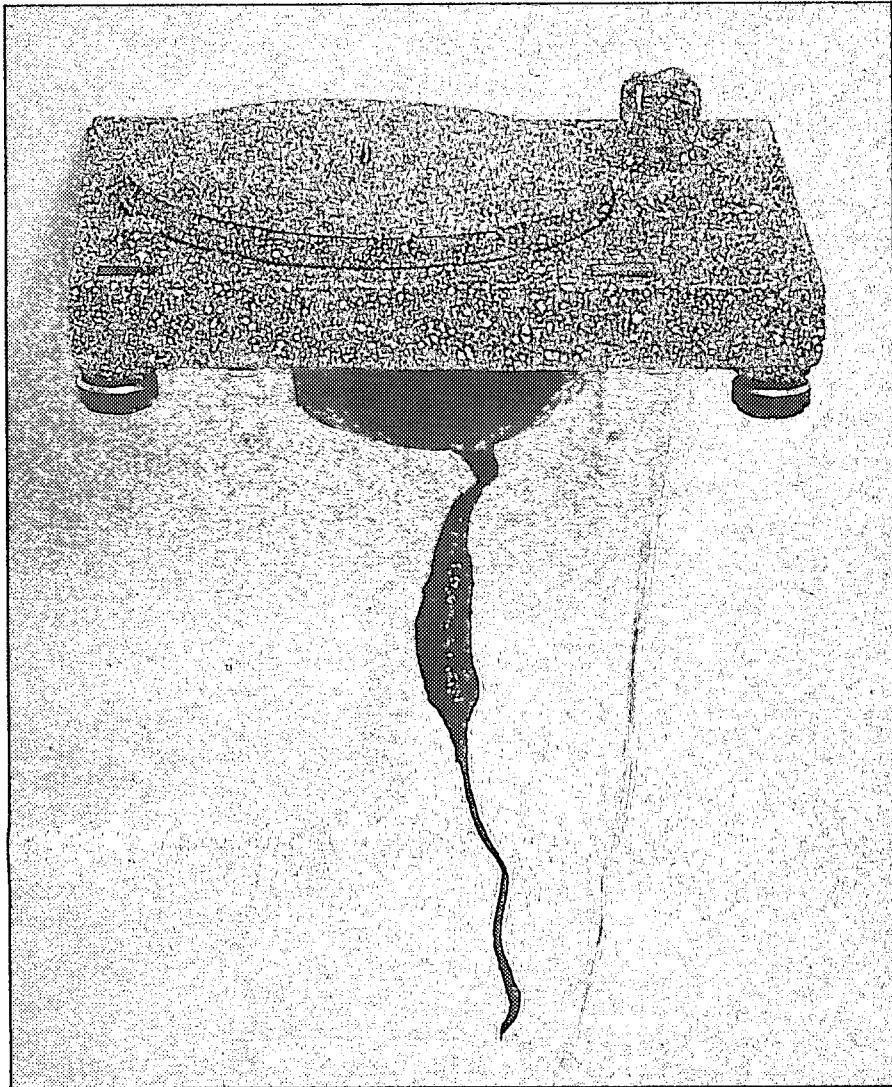


# Judgement Call



Jim Lambie Root in E-Mirror 1999

**Mark Wilsher** on the surreptitious return of aesthetics

THAT MANY ARTISTS TODAY ARE FINDING A REFUGE IN THE IDEA OF BEAUTY IS BEYOND DOUBT, however the binary opposition that JJ Charlesworth outlines (AM279) between an affirmative aesthetics in thrall to the marketplace and a largely state-funded sector of socially engaged practice is surely an oversimplification. It is correct to say that some have fallen back on a personal aesthetic, either as a response to the current lack of alternatives, or else through blissful ignorance of art history. However, most artists stick faithfully to the postmodern model of artwork-as-text, accepting the problematic relativism that goes with it that

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renders all value judgements highly suspect if not philosophically impossible. Artists are experts at dealing with uncertainty, and are quite capable of simultaneously holding two different opinions. They have developed strategies that allow a critical theoretical practice to coexist with an interest in beauty and the non-linguistic parameters of aesthetic judgement. Meanwhile decisions carry on being made, exhibitions are curated, works of art bought and sold, and to all intents and purposes it is business as usual. Rather than being gripped in a paralysis of indecision or affected by any apparent 'crisis of criticism', artists and the art market continue to make qualitative decisions every day.

Yet, as Raphael Rubinstein, quoted by Charlesworth in an earlier piece (AM269), has noted despairingly, 'no one articulates the grounds on which certain artists become famous and others are marginalised ... instead, everything seems to happen without explanation'.

