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"Bad painting" : an examination of the phenomena of "bad painting" through the work of pragmatists

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“Bad Painting”: An Examination of the Phenomena of “Bad Painting” through the Work of Pragmatists

Abstract

This essay is an investigation into artist’s strategies for rule testing and critical investigation within recent painting practices, primarily within ‘bad painting’ art practices where conscious decisions are made to paint badly. The research concerns the devaluation of the body within aesthetic discourses that tend to prioritise category definition. This is both a historical problematic going back to Edmund Burke’s definitions of beauty, and an ongoing source of debate about the valorisation of visual space over haptic space within contemporary painting practices.

What are the implications for painting practice if an artist deliberately and consciously sets out to paint badly? The essay builds upon Richard Shusterman’s book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and questions rationalist approaches to aesthetics developed from Immanuel Kant to Theodor Adorno. It points towards a somatic understanding of painting practice that leads away from category bound definitions of the good in art practice. Incompetence and gaucheness within the making of a bad painting are necessary correctives to the old normalising habits of aesthetic evaluation that have become acceptable disembodied orthodoxies within institutions.

This essay sets out to explore a range of issues that arise from the notion of “bad painting”, which was a term that came to have some currency within art practice and art criticism from the late seventies onwards. Does a reliance on category definition of what is good or bad painting offer a meaningful discussion of our experience of painting?

What has become one of the usual normative starting points in discussions around aesthetics has been the preponderance of the use of category definition as a means to explore what is meant by good and bad. This discussion in part arises from enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Burke who sought a global definition of Beauty that could be applied across all phenomena, as the a priori method of enquiry.¹ To some

¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, transl. James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press 1957).

extent this continuing drive for an absolute definition still exists within later writers such as the work of Adorno perhaps the most influential 20th Century philosopher of aesthetics and culture. Adorno's rejection of pleasure as bourgeois hedonism was tempered by a redefinition of real aesthetic experience that required self-abnegation and a submission to the objective conditions of art.² Though Adorno was sympathetic to art as a mode of behaviour, he nevertheless valued arts reification into objects because it allowed art to be a separate domain from life and therefore gave more space for a critique of bourgeois capitalism. He was of some influence within Clement Greenberg's writing; aside from Greenberg's own Trotskyist reasoning for an operative avant-garde culture as a critical bulwark against an increasingly supine bourgeois culture of consumption.³ Greenberg's conceptualisation of the immediacy of art experience as being separate from life has to some extent pushed other critiques of his work towards a more analytical approach to aesthetic experience.⁴ The problem that category defining philosophy exposes is that of searching for a category definition of Beauty or the Good, that can transpose across media and yet be subject specific. The attacks on experience by analytical aesthetics were founded upon the prioritisation of art objects over and above aesthetic experience. Continental philosophy has more in common with the pragmatic philosophy of Dewey and Shusterman, where poststructuralism deconstructs the object as a source of interpretations to be discovered. Its great claim, which is emancipatory, is that it opens up the texts to interpretation rather than as a closed self-sufficient system of knowledge. The text is an ongoing work within the practice of writing and reading. For analytical philosophy the fixation on a closed meaning made it possible for the object of criticism to be circumscribed and value judgements could be made that offered transparency and clarity of purpose.

Perhaps, the above schematic description of the terrain should lead us back to Burke's definitions of Beauty in his treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into our definitions of Beauty and the Sublime*, which in their overview are nearly comprehensive as might be fitting for a philosophy from an Enlightenment consciousness. Burke does however, make an intriguing omission around experience avoiding any admittance of the sensual body as being central to experience, However the definitions do come close to admitting sensuous experience as being a part its defining field. The

² T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1984)

³ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in *Pollock and After*, ed. Francis Francina (Harper & Row, 1985), 32. In his footnotes on "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", Greenberg quite plainly states that although some folk art can be of the highest quality, it is "Athene whom we want; formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension."

