

Musing on The Death Of Art

My statement after watching the film on Marina Abramovic, 'The Artists is Present' that, after Abramovic, art is finished was intended to be a comment on the importance of Abramovic rather than to be taken literally. However, having rashly made the assertion I will attempt to unpack the statement and construct a meaningful argument to support it.

Firstly in support of Abramovic I would say that I believe that she has been totally dedicated to her art for its own sake, making no compromises and pursuing an artistic ideal of total involvement in making deeply meaningful work and I hold these qualities to be both admirable and ideally a prerequisite for all true artists. I do not find these qualities in the majority of work being produced today. Whilst it can be pointed out that it ever was thus, that only a small quantity of art that was produced was of any importance and interest, it does seem now that there is not even the will to strive to produce meaningful work.

In unpacking the problem presented by my assertion I find it necessary to define and re-visit some very basic terms, particularly because in art they are all too often obscure and misunderstood and it is frequently in that misunderstanding that problems proliferate. To begin with I must look to the, much misused and argued over, word 'art' and I must clarify that I am not talking about derivative work produced by amateurs or 'professionals', however accomplished the technique may be. I do however acknowledge the wish for 'something to go with the curtains' but would classify that as no more nor less than interior decoration, albeit that such work covers a vast range of ability and quality. This statement however requires further clarification because I am not including celebrated artists whose work could be considered by some readers to be purely decorative – Klee for example. Klee was in no way a purely decorative artist but one who was engaged in exploring ideas such as about colour, form and visual communication. So, whilst a Klee may very well go with the curtains, the critical point is that it was not produced for that reason.

In using the words 'ability' and 'quality' we are faced with two further problems; firstly the assessment of what is perceived to be quality. This is all too often assessed in terms of the number of people who like the work in question. I totally reject this as a meaningful criterion because it involves no rigour and I seek for something deeper than simple popularity. Secondly, the vexed issue of ability that often arises and the tendency to value a work of art simply by assessing the quality of the technique, perceiving that to be the only criterion of ability. I would state, and it should be axiomatic, that for a work of art to be taken at all seriously it must, of course, be produced with an appropriate level of technique so that, for example, to approach the works in an art museum by assessing technique is a pointless exercise because it should not be exhibited if it has poor technique. It is important however, to add that if the technique dominates the work it will then mask the all important content and become little more than a *bravura* work: technique should exist only to carry the message, with the extreme exception of a work which is about technique for its own sake.

In examining popularity, it is possible to see it as being to some extent the product of Postmodernism. Whilst we may value the striven for purity of Modernism, we would also have to acknowledge the problems that it presented of hierarchy and the ensuing elitism that was central to Modernism. Postmodernism by complete contrast has thrown the baby out with the bath water, eschewing purity as well as any notions of hierarchy, claiming that all creative forms are equal, for example positioning Mills and Boon romances as equal to what had heretofore been considered to be the greatest literature. Given this situation, it is no surprise that technique has been turned to as the only remaining consideration for those somewhat at sea. Postmodernism unsurprisingly has also affected artists, with claims such as that, advertising copy is equal to a great work of art, doing nothing to encourage the artist to see the importance of focussing on and developing a particular art form and specific direction: such an ambition has become irrelevant. I believe that the work produced is all the poorer for it although this is in no way to decry the 'Renaissance person', rather to denigrate the *dilettante*.

Preoccupation with technique, whilst not a new phenomenon, is to some extent a product of the digital age: the ease of producing material using both digital cameras and computers with a high level of professionalism has made the hand-made poster, invitation or flier look extremely dated and amateurish. Whilst this creates enormous advantages for the large numbers of people who are now able to produce their own highly professional looking material, it does however mean that the expectation of the quality of visual material is that it will always be to a high level of technical proficiency, with the amateurs' hand made signage, fliers and posters a thing of the past. Although in itself it does not present a problem, it has created a generation preoccupied with technique. The quality of reproduction on Televisions, computers, i-pads, i-phones, i-pods and a plethora of other technology has created a preoccupation leading to the frequent use of the phrase 'production values' and great store being placed on them at the expense of the content. To privilege technique over content is, to my mind, to miss the entire purpose of art.

It could well be suggested that the above thoughts are simplistic: an examination of what has happened to subject matter could produce further illumination.

