



image: GRAHAM RAMSAY 'JOHN SAXMAN COOKERY CLASS'

Getting carried away

YOBS, WEIRDOS AND WASTERS are leading art down some dingy streets. Styles of enjoyment that seem to have always been sneered at by wisdom are being shamelessly displayed by the emergent art. The question seems to be, are these artists, who are getting carried away with little pleasures, losing sight of more important matters? The answer I want to give is unambiguous, but difficult to support: you can take your aesthetic propriety and stick it up your arse.

Not all so-called 'young British art' is characterised by fickle, wanton, undisciplined enjoyment. Some is. But what's more important is that this art of high-spiritedness and low tastes has turned its back on aesthetic and saintly visions of spiritual sublimation, of noble pleasures and purified souls. This is to be seen not only in the spectacularly puerile mannequins of the Chapman brothers and the adolescent fanaticism of Jeremy Deller's Madchester idolatry. Georgina Starr's cultural trashiness and Keith Tyson's incontinent absurdity are no less insubordinate to wisdom's ordering of pleasure, though they are much less conspicuously philistine.

Cheap thrills and cheap tricks, dirty words and daft ideas: the lover of wisdom would find the lowest of indulgences in the emergent art. Adam Chodzko getting off his face in the forest, or sending stuff in to contact mags; Bank's all-knowing curatorial irresponsibility; the Wilson twins' acid trip images; and, David Burrow's fist-fights between Britpopsters and Enlightenment thinkers - these are the works of vandals, numskulls and the easily led. Unless, that is, they are the works of those who can't take seriously the age-old eulogies of art and refined thought. There's no better example of this than Rebecca Warren's video of her own chirpy face being splattered with spunk - a piece which has an astonishing disregard for 'the beautiful', preferring the ugly, hateful and ludicrous. It's as if the art of the last couple of years has finally come to terms with the aesthetics of fat Elvis.

If aesthetic pleasure is satisfied with beauty then an Elvis pictography would be an aesthetic nightmare of waste, decay, loss, destruction, and weakness. Young Elvis was beautiful. And when his body got carried away with the music, the world swooned. But when Elvis got carried away with burgers and drugs his body left his control then collapsed. But isn't this picture of decadent tragedy a severe assault on voluptuous thrills in the name of exalted pleasure? And wouldn't the Elvis story begin to look very different if aesthetics could learn to love the passion and madness of falling, losing your head, getting fucked? Yes, fat Elvis deserves to be the patron saint of mad fuckers, layabouts and chemically aided hedonists, because these are the lovers of a graceless, insubordinate aesthetics.

Pleasure for the wise, on the other hand, must be ultimately commensurable with discursive reason. This is why beauty - not gluttony, drug abuse or theatrical excess - is at the centre of the noble discussion of pleasure. It's not that wisdom overlooks indulgence; it knows it only too well as a threat to truth, happiness and genuine pleasure. In this, pleasure has been written up as reserved for those delights which reconfirm

the rational and free self. All other enjoyment is accused of self-deception, self-destruction, and so forth. This leads to what I'm calling the ordering of pleasure. When Elvis sacrificed his beautiful body by giving in to bodily cravings he slid from near the heights to the ultimate depths of the ordering of pleasure. To choose burgers over beauty and health is, for these thinkers, to go against your own best interests. To do this knowingly, at least for Aristotle, is to have an incontinent will (to use your free will despite yourself). This is the heart of the matter: wisdom combines pleasure with truth and happiness by insisting that your tastes complement the pursuits of knowledge and ethics.

What's at stake here can be illustrated by looking briefly at the joys of masochism. I don't mean the popular misconception that the masochist paradoxically finds pleasure in pain - though this alone shows the ordering of pleasure to be at risk. I'm thinking of the masochist as someone who sets up a theatre of sensuality full of games, toys and rôles - all of which cast the masochist as if s/he is at the mercy of an accomplice. In other words, the masochist is a subject who takes pleasure in the surrendering of subjecthood. Strictly speaking, then, the masochist - although the author of their own eroticism - isn't the subject of pleasure at all, because, having surrendered the integrity of the subject, their delights can't claim the dignity of the category of pleasure. With no interest in the true interests of their own or their partner's 'self', the masochist flouts the ecology of aesthetics, ethics and rationality. In fact, the masochist's first pleasure is the renunciation of wisdom because s/he finds joy against the ordering of pleasure. Philosophers and priests have an anxiety for the subject which means that they will condemn the masochist but love the wise recluse. These two types shape themselves around denial, but it is the sort of denial involved that sets them apart.