⁴ T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art" in *Pollock and after* ed. Francis Francina (Harper & Row, 1985), 54. "Greenberg is aware of the paradox involved in his avant-garde preserving bourgeoisie..."

enlightened subject of Burke's enquiry is similar in make-up to Kant's "disinterested subject".⁵

There have been some attempts to use logical analysis to determine what might be a "bad painting". The most notable one put forward, was by Terry Atkinson, who wanted to enquire into whether it was possible to "consciously make a bad painting". Here the issue of being fully cognisant arises from the apprehension of the experience giving only the looseness of phenomenological immediacy. This stems from Atkinson who as a member of Art & Language relied upon British empiricism to insist upon proving the value of "truth statements". The defining of terms is in part due to rationalist philosophy's need to define what its area of expertise was, leaving other areas to science or sub sets of knowledge, such as neurology or psychology to be defined in their own terms. This is the foundationalist logic that runs through rationalist philosophy. One could argue, nevertheless, that the continental literary philosophy has guided philosophy away from absolute claims for truth and foundationalist lines of reasoning, towards what is contingent and discursive within changing social practices. It is this identification of the contingency within art practice that leads analytical philosophy to use more rationalist frameworks such as "testing out" to make the practice articulate its philosophy more overtly. This does however leave aside some of the fundamental aspects of aesthetic experience which is, that it is a heightened experience that demarcates itself away from ordinary lived reality. It is important to note Adorno's emphasis upon real meaningful aesthetic experiences as opposed to the immediate facticity of the object, which cannot be understood in, and of itself. This would be where immediate experience in art leads to a secondary reflection that explores the ideological meanings and social conditions that shape its experience.

The extent to which linguistic analysis has infiltrated aesthetic discourses to the almost complete denial of the somatic apprehension of the art object has left a lacunae around the body as the source of real ameliorative effect that art can have in the world through experience rather than object definition. Here, I want to do no more than indicate the importance of writers such as Shusterman and Merleau-Ponty, who affirm the somatic within philosophical discourse.⁶ It is this lacunae around the sensuous apprehension of the world by the subject that points to a tension and possibly to a problem within aesthetics that requires resolving through an approach to the world as lived experience, where the search for absolute definitions has to cease at the point of "good enoughness" or simply at its contingency to lived material reality. In other words leaving aside the search for a global definition in order to ground

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, transl. James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press 1957), 49. Disinterestedness carries with it a freedom from "want".

⁶ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Blackwell, 1992) as well R. Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and the care of the self", *The Monist*, vol. 83, no. 4 (2000): 530–551.

experience in social discourse. The pragmatic philosophies of John Dewey and Richard Shusterman here have great pertinence.⁷ Especially, the latter, through his work in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, by being able to bring together two distinct camps of philosophy, the writings of, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, and some of the work of the Anglo-Saxon philosophies of logical and linguistic analysis underpinned by Dewey's pragmatist philosophy. It is Shusterman's ability and dexterity in developing an argument that is not just a summation of argument between two seemingly opposite camps of thought but a genuine desire to propose a philosophy that describes and more importantly, changes our experience of the world for the betterment of all those who would normally be considered outside the remit of philosophy's usual audience, see for instance, Shusterman's engagement with rap music in his writing.⁸

To return to the question of goodness and badness; it would seem at first to be of paramount importance for the artist to have some form of absolute clarity about what is good or bad in art, and more importantly what is good and bad in their practices. It is, not always necessary to have total understanding of these, so long as the artist is aware that they exist and that these evaluations exist within a complex social network of discourses extending from the site of production through to the site of consumption. Otherwise we would not have the shocks and surprises that break the category of the object or how it might normally be understood. In other words, if an artist has been sufficiently well trained to locate their practice, historically and contemporaneously, then the work of positioning the object in the social space is carried between both sites by the social network and its discourses.⁹ Yet, this still doesn't fully account for the tacit knowledge that takes place at the very moment of making and doing in the work itself. It is here, that the artist, as suggested by T.J. Clark is able to take account of the serious process of making art and making cultural statements simultaneously.¹⁰ If the social sciences such as art history are more likely to be involved in interpretative arguments about the relative status of truth within the field of historical enquiry then it would seem that absolute arguments for a practice by artists restricted within category definition is no longer useful. There are some who would argue a division of labour approach, in that the artist "does", and the critic "decides" upon

⁷ John Dewey, *The Late Works of John Dewey* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987). Cited by Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, op. cit., 25–33.

⁸ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, op. cit., 215–235. "For rap's artistic innovation, particularly its technique of sampling, is closely connected with elements of fragmentation, dislocation, and breaking forms."

⁹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Le presses du réel, 2002), 43. "They (artists) all root their artistic praxis within a *proximity* which relativises the place of visibility in the exhibition protocol, without belittling it. The artwork of the 1990's turns the beholder into a neighbour, a direct interlocutor... They prefer *immediacy* in their visual writing." (Author's italics)

¹⁰ T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (Yale University Press, 1999).

its value and merit to culture. This approach has been mostly discredited by the experience of artists taking responsibility for the reception of their own work from the Sixties onwards, although not without continuous rear guard actions by those who seek to maintain an ossified status quo or the actions of the market place to reinforce utilitarian notions of expertise and attribution of value.