In establishing that whilst we can easily trace the history of subject matter and intent in art from cave painting to the present day, it perhaps suffices to begin at Modernism, simply acknowledging the well trod path that up to that point art had clear purposes, such as to educate the congregation in the stories of the bible or, in the absence of the invention of the camera, to record likenesses. With Modernism, having lost the educational and recording imperative, there was a shift to exploring both what art is about and exploring the medium itself. Arguably both those ambitions have been satisfied and exhausted leaving a void, with the extreme example of painting resulting in the totally blank canvas, leading to the conclusion that painting as a medium for creative originality was played out and on my mind this belief has yet to be shown to be wrong in terms of really important creative works. Similarly Duchamp, demonstrating that art could be something already existing that an artist appropriates as art, would seem to have closed the conceptual route for meaningful, original creativity. We therefore need to consider what is left for art in terms of subject matter.

Art inevitably reflects the era in which it is produced, and so we need to examine the era in which we exist in order to understand what is being produced. Fundamentally it is an era of extreme capitalism and this is reflected in art perhaps more so than in any other commodity and the word 'commodity' seems to be precisely what it has become, to the great delight of both successful and aspiring artists. This is not to decry the wish to lead a life other than one that is a struggle but today's attitude as I have said is one in which the main objective is not to produce deeply meaningful work but to become rich through whatever work will achieve that aim. David Hockney, in his days at the Royal College of Art segued his way through a number of different styles of painting until he found one that was quickly snapped-up by the dealers. This is a pity because some of his early work showed considerable talent and interest but it is clear that he was not motivated by a passion for a particular direction but for success. Further, his recent public rubbishing of the likes of deeply meaningful artists, in their very different ways, as varied as Duchamp and Rothko, leads one to question his entire motivation, particularly when he sites Picasso as being the most meaningful artist of the twentieth century. This is not to deny the enormous importance of Picasso but rather to situate him as someone coming out of the preceding century. Further concern centres around the Guardian newspaper recently printing a charcoal sketch of a recent Hockney landscape as a double page centre spread. The sketch would seem unremarkable if produced by a first year fine art undergraduate but such is fame that the Guardian has clearly forgotten to apply any critical faculties in deciding to print the work.

Art as commodity has benefited enormously from today's super rich, be they entertainers or, bankers anxious to absorb and invest their Christmas bonuses and looking to contemporary art as an investment. Artists are happy to have their works seen first in auction houses rather than galleries with prices as high as £21.3m in 2012 for a Gerhard Richter painting, owned by Eric Clapton purchased by him some time earlier for one thirtieth of that price and this exorbitant sum has no doubt already been eclipsed. British artist Damien Hirst was listed in the Sunday Times Rich List in 2009 as being worth £235m and his personal collection of art valued even higher. The galleries themselves are far from being affected by the enormous amounts of money to be made from buying and selling contemporary art with U.S.A. dealer Larry Gagosian now having more square footage of gallery space in his galleries around the world than there is in the massive floor space that is Tate Modern. Charles Saatchi's collection and the various gallery spaces that he has occupied have rivalled the public museums to such an extent that he collaborated with the Royal Academy of Art in the mounting of the seminal exhibition, 'Sensation'. Whilst this exhibition seemed ground breaking at the time, the message was clearly written in the title of the show, never mind the content, just enjoy the quick, superficial buzz. More recently, the Frieze Art Fair promotes vast amounts of artwork in marquees, reminiscent of posh weddings and with similarly exclusive entry prices. Slickness is to the fore in these fairs and capitalism is the name of the game.

Looking further at the current situation we can see that it is governed by a number of factors, those that I have outlined above and importantly the political shift to the right throughout the world and the social *zeitgeist* focussing on materialistic instant gratification. Today's generation of artists are no longer dedicated to an ideal of any sort but instead are dedicated to the twin ambitions of fame and fortune. Of course an objection can be raised to this statement in the belief that

artists have to make a living. Whilst this cannot be denied, the recommendation always was to find a job such as delivering milk or the post so that the bills were paid but plenty of time was left for producing artwork without having to sell out. An ideal alternative was to find some part time teaching, preferably in an Art School but we are no longer in a time when teaching jobs are easy to come by, indeed jobs are scarce. Historically some artists have been fortunate in finding patrons who have supported them in producing the work that they, the artists, have wanted to produce. At times, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century many of the artists who we revere today, had private incomes, freeing them to pursue an artistic ideal – Toulouse Lautrec being a case in point as indeed was Van Gogh, often thought to have been poverty stricken but in reality supported by his brother Theo who provided all the art materials he needed as well as paying for him to have a roof over his head, food drink and women. This continued into the twentieth century, notably with Marcel Duchamp. So, for the artist today without a private income or an indulgent patron, life is not easy in a recession but this situation is a long way removed from the imperative of fame and fortune.

