READINGS

[Essay]

A WORLD LIKE SANTA BARBARA

By Dave Hickey, in the Summer issue of Art issues, *published in Los Angeles by the Foundation for Advanced Critical Studies. Hickey teaches art criticism and theory at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His essay "Why Art Should Be Bad" appeared in the January 1998 issue of* Harper's Magazine.

I have been thinking a lot lately about what art does in our civilization and have come to the conclusion that, at present, it's not doing very much. I find this distressing, because one of the things that art can do and that urgently needs doing—one of the things that art has done in the past and does no longer—is to civilize us a little. It's somewhat surprising, of course, when one considers the wars, battles, massacres, murders, and banishments that characterized the quarrel over images from the Age of Constantine up through the Reformation, that the discourse surrounding works of art in modern times should be characterized by its civility, but, with certain glaring exceptions, it has been, and there are good reasons for this being so.

The primary reason for this civility is that human civilization, in the process of becoming less centralized and less authoritarian, has created modes of expression in which the burden of assigning meaning and value resides wholly within the colloquy of beholders. Objects and events that were once instruments of meaning and value have become sites for adjudicating meaning and value: icons have become art; rituals have become dances; history has bred fiction; and clothing, fashion. So, today, we all acknowledge that when we argue about art we are arguing about the use, value, and meaning of objects that have no use, value, and meaning beyond those we attribute to them. Moreover, as long as we are discussing the consequences of our transactions with works of art among peers, issues of institutional, scientific, and academic authority are moot, and even our personal disagreements are directed nonconfrontationally toward objects in the world.

These factors are calming, I think, and they explain why art critics disagree so happily while bureaucrats, scientists, and academics quarrel so acrimoniously. Art critics quarrel about perceived value and the ethics of one's relationship to objects in the world. Bureaucrats, scientists, and academics argue about the construction of truth, power, and authority, and this, of course, would seem to be the more urgent discourse. It would be, too, except for the fact that, in nontotalitarian societies, truth, power, and authority are dependent upon the value attributed to them by the populace. In such societies, the discourse of art is the civil site upon which we freely expand and refine our language of perceived value—because, for all the anxiety and disorientation our transactions with works of art entail, nobody gets killed as a consequence of them anymore. Very

[Study]

THE TRAGIC KINGDOM

From "Violence in G-Rated Animated Films," a study by Fumie Yokota and Kimberly M. Thompson that appeared in the May 24–31 Journal of the American Medical Association. The authors are researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Anastasia (1997)
3 injuries, 2 fatalities
weapons used: body, gun, magic, other

Bambi (1942)
2 injuries, 1 fatality
weapons used: body, gun, other

Beauty and the Beast (1991)
3 injuries, 1 fatality
weapons used: body, sword, gun, other

Duck Tales: The Movie (1990)
1 injury, 1 fatality
weapons used: body, sword, magic, other

Peter Pan (1953)
2 injuries, 1 fatality
weapons used: body, sword, gun, explosive, other

Pocahontas (1995)
3 injuries, 1 fatality
weapons used: body, sword, gun, other

Sleeping Beauty (1959)
1 injury, 1 fatality
weapons used: body, sword, magic, other

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)
2 injuries, 1 fatality
weapons used: body, sword, poison, other

The Great Mouse Detective (1986)
2 injuries, 2 fatalities
weapons used: body, sword, gun, other

The Last Unicorn (1982)
5 injuries, 3 fatalities
weapons used: body, sword, magic, other

The Nutcracker Prince (1990)
5 injuries, 2 fatalities
weapons used: body, sword, gun, magic, other

The Swan Princess (1994)
9 injuries, 2 fatalities
weapons used: body, sword, magic, other

