



Fun's Not Dumb: An Art World of Entertainment

For a while there, many lived under the delusion that comprehensive exhibitions about relevant cultural phenomena had the power to become paradigm-shifting events, not only for art but for the culture-at-large. Students of history will recall Harald Szeeman's "When Attitudes Become From" at Kunsthalle Bern in 1996, or Thomas Lawson's "A Fatal Attraction: Art and the Media" at The Renaissance Society in 1982, or even Elizabeth Sussman's 1993 Whitney Biennial—exhibitions that officially acknowledged coming changes in the accepted form and content of art. Of course, such "timely" exhibitions marked the end rather than the beginning of the trends they chronicled and painstakingly maintained the perception of art as a harbinger of things to come.

Art continues to enjoy the illusion of cultural authority, not because it is vital or intelligent but because it refuses to recognize its competition. In fact, Szeeman's show postdates Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* by five years, Lawson's the home video recorder by seven, and even Sussman's—diverse as it was by art-world standards—appears in hindsight to be a mere provincial reflection on the democratization of the Internet. "Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures," a show organized by Philippe Vergne at the Walker Art Center, tries to embrace the notion of art as just another form of popular culture, without being critical or condescending. And while I doubt that it

will be as paradigmatic as the iMac or the Star Wars trilogy—which is, by the way, the height of the bar these days—the exhibition is nonetheless an impressive, if problematic, arm’s-length look at one of the art world’s more uncomfortable taboos.

Art history abounds with aphorisms denigrating all forms of audience concession, from Andy Warhol’s “Cute rots the intellect” to Oscar Wilde’s “Art should not try to be popular, the public should make itself more artistic.” Disdain for popular appeal, however, often masks a jealous desire for the breadth of influence and depth of feeling that entertainment imparts on the general public. Indeed, in “Come Back to Pleasure,” the keynote essay in the exhibition catalogue, philosopher Richard Shusterman credits no less a snob than T.S. Eliot with the remark that the poet “would like to be something of a popular entertainer...As things are, and as fundamentally they must always be, poetry is not a career, but a mug’s game.” Of course, in the mug’s game of entertainment, the audience either already knows the source or simply assumes the present mug has invented it. The free use of good material is a vital aspect of the entertainment industry, from song hooks and sitcom quips to computer animation and period drama. Familiarity breeds success, and the dizzying speed at which a phrase or gesture can be assimilated is the main reason such phenomena are not taken seriously. “Let’s Entertain” begs to differ—largely on the premise that pleasure and democracy have replaced difficulty and elitism as yardsticks of important art. In so doing, it suggests that power, culture, and class politics have entered into serious flux.

There is no better evidence of this Machiavellian shift than a 1980 appearance by Johnny Lydon on American Bandstand. Video tape of the performance is one of the earliest bits of evidence in “Let’s Entertain,” and the ethical question of whether Lydon has “evolved” or “sold out” haunts all those who follow. With the Sex Pistols gone in a burst of flames and wreckage, Lydon’s reincarnation as the frontman for Public Image Limited averred that anarchy was no longer an agent for social change. By appearing to give the public what it wanted, the slick, media-friendly PIL suggested that a darker, more insidious form of cynicism than punk might be, well, catchy lyrics and a danceable beat. Throughout the performance, Lydon flaunts the fact that he is lip-syncing (then still an industry no-no), and at one point even sticks his microphone to a young woman’s lips just in time for her to mouth his next lyric. It’s a great, black, hopeless bit of humor that has the effect of setting you free.

This precious moment is a how-to video for viewing the rest of the show. Where art institutions have a long legacy of promoting art as a means of social betterment—regarding its viewers as passive subjects in need of inoculation against the baseness of more popular diversions—Lydon regards his shiny young fans as willing recipients of an infection. The idea of entertainment as a virus is well-exploited by popular music and film, but it was not until the late nineteen seventies that visual artists became knowingly and willingly contaminated, treating their minds and bodies like lengths of pipe through which so much behavioral information flows. And while “Let’s Entertain” accurately identifies the beginning of art’s liberation from forty years in the Modernist desert, much of the recent work in the show adds little to the instincts of Lydon’s generation.

Such is the case with Kyupi Kyupi, a current Japanese collaboration that makes music, videos, and performances that get spun off as CDs and books. Assuming the mantle of such nineteen-seventies art-school-assignments-turned-pop-culture-footnotes as Devo or Kraftwerk, Kyupi Kyupi takes the anxiety of influence one step further—by leaving out the anxiety part altogether, demonstrating a lack of interest in subverting anything except the expectation of art as subversion. *Fishheads* (1999-2000) is a short videotape in which three young men are dressed in primary-colored wetsuits with matching fishhead-shaped helmets. They do some primitive, martial choreography for a while before pursuing a leggy, Japanese version of Pam Grier. Or is that a Pam Grier version of a Japanese? Who cares? Decisions get made, things happen, the tape ends. That's about it.