What can be discovered in Bad Painting is that it is both an act of testing out of the orthodoxy of "good" painting and furthermore is a significant understanding of the tacit knowledge that painting offers to its audience. The neglect of tacit knowledge by philosophy has distorted the field of aesthetics to such an extent that the discussions upon art practices in the critical fields of aesthetics and philosophy have tended to overlook physical somatic acts, what Dewey might have called the "situation" of art. This will be referred to further on, as the aesthetic experience of art. Experience has become one of the key terms in the debate amongst pragmatist philosophers and philosophers of aesthetics, where philosophy is there not so much to describe the world as to transform it, and for it have an ameliorative force in the world. If Bad Painting, by logical definition invites the discussion of the terms good and bad and therefore, what would be a debate concerning evaluative judgements. The term also affirms and questions, that the orthodoxy is a rule or regime of power in the world and not just by implication a discrete series of judgements made by the gatekeepers to the discourses of art, which would come from a more Kantian influenced approach. Aesthetic experiences can affirm that "bad" art can also exist because to have a good aesthetic experience one must also have bad aesthetic experiences. The apprehension of the aesthetic experience is one of a heightened experience that demarcates itself out of the normal flow of the world, so a good aesthetic experience is one that is interesting and propels the subject to experience the world anew, a bad aesthetic experience is one that is uninteresting, boring and doesn't cause the subject to dwell upon the world. To have experience as the word in its origins suggests it is also to traverse the terrain of risk and danger too. It isn't necessary to rehearse all the arguments for or against Greenberg's Kantian use of disinterested evaluation in aesthetics but to note that the discourse of art is a shared discourse, a discursive act conducted amongst its group, in this case we can say, the "artworld", this is its field of expertise. As the delineation of aesthetic experience progresses it offers a widening of the discourses that can count as aesthetic; a process of ever expanding discourses that has been an ongoing process within the arts in the post 1945 period. The accounts of this widening discourse and expanding into areas typically not seen as art have to some extent been distorted by the philosophical demands that have promoted medium specificity or in later versions, category definition.

This leads us to considering and taking account of an art practice made in painting that is an embodied and cognisant practice. Bad Painting affirms the body as a site of experience and knowledge. It is the negation

of the Christian-Cartesian mind and body dualism that allows Bad Painting to affirm the body in the act of painting and in the viewer's experience of the painting. A good painting can also affirm the body and here one could speculate about what kinds of somatic experience are embodied by paintings as diverse as those by Lucien Freud or Ellsworth Kelly. The body that is affirmed by Bad Painting is not one that is centred, unified and conforming to 19th century ideals of Beauty such as Burke's enlightened eye, but is a body that is in a state of becoming and immanence and therefore capable of mistakes, failures, incompetence's and wilful acts of unlearning previous practices in order to renew its own knowledge of its own process in the world. This points us towards a body-centred tacit forms of knowledge embodied within painting, and a renewal of painting's own internal understanding of its process whilst understanding and affirming the discursivity of the practice of art as a public one.

In Burke's enquiry upon Beauty there follows a series of category definitions such as smoothness, delicacy, colour, taste and smell, whereas procreative acts are described merely as lusts. I am indebted to Shusterman's comments in a symposium that highlighted the value of using Burke to gain a historical purchase upon aesthetic experience.¹¹ Through Burke's definition of beauty and the sublime, ideas of pain, danger and terror are the strongest emotions that are aroused within the mind. States of mind that are closest to the apprehension of our corporeal existence in the world, pain is always uppermost rather than pleasure, as this is a more powerful state for the mind to recall.¹² It is also pain in the form of violence or sexual extremes that defines Georges Bataille's heightened state of mind.¹³ Would it be possible to bring together these two definitions of aesthetic and physical experience to re-define the category of the beautiful to include experience that would normally be considered outside of the categories of the good, the beautiful and the useful; taking experience as an embodied form of knowledge that has risk and uncertainty at its core and therefore as likely to be either bad or good?

Richard Shusterman in his book, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, takes us through some useful definitions of what aesthetic experience might be.¹⁴

¹¹ A symposium held at Univeristy of London 2003.

¹² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1985), 40. "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day *experience*." My italics.