Anxieties about the subject have always turned on questions about the body. The masochist is always willing to sacrifice the soul for a few moments of bodily bliss; the recluse will do without everything connected to the body in order to be closer to God and truth. Artists adopt similar positions. The thing is, wisdom has always derogated the body, with its corruptions and distractions, as a threat to truth. There is a foolishness of the body: it's always liable to the contingencies, myopia and errors of passion, appetite, need. This is why fasting, which is as old as religion itself, is regarded as a technique of seeking proximity to God. When fasting the soul is not being jostled by the seductions and satisfactions of salivating mouths, rumbling bellies, delicious smells, and all devastating invitations to bite, chew, suck and swallow. Food is an enemy of the soul because the mouth and belly couldn't care less about eternity.

You wouldn't find much enthusiasm here for Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas' T-shirt slogan, "have you wanked over me yet?" In this work the body is all over the place - dressing it, teasing it, speaking of its urges and mechanics, perhaps even affecting it with laughter or a blush. Moreover, their bare-faced questioning imagines a disorderly intermingling of the

bodily and the intellectual, figuring the body (itself fired up by fantasies) as overwhelming the mind. So, even if artworks of this sort can be made to feel at home in high-minded company, the thrills they speak of are supposed to be understood without indulgence, appreciated without getting carried away.

This is why Socrates opposed knowledge and the body: "I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body". For philosophers and priests the body is an undisciplined mob, forever confusing and misleading the rational and free mind with short-term gratifications and ill-considered desires. Even Nietzsche, the greatest opponent of truth's hatred of 'instinct', who is relentlessly anchoring the highest endeavours of the mind in the lowest workings of the body (German Idealism, he says, was caused by German cooking - one has to be 'selfless' to put up with such food!) - even Nietzsche regards thinking and solitude - a thorough cleanliness - as higher and more exalted than the body because of its distracting thirsts.

You get a clearer example of this fear of the body within a general anxiety for the sovereignty of the subject in the writing of Erich Fromm. His famous Marx-plus-Freud guide to personal and political health, "Art of Loving", is a manifesto for the ordering of pleasure in line with the requirements of the autonomous self. His distinctions between mature love and dependent love follow the contour of the distinction between genuine pleasure and bodily enjoyment. Mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity. This is why he tuts at lovers who lose themselves in each other, who ache with an exorbitant desire. Above all, Fromm is frightened of falling - falling in love, falling for someone, falling into something. Scared to death of making a mistake, he precludes all forms of seduction and thrill from entering the private property of his neat, ordered, balanced self. And then he extends his anxiety for 'falling' to include "masochistic submission to fate, to sickness, to rhythmic music, to the orgiastic state produced by drugs or under hypnotic trance". As such, Fromm is an intractable exponent of truth's ordering of pleasure because it is a regime that protects the subject against its own moments of weakness and self-neglect.

Elvis, the masochist, and the yobs, weirdos and wasters of contemporary art, all fail spectacularly to reconcile their tastes with the family group consisting of beauty, happiness and truth. Instead, they are seduced, duped, intoxicated, led astray. You would expect to find some of this in a Bank exhibition entitled 'Fuck Off'. And yet, the show was disappointingly smart. Nevertheless, it contained a work that knows exactly what getting carried away is all about: Rebecca Warren's neon sign which states, in a doubled handwriting, "trust yer unconscious". It combines the informality and sensual materiality of the colloquial voice, and the warm self-examination of the diaristic note, with the theatrical seductiveness of the culture industry's basest (though perhaps most sublime) technique, and a recommendation to develop a closer relation with urges, drives and fantasies that have been

repressed. It is a paradoxical goal, but I still want to see this sign in a boutique for bodily ornament, in a club full of sweaty bodies, above my bed, or in an art exhibition which sniffs at aesthetic propriety—in the toilets at the CCA perhaps.

I'm not arguing for the discourse of the body, or what came to be known as the embodied eye. This sort of critique was fashionable in the 80s. The New Art Historians, for instance, extended Bourdieu's sociological analysis of the secretions of power within the seemingly innocuous operations of pleasure, in theories of the embodied eye—the cultural gaze as a kaleidoscope of gender, class, race and so forth. It figures the gaze as a site of struggle. Recent attacks on the social history of art, for a more familiar looking defence of art's autonomy and judgements of taste, argue that questions of value and judgement cannot be reduced to psychic, social, political, historical questions. The stalemate which results considers what I'm calling the hierarchy of pleasure as either hierarchy or pleasure. And in both cases the foolishness of the body is renounced, through politicisation or sublimation. In other words, the aesthetic affirmation of pleasure and critical theories of embodiment alike are suspicious of the pleasures of the body.

What serious artists, critical theorists, philosophers and priests guard against with their fear of bodily excitation is what Adorno called the 'subjectless subject'. It can be understood as a warmed-up, industrialised, administered, mass version of Aristotle's concept of incontinence: only nominally a subject at all, the subjectless subject is consumed by momentary gratifications which bombard it relentlessly from all sides. Adorno was a chilling critic of the slightest trace of barbarity, authoritarianism, alienation, horror, inhumanity. As far as he was concerned, when he scarpered from Nazi Germany to exile in New York, he had swapped one form of totalitarianism for another. Capitalism's culture industry might be a softer totalitarianism than Hitlerian fascism, but Adorno was not soft on its abuses, corruptions, and violations. He spat evangelical poison at jazz, Hollywood, and even the way radio used only memorable sections of classical music. For Adorno, the totally administered society of technological capitalism had resulted in a totally administered subjectivity for which every aspect of life had been damaged by omnipresent brutality.

