

The implications of the Still Life in the context of Contemporary Art

The still life is a structure of Westernised art that has existed through millennia, from ancient times through to the modern day. It existed as a structure in ancient Greece and Rome with *Xenia* painting, throughout Renaissance periods, and forming its own genres in the 17th Century with Dutch technical still lifes, *Vanitas* and *Memento Mori*. Still life painting has forever been an underesteemed, yet pervasive element throughout many centuries of painting (Saisselin, 1976), with its inability to “invoke the action” of grand History painting.

For the millennia that still lifes have been used, the handling of them has mostly fallen into one of two categories. The most enduring is the symbolic still life, which Saisselin describes as the “image as language” view of art, where the objects could be read as metaphors. Throughout the Renaissance, lavish displays of food in fine vessels were used to signify wealth, advertise the social standing of the owner, and celebrate the seasons. This evolved later on, with *Vanitas* and *Memento Mori* painters, where the objects were symbols of morality and mortality, and like the earlier paintings could be read on a purely semantic basis. Then, with modernism, artists began the most dramatic reinvention the still life has seen, and adapting it as the static clothes horse, on which to hang their post-impressionist and cubist experiments. Artists such as Cézanne, who used the convention of the still life to work out his abstract intentions in a figurative form, used the still life as a “prose surface” to structure his poetic intentions (Saisselin, 1976). However, since the advent of postmodernism, the art world has been strangely lacking in the conventional use of the still life.

In order to assess the still life within the critical context of contemporary art we shall need to strip it down to the bare elements that run throughout its history. Once you have taken away any cultural or time based elements, the core of the still life that is left is the concept of a collection of objects that serve no purpose in themselves, but later have a process done to them, to make it art. Other than this basic construct, I will split the still life into its two most widely used treatments, the symbolic method (*vanitas*), and the abstract method (Cézanne).

In “The Republic”, Plato voiced his denial of the validity of art over philosophy in his theory of mimesis, using the allegory of the carpenter and the painter. In this allegory, the idea of the chair first came to the carpenter, and so he gave physical shape to his idea. The painter then imitated the chair by painting a picture of it. Thus, Plato concludes, the painter’s chair is twice removed from

reality. Plato hence believed that all art was twice removed from reality, and therefore only the carpenter would have full knowledge of the chair.

This sentiment is very valid in contemporary art criticism, since the freedom of modernity and post modernity means no artificial construct is required to make something art, and art has continued to push closer and closer to the idea in its rawest state. The attitude now is that the art is in the motivation, intention and idea, regardless of how it is carried out. Much like Plato's sentiment, it is the proximity to the original statement that defines its validity.

To think of a still life as anything that is assembled to then be translated as something else, to be an icon of blankness on which to coat your intentions, is a very foreign idea to contemporary art and Plato alike. Especially when the main factor of both seem to be their brevity and conciseness, where no element is taken as read, or there because some genre specification deigns it to be there. The freedom that comes with contemporary art, that Nicholas Bourriaud called its "nomadism" in the preface to *Altermodern*, means that no element has to be included, so works are made with the essential force-carrying elements and those only. Sometimes a construct such as the idea of still life can help brevity, for example the détournement of the icon of La Pieta in both Sam Taylor Wood's (fig 2) and Marina Abramovic's (fig 3) work acts as a still life. They use the widely known image as a blank slate in order to highlight their depictions of it more clearly. This is much more closely related to the abstract still lifes of Cézanne and Braque, rather than a vanitas, since the still life is the fixed icon onto which they may project a concept of their own.

The objects in vanitas, you could argue, used to be just as mute as those in a Cézanne still life, waiting to be given artistic value only once it had been painted. The value systems of a piece have changed wholesale now, by the fact that the very choosing and placement of the objects is now given artistic value. In the context of contemporary art, collected objects have become very rich currency: assemblages, found art, installation, and readymade sculptures, this new appreciation for things gathered crosses all art mediums. One example of this is with the late Louise Bourgeois' "Red Room" [fig 1]. This is where the value of a still life has changed dramatically, where before the objects had symbolic and monetary value, they are now given artistic value of their own as an unprocessed expression of the artist's intention. This relates contemporary art practices such as installation right back to the still lifes of the Renaissance period; where instead of painting objects as a portrait of the owner, we now employ the objects themselves as the portrait. You could say this is an example of Platonist progress in the validity of art.

