

Amateur Aesthetics

Sean Cubitt

To be human is to communicate. Our making and working, loving and dreaming, buying and selling are communicative acts. Some communications are richer than others -- making love gives more of us than collecting a paycheck. And today, our communication is most often mediated through things -- possessions, financial translations -- than through the broad bandwidth expressions of face-to-face fighting or sex or discussion. All communication is mediated, but some of those mediations -- bodily, vocal, visual contacts -- are so profoundly implicate in the construction of communication as to render indistinguishable the persons involved. When mediation is consolidated in objects -- letters, paintings, music -- it adds to these mutually complicit communications a wealth of additional, formal compositional tools, but when such objects are, as they have been in modern Europe, rendered autonomous, they act not as complements to the delicious intimacy of confrontation, but as boundaries between speakers, and latterly, in an age of information, between senders and receivers. And certain central mediating objects -- most of all cash -- contain almost no content at all, but merely mediate, offering only to place people in antagonistic relation to one another, enacting a separation which they can only experience. The contemporary history of communication is the dialectic of communicative mutuality and communicative mediation.

Communication is inherent, but it is also necessary, and its necessity makes clear a further property of the communicative theory of humanity: its ecological standing. For no-one stands alone. If I reach out to touch the world, the world touches me back. If I look out into the world, I inscribe myself into the field of the visible, offering myself to sight. My mind is not, despite the arguments of the now triumphant cognitivists, bound inside the bone box of the skull: it extends through the nervous system into the life-world that touches and illuminates me. What strikes me most about this phenomenological relation is my dependency on the world. It is no secret that diet, water and air, noise and light impact on psychological states. The human is unthinkable without the world. For the last hundred years or more, that world itself, for most of us, is human: the artificial world of the city, the media, of social and cultural histories and environments. That is the human world on which, in the first instance, we are dependent. Today, that world is global. The tendrils of communication have thickened into trunk routes: the collapse of the Thai *bhat* means fewer East Asian students, which means my university earns a million or so less pounds next year, which means I cannot increase student numbers, and the local economy doesn't benefit from them, and the local culture gains no depth of diversity . . . Communication takes place within, and indeed is commensurate with, the global human ecology.

Because of my dependency, I must take responsibility: as I am affected by the sum of others, they are affected by me, and I will be the recipient of the ripple effect of my

contribution to the global human ecology sooner, given the effects of proximity, rather than later. This is a reason to be critically alert (not, by any means, to retreat from communication, as though such a thing were possible) in communication, and to question all attributions that we make customarily about all our interchanges. For example, we cannot be cozy about art: the word, the concept, the institutions, the practices of art cannot be considered sacrosanct. Walter Benjamin, in the dark hours of 1934, when both Hitler and Stalin had declared the end of the modernist experiment, argued that 'The writer who does not teach other writers teaches no-one'. We might usefully slip this towards a redefinition of artistic practice: the artist who does not enable creativity in others is no artist. This is the responsibility born of the art-maker's debt to all those whose arts have impacted on her. But if this is our definition, it raises the question of the limitation of art to a small range of activities and concerns. I hold up as exemplary Kai's Power Tools, a software device for producing whizzy digital effects in computer-manipulated images; the bicycle and the lending library, the two most elegant products of the 19th century, true enablers; and Frank Annett, the English teacher who showed a generation how feeling and understanding did not have to be divorced; but also the art practices of Picasso, Heartfield, Beuys, Duchamp and a thousand others who have added to the repertoire of ways to think and feel, and most of all to communicate.

My point is not to devalue art, but to revalue the broad range of cultural practice. Frank Annett also demonstrated that writing and reading were not just skills to acquire so as to pass through school with the minimum pain, or to emerge suitably equipped to survive the cut and thrust of adult life, but a lifelong source of delight, with or without a professional interest. The initial problem is one of education. We do not teach the making of sound or pictures in ways commensurate with the technologised which dominate communication. The failure to teach young and old to write the media as they learn to read them has two roots. One is the reluctance to overload a school schedule already groaning with important matters, or to demand of teachers that they acquire yet another array of underpaid and undervalued skills. The other is a commitment, extending throughout the art education establishment, to media more appropriate to the 18th century than the 21st. I speak with the conviction of the convert: for four years as National Organiser of the Society for Education in Film and Television, I helped promote education about the media, but not the practical skills of media making. Today, it seems curious to devote such swathes of art school efforts in painting and sculpture. And sound is in worse straits: only music is offered in any form, and that within a rigidly historicist and ethnocentric mode: 80 years after Russolo, where is the Art of Noise? Worst of all: to deny to the mass of the population the pleasures of writing in light and sound.

