

Paul Rucker



SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com

On art, culture, and humanity

By Ana Leorne
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On his essay *Cultural Criticism and Society*, German philosopher Theodor Adorno declares that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Adorno, who was always a firm critic of inconsequential mass culture which he denounced by saying that "the materialistic transparency of culture has not made it more honest, only more vulgar," exalts the centrality of consciousness in art-making, itself an intrinsically human characteristic, exactly by denying the possibility of its existence in a world that has become progressively inhuman -- how can we comply with the production of objects derived from and using the same language codes as the culture that has let Auschwitz happen? And how is it possible to communicate if we have irreversibly cut all channels of communication by dehumanising the other and seeing them as the enemy?

Firstly, mass culture itself is not to blame for its vulgarisation. Mass culture is a great part of who we are, and it's only its perversion, usually brought about by money and power-driven institutions and not by its direct makers, that induces a normalisation that ultimately allows for it to emerge as "un"-culture. However, the paradox of these so-called mass culture institutions, who proclaim themselves pro-people and anti-elitism, resides in the simple fact that delivering a poor version of culture is treating people as being unable to understand nothing more than a reductive version of events -- in short, to call them "stupid".

If, on one hand, one can argue that it's the people's duty to reclaim a better education and culture themselves and that the quality of what is provided is but the result of an immediate answer to their demands, it must also be stressed that delivering said wholesome version of culture doesn't limit itself to full library access and open-source documents, but should instead consist of providing people with the tools which will help them make their own informed choices. If this doesn't happen, it's like giving an impressive and diverse collection of books to a child but never actually teaching them how to read.

Giving people the tools that will allow them to make thoughtful choices in any area of their lives should be one of our most basic duties as a functioning society, for it constitutes the ultimate weapon against the perversion brought about by the ever-growing camouflage of dehumanisation as "points of view". If we follow Norman O. Brown's directive in accepting that civilisation and its

so-called evolution can be perceived in the same way as a neurotic individual, we easily understand why our collective actions -- albeit increasingly fragmented as an arguably schizophrenic-like consequence -- have become so self-destructive: they are the result of centuries and centuries of self-loathing, lack of self-respect, repressions that have been not dealt with, and refuge-seeking in obsolete institutions whose true purpose (mass control driven by power-centrism) came about disguised as the unreachable carrot at the end of the stick, its pursuit constantly fuelled by collective guilt and a combative attitude towards the other. But if the human body can't be considered "healthy" when any part of it is sick, then why should we?

If postmodernism initially appeared to address an era whose constant mutability prevented any perception of reality to be considered true and absolute -- something that could initially be seen as a refreshing change from the incontestable dogmas that had been conditioning our lives for centuries -- perverting the hypermodernist meta-narrative quickly became a normative tool for those same obsolete institutions to validate their own agendas. The paradox of this mutability is that personal perspectives don't invalidate one another; to have a valid perspective on anything is to be able to accept any other as long as it respects basic concepts such as life and dignity. It means tolerance in heterogeneity, not totalitarianism in sided perception. It means informing and understanding, not controlling and manipulating. It means art, not artifice.

This is why Adorno was wrong. Art is not only possible after Auschwitz -- after Charlottesville, after Paris, after Barcelona, after every attack against humanity conducted daily and subsequently pseudo-validated by an ideology -- but it is also more necessary than ever. This isn't by any means an epiphany or a new concept: for example, multiple artists came together right after the results of last year's US election to state that the current situation not only didn't discouraged them but made them feel that it was their duty to keep fighting with their own tools: "if we don't address the elephant in the room, it will continue to be used in harmful ways far beyond our imagination," said visual artist Paul Rucker, whose work revolves around the theme of racism.

If we remember that art is one of the things that ultimately make us human, we rapidly become aware that the absence of engagement, curiosity and passion brought about by facilitism, by delivering poor versions of this privileged communication process, can further endanger our lives and menace our survival as a full-functioning society. To think is to be free: question everything, be informed, pass on knowledge to others, and, whenever in doubt, choose tolerance over bigotry, and love over hate. Freedom begins as a state of mind and cannot exist de facto if we deny ourselves our own ability to extrapolate from our narrow point of view and eventually see everything as being irrevocably connected. Art is the powerful tool that allows for this process to happen.