

[PREVIOUS PAGE](#)**Why So Quiet Child ?**

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Recently James Charlton showed me a photograph of the dining room at Bagh Palace, Indore, where two of Brancusi's marble 'Bird in Space' sit symmetrically at either end of an elegant side table. Next to each bird are two upright and very graceful lamps, casting a light that mirrors the grace of Brancusi's forms. In front is a highly polished wooden table surrounded by several identical and perfectly arranged chairs, and above is a crystal chandelier. There is a balance in this image, in the way each object is an equal partner in the visual energy of the photograph and seemingly of the room itself and, while a photograph is no replacement for being there, an impression is given whereby Brancusi's sculptures provide just one element of the gestalt of the space. In this way their expressive function becomes secondary, which is not to say they are merely decorative, but that they serve a function of interior decoration not dissimilar to the patterns on the chair, the shape of the light on the wall, or the wood grain on the table.^[1] They are in many ways visual muzak.

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If you visit James Charlton he will likely show you miniature replicas of Brancusi's 'Bird in Space' and 'Flying Turtle', which he uses as the handles of his kitchen cupboards; and he might talk of his family home, where art and non-art were treated by his artist parents with the same (dis)respect, and where art in effect became an element of furniture, part of the everyday. In 'Why so quiet,child?'^[2], this conflation of art and the everyday provides a matrix from which Charlton establishes a dialogue around art where, were it not for the framing of the art gallery, there might be genuine confusion as to the artistic 'identity' of the objects on display. This is not to say that Charlton has a disbelief of art, or that he thinks of the everyday as art, rather he has brokered a 'coitus' by which he explores connections, some esoteric and some not, between them.

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In 'Why so quiet,child?' Charlton's main strategy is appropriation or, rather, plagiarism, where he has transposed the designs of artist friends onto items that double as interior decor. 'Why so quiet,child?' consists of two rooms that must be entered consecutively, one almost a mirror reflection of the other. Within each is an orange and grey rug, exactly the same except for the reversal of the pattern and colour, designed 'after' an abstract painting by the Dutch artist Jan van der Ploeg. Scattered across each rug are five orange and grey hassocks or pouffes which double as lamps, based on a 1950s heater design. These are also 'decorated' a la' paintings by Jan van der Ploeg. Five television monitors that could double as computer screens emanate a 'sublime' Yve Klein blue. On the wall of the first room are terracotta-coloured fiberglass casts of toilet ducks that are also vague in their identity in their somewhat androgynous referencing of both male and female genitalia. Separating each room is a doorway with a large working sliding door painted in the 'manner' of Simon McIntyre. The only items not in any way vague are several shiny stainless steel whistles decorating the walls of the second room.

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Although the two rooms cite no specific interior, there is a pervading sense of a cosy intimate living room, soft and warm, that is persuaded by the warm orange glow of the hassocks-come-lamps-come-heaters. In their indeterminacy these objects, seen kicked around many living rooms until the last twenty years or so, establish the essence of many of the themes of this show. In their original form hassocks were multi-functionary objects – a place to put the knitting, a spot to rest the feet, a storage container for the television guide, a spare seat, or a toy on which to push a small relative around the house, among other things. More than this, the hassock in my home was always close to my mother: it was her coffee-table-come-footrest, and the place nearest to her where we children could nest. As such, when I first viewed Charlton's versions, it became apparent that these simple, odd objects were loaded with a quality, perhaps intersubjective, definitely nostalgic, that I could not define by analysis. In short, for me at least, these objects contain an indeterminate essence.