The answer lies, I believe, in the widespread return of aesthetics as a key part of contemporary critical analysis, albeit in a surreptitious rather than overt form. The root cause of today's problem with beauty was the paradigm shift from an essentialist idea of the work to the formulation of the artwork-as-text, open to endless deconstructions, and the conviction held by artists and critics alike that no final judgements can be made. 'The work can be held in the hand,' wrote Roland Barthes in 1971, whereas 'the text is held in language, and only exists in the movement of a discourse'. Reluctantly forced to respond, institutional exhibitions have become progressively more propositional, the display of a monolithic collection replaced by ever-changing temporary selections. Those artists grouped under the tag of Relational Aesthetics are the clearest examples today. They have taken full advantage of the possibilities of undecidability and have made this kind of open-ended dialogue the explicit subject matter and content of their work. Consider also the rise of the curatorial pseudo-organisation, endlessly deferring responsibility through layer after layer of artists' platforms and projects. Everything must be provisional, suggestive, up for discussion, and definite judgements avoided on the basis that it is impossible to step 'outside the text' to gain an objective view.

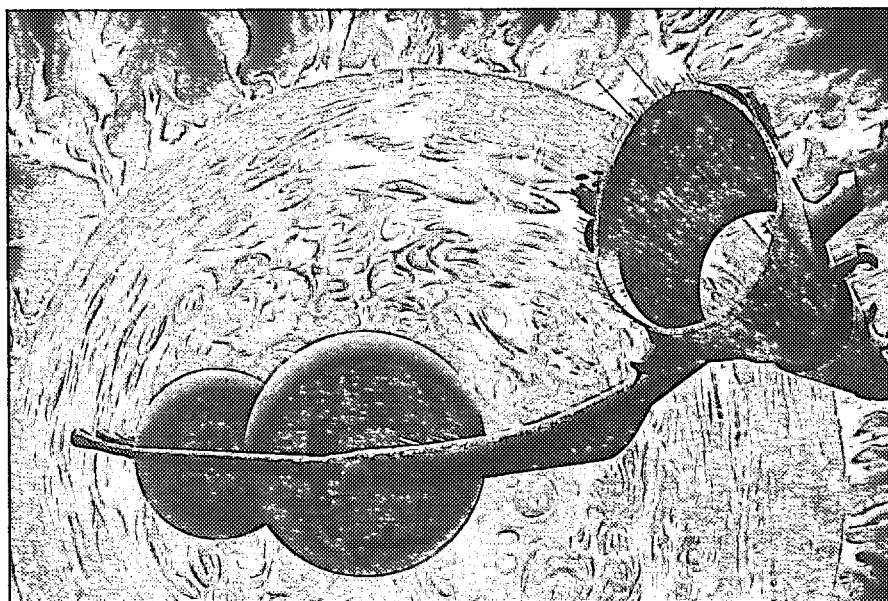
For almost every artist in recent decades, the open-ended conception of meaning as text has been galvanising and productive in a more general sense. The challenging of racist and sexist attitudes and opening up of a more international awareness are indicative of the enthusiasm with which the endlessly generative power of the textual model has been embraced. It has led to an overwhelming proliferation of formal modes and the sense that anything and everything is possible. Artists have never been more free to create their own contexts, and practices as diverse as those of Philippe Parreno and Tracey Emin illustrate how what was previously outside the work has been brought right into the centre. If the initial transformation was for the work to become a text, now that very proliferation of texts has become the work itself. Artists are able to take control of their contexts and create new nuances of meaning by massaging and modulating the ways in which their output is perceived. It is not considered unusual for a practice to consist of the dissemination of ideas and suggestions while the material component might only be one piece of a much larger jigsaw. In fact this is the predominant model of contemporary art today. Anything more tangible seems somehow clumsy.

But something interesting and problematic seems to have happened while critical attentions have been fixated on this wealth of language. It appears that the outdated and utterly non-textual idea of aesthetic wholeness has crept back in unannounced. The concept was perhaps most forcefully stated in modern times in the criticism of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, where it took its place alongside well-formedness and 'significant form' in the construction of an aesthetic system based on abstract formal principles. Later, in 1931, Herbert Read was able to write 'in a perfect work of art all the elements are interrelated; they cohere to form a unity which has a value greater than the mere sum of these elements'. The source of the artwork's aesthetic wholeness is found in the personality of the artist, which 'moulds them into a unity which is the unity of the painter's direct emotional apprehension of the subject before him'. The viewer too was supposed to be able to apprehend directly that sense of wholeness, a quality that was linked to everything from right proportion to correct morality, but which at the end of the day never seemed to amount to anything more specific than the prejudices of a local idiom. Think of all those generic modernist sculptures sitting outside head offices across the world.

Since the idea of a pure visual formalism has been thoroughly debunked, along with the unity of the subject, the contemporary test of well-formedness evidently can't be applied to the material objects of art in isolation. What seems to be happening instead is that the whole package of practice, text and context is being judged as an aesthetic totality. The physical artwork takes its place beside other factors such as the artist's biography, recent events and a specific package of theory, which are taken together as a loose whole and evaluated as such.

This is not quite the same as saying that the meaning of a piece of work is simply determined by the text that surrounds it, as often seems to happen in large public

Glenn Brown  
*The Loves of Shepherds*  
 (after 'Doublestar' by Tony  
 Roberts) 2000



institutions. It is just as effective for an artist to orchestrate a more abstract relationship between practice and language, or even one that seems downright contradictory. It is not the logic of this relationship that is being read and evaluated here but rather the aesthetic feel of it.

