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On Liberty and Art

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How to begin an address to Liberty and Art? It may be useful to propose three categories. The first is that of liberty as an *ethics*, a way of life or a social practice that situates the practice of art. The second is as a realm of *representations* of liberty within generic categories of art such as monuments, sculptures and paintings; this category includes works such as the Statue of Liberty and Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1831). The third category, which tends to subsume the other two, is the vision of liberty as an *aesthetic* practice, in which the autonomous sensibility of the artist finds its match in the liberated apprehension of the spectator, in a world where free expression can be produced and recognised. Liberty then becomes the name for a set of conditions for locating, apprehending and tasting the sensibilities of freedom. What I want to take up in this introduction to today's event is this issue of sensibility; how a particular flavour of freedom (the flavour of freedom fries, perhaps) that is produced by a certain distribution of the sensible, to borrow Jacques Rancière's[i] phrase, defines a social and cultural horizon of liberty, as well as the possibility for artistic critique, or assent.

The novelist Robert Musil wrote 'History arises out of routine ideas, out of indifference to ideas, so that reality comes primarily out of nothing

being done for ideas."[ii] The premise of today's event is that something might be done for the routine idea of liberty through the practice of art. In Britain, Liberty defined as the intimate link between free association, free trade and free expression is an idea that has become so routine that even the crises of liberty are part of that routine. For an example of what I mean by this, and of how artists are commonly included in descriptions of liberty, I'm going to quote a newspaper opinion piece by the historian Timothy Garton Ash, published a fortnight ago, which samples a current liberal consensus:

> Fanatics without frontiers are on the march . . . In the first decade of the 21st century, the spaces of free expression, even in old-established liberal democracies. . will continue to be eroded. Free expression is not just the preserve of writers and artists. It's a first order freedom, the oxygen on which other liberties depend. Not for nothing did John Stuart Mill devote a whole chapter in his 'On Liberty' to "The liberty of thought and discussion." The erosion of free expression comes in many different ways . . . If you think we are not engaged in a struggle against manifold enemies of freedom, as potentially deadly as those we faced in the 1930s, you are living in a fool's paradise.[iii]

Free expression, Garton Ash says, is not the preserve of writers and artists; nor are they the cause of the crisis of liberty, because they are part of its routine. The idea of liberty is what sustains and enables artistic practices, but these practices do not contribute to the evolution or the development of the idea of liberty. Maybe our current idea of liberty, based on the equivalence and immanence of meaning and the primacy of 'feelings', is so infinitely accommodating and culturally elastic that it has no need to evolve. There is no image too extreme or excessive, no meteorite-felled Pope by Maurizio Cattelan or painterly representation of paedophilic sex (I'm referring here to the work of Gerald Davis in the *USA Today* exhibition at the Royal Academy[iv]) that can't be included in the everyday operations of liberty that also

guarantee my right to enter and leave this building, grow or shave off a beard, or get on an aeroplane. Garton Ash thinks that anyone who doesn't see the moral and practical equivalence between *Jerry Springer The Opera* and their last trip abroad are missing the point. He offers a model of liberty that is ahistorical, first-order and steady state, a shared principle of social and cultural security that underwrites our actions – the threat to liberty, he says, comes from those who feel threatened by it, the fanatics without frontiers. In Garton Ash's view, as for the British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the term liberty defines a space where threat or coercion does not exist.

I'd like to look at this another way, which may open up the question of how the practice of art might do something for the idea of liberty. If liberty cannot be threatened by free expression, what is free expression? How does free expression support and confirm the current non-coercive, threat-free flavour of liberty? It is crucial to note that in order to function in this way, free expression has to be aligned, not with equality as such, but with the idea of equal distribution. In this way, liberty guarantees, not the equal right to expression, but *the right to equal expression*, that is affirmed in well-worn liberty routines such as 'everyone must have their say' or 'let's have a debate'. To understand the implications for artistic practice of this difference between equality as such and equal distribution, it is useful to pick up on Garton Ash's reference to John Stuart Mill, and Mill's text *On Liberty* of 1859[v]. Garton Ash thinks that Mill was a prophet of the primacy of free expression, as the foundation of all the other freedoms we enjoy. I disagree; in *On Liberty* Mill made free expression into the function of a system for the equal distribution of well-being and happiness, whose ultimate goal was to establish the *expectation* of security and the