This absurd institutionalisation of illiteracy in the major media of the age has as correlative the professionalisation of communication, a professionalisation rendered more damaging by the tendency most of us have to imitate the rhetorical and intonational patterns of the professional media when called on to speak or act in public. A professional media is as dangerous as a professional polity: both demonstrate a willing collusion in the demolition of democracy, which, if I am right, is the political state of a society in which as many of its citizens as possible are communicating in as many channels as possible. Only then do we

genuinely produce public opinion, not that pale simulation of the five-yearly poll and the questionnaire. (Of course we must also train professionals, responsible professionals: we cannot afford to leave politicians and programme makers utterly ignorant, or admit defeat inside the beast, but we must also recognise the beast for what it is).

Politics as it exists today is a struggle over the meaning of the future, the mode of futurity, between those who wish to control, to own the future, and those who seek its freedom, and in its freedom, their own. The future, as Levinas says, is other: 'the very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future' (44); the erotic is 'a relationship with alterity, with mystery -- that is to say, with the future, with what, in a world where there is everything, is never there . . . with the very dimension of alterity (50). Relation with an other -- communication -- is relation with the future, an opening up to the possibility of the future as uncontrolled, uncontrollable, indefinable, unpossessable, the negation of what is. The efforts of administrative reason are bent towards prediction, simulation, foreclosure, ownership of the future: the five year plan, Rand Corporation and Trilateral Commission modelling, the strategic planning of arms and industry, are based on the erasure of mystery, the annihilation of the other, the extension of the same.

From this, I think it is clear why there is an ethical imperative towards communication, as well as the instinctive drive observable in our cities and our intercourse. This is ethics without morality: no knee bent to tradition or authority, but recognition that the very grounds of communication, the hope that it may produce something new, are today in play in the political economy of globalisation. To hold the ecological in mind: this openness is the grounds of evolution. Our task is to prise open the closing gateway through which the Messiah, the New Humanity, the next species might arrive.

It remains to speak of the aesthetic. Nowhere is the question of the aesthetic more poignantly felt than in photography, the art that sprang into being a mere 150 years ago. Yet there are two problems with the phrase 'The Art of Photography': the word 'art' and the word 'photography'.

1. Art: -- is this already a redundant concept? Should we be capable by now of thinking a world in which practice, cultural practice, need not be separated into functional unities like 'art' or 'media' or 'school' or even 'contemporary'? Doesn't the notoriously undefined and perhaps indefinable concept of art circumscribe, delimit and nullify a range of practices and processes it strives and fails to contain? Can we think of creativity not only without making -- the step initiated by pop art, conformed by minimalism and attaining a (temporary?) stability in the metadiscourses of philistinism (see Beech and Roberts 1996, Roberts 1996, Quinn 1997, Beech and Roberts 1998) -- but without art? Are art institutions, art markets, art discourses -- the protectionist, autonomaniacal positions of journals like October -- already too prescriptive? The leakiness of the principal -- witness the pages of Frieze which can quite sensibly and without iconoclasm address Boogie Nights or campaigns for Nike in the same discourse as Joseph Kossuth and the authored artwork -- is sufficient. The failure of the metropolitan art scenes to provide even remotely adequate spaces for indigenous makers like Keith Piper, whose work should surely have showed,

meaning no disrespect to the Royal College of Art that hosted his 1996 retrospective, in other than the institutionally marginal space of an academic institution, or Korean art, or Japanese, or something more than group shows of African or South Asian art: failure, on all counts -- of art as institution, as discourse, and so its unveiling as power, naked, equipped only with resistance, but unequipped to accept the profound and rigorous critique of truly alternative practices, of the genuinely modern. Art fails not because it is not inclusive, but because, as concept, it is incapable of diversity.

