

Insane Comfort (Looking for nice)

Artists used to be attitude incarnate: “A certain rudeness and eccentricity” rendered them “uncouth and fantastic”, and caused “the shadows and darkness of vice to be more conspicuous in their lives than the light and splendour of those virtues by which man is rendered immortal.”

This Renaissance assessment from Giorgio Vasari in *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* was foundational for both art history and a modern idea of the author, as it dismissed the Platonic idea of art as imitation in favour of creative *Urheber*, to use the emphatic German term. This influential text echoes across half a millennium into our present moment, but if resurrected Vasari would find that many things have changed. The god-like creative power of artists has officially retired as a cultural archetype. And if Vasari were to produce a sequel to *Lives*, he would be best advised to look elsewhere than in the shadows of morality for his subjects, as today, art is created and presented by friendly, open, professional, even service-minded people.

When did artists cease to be, in a radical sense, asocial? When did they stop being fingers in the eye of culture; exorbitant, *outré*, irrational and amoral, irresponsible as children, sincere and brilliant? When did they come up from the underground and reject self-scrutiny, outsiderdom and Bohemia (the historic home of the uncouth and fantastic)? To put it differently, when did art become *nice*? And what does *nice* really mean? Is it a problem? Does it constitute a closure, one more step toward art's social integration?

Who is nice? People in debt have to be nice. If you have worked up a long tab you better stick to the straight and narrow, or lenders will give chase. Maybe art has become systemically nice because we contemporary art professionals take huge symbolic loans on the 'natural' authority of signs of art, perpetuating them without adequate attention to their historic materiality. This would be the symbolic extension of capitalism as a credit-ism. Art that produces knowledge is nice. Art by

which we can positively identify ourselves is nice. Art things are nice. Art that looks like art is nice. Nice is not original. It is not even personal.

If these observations are productive, it's because of the ambiguity of presently prevailing niceness, rather than an absence left behind by the expired condition of being not-nice. It is irrelevant to rehearse the clichés that mistake radical subjectivity for authentic artishood and machismo for genius. Arguments that 'political correctness' hold art back are beside the point. But by the same token, there is no reason why cultural transformation, driven by symbolic means, should necessarily arrive in the form of provocation and romantically styled gesticulation.

Of course it is deplorable that some artists serve chocolate covered strawberries to curators on studio visits (no, it is not just a metaphor) while whether artists are even nice to each other remains unclear. I like chocolate covered strawberries, too. This discussion is not located in the realm of tact and interpersonal relations, even if it is here that an observable part of its symptomatology may be found. The fault line I want to trace is from where a new polite discourse can be found; the insidious sobriety of a new structure of affect and its symbolic economy. Clearly, the problem cannot be laid squarely at the foot of artist or curator. Whether we like it or not, to be a human subject—artists included—is largely to be a cultural symptom, and unlike Vasari's twinning origins of art and artist, it is (still) necessary to dissociate author from artistic product. We need to go beyond the binaries of you and me, liking and not liking, then and now, nice and not-nice. The following fragments are stabs at doing so, in an attempt to trace and colour niceness.

It is a fair guess that patterns of niceness started at some point in the 1990s, the decade that synchronized art with the prefix contemporary and, more than ever before, turned art into a profession. When I was a fledgling critic circa 1996, what we back then called “an '80s painter” took it upon himself to introduce me to the new ways of the Copenhagen scene, confiding that “*Socialising er blevet*



Airtox advertising campaign in Copenhagen, summer 2015

start.” This insight that “socialising has become big” must be conveyed in its Denglish glory in order to suggest the extent to which the social was well on its way to becoming “a thing”, in the full Marxist sense of the term. The punk culture of antagonism that came before was hereby eclipsed by a commitment to social use value, by a new artistic self-entitlement to make art anywhere for anybody, and by the expansion of the mediatory complex around art. The symbolic power of art began to yield outside of the art market, in the economy at large, with the injection of ideologies of creativity in the labour market.

Looking further back than the decadence of the 1990s, Ad Reinhardt had it in his mind that “art is art-as-art, everything else is everything else.” A hard-nosed, high modernist statement, you may say, but its purism was distilled through the ethics

of someone who had to work as an ad man, cartoonist, and teacher for his education and living, who was a busy activist and artist concurrently, and who never had quite enough time for making art. There was plenty of “everything else” in his everyday life. Note that his famous *dictum* only observed the difference between art and everything else, not a hierarchy. Perhaps a way of reducing inflated expectations of art—higher visitor numbers, middle class lifestyles, big studios, stardom...?

Take the long perspective through history, and if you are in the genius league you really need to step in it in a rather excessive way for your *oeuvre* to be biographically coloured by your behaviour. Take an example from literature: for your work to become dubious you will need to reach a Louis-Ferdinand Céline calibre of inexcusable political

attitudes. Do you think Lygia Clark—an artist god if there was one—was an angel? Was Bertholt Brecht not a heel? Consider your other artist heroes. Average sinners on the circuit of contemporary art will not reach the ring of hell where these icons spend afterlife. Let us be frank: if you are really nice you won't even make it *into* hell. According to Dante, the dispassionate ones are condemned to linger eternally at its gates—they are just too *spießig* for the devil to give a damn and let them in. (The Vatican abolished the devil a few years ago; an incredibly boring decision, obviously.)

