The Mirror

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THE MIRROR

by

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B.F.A., University of Texas at Austin, 2000

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Department of Art and Art History

2004
This thesis entitled:
The Mirror
Written by David Alcantar
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Art is a transformative experience that is rarely attained because of a refusal to acknowledge what is true or honest, because of the certain vulnerability and aspect of danger that is inseparable with honesty. It is a rare occurrence, not because it is elitist or undemocratic, and not because it is not sincerely sought after, but because it exposes the artist’s vulnerabilities to the world and in doing so creates a conflict of interest, whereby, the artist must choose to either preserve himself and his ego or acknowledge that to truly be an artist and to truly make art is to make honest statements or reflections and stand with them. Honesty, and, therefore, Art, is not easy, which is what makes it such a rare and special occurrence.
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Part I: The Means

We cannot be irresponsible when we talk about art, yet it always happens and does so unintentionally. Perhaps, it is unavoidable, as the language used to describe and define art is inadequate compared to the very physical and experiential language used to create it. We must attempt to clarify and define at every opportunity to minimize the miscommunication that is so prevalent in discussions about art. There are only approximations of what art does. There are no complete definitions for what art is. I have no better an explanation than what has come before.

We circle the issue of art with oral language hoping that we can get close enough that the meanings of things like art and beauty can be inferred, if not clearly defined. As unfortunate as it may be, this is what will also likely happen here.

I use the word "art" in two different forms, because it is a term that suffers the same casualty as "love". It is often used flippantly, as if to say that everything that is crafted is art and that everyone who has a craft is an artist—which is not to say that everyone or everything hasn't the potential to achieve the status of art. As Donald Kuspit says in The End of Art:

Co-opted by the common place, [art] loses its uncommonness. It has also been undermined by the belief that all one has to do is have a 'concept' to be an artist, which suggests that the concept of artist, as well as of art, has lost clear meaning. This is why so many people think of themselves as artists, for everyone has a favorite 'concept', especially about some person, place and thing they know.1

What is important is that we distinguish Art, or true art, as I might also refer to it, as a rare, intimate experience ultimately transforming the self, using honesty as a

mirror (by which we measure each other, and ourselves) and a means (not an end in itself). This is in opposition to how "art" is used currently and convolutedly to describe objects of wit and cleverness that, while commenting on the external world, make little attempt to drastically cause one to question their perception of it. In other words, Art is honest reflection, both internal and external, of the world and those who inhabit it, and doesn't exist otherwise—though there are many well-crafted objects that attempt to be honest and be Art, but when the mirror of Art is held to them, they fall short. So Art either exists or it doesn't, just like absolute honesty either exists or doesn't. There is the in-between space of something aspiring to be Art—just like there is the in-between space of something almost being the truth—but intending to be Art and being Art is not the same thing, though one may be a valiant and sincere attempt to attain the other. This valor can still be celebrated. This is not to say that the existence of either Art or honesty is obvious, but it is ever present. It lingers in the background waiting to be discovered, and its feelings will not be hurt if it is not. As artists and human beings we are responsible for finding it, and that should be taken very seriously.