From a more modern perspective, if the basic concept of the still life is as a purposeful collection of objects which serve no innate purpose but to have a separate process done to them. Surely then could any assemblage of objects, from a collage, to sculpture, to an installation, be the object that by contemporary standards doesn't hold its value innately in its self but only once it is viewed and experienced by its viewers, audience, or participants. This then broadens out what began as a highly structured and reductionist genre, and expanded beyond this to encapsulate any form of art experience.

Some current schools of thought find there to be more traction in the act of a painting being painted than the finished item, seeing it as a narrative piece, collating a statement about the subject mark by mark. This then means that the very act of painting a still life (in the traditional vanitas, Pompeiian, and Dutch manner) is only once removed from the statement, the same as the viewing of a sculpture. However to paint a still life the in the modernist school, following Cézanne and the Cubists, the statement is not in the assemblage of the objects, but in the treatment of them. Whether through handling of paint, collaging of materials, or the photographic handling of the piece, the statement would be in the manipulation, and thus the art would be in the viewing of the painting.

Continuing with the Platonist view that the art is at one remove from the statement, we see that even if the early symbolic handling of still life has more use, variety and precedence in the postmodern consumerist contemporary art world, to view the finished item of a vanitas painting is twice removed from the original statement, whereas the abstract treatment of the still life with Cézanne's method, means that the finished work is just once removed from the original statement.

Work based around Relational Aesthetics, in installation, conceptual based, and happening based conventions, however, take the Platonian ideal to the furthest limits, with a working practice sculpted around the premise of the participant both creating and experiencing the work's statement simultaneously. Such as Rirkrit Tiravanija who converted public spaces and galleries into soup kitchens, where as Nicolas Bourriaud identifies in Relation Aesthetics, the "Form [of a work] can be defined as a lasting encounter", such as the sociological transformation of a space, from a public gallery, to an inviting space of warmth and domestic comfort. Here, the very way people experience this transformation, and react, is the statement of the work itself. Thus both the chair maker and performance participant are both enacting the art themselves, and Plato predicted Relational Aesthetics, and in part the abandonment of the still life, in the fourth century BC.

However, the purity of the statement was the major concern to Plato, and with works such as participation art, part of the purpose is often the recklessness of possible outcomes and conflicts that could arise from that. One example is the work of Emma Heddich, whose participation based works are an “exercise ... of negotiation”, where the statement and thus the art, “lies in the making, not what is made” (Frieze, 2004). It could be that levels of removal from the original artwork do not necessarily make the artwork less valid, watered down or polluted but make the statement richer for the levels of manipulation, having a tiered approach to working and reworking, a palimpsest of collected ideas. So this means of assessing work, although very close to the ethos of a lot of contemporary work, it will not be for the same reasons when you are comparing the most separated people as one of the earliest recorded philosophers and some of the most contemporary philosophers of our time.

The notion of the purity of an idea is tied together with the notion of artist as genius, with some special knowledge to give the world, which throughout most of history has been the norm, but nowadays holds far less water. With the sanctity of an artist doled out by their fame and not an innate gift, contemporary art in general is formed on far more democratic, egalitarian basis.

With democracy comes seas of differing options; art now is far less susceptible to forming nuclei of schools of thought, coherent movements in art, and collective reactions to events. There still remains a split, however, between artists who work with objects, and artists who work with events. With an event the art is enacted by the people participating and this is then not removed from the statement at all. On the other hand, work based in real tangible objects work in an entirely different manner, with the artist crafting, and with the art being consumed at one remove from the statement, and sometimes more. Often a building of levels of mutation of a work become essential and desirable, and so even if the reworking means the final consumption is two or four or ten times removed from the work, the mutation forms an integral part of the work, and so the viewer is never more than once removed from the statement of the mutation. This shows that even if there are not cohesive groups of artists working with still lifes directly, it is still a major consideration in any work of art, since it forms a universal delineation of our relationship to art objects.

The beauty of a great philosophy is a statement that is so precise and pure, that it can remain relevant throughout the ages. Plato’s ideas about art have proven shockingly modern, and amazingly relevant to the philosophy of current day art. Through his method of refining an idea, and honing it to the most basic of elements, he has shown us that the still life is not just a construct of a particular genre, but a basic relationship of viewer to object, and a pervasive element in art today.

Illustrations



[fig 1] Louise Bourgeois, Red Room (Child) 1994



[fig 2] La Pietà by Sam Taylor Wood



[fig 3] La Pietà by Marina Abramovic



[fig 4] Rirkrit Tiravanija

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