Before pursuing my belief that artists are pursuing materialism, I must acknowledge that there is a parallel path that some artists choose to take, that of what I call the 'art-worker'. This is where the social conscience, which might have been perceived in some artists of the last century, is to be found. These people produce work in response to various types of commissions or placements which they have successfully applied for and which require them to work in some aspect of society, engaging with a cohort of 'non-artists' and usually resulting in a finished work or works produced by all concerned. Whilst this way of working is totally admirable it inevitably and invariably does not produce art that is interesting in itself and that is not the intention of the project.

It naturally follows that the influence on artists of the political climate is enormous, leading to rampant avariciousness on the part of many and although for the majority it is and will remain just a dream, it nevertheless is a dream of untold wealth rather than untold intellectual and spiritual rewards. Another consequence of the vast galleries and enormous sums of money floating about for art is that enormously large and expensive works are produced from time to time: I find this deeply disturbing when there is so much poverty in the world, not least given that the same message could be produced in a far more economical way, many if not all of these works are simply enormous because they can be, with no thought at all for the context in which they are produced. The scale of these works is not a statement such as those made by some of the USA sculptors and land-artists in the second half of the last century, now it is all too often simply a statement of wealth.

Whilst the considerable interest in contemporary art around the world could be seen to be entirely positive, regardless of the motivation for this increase, this has created a problem for successful artists in that they will have a number of one person shows on at any one time. The consequence of this is that the artists are obliged to employ assistants to churn out their work which all too often is pale imitations of already existing works because the artist's creative urge cannot produce the quantity of interestingly original work required to satisfy the international museums and dealers. These artists simply make too much work: they could of course simply say 'no' and chase the mystique of rarity value.

It is interesting to wonder how we arrived at this position from the second half of the twentieth century with the opportunity for art to go in the direction of spirituality and to question and stand in opposition to the *status quo* rather than be the *status quo* as it now is. Art did show strong signs of developing in that direction until 1979 and the arrival of the clean broom wielded by the Thatcher government. Art had been something special, a rare experience, it had status even though that meant a remoteness in terms of difficulty to understand but that very difficulty, so often criticised for being elitist, provided something which if worked at provided immense rewards.

Equally art was something that explored and experimented for its own sake. Where is the Arts Lab of the 1960s? It is indeed difficult to imagine such an exploratory institution existing today precisely because it is not possible to see the magic words, 'income generation' resulting from it. We are in an age now where even (or is it particularly?) the Arts Council of England (ACE) appears content with its role to fund only projects which are, or will become, self sustainable despite the fact that this militates against real originality and creativity, precisely because those activities by definition must be risk taking.

Today there is a cynicism in artists, frequently very evident in the work which is presented as ironic as though the only way forward today is to mock everything, not to take anything seriously and so avoid criticism of lacking *gravitas*. It may well be that this is the answer to the question I left hanging in the balance earlier with regard to subject matter, it could just be that the prevailing subject matter today is cynicism: to my mind this cannot be sustained.

I am at a loss to see what art is now as it appears to exist seamlessly alongside so many other pursuits. What is it trying to say or achieve? There is no doubt that it is completely pluralistic therefore making it impossible to see any direction, save that of seeking fame and fortune, bringing into question any other personal motivation for making art, no real self satisfaction from making art in itself, no attempt to move forwards artistically, no attempt to say something worthwhile. A comparison (again) with earlier times might suggest that this is a continuation of the pioneering ideas of Fluxus, which sought to blur the definitions of different art forms and at times not even to differentiate between art and life but this was an exploration, an experiment as an artwork, not at all a cynical stance of everything being equal and nothing mattering. For Fluxus, all the works produced were Art, a far cry from the inter-arts works of today, produced without exploration or questioning.

For myself, I have no interest in producing art solely to be sold to the wealthy who look upon it as just another commodity, another investment to be re-sold as soon as the price goes up: I have no interest in assisting the already wealthy to make even more money. I cannot work in a capitalist system which only values art in terms of its financial worth. Equally, I have no interest in producing art solely for my own gratification; to my mind art must communicate to someone. Neither do I want to produce work that is simply pleasant or purely decorative.

Of course I have to acknowledge that I am a war baby, almost into my seventies with an entirely different perspective on life from those of a younger generation. And I must acknowledge that there are clearly still some interesting and

worthwhile artists producing interesting and worthwhile work but I fear that perhaps that is just the law of averages.

Michael Lumb January 2013