2. Photography -- let's not parse once more its dubious etymology, its existential ontology. Let's not insist, just this once, on its glorious specificity. Photography suffers, with its sister media, from the overblown religion of autonomy. The recognition of specificity always comes at the cost of the admission of difference. In so far as it is specifically and uniquely photographic, photography is the same as any other likewise specific and unique medium. It is only by questioning that specificity that we get to embrace the sweet hybridity of the form: its sumptuous dependency on the moving images of the contact sheet, the excreted temporalities of the caption, the manipulable and permeable skin of emulsions to dyes, physical and virtual tools, subeditors. . . . First among media, photography surrenders scale to the artisan other, and to the vagaries of projection, surrendering its edges to cropping, its definition and tonality to the printer, developer, hacker that cares to obliterate the total event of art in favour of the ministrations of the amateur.

To be professional is to surrender control -- a 'real professional' contrasts with 'a real primadonna' (darkroom sexism intentional). But that surrender of control, that giving, that dereliction of the object in favour of the unknown persons to whom it is donated, is the mark of the amateur, in the best sense of the word -- the lover, who gives without receiving, and who relinquishes control, even self-control, to the ravages of communication. What photography has to offer is its embarrassing, its dirty, its secretive hybridity, its wholly gorgeous failure to achieve uniqueness. There is no art of photography because photography does not exist. There is no positive medium, but a plethora of mutually negating media, myriad dispersed and divergent cultures and practices from cinematography to documentary, from billboards to Photoshop. At the moment photography recognises its plurality, its impurity, its divergence, it can become something far more creative, far more challenging and far more open to the evolution of the future: a public culture.

Not even cinema has been as public as this, because of the pedagogical and curricular failure of the school and university traditions to teach cinematic writing as a birthright on a par with literacy, even where, reluctantly, it agrees to teach cinematic reading. The promise of video likewise remains to be fulfilled, not least because funding bodies have fought shy, here as in so many practices, of a welcome to the amateur. In their place, the cult of the professional; and the professionalisation of the moving image is almost complete. But photography, which fails so beautifully to achieve this professionalisation, is wide open to the LOVE -- pursuit of the unnameable and always, anyway, partial -- of the amateur.

PARENTHETICAL DETOUR ON THE 'DEATH' OF PHOTOGRAPHY

If photography is dead, it is so in the Nietzschean sense that God is dead. As Vattimo (1997: 7) has it, 'the God that has served as the principle of stability and reassurance is also the one that has always forbidden the lie, so it is to obey him that the faithful have forsworn even that lie which he is himself: it is the faithful that have killed God' .

Photography as discrete art of writing in light likewise constrains its devotees to representation, and so demands of them another irreconcilable dialectic of realism and mimesis. The moment at which they insist on the reality of photography (for example as a specific medium), however, they deny its transparency, and in this second moment of the dialectic photography is slaughtered by the very power of their faith in it.

But, like Nietzsche's dead God, unburied, and whose abandoned flock have yet to mourn, photography is an unstill spirit that returns to haunt us, and of infinitely more value as a spirit of the undead than it was as deified and absolute. Inherently contradictory, the spectre of photography rattles its chains to unsettle the settled, and to unpick the aura of divinity that still adheres to painting, text, the engraved image and the moving picture. In this afterlife, the unquiet ghost of photography can spook out the new holism of convergence and its alchemical total artwork. Of all arts the closest to truth, the collapse of its technical approximations to the profilmic real result in the magnificent destruction of both art and integrated media, trampling the corpse of representation in the triumphal admission that everything is interpretation.

Beauty is not a quality of objects. The old saying is true, in this respect: beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We would have to say, in the body of the beholder, and to turn the language further to our purposes, to rephrase this as: beauty is the bodily experience of the other. There is something inherent in this otherness: an element of surprise, perhaps, but much more so a sense of opening oneself up to the experience, or sensing the invasion of self by some other, be it thought or sense experience. Today beauty is more valuable than it has ever been, not just because of its rarity, but because the hyperindividualism of neo-liberal capital, the narcissistic culture of consumption, militates against openness, and can only explain it in narratives of self-expression, confession and the healing of the self. The point is elsewhere: to experience beauty is to experience the permeability of the skin, to feel viscerally the pull of other tides than those associated with the Will.

Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the aesthetic from disgust: both are extreme states of the body, confronted with its unbounded connectivity with the whole world, synthetic and organic. The experience has nothing to do with taste, even with the socialisation of taste, where groups communicate their solidarity with one another (and often enough their rejection of others) through demonstrations of shared cultural attitudes and practices. It has everything to do with the ethical imperative of communication: to enhance the communicative, so that every cell is engaged in communication. In this sense, the aesthetic is the highest expression of the ethical, impelling us towards, more than the recognition, the experience of interconnectedness. As such, it demands that we take responsibility for our experience, as it reveals the complete dependency of experience on the world. It occupies, for the materialist, the position which spirituality has for the religious.