¹³ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: John Calder, 1962), 39. "Man achieves his inner experience at the instant when bursting out of the chrysalis he feels he is tearing himself, not tearing something outside that resists him. He goes beyond the objective awareness bounded by the walls of the chrysalis and this process, too, is linked with the turning topsy-turvy of his original mode of being."

¹⁴ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, op. cit., see especially his introductory chapter on "Placing Pragmatism", 3–33.

Shusterman begins with, John Dewey's somatic naturalism in his book *Art as Experience*, where aesthetic experience is embedded within the human organism, as a basic need and activity. Aesthetic experience for Dewey is one that is indivisible with the normal processes of living and is a basic vital function of the human organism. It is to give a holistic integrated expression of a bodily and intellectual dimension.¹⁵ Secondly, noting Kantian aesthetics' notion of disinterestedness and attraction to analytical philosophy, it places the worth of art apart from and above instrumentality in order to protect art from utilitarian evaluation. This carries over into art for arts sake defence against the functionality of an industrialised world. Thirdly, where art has a global functionality within the organism as Dewey states, "in which the whole creature is alive, to aesthetic experience", it is then the philosopher who must understand what experience is. Here Dewey insists upon the deeper and richer experience that art offers as being more meaningful and satisfying to the human organism.

If we take these two cases of Burke and Shusterman and consider them together we might begin to also map out what might be the usefulness of the term "bad painting". If Burke has excluded sexual experience from his definitions of aesthetic experience, "the simple enjoyment of them is not attended with any real pleasure, lest satisfied with that, we should give ourselves over to indolence and inaction".¹⁶ We might be able to learn from this telling omission. What was once omitted allows, for its utterance later in wider discussions upon the history of aesthetics, in such writings by Dewey, Merleau-Ponty and Shusterman.¹⁷ It is a revealing lacunae, of the body being present in its absence. Michael Fried's claims for Merleau-Ponty's attitudes to the body for his own understanding of Antony Caro's sculpture in counter distinction to Minimalist work that was "surefire" and theatrical are a case in point.

Returning to Burke's categories briefly. The word experience is deployed in conflicting ways being both objective and subjective, both noun and verb. Experience seems to be both in the flow of life and out of the flow of life. It is important to review these categories because we can appreciate the unusual effort on Burke's part to establish experience at the heart of aesthetics whilst at the same time subtly shifting the terms away from Platonic idealism. It might be why there is, a curious distortion to the definitions advanced by Burke, a distortion about the nature and category of experience. This does let us consider what might be useful when thinking about experience and beauty in present day artefacts. One can

¹⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, op. cit., 41. "It is therefore attended with a very high pleasure: but as it is by no means designed to be our constant business...it is not fit that the absence of this pleasure should be attended with any considerable pain."

¹⁷ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1943), Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, op. cit.; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

now propose that experience in aesthetics be widened further to include sexual experience and why not drug induced experience, as in Foucault's expanded experience of "aesthetic of life".¹⁸ It also beckons us to reconsider what might be an aesthetic experience one that is not merely experienced by the few or the noble or the disinterested. The positing of experience at the beginnings of Burke's discourse that allows us to acknowledge the site of the body as the primary site of knowledge, aesthetic knowledge and experiential knowledge. From this insight into widening the discursive field of aesthetics, we can return back to some Burkeian definitions with the knowledge that the body is a site of knowledge and pleasure. It has until recently been a common position for philosophical discourse to render physical experience as uncertain and to always cast doubt on it, where the subjective is seen as an uncertain truth. Consider a category such as unity, one of completeness and consummation, and then reconsider its opposite definitions such as badness, incompleteness and how these opposite definitions help us define the field. If the body in its Platonic ideal is symmetrical and unified, what might happen to this ideal when we re-introduce the category of sexual experience into this term of unity? There is completeness and possible consummation. There is also beauty and ugliness, there is difficulty and magnificence, and there is tragedy and uniformity. To name just a few attributes to this sensuous experience.

Perhaps, as Shusterman has noted, Burke is within a long line of Platonic-Cartesian philosophical thought; one in which we can now begin to address by re-asserting the body at the centre of cognition.¹⁹ If, philosophy is 'a way of life', and not merely the product of the mind, then the health of the body becomes paramount to thinking.²⁰ Aesthetic experience becomes an experience, which is both phenomenological as well as categorical. That is, it is a sensation of the work as well as a critical appreciation of the work. Furthermore, it is the work of the viewer as well as of the object. As in the knowledge that the game plays the player as well as the player playing the game. Taking Kant's explicit identification of the subject as being at the heart of the experience where "pleasure and displeasure" will be experienced we might begin to see a connection to painting as a possibility that allows for goodness and badness in a philosophical questioning process that is both evaluative, and phenomenological rather than being propelled only by

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1986), 89.