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Traditionally it is agreed that art, whatever that is, has this very special quality usually called

'essence'– something that nobody can ever define but which makes it unique to other cultural products. By appropriating the styles of other artists, Charlton does not suppose that he has captured this essence, he in fact suggests that this is an impossibility. Appropriation is a strategy frequently used in contemporary practice by artists endeavouring to make a comment by using art as their source material, whereby all art becomes a found object in the same manner as Marcel Duchamp's readymades. However, Charlton's copying is as much respectful as critical – more so for instance than Cherie Levine's six times appropriation of Brancusi's 'Newborn' (1915) in her same-titled 'Newborn' of 1993, which challenges the idea that an artwork is uncopyable by suggesting its 'essential' qualities may be reproducible. It is arguable that many contemporary artists such as Levine, who query the existence of a unique essence in art by focusing their creativity around it, merely rehabilitate its importance by their emphasis. Issues such as these are important to Charlton, who asks if such work actually disavows Walter Benjamin's desire that reproduction should undermine the aura of the original, by asserting its significance via a sense of loss caused by its absence. And, as I experienced when I first saw his eccentric and humble hassocks, Charlton is also exploring the possibility that this unexplainable phenomenon that is called essence, if it exists, also lies elsewhere, perhaps within our nostalgic memory of the everyday.

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Essence is sometimes bound with spirituality, and more recently in terms of psychology; at other times it is tied to Marxist theory, or even to simple emotional experience, among other things. Whatever it is, this phenomenon, remains forever indeterminate: As Rudolf Arnheim has noted, great works of art are notoriously reluctant to yield their secret to analysis. "Many useful and clever things are said about them," he said, "but what precisely creates the greatness in the face of an old man in a Rembrandt portrait, the desperate passion of a Beethoven quartet, the perfection of a Greek temple, or the intense freshness of a passage in Dante's *Commedia*? If we are admitted to the grace of such company, we surrender to the magic and barely remember the question: How is it done?"^[3]

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Over the last two hundred years or so, since eighteenth century philosophers Alexander Baumgarten and Imanuel Kant, aesthetics has been the main theoretical frame used by western art to categorise an item as art and to judge its worth against other objects. Timothy Binkley wrote that " 'aesthetics' has a general meaning in which it refers to the philosophy of art. In this sense, any theoretical writing about art falls within the realm of aesthetics."^[4] As such, any analysis of essence within western art came to be articulated using terms such as 'aesthetic emotion'. For example Clive Bell in attempting to identify the 'peculiar' nature of art, asked "What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that evoke our aesthetic emotions?"^[5] This was particularly the case in the twentieth century when western critics such as Bell and Clement Greenberg strove to forge a unique place for art in a society in which it had become marginalised by secularisation and threatened by capitalism.^[6] Interestingly, most positions presented as a counter to the aesthetics model have themselves been appropriated into the aesthetic realm. For example Marcel Duchamp, who explicitly wanted his readymades to emphasise idea over beauty, only found them increasingly referred to as beautiful in the conventional sense; and conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, who similarly questioned whether aesthetics had any place in art at all, have been accused of replacing visual beauty with an aesthetic based in the intellect.^[7] °

Aesthetics, as experienced through culture and originally outlined by Kant and others, was not just located within the realm of art. In the nineteenth century, for example, aesthetic consideration or in other words, a concern for the beautiful – was considered a moral responsibility of home-keepers.^[8] By the 1960s, houses were spoken of in some circles in language similar to that used to describe a painting: "The home that you create expresses something. It expresses a spirit, an atmosphere that can be sensed."^[9] However, aesthetics itself became dependent on art, partly to justify its own philosophical pretexts^[10]; and, conversely, within the cultural sphere it is in art that 'real' aesthetic beauty is said to be found. According to Pierre Bourdieu, it is traditionally believed that an aesthetic response related to the everyday and to basic human needs is a facile pleasure, pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses". Art by comparison provides "pure pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure, which is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence and a measure of man's capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man. The culture which results from this sacred division is sacred."^[11] °

This attitude is sustained in the contemporary world by the chimerical ideal that art is not a

commodity. As Bourdieu has pointed out: "The art business, a trade in things that have no price, belongs to the class of practices in which the logic of pre-capitalist economy lives on... These practices, functioning as practical negations, can only work by pretending not to be doing what they are doing."^[12] According to this argument, a disavowal of interest in economic gain provides for the 'accumulation of symbolic capital', whereby one's ethical and moral authority as artistic producer, et cetera, is legitimised and, concurrently, one's viability as economic commodity reified. In short, Bourdieu says, producers and vendors who 'go commercial' condemn themselves. "For the author, the critic, the art dealer, the publisher or the theatre manager, the only legitimate accumulation consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognised name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trade mark or a signature) or persons ... and therefore to give value, and to appropriate profits from this operation."^[13] °