The loss of subject in the aesthetic experience, or rather the irrelevance of subjectivity in the experience of connection, implies the irrelevance of objects, and more specifically of the subject-object relation. In turn, this implies the irrelevance of objects. Anything can be the matter of such experience: Proust's memory of the madeleine, Kristeva's horror at the skin on hot milk, the Shoemaker-Levy comet in the Summer sky, my puppy leaping for a ball on the beach.

But because we live in a period in which every effort of contemporary discourse is bent towards subject-object relations, there has to be an equal, indeed a greater effort towards making the aesthetic available. This effort, it seems to me, is the same as the effort to pry open the gates of the future. It is about the experience of alterity, of the availability, if not now, then soon, of an utterly other mode existence beyond the cultural imperative of selfish individualism.

There is a quality of amateurism which is perhaps more precious than any other in this context of the struggle for a future, a quality it shares with diasporan cultures. In amateur cultures, the processes of sharing, of remaking what arrives in new forms, comes from an understanding that culture is not a collection of goods to be preserved but a resource of materials and skills. The amateur is ready, like the musicians of the African diaspora, to transform every material, to show respect through manipulating and changing what comes to hand, seizing a technology, a technique, a shape or melody or image and making it anew. The process is future-directed and open-ended. The purposes of amateur culture are not to preserve some past or to capture some future truth, but to defer truth to that place where it really belongs, the future (it is only the dangerously dogmatic who believe they possess absolute truth, only the dangerously relativist who believe that because it is unavailable in the present it has no ethical power).

The ethical aesthetic of amateurism presumes to question not only truth but the value of art, even its very concept. This is, of course, a central function of art itself, probably since Duchamp; certainly since Kossuth. What Kossuth retains, however, is the art-function, even as the art-object fades (Kossuth 1992). In a sense, what there is of the aesthetic in art-objects is what is left when one has removed from Wagner his totalitarian pomp, or from Poussin his Jansenism. It is, perhaps, what one gains from the loss of familiarity: the shock of alterity that sometimes disengages itself from a Vermeer or a van der Weyden as the constitutive context dissolves, and the thing itself imposes itself as raw percept, as material. The absent artist has become future in their lack, and so achieved that utter otherness which makes them valuable in the current struggle. There are some works today that seem to operate in just this way: Rachel Whiteread's House springs to mind.

Most art, however, is not aesthetic in this sense. It is, by and large, research into survival. How are we to retain some humanity in the face of what confronts us? Art, the mode of artisan production, the personal relations that the artworld fosters, the scenting of coming storms, of the world or of the heart, acts without fundamental or radical challenge, simply because it accepts its status as art. As work, art offers one leading contribution: the

example of creative labour. But in terms of its productions, it can only operate within the terms of art itself, a discourse in which the resilience of the dominant, its ability to contain and assume the resistant, has been apparent now for over a hundred years.

The challenge is to produce an art without artists, just as it is to produce media without professionals, and a polity without politicians. A public art, in which the private is dissolved, as it is in any case in the surveillance society, and the intimate and unconscious are leaking into the light; a public art which is more than the artist making their work public, or building works in public spaces, or directing the work of members of the public, but rather an art by, for, in the public sphere, art by virtue not of the success with which it moves expression from sender to receiver, but by virtue of how many people it inspires to communicate, and with what breadth and depth.

REFERENCES

- Beech, Dave and John Roberts (1996), 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', New Left Review 218, July / August, pp 102-127.
- Beech, Dave and John Roberts (1998), 'Tolerating Impurities: An Ontology, Genealogy and Defence of Philistinism' in New Left Review n. 227, January-February, 45-71.
- Kossuth, Joseph (1992), 'Art after Philosophy' in Harrison and Wood (eds), 840-850; first published in Studio International v.178, nn 115-7, Oct-Nov-Dec 1969, 160-1, 212-3.
- Quinn, Malcolm (1997), 'Re-Thinking the Unthinkable: Ventriloquy, The Quotidian and Intellectual Work', Third Text npo 40, pp 13-20.
- Roberts, John (1996), "'Mad For It!" Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British Art', Third Text, np 35, Summer, pp 29-42.
- Vattimo, Gianni (1997), Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy, trans David Webb, Polity, Cambridge.