

Reading Diary: Beyond the Body

The readings kept bringing to my mind an issue of the relation between an institution, the art which it displays, and the greater public, especially those of low class. I thought of the power relationship found in different aspects of art and how this relationship affects the work itself and possible interpretations of the work.

The theory of Relational Aesthetics seems to say a certain experience is created by the interaction of an artist and an audience. The artist become more the catalyst than the creator of an independent work. Now as this “experience” is generally housed in an institution of art, and that institution exists within an established power system, the message of the art, in particular, in regards to issues of justice and equality, can be seen as compromised. If the art’s objective is to bring into light the injustices inherent in a stratified society, the very existence of the institution which is disseminating this message is to a degree the outcome of such stratification. Now to be fair, this is an inevitable problem of political and social art. Its very existence is usually the product of a class which has time and resources beyond those whose struggle it attempts to elucidate. An example is the traveling photographer whose equipment and trip expenses far surpass the wealth of the impoverished country he records in image.

Recently I was invited to a reading of Wallace Shawn’s *The Fever*, a play which deals with the gaze and fascination of an affluent man towards those in poverty. It is dark, comic, and portrays the attitude of an affluent man as schizophrenic, as his mind oscillate between feelings of empathy and entitlement. Feelings of empathy arise out of the understanding in the universality of human dignity which brings to light the idea that the systems of power and control which created their affluence and wealth are also responsible for the poverty which confronts their gaze. But in the next moment, this overwhelming feeling of sorrow and guilt is countered by pride and ego bringing up notions that the system rewards the virtuous and hardworking by compensating him for his contributions of talent and effort. In this harmonic flux, in the mind’s fascination with its own endorsement, in its fragile neurotic love for itself, the real is captured by a clouded lens and honesty is lost. The sensory might be well maintained and of high resolution, but the lens distorts and destroys the focus of the piercing light reflecting from the real. What is a difficult, confusing and painful process of self inquisition instead resembles a game to be played for prizes and accolades. In a most cynical view the Biennial circuit creates art stars whose work is political, directly critiquing a structure in which they not only actively participate but also perpetuate.

For me, I look for inspiration in the search for a solace born in creative activity, occurring against the odds, amidst the injustice and struggle. I do not look to the creations born from the conversations in the castle. Street art and other endeavors of shared passion and creation, like skateboarding, define for me the artist and artwork rather than affluent Artist Ethnographers whose behaviors seem to more closely resemble those of a politician than of an innovative creator.