

An Impossible Umbrella

Umbrellas keep the rain out and us dry. They function both as a shield from the outside and as boundary delineating the inside, the comfort zone. When one references “umbrella” in a thesaurus, terms such as the following appear: protection, support, backing, agency, guidance, care, charge, responsibility, and cover. The ‘umbrella concept’, as an all-covering, all-shielding mechanism, is regularly employed by humanity in attempts to neatly summarize our explanations of the unknown, the uncanny, the unfamiliar. Sanctuary is found under our ‘umbrellas’.

While the particular manifestations of umbrella concepts are myriad, only one, that of high art, will be considered here. In lieu of an academic or cosmopolitan definition of high art, I choose a much more pragmatic, perhaps reductive definition focusing on terms of access: the representative traits of high art are access to funding, contacts, and the status quo. The case study in this brief exposition will be my subjective experience of a decaying alter, the Venice Biennale, which I put forward as an exquisite example of an artificial world. Taking the event as a whole intentionally avoids the interface as embodied by an individual work of art while simultaneously addressing a concrete event in space and time. This avoidance is carried out in order to set aside orthodox artistic measures and debates such as those based upon concept, form, content, aesthetics, and identity politics. The levers of traditional theoretical critique are diverse in their thought-inspiring abilities, but the rhizomatic, *concrete* complexity we face in this technological age asks us to do more than chase our tails in pursuit of free-ranging subjectivities. The Biennale is an umbrella event—a conglomerating synopsis of the high art sphere. It is certainly an *arbitrarily quite discontinuity*, but this is a necessary delineation if any practicable conclusion is to be derived. The goal is not brilliant infernos that leave all barren, but instead galvanizing, rejuvenating flames that are integral to keeping soil fertile.

Dash Snow is dead. In his bathtub overdose, he left a disembodied specter; a specter that conjures animalistic instincts, delicately rotting resources, and lavishly ignorant betrayals of opportunity. In more brutal, less romantic terms, the story of Snow is also one of access—something he undeniably possessed. Snow can be taken as a human example of a world of artifice, as a living exhibition.

The Biennale is a cul-de-sac creature—a gross expenditure of energy and resources by experts who are lost in their expertise; experts awash in the awareness of how much they don’t know, burning the fumes in a desperate attempt to keep the smoke in front of the mirrors for as long as possible. The status of the Biennale capitalizes on the fact that methods of de-masking and revelation (as in revealing) are not currently threatening. Between the acceleration of information and the crushing mass of human production that now falls under the rubric of art, there is no longer an identifiable wizard behind the curtain—we don’t know what good art is and we have no one to ask. Our systems of certification and measure have been hung out to dry as their awkward ineffectiveness surfaces.

Take the fact that Bruce Nauman has been present in the last couple Biennales, and he is the artist for the United States pavilion in 2009. Nauman was born in 1941 and has been working since the 1960s. With complete respect to Nauman, how does a country of three hundred million people, massive cultural resources, and one of the global art capitals, New York City, not offer anything more inspiring than a 69 year-old who has been on the scene for half of a century? Is this contemporary creativity at its pinnacle? Attention to history is important, but Art’s main job has never been to respect tradition. It seems the main function of the Giardini, besides stoking fluttering nationalism, it to certify that yes, the artistic cannon is alive, and that yes, the gallery system is the best way to support the arts. Artists consistently rage against white gallery walls that function to delimit and, in many ways, suppress what art can be and do; yet apparently this complaint has been lost on the Biennale—there is little truly creative challenge to its organization and dominating position. Creativity has effectively been caged within the event; art has its “correct” place.

While tragic, Snow’s death is exactly the kind of performance our creative systems, of which the Biennale is a culminating event, are best at cultivating. We get what we ask for.

It is here we need to honestly ask ourselves whether it is art we are interested in or simply the voyeuristic, sickly sweet candy of youth, opportunity, and time being scorched by a midday sun? Regardless of message, does it make any sense to culture creativity that primarily tends towards consumption and cultural decomposition? Is it just death we are really after? In moments of conceptual wandering, simple pragmatism can be helpful in rebuilding foundations. The overwrought question of “What is art?” doesn’t serve us here as that only leads to opinionless tale-chasing. More pertinent is this question:

What can art be used for?

Jackson Pollock and Dash Snow played somewhat similar roles in the art scene theater, but there are differences. Before he could meet his end and enter the *cannon*, Pollock had to be productive with some authority. Production within context still had the mystique our overeducated irony has since slowly strangled. Today this expectation of productivity has been shelved out of boredom—rarely does high art open our minds and invite us anywhere any more. In today's high art world, Snow's death was the proper magnum opus.

Our creative expectations have fallen under the opiate-effects of post-modern critique. Walter Benjamin was right; art has lost its shamanistic aura over those most charged with it care. Today art seeks "undomesticated" anecdotes offering savage thrills, including death, which feed into our media and commercial systems. Extravagant fireworks, glorified politics, remnants of colonial misadventure, or kitsch entertainment are enough, but this tendency isn't inevitable or irreparable. In ways, this can even be considered an improvement for the elite field of high art has been fully infiltrated with popular culture tastes. The divide between elite culture and low culture is as imaginary as it has even been. Then again, was it ever otherwise? Has it ever been anything more than a well-maintained hoax? What happens when the shtick gets dull and the audience finds more revelation, opening, and excitement in codes, computers, and software? What happens when the utterly logical calculations of our technology easily relegate high art to its detached, self-serving corner, while proceeding to bend our minds in astonishing ways?

