

Why the London Group?

I just want to make a few personal comments on why we have the London Group exhibiting here at the Highgate Gallery. Attributions in the text that I shall read, apart from the direct quotations, must go to Diane Collinson's excellent essay in the book "Looking into Paintings, also extracts from letters in the Jackdaw magazine and Simmel Georg's essay from 1903 "The Metropolis and Mental life" – I will take questions at the end.

On April 18th in the Wall Street Journal Eric Gibson wrote, "Until Duchamp, criticism was aesthetically based. The critic talked about a painting's subject, the way the artist handled colour, drawing, composition and the like. With Ready-mades, the objects appearance and beauty were no longer the issue – indeed, they were irrelevant. What mattered was the idea behind the work – the point the artist was trying to make. So art criticism moved from the realm of visual experience to that of philosophy. The writer no longer had to base his critical observations on a close scrutiny of the work of art. He could simply riff" - jazz it up with the quick and witty remark. This reminds me of the early Greek pre-Socratic Sophist, they were professionals in cleverness skilled in words and ideas, so called facilitators of a democratic ideology and yet their effect was to secure advantages for the rich. Nothing ever seems to change!

There is in my eyes, a lack of values in today's cultural world. As predicted, in the 1960s, by the Situationists and Marxist theorist Guy Debord, we are all held within the power of the spectacle. We need to educate our eyes and begin to think through seeing not see through thinking, Trapped as we are in our Capitalist society of fetishised commodities.

Plasma screens, instant gratifications, globalised internet, cell phones and money has been the spirit of the recent age, and who isn't fed up with 'geddit?' art. Diamond encrusted skull equals money, bling, death – geddit? Or, in the period we have just been through, Myra Hindley's face, made up of images of a child's hand; two fried eggs and a sausage on a plate; a child mannequin with a penis for a nose. We are not shocked, we are just bored by the obvious [pop culture] self publicising adolescent narcissism of untidy emotions and dirty underwear complete with the sort of spidery scabbling which are regularly cleaned off the walls of public lavatories.

I want to talk about why the London group should exist in today's self obsessed world. What it offers to an audience. Its hidden values, what it can offer to those outside its own internal orbit. Why the members have joined the group over its diverse 95-year history, and what, in terms of aesthetics, does it offer to the general public. I would like to consider some linguistic terms of aesthetic appreciation, to dwell on the order of activity and response, the disinterested gaze, perspectives from which to see the London Group and the hidden values it has to offer the viewing public. Also, how in general we look at a piece of artwork coloured by our attitudes towards it. I will use quotations from the recent and distant past - including some from my own particular passions, which range from perception to the ontology of existence. I will conclude with a critique of today's 'instant art', a lament at the loss of seriousness, scholarship and a sense of history and compare this to the endless

possibilities of the loose collection of professional artists who make up the London Group, offering their wares in public exhibition and display.

When I think of the London Group and refer to it, I say it has amoeba like qualities, in that it has no shape and never dies. It is a peripatetic organisation; it has no home, no resting place and exhibits where it can.

There is no brand to sell other than a guarantee of quality. It is an artists' collective brought together by necessity and individual need. It certainly began in 1913, with an illustrious history and has been used, visited and colonised by many distinguished names over the last 95 years to the present day.

Many who have joined have been involved in art education and have been strong influences in the major art institutions of their time, which is still the case today - artists having little other regular means of income, than teaching.

Although called the London Group the majority of members are from elsewhere, some are foreign born or as with myself, the sons and daughters of immigrants. I would not like to guarantee how many of the London Group are actually from London, but like the eclectic metropolis that we live in, the group echoes the agglomeration of styles, histories and backgrounds in its makeup, where tribal loyalties and aesthetic motivations can be ignored or forgotten as we easily exhibit together on a level playing field, with a variety of styles – pure eclecticism.

Where does that leave us other than with the work itself on the walls in front of you - where you have a sort of London Group in Lilliput? Although many members normally work on a much grander scale, let us look at the aesthetic proposed. Let us regard how we look at the work on the wall, and what sort of aesthetic experience it can offer us. We as viewers, in so far as we are considering the work aesthetically are not normally concerned whether it is a resemblance of what it claims to depict, but with whether the world created by the artist is coherent, satisfying, illuminating, appealing and whole.

