that I've argued for. He or she skips past personal pronouns to it-ness, to entity. A test of success in a work, in the mind of the artist who has created it, is that it feels strange. It is a new fact in the world, whose value, if any, other people will decide. Perhaps they will still be deciding when the artist is dead. I saw recently that Bob Dylan was buttonholed by a fan who enthused, 'You changed my life!' Dylan replied: 'What the fuck am I supposed to do about it?'

That was bad manners. It wouldn't kill Bob Dylan to say thank you, fake it a little. But his point is impeccable. If you're an artist, you don't start the morning by saying to yourself, 'Hey, think I'll change some idiot's life today'. You work. To be really good at anything, assuming that you're talented, is to work harder and longer, with more ruthless honesty and discipline, than other

people could do without bursting into tears. Your secret is that, hard as it may be, it doesn't feel like work to you. It feels normal, like eating and sleeping. You are not about to hand your own life over to anybody to change or to not change, though you might wish you could. And you positively do not accept responsibility for the lives of your audience. That's not good for them, and it is a day-spoiling pain in the ass for you.

So as an artist you're lonely. You know the fragility and vulnerability of your Great Good Place but you lean your whole weight into it anyhow. Along with wanting fame and money and sex, like everybody, you want to slip that place into the map of the world, to make the world a little less wretched to you. You will even go without the fame and money and sex parts, if necessary. You will be misunderstood, often enough by people – darling dumbbells – who praise you. (Be kind to them if you can.) That's the deal. No one said you were an artist. You said you were an artist. You asked for it. No whining.

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