In a properly speculative move, perhaps Snow himself was aware of this: that his art products were only byproducts; that it was his life as lived art that was most intriguingly consumable, most touching; that by having access to the scenes and means to sustain his binges and bailouts, he was somehow assigned what he likely came to see as simply the next step in his storytelling. Snow's demise, whether intentional or accidental, concluded his living legend. And it was indeed Snow's legend, his storytelling that was most enthralling: *'Wayward scion of the American art family rolls in the grit, becomes muse, and ends his journey at 27.'* If Snow's life carried an art, it is this: **we seek stories at all costs and are suffering without our shamans. Regardless of the depth of our logic and the breadth of our explanation, storytellers will always be able to capture our attention with both triumph and tragedy.** For Snow's story was one of inviting mystery and testifying self-destruction as to his authenticity—too much information and the fantasy cracks; too little action and validity fails.

The Venice Biennale struggles to summon both emotion and exhilaration; it falls short due to too much information and too little action. The creative fantasies never even got off the ground as they were swamped with expectation and overproduction. In a realm where financial backing is so flagrantly apparent, one must be "cultured" to see past the bills if any Art is to be experienced. In a realm where Western colonial access is undeniably present, one must be "cultured" to ignore the gaps among location and representation if any Art is to be experienced. In a realm where the all the canonical tested names are in attendance, one must be "cultured" to look deeper for new invention if any Art is to be experienced.

Peter Greenaway, born in 1942, presented what amounted to a redux of "The Wedding at Cana" as an example of contemporary innovation. While both loved and reviled by reviews, the work is first and foremost a master application of technology, yet this team-of-technology aspect (for Greenaway surely did no coding) is completely neglected in discussions surrounding the work. Greenaway, in a role better described as producer, has been labeled as 'artist' because that is what he has been before—an easy deference to the status quo to keep things in their "proper" place.

Stories are what we need right now, but when narrative threads are so thoroughly and narrowly predicted and enforced, experiencing high art with the necessary fluid openness that best feeds creative experience becomes nearly impossible. The stories are too thick, too convoluted, too bound to each other while circling within an approved cage—spaces to breath, appreciate, and play within the presented creativity are entirely too few and far between. There is certainly an appreciation to be had for such densely obtuse internal references, supports, and systems, but the 'explainability' that art once offered as an umbrella has run refugee from the Biennale.

Perhaps this is a folly of high art: it has continued to operate with an assumption of post-modern attitude and awareness when in reality sensual aesthetics and expectations have moved on the face of digital advancement.

Whiz-bang technology employed by “artists” pales in comparison to whiz-bang technology wielded by Google programmers. Why are artists doing what programmers do? Isn’t that just programming? Is programming the new “art”? Is there no other space for art to play?

Is there hope for the Biennale in this wildly networked world? Can creativity be revived in a more distributed sense? Has technology taken over the mantle of innovation in applied creativity while high art and the Biennale (and other such events) are delegated to commenting on yesterday and burning off excess resources? *Who the hell has excess resources today?* What happens when habit comes to rule to innovative systems?

Dash Snow happens, right to his end: 27, high on heroin, submerged in the bathtub of a \$325-a-night hotel room.

Habit-driven systems lose their ability to critique themselves; they lose the ability to reinvent themselves. This is what has waylaid contemporary high art and the Venice Biennale—they **have forgotten their own artificiality**. When freshly minted, the critical tools of art and thought that came into fashion in the Twentieth Century were incredibly useful in asking intriguing questions that led to the manifestation of wonderful creativity in many forms, but the time has come to set them aside, if only for a moment.

And it is here where a *healthy* insanity hopefully will descend.

How do we set aside knowledges, thoughts, and theories that we have so long struggled to get a hold of? Is there anything to be found by intentionally neglecting certain human creations in the hopes of creating new avenues of consideration? Of course there is. To assume humans have already achieved the apex of creativity (both in art and institutions) is utterly asinine. But if this setting aside is to occur, it will depend on the constructions of another artificial world: a world that in its initial phases will parallel the intents of high art and the Biennale while leaving behind the access-based definition (among other things); an utterly artificial world, something conjured with imagination, energy, and probably private funding. But what is the benefit in trading one artificial world for the next? The benefit is the opportunity of experience, the opportunity to create and engage at will. The opportunity to rewrite the rules as many times as we like, strip off our cloths, dance around the fire until dawn, and then do it all over again. This is the gift of artificiality. A gift much of the high art world has forgotten.

We are seeking a new umbrella, a new way to ‘cover’ our thinking. But until we are ready to close our eyes, to release our death-grip on our comfort-giving umbrellas of knowledges and creativities, we will never find support for this new agency: it will remain an impossible umbrella.