Critical Bastards

-Issue 11
Critical Bastards is a magazine of creative criticism that engages with visual arts in Ireland.

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Issue 11

Expectation + Disappointment in Art
There are plenty of disappointments to be had. Although art is run thick with them, it holds no special purchase over the feeling. But to presume one’s own over-familiarity with disappointment can too quickly descend into vanity – it’s easy to spot a cynic thriving on small failures, always with the same churlish ostentation, always taking the temperature of the room with the same capacity for discerning judgment as is held by any other rectal thermometer. It’s harder to articulate a sense of joy than it is to root out another disappointment. For its own part, expectation is tied to feeling ready for something good – something sure and constant. But in seeing and making art, the genuinely satisfying experiences accompany the feeling of being unready: an unfamiliar worthiness weaving its way into the fabric of a moment without being fully deserved.

I remember breaking a plastic toy when I was about four years old. It was a long, malleable thing: a mechanical limb that could deform into an imaginary building or a pistol or a pair of legs. Ostensibly, it could be anything tubular, and I grew familiar enough with its physical limits to seek their edge and skirt the breaking points. Then, in a sudden and rather untimely burst of stretching I managed to snap the toy down to its base components. Having put the thing asunder the interior machinery that gave the object its power was fully revealed. It was a thick nylon string fastened to meet the rod’s inside ends so as to form a flexible spine. Looking back, I’m not sure what workings I had expected. In wondering about how the object worked I could flex my mind somewhat, but finding out the truth was something different. It was unceremonious and boring. It was totally ordinary.

This remains a paradoxical feeling. The magic of the machine was held in its experiential simplicity, but there were various manifestations of that simplicity and only some of them were encouraging or useful to the imagination. Half of them let me play within the helpful confines of the toy’s rules, and the other half exposed the true nature of the thing and all the components that gave it its thingness.

Four-year-olds get used to meeting with realist disappointment, and the feeling is usually followed by some guileless advice about understanding and respecting the things you love. But that advice is incomplete; once you know how ‘things’ go they can never be new again, nor loved in the same way. Our expectation is that enjoyment can last, but that expectation can only conciliate with reality if the concept of joy is understood as being malleable and deformable not only by oneself but by every manner of external condition. Call it the sausage principle: if you love something as it is, don’t bother finding out what’s truly behind it. This might be a useless thought to apply to art, particularly considering the venerated range of difference amongst our herd of independent minds. Someone is always desiring of the real truth; someone always wants the full machinery.
Shame as a cognition, an emotion and an affect enables us to assess the position it holds as a violation of social or cultural values. Subsequently it can act as a litmus test for perceived wrongdoing according to our collective consciousness. German artist Andrea Büttner maintains that there is a close link between exhibiting and shame: ‘Shame is a necessary condition of visual culture: I will show you something and you may look at it and make judgment’ (Andrea Büttner). Presenting something and waiting for it to be accepted or rejected, winning approval or causing disappointment: the act of exhibiting can anticipate shame. This is a dynamic that the artist thoroughly embraces.

Andrea Büttner’s recent exhibition at The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin centered on a specific set of ideas, musings and research stemming from a practice led PhD at the Royal College of Art, London completed in 2010. The artist has developed an intricately assembled body of work that allows for an interplay of ideas and mediums.

Throughout her practice, Büttner focuses on the corner as an embodiment of shame. The corner motif appears throughout the untitled exhibition in a large-scale, two-coloured woodcut as well as being the site of a painted installation and also a bench constructed to form a right angle. This encourages gallery visitors to sit in a corner to view the artwork. Büttner draws attention to the act of standing in or facing into a corner. She is implicating a physical position that is intrinsically linked with shame, perhaps due to the segregation associated with childhood ‘bold corners’ - where a misbehaving youth may be sent to contemplate the shameful aspects of their behavior. Each encounter encourages the viewer to consider the shameful attributes of this architectural inevitability.

A large mound of apples lures visitors into another corner of the gallery. The fruit, being exhibited and not meant for consumption, evokes ideas of original sin and perhaps God’s disappointment in Adam and Eve for yielding to the temptation of the forbidden. Christianity and the crossover between religion and art is of keen interest to the artist, and her work often draws on religious fables and iconography. Biblical references quietly announce themselves through the work. It becomes clear that the artist seeks to bring religion, shame and the experience of poverty into concurrent discussion, perhaps in order to redress the negative and shameful connotations associated with enduring poverty. The curse of never ending growth and the myth of economy as an organic process are important issues that Büttner addresses throughout her practice. She questions an unsustainable cycle in which people become complicit in the trivial drive to produce and consume.

The proliferation of craft, such as glass paintings, represent Büttner’s appreciation of objects made within enclosed religious orders; she applauds this integrated routine of making that stems from a natural creative drive. Imagery of simple foods, such as the potato and the apple, and depictions of dwellings like tents and huts, culminate in a celebration of frugal living. Through her practice, Büttner implies a simple inversion: perhaps the real dirt and shame lies in the impulse to hoard, in greed and in the vulgarity of amassing wealth beyond need. Eschewing a head on discussion on the pitfalls of current consumerist society, Andrea Büttner manages to drive a point by celebrating and ennobling the earthy, lowly and understated things in life.
Shirley's mother's friend managed a house in Roscommon in the early 90's. It was a historical house that had been renovated and was open to the public to visit. There were gardens and a famine memorial centre on the grounds too. Shirley's father thought this particular friend of her mother's to be "hyper" and that he made them all, including her mother, "hyper". The friend put a packet full of brown sugar down the back of Shirley's trousers once in a while. Her mother laughed hysterically. He wanted to buy Shirley some patent leather lace-up boots. Her mother wouldn't let him. Shirley's father did not accompany her mother, her brother and her to the house. She learned years later that, of course, he wasn't invited and, in fact, they had only intended to visit for a day: a trip, instead of staying a week: a holiday. Her mother got down there and didn't want to go back.

