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Vampires and Peacocks' Tails

'Vampires and Peacocks' Tails', in Beaconsfield/ AMPCOM, *Between the Devil and the Deep (Blue) Sea*, London/ Helsinki 1997, n.p. Exhibition catalogue with the work of Beaconsfield, Stuart Brisley, Robert Ellis, Tracey Emin, Bruce Gilchrist, Hayley Newman and Mark Wallinger.

Plumage, petals, performance, bristling fur, bared teeth, wit. We may appreciate, or fear, or both, all of these things, and be dazzled by their ever branching and beautiful ramifications. We, the viewers of art, may think of the art world as a country garden, cultivated but full of natural wonders, the gentle scene of mortal struggles, the stage on which living things act out their strategies of display, camouflage, mimicry, feigning and intimidation.

In that garden, why is it these days that artists are so frequently present at the birth of the work? They hover over it, or live parasitically within it, or preside over its emergence with some ritual movement of their bodies. Sometimes their presence seems necessary to its very existence. Each artist is parent and midwife at once, and when the head appears, what a surprise to see that it bears the artist's features.

This indulgent concern is in part a result of the justifiable suspicion of objects severed from their makers, saleable, collectable, and easily turned to dubious ideological work. Far better to keep these children in hand, to stamp them, not with the minor authenticity of signature or certificate of provenance, but with the artist's presence as a whole, run through and through, as genes instruct the growth and decay of each of a body's cells.

Such an art, of behaviour and object-making together, draws to itself a feeling that it must be authentic because of its intimate link with the artist's body. Some wasps make burrows for their eggs only because that is what they are programmed to do, so as to be

wasps, and nothing short of death will prevent them. Similarly with this art, it seems, artists do what they have to do, and what they have to do is inseparable from what they are.

Surely, though, long ago everyone stopped believing that artist and work could be so simply identified. The artist, along with the author (and humanity, even), were supposed to have lost the struggle for existence, perishing at some moment in the last geological period (or was it in the early reaches of this one?—it is too soon perhaps to tell). No one is sure that they or anybody else is a coherent unity any longer, identities are unstable, and irony has become a pervasive, corrosive force, defeating straightforwardness everywhere and then turning inwards, preying even on its own critical character.

Yet curiously, this has barely affected that authentic personal presence. Performance has often relied upon the ineluctable charge of a body before an audience. Armed with fire, nudity or chain-saws, the artist is assured of a response that goes beyond theory, at least for those in the first few rows. Further, any quality of instability or irony, conscious or not, is co-opted into the monad of the artist's personality, instantly branded as an essential part of both the work and the person. It doesn't matter if this confessional work is true life or fiction, honest or ironic, narrative or symbol, for it seems to serve a purpose beyond its own content, a purpose which is centred upon the display of the artist's image, and its relation to all the other images in the art-world garden.

There are many strange texts, dubious both logically and ideologically (tainted, for instance, with fascism) which have acquired an inflated status in recent art theory—they are the far-flung territories over which herds of theorists scatter as the forest fire of paradigms continues. Among the more foolish was an essay about animal mimicry by Roger Caillois which tried to read a luxurious form of expenditure, of art, into what appeared to be the evolutionary adaptation of organisms to mimic their surroundings.¹ Perhaps it is more productive to take the opposite approach: to see behind the complex and luxurious display of artists' behaviour the workings of an evolutionary system.

¹ Roger Caillois, 'Mimetisme et psychasthénie légendaire', *Minotaure*, no. 7, 1935, pp. 4-10; translated as 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthesia', *October*, no. 31, Winter 1984, pp. 17-32.

In the cultivated garden, the face of nature seems bright with gladness. And like the garden, the art world, bright in appearance, is a competitive system, punishing and rewarding its inhabitants. Like any market, with impersonal mechanisms it encourages diversity, and produces a knowledge about what is most efficient at any one time. The knowledge of the system far exceeds that of any of its individual participants, no matter how well informed. So within the art world, beasts of great fitness to their environment evolve, thoroughbred racehorses, specialists in relieving institutions and individuals of their wealth in exchange for kudos. Scaling the heights of improbability in the search for novel efficiency, ever more obscure and elaborate methods are discovered. While the diversity of its forms is great, the rewards the system offers sit on a single scale; so in this sense (like the content of authentic personal expression) individual motivation is redundant.

As with the evolution of species, great changes in the art world come in discrete periods, comparatively sharp breaks which we characterise with inadequate but necessary names like 'minimalism'. In Finland, particularly, artists are well aware of how some cosmic catastrophe (recession, for example) can explode over the system with all the force of a comet smashing into the Earth, wiping out whole classes of obsolete organisms. In the aftermath, different genera may breed, producing weird hybrids, such as the splicing of conceptualism and pop.

Of the many objections that can be raised against applying evolutionary theory to culture, the most pressing is this: that culture is more Lamarckian than Darwinian since conscious knowledge, as well as raw instruction, is transferred from generation to generation, allowing for much faster and more directed development than the merely random swapping of genes.² Yet this view assumes that knowledge actually is transmitted over generations, and, if it is, that the sum of that wisdom is directed towards some goal. But in a culture in which forgetting has become so pervasive, in which information exponentially increases as generations pass, and the chance of grasping it as a whole decreases, in which the grand directed project of modernism appears exhausted, and in which the speed of fashion makes forgetting advantageous, the system may be more Darwinian than it at first appears.

² For this and other objections, see Stephen Jay Gould, 'Evolution: The Pleasures of Pluralism', *New York Review of Books*, 26 June 1997, pp. 47-52.



Perhaps, after all, the death of the artist has had an effect. There must be viewers who expect from contemporary art the same intensity and meaning promised by artists of old. The two do bear superficial similarities. For Caillois, a stick insect imitating a twig did so as a static form of expression that opposed life. Now there are artists who mimic the animated expression of past art, though their rigid postures hold the signs, for those who know how to read them, that even they know that this is a ploy. Vampires, they feed from the corpses of the old authenticity and, its blood in their veins, they become like those eighteenth-century anatomical models of human torsos and limbs in which real veins and capillaries are filled with wax—ungraspably intricate in their branching, terrible in their beauty, and lifeless in their complexity. The infection spreads backwards and outwards until, mobile and lively though it may appear, the garden becomes a parade of hollow forms, its inhabitants' bodies being mere vehicles through which deeper instructions execute and reproduce themselves.

Darwin, thinking of the 'endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful' that were produced by his long tale of copulation and death, found 'grandeur' in his view of life.³ As with nature, so with human culture, there is extensive spillage in any public display.

³ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, [1859] Oxford 1996, p. 396.

Advertisements for, say, luxury cars are seen by far more people than those able to buy such products—even children soak up their slogans. Likewise, humans admire petals and plumage though these displays are never meant for them. Despite the appearance of meaning, there is a strong sense in which the production and reproduction of the cultural artefacts which the art world displays feeds a system which far exceeds its viewers. Despite the presence of the artist's body, the show is not really there for us.

Needing God, if not art, Darwin balked at the moral implication of his system, trying to mitigate its savagery by claiming that it was dedicated finally to a higher good: 'When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.'⁴ But God turned out to be superfluous to evolution, and of its higher purpose, we may now be a little less certain.

⁴ Ibid., p. 66.