In today's professionalised art world the object now comes pre-packaged with a limited discourse, a ring-fenced set of ideas that acts as context, explanation and justification, and is meant to be enough in itself to understand the work and to form an opinion. Omnipresent background information is delivered in an array of forms, from the impressive gallery catalogue to carefully leaked rumour and casual post-private view discussion. Artists and their representatives do their best to push the interpretation of new work in a particular direction, and that creation of a context is taken as being as essential to an artist's practice as any tangible material qualities. Once these ideas are out there in the world it is very difficult to get rid of them again. The very fact of their presence near an artist's practice implies a causal connection, and in the absence of any obvious alternative, they settle into place. This model is played out with infinite variation and varying degrees of subtlety across all types of contemporary production. It suggests a convenient bastardisation of poststructural theory. A creative misunderstanding of textuality that always threatens to lapse into lazy pseudo explanation and self-justifying art speak. Originally 'the text' was meant to be understood as an infinite play of possibilities, a living network of argument, interpretation, belief and rhetoric that supports meaning like flotsam bobbing about on the waves. To try to limit the text, to draw boundaries and declare things complete, is a deeply reactionary position.

Take as an example the recent rise of Jim Lambie, a protean sculptor whose low-fi glitter has been exported successfully around the world by his gallery. The one fact that is repeated again and again about the artist is that he previously played with the successful alternative rock band Teenage Fanclub, and this piece of information is

allowed to flavour his sculptural oeuvre with glamour and authentically hip street cred. It is an essential part of his mythology that is meant to explain everything about his chosen subject matter, materials (which often include old LPs and turntables) and style (low rent glitz). And yet what does it actually mean? How is his past as a musician meant to guarantee the quality of his object-making practice?

There is a category mistake at the root of the way these assessments are made. The object and its associated package of text are read as a whole that obeys rules of formal coherence and internal logic. Aesthetic qualities are being mapped onto the textual field surrounding the artwork. This should be a philosophical mismatch, since the logic of any particular local discourse needn't necessarily correspond to the idea of well-formedness. It could be this process that makes it seem as if 'everything seems to happen without explanation', because the crucial value judgements are being made outside the arena of the practice, in the famous non-space outside the text. This is why there is such a dearth of critical debate about actual work, about what a practice might mean and how it might actually operate in the world. Decisions are being made on the basis of aesthetics; on the aesthetics of the text in the sense that an art object might fit particularly well or in a particularly interesting way with its explanation. It was interesting that during Nicolas Bourriaud's painful performance at the Whitechapel Art Gallery (see AM278) he claimed repeatedly in spite of appearances to be a predominantly formalist critic. Rather than falling back on formalism due to any uncertainty about the effectiveness of practice as 'politico-cultural intervention', as Charlesworth suggests, perhaps Bourriaud was unconsciously admitting to this tendency to assess the well-formedness of the bigger picture; to consider everything from the declared project to an artist's biography and current hipness quotient.

Critics and art theorists aside, it seems that most are happy to go along with this conceptual bracketing. The alternative is an uncomfortable tangle of competing

deconstructions, explanations and analyses that run off into infinite and unsatisfactory textuality (unsatisfactory that is, for anyone whose business it is to search for definite answers and final conclusions). But the truth is that explanations posing as justifications only serve to situate a work within one particular context. They do not satisfy any broader desire to locate that context within the world at large, since a boundary has been drawn between the art and the world by that very process of conceptual bracketing.

For example, take the common sequence of events on encountering a piece that relies upon knowledge of an artist's project, a painting by Glenn Brown for instance: the object makes no real sense in isolation and so additional information about the source of the image and the processes of the artist is gathered (usually from a piece of writing) and it is all meant to fit together to outline an interesting totality. But the audience is going to remain unsatisfied as long as it fails to make an aesthetic judgement about the way the painting and the narrative fit together. It is quite possible for someone to understand fully that they are looking at a carefully rendered copy of an original painting without conceding that the logic sustains a claim to quality. Isn't this exactly what happened during Brown's Turner Prize exhibition? A qualitative judgement comes from reading the aesthetic fit of the practice as a whole in relation to the physical piece in the gallery, from stepping outside the

text to weigh up the feel of that internal logic. This is a very specialised means of analysis that the wider public doesn't have access to, hence their frequent bafflement. By rights an aesthetic reading shouldn't sit comfortably with an infinitely recursive textuality, the two concepts are simply incompatible. But that doesn't stop it from being a useful tool in the day-to-day business of the art world that demands certain decisions be made. It is understandable that this kind of pragmatic settlement should have emerged, seeming to ring true even if it doesn't make any strictly logical sense. The beauty of this particular theoretical twist is that it doesn't overtly depend on anything outside the artwork. Qualitative evaluations can be made surreptitiously while the expanded model of a textual practice is allowed to meander on generating new work and new discourse ad infinitum. Artists are happy to go along with it because the productive flux of textuality is preserved, albeit merely as a toolbox.

There are irreconcilable differences between a truly contemporary practice and the market's need for value judgements, but this unspoken arrangement suits the needs of many parties, at least for the moment. ■

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