



REVIEWS, OPINIONS

Is This Art? Do You Appreciate It?

Dick Goody

Professor Phillip Singer, anthropologist, has produced, and is the star of, a new video entitled *Museum Security Guards as Art Connoisseurs*. He presents an interesting premise. Because museum security guards are exposed to modern art more than anyone else on the planet, it might well follow that they ought to have a greater appreciation for it. Standing before Nam June Paik's *Video Flag*, 1985, a stacked array of video screens that mimic old glory in a whirring staccato, Dr. Singer asks of Angelo Lewis, a seasoned guard with ten years experience at the DIA, "Is this art? Do you appreciate it?" If this were a court of law, the judge would tell the good professor to ask only one question at a time. Part of Singer's shtick is that he wants us to know he's going for the jugular—he's going to make Modernism suffer—he wants to incite the mob to riot. Mr. Lewis, glistening with sweat under Singer's relentless gaze (some make-up would have helped), replies that he could not say whether or not it is art. Despite his propensity to perspire, however, Lewis manages to remain composed. In fact he is a study in circumspection and tact. "Is this art for the people?" demands Singer sardonically. "I couldn't say whether it is or not," replies Lewis diplomatically.

Modernism has often been misunderstood. To the majority of people it must seem completely unfathomable. In the

nineteenth century Renoir's depiction of flesh in his opulent translucent nudes was condemned as being vile, green and putrid. However, the acceptance of the avant-garde by the bourgeoisie (it usually takes about four decades), is a curiously inevitable process. Often it is left to the bathos of commercialism to promote such rehabilitation. Think of Monet's pastel landscapes adorning the lid of your cookie tin. It took fifty years before Mondrian's sublime grids became an acceptable part of our visual currency, albeit in the guise of backdrops employed in Loreal cosmetic advertisements. When Matisse and his circle were provided with a special room in which to exhibit their new work in the Salon d'Automne of 1906, they were immediately condemned as wild beasts. Of course even the Fauves eventually succumbed to the relentless insatiability of mass culture, assimilated into the milieu of greetings cards and becoming poster fodder. And think of *The Scream*, by Munch. Who in 1893 (if it could have been predicted that people would one day wear undershirts with pictures them), who would have foreseen *The Scream* as a T-shirt icon, not less an inflatable doll!

The fulcrum of Professor Singer's denouncement is a work by Haim Steinbach entitled, *Shelf: one minute managers IV-I*, 1989. In effect, cunningly, Singer has chosen the most difficult example of Modernism to hone his attack. Steinbach's piece is a shelf, covered in kitchen laminate, displaying three brand-new aluminum stockpots, and three freshly minted black medicine balls. These are not replicas but the real thing. Steinbach himself, it must be conceded, has contrived to appropriate the most intractable, alienating, and confounding objects, which the uninitiated will absolutely find antagonizing, engendering the most reactionary possible backlash. "Is this art?" Singer inquires. "No," replies Lewis. "Why?" "Because it has no representation. It's more of a puzzle." "What's the puzzle?" presses Singer, ever on the offensive. Lewis replies, "I still haven't figured it out yet." "How is it possible to appreciate something like this?" rants Singer with incredulity, a leading question if ever there was one.

In Singer's continuum, art history would have frozen its progress in the middle of the seventeenth century. How paternally he smiles upon Lewis when he chooses Artemesia Gentileschi's, *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, 1625, as the epitome of good art. "What is it about this that you like; why is it art?" asks Singer. "It actually tells a story. You get a feeling from it," says Lewis, adding, "Once I found out the meaning behind the actual story, that's what made it even more powerful." Singer then inquires whether there is a story in modern art. "Not very much," replies Lewis.

"You can look for a long time at a sixteenth century painting, but in the gallery of contemporary art you don't want to stick around," says Singer, leading the witness once again. Lewis replies: "It tightens down very narrow." And of course he is absolutely right, it does get narrow because Modernism is very much concerned with tightening things up.

Up until about 1850 all painting was narrative. Even Chardin's meditations on the scullery speak with intimate passion about the calm of petite bourgeois immutability. It was the Impressionists who severed painting from the conventions of narrative subject matter. They painted what was in front of them wherever they happened to set up their easels: trees, water, sky. They were interested in the way light created structure; they became fascinated in the physicality of paint and the primacy of color, neither of which had or has anything to do with storytelling. Modernism is concerned with shedding all the paraphernalia that is not useful in the pursuit of creating pure structure. It is about reducing everything to its purest form. It requires an austere discipline and is certainly an acquired taste. At the hands of fervent devotees, during the sixties and seventies, in its most reduced and decimated form, Modernism branched into Minimalism and took the form of the blank white canvas. In this manifestation it was argued that the weave of the canvas wasn't minimal enough. Such extremism makes Jackson Pollock's drip paintings appear positively Rococo in comparison. Once Modernism traveled up this cul de sac, it was all but dead and buried. Haim Steinbach, seen in

this context, seems like a forsaken Japanese soldier, alone on his island, still saluting the flag, decades after the armistice. It is paradoxical that despite being radical in the extreme, Steinbach's work is already out of date. Art that displays everyday objects has a short shelf life. For example *Related and Different*, 1985, which resides in the Saatchi Collection, displays, fresh from their box, red and white high top basketball shoes. Fifteen years after the fact they look utterly obsolete and ridiculous. But the point that Phillip Singer chooses to ignore is that Steinbach is making art that is not entertaining or didactic, narrative or meaningful; he is interested only in object and display. There isn't anything abstract or hidden in the work. It is merely the linguistic representational equivalent of a minimalist blank canvas. Whether Singer is ignorant of this fact or not is unknown. Outwardly he has zero tolerance. His pursuit is righteous and relentless. Yet again the hucksters and charlatans of Modernism have pulled the wool over the eyes of the Founders Society. It's scandalous!

Haim Steinbach's shelves will undoubtedly soon be consigned to a very dark place in the basement of art history, nothing more than an embarrassing footnote. But nothing ventured, nothing gained, eh? Any anthropologist will tell you that.