

The Selfless Artist, A Personal Reflection on Expanded Engagement with the Other

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Mike Kelley's recent suicide seems to have been partly a reaction to the internal conflict of being at the top of the art world, a system he was highly critical of and whose 'abject' and 'difficult' work was supposedly in opposition to. This sad departure to me gives a sombre cast to the question of what it is to be a successful artist. Discussion of what constitutes success is an essential component in an art school system that more and more posits economic success as a top priority. It is right and proper that our students are given the means to be successful but not at the cost of compromising what is most valuable in terms of what it means to be an artist in the first place.

A discussion of the values of the art world system and the pitfalls of success the attainment of which we are all urged to inculcate within a curriculum increasingly focused on entrepreneurship and professional practice is essential lest the idea that extrinsic determinants of success become the mistaken ideology our students take out into the world.

There has been much speculation as to why Mike Kelley killed himself - doomed romance or was being at the top of a rampantly capitalist and narcissistic commercial art system too much to bear? How does an artist deal with the political and ethical dilemmas of the capital that fuels the ridiculous prices and disparities in income? When an artist becomes enormously successful and wealthy, how does he align this with the role of opposition to the very values that created such success? Could this single tragic event be seen as a crisis of conscience for an art system corrupted by greed, money and a celebrity machine?

In professionalising art practice do we risk producing "one-dimensional artists" who like Marcuse's one-dimensional man abandon critical thought and conscience in favour of playing the system and attaining worldly success at odds with what it means to be a mindful and critical voice? Are instrumentalised notions of consumption and production the default for a society deracinated from a sense of shared values or ultimate concern?

Years ago when applying for the Whitechapel Open I was struck by the application form which made it very clear that only 'useless art' would be considered, art with any functionality or utility, any tangible "use-value" would not. At the Sydney art school I attended in the '80s, political activism was considered as valid an activity for an art student as producing art. In the Marxist tinged rhetoric of the time, we were urged by tutors to join anti-tuition fees demonstrations and several of us came away from violent encounters with the police with criminal records and broken bones. Artists were referred to as 'art workers', a moniker redolent with working-class solidarity. Art's value lay in its ability to critique late-capitalist society. At the same time facture, the enjoyment of making of work was looked on as a rather quaint, retrograde bourgeois object-fetish. I was accused of having 'constructivitis' a disorder

characterized by a compulsion to make spatially and technically ambitious sculpture, to think through making rather than to produce 'conceptual' work where the facture was a final gesture of bringing an idea into concrete reality.

In this time of austerity the dichotomy between instrumentalism and intrinsic value in the arts is being interrogated keenly by practitioners and organisations feeling the budget squeeze brought on by the latest failure of capitalism, the collapse of the financial system instigated by the mass-delusion of ever increasing wealth and unlimited growth perpetrated as much by middle-class home owners as investment bankers. This current situation highlights the divide between the romantic ideology of the artist as self-involved autonomous seer and utopian socialist notion of the artist as socially involved responder to others needs: either gloriously useless art sufficient for its own obscure purposes or art with use-value or social utility. Art beholden to its usefulness has always been seen as the less noble of the pursuits.

There are dangers in the pursuit of worldly success. In our teaching of professional practice we need to emphasise that success is an internal metric, comparing oneself with others and the 'politics of envy' is corrosive. So how do our graduates position themselves? What can the artist's vision offer the individual and society? Can the singular vision of the artist become a collective inspiration and provide a sense of what it means to be in the world authentically? Our teaching of professional practice must inculcate an expanded engagement with audiences and society; instill what philosopher Martin Buber termed an "I thou" relationship to the other rather than an "I-it" one.

An artist's concerns need to be larger than the market, larger than the instrument of change so beloved of authority. Art can be a conduit to an expanded sense of self, to a sense of wonder and speculation like that which science and philosophy provide. Art can account for the human person within society and within the natural order. So is not the ultimate purpose of art recognition, relatedness, exposing hidden and unspeakable dimensions of experience and connections? Art needs to be in conversation with science and religion, at least those forms that are more speculative, comfortable with uncertainty and able to examine the foundations of their own dogmas. New forms and conrescences of art philosophy, science and religion are apprehending the world in a post-materialist and post-positivist ways and drawing on pre-modern and non-Western spiritual and philosophical traditions. In those societies Jurgen Habermas calls post-secular, ways of thinking about being, consciousness and what it means to be human in an expanded sense are revenant. How are our young artists going to contribute?

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