

The Politics of Looking

Nicky Morgan, the current Conservative minister for culture, said in 2014 that children studying art are limiting their careers. Maybe she has a point - how can self-expression help me when I'm starving? Does a pretty picture really take away the tediousness of my minimum wage job? But maybe we've fallen victim to an illusion of art being something purely aesthetic, economic and elitist. Perhaps seeing art as purely aesthetic, economic, elitist, keeps it within the grasps of an elite.

To say that art has no social usage, is not political, is to strip it of its full revolutionary potential. Human society is the artistic illusion of a select few. The phone you hold in your hand, the building you live in, the toilet you piss in, the way you talk, whom you associate with - are constructed as one may paint a picture of their fantasies. Art is not merely canvas on a wall, art is a vision that guides us through this labyrinth called society. Remember that a man called Adolf Hitler was the world's most dangerous failed artist, his aesthetic vision - facism.

Art institutions have always been the playgrounds of the extremely wealthy, casting them as "useless" bars access to an understanding of the 1% who determine our futures. Manchester Art Gallery, a Victorian gallery, characterised by excesses of gold and objects was designed to appeal to the Victorian bourgeois man, who owned excesses of gold, objects, and people from colonised lands, giving him the visual illusion that he owned the world as an object. Modern galleries, such as Saatchi, appeal to the modern bourgeois man. White cube galleries, with blank, minimalist layouts, keep artwork separate from the chaos of the outside world, just as rich men in their vast, white mansions like to be kept - isolated - so they can't feel the pain of social regression and bloodshed. If the art gallery has been built for one type of person, then who is the city you live in built for? Who is it the aesthetic landscape of cities across the world is meant to validate? Who watches the grandeur of the Principal Hotel and the developments of the skyscrapers on Oxford Road from their ivory tower?

A multi-platform project exploring alternative art histories in Writing, Performance and Events.

Who invests in art and why? The 1% who control the world are investors, who invest in their own separate visions and aesthetic fantasies. They invest in politics and business, just as they invest in art. Art, the validation of an elite, reflects the economics, dreams and impulses of the wider political and social scene. Politics and society aren't a truth, but the fantasies of a select few.

You might say that art isn't political, but don't you perceive the world around you visually? We dream in pictures. Images have the power to taint our visions of reality. Would you feel differently waking up to the sun rising than lying face down in the dirt? If you wore silk instead of rags?

Paintings are fantasies, spectacles. Just as politics are fantasies, spectacles. What is the difference between a prime minister and a work of art? The public image of a prime minister is a dream-like fantasy, an image people pin their ideals and hopes to, just like we have done to a Basquait, Egon Schiele, Picasso: except unlike a Basquait, Egon Schiele, or Picasso, the Prime Minister's image is not confined to a canvas. It has the power to shut down all of our voices. Boris Johnson is a carefully cultivated blonde-haired, satirical media image, so we should stop calling him Boris. Start calling him Prime Minister, because "Boris" is a piece of art, a fantasy, the reality is the authority of a prime minister. And you say images do not have any value except mere aesthetic pleasure - hasn't an image you believed in fucked up your future?

We say artists have no power, no use - but with the rising tide of the internet, who has more influence: the cultural artistic figure or the politician? Who do we worship more? Who do we put more love into? Who do we see ourselves in? What kinds of people do we love and hate? Who do we see as objects? Who as animals? Who do we spit on? Who do we perceive as SCUM? Whose voices do we evade, cast as silence? How much of our identity is founded in images? Aren't our identities performed? The roles we are supposed to play are visualised to us every single day. Phones, screens, advertising boards - all play to us

images of the different people we are or might be. These images didn't come from us as a collective voice. They are not our voices, but the voices of those who have the privilege to speak to us visually - they had the money to study, buy a camera, learn the intricacies of digital technology. Somehow, someone's artistic vision enters our bodies, penetrates our very flesh. It has always been this way, it just becomes more physical, more insidious with the painstaking hyper-reality of digital technology.

However you decide to modify your vision, there is a visual politics, a politics of looking, digested into the background noise of architecture, phone screens, institutions, hierarchical systems, telling us how we are to perceive one another, keeping us as separate beings, unlike the communities of cavemen and women we used to be when we first emerged on this earth. You are prescribed an illusion at birth, but you can project a different illusion. Art is how we handle illusions, how we construct the way we look, hear, and feel things. Think about the images that infect our way of looking every day, the art that is cleverly disguised to us as politics. If we create our own art, our own politics of looking - together as a collective voice we can revolutionise our grip on social reality.



Image by Hannah Sullivan

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