

Artists: Rebels without a Cause

There is no difference between fine-art and commercialism – and there never has been

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I am fascinated by those archaeological documentaries on television. You know the ones I mean: close-up of a hand brushing away at a piece of dirt and, then, voila, a tiny shard of pottery is miraculously uncovered. . . .

How do they do that? How did they know that a shard will materialize in the exact spot on which the camera was trained? How many times did they go through this process – sweep, sweep, sweep, nothing – until they got the right place?

. . . then the shard is reverently held up to the camera until it fills the frame while the narrator sonorously deduces from this itty-bitty piece of trash that the makers were the meso-cryptonites who lived in the lower Wahili three thousand years ago, buried sacred pigs with their dead, invented forks, married their sisters, constructed bamboo geodesic domes, worshipped nautilus shells, wove clothing from billiberry bark, believed their ancestors came from the stars (Alpha Centauri to be exact), laid the foundations for Greek philosophy, and suffered population depletion by hunting rhinocerii with sling-shots.

Well, excuse my skepticism but perhaps there is a slight credibility gap here between the actual historical truth and the ravings of an academic who has been on his knees too long in a hot desert without a sun hat.

But that's not, exactly, what I wanted to talk about (although, God knows, there is enough nuttiness in academia to keep me going for years). No, I got started on the wrong foot. I want to explicate (which is the academic word for "talk about") a few observations on the beginnings of art, modern culture and fine-art photography which may, or may not, have something to do with facing a charging rhino but which makes more sense.

It is this: we have been warned zillions of times not to interpret the past in the light of current states of mind because our ancestors were different from us. We abuse history when we view it from the vantage point of our own, presumably more.

sophisticated/intelligent/enlightened age. Personally I'm not so sure this cultural superiority is justified. What if the abuses occur because we assume the people of the past were different from ourselves? What if they were not, if you see what I mean. What

if the people of the past, in every culture and period, were exactly the same as us – in temperament, personality, values, subconscious yearnings, dreams and aspirations, in every thing except their love of cellular telephones? The problem is solved if we look at human behavior of the past and assume it was motivated by exactly the same forces that operate today. “This,” as the saying goes, “changes everything,” with due credit to the commercial for a Dodge or some other vehicle.

It will soon become apparent that this is a clever segue, because if we need to discuss the truth of the past in the light of current motivations then we need to be clear about the present culture. It is all about advertising. Period.

At this point in my narrative I initially wrote a sentence about Them (those with something to sell) and Us (those who are potential customers) but crossed it out because it implies a confrontation. It is not. “Us” are complicit, even embarrassingly eager to cooperate, with “Them.” How eager? We will actually pay money to be in their service.

As a test of this pathetic need to pander, walk through any shopping mall and notice how many goods are emblazoned with the trade-names and logos of their manufacturers. These same companies pay millions of dollars to publish their names in newspaper/magazine advertisements and television commercials yet the public fights for the privilege of paying them (usually a premium) for the dubious distinction of appearing in public as an ambulatory billboard with logos and slogans plastered across T-shirts, bags, sneakers and baseball caps. Personally I think Nike should not only hand out free caps but also pay us hourly rates for advertising their company.

I feel the same when perusing my daughter’s fashion magazines, avidly bought by the public which pays for the privilege of being conned by a multi-billion dollar industry in clothes, accessories, cosmetics, hair products, diet programs and thousands of ancillary products and services.

When I last bought a vehicle I was perusing the sales manifest when I came across a charge of \$50 for “publicity.” I was told that this was to help defray advertising costs. I responded by saying that I presumed the dealer would attach a sticker to my vehicle telling every one where I had bought it. Therefore, I said magnaminously, I would only charge \$50 for the advertising space on my vehicle. The dealer was first uncomprehending and then flabbergasted. No one else had ever objected. Of course not. I’m a rotten misfit. If I get a bag or shoes or a camera strap with a logo then the first thing I do is take a permanent marker and obliterate the name. But I do wish I could be a coconspirator in the commercial arena and then I would not be so surly – it’s no fun being pissed off whenever I go shopping. (Footnote: this is such a blatant and squirrely plea for sympathy that it even makes me squirm . . . so let’s change the topic if not the theme).

