

THE CONFIDENCE TRICK

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In 1964, Harold Rosenberg prefaced his book *The Anxious Object* with a quote from Picasso, one that spoke to the modernist art surveyed within: 'What forces our interest is Cézanne's anxiety – that's Cézanne's lesson'. Almost half a century old, that book, and the quote still older. In other words, though our current cultural moment might be characterised as 'precarious' – to use the presiding word Hal Foster chose when summing up the art of the first decade of the 21st century in *Artforum* in 2009 – it's a mistake to envision the last century as a comparatively halcyon one of forward-facing artistic certitude, movement following movement, breakthrough upon breakthrough. For all that there were many manifestos striking many a bold and luminous tone, those hundred years were doubt-haunted from the outset, too, and stayed that way; manifestos, or any act of rallying projection, exist against a context of doubt, not in the absence of it. Sometimes you need to decide to be decided, because it doesn't come naturally.

That's not to deny the increasing difficulty of doing so, however. What we have that the early moderns didn't, one would say, is an ambient awareness of the terminal; planet-wide doom in the air. If the last century was broke-backed by Auschwitz, ours is ghosted by consciousness of collapse, economic and ideological and, obviously, ecological. (Postmodernity, with its assumptions of the end of progress, emerged pretty much contemporaneously with the rise of environmental awareness.) Add to this a continuously evidenced sense of the narrowing of cultural horizons, of ever-decreasing space to manoeuvre newly in, and cultural production today can feel like a woolgathering exercise, a fire sale in the face of assumed annihilation.

If postmodernism is:0 – where the past was first fulsomely ransacked – at least had a residual theoretical *raison d'être*, that's also gone now. As US music critic Mark Richardson, himself expanding on the insights of Simon Reynolds' *Retromania* (2011), put it in a recent article about the 'Tumblr-ization of Indie' (referencing the social-networking site where people simply post things that have caught their eye, fashioning an autobiography or persona through a magpie attitude to culture), what watermarks contemporary music making now is 'liking things'. That is, rubbing certain historical reference points up against each other (e.g. trance synths, circa-'95 jungle drum patterns and the Mahavishnu Orchestra; David Lynch and Nancy Sinatra and hip hop) creates sparks of synaptic excitement, the threads – to switch metaphors – being old but the stitched pattern feeling new, and that's all the justification that's needed. Need it be pointed out, this applies to visual art also: see the excitable, amoral mashups of found photography and junk sculpture, or disparate styles of modernist painting stapled together, that pour out of art schools today. It also goes without saying that the Internet – the locus of our sense of an archive, of a vast, ever-increasing and constantly available past outweighing the present and future – is indivisible from this. Assumedly, we're all librarians now, and all library users.

Liking things, Warhol said, was the essence of Pop; but Pop had its critical purposes too, with regard to industrialised society. What our moment may have is not a theory or oppositional intent but, under the recombinant surface dazzle, a bleak and rueful poetics: an embodied sense of an ending. It's there in culture; it's there in grab-all-you-can, sinking-ship capitalism. (Not forgetting that it's in capitalism's interest to promote impending disaster: depressed people are good consumers.) And yet the moment is a schizophrenic one with regard to the mooted future, because on a biological level we weren't designed to be fatalists. We want to live.

Posit that the problem is as much mental as environmental; that the cart must be put before the horse; that before you can effect change you have to believe, at least to some degree, that change is possible. See 'Yes we can!' – although the bloom is off that rose. Art is not going to have a comparable exclamation-point moment. It might, however, go tentatively forward, or at least move crabwise, under the sign of the interrobang (!?). Just about the most clarifying thing I've heard anyone say about the condition of painting, in particular, in recent years was voiced by Michael Krebber, in what amounted to magisterial aside while writing about, of all people, Chardin: that the contemporary painter must behave, though an agnostic, as though he had faith. What that necessitates is a split mindset, half sanguine and half hopeful. (Hard to say, under the circumstances, which one is the more irrational.) If we consider art as, ideally, a wish blown into the future – an articulation of what tomorrow might look like, in order to give it a chance of becoming that way, or a predictor of how it will look, to give us a chance of avoiding it – then this process becomes a variant on Pascal's Wager: if I have faith in tomorrow and that faith turns out to be unfounded, what have I lost? It is, in short, a confidence trick that we would play on ourselves.

Not that attaining this state of self-division would be easy, when on any given day one can turn on the radio and hear, within five minutes, a discovery-toting physicist who measures the future in aeons followed by an economist who measures it in weeks, and when the cultural mainstream reinforces a sense of the ubiquity and inescapability of retro at every turn. Yet remember that the artist's job used to be not to mirror or condense cultural conditions but to anticipate them, to be what Ezra Pound once called 'the antennae of the race' and *The New Yorker* rephrased in 1990 as 'feeling crummy before everyone else feels crummy'. The older, more elevated take on the vocation currently feels in short supply, for perhaps intractable reasons. But if, and it's an admittedly big if, it could be adapted to present uncertainties – which might also mean diagnosing the conditions that make us feel crummy and creatively circumscribed before we can move past them, and avoiding the narcotising snare of patchwork-retro affectivity – then *that* is one of very few things right now that truly needs a revival.