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NO PARTICULAR THING TO MEAN

Introduction

There seems to be an emerging awareness that one of the outstanding problems in the de-constitution of art-history as an academic subject remains the status of the art-object itself, as a historical form of production, as a site of the intersection of various ideologies, and in terms of how it is understood as an object of knowledge. Awareness that is, that this is a problem and that it is grossly under theorised. The way in which this problem is confronted will shape the elements of a new art-history, in what way or if at all it requires the epithets of art or design. In some respects the new and progressive art-histories of the last decade, that have embarked on particular methods of historicising the art-work, have as much intensified the problems as they have resolved them. In Tim Clark's work, for example, the fundamental issues of the reception of works of art and its diverse meanings have been broached. But in one way or another, we are always left somewhere in the Louvre or, of late, in the Jeu de Paume. That is to say, in a highly privileged space, one of whose functions remains the equipment of our own cultural outlooks with the hierarchies of its privileges. Clark's Louvre is very differently peopled from that of college visits or the artistic biographies produced in the Institutes of art. The conditions through which the works hanging there began to acquire their importance through various kinds of historical process are interpolated between us and the painting. But quite often it's like going out where you came in, and the historicisation acts like a sort of immanent meaning of the art-work, as if the source, – the real source, of its timeless values. Even, pleasure in it is intensified through the knowledge of its historical profundity, and it gets re-presented as the file of new struggles.

For instance it can be seen as the proper place of a struggle for an appropriation of values by art-historians of left and right alike. Or, one step on, if appropriation itself is not an objective, then a painting can still be the field of a conflict of tendencies at a level at which academic method and cultural politics overlap. To the right of this relatively safe terrain lies the sociology of a Baxendall in which a complex but soothing group of methods explains everything at the expense of theory, or possibly nothing at all. If I remark on these things here, it is not to suggest that

this essay is going to provide any answers. Rather I want to place it by detaching it from a notion that is residually important in the debates that they pose. This is the notion that there needs to be a contradiction between 'high' and 'low' art forms, and that the elaboration of this contradiction is a means of combatting some unjust ideas of quality . . .

In Schapiro or Clark, for instance, popular prints or songs, and their contemporary commentaries and types of appropriation, are made to serve the analysis of the always more comprehensive meaning of a painting from the Louvre - Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans* or *Atelier* are the principal subjects. This process also tends to confer quasi immanent meanings on the museum art, even if these meanings at times become unfixed in the confusions of social life. If we were to respond to it by asserting the independence of the popular prints as such, we would have to engage ourselves in a welter of categorical muddles held together by a well established language of dominant values and qualities. The prints 'are as good as' or 'are unjustly neglected' etc etc. This might get the print out of whichever museum it's in, municipal history or social anthropology, into a temporary showing in the Louvre, and so reinstate its hierarchisation with shuffled terms. So in making some political prints the occasion of this piece, I want to emphasise that they are not being endowed either with any imaginary privilege or with its lack. They are a starting point for the consideration of some problems of analysis – a starting point that is not, in this instance, excessively overdetermined by systems of values that one would wish to dismantle, or, as a pro-tem measure, marginalise. They are no more high than they are low, nor folk, nor popular, for that matter.

The essay itself is based on a number of talks that I gave to accompany an exhibition of some 200 of these prints that I made about 2 years ago. It has thus had innumerable inputs, and follows the final presentation more or less exactly. I had thought to say that it is a preliminary sketch for a much longer, more definitive etc etc, but since the preliminary sketch has become more or less a vocation, it would be silly. The reproductions are all black and white, and so their colour coding is lost.

