

~~People For Art Related To Theory~~

Wanda: I've known sheep that could outwit you, but you think you're an intellectual don't you, ape?
Otto: Apes don't read philosophy.
Wanda: Yes, they do Otto, they just don't understand it.

– *A Fish Called Wanda*

So, the Dalai Lama came and spoke at my college once. During the question and answer period, people were asking questions like “How can we really achieve happiness in a world full of evil?”, “How does one reconcile the central messages of Buddhism with the knowledge that the Dalai Lama represents a theocracy that ruled over Tibet without the democratic representation of the people for hundreds of years?” You know, the normal questions one would ask the Dalai Lama, when one person stands up and asks His Holiness “How do you feel Buddhism relates to Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence?” To which the Dalai Lama replied, “I am not familiar enough to speak of it.” The woman who asked the question sat down with a look on her face that was a cross between the horror of thinking “God, how ignorant is that?” and the joy of thinking “I know more than the Dali Lama about philosophy.”

I seem to know a lot of experts on Derrida. And Foucault. And Homi Bhabha. Etc. I know they are experts because they tell me they are experts. None of the experts on philosophy that I know actually claims to be a philosopher or critical theorist themselves. They just claim to be experts on what other people write. I am not an expert on anything, especially not philosophers. It seems that every expert on philosophy that I know implies that my lack of expert knowledge of semiotics, deconstruction, etc. is the main reason why my artwork is not successful. I keep trying to explain to them that for me, the relationship between art and theory is very different from what people who are experts on theory seem to think it is.

It seems to me that most experts on theory believe that artists make art from theory rather than the other way around. I've tried explaining to other people that my relationship to art theory is the same as the relationship that the players in a baseball game have with the commentators at a baseball game. During a game, fans and commentators will routinely recite statistics and analyze the game from their perspective, but the players on the field don't care about the fans' analysis. David Ortiz doesn't care if a fan knows that he's 0-2 against Mike Myers; he's focused on hitting the next pitch as far as he can. Now, if you tell a die-hard fan that their knowledge of the game does not effect the game at all, they'll tell you that you are wrong, because the knowledge effects how they perceive the game. But in the end, a viewer's knowledge of the theory of how the game is played doesn't actually effect if Ortiz will hit the ball.

The same relationship is true for my art making and it seems to me that many of the artists I know make work the same way. I just make stuff and show it to people. After I've made it, if it happens to fit in with a theory that someone else is interested in, then they are welcome to use my work as an example. I would never read someone else's theory and then try to illustrate the theory through my artwork. This is not to say that I'm not aware of art theory, I just don't care to become a self-proclaimed expert at it and I also don't want illustrate other people's theories.

"Baseball isn't statistics. Baseball is DiMaggio rounding second."

-Jimmy Cannon

"The work is what it is ... I'm not going to go around espousing theoretical bullshit about feminist stuff."

-Cindy Sherman

Contemporary art theorists seem to think that artists are a form of theorist just like they are, only artists use visual language to develop theory while they use written language. Now the real issue is that over the past few decades there has been a rise in theorists who produce visual images as part of their discourse, but this is a new type of art making that I like to call “People For Art Related To Theory” or P-FART. There now seems to be an assumption that **all** artists participate in the P-FART form of art making that combines art and theory as one practice. This fact can be seen in any rudimentary discussion of artwork where the vast majority of discussions begin with a statement like, “With this piece, I believe the artist is commenting on ...” Why does an artist have to be commenting on anything?

The problem that I seem to have is communicating to theorists is that there are many different types of art making, not just the P-FART method that views artists as a form of theorist. To me, the positions of artist and theorist do not have to be the same any more than a baseball player has give a running commentary while he’s playing. I don’t want to be a commentator; I want to be out on the field making art. I also don’t seem to be able to convince anyone that I want to make art because I love it, not for fame or fortune. It seems that a lot of artists make art to try to become well known, rather than because they love making things. The last thing that many people don’t understand about my style of making art is that even if no one ever writes about my work, my contribution is still important. If a pitcher throws a no-hitter, does anyone say that the other people on the field were not part of the team or didn’t matter? I’m just not the super-star that everyone talks about. I’m in left field. Deep left field. In the minor league. And I’m ok with that.

Even though I’m in the minor leagues of the art world, I love making art. Explaining why I love making art is as difficult as explaining why I love anything, so I usually tell people I love making art in the same way that I love finding money.

“Find a penny, pick it up/then all day you’ll have good luck.”

Well, yeah ... by definition you’ve already had a lucky day; you just found money. Most people spend their whole day hoping to find a bag of money. Most people spend their whole day hoping to find meaning in their life. Just hoping to find meaning in your life seems pointless to me because only a really lucky few people will just stumble into something meaningful. The major difference between every artist I know and many people who don’t consider themselves artists is that artists don’t spend the whole day hoping to find meaning. We make meaning, usually from nothing. I love finding money, but rather than just walking around hoping to find some, I made a metal detector and for me, the meaning was in the making.

I do my best to surround myself with people who spend all day making meaning in their lives. For example, I have a friend who is a writer. At least when I first met her she said she was a writer. She was a friend of a friend and after being introduced to her a few times, I asked if I could read some of her writing. She said sure and opened a newspaper to the classified ads.

“I write the copy for people trying to sell boats.”

“That’s not really what I call writing.”

“Have you ever tried expressing a boat in less than twenty words?”

She wrote Haiku’s all day and I was too stupid to realize what I was reading:

For sale: ‘92

Winter waves Boston Whaler

Best offer; as is.

One of my biggest problems is that I frequently get so caught up in my own life, that I end up missing people who are working on making meaning in their lives in really interesting ways. I never would have thought it would be meaningful to spend your whole day writing classified ads, but it’s all in the meaning you put into the act of making something. I hate it when I become complacent about how

I perceive the world. I surround myself with artists because seeing their attempts to make meaning in the world gives me fresh eyes.

“What we call art would seem to be specialist artifacts for enhancing human perception.”

– *Marshall McLuhan*

So, at the end of the day, I just love making art. I'm not a theorist who is using visual art to further theoretical discourse. For me, art making has nothing to do with art theory, because making art is a much simpler philosophical act. The act of making art makes meaning in my life and I surround myself with artists because I want to share in the meaning they put into their lives. That's it.

