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The Everyday: A Conversation between Nicholas Serota and David Ross

Nicholas Serota and David Ross

Nicholas Serota What is it that interests you in the idea of organizing a show about the quotidian in the Twentieth century?

David Ross There is once again something in the air, as the situationists would say about the idea of the everyday. Not that it's ever gone away in this century and for me speaking as someone who's tried to find, of such a thing exists, a unified field of theory of twentieth century art, it's this tension between the idea of the everyday and its apposite as we progressed through this strange, fabulous and horrible century.

Nicholas Serota I think for me it begins in the early part of the 20th century with the widening of the artist's independence from the patron to the point at which the artist is effectively choosing what he or she wishes to present.

David Ross So you mean for you its a question of freedom, the independence of the artist?

Nicholas Serota I think it is very much about the artist being prepared to make a personal statement which reflects his or her own view of the world.

David Ross Well that's a highly contested point of view. I mean to the extent that slipping out of one system of patronage into another which seemed to offer unlimited freedom was quickly discovered to just be another structure of reward and patronage that had a different color to it and maybe a transparency that made it more difficult to detect for some time. But I've always thought that really the roots of what we're talking about go well back into the nineteenth century. And even though we're not dealing with that in this exhibition, it seems to me that if we look at 1839, with the invention of photography, the roots of this exhibition lie in what changed in art in general following the invention of that particularly revolutionary tool.

Nicholas Serota I think if I was doing a show about the everyday, going back that far, I'd begin with Courbet.

David Ross But I think the artist's job was changed by the invention of photography. What it was that an artist needed to do at this point to advance the body of knowledge was radically challenged by this new technology to the extent that, they were faced with the question 'now what?' 'Now what kind of questions are you going to ask about the world now that we know it's reproducible?'

Nicholas Serota But there is a further break in the first decade of the twentieth century.

David Ross I believe that in the beginning of the twentieth century they were able to first begin to put into a concerted practice what had been happening intermittently during the last 30 or 40 years of the nineteenth century, and it brought together both the responses to technological advance as well as the radical changes in the workplace brought about by factory work and the change of people's relationship to work which I think changed again the artists relationship to work. The artist now had a curiously old fashioned relationship to work, at least to work in their studio. That started to represent something nostalgic whereas the rest of the workplace moved to the factory the artist still had this antique work place that harked back to a very different era.

Nicholas Serota So what was the distinctive contribution of Picasso and Braque in bringing the notion of the Quotidian into being?

David Ross Well, that they wanted to open up the domain of art to the world at large and show that art as a human practice not only could, but had to embrace the world not just by a mere representation but by actual integration. It had to embrace the life of people living in their own time. We move away from the mirror at the Folies Bergere to a very different kind of mirror, a newspaper clipping.

Nicholas Serota Or we move, for instance, to Picasso's absinthe glass sculptures, in which the glass 'becomes' a sculpture including the actual spoon with which you drop the sugar into the absinthe. For me, those sculptures and the related collages and reliefs are crucial to this notion of the everyday.

David Ross How about in its literal use of absinthe? Isn't there also a relationship, on another level, to removing yourself from the day to day in a very direct way?

Nicholas Serota I'm sure Picasso was conscious of that paradox.

David Ross It wasn't a coffee cup.

Nicholas Serota And it wasn't cards on a table. It was a symbolic object as well as being one taken from everyday experience.

David Ross So the poetry of the everyday.

Nicholas Serota Yes.

David Ross The evocation through metaphor, not of the everyday experience but of the feeling of the psychic experience of the everyday more than its simple, dumb, literal evocation.

Nicholas Serota Well I think that is the thread which ties together many of the artists who are represented in this exhibition. We have not brought together artists who are representing the everyday as such.

David Ross We've avoided not only that level of realism but we've also avoided the surrealists whose response to the everyday was to move it into the everyday as experienced in dream. Yet we've decided to privilege the conscious as opposed to the subconscious thought and to the idea of

dream and repressed thought.

Nicholas Serota Why?

David Ross I think it may be a bigger task to look at the Quotidian and to recognize that in fact it's a reflection of a mind awake and a mind asleep. That the conscious and unconscious minds are both reflections of our Quotidian lives. If we frame the reasoning behind our decision to eliminate not only certain artists but certain directions in art and to define the Quotidian, I think we would end up by saying we've used contemporary practice to go back and redefine the Quotidian throughout this century.

Nicholas Serota Well, this is a show which is being made in the late 90s and reflects a view of history which is undoubtedly shaped by what artists are doing today.