Such a predicament, for Adorno, requires cultural diligence: blackness, silence, negation, dissonance. This is the repertoire of an art which registers beauty as the promise of happiness betrayed. Art's self-reflexive attention to its own unhappy situation is thus a central component of the resistance to totalitarianism, and merges political, ethical and epistemological truths in an aesthetics of formal self-suspicion. Art's critical burden has never been quite this sobering.

Adorno's concept of the 'subjectless subject' stands in sharp contrast to his imagined artist: one consumes, the other produces; one loses him/herself, the other constantly inspects her/himself; one acts with the masses, the other produces her/his own subjectivity out of a rigorous critique of commodity fetishism and its characteristic alienation. Subjectlessness seems to be a negative and inverted image of Adorno's own intellectual, cultured, liberal, poised, snobbish personality. But it's not the case that Adorno hated mass culture because it clashes with his love of books and Beethoven. There is no conspiracy of good taste. With

The things that seem beautiful, inspiring and life-affirming to me seem ugly, hateful and ludicrous to most other people

Pat Califia, Macho Sluts

the entire weight of wisdom behind him (egging him on), Adorno faced the hellish force of capitalism with awful clarity, knowing subjectlessness to involve the gravest of sacrifices—the loss of the emancipated, autonomous self.

Wisdom's ordering of pleasure and its attendant sense of subjectivity and subjectlessness can't be explained away as an effect of social divisions. It is the outcome of a systematic assessment of judgements and experiences in relation to what is taken to characterise truthfulness. Socrates runs away from beautiful boys because the body's appetites distract the soul from eternal truths. Likewise, Nietzsche never spares himself in the pursuit of hard truths; he is strict, persevering, exacting, disciplined, austere, frugal, serious. In short, so long as it seems wise to act according to your own best interests, then getting carried away (acting against, despite or with neglect to your best interests) will seem foolish. And not only foolish, but a sort of masochism: taking pleasure in something harmful. In this way the hierarchic ordering of pleasure, even the affirmation of restraint, can make a good case for itself as benevolent and enlightened. What has to be challenged isn't the ordering of pleasure directly, but the constitution of wisdom that shapes it.

Lusts take your mind away from questions of truth, freedom, and the greater good—at least for a time. Getting carried away is never rational, is unlikely to be ethical, and can't be relied on to serve one's best interests. In a sense, such things are put in abeyance. And the idea of switching these imperatives on and off at will strikes the robust thinker as hypocritical and inconsistent: wanton. Even occasional lapses seem to threaten the integrity of the subject—as if losing yourself in something would be irredeemable, as if having a weakness for something meant an erosion of one's powers, as if getting carried away meant loss of self. Psychologically such principles are dangerous; culturally they lead too easily to prejudices which make the preference for self-reflexive art somehow have the edge over having a good time because it is as if the difference between them is determined by whatever distinguishes truth and error.

Despite appearances, then, it doesn't seem all that wise to ask us never to get carried away. Even if the systematic thinker expects it, consistency is certainly not practically necessary. Wisdom's ordering of pleasure distributes guilt to forms of enjoyment that are too unhinged to produce or result from robust debate. As such, the ordering of pleasure is always the surreptitious work of ethics, rationality, theology or whatever. And without this aesthetics wouldn't appear to reconfirm spontaneously the values of wisdom, but would be seen as wisdom's colonisation of bodily experience. Without the surreptitious ordering of pleasure there could be no aesthetic privilege for beauty over

masochism, gluttony or addiction. Contemporary art's indulgence in pleasures of this sort casts itself as unseemingly, ill-advised, brutal: having its thrills in the shadow of the ordering of pleasure.

To defend the willingness to fall—or to be pushed—means to run up against a cluster of very well placed axioms. It is not for nothing that hard thinkers regard subjectlessness and its cousins as damage, illness, contagion, insanity. Being mad for it is, from an intellectual point of view, utterly monstrous. So, in order to get out from under the oppressive grandeur of intellectualism's self-serving attitude to culture, younger artists have lost themselves in worthless preoccupations without the least care to show themselves in a good light. Sue Webster and Tim Noble don't only call themselves 'the cunt' and 'the shit', their works—such as a group of shagging bunnies in a grassy idyll—are simply too risible to compete with the jumped-up institutionalism of Damien Hirst and Douglas Gordon. Baby Conceptualism has given way to something much more infantile. Mixing the kitschploitation of the Chapmans with the strategic art-world nous of Bank, Webster and Noble are setting the tone for an art that doesn't take seriousness seriously, preferring unjustifiable loves because the architecture of justification is uninhabitable.

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