

A short statement on the predicament of experimental art

Art is what artists do. It develops from what other artists have done before. Contemporary artists are specialized in reading such genealogies. One of the things artists have been doing for a while is to systematically test the boundaries of what can be considered art. The resulting artwork may look a lot like social work, activism, architecture, design etc., but this does not make the artists designers, social workers, or architects. Their art is significant neither as amateur sociology, nor as grassroots politics, nor as dilettante science, but as professional art, which experiments with disciplinary categories. In this sense, bad social science can be good art. The historical purpose of such experimentation has been to escape the constraints of academism and salon art and, in doing so, to render art meaningful. (In other words, it was an expression of the simultaneous desires for freedom and relevance.)

When such boundary-testing art loses its experimental validity, when the explorations it undertakes become moot, usually because a practice has been pre-empted sufficiently often to acquire the status of established genre, it can no longer be interpreted intelligently in the context of experimental art. Instead, it should either be suspended or, if a given practice is continued nevertheless, it becomes something entirely else and it must be viewed as conventional art and judged accordingly. As obvious as this is, it rarely happens. Just as the formal properties of conventional painting have been discussed for centuries, we should have discussions about why for example one interactive performance utilizing foot-massage may operate mainly as therapy, while another, unrelated, interactive performance utilizing foot-massage, carried out by a different artist, functions primarily as anecdote supported by staged imagery, and what these observations mean. Rather than the necessary, possibly dry conversations about the operations of such post-experimental works, we see an overwhelming desire to hold on to the notion of the violation of conventions as a value in itself, even if the conventions have long since been reformulated to include just such violations. Why is that? I can think of two main reasons for this seeming inconsistency.

1) The idea that transgression could be sustainable as an artistic practice was logically flawed from the beginning (just like the idea that freedom and relevance easily coincide), but it is still such a central tenet of contemporary art that it can only be dispensed with at great risk to the credibility of the entire field.

A strategy of transgression can provide momentary ruptures, but even to achieve this it needs an intact system of conventions and boundaries to break with, and these boundaries have to be worth transgressing, both, in terms of the significance of the transgression as well as the expected counter-reaction. If an artistic practice is sustained over any extended amount of time it will necessarily be integrated into a stable set of cultural values. Whenever this becomes obvious, artists draw different conclusions. Allan Kaprow gave up Happenings, left the art world and dedicated the longer part of his career to semi-

private research settings where experimentation was still feasible. Raivo Pusemp stopped calling himself an artist and became a local politician. Marietta Heuken became a full-time Shiatsu practitioner. These artists, and many others, realized that to remain in the art world without fundamentally reevaluating their own work, would transform their initial, meaningful engagement into repeatable symbolic gestures. But a large number of artists in the experimental field were less hard on themselves. They remained in the market, pruning their work into recognizable sub-genres. Many of them went into the academies, trying to convince generations of young artists that a practice of make-believe experimentation was necessary, even though it could never have the same relevance as their own, original, transgressive acts.

2) The work is being done, but we don't know much about it. Artists are in fact drawing the necessary conclusions from the exhaustion of transgressive strategies, but hardly anybody wants to see it or pay for it.

Art markets and audiences have undergone fundamental changes. Today's art world is a mass-industry combining aspects of tourism, entertainment and education. Art objects are losing their unique significance. Rather than serving as the objects of refined esthetic contemplation, they are becoming tokens of membership, souvenirs of the most exclusive type of tourism (to a place called authenticity). It is true that as such they are being collected, commissioned, and exhibited like never before, but their specific qualities are now less relevant than with what - and with whom - they are associated. Ironically, the products of make-believe experimentation serve this system just as well as conventional art objects, sometimes better. (A videotape of a man eating his shit is easier to put on the circuit of international group shows than a bronze sculpture of Apollo. A wall text can be designed at home, emailed, and then cut, and vinyl-lettered onto the museum walls in Seoul or Reykjavik with much less effort than it takes to ship and mount a painting, let alone paint it.) Today's pseudo-experimental art graciously accommodates the business while still claiming to "push the envelope."

To the experimental artist, the failure of avant-garde experimentation evidenced by the market success of its undead remains, could logically only lead to two conclusions: To either admit failure and abandon the project, or to try and continue a practice of meaningful experimentation, but this time within a new system where the theatre of transgression has become the norm. Such work which, paradoxically, needs to rebel against the rhetoric of rebellion, is necessarily complex, tactical, self-referential, specialized, and difficult to mediate. Nevertheless, it is being produced. Some artists take up discredited forms. Others lure institutional players into compromising situations and thus expose the contradictions of a cultural mainstream organized around tropes of marginality. Some run fly-by-night operations. They do what they feel like, but stay mobile and unpredictable, leaving their work nearly indigestible. Many are likely doing remarkable things which we don't have the faintest idea of, simply because the art world doesn't cover them. The sizeable minority of contemporary artists who are continuing the experimental project tends to be underrepresented in our spectacle-driven industry. And their relative absence from the airwaves isn't much noted, as the positions of criticality, experimentation, and dissent seem to be well staffed by artist, claiming to perform these

functions, albeit without any real interest in rocking the boat. The sophistication it takes to spot the difference between the real thing and the postcard version is rare among contemporary audiences. But a lack of attention needn't be bad. Some things develop better in the shade. And it's possible that there will be a moment in the near future when art world audiences as well as actors will get tired of high art not doing what it's best at. (If there's one thing high art is not, it's good entertainment).