David Ross It's not just shaped by what we're all doing today in the field of art. When you leave this museum what role does art play in your life? I think one of the things we're talking about is artists who are speaking about changes in the way we are supposed to look at things. It all speaks to a desire towards a re-integration of life. That there is some inherent societal concern about our lives having become so fractured. Not life and art alone because I think that's too simple, but all the elements that one recognizes could produce a more fully lived life.

Nicholas Serota Do you think this has happened at certain moments in the twentieth century and that there are other phases in which this has not really been a concern of artists?

David Ross I don't know about the cycle of history on that level. I think that any point in time throughout this century you'll find artists who are.

Nicholas Serota Certainly you will find some artists, but even within our show you will find there are moments of concentration.

David Ross Like what?

Nicholas Serota Well, for instance, artists working in the Sixties, who brought the everyday into their work in a much more emphatic manner than had been the case, for instance, with the abstract expressionists.

David Ross So are we really talking about a shadow history of modernism here? What is this stream that we're following here?

Nicholas Serota I think it's a stream which recognizes the world in a grain of sand and believes that you don't necessarily have to deal with either the heroic or the spiritual to examine the essence of life. The connecting thread for these artists is an involvement with the particular.

David Ross But how does a particular work by a particular artist which speaks so specifically to the reality of an individual, of an artist who may be reflecting a deeply personal experience, reach beyond that distinct situation and communicate the essential qualities of the everyday? How does it actually function? How does it become more than just a diary entry? Especially in the context of so

much self-consciousness, because not only is the artist self-conscious but the audience is self-conscious.

Nicholas Serota Well, we're not dealing here with the confessional mode. I mean, we're not dealing with artists who are dealing with issues of identity by means of anecdotal reference to their own lives. We're dealing with artists who are engaged in a process of distillation and selection that concentrates on the overlooked, the over familiar. These are artists who highlight by taking the newspaper article or the newspaper photograph out of context, whether it be a tuna fish disaster or a portrait of an unknown figure.

David Ross Warhol highlights the spectacle in neon highlighter and Carrà submerges the spectacle in the repetitive action of a Zen-like focus on the day with all particular qualities expunged. For me there is another factor at work here. The notion of the anti spectacle or of confronting the way that post-war life had been projected into this spectacular form as one more extension, one more removal, one more layer between the life you lived and your ability to recognize that life. But are we trying to create a map that allows people to understand the modernist trajectory from the perspective of that absinthe drinker - the person who both wants to disconnect and connect at the same time?

Nicholas Serota I think that the map is not really an alternative in the sense of being anti-modernist. It would be difficult to argue that many of the artists are entirely outside the modernist trajectory, but I think the inclusions reflect a perspective which is very different from the conventional high road of modernism.

David Ross And how has that shifted through the century? How would you define that, that change?

Nicholas Serota I would say that we are dealing with artists and a position which seeks an integration between art and life rather than a separation. But it's not a self-consciously political position in most cases, although there are some. It is rather more from the position of someone who's seeking to expose the grain and the dirt in life as well as those transcendent moments. It's the bit of life that's caught between the cracks.

David Ross I wanted to talk about a tendency that we've seen in the US, and I'm not sure if it's equally visible in England but I think it may be an international tendency, and that is, in terms of popular media, a renewed interest in real life. Real life television, not just documentaries but shows that look at the regular life of the police or the regular life of people living Quotidian lives. One example is the movie *The Truman Show*. Now there is this big brother experiment in Holland, where they've gathered together a group of people to live in a house, in order to observe their lives and social interaction, monitored with hundreds of cameras and microphones.

Nicholas Serota This is similar to a 'fly on the wall' feature on BBC television about 20 years ago, where they had a camera following an 'ordinary' family over months. The closest art equivalent in the 90's is, of course, Richard Billingham's photographs.

David Ross Or maybe Sophie Calle following people and invading their privacy in a more discreet and artful way, as a maid opening up people's suitcases and photographing their contents.

Nicholas Serota So why do you think there's this passion for voyeuristic television?

David Ross I'm not sure. I find a sense of despair about this. There seems to be an air of desperation and despair underneath all of it, a longing for something real.

Nicholas Serota Do you think that sense of despair is any greater now than it was fifty or even eighty years ago?

David Ross I don't know, but I believe that sense of anxiety/despair/longing may be the engine that has driven much of what underlies the idea of the quotidian. The desire to reconnect with something that's very real. To not just blindly celebrate the real or the everyday, although I think a very superficial analysis of Pop Art always calls it a celebration of popular culture. I think pop was more critical than that. I think it's widely acknowledged to have been more critical than that, but it's still a recognition of the value of ordinary life and that there need not be a distinction between the ordinary and that which we consider special.

Nicholas Serota Well that was what I was describing earlier as giving dignity to the everyday.