The ideal of legitimate culture as being untainted by commercialism is in line with Kant's original argument that 'pure' aesthetic judgments can only be so if they are made within a context of disinterestedness where no exterior or subjective factors have been of influence. However, if western artworks are usually produced and judged within a culture of commodity exchange, as Bourdieu suggests, where the concerns of the marketplace may be considered to have influenced their production and reception, they become marginalised from being 'true' in the manner of Kant.^[14] Art therefore, being the commodity that it denies itself to be, becomes everyday a la' Kant.

If artworks are commodities then aesthetic theory, if it is a theory of art, is also a theory of cultural capital. Accordingly, like any other commodity, artworks and the ability to 'understand' them are signifiers of social status. Art and non-art objects are never passive ornaments as their mere presence within a space articulates information about the owners of that space: about their wealth (in being able to afford such artefacts), their taste (in that they know what 'great' artefacts are), and therefore their general social worth.^[15] The semiotic function of such items, as signifiers of social and other forms of status, cannot therefore be underestimated, especially, as Bourdieu has shown they are used "to fulfill a social function of legitimising social differences... Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the classification they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed." ^[16] This is particularly so in the late twentieth century, as Judith Williamson has pointed out: "We differentiate ourselves from other people by what we buy... In this process we become *identified* with the product that differentiates us... We have allowed objects to speak for us and have become identified with them."^[17] That is, the commodity has shifted from the concrete to the abstract, from objects to the values implicit within, which are the essence of art and non-art. Thus, within 'Why so quiet, child?', the conflation of art and the everyday is a consonant union, whereby commodity conflates onto commodity, and art and non-art become coterminous. With his working door-come-abstract painting 'after' Simon McIntyre, Charlton marks the potential of precious art and functional objects to convey meaning, or at least the impossibility of there ever being meaningless form. °

In light of this, Charlton's androgynous toilet ducks suggest another layer to this union, with the implication of a hidden psychological essence based in gender and sexuality. In the twentieth century much was made of the links between art and psychology, but everyday spaces and objects may also be subjected to psychological analysis. For example, in 'The Interpretation of Dreams' (1900), Sigmund Freud argued the house as a metaphor for a woman's body, pulling on the long association of women with the house in poetry and mythology.^[18] This was particularly so in the nineteenth century when, excluded from all forms of work, women became the managers of 'home', and it was expected that domestic interiors should express the personality of the mistress of the house.^[19] During the twentieth century the interior of a house took on other psycho-symbolic associations. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller have analysed the modern domestic kitchen and bathroom to suggest that twentieth century design "gradually articulated the bathroom and the kitchen as the erotogenic zones of the domestic body. While the parlour or living room is the home's symbolic heart ... this center was displaced by the utilitarian regions of the bathroom and kitchen which became concentrated zones for built-in construction details, costly appliances, and ongoing material maintenance."^[20] Functionality and hygiene are thus the disguises by which desires centred on biological consumption and waste are sublimated into the design and fit-out of kitchens and bathrooms. Similarly, Lupton and Miller have suggest that "streamlining, the design style which enveloped innumerable American products in the 1930s, took shape out of the compelling ethos of bodily hygiene and domestic waste embodied in the modern kitchen and bathroom."^[21]

So, as you pull the door-come-painting to the side and pass through the first room and into its 'reflection' in the second, a more inclusive and private space, what do you find? It might occur to you that Charlton has more or less copied or appropriated himself in largely repeating the set-up of the first room into the next. The differences perhaps represent Charlton's acknowledgment that he can't even copy himself. Or you might think that you have found the work's interior chamber – its core, where its essence will surely be revealed. But what of the whistles on the wall? Perhaps they chirp the 'truth' about art's chimerical image, possibly they alert the viewer to the connections between art and the everyday, in order to broker some sort of coitus. Maybe they simply offer a warning as to the nature of essence, whatever that is.