abolition of threat. This is Mill's Bicentenary year, and is an occasion to address his version of liberty, in the context of neo-utilitarian models of democracy, which have been applied to many social formations, including arts policy and art practice. Mill's model of liberty, which can be summed up as 'everyone to pursue their own good in their own way, without harming others' seems to offer a defence of individual autonomy, creativity and the immanence of meaning, against irrational prejudice and popular opinion. This seems just and reasonable, but if you read *On Liberty* alongside Mill's other book, *Utilitarianism*[vi], which was written concurrently and published two years later in 1861, a controlling definition and concept of liberty becomes apparent, that determines the character of free expression. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill said that the central principle of utility was that 'equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable'[vii], an echo of Jeremy Bentham's dictum 'an equal quantity of happiness for every one of them.'[viii] Mill stressed that this was not the same as saying that everybody has an equal right to happiness. Infringements of the Millian and Benthamite brand of liberty do not occur because of the exhibition or publication of offensive or obscene images, but because of the disturbance of the principle of equal distribution. To give an example – a journalist recently went to visit two well-known British artists and said 'I find the ponciness of the language that surrounds the art world a bit frustrating' and 'I don't believe that a complicated word is necessarily better than a simple one.'[ix] I think it's important to point out that, in saying this, the journalist was not claiming an equal right to the happiness that can be gained by working at an understanding of art or pursuing an *entrée* in to the art world, but was instead seeking the artist's agreement to the right to equal happiness, supported by a sphere of communication in which art would be made available to

everyone. The response she got was to be ejected from the studio with the words 'What's the point of trying to talk to someone who's always going to try and reduce it down to this kind of common language . . . there is no common language in art, it's a complex activity. I get bored with this, I'm bored or this already, this conversation.' In this trivial exchange of dialogue, we already have two versions of the relationship of liberty and art. In the first, the activity and practices of the artist are part of the everyday liberty routines of a participatory democracy and should therefore be accommodated to them – an open society requires accessible and comprehensible art made by co-operative artists who don't fling the gift of liberty back in our faces. In the second version of the relationship between liberty and art, the artist's intervention suspends, and thereby compromises, the common dispositions and sensibilities of liberty. I will discuss this second version in a moment, with reference to the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay, but I also want to point out that the notion of the 'accommodating artist' isn't just favoured by wandering journalists; it has considerable academic, intellectual and institutional support. Professor John Skorupski, in his recent summary of JS Mill's thought *Why Read Mill Today?*[x] addresses the question of liberty and art; in testing Mill's ideas against contemporary phenomena, Skorupski identifies a 'crisis . . . of ethical and aesthetic self-identity . . .. the coarsening or diminution of ideals of the good'[xi] that he thinks is manifest in much contemporary art. He claims that while scholarship and science continue to develop as an infrastructure underpinning notions of rationality, current art fails to provide us with models of a life worth living, offering instead inner exile, vacuous gimmickry or fatuousness.

The artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, who died in March 2006, was someone who used 'inner exile' as a central element of his practice, and thereby produced a robust response to Skorupski's accusation. Finlay engaged with 'the problem of liberty' through the practice of art, and specifically with the legacies of the French revolution and the utilitarian conversion that followed it. His work also showed that to assume the position of the subject of a discourse on liberty is to understand its current problems, and its future tendencies, by means of an historical reflection. Finlay's opposition of 'Athens' (Edinburgh) to his garden at 'Little Sparta' established a topography of liberty that allowed languages, forms and histories of liberty and tyranny to cross-reference each other, and replaced a simple opposition of liberty and tyranny with a more complex understanding of how the forms of civic and social liberty that have followed the French revolution have their roots in forms of violence, overthrow, and the institution of new forms of mastery of audiences and of the cultural and visual field. His art looked beyond the assumptions of 'Liberty as Security' to ask what it is that liberty secures, disposes and appropriates.

