

Barnaby Drabble

“In a neo-liberal understanding of culture, enlightenment has been superseded by entertainment” Simon Sheikh

Lets take a short, sharp look at the most celebrated of our Museums and galleries today to show us how the state, arm in arm with a rampant art-market, willing corporate sponsors, opportunistic artists and curators and an ill-informed public have dispensed quite willingly of all philosophical aims for art. We are witnessing the slow Disneyfication of the art-experience.

This process is marked by subtle and barely noticeable changes, and what is interesting is the extent to which the ghost of the enlightenment project lives on, and how well the new entertainment project has taken the trappings of its predecessor as a leit-motif, an empty signifier of a new kind of ultimately very marketable value. When we visit art museums and galleries what confronts us still looks like art, and the spaces themselves continue to signal to us that it must be art, we still stand in front of it and simulate enlightenment, but actually we're faking it. We are not transformed, we are comforted, we are not being enlightened we are being paid off.

It's a cosy match – for the state the support of art becomes symbolic of its investment in creativity of its citizens and in this thing called 'culture', for the sponsor it's a pleasant marketing opportunity in which their association helps them to compensate for their less savoury activities elsewhere on the planet, for the citizen a visit to the Museum or the purchase of their first painting becomes symbolic of the idea that they are 'cultured'. It's a trade-off, and one in which none of the parties have to change themselves in any meaningful way. The exchange denotes progress but effects stasis. We are running to stand still, talking up the social importance of this thing called art, while simultaneously stripping it of any radical or transformative potential it ever might have had.

So lets get this straight, any art exhibition today that uncritically simulates this old enlightenment paradigm is a toothless lie, a sheep in wolf's clothing. Architects who build spaces for art objects, artists who make these objects and curators who select and display them, need to understand that this is the new role asked of them. We are all working for Disney.

The challenge is for the better amongst us to confront this impasse and react to overcome it.



