

Assuming Positions

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Jean Baudrillard's smug grin greeted me as I walked into 'Assuming Positions', the ICA's summer show that offered a speculative glance at the 'renewed romance between art and mainstream media'. The position assumed by the exhibition's curators was designed to be provocative and consisted of selecting work for its delight 'in the immediacy, accessibility and impact of the "pop" image'. The French sociologist's bulky figure, sheltering in the ICA to avoid the storm outside, vibrated with stifled, uncontrollable mirth and I remembered the heady conferences and exhibitions that announced the arrival of Post-Modernism, staged regularly at the ICA throughout the previous decade. I watched the Blackcurrent Tango *St George* ad, one of the shows star exhibits with its impossible 90 second tracking shot, and contemplated the question posed by the show's curator Gregor Muir, 'just what defines art as being "different"...' Baudrillard's eyes twinkled with Gaelic charm and I remembered his essay 'Beyond the vanishing point of art', an image that once fascinated me simply because it was an event I was unable to visualise. The spectre of Baudrillard's now forgotten thesis, that artists following Warhol's acceptance of 'absolute merchandise' should work to affect art's disappearance, was being raised by 'Assuming Positions', though the writer was never referenced by name. Baudrillard's admiration of Warhol is built on a crude misinterpretation but the question — is the uneasy relationship between art and mainstream culture disappearing — posed by the exhibition echoes Baudrillard's lines of thought. Through my naive, 'received idea' of Post-Modernism I thought that any artwork moving beyond a 'vanishing point' would have some strange, electronically-produced aura. Artworks that were 'pure signs', I thought, would be like the complex neon signs at the Kentucky Fried Chicken shop that made my eyes smart. Now I understand that art's disappearance, that is the collapse of the distance between art and mainstream culture and consumerism, could be a far less spectacular affair. So these were the issues I debated as I wandered around 'Assuming Positions' to kill time while I waited for the rain to stop.

'Assuming Positions' was a polite exhibition despite claiming its agenda was influenced by Dada. References to Haim Steinbach could be found in Tobias Rehberger's vases which were exhibited on plinths and completed with flowers. Rehberger suggests that the vases, made from a hollowed tree-trunk, ceramics and glass, embody the personalities of colleagues in the art world. They resemble Steinbach's displays, though Rehberger's sentimentalism is far removed from Steinbach's Duchampian analysis. In Rehberger's displays there seems to be little irony of the kind found in the work of Steinbach, Jeff Koons and the Neo-Geo artists such as Peter Halley. Supporters of these artists firmly believed in the 'Vanishing Point'. Neo-Geo, through its repeated mantra that nothing, not even abstraction, could escape capitalism's system of commodity / sign exchange, was an attempt to resist the 'Vanishing Point'. This brave front could not be maintained forever and, retrospectively, Neo-Geo art practices appear as a way of keeping the corpse of a Modernism warm, with its distinction between high and low culture intact. Was 'Assuming Positions' proof that this distinction was invalid or not worth making?

On the top floor of the ICA, Sarah Lucas' *The Great Flood*, a toilet in full working order but not much used, was placed in a central space in a room of its own. The toilet challenged visitors to publicly bare their toilet habits and made the 'fun slot' on several news programmes. News at Ten forgot to report that the piece parodied Francis Bacon's angst-ridden representations