I made two small paintings, 18" X 18", of the same image for two different people. The paintings had no concept behind them other than to be aesthetically pleasing. The minimum requirement was that they were to be well painted. However, upon their completion they revealed how the aspect of honesty directly relates to art making—an aspect that I had been ignoring. As artists we want everything we make to be Art, but Art is a transformative experience that is rare, not because it isn't democratic, but because it is almost impossible to uphold and maintain
the honesty necessary for Art. It is incredibly difficult to be consistently honest, which makes Art rare. But why should that prevent us from trying? The agenda for these two small, gift paintings was not to be proven as Art, and yet, they achieved close proximity to it. In their case, there was only an intention to make and to give. For the paintings there was only the fact of their existence. They resulted in being the best works in paint that I had done to that point, but I was unsure at the time as to why that might be. It had to be explored. Why had these two small paintings come out so easily, or more naturally, and better than any I had done before? Was it their size? They were of a scale, 18" square, where the idea and history of painting weren't overwhelming. The method of painting in this small scale was very close to my method of drawing, which has always been more successful. Was it that they were being given away, and in giving them away I just didn't think about them as much? Is that what it is to make Art, to make without thinking? According to Donald Kuspit, "It is not clear to what extent the act of making is an act of reflecting, however much reflection – about how to make a particular work of art – may go into it". Kuspit declares that making and reflecting are two separate acts, and in order for Art to happen, making and reflecting, what he calls "sensation" and "reason", have to synthesize. For Kuspit sensation exists in the unconscious, and reason is obviously a conscious act, so how can they ever work together, unless we make what is unconscious conscious? The only way to discover how this occurs, and what differentiated these paintings from previous attempts, was to make more paintings with the same intention of giving them away. So, I embarked to discover two things:

1) making these paintings as fluidly and naturally as I have always made my
drawings, and 2) determining if and why making paintings as gifts was easier and/or
better. What I learned was both liberating and incredibly demanding.

These paintings were to be given to specific people because I wanted them to
be sincere gifts—sincere objects. In retrospect, what I became more attached to was
sincerity for the act of creating. The people for whom the paintings were made
already accept who I am. I don't need to give them an object. What they are
interested in is the sincere giving of myself—of what I have to offer. In art, this
aspect of the self is present in the process of creating, which manifests in an object.
Suddenly, I had to consider how I was giving myself to a wider audience who knew
nothing about my experiences or myself. How were they going to respond to and
consume my work, and why would that matter? It matters because to make an object
is to make a statement. To present that object to a viewer is to ask for acceptance in
some way. As Dave Hickey says, "That's what artists do: they make views they wish
to prevail. They wish their moral and political construction of the visual world to be
the way the world looks, to be the way people look at the world." If I were
irresponsible about how the world looks or how my statement about the world is
made, then the opportunity for Art would be missed altogether.

The format of the paintings is square because it is neutral. Since the
measurements of the paintings are equal, one dimension commands no attention over
the other, whereas in either a portrait or landscape format, the larger dimension has
more authority, commands more attention. What remains here is a painting
archetype—an object that simply exists and is waiting to be used, to be transformed into a painting. The thesis paintings don’t rely on their dimensions for acceptance or authority. Instead, the paintings rely on their imagery and painterly process to win favor from the audience. The square is neither portrait, nor landscape space, and yet it is both. The viewer can alternate between the two and is encouraged to do so by the quality of the painting process and the representation of imagery. James Rosenquist's representational painting President Elect, 1960-61, is a landscape, though it bears no resemblance to the traditional landscapes of Thomas Cole or John Constable. What it represents most is a cultural landscape using the format that is typical of landscape painting. Willem DeKooning's Woman series, 1952-53, are absolute portraits despite the absence of a specific identity. The painterly, insouciant gesture, typical of abstractions, generalizes the portrait but doesn’t diminish it. DeKooning’s Woman series also adheres to format traditions.

To ensure the thesis paintings would indeed be sincere gifts for others, not just excuses for showcasing my ability; personal memories with strong emotions attached to them were used. Precautions were necessary, however, because personal subject matter of this kind is easy to over romanticize and trivialize. As Kuspit says, "Simply put, it does not mean that making art gives the artist insight into what he makes art about—into his feelings about his subject matter." Though something may be well intentioned, it does not automatically deem it right or good, or as Art. One must compare what one is making with what one wants to make. It is easy to lose

objectivity, to be dishonest, when representing the subject of the emotional. It is also
dangerous to distance oneself from the emotive impetus behind the object altogether
for then it may become insincere and sterile. "What you repress will return with a
vengeance and in fact was never really absent and lost. It always has an unconscious
influence on what one consciously creates." The aspect of the unconscious that
Kuspit alludes to is that which honestly presents itself. The imagery and format,
therefore, of the thesis exhibition paintings had to be chosen cautiously and with
consideration. I could not be irresponsible with these paintings, because, if nothing
else, they were going to speak about me.