¹⁹ Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and the care of the self," *The Monist*, vol. 83, no. 4, (2000): 530–551. Shusterman's essay is mainly concerned with Foucault and the 'basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices and of their function in our knowledge and construction of reality'. The point is if the body becomes a part of the discussion of aesthetic experience which seems obvious to most practitioners of what we loosely term the 'plastic arts' then we have to begin to place the body at the heart of discussions upon aesthetics and therefore not eradicate its presence through claiming just the one part of the thinking process which is only the evaluative dimension present in most discussions on aesthetic judgement.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

category demarcation questions.²¹ Pleasure and displeasure both provide strong definitions of cognitive experience.

This is not to deny the evaluative, where aesthetics gains pleasure from the experience, it being both a process of learning and a training of thought. Aesthetic experience is one that steps outside of ordinary experience and is a heightened experience that is absorbing and focuses all of our attention on the experience. It demarcates itself out from everyday experience and so re-arranges the field of experience. It is a unique experience that identifies it as one that belongs wholly to art and becomes one of its category defining dimensions. If the aesthetic experience is widened thereby dispensing with category definition and valorising experience it would offer a valuable insight and affirmation of life thereby, as Dewey proposed, becoming an extension of the aesthetic into life as well as an enhancement and affirmation of life.²² It is here that rationalist analytical philosophy has problems with experience, where experience is in danger of becoming an empty term to be filled by predicates.

The body as the centre of art practice, principally painting, with the kinetic connection between hand, arm and eye can therefore, be taken as the neglected site that has been missing from discussions within aesthetics and principally aesthetic experience, which is sensory, and bodily centred. This is an embodied form of philosophical enquiry, which will map out how we as artists and writers can engage with transgressive acts of behaviour that question categories. As artists that are in a process of enquiry, rather than simply in a process of rebellion, the rebel will inevitably be recuperated back within the normative body or what Foucault would term the "docile body", of a regime of description and inscription of what is the norm and what is the possible.

There is a genealogy of processes of transformation where the issue of what is good and what is bad is scratched out upon the social nexus of what is merely possible. "Modernity's sad irony, Shusterman said, "is that art has inherited religion's spiritual authority, while being compartmentalised from the serious business of life." It is not certain if Shusterman meant or implied that art is ever nearer or further away from the serious business of life, as art and commerce are never far apart.²³ The compartmentalisation into categories of style, acts as a foreclosure on the serious business of signification. The following commodification of the art product takes

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, transl. James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press 1957), 41–42.

²² John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (Southern Illinois University Press), cited by Richard Shusterman in, "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 55 (1997): 29–41.

²³ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, op. cit., 20. "By thus compartmentalizing art and the aesthetic as something to be enjoyed when we take a break from reality, the most hideous and oppressive institutions and practices of our civilisation get legitimated and more deeply entrenched as inevitably real; Art becomes, in Dewey's mordant phrase, "the beauty parlour of civilisation," covering with an opulent aesthetic surface its ugly horrors and brutalities."

precedence over the serious business of the work of art, our experience of the art object in this utilitarian manner is lamentable becoming nothing more than the beauty parlour for the ugliness of life. For others, such as Bourriaud, it is this very “conviviality” with transactions that makes it such a discursive activity, and leads on constantly to a conversation with others and with the work, and is that not what the work of aesthetic experience is, in some part?²⁴ How can an art product be experienced unless it has visibility? However the regimes of visibility are controlled by the same regimes of commodification that exist in cruder fashion elsewhere in our society.