If not exactly a hallmark of genius, nice was at least irrelevant. But our sense of history has shifted radically. If you don't work for history, but for the contemporary, you no longer refer to the dead but to the living, and they want you to be nice to them. The circulation of nice is commensurate with a depoliticised society. The beginning of nice is an end of history. And thus it follows that, in a very small way, you can start history again by saying no. We say yes far too much, mainly out of anxiety—social, economic, professional. Saying no is uncomfortable, but it makes for a new departure because it is a first step toward interrupting a logic of systemic reproduction.

A Danish manufacturer of safety shoes advertises its clunky products aggressively under the English slogan “Insane Comfort.” Philip K. Dick was so right when he observed (40 years ago!) that “Going mad is a lost art.” No doubt unconsciously, the oxymoron of “Insane Comfort” crystallises an important insight into the contemporary mind and nervous system that honours Soviet era reflexivity: “It is highly probable,” wrote I. P. Pavlov in 1926, “that with the preservation of the same living conditions through a number of generations newly acquired reflexes continually become permanent. This would, hence, be one of the active mechanisms of the development of the animal organism.” Imagine that: the creation of permanent comfort. Forget about abstract and elusive ‘happiness’: preserve our living standard for generations and generations on an uphill curve and

cushion us into oblivion, let our minds be blown by delicious numbness. A neural subjectivity in the desert of the real. *Nice*. It has once again become obvious how much human beings crave their own oppression.

If you revert to 20th century critical theory, nice would no doubt be seen in terms of an affirmation of dependency and reproductive attitudes; all the gormless social automatisms effectuated by hierarchy. Maybe nice is no deeper than an infrastructural sensibility, created by networked beings of functional affect. Seen from here, it is logical that a pervasive culture of contemporary niceness finds its counterpoint in hate. Power used to be into art and other nice things, as a symbolic legitimization of hegemony; today power has become quite unrhetorical, even uncivil.

There is not a lot of information in nice. Nice people don't say what they really think, so it is not something on which decision-making can be based. Nice has no leverage in the vertical aggregates of power. What Karl Marx called primitive accumulation remains a central dynamic in capitalism: this is the moment when the score is made and ownership asserted. You can mediate primitive accumulation with law and normalise it with socially accepted modes of cynical reason, but it remains a form of violence.

On the other hand, maybe there is resistance in nice when it is used for the strategic retaining of sincerity? Something in the style of what Roland Barthes had in mind when he talked about the double-edged character of tactfulness and neutral attitudes, a kind of social camouflage which allows you to buy time and space to look for your own style “of being present to the struggles of our time,” as he put it? Turning yourself into a witness is sometimes the only way you can act authentically.

In the 1973 short story “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” Harlan Ellison—a pseudonym of Ursula K. Le Guin—dares the reader to imagine an idyllic, festive realm whose equal, free, guiltless, and happy denizens manage to do without

slaves, capitalism, monarchy. It is too good to be true, but don't think “Omelas” is some quietist fantasy: thanks to the psychedelic *droom*, the pleasures of sex are “beyond all belief.”

“Do you believe?” Le Guin asks the reader. “Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No?” And then she adds one egregious detail.

In a cellar of one of the beautiful public buildings or spacious private homes of Omelas, inside a closet-sized dark space, a child is kept: “It might be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually it is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the farthest corner...” The emaciated idiot child is kept isolated, festering in its own excrement, terrorised by the people who maintain its existence. It used to scream at night, but as its memories of sunlight and its mother's long gone voice are subsiding, so are its screams fading to whimpers.

“They all know it is there,” the people of Omelas, “and they all know that it has to be there.” It is the miserable existence of the child that makes possible their arts, their achievements, the abundance of their land, their happiness and wisdom—even their fine weather. But the terms are set: if the child is brought up into the light and treated decently, “in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed,” Le Guin solemnly writes. How could you throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of happiness for one?

A good reason never to believe in the nice around you.

The fear of becoming demoted to a societal margin arises when social and professional failures are entwined. This is obvious enough, yet half a century ago failure in social terms might have been open to idealization as bohemia; the latter is now well off the cognitive map of contemporary subjects (neoliberalists such as Richard Florida

scoff at Bohemia.) In the twilight of critique (did contemporary thought do us a big disservice there?) and in the eclipse of symbolic orders left and right (see Bernard Stiegler: *Symbolic Misery*) there is a temptation to turn into social lube, go with the flow. In the age of artist as producer as activist as entrepreneur as influencer as poet, etc., flexibility breeds indifference and nicety.

Maybe nice is contemporary art's defeatist way of acknowledging that its economies of money, attention, and symbolic structures rely on the authority of intermediaries and mediating mechanisms, anyway. That somebody had created a great work of art used to be enough for collectors and institutions. Now, no artist exists without a gallery, media presence, endorsements here and there. Mainstream narratives about art belie this fact by insisting that it is still all about the individual.

INSANE
COMFORT