

## ART, FOOTBALL AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

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Richard Brown, Professor of Art History at Pacific Lutheran University, recently published an article synoptically titled "Regionalism, a Tenacious Myth" (*Signature*, 1986, 3(6) pp 5-7). Most surprising was that it appeared in *Signature*, a low budget Northwest arts newspaper out of Seattle, Washington. The appeal of *Signature* is its plebeian accessibility: descriptive reviews, pragmatic advice on competitions, personality profiles, and an unpretentious gallery guide. For example, it is the perfect place to find the latest word on the Snohomish County Craft Guild. In the differentiation between theory and practice, *Signature* represented the voice of practice, that is, until Professor Brown's theory piece let down the side. Brown, a theorist, accused the world of art criticism of gamesmanship and thereby shifted his allegiance to the side of the practicing artist. The world of the artist, however, also requires gamesmanship and since Brown insists on carrying the ball it behooves us plebs to politely point out that he is running the wrong way.

Football metaphors have become very familiar to us since Ronald Reagan took over as head coach. They have been employed with gusto to such complex matters as foreign policy, national economy, and the Iran-Contra affair. If the Gipper teaches us one thing it is the political inadvisability of taking serious matters seriously. In the spirit of gamesmanship then we shamelessly present an uninhibited flood of metaphors which attempts nothing less than to reshuffle the deck, close the can of worms, and paint the horse a different color, all in the interest of saying something meaningful about the political nature of art criticism.

Metaphors are never tidy so we will limit the discussion of decks, worms, and horses and proceed to our analysis of art. Our point of departure, of course, is the rather serious essay by Richard Brown.

The accusation Brown leveled at the conventions of art criticism seems to be prompted by a heartfelt frustration with the artificial turf, that is, a politically expedient manufacture of a Northwest identity achieved by lumping Mark

Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson as a Northwest school:

The original attempt to define a Northwest regional style or tradition apparently developed from a sense that this area, being out of the way of mainstream art, needed an identity to give it parity with other parts of the country. Hence, promoters of the Northwest jumped on the works of a few regional artists whose work was superficially related, and tried to make a coherent package of it. The result was the concoction mythos that tries to hold such disparate artists as Newman, Rothko, and Pollock together in that construct known as the New York School, the development of a body of criticism and history that relies on imprecise and arcane terminology to explain this "school," and a continuing attempt to make aesthetic and ideational connections among the artists involved. It provides for great intellectual and criti-

cal gamesmanship. (Brown, p.5)

Here Brown shows promise. The paragraph identifies the game as one involving language. Notions of promoters, packaging and lack of parity imply a thick and active political process. But this is as far as Brown takes it. Not only does he fail to call for an investigation, or at least a meeting of the rules committee, he actually prods us to forget the whole thing. As Brown sees it, a viable alternative to this intellectual and critical gamesmanship is that artists be considered on the basis of their "individual merit." He quotes Greg Kucera in support of a romantic formulation of individualism: "The best artists will speak from their souls . . . and they will be heard regardless of the prevailing style." (Brown, p.7)

This is where Brown runs over his own blockers and fumbles the ball to the opposition. If regionalism is a "tenacious myth," notions of autonomous artistic genius are even more tenacious. In the face of Brown's baffling political optimism (the assumption of equity in the art world) it would serve us well to call "time out" and talk things over.

Brown's parting words as he left the playing field were, "forget the critics. Look at the works" (p.7). Granted, such advice has great sentimental appeal. However, it is rooted in some troubling notions of how the game is played. Before our team loses its concentration we should peruse the rule book:

Under Regionalism, here on page seven, it says, for instance, that Snohomish County has an evocative power of .003, whereas Seattle rates .05; Portland, Oregon, .04 and Soho, New York, 9.6. (Forgetting a critic is one thing, getting someone to look at one's work is another matter altogether.)

Here on page four of our rule

book we find Goals of the Artist. It says, first: "To Survive" (which we interpret as having a certain economic imperative) and second, "To Be Taken Seriously" (an allusive reference perhaps to art criticism which, not incidentally, increases one's chances of survival).

Under Conduct of Officials we are told that critics are to take Leo Castelli seriously, flirt with post-structuralism, rethink art history and write in prose style wholly inaccessible to the general public. Terms such as "simulacrum," "iterability," and "deconstruction" are to be used whenever possible, but only as adjectives to convey a great sense of depth without the burden of much content.

Under Conduct of Artists we learn that artists are to act aloof, defiant, progressive, innovative, enchanted, and prophetic. With one hand they are to reflect their time, while with the other they are to shape a new consciousness by Star Trekking the cognitive edge of contemporary thought ("to boldly go..."). Between these two creative hands the body is to squirm with discontent. This squirming takes on different levels of difficulty as artists assume or inherit various positions of economic privilege. Squirming on food stamps, is a natural act: squirming on \$100,000 a year is a harder trick to turn.

Robert Arneson is an example of an artist who has skillfully mastered the rules, hazards and contradictions of the game. This past year the exhibition "Robert Arneson: A Retrospective" has shown at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., The Portland Art Museum of The Oregon Art Institute, and The Oakland Museum. Articles on Arneson and his work have appeared in numerous publications including Art in America (Kuspit, May 1985), American Craft (Kuspit, Oct/Nov 1986), Ceramic Monthly (Singh, March 1987),

and The Los Angeles Times (Wilson, January 1987). His work is represented in collections the world over, and he has enjoyed the support of The National Endowment for the Arts.