The regimes of visibility is a discussion which is lacking in the Shusterman delineation of aesthetic experience, where the field of discursivity and visibility, is to some extent left to its own devices while foregrounding the beautiful and the somatic. If an artist is to become visible, it is under the not so benign eye of the market as the arbiter of value – the most reified value is that of visibility. The task of philosophy is to rescue the good and the bad from the determinism of the market place. To address them further then is the task of the artist in providing an account of the culture we inhabit, good or bad, in the face of a grinding informational technological universe that is encroaching further and deeper into our selves. Art might begin to start making a public claim for what is good and what is bad. In order to do such a task purposefully making it badly would be a means to disrupt the “normative field” of art consumption and production. Accepting that we are working in a transformational field of ethics as well as aesthetics. Here I am not arguing for a narrow mechanistic approach to morals or politics, it is implicit within the development of Dewey’s argument for an art to impact upon ordinary living giving it an ethical dimension. If art can take on board the real issues following the debates of postmodernism such as its lack of history, what some have called “posthistory”, and its groping for shared public discourses then art would have a ground in a democratic dialogue with a public. Postmodernism as it stands today is a wholly managerialised discussion with neither public nor artist in any real meaningful dialogue with each other.²⁵ This is what Atkinson has called its “monolithic pluralism” whereby anything goes so long as the artist upholds the sterile conventions of an avant-gardist model of practice. Those such as Bourriaud and Shusterman are involved in the hard work of making the experience of art one in which everyone has a stake and a part to play.

²⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Le presses du réel, 2002), 43. “They (artists) all root their artistic praxis within a *proximity* which relativises the place of visibility in the exhibition protocol, without belittling it. The artwork of the 1990’s turns the beholder into a neighbour, a direct interlocutor.”

²⁵ Terry Atkinson, *Fragments of a Career* (Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 2000), 83. “(...) under the monolithic pluralism of Postmodernism all the changes on the well-tried resources were likely to be rung, much in the manner of a quack doctor trying remedies from the familiar ingredients...”

There is a training of the mind and the body in painting that goes largely unrecognised and seems to be a unique area of investigation, though this is not to make too large a claim for an ontological truth. This training is not perhaps one that always leads to healthy fit Olympian bodies. The dwelling upon phenomena and the attention to the inconsequential, demands a unique attitude of stillness and corresponding alertness to processing of material or thought. Does the pursuit of a critically aware painting provoke thought and recognition in the viewer? Does that mean that to paint badly necessarily leads to bad behaviour or ingesting large amounts of intoxicants, such as Guston or Kippenberger, for example.

In defence of Bad Painting²⁶

A painter stands in front of a flat sheet of board and starts to paint the surface quickly with his finger. From time to time taking his finger off the surface and dipping it into a tub of dark green acrylic paint, working from left to right and quickly covering the surface up to the outlines of what looks like a figure. Occasionally, the paint drips down in thin vertical slicks across the already covered surface adding a random cross hatch to the overall gesture to the paint that is moving across the board in a more or less horizontal movement. The start of one gesture never completely obscures the previous gesture and so covering the ground in a dappled manner. The figure is filled in with a pale pastel colour and some pinkish yellowish white for a flesh colour. The title of this painting by Jenney is *Girl and Vase*. There is no loss between what you see and the title, except the emotional loss of the little girl who is crying. When looking at this seemingly banal painting what is gained by looking closely is an awareness and experience of the paint slipping across the smooth surface of the wood. The materiality of the paint is of paramount importance, the facts of the painting, a painting of a girl and a doll are made absolutely abundant and clear. That what is left for the viewer is the paint, as all poetics has been removed from the figuration, the painting has arrived at a state of denotation. This seems to undercut the need for definitive statements of what is the evaluative category for this painting. If the argument previously rested upon category and boundary definitions, then the line of enquiry would turn towards what Terry Atkinson outlined in his thought, as to whether one could consciously make a bad painting.²⁷ This would provide us with a critique of normative practices of painting that define what is art. This is where the Atkinson and Art & Language critique is at its most acute and pertinent. But those definitions cannot help us formulate further truth definitions as to what is the good and the beautiful because the rationalist arguments for category definition

²⁶ A reference to T.J. Clark's, "In defence of Abstract Expressionism," *October*, no. 69 (1994).

²⁷ In a letter sent to the author, he posits the paradox of becoming skilful at 'bad drawing' "It was the business of *intending* to make a bad drawing which interested me – its logical status and possible historical absurdity."

disallows for experience of the art object, because experience is seen as subjective by most analytical philosophy and therefore not admissible.