'The Little Spartan War' of 1983, which was occasioned by Strathclyde Region's attempts to seize sculptures from Finlay's garden at little Sparta against unpaid taxes, pointed to a division within the public sphere between the 'Athenian' liberty of Edinburgh, characterised by a neo-utilitarian order, and the aesthetic practice of liberty that Finlay developed at Little Sparta, which included references to the iconography of St Just and Hitler's SS alongside classical motifs.
The terms of engagement that Finlay used in Little Spartan War had been anticipated by 'The Third Reich Revisited' an image/text piece from 1982 that, as Finlay put it 'was . . an attempt to raise . . .the questions which our culture does not want to put in an idea form.'[xii]

One of the questions that Finlay addressed in this work was directed at the legacy of the utilitarian model of civic or social liberty promoted by philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and JS Mill, and was expressed in the following way:

> One of the enigmas of the 70s and 80s is the failure of a pluralist democracy to produce a public art for itself. Where (except possibly in the new sculpture parks) is there any public celebration of radical secularism? Of ecological utilitarianism? Of caution-at-all-costs free conformism? Of Benthamite pacifism?[xiii]

In October 2006, I think that Finlay's rhetorical questions have been answered, in a more precise and satisfying way than he could have anticipated. An apparently perfect reconciliation of the liberal/utilitarian model of liberty and the practice of art can be experienced in one quick slide down one of Carsten Höller's chutes, a definitive piece of mass choreography that has been installed in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern[xiv]. Two views on Höller have been put about – either that he genuinely wants us all to have fun or that he is cultivating a bit of satirical ambiguity. I would say that neither of these views are correct. Höller, whose previous works include 'Killing Children' – a child's bicycle rigged up to a jerry can of petrol that ignites when the child starts pedalling, is simply interested in finding out how the spectator can, not just 'interact' with, *but be made responsible for*, the social being of the artwork, in much the same way that the artist is asked to do. What the Turbine Hall piece offers us is the even social distribution of happiness within the framework of autonomous, individual experience. As you slide down one of Höller's chutes, you can be assured of your place in an aesthetic order where everyone has an experience, yet no-one's experience counts for more than anyone else's – in this way, your moral security is guaranteed as well as your physical safety. The famous 'happiness principle'

proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth century, does not indicate the maximisation of some abstract stock of social happiness, but rather, as I have said 'an equal quantity of happiness for every one of them.' This utilitarian principle was also enshrined in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, Article 27 (1). Declaration 27(1) says:

"Everyone has the right . . . to enjoy the arts."[xv]

Since the British Government was a signatory to the UN declaration, they ought to be pleased with Carsten Höller's achievements in the Turbine Hall. However, while Article 27 (1) is aligned with the principle of liberty as open access and equal distribution, it is important to point out its historical amnesia, as it severs the link between modern forms of liberty-as-security and the rhetoric of 'liberty or death' that emerged in the French revolution. In this regard, it can be noted that nothing in Article 27(1) secures or protects my particular, personal or pathological forms of enjoyment in relation to visual art or the arts in general; in fact, such forms of enjoyment are placed under suspicion. To quote one summary of Bentham's position on particular interests: 'the interests are not particular because they are sinister, they are sinister because they are particular.'[xvi] This telling phrase indicates, I think, why our current definitions of the 'excess' of free speech are so imprecise, since they ignore the sinister nature of particularity itself, and assume that the fail safe point of free speech is triggered by a reference to some recognisably sinister or evil object from the store cupboard of transgressive images. Anyone who has been following recent debates on whether or not cultural and religious separation presents a threat to liberty and participatory democracy will have