Now, what can our interest or experience of a piece of work be, that moves us from a first order to second order activity into the limitless area of speculative enquiry consisting of the responses and attitudes we have in an extremely haphazard way. A conglomeration of fast moving, semi articulate, thought activity. You would have attitude, the economic attitude – what price is it? The historic attitude – where does it fit into 'Art' with a capital A; the evaluative attitude – how good is it, the technical attitude – how did they do that?

Aesthetics is to do with things perceived by the senses, but something may be ugly and gross yet aesthetically pleasing, or beautiful yet aesthetically cloying. Whether we like or dislike the way it looks we move somehow, with sensory experience from matter to meaning, and it is a distinguishing mark of aesthetic experience that it is one of participating in or inhabiting, no matter how briefly, the world view being presented. This is not to claim in any Greenbergian sense that it is superior to any other experience, exclusive and only available, as implied by Greenberg, to the ultra sensitive or initiated. It is one particular aspect of conscious activity in general that we all experience, and is latent in all our investigations of the world we live in. One

aspect of this type of regard, though, is disinterestedness, which does not mean uninterested, but that the attention given is unbiased. We don't have to compare it, grade it or learn lessons from it, but to allow ourselves for a nanosecond to be held within the work's orbit, allowing its limits and evocations to arrest our attention. So that the work's own self validation self validates ourselves. Not a reflection as a means to some further end, but an investigation working tentatively into the imagination. And this disinterestedness does not imply removal from our own knowledge, but rather we become receptive to a new particularity. We are as persons with history, knowledge and experience, ready to open up these areas, to develop and revise our own innate ideas.

Nelson Goodman wrote on the cognitive role of feeling in relation to the artist:

"It is not something that is done with the eyes but also done for the eyes. Accordingly in order to produce a work that is satisfying in this way, the artist does not have to verbalise what it is that is satisfying; but only to bring the work along in the appropriate way. The work will direct its own progress to a considerable extent and the satisfaction it yields will be what decides when it is right. What is more, because there is a kind of unconscious intuitive feedback between the artist and the work, it partly determines the character of the artist whilst working on it, and may even reveal kinds of satisfaction he or she did not know they could find beforehand. Making a piece of work, in other words, can reveal aspects of the self, or the world that were previously hidden."

The post existential philosopher Merleau Ponty also said that we understand the structure of reality by understanding ourselves, but we also understand ourselves by understanding the structure of reality. Not reflecting on the contents of our minds, but reflecting on our relationship to other subjects in the world.

Some might regard these thoughts as escapist flights of fancy, the self, me as me, being lost and absorbed in what is explored, subsequently to be found with a new authentic experience. But if we open ourselves up to our likes and dislikes, something may change and develop and there can be a delight from whichever direction, if what we perceive has been presented with a clarity that will make us look again at ourselves.

In 1580, Michel de Montaigne said:

"Do we judge a work as not being clear, or ourselves inept for not grasping what is going on? I say blame to the artist rather than yourself. Incomprehensibility can be more about laziness than cleverness; it is hard work to put an idea across with simple clarity, being incomprehensible offers protection against having nothing to say."

"Technique is the excuse of the idiot who lacks ideas - where talent is called upon, is where the imagination gives out" says George Braque.

It does not help trying to adopt mental and physical attitudes to bring the aesthetic experience on. The more you try to deliberately seek it out, the more illusive it becomes, and it creeps up on you on rare occasions without you being aware of it. Although as your regard alternates between aesthetic, practical, historical and

analytical looking, one can open out and occasionally become conscious of inexhaustible meaning. This can often occur after the event of looking.

The work of art essentially means itself, and the only proper reply to the question, what does this work mean, is to point again to the work. Everybody sees work differently, just as they experience colour, taste and sound differently, and a work may not have a fixed and unequivocal meaning and neither can it mean anything at all, even if it is about the human need to attribute meaning to random content. In aesthetic experience, we engage another segment of reality as a form of knowledge through our visual experience and it is acquired for the sake of knowing, arrived at through participation as an insight or illumination. We can dwell on the meanings of the whole complex presence of what is before us. Perhaps we will want to engage again as the knowledge acquired is of the kind discovered in relations, as between two people. Albert Camus suggested we fall in love with people because from the outside, they look so whole, so physically and emotionally together.

Aesthetic regard is as itself and meaningful in itself as it is if we like and love another person.