David Ross But we want art to be special at the same time. We don't want our art to just be 'common'.

Nicholas Serota I think the difficulty for many observers of contemporary art is to understand that the everyday in art is in itself an insight rather than necessarily a representation. The constant media cry in Britain is, 'but is this art?' or 'why is this art?' when the art appears to be simply the presentation of a slice of life. Of course what those questions do not acknowledge is the degree of selectivity, of distillation, of isolation that occurs when an artist like Billingham or Emin takes an element of life and appears to present it verbatim.

David Ross Well that has to do with lag in the recognition of the new task that artists have taken on.

Nicholas Serota One of the things I find interesting about the way in which artists deal with the everyday is how quickly it becomes clear that an apparently very straightforward presentation of the material facts of life is conditioned by the moment at which it is made. Any statement very rapidly acquires a tinge or patina. The everyday dates quickly.

David Ross Yes, what at one time took twenty years, forty years, sixty years to develop the patina of art, the aura of a genuine work of art, can now happen in a year, because the rules of the game have changed. People will continue to question whether Duchamp can ever be art because it doesn't fit in their framework of the way art is supposed to be structured and ordered. And people who challenge the structure and order of art, regardless of whether they're representing everyday life or whether they're representing a different level or type of experience, still run into that. In the US the divide is still clearly abstraction versus representation.

Nicholas Serota I would say here the split is a three-way split between the elements you mentioned, abstraction and representation, and a third that is generated by the incorporation of cheap material, everyday life, an apparent artlessness in terms of fabrication.

David Ross Although you know...

Nicholas Serota The greatest criticism is now reserved for the incorporation, not of obscene or offensive material, but the incorporation of non-art materials.

David Ross But why is that so and why is that so threatening? We stimulated a similar reaction when we showed Robert Gober's plywood piece, a seemingly unadorned sheet of plywood leaning against the wall, a work which in fact he fabricated to look like a regular sheet of plywood. It was a remarkable work from the late Eighties. I mean to make plywood, especially when you can go out and buy it. And there are other artists who did those kind of tricks also, making something look ordinary. When artists deal with this era and use techniques and whole aesthetic approaches that are consistent with our era, they're often not recognized.

Nicholas Serota But that brings us back to this theme which has arisen several times in our conversation, which is, that the subject of this exhibition involves a redefinition of what artists deal with.

David Ross What is the job of an artist?

Nicholas Serota There continues to be a popular misconception that the job of the artist is to deal with things that are not of the everyday, but rather things that deal with our observations, our aspirations, our inner life, things which are either transmitted or special and separate.

David Ross Extraordinary rather than ordinary. And if Zen has had an impact on Western culture in the last 50 years it is in defining the extraordinary in the quotidian. In breathing, in taking pleasure, in breathing, in listening to this sound in this room which is actually quite rich. It's surely anything but silent. It's just because this room is alive. I think Cage is important in his complete beatific acceptance of the world and his ability to compose within the framework of acceptance of the everyday.

Nicholas Serota Cage gives weight to the everyday and gives it value.

David Ross Yes, but he is still making choices. You know, he does construct parameters. The artist who uses the everyday is still making an enormous number of choices and employing levels of discrimination and distinction that are very, very difficult to do well. To be anti-spectacular is more difficult when the techniques of the spectacle are so well understood that with X amount of money and X amount of talent pooled through the use of that money we can produce an empty spectacle like the Titanic. But looking at, for instance, a Sarah Jones photograph of a psychiatrist's couch, you find a work of distinction in distinguishing something that's meaningful and ordinary. Maybe not as ordinary as a couch in a middle class living room.

Nicholas Serota Do you think that the effective presentation of the everyday through art demands the frame of the museum or the frame of publication?

David Ross Well, I have a yes and no answer to that. I think that all of this new work fits very consciously and self-consciously within the framework of post conceptualism, in which the function of the museum as site for the contest of values and ideas is an absolute, understood element to be

worked with directly or accepted indirectly but never ignored or not played with. And so the artist can choose to work outside of that frame or within it with equal quality. I think they can take us or leave us at this point and, as technology moves more power into the hand of individual artists and extinguishes the line between readers and writers, the role of the institution in the representation of everyday life will change yet again. It's a challenge we all face. Can we become commodified? And by that I'm only speaking about our relationship to living artists, to contemporary art. I think our relationship to art history remains contested because it only can take place within the framework of what we do, of what we traditionally are, have become. But in contemporary practice I think it's up for grabs. What do you think?

Nicholas Serota I think that to be effective there has to be a frame, that frame doesn't necessarily have to be the museum. It can be a TV program, a newspaper publication, a presentation on a street, a bill board.

David Ross But it has to be public.