The specific imagery I chose for my thesis exhibition work was culled from
popular culture image sources to symbolize specifics of personal memories. As
Donald Kuspit declares, "Modern art [serves] as the special space in which one can be
ture to oneself in a society that encourages one to be false to oneself," he adds,
"Aesthetic experience allows one to recover the sense of individuality and
authenticity lost to obligatory behavior." The very nature of emotional states, which
are general and very large, indeed, like Love and Loneliness, and Death, shakes one's
foundations regarding a determination of one's self. Through the symbolic use and
transformation of casual images that relate to emotions, I could connect with (at least)
the people for whom the paintings were made, if no one else. In the end, the painting
would be a metaphor for my relationship to these memories and these specific people,
then and now. Kuspit describes that the best Art gives "a new perspective on

5 Donald Kuspit, The End of Art 46.
6 Kuspit, The End of Art 12.
7 Kuspit, The End of Art 13.
existence and a new vision of reality...that would threaten and unsettle the crowd," and "create panic by making everything familiar seem unfamiliar.\(^8\) First hand experiences of Love, Death, Loneliness, etc., are truly unfamiliar. Why would we want to trivialize them to everyday banality? What could possibly be learned from doing so? While Love and Death are formidable entities, they are “conquered” by confronting them not avoiding them.

Beauty and honesty are not necessarily positive or attractive, despite how much we may want them to be. As Hickey points out, "they are immediate, sensual, and morally neutral.\(^9\)" Though the subject matter to create Art may be inflammatory, or undesirable, the result of Art is often contemplative and affirming. Kuspit refers to Art as the "privileged space of contemplation, and as such a reprieve and sanctuary from the barbarism of the world – however much that may be its subject matter.\(^10\)" Hickey says, "beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder–by showing us something of which we may not approve in such a way that we cannot resist it.\(^11\)" The point is that in both assessments, this tension between the desirable and the unsettling, and the defining moment that results, exists when one compares what one wants to believe with what is true (in art and most other aspects of life).

This internal, defining conflict may not be immediately distinguishable and comprehensible, but it is immediately and intuitively physical. Ultimately, when the

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\(^10\) Kuspit, The End of Art 37.
\(^11\) Hickey, 13.
mirror of Art is held to an object (especially one proposing to be Art), it reflects with honest accuracy the true existence of the object before it.
Part II: The Measure.

To make paintings as gifts is only the beginning point. For it truly to be a gift, to truly be Art, it must be a sincere self that you are giving, and to find that is not easy and may not be pleasant, because in the end you are faced with only yourself. That is what good art does. It leaves us exposed. That is also exactly how honesty operates. Honest expression and, therefore, Art, is not easy, because as we all know, self-preservation is also a human characteristic, and manipulating the truth mostly comes from a desire to preserve the self physically, psychologically, and emotionally. So it is an unfortunate duplicity that that which preserves us can simultaneously prevent us from being true to ourselves—prevent us from making Art. As artists, we must accept this and willingly put ourselves in this vulnerable position that honesty inhabits.

Artists seek the sincere acceptance of their audience, but how can that really be attained if what is presented to the audience is not sincere? In the art experience, there should be a surrendering of the self, for both the artist and the viewer—one to the other. Ideally, both the artist and the viewer put each other on pedestals and pull each other down as equals. They exalt each other's specialty and/or potential despite being human, which is burdened by obstacles. Kuspit says:

Unlike modern artists postmodern artists are not interested in alchemical experimentation, however uncertain the result—they are too disillusioned to believe that works of art can be alchemical miracles—but in having an audience that will make them popular, giving them the celebrity and charisma they believe they are entitled to as artists.12

We cannot force a viewer to participate in art, no matter how "right" our statements may be. Viewers must surrender themselves to Art freely. Hickey states:

A great deal of art that I see presumes to tell me what is 'right' in an environment where it is presumed that 'right' things are said. I find this strategy stunningly ineffective—because, although we have something like free speech in this society... the citizens who hear our free speech are under no moral or legal obligation to believe what we have to say—or even listen sympathetically.