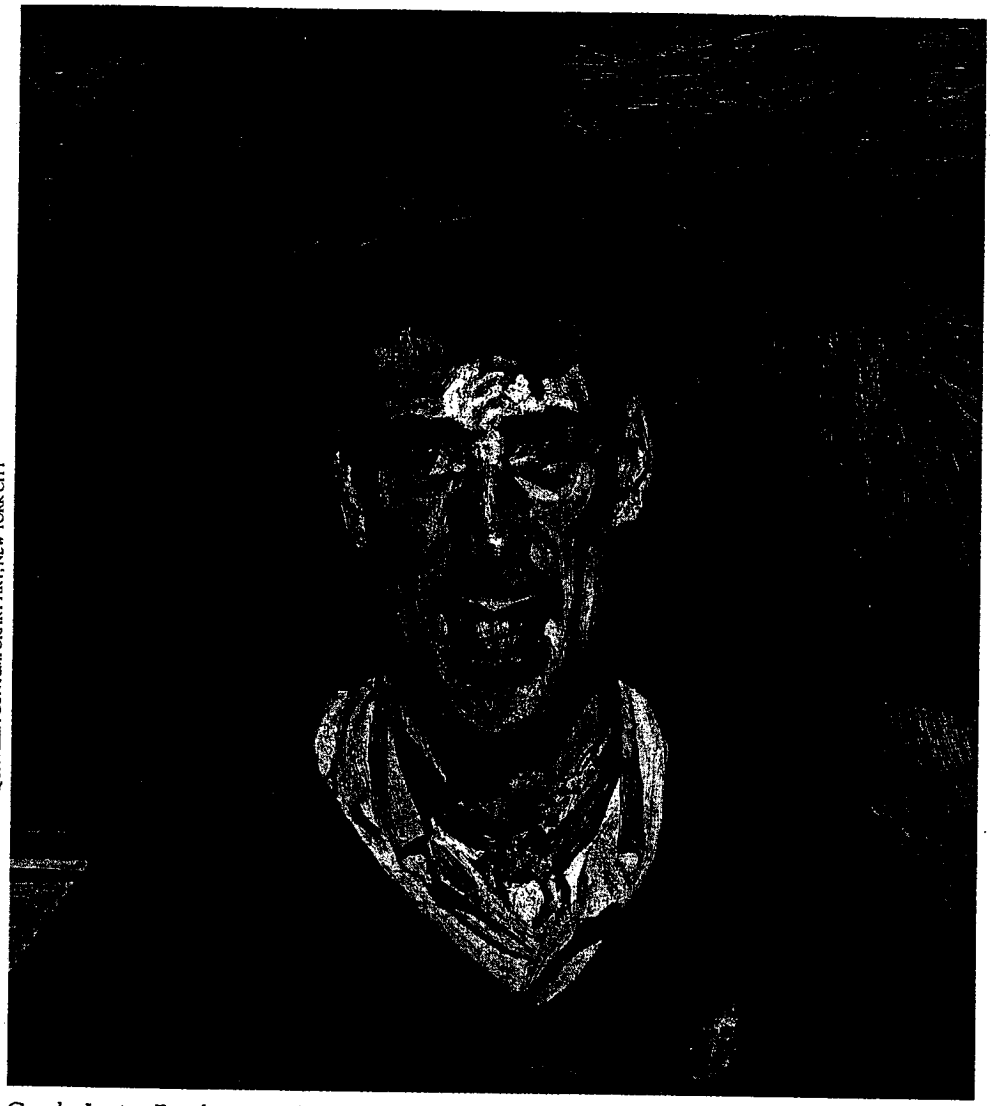
few even go to jail, and that is just the point: art is a safe place where we may nonviolently come to terms with disorienting situations and adjudicate their public and private relevance in a public discourse.

We can do this because works of art have only as much power as we attribute to them by our free response. The habit of responding freely, however, and of tolerating the anxiety these responses generate, is a learned activity. If we cannot learn to volunteer our free response—or if we are taught not to respond (as we are taught today)—the live discourse about art is over, and what Susan Sontag calls the "erotics" of art has been wholly supplanted by the language of bureaucratic explanation.

Our responsiveness, then, is the primary signifier of a civilized transaction with the world that, at its most refined, sophisticates us and facilitates social change without revolutionary violence or authoritarian edict. Unfortunately, the right wing of American culture harbors a deep distrust of this sophistication. It doesn't think we can be civilized, except through authoritarian police control; it presumes, further, that any disorienting challenge of the sort that works of art issue is a direct incitement to civil unrest. The American left wing distrusts this same sophistication, because this faction doesn't really want us civilized. It wishes to retain the option of revolutionary violence in the furtherance of a "culture war," and consequently retains its warlike rhetoric, disdaining any inference of art's civilizing mediation. The left wing suspects that art is opium; the right suspects that it's PCP. Neither recognizes art as the conventional, civilized forum that it is. Failing to recognize this, they assume that ordinary citizens are not cognizant of its conventional nature either, and thus cannot be trusted to distinguish artifice from actuality, words from deeds, signs from referents, narratives from actions.