noted that cultural and social evil is in fact said to reside in those 'who are sinister because they are particular'. For Jeremy Bentham, the American and French declarations of rights of the late eighteenth century threatened the utilitarian model of liberty, in which the right to equal enjoyment (the example Bentham gives is 'it *is right* that I should have such a thing done for me') should always take precedence over the kind of absolutist claims that typified the American and French Declarations of Rights (the threat of sinister interests, Bentham tells us, emerges in the phrase '*I have a right* to have such a thing done for me')[xvii]. Article 27 (1) of United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, is something of an oddity in this respect, since the phrase "Everyone has the right . . . to enjoy the arts' combines the utilitarian morality of '*it is right* that everyone should enjoy the arts' with the absolutism of 'Everyone *has a right . .* to enjoy the arts'. This paradox is occasioned, I would suggest, by the definitive victory, after World War Two, of a kind of politically inflected *embourgeoisment* of culture, that served its particular interests by opposing the principle of particular interest, and promoted participatory democracy, initially of the 'trickle down' variety. Some artists, like Carsten Höller, have found ways to make the legatees of this cultural shift responsible for the forms of art that they have helped to create. Other artists have also found it necessary to produce critical reflections on liberty, that address the impasse created by the clash between 'the equal right to happiness' and 'the right to equal happiness.'

A brilliant allegory of the contemporary dilemmas of liberty and art is to be found in the painting *Where Happiness Happens*, made by

Geraint Evans, my colleague at Wimbledon College of Art[xviii]. This painting has been described in the following way:

A younger artist sits in his studio surrounded by his own attempts at emulating his artistic heroes whose postcards adorn a wall. He hopes a gallery dealer will ring, but knows they won't.[xix]

Nonetheless, it is also possible to read this narrative of individual failure as the story of a pyrrhic and perverse victory for the utilitarian idea of happiness. This artist shown in this painting exists within the ideal of zero-threat and non-coercion promised by the utilitarian model of liberty; he is not being coerced, nor is required to co-erce himself. He is the still point of the still world of liberty, living in a social bubble or diving bell, breathing an atmosphere of freedom where the pressure is constantly intensified to ensure his security and survival. Where happiness happens; culture at a standstill.

Notes

[i] Rancière, J. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics,* London and New York: Continuum.
[ii] Musil, R. (1995) *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike New York: Alfred A. Knopf p. 395.
[iii] Garton-Ash, T. (2006) 'The struggle to defend free expression is defining our age' *The Guardian,* 5 October.
[iv] Royal Academy of Arts, (2006) *USA Today,* 6 October – 4 November.
[v] Mill, J.S. (1859) *On Liberty,* London: J.W Parker and Son.
[vi] Mill, J.S. (1871) *Utilitarianism,* London: Longmans, Green and Reader.
[vii] *Ibid*., p.93.
[viii] Postema, G. J. (2006) 'Interests, Universal and Particular: Bentham's Utilitarian Theory of Value' *Utilitas*, 8 (2) p.113.
[ix] Cadwalladar, C. (2006) 'Meet the Real Brothers Grim' *The Observer*, 8 October.
[x] Skorupski, J. (2006) *Why Read Mill Today?,* London: Routledge.
[xi] *Ibid*., p.97.
[xii] Abrioux, Y. (1985) *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer*, Edinburgh: Reaktion Books p.117.
[xiii] *Ibid*., p.119.

[xiv] Tate Modern (2006-7) *The Unilever Series: Carsten Höller*, 10 Oct 2006 – 15 April 2007.
[xv] See Hewison, R. and Holden, J. (2004*) The Right to Art: Making Aspirations Reality*, Demos Report, available online at http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/righttoartreport.
[xvi] Postema (2006) *op.cit*., p.120.
[xvii] Schofield, P. (2006) *Utility and Democracy: the Political Thought of Jeremy Bentham*, Oxford: Oxford University Press p.70.
[xviii] See this painting at http://www.chapter.org/1697.html.
[xix] *Ibid*.