During the past nine months (at the time of writing – and it's still going on) the so-called news media have been saturated with the Clinton/Lewinsky nonsense.¹ Do I believe all those pundits and politicians wheeled in front of the cameras to pompously and hypocritically drone on and on about justice, integrity, truthfulness, honesty and so on, ad nauseum, have the best interests of the country at heart, or even believe their own drivel? Not a bit of it. They love the scandal which they have manufactured, promoted and maintained with one purpose in mind: to advertise themselves, increase visibility and to transform attention into money (pundits) and reelection (politicians). The proliferation of talking head shows has created a demand for pundits to blather on about matters they know little about (and the accuracy of which is in hindsight abysmally low) but which is presented as if it was news.² Of course, in this age of hype there is no penalty for being wrong, only for being boring. The effort to extract any hard facts from these programs is akin to watching a particularly inept scout attempting to light a fire in horizontal rain.

And look at all those television programs that are about television programs, in a nepotistic, cannibalistic parody of information.³ And look at how popular they are. And what about the shameless selling which masquerades as programming, such as MTV, a highly successful channel which primarily consists of advertisements, comprising expensive little creative films, financed by music companies to promote the sales of their products.

My personal aversions aside, I'm not saying that all the above examples are unenjoyable, unesthetic or socially harmful. My point is that the divisions (themselves the most creative constructs of artists) between truth and fiction, altruism and commercialism, art and advertising, are meaningless. When I hear my colleagues pontificate on the purity of art versus the sordidness of advertising I have to wonder at their own grasp on reality. The boundary between art and advertising cannot be erected because there is no dividing line. This has always been true. Art, even so-called Fine Art, is no different in principle or spirit from advocacy. The chances are good that our ancient ancestors, like us, were equally complicitous in the selling/buying pact.

Recently I was reading a turgid tome speculating on the purpose of neolithic cave paintings, in which the authors were blathering about magic, spiritualism, ritual, psychic connections, shamanistic practices, empathetic resonances, on and on. It seems to me more than likely that Og, hoping to be elected a tribal elder and so have his pick of the meat and women, is boasting of his prowess with spear and bravery on the hunt, and in an effort to sell himself hires Ugh to produce some visuals on the cave wall which when lit by the flickering flames of the fire look like television commercials.

This is not far-fetched. Throughout most of history painters were artisans, paid by the square foot to promote the prince or church or other patron. They made commercials, in exactly the same way and for the same reasons as today's film directors – Woody Allen, Spike Lee, David Lynch, John Frankenheimer, Ridley Scott, et al – make commercials

to please their corporate paymasters. 'Twas ever thus. The only factors that have changed are: who owns the wealth to commission art and the ability of that art to reach vastly more viewers than those actually standing in front of the original.

That is why practically all art history textbooks are so ridiculous. They talk about solitary genius, iconography, stylistic movements and artistic influences, with only brief asides on patronage (Michelangelo) and politics (Goya). They all miss the important issue: money. The real history of art is its economic history. Art takes place when there is surplus wealth which can be spent on the promotion of an institution, product or person. It is no coincidence that the major centers of art production throughout history have been the centers of thriving commerce; it is no coincidence that in recent times New York has produced more "art" than Sarajevo; it is no coincidence that there are more art galleries in Scottsdale, Santa Fe and Santa Monica than there are in working class enclaves in the boonies. As the famous thief remarked when asked why he robbed banks: because that's where the money is.

But photography "for the masses" changed all that, right? Wrong. Forget the Beaumont Newhall text. Beaumont produced an important work of pioneering research but one which is based on the art-history model (like all those that have succeeded it), which is not surprising because he was a trained art historian. The invention and early history of photography is rooted in economics. Without the newly wealthy middle class in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution there would be no need for a substitute for oil paintings. Photography was invented, developed, made by and sold to those with surplus wealth, the nouveau riche of the Victorian Age. Which is the reason why the endearing but misguided attempts of multiculturalists are doomed to frustration: you cannot "balance" the ethnicity of early photography and this fact is not because of prejudice or discrimination but because people in a survival situation do not produce art or photography. They cannot afford to do so – and even if they could, there would be no market for the results. Only when there is enough surplus wealth in a culture (such as our own) can it afford to siphon off otherwise productive citizens and allow them to become fine artists in order to promote their own or someone else's egos.

Such notions, I am aware, deserve expansion but I do not have the time, the editor does not have the space, and my guess is that you do not have the patience, so let us quick-cut to the present for a few examples.

