Courbet's Crime

Q. What if we took Barnes literally, straight from the dictionary: larme as "tear"; endimanche as unsatisfactory; clumsy as lame at "out of touch with modern facts or trends"?

It's difficult to say what we would discover. As I understand it, the modern art historian is an artist as well as a scholar. He or she can employ all the tools of the trade — the use of art history, of aesthetics, of critical theory, of psychology — to explore the relationship between art and society. But it's important to remember that art is a subjective experience, and that each person's interpretation of a work of art is unique. So while we can use art history to understand the context in which a work was created, we cannot necessarily assume that the artist's intentions are the same as ours. In short, art is a complex and multifaceted field, and there is no one right answer to any question about it.

For example, consider the painting "The origin of the World" by Edvard Munch. This painting is often interpreted as a depiction of the artist's own sexuality. However, others have suggested that it is a commentary on the human condition, or a representation of the artist's own mental state. Ultimately, the meaning of the painting is left up to the viewer, and it is important to remember that the artist's intentions may not be the same as what we interpret from the work.

In conclusion, while it is possible to use art history to understand the context in which a work was created, it is important to remember that art is a complex and multifaceted field, and that there is no one right answer to any question about it. Each person's interpretation of a work of art is unique, and we must allow for the possibility that the artist's intentions may not be the same as ours.

Paul Crowther, Beckell Jones, 2009, image: Beckell Jones.
rendering it ingenuous and immediately consumable. Under such circumstances, the introduction of mass cultural elements into the realms of fine art was intended to produce a "limiting" effect, a crippling deskillization of art's lofty ambitions. Picasso's use of newspaper ads in his collages, Schwitters' incorporation of printed ephemera in his Merz works; Smart Davis's introduction of advertising imagery into his paintings; the list of banalistic interventions is endless and it signals a fundamental transformation of art's procedures and identity.

The exponential expansion of mass culture — as a uniquely modern phenomenon — could not be ignored by modern art. Existing "outside" of art, an invention of "cheap," vulgar, manipulative mass culture could act as a leveling force on art, negating the (class-based) privileges associated with traditional connoisseurship and — notionally, at least — democratizing art's appeal. "There is a sense," Leo Steinberg writes of such moments, "of loss, of sudden void, of something wraithly desired — sometimes a feeling that one's accumulated culture or experience is hopelessly depleted, leaving one exposed to spurious destinies." This crisis arises, according to Steinberg as a consequence of the viewer's failure to understand the rationale and significance of the artist's "sacrifice." For only through an understanding of the sacrifice involved can we engage with the achievement and presence of all that has been sacrificed on their behalf. The notion of sacrifice necessarily entails an etymological connection to the notion of the sacred and, thereby, to its animates, the profane. Yet the supposed profanation of art by mass culture is only possible if sustained a critical force when mass culture is understood as base, corrupt and perhaps even immoral. When, in other words, the character of mass culture is defined negatively in relation to those positive values purportedly enshrined within dominantly, high culture.

Today, however, a different relation pertains between the concept of high art and high culture, a relation in which it is no longer clear what might constitute "high" and "low," or even whether such distinctions is possible to sustain, let alone have any relevance. What might have been meaningful in the definition of mass culture and in its reception, mass culture is now less the means through which we are increasingly invited to view high art. Whereas, formerly, those signs associated with high cultural forms (intellectual ambition, formal innovation, a critical disposition, etc.) were only deemed to exist within the restricted confines of art, today mass culture represents a more fluid and ambiguous cultural terrain. And, whereas seeing themselves as unwitting victims, they are able to discriminate between its various aspects and manifestations, people work to participate more fully and satisfactorily. Most important, these artists are trying to find ways to inhabit it as much as it inhabits them. They operate from within, not from without, as a point of reference. In many instances, this is the point of resistance, not the critic, but of the obsessive fan, the enthusiastic amateur, the nerd, the geek, the dork. This often entails an apparent regression to a freighted adolescence, the only form of "distantive" (emotional, psychological, cultural) available, perhaps, in the absence of those other productive sources of difference: the avant-garde, the classical, the Vernacular. With the collapse of history into an undifferentiated scene of immediately available "pastimes," indexing adolescence allows a degree of temporary distance to re-enter the cultural landscape — the "return" of the "lost" "imaginaries" of the "lost" "imagination" of "lost" "childhoods". Yet it is significant that the veil of "childhood" has been obscured. Adolescence is a parenthesis, a place of incompleteness and incompleteness with incomplete assimilation into the world of work and responsibility, so that, perhaps, the youth culture/adult culture conflict replaces the high/low pairing as a means of establishing otherwise (although some theorists maintain that youth culture serves merely as preparation for adult culture, rather than as its resistance). Thus a lot of this looks as though made by teenagers, alone in their bedrooms. Much of it is sketchy drawing in pencil or ballpoint pen, yet: paper. Since it appears as hand-written text, blearily misspelled. Alternatively, it may form the texture of a painfully wrought drawing derived from a magazine photograph, immense time and labour expended on an apparently futile exercise in copying. Some of its use of the lo-fi look and feel of outmoded video and computer game imagery and technology (fuzzy colors, chunky pixels) analogous video effects). A great deal of it appears arrested at that stage before full maturity, lagging and lacking. Inevitably, the spirit of nostalgia haunts this enterprise, suggesting that access to the past in our post-historical state is only possible through the filtered experience of private attachment and feelings of personal nostalgia. Curiously it seems that, despite being intended for exhibition, this body of work often speaks in a private voice that seems oblivious to the need for public engagement or wide public recognition. It is as if the artist were saying: this work has been made for "me", for my circle of close friends. We watched the TV shows as kids, listened to the same music, played the same computer games; now we laugh at the same in-jokes, use our own special language, and do our own things.