

To whim or not to whim

by Christos Tolera

A text message sent by myself to Jo Phillips, .Cent's Creative Director, on Sunday 6th August at 10.43 a.m. read as follows:

"I'm hating this whimsy thing! I don't know if it can really exist in Art because the amount of thought, before and after the act of making, means everything is knowingly done thereby nullifying any eccentricity or spontaneity. Surely a whim is a fleeting moment not a permanent gesture. The whole idea makes me want to puke!"

The phone rang and, feeling slightly embarrassed to see Jo's name on the screen, I picked up. For the third or fourth time in a matter of weeks we held a similar discussion as to the nature of whimsy and how my distaste of it probably revealed more about me than whimsy itself. The gauntlet thrown down before me, I decided to investigate further as to whether I could indeed entertain the idea of whimsy in Art and why my reservations were so strong.

When Dadaist Marcel Duchamp drew a moustache and goatee beard onto a postcard reproduction of Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa in 1919, the world was once more made to review art and its history. His starting point, the postcard, was a 'found object', with whose introduction as a medium he had previously changed the course of 20th century art. Having displayed a urinal on its side in a gallery setting, he changed the significance of the object, thereby expanding the role of the artist as one who, purely by making choices, made art. So with this irreverent, iconoclastic, yet funny gesture, he had rendered Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile farcical and drew attention to the unquestioning worship of an ordinary painting, albeit by an extraordinary man. The title 'L.H.O.O.Q.', when read out in French, phonetically translates as 'She has a hot arse', supposedly a pointedly Freudian remark towards Leonardo's homosexuality. In a swift, deliberate and seemingly spontaneous act he undermines one of the most revered men in history.

It is important to acknowledge that Duchamp, one of the great thinkers of 20th century Art, was not a man given to thoughtless acts. He was philosophical, serious and knowing, as well as funny. Once this is taken into account, it becomes difficult to ascribe any of his works to whimsy. The germ of an idea, the initial thought and possibly the initial action, especially the graffiti with which he defaced the 'Mona Lisa', can look as

though it was done on a whim and I can understand how it could be so perceived but is it more important how we read it or is the artist's intent the overriding factor as to whether it is whimsy or not?

Gerhard Richter, seen by many as the greatest living painter today, is someone whose work would be very difficult to describe as whimsy in nature. His painting, spanning five decades, is held up as a benchmark for Art students worldwide in terms of the investigation and process of painting, to be taken very seriously indeed. Yet he insists that many of his works have a very random inception. As an example, his painting 'Uncle Rudi' (1965), he maintains, was picked by chance as an image from many at hand. A photograph he came across and wished to paint. On a whim. No more, no less. However, on inspection, we see a smiling man, resplendent in Nazi uniform, rendered in black and white in the style of a blurred photograph. There is a feeling of romantic melancholy induced by such stylistic choices which are far from spontaneous, requiring a high level of skill and concentration. The fact that Richter is German, having spent time growing up in East Germany as a direct consequence of the war and has a direct connection to the subject in the painting, makes it a very poignant choice, fully loaded with possible interpretation.

There is also the philosophical and psycho-analytical argument that chance does not exist; that choice is not and cannot be random. There will always be a point where the first decision is made, whether consciously or not, to include the so-called random elements, which will eventually determine the outcome. With all of this information and thinking at our and the artist's disposal, can we still, on his word, describe the work as whimsy?

I am not sure the viewer would even consider describing a painting of a smiling Nazi by his nephew so, yet if the finished artwork is a gigantic, pink shiny cast metal replica of an inflated balloon dog, somehow the idea that there is less thought involved in the process prevails over any due consideration. This is regardless of the fact that this and other similar sculptures take more than two years and a fortune to make, leading me to doubt very much that an ex-commodities broker would make such decisions on a whim. I speak of Jeff Koons, a historical disciple of Duchamp and today's grand master of the found object, who was suggested and regaled to me as the leading candidate for the 'King Of Whimsy'.

Much of his earlier work focuses on the surface and presentation of common consumer objects, such as vacuum cleaners, the pristine condition and presentation of which belies their function as cleaning implements. Not a speck of dirt to be seen inside the hermetically sealed Perspex boxes. The same is true of the more recent 'non-ready made' of Koons' works. Evidence of the human hand that made them is undetectable. The afore-mentioned 'Balloon Dog' (1994-2000), under the closest of inspections, is seamless. His paintings have no brushstrokes, no ridges where masking tape has been used for the production of straight lines. These shallow, immaculate surfaces draw attention to hidden depths. He looks at the human desire for unattainable perfection and talks of "dealing with an ultimate state of being that you couldn't sustain but would keep striving for." His work is very much about desire and where there is desire there is suffering and where there is suffering there is the possibility of salvation or death. So once more I ask myself, could this be whimsy?

Well the .Cent team and this issue's guest editor, Stephen Jones, would certainly be prepared to argue the point, especially in Koons' case, the work successfully managing to retain that air of other-worldliness and spontaneity, whilst saying something more substantial. Their argument centres on interpretation by the viewer as well as the artist's intent. After all, isn't it a given that art exists in the space between the object and the spectator? That neither can exist without the other? They would say that the work has a duality and that these obscured meanings are what actually differentiate it from being whimsical, that the whimsy actually resides in the darkness and is not nullified by it.

A lot of creativity happens in the spiritual emptiness some call 'the void' and I have long been a believer that, in the face of death we find life. There is an essence of life in whimsy, which I admit to finding rather alluring, that is the idea of an ever-present darkness, of a hidden motive. However... maybe my Mediterranean roots demand more concrete passion, more blood and guts. Maybe I find it all a bit fey or maybe it's just a question of semantics. I think there is a case for whimsy in art especially in the conception of it and at times the process of making it but I can't help thinking that it stops there. The finished article undergoes such a rigorous examination of doubt and self-criticism, which, for me, negates the initial spark of creative thought that may determine direction but rarely the



destination. The confusion for me arises in the successful completion of a work that retains a feeling of whimsy. What appears to be whimsy is in fact a very deliberate and considered act, which mimics it. I believe that whimsy is a romantic notion placed upon the finished product, which does not account for the efforts in the making of art. As a working artist, the idea that creativity is some kind of magical process of reverie is repugnant to me, devaluing and undermining my belief systems. It seems to be a description of the surface value, not given enough thought or time to reveal more. Regardless of the artist's intention, the viewer could perceive the work as whimsy yet in doing so relegates the work to a lesser state. I believe whimsy is not an adjective that describes something which has depth but one that precedes the discovery of it and as a consequence makes it redundant. So is there room for whimsy in art? Obviously there is, but I just can't get my head around it...

*Christos Tolera is an artist and .Cent's Associate Creative for Art.
www.christostolera.com*

above: Installation view of Jeff Koons' Balloon Dog, 1994-2001, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Collection of The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica, CA. Photograph © 2006 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston