

Is art dead?

There is no other discipline that financially rewards a lack of excellence

Judy Singer, National Post



In an article announcing the National Gallery of Canada's 2010-11 season (Not into Koons? Try Canadiana, Feb. 18), Vanessa Farquharson contrasts the upcoming "slightly predictable" shows of classic artists with the summer blockbuster Pop Life, a collaboration with the Tate Modern in London. This exhibit will showcase works from the 1960s onwards: Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, etc. I can't imagine anything more predictable than the flock of curators who continue to showcase this work, which is overhyped and, frankly, of very low quality.

With Barbara Kay's Feb. 3 column, "The Artist Has No Clothes," which was a thoughtful response to scathing reviews of Damien Hirst's most recent exhibit, I continually wonder why the scandalous lack of standards continues to persist and thrive in the art world.

Assistant curator at the National Gallery Jonathan Shaughnessy states that this exhibit looks back to the 1960s, to Andy Warhol and how Warhol influenced today's artists. I contend that they haven't gone far enough back into art history, where

one can quickly determine that this art is not so original, that the so called "raising of the most vexing and controversial questions of our time" has become a boring exercise in self aggrandizement and puffed-up egos.

Although many scholarly works have been written over the millennia on the topic of what art is, it was not until the early 1900s that the Dada movement, led by Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, challenged traditional definitions with "anti-art" art. The Dada artists rejected all premises of modern painting. As they stood on the eve of the First World War, one can, in sympathy, understand their feelings about the absurdity of being concerned with aesthetics when the world was in such a state of chaos.

It was within this milieu that Duchamp not only wanted to "put painting at the service of the mind" but, also, wanted to create something that was devoid of aesthetic interest. Hence, one of the things he did was to choose "readymade" objects, sign them and declare them "art". An example of one of these "Readymades" is called Why Not Sneeze. It is a bird cage filled with sugar lumps into which a thermometer has been thrust. The value of this work lies in throwing into doubt previous definitions of art. Interestingly, Duchamp himself had to have a clear definition of what art is in order achieve his goal. This dissociation of the object from its title became a habitual way Duchamp disturbed viewers in their perception of his work; and this very tactic is one of Hirst's favourite borrowed practices.

The Dada artists were also the first to create what we call installations or happenings; combinations of art, poetry, theatre, etc., pushing the limits of the absurd to shake up ideas of what art could do. It was in the 1960s that these Dadaist techniques were resurrected by The Feminist Art Movement in pursuit of their feminist platform. They felt that as the great art of the past (mostly painting) was male dominated, then, logically (or not), painting was a male medium. They therefore generally avoided painting as their media and instead focused on happenings and events.

Personally, I have found the medium of paint to be genderless. Nevertheless, men continue to dominate the art world and in my opinion, feminine sensibility and imagery is still struggling to find its place in our accustomed way of looking at all art; an art made primarily by men.

Simultaneous with feminist art, Andy Warhol exhibited his first Campbell's Soup Can in 1968 and this movement, called Pop Art, was another challenge thrown at the notion of what art is. Pop Art was a declaration of art as social commentary, a stab against art esteemed for its aesthetic value. The Abstract Expressionist movement that triumphed in New York, with its stunning, sublime, abstract paintings, the most beautiful and challenging paintings since Cubism, was its target.

Concurrently, the historic separation of intellectual pursuits vs. technical pursuits (e. g., art history vs. drawing, painting, sculpture, etc.) changed when university fine arts departments created visual arts studio degrees in the late 1960s. Art soon grew into a philosophical discipline and by the 1990s, talent and skill was declared irrelevant, and "conceptual art" became mainstream. "Painting is dead" was the new maxim.

Exhibitions were mounted where the visual component of the artwork had to be supported by an accompanying written explanation in order to grasp what the artist was getting at. The visual component merely illustrated the concept, usually one of a social or political nature and of course, the human condition.

Art was expected to "mean" all kinds of things. But "art" was not expected to be aesthetic, nor was it expected to have any structure or rules.

You might be surprised by the term "visual language" with its implications of rules of grammar and vocabulary. But, in order to perceive or create a work of art with aesthetic value, the knowledge of visual language is an absolute requirement. The visual language of art can be seen in the tensions created through the manipulation of spatial and compositional elements, using colour, line, texture, etc. Sculpture, of course, has the added considerations of three dimensions. To elucidate the way visual language works, imagine the way a gifted writer uses words to craft a poem or the way a composer arranges the notes in a quest to create an enduring piece of music. The artist must know the language, laden with promise of possibility and nuance. And to know the visual language means studying the art of the past.

The prevailing art philosophers of the 1990s, by deconstructing art, felt that the idea of quality was a non-issue. Without this burden, art could be anything. Damien Hirst's work is exemplary of this philosophy, quote "Anyone can do it [be an artist] if you just believe." I would put forward the theory that Hirst and his colleagues have extended the Duchampian and subsequent Warholian agenda for way too long. I know of no other discipline where standards of excellence are non-existent, and

astonishingly, at the same time, this lack of standards is financially rewarded.

Unlike the deconstructionists might have us believe, being concerned with standards of excellence in the creation of art is not to be unconcerned with the human condition -- rather the opposite-- this concern leads to an aesthetic experience that can lift the human spirit. To quote Julius Meier-Graefe (1867-1935), "All great works of art are trophies of victorious struggle."

It takes years of work and great effort to understand and be fluent in a medium and this holds true for both the creator and the observer. By making the effort to learn the visual language, by not just looking at the narrative of the art work, as if it were a chapter of a book, but rather looking beyond, to all the visual relationships of the work, only then will authentic "seeing" happen. This is where the true content of the work lies: in the visual elements, and the resolution of tensions created when those elements interact with each other.

As I stated in a letter to the Post's editor, "The whole business: collectors, dealers, museums, universities, art magazines have nothing to do with what it takes to make a great work of art. Curators are not the trailblazers that they portray themselves to be, but rather, they are sheep, merely following trends. I challenge them to step out of the mainstream and show art that is great. To do this, they would have to know what it really is."