of men on lavatories and Duchamp's celebrated, non-functioning urinal. Opposite Lucas' toilet, in the adjacent room, a cinematic projection of Jarvis Cocker performing a spoken version of *Babies*, directed by Pedro Romhany, flickered across the gallery wall. Comfy jute-covered poufs by Tobias Rehberger were provided in the same room. Not only could visitors sit down to watch Jarvis Cocker's antics, they could ponder whether their arses were supported by works of art or furniture at the same time. The question posed by the exhibition, however, was not, 'can you tell the difference between art and pop music, design and the Blackcurrent Tango ad?' Specialist disciplines are not undergoing a crisis; Lucas is unmistakably the artist and Cocker the pop star. 'Assuming Positions' instead asked, albeit through crude juxtapositions, whether the status of art as the estranged other of the twentieth century culture has disappeared, at least for some contemporary practitioners who show no signs of distress at being seen as just another branch of the culture industry. This would be hard to argue as Sarah Lucas' position but perhaps artists don't always have a choice in their relationship with the mainstream media which has learned not only to love art, but also value its current photogenic image. Further still, perhaps the admiration is mutual: maybe there is a love affair going on and it is not just a case of a mainstream media screwing contemporary art for quick gratification. As one-dimensional and as banal as 'Assuming Positions' often was, it is one of the few recent exhibitions to address this question. The show posed one further question too: 'Is this "romance" between art and mainstream culture a bad thing?' In current circumstances, the positioning of art in relation to 'popular culture' and a spectacular mass media remains one of the most important questions facing any practitioner. Art has of course not disappeared and many artists would not recognise the agenda of 'Assuming Positions' to be worthy of comment. However, a widespread questioning of the distance demanded by critical Modernism and Post-Modernism in relation to mass culture has occurred. In that sense 'Assuming Positions' was a missed opportunity. The dilemmas faced and new departures undertaken by artists who have collapsed or narrowed this 'distance' was not acknowledged in the show.

It was important that 'Assuming Positions' was international in its selection and by drawing on artists from Western Europe and America, rather than just from London, the exhibition implied that the 'romance' between art and mainstream media was a phenomenon common throughout the Western art world. Whether this is the case is hard to ascertain but certainly in Britain, style and fashion magazines and quality newspapers have been desperate for a bit of art to feature in their pages. In return, the exhibition's curator included a collaboration between fashion photographer Phil Poynter, whose work often appears in *Dazed and Confused*, and Katy England. The resulting collaboration, a series of photographs of a model taking her clothes off and then lighting her farts with a match in a darkened room, aspires to be art and begs the question why do some fashion designers / photographers desire to be recognised as artists? The motives behind magazines like *Dazed and Confused* featuring art might be

less romantic: contemporary art can be utilised as a legitimising burst of serious or high culture.

Rather than choose between fidelity to the traditions of a critical Avant-Garde of the past or the embracing of mainstream and everyday culture, it might be possible to argue that some position occupying the tensions of this relationship is possible. This was the position occupied by the most engaging work in the show by Hillary Lloyd who exhibited a tiny video monitor that played a documentary / portrait of a woman having her hair cut entitled *Nuala and Rodney*. Another documentary / portrait, *Dominic*, displayed on two monitors, presented the journey of a DJ to and from the club Heaven. The artist's concerns are similar to that of ID magazine but there is also an interest in chance. Lloyd appears to be a contemporary flâneur, finding her subjects through chance encounters in clubs and night-time London. Like some others of her generation, Lloyd occupies a position which does not place itself above everyday and popular culture (both her own and other people's) but, at the same time, is not entirely affirmative of that culture either. There is no need to write a manifesto on this position as this is what many artists have done and are doing anyway.

If for the present moment we accept some kind of shift has occurred in the discourse about art's relationship to mainstream media and consequently the critical distance demanded by Conceptual and Post-Conceptual Art in the 70s and 80s appears, due to a number of circumstances, less and less feasible, perhaps one aspect of Conceptualism can be drawn upon. Conceptual Art can claim a significant intervention in the relationship between an audience and an artwork. By challenging a 'Modernist Protocol' conceptual artists created new conditions of audienceship by turning modernism's passive viewers into readers and interpreters of an artwork's contingencies. What was lacking in the curation of 'Assuming Positions' was a challenge to Post-Modern protocol and a consideration of new conditions of audienceship for our contemporary situation.



HILARY
LLOYD
*Marie and
Alex*
1994



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LLOYD
*Felix and
Frederick*
1995



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