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Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* on the *Colbert Report*

Modeling a Damien Hirst T at Gagosian Gallery

Bags in the Louis Vuitton store at L.A. MoCA

COMMERCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS
by Ben Davis

My New Year's resolution for 2008 was to be attentive to the positive side of contemporary art. As for the reasoning behind that, more later. But first, a look back on the year that was.

In terms of trends, 2007 was a year of commercial spectacle and hype. Damien Hirst's $100-million, diamond-studded skull won a reference on the Colbert Report's "Colbert Platinum" -- and according to some reports, briefly affected the world price of diamonds -- and Hirst went on to design a line of skull-studded jeans and jackets for Levi Strauss. Takashi Murakami hypnotized the L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art into opening a Louis Vuitton boutique in its galleries, and erected an enormous self-portrait of himself as the Buddha. And the New Museum opened its grand new building on the Bowery, showcasing contemporary trash esthetics, and illustrating how, when put together, it all blurs into one big rainbow of random bits and pieces.

How to make sense of all this?

In a useful recent book, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, Johanna Drucker offers the term "complicit esthetics" to describe contemporary art. Art today, she argues, is distinguished by its embrace of commerce and the values of the mass media. According to Drucker, the familiar notion of "oppositional critique" is now largely a relic of academic writing, which has been reduced to justifying artwork based on its political correctness.

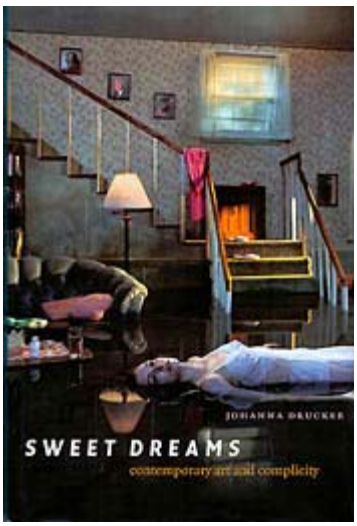
For Drucker, Vanessa Beecroft's practice of staging fetishistic tableaux of naked women in high heels is the rock that high-flown art theory runs aground on. While critics persist in looking for a political kernel in the work -- Drucker cites one who calls it a "post-feminist critique of the catwalk" -- Beecroft is clearly not attempting to resist the values of fashion. She is replicating them in the space of the art world. And this loss of art's distinction as an alternative to media spectacle, *Sweet Dreams* argues, is not just one artist's choice but an existential condition for all artists, and therefore something that should be embraced.

It's a great read (despite echoing Dave Hickey's *Air Guitar*, which argued that art should ditch its self-seriousness and embrace its frivolous character a decade ago). But Drucker overlooks something -- the unstable, self-sabotaging nature of this "complicit" condition. In debunking the platitudes of her academic peers, Drucker underplays the crisis that the blurring of "high" art and media spectacle represents, and the weird place that art finds itself as a result.

Sweet Dreams speculates that art developed its myth of purity and critical independence in reaction to mass culture, with its higher production values and larger audience. But art today, she vaguely suggests, may finally be ready to give up and merge with "the greater power of visual culture and its industrial strengths." This is as much of a material analysis as she offers. In her summary, art's

Takashi Murakami's *Oval Buddha* (2007), installed at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA
Photo by Brian Forrest
© 1997 Takashi Murakami / Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd.

Installation view of "Unmonumental: The Object of the 21st Century at the New Museum
Photo by David Rager



"oppositional" pretentions are just bad ideas that should be waved away in the face of technological advance.

But as we survey the fireworks of the contemporary art scene, and guess about the future, it's important to remember that there is a *material basis* for its critical stance. Earlier in 2007, I argued that one key to understanding the art world was its uniquely middle-class base, with its corresponding focus on the values of individuality and small production [see "Art Class," Aug. 24, 2007]. The current blurring of the boundary between the values of artistry and spectacle is not just the fruit of some random idea that people hatched in their heads, but a consequence of an unprecedented amount of attention from large sponsors that allows, in some local cases, for artworks to approximate production on the scale of the "culture industry." But this phenomenon has its limits.

Take an appealing contemporary artist like Michael Bell-Smith, who has a new exhibition at Foxy Productions in Chelsea. Bell-Smith creates video projections of landscapes or scenes from space that are constructed with computer and video-game imagery. So in one sense, they are "complicit" with video-game culture. Yet the voluptuous, sophisticated productions of the modern video game industry require massive industrial production teams (Electronic Arts was recently busted for forcing compulsory, 7-day-a-week overtime on its programmers). "New media" art cannot, and does not, compete on this scale. So how does it function?

The answer is it requires an alternative set of values to justify its own, small-scale, individualistic place in the world. Drucker lays into academic writers who champion esoteric artistic strategies, insider references and "oppositional" posturing, because these approaches make art seem out of touch. But the cerebral, low-fi approach Bell-Smith takes and his free-floating art-historical references are not incidental. Going against the grain of mass media technique is constitutive of Bell-Smith's ability to function as an artist, period (in fact, he is a graduate in semiotics, not in computer engineering).