As was once said to me, every Rembrandt must have been his failure, if it had been a success, he would not have bothered to continue. So often what we might perceive as perfection, the author perceives as failure. Giacometti is quoted as saying,

“The model could sit for a thousand years and I’m certain in a thousand years I’d say everything’s wrong, but I’m getting a little closer. There’s no reason to change the model, my only concern would be to focus more on the same subject and try to push it as far as possible, without worrying about the outcome. Because whether it’s a failure or a success the truth is exactly the same. There’s only success in relation to failure. The more it fails, the more it succeeds.”

So why is it that the London Group does not get more full appreciation? The art world is dominated by the thousand or so artists that are very successful, that are handled by the top fifty dealers around the world. They are the ones that get all the attention but the real world is hundreds of thousands of artists who do not have dealers and are pretty much unrepresented. Today, art is the icing on the Capitalist cake, and Hurst’s diamond skull is the ultimate embodiment of that 21st Century equation Art = Money. Some day, the art world will rediscover the standards it has abandoned. “Culture does not always have to take risks, push barriers or confront difficult questions (especially when they’re not risks)” says Peter Aspden “audiences mostly do not want to go to places they did not expect to go. They want to see excellent art. What is wrong with the cultural institution that provides consistent, assured quality that mounts works that have been put together with scrupulousness and fidelity that celebrates the layers of heritage and tradition that make us what we are today? It may sound conservative, but that is how culture works. Its cutting edge makes telling incisions only when it knows where to cut. If I pay £50 to see a top class orchestra, lead by an accomplished and experienced conductor, performing a major work from the 19th century, it is not immediately obvious that I want to see too many risks being taken. I want to feel the power of culture come from the excellence of the work itself, not from the vainglorious visions of its interpreters. This is not a controversial view; it is what most people want, most of the time”.

Which brings me back to the amoeba-like quality of the London Group; it has no boundaries and never dies, but just keeps reinventing itself as it is based upon the quality of peer approbation. You cannot just join the London Group, but must be elected, not on your style or track record, but on the quality of work produced, judged by experienced and committed practitioners within their own individual fields. This is what the group offers to its audience, a multi faceted cultural experience.

Where does the London Group stand within the values of the art institutional hierarchy? The subjectivity of the group, its lack of indifference to what each individual member contributes to the whole can defeat objective measure. You cannot account its value. The London Group is not an intellectual, a-priori construct, but a loose collection of people who value one another for their individual contribution. It does not have success among critics, because it cannot be sold as a packaged whole.

Yet, its primary subjective individuality is its very strength. It is from this very substrate of creative activity that the institutional art world initially extracts its meanings and theories. In this sense, organisations like the London Group are crucial? The abstracted idea of a saleable, packaged whole can only be evolved and constructed from the desire of individuals to make art. In this way, the London Group is a direct contact for the public with a sector of the genuine art world in all its schismatic variety. It is not a constructed hypothesis, but primary involvement within an active process, forever evolving, mutating and changing shape. This is something that the outside world, in today's global economy, fails to grasp. The idea of the London Group is created by its members. To the viewer it is a mode of access to the eclectic nature of practice, personal viewpoints from different perspectives. Not separate ideologies, against each other - but a collect of ideologies seen as a whole, influenced and affected by internal relationships. Each artist has their own contribution in relation to the totality of the group, giving the possibilities of inexhaustible meaning.

The London Group is not measurable, and that is why it continues to survive, because you cannot objectify it. Like pre-reflective perception, it acts before the duality of explanations sets in. Not as a theoretical construction, but as a simple description of involvement where theory derives its meaning, living comes first, knowing later.

The group cannot be analysed to make a compound representation as a passive package to the world, it is an active process that creates its own idea. Not knowledge of art but a mode of access to it. Starting from the inside with a perspective to view the outside institutionalised art world, more an example of holistic creativity rather than an ideological grouping of power, giving the potential for continuous meaning.

I have not been reflecting on a means to a further end, but an investigation into the diversity of the imagination. This can reveal and discover aspects of creative behaviour, for London Group members as well as the viewing public that were previously hidden. The very nature of the art world is that artists are in competition with each other. Exhibiting as a group puts the members in a position to reflect on their relationship with other artists as a measure for their own project.

As an exhibiting member of the group, and ex-president, I approach the question 'Why the London Group' from a personal, subjective position, rather than a platonic view from nowhere. I have tried to give an account of things as they are in themselves, from an individual perspective. I believe socially and politically that such a loose collection of individuals, acting as a group, is the best way forward for communication. It is the key for successful interaction and stability, to allow the demonstration of creative and aesthetic value, with a seriousness attached to it and a quality to pass on to the future.

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