[1] Brancusi is a good example here in light of the 1928 court case *Brancusi vs. The United States*, where the artist challenged a customs ruling that his sculpture 'Bird in Flight' was not art. The judgment determined that it was, but in doing so emphasised: "The object now under consideration is shown to be for purely ornamental purposes, its use being the same as any piece of sculpture of the old masters. It is beautiful and symmetrical in outline, and while difficulty might be encountered in associating it with a bird, it is nevertheless pleasing to look at and highly ornamental." Discussed by Thomas Munro, in 'The Idea of the Visual Arts', from Philip Alperson (ed), *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, p20.

[2] Mary Norton, *The Borrowers*, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1955, p8.

[3] Rudolf Arnheim, *Toward a Psychology of Art. Collected Essays*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1966, p10.

[4] Timothy Binkley, 'Piece; Contra Aesthetics', from Alperson, p450.

[5] From Clive Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis. Significant Form and Aesthetic Emotion', in Alperson, p120.

[6] See Greenberg's essay 'Modernist Painting', first published in *Arts Yearbook*, n 4, 1961, p102. "Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. By doing so it would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its position of that area all the more certain."

[7] As suggested by Thomas McEvelley in 'I Think Therefore I Art', *Artforum International*, v23, Summer 1985, pp74-84.

[8] "One of the grandest points to be attended to, in making a home happy, is to make it attractive. The husband should do his best to render it comfortable and attractive to the wife, as she should to the husband and children...Beauty, as one of the most powerful characters with which the Supreme Being has impressed the most prominent characters of his creation, is one of the most essential elements of the attractiveness of human life in every condition." An extract from the *Family Friend* of 1867, quoted by Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire, Design and Society Since 1750*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1992, p109.

[9] H. Rockwell, *New Creative Home Decorating*, Stuttman, New York, 1960, p13.

[10] According to Tony Bennett: "Aesthetic discourse presupposes the existence of the artistic as an identifiably distinct institutional sphere within society for there to be something, on the object side of the equation, for aesthetic discourse to latch on to. To paraphrase Habermas, we might say that aesthetic discourse can acquire momentum and a social purchase only when there exists a 'public artistic sphere' produced by specific forms of classification and exhibition in such separated exhibition contexts as art galleries and museums." Palmer and Dodson, *Design and Aesthetics. A Reader*, Routledge, London, 1996, p36.

[11] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Routledge, London, 1979, p6.

[12] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Production of Belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods', from *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 1977, v. 13, p3.

[13] *ibid*, p 4.

[14] Charlton is interested in the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, who has studied the issue of essence and commodity exchange in non-western models, such as gifting practices in so called archaic societies, whereby an item gifted comes with a spiritual essence or presence, which demands respect or else evil or bad luck will befall the recipient. Respect is demonstrated by accepted ritual and procedures, particularly in regard to reciprocation. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. The form and reason for exchange in archaic society*, Routledge, London, 1954.

'[\[15\]](#) Tony Bennett has written about this when, while pointing out that judgments of aesthetic taste are not universal but ideological, he reveals the narcissism in being able to recognise such value. Tony Bennett, 'Really Useless Knowledge', from Palmer and Dodson.

'[\[16\]](#) Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, p7.

'[\[17\]](#) Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements. Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Marion Boyars, London, 1984, p46.

'[\[18\]](#) Forty, p104.

'[\[19\]](#) Remarkably, this attitude continued into the twentieth century:"The house that does not express the individuality of its owner is like a dress shown on a wax figure. It may be a beautiful dress - may be a beautiful house - but neither is animated by a living personality." Emily Post, *The Personality of a House*, 1930, quoted in Forty, p104 to p105.

'[\[20\]](#) Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, p8 to p9.

'[\[21\]](#) Ibid, p65.