The pragmatic philosophical positions of Shusterman and Dewey proposes experience as a foundation to knowledge and philosophy where the body and subjective states of being are taken as an embodied form of knowledge, much like Foucault's "aesthetics of life". This is not perhaps as extreme as it appears given the training accorded to the body and the mind by Greek philosophers going as far back as the Stoics and further. Following on from Shusterman's call to a somatic aesthetic, "we put aside philosophical prejudice against the body and instead simply recall philosophy's central aim of knowledge, self-knowledge, right action and the quest for the good life".²⁸ Then it becomes possible to re-think aesthetic experience as a bodily organised experience – somaesthetics. The implications of a somatic aesthetics for a discrete area of art practice such as painting are wide ranging. Painting being an art process that requires significant amounts of kinetic and intellectual processing of thought into an object of both visual and intellectual pleasure. (This can be argued for other medias as well, but for the purpose of this essay, I will keep it to painting.) One of the wider aims of Shusterman is to open out the field of aesthetics through the philosophy of pragmatism, which allows for the foundation of aesthetics based upon experience and a recovery "of the continuity of aesthetic experience with the normal processes of living."²⁹ This continuity has certain problems such as how do we identify an art experience as a heightened experience, stepping outside of or separating itself off from the flux of life? It also has tremendous possibilities regarding the institutionalised and increasingly redundant separation of knowledge between the arts and the crafts, which for the large part are separated through institutionalised behaviours in academia. This is wide ranging and democratising possibilities of the pragmatist aesthetics claim.

However, sometimes experience is an uneven affair, it doesn't all run smoothly, mistakes are made and learnt from, habits are formed that need to be unformed and becomes less habitual. The body is no less a site of learning and training than is the mind. Shusterman himself uses Feldenkrais exercises to correct bad habits of the body indicating a process of de-habituation and re-learning. If somatic aesthetics is the critical use of experience and its engagement with the body, then the dysfunctional must be admissible to this field, in order for pragmatism to have a critical function upon the objects it chooses to discuss. Day in day out we are continually being burdened with yet more instrumentalist and brutalising

²⁸ Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and the care of the Self," *Monist*, vol. 83, no. 4 (2000), 531.

"If we look beyond Platonic sources, we will be reminded that Socrates 'took care to exercise his body and kept it in good condition' by regular dance training."

²⁹ John Dewey, *Aesthetic Experience*, cited by Richard Shusterman, "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 55 (1997): 29–41.

strictures about our imperfect, obese, anorexic, bulimic, neuroticised bodies. In short, we are just not perfect enough, not symmetrical enough, and not beautiful enough. An "aesthetics of negativity" comes to mind where the corrective to negatively learnt habits about the perfect body are to play them out in order to correct them through the body. Clark's list that spells out modernism's processes of progress, illuminates this "aesthetics of negativity", giving us a series of resistances and retractions in the history of art to what would appear to be the normative and prevailing orthodoxies of art.³⁰ It is here at this limit of painting, at the liminal edges of practice, that practices become unlearnt in order for new discoveries to be made or old habits to become unlearnt. Art like philosophy performs a reflective and ameliorative function upon its culture. In much the same way, that we need to have representations of the body given back to ourselves in order for us to correct bad habits formed deep in our somatic selves.

In the immediacy of the production of a painting there are histories of art implied and problems of differentiation between subject and object performed that affirm the centrality of the body as a source of knowledge. This is where tacit knowledge is formed and performed on each and every painting, much as skill is a learnt craft performed as a received knowledge that is then tested out each time in the act of painting as either a transparent act or one that is restrictive procedure. One could expand this discussion further than just painting, if pragmatist aesthetics of experience really is an inclusive object then let's acknowledge other cultural activity such as punk music. The general effect that punk culture had on a generation who were told that music culture was about big business and the spectacular event, and not about culture being grounded in lived experience from the street or group it arises from. What punk culture gave back to culture in general was the knowledge that doing something for yourself no matter how low your skill base or how perverse the taboo lines being crossed; doing it and expressing it physically and viscerally, held more potency than staying at home and being invisible in your culture.

Bad painting has some of this vitality at its heart. It is a tacit knowledge working at its most fundamental in painting, where it is neither representation that is the art product, nor faithful mimesis, but the experience of working paint, Clark's serious business of picture making. A cultural process that stretches from the studio as the site of production to the public site of display and consumption. Even if, like Kippenberger you dream it all up in the bar with your mates, or like Jenney you smear it on the board with your finger, or like Guston you drink and paint, or like Golub you keep witness to the continuing ongoing cruelties of late capitalism, what is not being

³⁰ Pollock and After. *The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (Harper and Row, 1985), 55.

