

The Experience of Art

Juliet Steyn, City University London

My particular concern is to explore and question prevailing notions of *experience* and how these percolate into our expectations and indeed assumptions about art and the institutions that house it. I am continually struck by the ever increasing prevalence of art and museum exhibitions in which the visitor — in the name of ‘accessible experience’ — is encapsulated in and by the works on display, *as display*. Many thinkers across history have felt compelled to think and write about experience revealing, as Martin Jay’s study, *Songs of Experience*, amply demonstrates, multiple and contradictory meanings¹.

The philosopher, Giorgio Agamben has cautioned, ‘The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that is no longer accessible to us’. His thinking follows that of Walter Benjamin who, in the dark days of the European fascism deplored the dearth of human experience. T.W.Adorno warned even the possibility of experience is in peril. More recently it has been argued that Hyperreality may have succeeded to deprive us of experience. So, if this is indeed the case, what is the significance of those many cultural sites and art works which locate the experience of the spectator as the reason and *modus operandi* of the work? So I wonder upon what understandings of *experience* are such claims predicated. The question that always needs to be asked: experience in the service of what end? (Jay:406.)

What caught my attention increasingly in the last decade of the 20th century were multi-media installations that were changing the nature of the viewing subject in relation to the object — the work of art. But it was the Bruce Nauman show, at the Hayward Gallery a decade ago, that alerted me to other changes: works that had been produced in one régime where their potential as radical works of critique was recognised, to another régime in which our *experience* of them had become paramount —evidenced in the tactics of their display. The relationship between Subject and Object was skewed in favour of the viewer as the Subject of the work. Questions

emerged for me that concerned the affects of Nauman's work in the changing context of their display in the gallery.

The Gallery guide to the exhibition makes this move plain arguing that 'he [Nauman] makes you powerfully aware of your own presence in the often complex psychological spaces of the contemporary world' (Hilty)². More or less everything on show was set-up to hector and bait the spectator, for whom little choice remained other than to endure the excess, the end of illusion. Surrounded by vast video projections, bombarded by noise, seeing oneself on TV screens, everything closed in, is too close: distance disappeared. Nauman's work functioned in this particular exhibition by assimilating the identity of the object to our own reality and identity to the point of vertigo.

The spectator becomes a *manoeuvre* of the exhibition. In other words, the notion of disinterested viewing is untenable and this is seemingly because we are not involved enough. What is enough? Is it not enough for anyone to visit an art show but be part of it, enrolled, and stitched into the fabric of its meaning. An exhibition such as that one operated as an incitement. We were quite literally projected into the work, coerced and enlisted to empathise with it. This procedure might on the face of it appear benign. But it can also disguise a tyrannical design which destroys any true relation of communication. In the name of interaction, we are implicated and entrapped in spectacular simulation and we are propelled into a role as passive recipient.

In Nauman's case, as I have been arguing, context is all important, otherwise Nauman's project is reducible (as it was in the Hayward show) to an experience of 'aesthetic harassment', a phrase I borrow from Jean Baudrillard³. To focus on this exhibition and the different possibilities of interpretive meanings, is also to comment on the mutability of art works themselves. This brings to art exhibitions the demand of differentiation and the refusal to assimilate the work to immediate trends. What is at stake here is both a question for a history of art and the critical prospects of art and institutions as well as the recipients they avow to entertain.

It is, I suggest, precisely the tension between Subjects and Object that is productive of 'experience'. Having written that also exposes the inadequacies of these binaries. Again following Jay, I am inclined to the view: 'If the subjective is pushed to the extreme, it can allow the inappropriate slippage that turns anything into an aesthetic experience, no matter what its precipitating object might be...the indiscriminate aestheticization of morally or politically fraught phenomena can also have disastrous consequences, as Walter Benjamin famously warned.(Jay:405-06).

This means to question the ways in which *experience* is presently packaged, in something we might argue can be described as the Commodification of experience (Jay:107). We may ask whether such contrivances that stress the subjective collude with the ontological shift in the museum and art gallery from education to entertainment — from spectator into something more akin to a consuming receptor? Tentatively and with recourse to Jay, I suggest that the distinguishing mark of art and the one that separates it from entertainment has been that the latter sells commodified experiences, whereas the former does not (Jay.407). The fourth and current Tate Triennale, curated by Nicholas Bourriaud promises a shift from the *post* to the *alter* modern. Art in this discourse is a 'hypertext', the artist a 'nomad', and the spectator enjoined to follow a highly choreographed passage, 'stressing', as Bourriaud puts it, 'the *experience* of wandering in time, space and mediums'.⁴ Always experience and so to return to the question I posed above: experience in the service of what end?

Paul Virilio has argued that Fukayama is right: 'it is the end of history and the start of another history, that of events, of the 'live'⁵. If we envisage the annulment of history, we are also obliged to take account of the diminution of the field of reflection': A world in which 'Sensation has replaced cognition, process has replaced content and movement has replaced thought' as neuroscientist, Susan Greenfield has recently argued. The viewing subject becomes a receptacle for sensation. The constructive moment that allows experience to transcend mere stimulation is cut short – suppressing, if not obliterating, the role of memory and past experience on the present. Experience is reduced to little more than momentary excitation (Jay, p.406). *Authentic* experience, if I dare use such a phrase, involves encounters with otherness leaving the

Subject and Object no longer where they were before. Something worthy of the name experience cannot leave us where we began.

¹ Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, 2005.

² *Bruce Nauman*, Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre, 16 July - 6 September, 1998. It is important to note that the version of Bruce Nauman presented in the Hayward denies the complexity and flattens the work. Although the exhibition was initiated by the Georges Pompidou centre (Paris), in London a deliberate ploy was to mobilise the work to show its relevance for British art now. This is to say to create a precedent and legitimating strategy for YBA (Young British Art). For example, the installation, *Art Make-Up* (1967-68) one of the earliest works on show, is speciously described in the unpaginated gallery guide as, 'closely in tune with the art of today in its ritualistic focus on self-identity', Greg Hilty.

² Zurbrugg, Nicholas (ed.) (1997), *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artefact*, London: Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE publications, p.11.

⁴ N.Bourriaud, *Altermodern*, 'Introduction' Tate Britain Gallery Guide, Feb.2009.

⁵ Virilio, Paul,(1997) 'Un monde surexposé' *Image et Politique: Acts du colloque des rencontres internationales de la photographie*, Arles: ACTES SUD/ AFFAA.