

Confessions of a gallery hater

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There's something basically wrong with art exhibitions. To be more specific, art exhibitions of the type which have become commonplace today always leave me feeling dissatisfied, as though the effort of taking a shower, traveling to the gallery, making small talk with the other guests, is never compensated by the experience of seeing the images. For me, art exhibitions are a draining, de-energizing experience. Yet the best of art is always energizing. "Art", as Ozenfant says, "tends to elevate us." [His emphasis]

So there is a discrepancy here between the art itself and the exhibition experience. The only logical solution to the problem as I see it is that the environment and the atmosphere surrounding the art tends to dull its significance and drain its power. It is possible that I have become jaded over the years, and am suffering from ennui, a boredom with images, and that the surfeit of pictures in my past has produced an art-dyspepsia. I do not think this is true. I can still be immeasurably moved, excited, energized, angered and emotionally and intellectually charged by images in almost any other context than hanging in pristine splendor in a spartan gallery setting. I do not find the usual gallery ambiance very conducive to a personal relationship with a picture.

One reason for this state of affairs is that most modern shows are hung for commercial reasons - to sell pictures off the wall. I have nothing against this idea *per se* and it would be foolishly naive not to recognize the business of art. But I must admit that I feel (am encouraged to feel?) slightly guilty about the fact that I am there to (merely) enjoy the works and not buy any of them. Inevitably my appreciation of the images suffers unfairly because I am constantly reminded by the environment that these are commercial objects, and that although browsing is tolerated it is not wholly welcome.

I confess, also, to a feeling of intimidation in the average gallery. The environment reeks of wealth, privilege and preciousness. I am well aware of the efforts on the part of caring directors to obviate this anxiety in the gallery-goer, but the fact remains that galleries are inevitably associated with a small and favored class of society, one in which I suspect I do not belong. So I tiptoe around the hushed, empty space, staring with isolated reverence at perhaps a print, surrounded by acres of whitewash or fancy wall covering, as if in the presence of some sacred icon of Art. Anything the work itself might be saying to me is drowned out by the fear and guilt of being in the place at all.

I bet it was a lot more fun to visit exhibitions 100 years ago. Then, pictures were individually and often eccentrically framed, butted together from floor to ceiling, and competed for attention with floral wallpaper, gas fittings and furniture. What a mess - but also what an adventure to find the memorable images! Of course the idea was usually taken to excess. I love the announcement of an exhibition of photographs held at the Royal Horticultural Hall, London, in 1907. 50,000 prints were on display for only three days. That would mean looking at just over 16,666 prints per day; a viewing of over 2,000 prints per hour, assuming an eight-hour day. Or approximately half-a-second for each photograph, and moving on to the next. I, for one, would welcome now and again the excitement, and even the mistakes, of a wall-packed, diverse and chaotic excess of pictures, in a multitude of styles and presentations and subjects - especially if the exhibition was held away from the gallery in a horticultural hall.

Perhaps this example is exaggerating towards the absurd. But the point of the story is sincere and it is this. The assumption that a small number of art pieces, isolated in wall space and with a presentation of rarified refinement is the only method of properly presenting art is equally absurd.

Over the years there have been many isolated experiments in alternative venues - in buses, projected onto the outside walls of buildings at night, on freestanding screens in shopping malls, propped against steps, trees and benches in public spaces, pinned to trees in parks, and a host of other creative spaces. When young photographers complain about the lack of gallery opportunities, my first reaction is that they lack the imagination to find alternatives.

Even establishment galleries can sometimes (but not often enough) expand their audience, and please me at the same time, by taking art into different environments. I fondly remember, for example, an exhibition arranged by the Eaton/Shoen Gallery. It wanted to celebrate the anniversary of its opening with a special exhibition featuring a large selection of works from its first eight shows. The exhibition was held in Frank Lloyd Wright's 1957 desert home (known as the H. C. Price "grandmother" House) in Scottsdale, Arizona, although the gallery is based in San Francisco.

The art objects were hung on the walls, as if they belonged in the home, and sculpture was placed in the central atrium and in the surrounding desert. In the house, and unlike in a gallery, the art and all the accoutrements of a home came to a mutual understanding. The art did not proclaim itself like a prostitute in a hotel lobby, as it would have done in a sales place, but allowed the visitor to search out new friends in an atmosphere of relaxation and generosity. A Nassos Daphnis piece of plywood and paint was like an exotic plant of the future, placed by the atrium fountain - and perhaps it is no coincidence that Daphnis is also a distinguished horticulturist. A nice touch: an easy chair faced the Daphnis piece and looked out the garden to the pool. Similarly a large photo-mural by Keith Smith and Philip Lange was a folding screen which shielded the corridor to the bathroom. On a bookshelf nearby, what else, but artist-made books and "Gathering Dust" by Donald Lipski. The garden gazebo was in fact a cast aluminum, steel, wire and acrylic sculpture by Clarice Dreyer. And so it continued, each work of art complementing the environment, appearing naturally and inevitably a part of the home. They belonged.

A good example of this art/life synthesis was the set of photographs by Bernard Plossu. Not only do his images invite intimacy by the deceptive simplicity of his seeing, but their regular display down a corridor of the home gave the impression that the owner had proudly placed his own momentos of faces and places on the ideal wall.

There was a similar inevitability about all the art works in the house. Because the art belonged there, so did the visitor. It was more than an impressive exhibition; it was an enjoyable, invigorating experience. And that, for me, is a rare enough event to be celebrated in these words.