We must believe in the ability of people (including ourselves) to reach their potential and take both ownership and responsibility of their freedom, which allows them to accept or reject Art according to their aesthetic response. Freedom is neither easy to practice or acquire, but it is pure, for it leaves us with our convictions. However incorrect those convictions may be, they have been acquired (mostly) by a willing acceptance, not a forced indoctrination. Hickey continues, "...most of the art I see today is made on the behalf of others, or the Other, if you will. This may seem altruistic, I grant you, but in fact, it positions the artist virtually outside and above those upon whose behalf he or she [the artist] so selflessly labors." An honest representation of an emotion or state of affairs does not seek the kind of acceptance or recognition that many current objects that propose to be art do. They make statements matter-of-factly and leave the viewer free to decide to ally with the object or not. This is the best that we can hope for as artists, because the surrendering of the self requires trust. How can either the artist or the viewer give themselves to one another if neither is sincere about their offering? The gift, and, therefore, Art, is never a possession, though art objects may be. What we possess, what is the gift, is the intimate experience of Art. The initial two gift paintings, in other words, were far

more democratic and definitely closer to Art because they had no agenda other than to exist, and did so sincerely, which enabled the consumption of them to be more sincere also. This was the agenda for the thesis paintings: to sincerely and matter-of-factly present personal and emotional states through the object of a canvas, and have them consumed not by commercialism, but by sincere acknowledgement.

There was my intention of making the thesis exhibition paintings sincerely, but ultimately when the mirror of Art was held to them, they did not measure up, which does not mean that they had nothing to offer, but the gift was not as sincere as it could have been. They were not as much of gifts as they should have been. It is possible that, though objects may not exist as Art, they may be insightful in terms of what is absent to get to the Art experience. An active search for insight into what Art is and how one finds it is first necessary before one can get to an Art experience. To know or understand a thing, you must know the antithesis to that thing. The only way to achieve artistic insight and ultimately Art is to be honest with how one makes or attempts to make Art and how one seeks to define it. Artists must be honest about how they experience the world and reinterpret that world through an object to affect or transform a viewer with a sincere, individual, and intimate experience. Essentially the thesis exhibition paintings had to “fail” if I was to progress as an artist—if I was to get any closer to Art.

We continue to believe Art is an end, a finality to which we should aspire. But for humanity, Art is a means to an end. It is a way for self-criticality to happen and, thus, perception and self-definition. Dave Hickey says, "The simple fact is that we have such deep, essentialist ideas about the wedding of form and content—which I
think are fantasy—that we somehow think the canons of beauty have ideological meaning. We think of beauty as an idea rather than an instrumentality. If we understand Art in this same way, as an instrumentality, a means to the end of discovering a true self, then only through honesty can one achieve Art. As Donald Kuspit says, "Art is not presupposed as an answer, but becomes the question. When it becomes the question that creates a self, true apprenticeship begins; the future is conceived, even if never to be delivered in an expectant form." The end is perfection, of course, but since humankind is inherently flawed, that pursuit is endless, which doesn't mean that that pursuit is frivolous. Art is just a tool, albeit a powerful and powerfully persuasive one, that provides a greater perspective of ourselves and, thus, allows us to change the world, or at least our perspective of the world, as a result of that knowledge. Hickey says, "This vertiginous bond of trust between the image and the beholder is private, voluntary, a little scary, and since the experience is not presumed to be an end in itself, it might, ultimately, have some consequence." Any real, sincere good that is possible with Art (but not expected) only results from a choice freely given. Only through an honest, or sincere, experience of the world, a sincere attempt to make an object of Art that reflects that experience, and a sincere reflection of that attempt can this free will occur.

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