This is elitist balderdash, of course, yet for the past thirty years the left and right wings of American culture have urgently conspired to mitigate art's ability to civilize us by striving to "civilize" art itself. They have conspired to limit our freedom to construct new meanings and values for works of art: the right wing by seeking to censor any art that might generate healthy anxiety; the left by explaining away art's ability to challenge us individually, by presenting art to us in perfectly controlled, explained, and contextualized packages.

The consequence of this conspiracy has been the authoritarian and therapeutic pollution of art's last free public habitat. Thus, at present, American cultural institutions routinely embody both factions' prejudice against art's contingency and embrace their mutual distrust of



PRIVATE COLLECTION/PHOTO COURTESY ACQUAVELLA CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK CITY

Gaz, by Lucian Freud, was on display in May at Acquavella Contemporary Art in New York City.

unadministered artistic experience. In public galleries, labeled from PG to X like cable-television movies, unoffending works of art are stranded in fields of explanatory press-type, like ornaments in a medieval breviary. The wild domain of freedom and imagination—of new meaning and eccentric value—that a gallery full of unadorned objects and images would otherwise generate is now rigorously domesticated. Its effects are distanced and irrevocably muffled, and all on the mad presumption that a literate populace, which is perfectly capable of participating in the knowing carnage of *Scream 2* without henceforth running amok, is somehow incapable of dealing imaginatively with the anxiety of Fragonard without "edu-speak" wall texts and signage denoting ad hoc parental guidance.

Thus we have reached a point at which members of the literate populace have a right to ask just what kind of a world they are being asked to inhabit. As a lone member of that literate populace, I am more concerned than most, since I have seen that ideal world, and I do not like it.

A few years ago, I was privileged to teach a group of splendid students at the University of California at Santa Barbara. In order to do so, I had to fly in and out of that coastal paradise on a weekly basis, and, as pleasant as my class was and as beautiful as the setting is, I found the community of Santa Barbara troubling in its perfect contentment and uncanny coherence. Contentment is always annoying, of course, but the coherence was confusing in

the extreme, since the community itself, in its ordinary constituents, seemed anything but.

But there I was, in a small city populated by petit bourgeois right-wing Protestants, woozy New Age gurus, hard-core libertarian ranchers, over-groomed hacienda patricians, scruffy surfer hippies, retired art dealers and policemen, well-patronized psychoanalysts, psychologists, group therapists, and self-helpers, academic liberals, assorted movie stars, and tenured Marxists, all living happily together, dining out and placidly shopping, in a smoke-free, herbivorous, puritan utopia. My confusion was exacerbated by the fact that I did not cohere at all. My clothes were wrong, my hours irregular, my habits unhealthy, and my talk too ebullient and abrasive. For me, it was a hellish paradise. Not a day went by that I didn't tread on some invisible snake or bump into some invisible vitrine, jostling the invisible *objets* within. Every time this happened, I asked myself: What does this culturally and ideologically disparate group of Americans have in common that I do not have in common with them?

In the final week of my stay, I figured it out. All these people, the Baptists, Marxists, patricians, gurus, surfers, celebrities, and shrinks, believed that all of the problems of modern life derive from the anxiety of commercial society and that the goal of any enlightened community should be the alleviation of that anxiety through the ministrations of an enlightened elite.

In a world like this, I realized (and not without trepidation), art and society as I understood them simply could not exist. I understood art to be a necessary accoutrement of urban life, a democratic social field of sublimated anxiety and a forum of contentious civility. I assumed that free citizens cultivated their responsiveness to works of art in order to mitigate their narcissism and fuel their imaginative grasp of that which is irrevocably beyond themselves, to transform their anxious discomfort at not-knowing into a kind of vertiginous pleasure.

