

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 15, 2007

Documenta, children, sexuality, Barnes & Noble

Filed under: [aesthetics](#), [artists](#), [exhibitions \(not mine\)](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:40 am

Yesterday I went to Documenta. Along with feeling under the weather, I am getting to be too much of a curmudgeon to walk through a half dozen museums of Scotch tape, toothpicks and wall text. But there was the occasional gem. I'm always a fan of Kerry James Marshall. He took the prize for best painter:



In the sculpture category, I liked Lukas Duwenhögger's 'Celestial Teapot:'



And in photography I was happy to discover the vintage photographs of Bela Kolárová:



more by Kolárová [here](#) and [here](#)

But the most thrilling experience was watching 'Who is Listening 1,' a video by the Taiwanese artist Tseng Yu-Chin.



This video powerfully addressed an issue that has been on my mind. As mentioned [yesterday](#), I recently spent time with the photographer Jock Sturges. Jock is famous for photographing naked children. In 1990, the FBI raided Jock's studio. After a year, Sturges successfully defended himself on child pornography charges.

Jock and I had a long talk about his work and the way it is received. He convinced me of his good intentions. But I still struggle with how his work functions in the world. For years it seemed like the only photo books the local bookstores carried were crisp new books by Anne Geddes and pawed-over books by Jock Sturges. Why are these books so popular and who is the intended audience?

Sturges agrees that it is problematic. "That dichotomy between the public consumption of the work and my intent and practice in making it is an uneasy one for me, on occasion," Sturges said in an interview.

The thing that is so fantastic about Tseng Yu-Chin's video is that it powerfully challenges our ideas of age and sexuality. In the video, the camera is focused on the sweet face of a young boy or girl. Music is playing and a gentle wind blows the child's hair. All of the sudden, a stream of yogurt is shot on the child's face and he/she reacts with surprise and pleasure. The same act is then repeated with numerous children.

When I first started watching the video, I was totally entertained (a real relief from Documenta). The children are cute and their reaction is hysterical. In the audience I saw young children barely containing themselves as they waited for the next yogurt blast. I also saw an elderly woman in a wheelchair with an ear to ear grin. But the more I watched, the more I became uncomfortable. "Does this suggest what I think it suggests?" I looked around at the audience. Others looked uncomfortable too.

Along with being a stunning piece of work, the video functions as a kind of Rorschach test. Will you view this like an innocent child or like a suspicious adult?

Poking around online for more information, I came across a text by Yu-Chin that he uses as a statement for the work:

I liked walking in large strides when I was young, freely moving my hands, feeling the air piercing through the gaps between my fingers. It's comfortable.

But it was ruined by a woman. A stranger. A nameless woman. That one afternoon, when I still walked with my hands moving freely, I cheerfully crossed the street with my mother I lifted my head, without realizing that a woman was coming towards us from the other side. My hand coincidentally collided with her private part. Of course, it was through the cover of fabrics. Honestly, I had yet to realize the significance of sex. I was going to simply apologize. However, I was treated as someone blinded by sexual desire. The woman stared at me with resentment. Full of moral judgment and anger, her lips were pressed so tightly as if she is grinding her teeth behind them. As if I had been slapped mercilessly, my ears rung with endless chatter, and my head filled with cold murmurs, as if the world had frozen over to look at me and my embarrassment, pointing at me with accusation, buzzing over my behavior. And my mother's figure trembled far ahead. I ran over to hold her hand. Her hand was warm, yet cold at the same time. I didn't know what to feel. My mother was a woman, too.

I did not know what the stranger was thinking, nor did I know what burden she had placed upon me. At that moment, I felt only the gliding air between my fingers, and not the part of her body that she was taught to believe to be a controversy. I remembered the air becoming suffocating, and those eyes that pierced the stifling

space. The zipper on those jeans feels cold, and warm, at the same time. It takes a variety of manners to remind you, that your body had once remained in the naiveté.

It might be that Yu-Chin and Jock Sturges have very similar motives. But context matters. Documenta isn't the same as Barnes and Noble. Or is it?

- - Watch a clip of *Who is Listening 1* [here](#)
 - Watch other clips by Yu-Chin [here](#) and [here](#)
 - Read articles on Tseng Yu-Chin [here](#) and [here](#)

10 Comments

1. It seems to me both artists are playing around with taboo. Of course taboo would not be necessary without its jarring reflective 'interest', but taboos are there for a reason, playing around on the line and thereby bringing it to renewed consciousness is unnecessary unless the intention is to challenge the natural cultural taboo. One thing that disappoints me about art/photography in the last couple of decades is this constant need to cut into the edges, to be hyper-analytical and piercing, and when these tools are used to break our natural joy I really find it almost aggressive. I vaguely remember a story of a man who lost his young daughter in war, his memory of her was her sweet laugh, imagine defacing 'that' with some context.

Comment by Philip — September 15, 2007 @ 2:54 am

2. Art has always flirted with taboos. There could and should be some brave and worthwhile work about these issues. But you would have to be very sure of your own moral compass to make it. It's too easy to cause an attention-grabbing controversy, even if that is not your primary objective.

