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NOTES ON DUMB AS A QUALITY IN ART THAT PEOPLE SOMETIMES REFER TO AFFECTIONATELY

“one of the dumbest songs in existence, and i mean that in the best way possible”
[sic] -Jordan Murray, commenting on “Eat My Dump” (1988) by The Thrown Ups,
via YouTube.

This is a hunch.

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In a 1975 interview with the magazine *Art Rite or Rong*, the painter Brice Marden described his profession casually, mystically, saying, “A painter’s just this odd weird person who has to do this dumb thing called painting.” Later that year, Mel Ramsden, a member of New York’s Art & Language group, and a contributor to their magazine, *The Fox*, responded to Marden, and more specifically to an essay on Marden’s work by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe that had recently been published in *Artforum*. Ramsden wrote:

The reason [Brice Marden] and a lot of other painters can proudly proclaim their work “dumb” (the dumber the better it seems) is that there is a sovereign infatuation that in impoverishment, blankness, passivity, emptiness, there lies the truest metaphors for purity, profundity and transcendence. [...] By “dumb” I mean less that they are stupid and more that they are mute.

Ramsden’s sentiment was almost perfectly echoed 20 years later, by the photographer Charles Peterson, in an interview for the documentary movie *Hype!* (1996), which surveyed the Pacific Northwest music scene in the 1980s and early ‘90s. Peterson described, “Someone said to me once that there was the ‘aesthetic of dumb’ about the Seattle music scene, that the music wasn’t stupid, but it was dumb.”¹

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¹ Peterson may have had in mind the mordant song “Dumb,” released by the band Nirvana in 1993.

Sharon Butler, writing on David Humphrey's paintings, recalled her first experience with one, saying, "It felt really thrilling and dumb to me. I had this idea that it was a 'normotic' painting; it was pathologically normal. Its specialness was accidental. It tried to be normal but it failed, and its failure was something special." Humphrey himself, in an essay about low-resolution imagery, says of Jacqueline Humphries's paintings and drawings, "Low resolution here translates as languid irresolution. The dumb simplicity of the dissolving gestures registers a low-intensity resolve to simply mark the surface without the burden of representation."

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Bob Nickas, in his 1995 essay "Steven Parrino. The Return of Goo Goo Muck," never uses the word "dumb," but does repeatedly remind the reader of the "idiocy" of the source material for Parrino's arresting collages and paintings. Parrino pulled from punk rock, TV, performance art, horror, and formalist painting, mashing coarse imagery together to form complicated intellectual webs—stuff far smarter than the sum of its dumb parts.

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Except for the dubious link between monochromes by Marden and Parrino, these artists (and others) appear to have little in common. Humphrey makes dense, colorful, representational pictures, while Humphries uses spare dots and lines and gestures, and the Seattle bands weren't/aren't visual artists at all. And, just to complicate the problem a little more, I often think of dumb in the context of Georges Bataille and his clan around *Acéphale*, etc.² Or there are certain sculptors and performance artists, with even less apparent connective tissue, which also seem relevant here: Marcel Duchamp, Jean Tinguely, Bas Jan Ader, Richard Serra, and on and on. There are likely other similar formulations. But the point is there's a fundamental *dumb*, found in a lot of different art, that holds a special kind of power.

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Unlike "stupid," the term dumb is *not* typically meant pejoratively.

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² *Acéphale*, not incidentally, takes as its icon a man with no head.

What is dumb? Like, what's *meant* by that word here? A lot of this is shorthand for getting at something the speaker may be eliding. It comes up often in loose studio talk.³ In common parlance, dumb connotes big, blunt, slow, crude (Humphrey's "low resolution"), juvenile, corporeal. Ramsden proposes some of its properties as residing within the work itself: muteness, blankness, and those things suggesting the possibility of purity and transcendence. Dumb isn't assertive, but it's also not yielding or recessive—"impassive" in place of Ramsden's "passivity." Dumb often puts the viewer in the position of meat that can see, a haptic transmission. As Butler notes, it flirts with the possibility of failure, or even indulges outright. One can also rope in the idiom of "playing dumb," of hiding or shutting up. But such dissimulations are appealing because of the earnest core in the middle of dumb. It's *playing*, guilelessly. Nonetheless, as an aesthetic device, it can sneak a lot of information.

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This is a complication I can't get past: Ramsden criticizes Gilbert-Rolfe and Marden because in that dumb, Ramsden sees a screen for exactly the kind of values that I think this quality (dumbness) protests. I just totally don't know how to square that except to say that dumb doesn't have any absolute ethical or aesthetic values. Is that a problem?

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I figure there's some parallel that could be drawn between the experience of being struck dumb by the Sublime and the aphasic pose of dumb art. But I don't know enough about Kant and all that to hazard such a metaphor.

The same goes for comparisons to the thoughtlessness of signals in information theory.

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³ I've wanted to write about this subject for a long time, and nearly did a few months ago when an artist described his work this way during a studio visit. But the idea of associating his work with the term, and the misperceptions that might induce, naturally freaked him out and I wrote about something else.