One of the biggest myths of contemporary photography is that of the solitary, wayward, individualistic, non-commercial, art-for-art's-sake spiritually minded genius who is in opposition to corporate money-grubbing. The corporate world is way ahead of you. It has embraced rebelliousness and spirituality as slogans and created a climate where you can indulge a private fantasy about being a non-conformist if your dissent is confirmed by choosing to buy a specific product. Clever. This idea of non-conformity as a sales device is so pervasive, insidious and suffused within the culture that it is ironic that rebelliousness against corporations is being created by market strategists.

Perhaps the most blatant and shameless example of the advertiser corrupting the idea of rebelliousness is Apple Computers' ungrammatical "Think Different" campaign, parading before us the images of dead geniuses – Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Martin Luther King, Amelia Earhardt – who, by association, are endorsing a product that did not exist while they were alive, as Richard Dreyfuss' voice intones: "Here's to the misfits, the rebels, the trouble-makers . . . while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius." It is irrelevant that many of the wayward geniuses had never heard of the personal computer. The product per se is not the sales message. So do what Apple suggests and think differently: is a picture of Gandhi any more appropriate for the sale of a computer than for a watch or refrigerator; is the sale of a computer more likely to be made because it is being touted by Picasso than any other dead genius? No. The connection between the sales message and the product has been pulled so far apart that it has been completely severed. Rebelliousness is not anti-establishment; it is the sales pitch of the establishment.

The Rebel is now the name of a camera by Canon; Burger King insists, somewhat cryptically, "sometimes you've gotta break the rules" (like, what, refusing to pay or running a red light?); Ford advises that "middle-of-the-road is for painted yellow lines" whereas rebels, I presume, are on the wrong side of the road; American Express celebrates a range of what look like ex-hippie misfits all of whom are grateful that the company never interfered with their lifestyles, to which the only response can be why the hell should they?; Nike co-opts the music "Revolution" by the Beatles and the image of William Burroughs, the most anti-corporate subversive of his generation, to sell sneakers; and the beat goes on. It is In to be an Outsider . . . (Hey, that's a good slogan: it's for sale to any advertiser who would like to buy me . . . it, I mean).

But what about spiritualism? Isn't that the last bastion of the artist? Surely the spirit cannot be co-opted as a sales pitch. Campbell's Soup is "Good for the Soul," "Coke adds life" just like the Holy Spirit; "Seek the Truth" with a Heineken beer; "Inside me lives an eternal life force" if you drink Evian water; "Ignite the soul" by buying a Volvo; "They say the soul lives on. And it does" in a Chrysler car of all places; "If you sold your soul in the 80s, here's your chance to buy it back again" with the purchase of a VW Beetle.

I know what you are thinking⁴ . . . you are saying to yourself that the photographs used in these advertisements were not made by artists but by commercial hacks. Or, if they were made by artists, then they were appropriated posthumously and, presumably without their approval (unless their souls emerged from the Chrysler to sign the OK).

That is true in some cases. If ever there was a non-conformist, spiritually-minded genius in modern photography it was Bill Brandt. After fifteen years of solitary creation he produced *Perspective of Nudes*, a landmark publication, which was almost universally panned by the critics. But the reviews did not disturb Brandt nearly so much as the fact that advertisers quickly stole the idea and imitated distortions to sell all manner of

products. Now that he is dead, his actual nude distortions have been used in a British national advertising campaign to sell Levi jeans, appearing on posters in over 4,000 city-sites during 1993, the very year that the originals were on display at the Barbican, one of Britain's most prestigious venues for fine art.

But it would be a mistake to suggest that fine-artists do not/would not sell their personal images to be used in advertisements. Examples are legion, from Ansel Adams' wilderness image on a coffee can⁵, Joel Meyerowitz's Cape Cod image selling Adobe Photoshop, Duane Michals' sequence images selling everything from fashion to insurance, and the list is endless. Hundreds of fine-artists are daily pitching their art as advertising. And I am not talking about their willingness to sell their talents as moonlighting professionals; I'm talking about their personal art, once made, being coopted as advertising images.