I'm always been uneasy about Sturges' work. It seems to hint on the one hand, and then deny with the other. Compare it's impact and apparent intent to Sally Mann's for instance. Then there's Tierney Gearon, who like Sturges, seems either double-handed or naive about the potential interpretation of her work:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,450865,00.html>

If Yu-Chin's intention is to make us question our own uneasiness, it certainly works. But I'm not sure that that in itself is enough.

Comment by Guy Batey — September 15, 2007 @ 4:10 am

3. yu chin's video of the mother playfully trying to kiss her son and then the son almost smothering the mother is an equally powerful work and the one which got the most attention the day i was at documenta.thank you alec,for mentioning kerry james marshall,the clear star of this documenta.

Comment by jack drake — September 15, 2007 @ 6:32 am

4. For all its differences, 'Who is listening' reminds me of the film 'Sour Death Balls' by Jessica Yu. It makes me smile each time I watch it and I haven't found any uncomfortable subtext.

<http://www.lumeneclipse.com/gallery/11/Yu/index.html>

The quoted text by Tseng Yu-Chin makes me think of the 4 year old boy who recently got expelled from a pre-school in Texas for sexual harassment. I wonder why so much is being sexualized? Why can't we just see yogurt for what it is? Is our imagination corrupted? I think Tseng Yu-Chin does well in raising these questions.

Morals seem a tricky territory to navigate, and faith doesn't provide much of a compass. Some Christians channel their energies to prosecute artists, bookshops and galleries for indecency, while others found the Christian Naturist Village:

http://www.cnvillage.org/album_page.php?pic_id=29&mode=next

http://www.cnvillage.org/album_page.php?pic_id=24&mode=previous

(picture descriptions!)

Comment by christoph — September 15, 2007 @ 12:14 pm

5. You guys are over-analyzing... in any other scenario (other than an art film) throwing food in kids' faces is just plain mean! That's the type of thing that abusive parents do to their kids.

Comment by Derek — September 16, 2007 @ 12:00 am

6. When someone such as yourself suspects the moral credibility of Jock Sturges then your own moral credibility becomes suspect. Next thing you will be suspect of Joel Peter Witkin!

Comment by Darrell — September 16, 2007 @ 12:56 am

7. It seems to me that Sturges work and the work of Yu Chin function in subtly different ways. While Sturges work might be, if one takes the artist on his word, innocent images or images of innocence that are received with difficulty in our hyper-sexualized culture, Yu Chins work is made to ask questions of its viewer. I would personally view the Documenta videos as a work that heightens our understanding of both the innocence of children and the destruction of that innocence through sexual predation. I think that it is quite effective, the video, very disturbing. It might be a Rorschach test also, though the second video of the mother and child seems to function more in that way. That video more seems to be a question of innocence and interpretation. Perhaps the second video functions to question the assault on images of normal childhood behavior (Sturges images themselves, or Geddes, maybe even Sally Mann)(though childhood behavior can obviously be sexualized in itself), and the first video question an under reaction to some deeply disturbing things that exist in probably greater numbers now than at any other time in history. One about overreaction, one about under reaction.

Comment by stefan abrams — September 16, 2007 @ 2:37 pm

8. Yu Chin's work is funny – it's also a test , not of the viewer's innocence or sexuality, but of the extent to which his or her perspective is defined by sexualised pornographic imagery – and how that imagery has appropriated actions (like being splashed into the face by yogurt) and made them taboo. People who have not been exposed to that kind of pornographic imagery are not necessarily going to be aware of those connotations – children and possibly the old woman in the wheelchair – and will see the video as simply fun (in a mean kind of way). The point is how pornography has inundated our everyday lives and changed the way we interpret particular acts, postures and states of dress. Maybe that is makes Yu Chin's work so interesting.

The same applies to Jock Sturges' work – I understand Sturges subjects come from naturist families and from that perspective, I don't see anything wrong with his work. However, there are predatory people, and some will see Sturges' photography as overtly sexual. So should Sturges censor his work in case it's viewed in a sexual way? I don't think so – a naked body is not in its own right a sexual image. It's a physical image and instead of instead of allowing the lowest common denominator to dictate what right and wrong behaviour is, we should accept it for what it is. When Sally Mann was getting criticised for her Immediate Family work, she said that Child Sexuality is an oxymoron. I interpret that as meaning that though children are physical, we shouldn't project adult perspectives of sexuality onto children. At the same time, children are physical, feral and have an instinctive awareness of the world that is far wider than we give them credit for – something that Sally Mann's and especially Wendy Ewald's work with children shows.

People bring their own preconceptions to photography of children, and are very protective of them – protection is good but when protection changes to obsessive control (arresting parents who take photographs of their child breast feeding for example) that is a bad thing. Childhood is about physical and imaginative freedom and part of that freedom is running around naked (like Sally Mann's children). Attempts to censor the photography of people like Sally Mann, Tiernay Gearnon and Jock Sturges is part of an attempt to control the behaviour of children in general.

Comment by colin pantall — September 17, 2007 @ 5:10 am

9. FYI the artist's last name is Tseng, not Yu-Chin, as with all Chinese names.

Comment by Lai — September 18, 2007 @ 11:14 am

10. I believe that the last paragraph is the most sincere philosophy I have and will ever hear.

Comment by mavikozmetik — December 31, 2007 @ 7:46 am