Nicholas Serota But it has to be public and it has to be presented. There can be circumstances in which the viewer is uncertain as to whether he or she is dealing with work by an artist or work by a graphic designer or whatever.

David Ross I remember Chris Burden's TV ads that he made in the mid 70's which were placed between other TV ads and it so disturbed the TV station that they made him put his name and the designation artist at the very end of them. At first they were just too disturbing. What was this thing placed between a dog food ad and a sanitary napkin ad?

Nicholas Serota The issue was, 'what was the message'.

David Ross The message was in a way the same as in the earlier piece which involved him crawling through broken glass in a parking lot. It was very hard to see what he was doing. It's not as gory as it sounds and so really the message was that you could insert your ad into the machine. A certain kind of sabotage on a very real level when an artist asserts themselves into a quotidian process.

Nicholas Serota So do you think that the everyday has become the dominant subject of the Nineties for the artist?

David Ross I think it's revealed itself to be the obvious and yet somehow in being obvious it didn't become either lame or notorious. It became obvious because it was necessary. I think many artists feel it's literally necessary to work within that framework at this point. They can't see working any other way. Nothing else feels legitimate. Everything else seems forced.

Nicholas Serota So does that disclose ambition or lack of ambition?

David Ross I'm not sure. I think it's actually a direct response to the reality of trying to understand where an artist stands at this point in time. To again address the same question that was addressed by artists starting in the 1840's and Fifties. What is an artist? What does he or she do? What's their job? I don't think that's been resolved.

Nicholas Serota But is dealing with the everyday essentially an amoral position?

David Ross No, quite the contrary. I think it's the reassertion of a real moral position from a moment which it seemed that the artist, that you know, this is not art as anything you can get away with. This is not art that's easy. This is art that is distinctly staking out a moral position about the way life could and if you want to get pro-scripted, should be lived without getting ham handed about it. Without saying you have to live my life. It's taking the dictum of Duchamp and Cage and bringing it to another moment which is 'Here is life. You are in it just as I'.

Nicholas Serota I agree that it's a fundamentally moral position, which of course connects it back to the modernist tradition. I think it is saying 'here is value'.

David Ross 'Here is value'. That's very good. Perhaps it's also saying that we no longer have to mourn the inability to construct the ideal that seems to lay at the heart of the modernist enterprise. That that ideal, that the longing for an ideal was a false call and that the modernist enterprise can carry on quite well in relationship to a reflection on the ideal that can be found. Not necessarily celebrated but acknowledged in day to day life.

Nicholas Serota I think it's one of the things that distinguishes the Nineties from the Sixties. There was a greater sense of celebration in the everyday in the Sixties than now.

David Ross I'm not sure about that. Ironically, in the US when we talk about the Sixties we're really talking about the Seventies, generally speaking.

Nicholas Serota Whereas here when we talk about the Sixties we're often talking about the Fifties! I think that much of the art of the present does reflect, as we were discussing earlier, that there is a sense of despair in the world. Whereas in the immediate post war period there was a sense of potential and a belief perhaps that we'd seen the worst.

David Ross The optimism that comes with victory and survival.

Nicholas Serota Survival more than victory I would say.

David Ross But two generations were moved from that sense of survival. To seize that level of celebration as comical and as the source of the irony or the cynicism depending on how far you extend it. That sees a celebration of that potential and that renewal which in fact led to only more bloodshed, more disruption, more inequity and no end really in sight to a set of social conditions which still cripple more than half the planet.

Nicholas Serota I think dealing with the quotidian in the Nineties has to do with acceptance rather than a belief that the world will change or can be changed.

David Ross And the destruction of an era of heroes. There are no heroes. No heroes in art, no heroes in private life. Who are the heroes? Who are the heroes that today's art celebrates? If that's inherent in art, that is somehow historically what we seemed to have been in the broader sense of the term, celebrating the heroic of its time, who are we celebrating today in this art of the *Quotidiana*?

Nicholas Serota We're probably celebrating survival.

David Ross The survival of an internal life. The potential of an internal life.

Nicholas Serota I think we're probably celebrating the survival of the individual in a world where commerce and other pressures, politics and commerce both tend towards the obliteration or elimination of the individual. In a work like Richard Wentworth's, *Making do and getting by*, he records improvisations that people have made in their lives, in their daily existence. Little moves that adapt and make their lives more convenient or feasible. That is about celebrating the individual in a mass society. Do you think that there is a loss of confidence in collective achievement as opposed to individual achievement?

David Ross Or a reflection that collective achievement is in fact made out of a reflection of individual achievement by other means and for other purposes.

Nicholas Serota It's a redefinition of what collective means.

David Ross Or what community means.

Nicholas Serota That the regular life is worth living.