"I meant some form of decisive innovation, in method or materials or imagery, whereby a previously established set of skills or frame of reference...are deliberately avoided or travestied, in such a way as to imply that only by such incompetence or obscurity will genuine picturing get done."

performed by bad painting is a faithful and reverent reflection of culture to itself. What is important to bad painting is the physical act of making the painting as a somatic act of thinking upon the picture making process an ongoing reflecting upon the culture we inhabit, this is undeniably a formation of knowledge. There is a body making a painting, not merely a disembodied and disinterested mind, a mind only in possession of the logic of distance and formal symmetrical beauty. There is a body that is at the centre of the working process. Neil Jenney in a 1981 interview said rather appositely. "Baseball has the same principle – learn to stand right, breath right and sure it's life-enhancing."³¹ If, the work of art, as being the totality of, the artist's thought, the object and the viewer is in some asymmetrical space of communication, it is the body that secures the "work of art" in painting as an immediate cognitive experience. As Dewey noted by making a distinction between the "art product" the hardware if you like, and the "work of art", the software, "which is what the product does with and in experience."³²

It was never my intention to give a global definition of the field but to use the issue to explore themes that have been pertinent in my practice and several other practices that seemed to carry the most possibilities for discussing my central argument that Bad Painting is not a category definition problematic, it is more importantly about affirming a new outlook upon aesthetics that are body centred. By opening out a discussion on Bad Painting that prioritises the somatic rather than the compartmental definitions of Fine Art, it is possible to use this as a general tool for thinking about aesthetics and importantly ethics in painting.

Shusterman like Dewey prioritised the experiential as being central to the object and in so doing has avoided the pitfall of relying only on history as the arbiter and evaluative force in art practice. The experience of art, the working of art, body centred but not an inward looking one avoiding engagement with the social space, nor one disinterested and only cogito located, has to negotiate the world of experience through the body. It is reasonable to enquire as to whether this body, now a subject and a gendered one, experiences the world with complete uniformity. European philosophy has told us much about difference, interpretation, and resistance to fixed ideals of theory or criticism and boundary definition. My argument in this essay for a holistic and experiential approach to art that recognises the dynamic taking place both within the producer of the art object and also in the ongoing dynamic between the work of art and the audience. If, we are to fully recognise these dynamics it would seem perfectly clear and logical to say that the experiential approach to art and aesthetics would embody the distortions of the brutal, reifying forces of

³¹ ZG, no.3 (1981): 23. Interview with Neil Jenney.

³² John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 9 as cited by Richard Shusterman in "The End of Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1999), 29–41

capital that are inflicted upon the human organism and that would have to be a part of its potential critique as well as its own organic unity. Whereas, Shusterman makes a large claim for pragmatism to offer a third way between European philosophy and analytical aesthetics, with the body spoken of as neutral, non gendered, and a body in harmony with itself or one that seeks harmony. This follows from his acceptance of Dewey's rather homely "upbeat aesthetic of natural energies...more likely to inspire hopeful 'New Age' explorers than disenchanting European intellectuals..."³³

A negative act of affirmation also helps us understand who we are as viewers to painting and participants in our culture. It is important to retain a residue of Adorno's aesthetics of negative critique, otherwise we risk continually being ridden roughshod over by the distortions of the market forces that control most acts of the visible, such as painting.

But what then becomes of our experience of art through a body that is distorted by the impulsive utilitarian forces at work in our culture, a somatic experience that is not conducted within a perfect self-balancing mechanism in that instrumentalist sense. Art as a separate function in a utilitarian division of labour between those who have access and those who don't has become the sacral replacement of religious experience. One major part of the experience of art is its separateness from a lived experience, that it is a heightened experience that demarcates itself out of lived experience; here we must reinforce the difference between experience as one that is heightened and the definition of the art object as being one that comes to be possessed only by those who understand how culture works. The nullity that is given back to culture is art as a separate function in the compartmentalisation of culture we inhabit, and the sterility of art for art's sake. The work of art as bad painting, is the constant corrective and ameliorative processing of knowledge using all means necessary in the business of picturing the culture we exist within. What aesthetic experience offers is a new formulation of the good in art that widens out the field of possibilities in an inclusive manner. Bad Painting as an extension of the field outside of demarcational skirmishing and offers a corrective to institutional orthodoxy as well as opening the field out – away from the museum experience of art as society's sacral experience. Here good and bad operate in co-existence with each other as polarities along the same line by which they exert themselves as a force for rethinking contemporary patterns of artistic behaviour all the while having to accept the contingency of producing art in a social nexus. Incompetence's and gaucheness within the making of a bad painting are necessary correctives to the old normalising habits of aesthetic evaluation that have become acceptable disembodied orthodoxies within institutions.

³³ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, op. cit., 10.