Here's one I can toss off: the Elizabethan “dumbshow,” a kind of pantomime, was used to silently perform abstract and meta-textual themes, sometimes as plays within a play, as in Shakespeare’s variously parodic or creepy use of the form in *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Such performances employed symbolic gesture in place of the spoken word. And similar phenomena can be found in abstraction from its birth: signs used where words are impossible or unnecessary or redundant.

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In his book *All of a Sudden* (2008), Jorg Heiser discusses his concept of “slapstick” in closely related terms. He describes it as an intrinsic quality, rather than one tacked on: “It’s not about art taking the content of slapstick on board like a vessel. [...] Instead, it’s about slapstick as a *method*.” It’s something that triggers the work, rather than something that is put into it. And in like way, he traces the idea through a variety of mediums and eras and cadres, from Marcel Duchamp over a century, in a variety of media.⁴ Dumb’s qualities, maybe all of them, can be found in Dada, in its children in Switzerland, Paris, New York, and etc., and in totally unrelated aesthetic lines, such as Minimalism or Humphrey's super retinal paintings, etc.⁵

Likewise, there’s been a series of anti-art stances in the last century that parallel those same choices: Dada, NO!art, Suprematism, Lettrism and Situationism, some Latin American movements, punk rock, Henry Flynt’s *brend*, possibly Art & Language, depending on how you want to draw some of those boundaries, both historically and semantically.⁶ One way to consider the boundaries and their definitions is to consider what would be offended by the label of “dumb”: cultured, erudite art. Acceptable stuff. “Good art.”

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Paul Goodman writes in *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) of youths acting out childishly in order to reject the increasingly regimented adult society in which they live. Facing acculturation to a vile system of subordination and domination, of serious moral

⁴ He also captures many of the same diverse and unconnected artists that I listed, plus more, in his genealogical rundown.

⁵ It’s not as though these things are handed down, one to another, but that they persist and find *embodiment* in every era.

⁶ Again, these aren't inheritances so much as a series of historical accidents at similar intersections.

failure, they instead chose absurdity, juvenalia, negation. Rather than sober rationalizations for exploitation, they pursue anti-intellectual hijinks. They act badly by refusing to accede to the demands of tasteful culture, which are, it turns out, destroying the planet and the people who live here.

Dada is probably the *ur*-example of this kind of thing: an irrational response to the rationalized mayhem of World War I. How does Dadaism respond to the destructive logical end point of militarism, colonialism, and influence peddling—to millions of men marching into the meat grinder of the Battle of Verdun or the Battle of the Somme? With crude jokes and nonsense. How does Piero Manzoni reply to the invasive development of Italian consumer society under the Marshall Plan? By canning his own shit and selling it for the price of its weight in gold. How does Lee Lozano register global interconnection and capitalist patriarchy? By dropping out to masturbate and smoke pot. How does Caleb Larsen react to the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few people, and a concomitant 30-year rise in art speculation? By building a black box, a robotic sculpture that is only a complete artwork when its owner plugs it an Ethernet cable so that it can auction itself on eBay and, consequently, go to another collector.

This strategy isn't necessarily productive, or even good, but it does show the critical potential of refusing the patrician rules expected of upstanding, socialized peers and authorities. Art's got a lot of pressure to aim for good taste, which means the values of the class of people who can consume, study, and buy art, which is obviously not a lot of people.

I think it's important when thinking about class, art, good taste, etc., to note that the art market has incredible economic disparities built into it, that mostly rich people buy art (like *really* rich), and that when art sales hit record highs of \$66 billion in 2014, arms sales reached an estimated \$1,711 billion, which is about 2,600% bigger. That also means that art sales in a given year are about 900% larger than the market for a contemporary US presidential election. And that the overlap of people who manage and benefit from both of these markets is big.

Other things worth about \$66 billion: Allergan, the maker of Botox, in a 2014 purchase by Actavis; Disney, when purchased by Comcast in 2004; Google's ad business last year; remittances home from Chinese expats in 2015; Marin County's total assessed value; Ukraine's sovereign debt; the cost of potholes to Americans in repairs and lost productivity.

Part of the point is that all that money, those other concerns that are not strictly about “culture,” still affect art and its production in really significant ways. They affect everyone significantly. People have to live in this world, including artists, who are just as human as anyone else. And living under the strictures managed by all that money and power makes some people want to dumbly bang your head against the wall, or jump off a roof like Yves Klein or Bas Jan Ader.

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Art in and of itself is not a transcendent force in everyday life; it’s basically coming from the same pressures as those that produce McDonald’s and Lockheed Martin and birthday clowns and OxyContin and Pay-Per-View and etc. It will never automatically take a rejectionist pose against those things, and *almost* never offers possible alternatives of any merit. Dumb rejects art’s role as vanguard, scion, or oracle. But it might be a trap—cutting out one’s tongue to keep power from doing it in advance. Dumb is not a foregone, like, liberator or anything. But it is one possible form of resistance. Or at least sometimes, probably.