A more insidious trend is for corporations to jump the gun and prepay the artists to produce art, hence aligning commercial interests with the rebel-artist syndrome. A recent example is the "Barbie" series of large-format Polaroid prints produced by David Levinthal. These have been exhibited, promoted, and sold (for huge figures, at least by photographic standards) by major art galleries throughout the nation. The exhibition can also be seen in book form, *Barbie Millicent Roberts* (Pantheon). Levinthal has a track record of photographing table-top figurines – soldiers, cowboys and Indians, glamor models, blacks – in order to make, as he and the critics seem to think, biting satires and critical attacks on social/cultural stereotyping. His Barbie dolls presumably fit the same pattern. Yet, lo and behold, the major funding, and promotion, for this series was provided by Mattel, the makers of the Barbie doll.

So what is wrong with this picture? Nothing. It merely illustrates that art and advertising are not as dissimilar as usually assumed. I have heard gallery directors (who are selling the Barbie series) actually say that Levinthal has perpetuated a crafty scam on Mattel: the lone artist cocks a snoot at big business by making art which criticizes a product while getting the manufacturer to pay for it. The implication is a sniggering "up yours" to Mattel while they themselves, the galleries, are also making money from Barbie. Self-deception and hypocrisy are deeply embedded in the game. And you do not think that Mattel is fully aware of these reactions from the art community? Of course it is. It fully embraces all the ideological, critical mumbo-jumbo surrounding the series; Mattel is now a player in the rebel-artist stakes, and reaping the benefits of all the free publicity.

Levinthal, by all accounts a serious worker and a nice guy to boot, has not been singled out for special criticism. He is merely a prominent example of the syndrome. Other artists are more than willing to aid and abet the advertising process. Indeed a special agency was created just for this purpose. The Swanstock picture agency took already completed projects by fine artists and sold the results for commercial purposes. So successful was the idea that the agency was bought out by Image Bank, one of the biggest commercial picture agencies in the world. Image Bank is owned by Kodak.

Swanstock had no difficulty in recruiting fine artists to submit their individual creativity for advertising.

But you are right in that there are many undiscovered artists out there who are pursuing their own visions without regard to such crass commercial interests. That is why they are unknown and likely to remain so. Remember the old definition of a liberal: a conservative who has not yet been mugged. The artist-photographer is an advertising photographer who has not yet been economically mugged, but hopes to be and will then, in a classic defensive posture, claim that he/she is cleverly subverting the system.

By now the conclusion must be clear: there is no intrinsic difference between advertising and art. We are so inured to advocacy masquerading as information in every aspect of our lives that we can no longer separate one from the other and therefore need to invent distinctions between the two in order to preserve a fantasy of individualism. Michael Jordan, the basketball super-star, said/was paid to say: "Recently, I bought my first piece of modern art." When I read this interesting announcement I was not at all surprised or disappointed to discover that he was talking about a Philips flat screen television set. Or that John Updike, the literary guru, told the National Arts Club that advertisements were "the aesthetic marvels of our age." It would be hard to disagree, and I say that not in anger, or sorrow but as a fact of life, then and now. It is a cliché to say that the best television commercials are incomparably better than the actual programs - but clichés are clichés because they are true.

The real anomaly is that we ever expected anything but irrelevance from art or advertising. The fact that "Coke adds life" means absolutely nothing or that a Volvo "ignites the soul" is patently absurd or that "Think different" promotes bad English while advocating brilliance or that art, advertising and news programming are all advocacies, is all part and parcel of our willing acceptance of image over substance.

So when the archaeologist deduces a whole civilization from a single shard, television sets are not switched off by the million to the sound of raucous jeering. Perhaps the Wahili residents would not have been wiped out by irate rhinocerii and could still be around to tell us the truth of their culture if they had access to television. A recent advertisement depicts a "native," presumably in Africa, looking as if he is a prime candidate for credit rejection and a thousand miles from the nearest shopping mall, asking his colleague: "How do you keep a rhino from charging?" The answer: give it an American Express credit card. Ha. Ha.

References

1. My award for the best newspaper headline announcing Clinton's "confession" was in a British Sunday edition: "Clinton admits sex – but did not impale."
2. My award for the most sickening, non-stop blather of any television channel: MSNBC.
3. In the interests of full disclosure, my favorite is E! channel's "Talk Soup."

4. I know this because I'm a rebel genius since I wore my Nikes when driving to a Burger King in my Ford where I paid by American Express before typing this on a Macintosh.

5. Now there is a clever switch: a right-wing capitalist remade into a tree-hugging environmental leftie.

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