Most often, critics (including Drucker) just tag everything that involves commerce as "capitalist" and leave the analysis at that. But the fact is there are different ways to relate to commerce, and the production and distribution of "visual art" is defined by particularly middle-class relations, not by large-scale wage labor at the service of massive conglomerates. Just ask the animators whose work was shown in the "Pixar" show at MoMA a few years back what a difference this makes (they don't have an individual claim on the creativity that goes into the work; it belongs to Disney). Contemporary art's position in the world forms the basis for the quirky values -- the fetish for low-fi, child-like creativity, the questioning or ironic attitude, the attention to the individual touch or "statement," etc. -- that are associated with it.

Even when individual productions go beyond these terms, the climate of being resistant to mass culture values must be preserved. In December, Paul McCarthy transformed his New York gallery into a factory for producing chocolate miniatures of a signature image. Though the project would seem to be a fairly full-throated replication of commercial-scale production, McCarthy takes esthetic refuge precisely in the fact that, as a straight-forward commercial enterprise, it is a money-losing deal [see "Artnet TV," Dec. 11, 2007].

Consumer society is always ready for fine art, of course. And there is nothing stopping an artist from inflating an artwork with helium and putting it in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade alongside Shrek and Hello Kitty, as Jeff Koons did in 2007. But this is not the kind of project that can shape the practice of your average SVA grad. And

Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity by Johanna Drucker (University of Chicago Press, 2005)

Vanessa Beecroft
VB45
2001
Deitch Projects

Michael Bell-Smith
Glitter Bend
2008
Foxy Productions

Electronic Arts headquarters in Redwood City, California

playing on pop culture's field, the pressure is on to do it again, only bigger, while at the same time one sacrifices things that art is actually in a position to do better, like nuance. This represents a legitimate crisis, of material and of spirit -- even if it is covered over for now by an art world that is relatively flush (though the fact that Hirst himself had to help buy back *For the Love of God* is testament that "complicit esthetics" may be approaching an internal limit).

Seen in review, 2007 could be taken to provide evidence that the condition of art is changing, to be something more akin to contemporary fashion, where designers make unwearable, esoteric prototype projects that are then reprocessed for mass consumption, where they find their actual home. This may be what the incursion of design into the art galleries is unconsciously about. But I doubt it. The devil-may-care, anything-goes "complicit" condition Drucker outlines is bound up with the art boom, where collectors literally seem to be buying anything, a phenomenon that has the effect of drawing more students to art, producing more art programs, and thus a more pluralistic scene. . . and so on, round and round.

But it is important to keep in mind the lurking contradiction that it is all built on. In the event of an economic contraction, once again, the importance of a critical position and a rhetoric of independence will likely reassert itself -- just so that art can justify its place in the world. For all its decadence and delusions of grandeur, the art world is actually a small and delicate space.

Therefore, a good reason exists to be attentive to the positive side in 2008, as the economy continues to tailspin. When things are overheated, I think an extra-critical eye is appropriate; in a capitalist world, there are obvious limits to how far the middle-class perspective takes you, and it is certainly easy to point out its contradictions. But when things get embattled, values shift, and it's worth remembering that art's social position does give it an eccentric relation to the dominant values of the day -- though of course it should still be approached with eyes open about its excesses. Criticism is not a matter of saying things "are" good or bad in the same way that one says that they are made of plaster or plastic. Judgment is tactical; it always reflects an implicit idea of the relation of forces inside or outside the art world that bear on objects and give them meaning and value.

For my own part, I ended the year onstage at the National Academy Museum for art critic David Cohen's invaluable Review Panel, which brings together various stripes of art writers for dialogue. Alongside *Art in America*'s Lilly Wei and myself was the *New York Sun*'s bomb-throwing esthetic conservative Lance Esplund. His take on the art world is as derisive of politics and theory as Drucker's, but it is put in service of a mass circulation newspaper's attempt to out-Murdoch Rupert Murdoch, demonizing liberal decadence. In the course of the discussion, Esplund was actually able to accuse venerated New York abstractionist David Reed's paintings at Max Protetch of representing moral failure because they seemed too cool.

With the potential for this kind of rising reactionary sentiment as a backdrop, I'd even be willing to say that there was something *political* about Reed's painting, his deadpan surfaces and staticy color combinations asserting modestly that painting is about painting, not about scaffolding some naïve idea of traditional virtue.

The wolves are always circling. It's worth keeping that in mind as we step into the new year.

Teddy Newton
Frozone from *The Incredibles*
Marker and pencil
© Disney/Pixar

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Paul McCarthy's "Chocolate Factory" at Maccarone, Inc.
Still from Artnet TV by Erik Lang

Jeff Koons' float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, 2007

David Reed
#563
2006-2007
Max Protetch Gallery