There were three categories of the house – the fancy part (all done up and historical for visitors), the normal part (hidden away, where the people that worked there slept and ate), and then there was a third kind (parts of the house that hadn't been done up, weren't open to the public, non-operational as ‘behind the scenes’). There were a set of stairs that led off a hidden door that opened behind a painting hanging in one of the fancy public-visited dining rooms. Visitors weren't allowed up those stairs. There was old gymnasium equipment, really old, Titanic-ish, up those stairs. Shirley and her brother would play chasing around these upper parts of the house that weren't for show and weren't for living. She ran after her brother down a floor-boarded hall. Escaping, he threw open a door. The door led nowhere, there was only air. Had they stepped beyond they would have plunged to their cobbledstoned death 50 metres below.

Shirley's mother's friend slept in a room in the normal hidden part of the house, non-historical yet adequately refurbished for modern habitation. He had blue sheets that were some kind of special cotton and he changed them every day. The kitchen, the normal one for eating, had a large table and an oven that was always on. Shirley's mother's friend made mayonnaise which was yellow. They danced on the table to ABBA. It was the first time Shirley heard them. She was filled up with a melancholic grandeur.

Her mother's friend could drive and he brought them to Longford to swim in the pool. Shirley got a very big rash from the chlorine and her mother's friend nearly drowned her. He wasn't hyper then and she felt sorry for him. They went for walks around the grounds. Her mother, her brother and the friend saw him before she did. Shirley was surprised she was let look, or wanted to look. She would never look at a thing like that now. He was bloated and sideways and trapped and dead. His trotters were awkwardly mashed. He had fallen in a tight stream without company.
What do you expect him to do? He's a grown up, rational, sentient being. Isn't he?

Impossible animals, issuing from a demented imagination, become the secret nature of man; and when on the Last Day sinful man appears in his hideous nakedness, we see that he has the monstrous shape of a delirious animal;... Animality has escaped domestication by human symbols and values; and it is animality that reveals the dark rage, the sterile madness that lie in men's hearts. (Foucault, Madness and Civilization, pg 21).

Liam O'Callaghan, Ordinary Man Series (the rise and fall of a man kindal), 2013. Image courtesy of Butler Gallery.

What is at stake when an artist becomes exposed by placing himself at the centre of what can be described both as his own joke and his nightmare? In a recent exhibition at the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny titled 'if and then...', Liam O'Callaghan presented a video work (part of his Ordinary Man Series) that left The Sunday Times critic Cristín Leach Hughes unimpressed to say the least. She described this work as being “a funny idea with a limited scope for interpretation.” She finishes the article with the comment: “O’Callaghan is a talented artist. He doesn’t need to act the eejit in a pair of fake legs to prove it.” It is obvious by this ad hominem effort at criticism (failing, as it does, to analyse where this artwork really fails) she expected more of the artist and was unimpressed by his appearance in the video work in question.

However, it could be argued in the artist’s defence that acting the eejit in a pair of fake legs is exactly what Liam O’Callaghan needs to do. Whether he has anything to prove or not, the video work is both hilarious and terrifying. It holds to a hollow humour that draws on a long tradition of surreal and post-modern artistic production reminiscent of works by Samuel Beckett, Lars von Trier, Rebecca Horn and the great neo-dada performances of Yves Klein. Though it raises a smile, it is an uncomfortable piece to watch. Perhaps what Cristín Leach Hughes is acknowledging is a sense of embarrassment in the viewer for the artist who has humiliates himself through his performance. Placing himself in the role of a deformed four legged human-animal, careering around banging off of walls, emitting inarticulate animal like moans and tumbling over the camera in the jagged staccato of a Buster Keaton silent film, O’Callaghan is exposing himself utterly as something vulnerable and fragile. The Artist, that persona of elegant genius who stands aloft upon the pedestal, autonomous and above the banality of normal life, is exposed as an untenable construct that cannot hold in the slapstick contortions of Ordinary Man. Perhaps it is this undermining of a more traditional idea of the artist that has upset the critic.

This particular artwork exposes the viewer to a performance where the rationality of human thought is exposed to the absurd condition of being. The very exhibition title is a conditional expression found in language, the structure of which addresses causality itself. The very basis of humour is to undermine our expectations, to disrupt the conditional and to reveal the absurd behavioural conventions of the human condition, turning them on their head. The choice of the opening quote by Foucault is to point towards the core of what an artwork like this exposes us to, the artificial separation of man from animal and reason from non-reason. Central to this separation are the taboo's surrounding the question of mental health, idiocy and the non-rational. Is it too conceivable in nature that something so cruel could be born into the world as a four legged man? As humanity full well knows, nature is capable of far crueler twists of fate. So, unlike the claims of Cristín Leach Hughes, it can be argued that this work has a wide scope for interpretation and that it was an absolute necessity for the artist to “act the eejit.” It’s just a pity she didn’t get the joke.