Perhaps the clearest way to give the reader a sense of the game is simply to describe "Naive viewers" (in this case a group of high school students) confronted with the works of Arneson, while two enthusiastic cheer leaders (a docent at the Portland Art Museum and an animated high school art teacher) attempted to convey the artistic import of the works under consideration. The students first viewed Assassination of a Famous Nut Artist. This work, a ceramic bust of Arneson, depicts a gun, balanced over the head, blasting a large hole in the skull. Orange brains spume over the forehead while green matter hangs from the nostrils. An arrow and knife protrude from the neck. As the students gaze at this colorful work they listen to the cheerleaders quote Neal Benezra, Associate Curator of Twentieth Century Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago, praising Arneson as "the most powerful figurative sculptor of the post World War Two period."

The students glance around the room. While they muse over a large drawing of Arneson with the index finger of each hand thrust up his nostrils their teacher trumpets the virtues of "daring to be different." As they view the six or seven pieces portraying excrement, for example, John with Art, a colorfully glazed toilet filled with ceramic feces on loan from the Seattle Art Museum, or Portrait of the Artist as a Clever Old Dog which consists of Arneson's head on a dog's body, a supper dish, and four colorful mounds of feces, they listened to the docent explain how the insensitive public, the uncultured public, doesn't understand Arneson's swim against the

tide of convention.

The preceding paragraph illustrates a curious confrontation; that point where the bawds of theory attempt to explicate works of art to an uninitiated public. In this case (which is a report of an actual experience) we see several taken-for-granted ideas employed in an effort to make the art work seem both legitimate and important. Ideas which are most often employed are those which provide criteria for defining "good" art. Critics may demand innovation (new, progressive, experimental forms), excitement (art which is bold, daring, shocking, risky), and prophecy (art which signals us from the "cutting edge" of modern thought). Although we can all think of notable exceptions, art which exemplifies a respect for tradition or a reverence for craft is generally not taken seriously. In the example of the docent, the art teacher and the high school students, the idea also came into play that art is produced by people of "genius," or at least special vision, and the general public lacks the intellectual, emotional or perhaps, culture sophistication to understand and appreciate its expression.

In the hands of a skilled wordsmith we witness remarkable transformations in the meaning and significance of form. Donald Kuspit for instance, writing for American Craft (Oct/Nov 1986), transforms Arneson's sense of self, which in the eyes of our high school tour group appears as a bodacious narcissism, into a tormented misunderstood artistic genius comparable to Leonardo da Vinci! The visual kicking tee from which Kuspit launches this piece of verbal wizardry is a whimsical ceramic plate depicting Arneson's own portly nude body as Leonardo's ideal man. In a 1985 article published in Art in America, Kuspit transforms Arneson's rather blunt enumeration



of the horrors of nuclear war into a "powerful" and "important...surrealistic obliteration of the boundary between the suffering subject and the victimizing world" (p.39).

At this point it may seem that Richard Brown's approach is the most sensible: that is, we should forget the critics and look at the work. But this is impossible. First of all the language concepts employed in the legitimization of art -- concepts such as genius, creativity, individualism, and progress are pervasively taken for granted not only by high school students but by artists and art critics as well. They are so entrenched in American discourse that to call them into question is to blaspheme not only the foundations of art criticism, but The American Way as well: The baby with the bath water, the Constitution with the cornflakes, art as well as football. These language concepts, which become questionable to us only through exposure to alternative ordering systems, as say, through dedicated cross-cultural study or serious historical analysis, support not only a hierarchy of art experts, but an entire educational enterprise as well. We cannot, as the saying goes, step out of one language without stepping into another.

The realization that there is tension, contradiction, and inequity in the language of the art world is not enough to inspire meaningful change. Even a writer as thoughtful and well meaning as Elliot Eisner, a Stanford Professor and favorite son of art education, lends enthusiastic support to a cultural cliché. Speaking at the 1986 American Craft Council's National Conference, Eisner said that the first obligation of a craftsman is "to get out of comfortable ruts...to create work the public does not like." (Malarcher, 1986). Eisner doesn't elaborate on the implications of this statement for public art

education, nor does he demonstrate any understanding of the preposterous interface created when high school students confront a nose-picking Arneson while under the education charge of a system he himself champions.

Perhaps it is time that artists and art educators accept that the language game is inescapable. For better or worse, artists are always located within meaning systems that involve language practices. These provide categorical distinctions, explanations, and justifications of art as well as cultural and historical association. These inescapably locate our identity as artists. Short of requiring Ph.D.'s in cultural anthropology, however, there may be a few subtle ways to rethink our circumstances. Rather than thinking of artistic genius as a natural phenomena it may be more helpful to note that the identity of objects as art flows from special meaning systems which have rules, evaluative notions, and most importantly, perhaps, privileged speakers.

The power of privileged speakers to shape content in the arts operates at the theoretical level as art criticism assumes the posture of evaluative criteria and at the economic level as funds are allocated from such agencies as the National Endowment for the Arts. The process provides forums for particular kinds of art while excluding others. What takes to the playing field is art enumerates the horrors of modern life. It includes art that seeks to re-enchant the world with bundled sticks and feathers, and art that ventures beyond the boundaries of intelligibility. What gets excluded in critical discourse is art which mindfully seeks to affirm something in life worth embracing.

Artists of the Northwest are not impervious to the seductive pull of intellectual fashion. There are

obvious economic incentives for paying attention simply because our public officials get nervous when they look at the rule book. To ensure that they don't inadvertently spend public funds on art the public might like they call in experts from the outside. It makes pragmatic sense for artists to stay in shape, to study the latest plays, and to leap from the bench, hands waving, in hope the visiting coach will send them into the game: "You! Number

Six from Myrtle Point! Yes, you, with the bundled sticks and electric features! Go in for Arneson!"

Some of us, however, may ponder deconstruction but still manage letters to our parents. We are the ones who shall remain devoted readers of Signature and continue to take the Snohomish County Craft Guild seriously in spite of its inability to make anyone in SoHo throw the cigar out of her mouth.

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