In Santa Barbara, such adaptive behavior was unnecessary. Everything was regulated and explained. Urbanity, anxiety, otherness, contention, loud colors, and bright talk were wholly absent. Even shopping (that quintessential urban activity) was conducted as a form of relentless grazing administered by tastefully regulated signage. Antique agrarian values had been fully reinstated, and civilization, in this rubric, was defined as a bucolic quietude prefiguring the silence of the grave.

So let me suggest this: That, Santa Barbara notwithstanding, we live in a cosmopolitan age in which civilization must be defined by the ability of a diverse populace to tolerate and appreciate the anxiety of living in a tumultuous, heterogeneous urban world. That, for 150 years, Americans left the farm in search of just that heterogeneity and anxiety. That those who were forced to leave the farm found it anyway, because anxiety is the very stuff of urban existence, of living in a world where one's autonomy and identity are compromised by the simple fact that one cannot grow one's own food in a city, or slaughter one's own pig, or weave one's own cloth, or churn one's own butter, and in order to acquire these necessities one must interact in a civil way with commercial culture, with people who are different from oneself, people in trade who are totally unaware of one's own genteel agrarian authenticity.

The world of art and letters is the site upon which we hone these skills, acquire the responsiveness, imagination, and flexibility to deal with this world, where we learn to appreciate its anxieties. Because, to speak plainly, one doesn't really need art on the farm, or in Santa Barbara either, if one is comfy there. One of the great ironies of American history, in fact, is that Thomas Jefferson, who invented the idea of America as a nation of contented farmers, bankrupted himself out of boredom with that life—importing fine art, rare books, exotic objects, elegant furniture, and scientific instruments because he wasn't comfy with the bucolic ennui of life at Monticello. Paris it wasn't, in other words, and although Jefferson never admitted this, I suspect that the putative father of the American suburbs would agree with me that the idea of a life without sophisticated contingency and a culture bowdlerized to alleviate the beholder's anxiety presents a prospect that only a farmer could countenance.

I will go even further, in fact, and suggest that the gradual refarmerization of America explains the current penchant of suburban youth for killing one another in bunches, that these killings are the direct consequence of a culture that proposes the instantaneous alleviation of anxiety as its primary goal—a culture in which weapons are sold, games are designed, and art is explained for no other purpose. Children in the cities kill one another, too, of course, but for explicable reasons like poverty, greed, anger, and ambition, for causes whose consequences can be sublimated into civilized endeavors, that are, in fact, being sublimated as we speak: into music, dance, drama, and fashion. These city kids kill because they want more life. The killer children in the suburbs have no such excuses or ambitions. They're just anxious about being teenagers and don't think they should have to feel that way.

COURTESY 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

Untitled (S. at his place), *a watercolor by Tim Gardner. Gardner's work was on display last spring in the Greater New York exhibit at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens.*

Some people blame the media for this, but that's like blaming the violence of Elizabethan culture on the last act of *Hamlet*. Some of the same people blame the killers' parents, and this would be plausible if these children were killing their parents, or assassinating other authority figures, but they rarely do. Their first option, in fact, is to become their parents, to usurp the authoritarian parental role and obliterate the peers and siblings who make them nervous—because they have been so well nurtured, loved, and protected that they have never been nervous before, because they have never read an exciting book, felt the anxiety of high drama, or experienced the disorientation of difficult art, and consequently do not even know how to be nervous, much less how to enjoy being nervous and exploit it.

What I am suggesting, then, is that we are well on our way to censoring and explaining away the primary adaptive modality of urban life, that the unruly, uncivilized domain of art and letters is being robbed of its civilizing function. I offer this because what one perceives most profoundly in these killer children from the suburbs is their absolute lack of imagination and affect. They can't imagine obliterating a million hopes, dreams, and memories by squeezing a tiny metal trigger; they can't imagine the empty place they are making in succeeding generations; they can't even imagine their own futures or the constituents of an ordinary human life. And those who survive are unlikely to acquire this knowledge either, even from *Oliver Twist*, because the consequence of their brutal acts—acts designed to do nothing more than to alleviate anxiety, instantaneously, and make the world more like Santa Barbara—will be more parental control, more professional explication, more elite explanation, and more authoritarian censorship.

It will mean fewer works of art, less freedom, and more killings. And all because we wanted to make a safe place. Unfortunately, art is the only safe place, and it is only safe because the world can't be made so.