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Between yak and yeti



By Harry Eyres

It was late and things had got both worse and better. The culminating event of Vienna Art Week had been a conversation about art and money accompanied by a performance piece in which three naked models got into contorted positions while a man in a paper hat pretended to paint them.

In a crowded flat one couldn't see or hear much, or concentrate on what one was seeing or hearing but the worst thing was that small canapés kept passing, like military planes on training in Scotland, very fast, at just above head-height.

A small group of us, motivated by extreme hunger, headed out into the rain-lashed street. As in some late Buñuel film, we seemed destined for frustration; the tempting-looking Stubel was full, and the one Viennese among us said there was a Tibetan nearby. So there was, and we waited for half an hour at the Yak and Yeti before a table was cleared.

That was when things got magically better. Sitting cross-legged at a low table, eating something called shakahari (I decided against the yak, and yeti was off the menu), I suddenly felt we were in a conversation – two artists, an editor, a curator, your columnist. I suppose it's always like this at festivals and conferences; the real business happens at the margins, at the fringes, or the fringes of the fringes, as official events become colonised by vested or invested interests, or just simply over-scheduled. Our conversation had not been scheduled at all; most of us hadn't met most of the others before; and none of us had been planning to have a Tibetan meal that night. Of course there are risks in all this; we might not have got on at all, or found out that we had so little in common that we would have been happier eating something non-Tibetan in our hotel rooms.

So what did we talk about? We ended up discussing the education and training, or what used to be called formation, of artists and curators. The Scottish-educated New York curator bemoaned the shortcomings of the American educational system, launching people on MA programmes who would struggle to pass GCSEs or Highers in Britain. Not a new topic, and rather a conservative one, and not one you would expect to hear aired in this context.

The Viennese artist had a slightly different take on this: his first impression on meeting students at Art Center in Pasadena (where he studied for a while) was not of their lack of education but of their formidable articulacy; they knew the films of Fassbinder and the theories of Baudrillard backwards. But what was lacking was not knowledge but ownership; they knew what they ought to say but not what they would be moved to say before the ultimate tribunal.

All this made me think back to the show I had seen earlier in the day at the Kunsthalle (part of Vienna's rather splendid new MuseumsQuartier) called *Western Motel: Edward Hopper and Contemporary Art*, curated by Gerald Matt, one of those talking about art and money while the models did their yoga. This was, I thought, an exemplary exhibition: intelligent in its connections across time, elegant and thoroughly enjoyable.

It was also convincing in establishing Hopper as an artist of genuine, prophetic vision: somehow Hopper's paintings have an unusual relationship to time and duration; they look like stills from films. Thus the connection to David Claerbout's subtle, slow video pieces, one of a car mysteriously stopped in desolate stretch of the Rockies, with wind rustling the sere grass and the pine needles, another of men trying to enter a space consisting of an old black and white photograph, seemed both logical and organic.

But what struck me was not just Hopper's images, and the work inspired by them from contemporary artists, but also his words – three or four short statements, prominently displayed, and the strange notes he appended to his paintings, rather like technical notes on photographs.

One of Hopper's statements went like this: "I think I don't quite understand the ways of human beings. I hated to draw people gesturing and grimacing. What I wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house." In another, Hopper remarked: "Most of all the important qualities [of every art] are put there unconsciously and little of importance by the conscious intellect."

These statements hover at the edge of the inarticulate and the incommunicable: profound and suggestive, they come from somewhere beyond the reach of theory. Nowadays artists are expected, in written statements, to articulate exactly, but in second-hand terms, what their works are about ("My installation deals with issues of gender and sexuality" etc). I wonder whether someone such as Hopper would even scrape a pass degree at art school.

Back at the Yak and Yeti, the Viennese artist was recalling that in his art school days it was the fashion, when asked about the thematic content of one's art, not to be super-articulate, but to engage in animalistic grunting. Surely it is the role of the critic, not the artist, to be articulate about the art.

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