I like that approach to art-making and even admire its expendability. However, Kyupi Kyupi's antics too often typify Vergne's criteria for what it means to be entertaining, implying that all entertainment, by its very definition, is vacuous, derivative, and forgettable. This explains the "Life's Guilty Pleasures" apology that is the tag line of the show, as if running home to watch *The Simpsons* was morally inferior to running out to see your local William Kentridge retrospective. Thus, my disappointment with "Let's Entertain" is that it hypes a clichéd, obsequious notion of entertainment over subtler or nastier forms, a slant that not only limits the possibilities of the premise but also betrays a lack of confidence in the viewer's ability to be comfortable with what they like. To my mind, Stan Douglas is more entertaining than Piotr Uklanski, but I doubt Douglas's *Monodramas*—a series of short establishing shots lacking any subsequent action or dialogue—will get held up as an example of good entertainment to the same extent that Uklanski's readymade installations of disco floors and mirrored balls are.

While it could be suggested that "Let's Entertain" merely wants to knock art down a peg or two in the process of making it more competitive with the wider culture, I would counter that in its haste to be immediately relevant it obliterates the arcana that is art's strength. Instant Gratification can be fun, but some things are ultimately more desirable when they're at least unfamiliar, if not offensive. Indeed, that may be precisely the effect "Let's Entertain" will have on the art world, but such discomfort is still rooted in an unwillingness to consider art as entertainment in the first place. If bearing the anxiety of whether or not we're attracted to art is the foundation of the pleasure it gives us, then whatever anxiety "Let's Entertain" induces only serves to entrench an old belief: that art is special and everything else is not, until proven otherwise (as art).

This class distinction is underscored by the fact that some of art's most impressive entertainers are not part of the exhibition. Had Edward Ruscha or Allen Ruppersberg been included in the show—let alone Laurie Anderson, Talking Heads, or Sonic Youth—then most of the art in "Let's Entertain" would pale in comparison. Furthermore, while Dike Blair's collected interviews with Karen Daroff (theme restaurant designer), Jonathan Ive (Apple Computers), J Mays (vw bug), Gordon Thompson III (Nike), and Jack Womack (pulp-fiction writer) in the catalogue demonstrate a prescient eye for the cultural powerbrokers of our time, their inclusion in the discussion ultimately serves to make art seem all the more puny and derivative. Which is fine, if art is willing to acknowledge the fact that it is puny

and derivative, in which case we'd finally be free to enjoy whatever great or small insights our experience of it might give us.

Musician Kim Gordon once observed that, after Pop art, it is better to enter into popular culture than to go on making art that merely comments on it. She was right, but being right means having to be truly competitive in your cultural field of choice. This is neither an easy nor very promising task for contemporary artists, unless we approach art as just another form of popular culture. In such an environment, many of today's artists no longer make "challenging" work but work that commands an exclusive market niche, a brand of structural rigor and dry humor that reflects the consumption patterns of a small but loyal demographic. Does that make their work any less interesting? No. Does it shed light on their motivations and demonstrate that their works are not tainted by the admission of a little audience savvy? Certainly.

For example, in *Fresh Acconci* (1995), Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy put their marketing pitch up front as the simultaneously transform it into art. In the original videotapes, Vito Acconci's lugubrious threats and come-ons are a kind of last stand of the self, a schizophrenic whose livelihood depends on his ability to persuade us of his fears and desires. In Kelley and McCarthy's remake, Acconci's scripts have been slavishly adhered to, but their mood has been radically altered through the use of spokesmodels and exercise video extras who are by turns reclining languorously on a bearskin rug, tangling in a sudsy tub, or wrestling in a stucco rotunda. Whatever angst dripped from Acconci's originals has been burned off by movie lights, replacing Acconci's lone rendition of the self with no less sinister, interchangeable androids. *Fresh Acconci's* "fuck you, here's more of the same, on re-mastered" attitude is a blunt acknowledgement of the pre-packaged art historical legitimacy that can separate a knowing artist from the pack.

Thirty-three years ago, Robert Smithson was complaining about curators wanting to liven things up in museums, tending to make of them a kind of specialized entertainment venue. (Smithson, of course, preferred the institution's inherent emptiness to the human impulse to "fill it up.") It apparently never occurred to Smithson that museums had always been in the business of specialized entertainment, nor did it occur to him that his concepts of emptiness and displacement could just as well be seen as sly inversions of industry standards, no more or less clever than Jerry Seinfeld's television show about nothing or Gary Shandling's partially buried career. Most importantly, entertainment itself might be a kind of profound emptiness. Indeed, the only thing emptier than an empty museum might be a museum full of entertainment. What's interesting now about museums is the fact that it really doesn't make much difference whether their "emptiness" is provided by Robert Smithson or Maurizio Cattelan—just so their ever-expanding spaces get filled. That's neither the fault nor the revelation of "Let's Entertain," merely the condition it finds itself observing without the nerve to be skeptical of it.

No matter. I have only ever been interested in art because I found it entertaining, and while I can't understand why someone would look at art for any other reason, I would also suggest that no one

really does. I know that there are people who look at art because they believe its good for them, and that there are just as many whose livelihood is to propagate that belief, but doing something because it's good for you still boils down to the desire to be entertained by your own behavior. If I have a predilection for Samuel Beckett or Agnes Martin, then it's because I find their work entertaining—and, of course, beautiful. That doesn't make me special, just a particular (and marginally profitable) consumer whose favorite products are seldom on the display. Were such artists presented as the unadorned Wasa crackers that they are, instead of birthday cakes with useful implements hidden inside, then their infrequent appearances might at least be accompanied by a less desperate, more contented mood, one that refrains from ascribing reasons and simply acknowledges our delight in their existence.

First Published in Art Issues 64 (Sept., 2000): 20-22.