

Visiting the O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM

by: Scott Hendrickson

“Nothing is less real than realism...Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis that we get the real meaning of things.”

- Georgia O’Keeffe

For any of us that have fooled ourselves that this job, this current form or volume of artistic or professional expression, this way of spending time and energy—a life—is sensible, a short afternoon in the weightlessness of a mature artist can be shattering. Complacency with drab gray pretenses, subtle self-deceptions, overt denials and petty fears can be broken.

What is there to be found? How much is made? What is essential? How to navigate?

Honesty relies on respect for agency. The worked-for must not be flippantly dismissed or undercut by fear or airy superficial matches with limited past experiences or manufacture memories. Nor may we hold the worked-for out above all else, acting with ego above heart or intellect, without regard for the will or wellbeing of others.

The seduction is that one’s gravity (or weight?), degree of integrity and influence with fans, family or coworkers is the result of having gotten it *right*, having my affairs settled, having been relieved of this or that burden of life. Surety. Continued confrontations with obstacles can become excuses. As if the stream won’t flow until the boulders are removed and the stream bed is made smooth and straight. Success is easy once on gets the context right?

Intelligence is a trap. “Choosing among” implies some benefit in having the ability to identify many choices so that a rich context seems desirable.

Here another trap: The seduction of the multiplicity over multiple particulars. Has Wal-Mart made us more intelligent by posing an immense array of choice? Do 100s of channels of cable television increase the sophistication of television viewers?

Copies are inexpensive; the more copies the less expensive. This is so spiritually, economically and intellectually. It is most true when dealing with ideas and designs.

Novelty happens for the individual. But, your copy can become my original and particular but once. It is not the printing press, copy machine or patent expiration I question. It is the assumption that multiplicity is synonymous to more choice.

I propose a distinction: A *Weak Choice* is the opportunity, ability and right to address multiplicity and say “no” to some and “yes” to some. Coke, Sprite, Pepsi. *Weak Choice* is the power of “No”. Weak Choices allow a quick trip down the soup isle and let taste dictate clothing choices. *Weak Choices* made quickly make one “efficient” or “decisive.”

Strong Choice involves our participation in creating the selection of choices, in allowing choices to emerge in an evolving context. *Strong Choice* is the ability to co-create. Any clever person can see or uncover more choices. However, the strongest choices are created in our interactions with a World that pushes back and in our interactions with others. And the existence of these choices comes about through the process of conversing (poking, assumption-testing, waiting, asking and listening). This is not an uncovering or a culling, but rather an assembly.

Advertising regularly connects the results of *Strong Choices* to a particular weak choice, adding to our bewilderment and entrapping us in a futile race.

More damaging to our personal relationships, *Weak Choice* taken as a matter of taste is snobbish. It requires the inside knowledge shared within a group—a clique. It is disconnected from up-righting forces of common (among people) and everyday (across time) experiences, capsized by being fundamentally un-deducible, by existence through fiat. Define “Quality”: an arbitrary and capricious barometer of one’s fitness for inclusion.

Good taste results in attractive decoration. If this good taste involves some sort of knack or repeated personal mark, we admire the resulting style. Robert

Graves has an attractive style; Starbucks' décor has a particular, identifiable and comforting style.

A example of a naïve application of *Weak Choice* to taste would be to lift a style from its context, the one we originally found attractive and place it in some context that we find is unattractive and requires some additional design work, e.g. decorating my bathroom in the style of Starbucks or knitting a Robert Graves hat.

We react to the absurdity. Yet to the extent we consider art as mere decoration, we condone and practice it as taste.

More mundanely, to the extent we assume our tasks or processes to be universal we become naïve in our use of mere tools. Unless our context is reduced to a generic uniformity, there are no "real finds" at Wal-Mart. This is not a rant against buying soap or deodorant at Wal-Mart, which makes a great deal of common sense. It is warning against allowing this form of *Weak Choice* to carry much weight. *Weak Choices* can be prudent; they cannot be fulfilling or constitute self expression, self-knowing or even the cornerstone of a practice of good taste.

I found Georgia O'Keeffe devastating to this façade, this protective shell because her work is an expression of agency. It is honest and it is a practice of discipline. Under the intense illumination, the stark juxtaposition, my wrong-side-out constructs, pretenses, disconnected abstractions and persistent practices of fear shatter and splinter and disintegrate. The walls crumble and I find myself naked, find my excuses foolish babbling.

From my position her expression and appreciating is resonant. I love the country she loved. Her sense for color and shape are attractive to me. She has good taste, her style appeals.

However, it is the trueness, the unrelenting commitment to clear, accurate and shared expression, the honesty that is the source of influence. And it is my perceptions of relative laziness and weakness that crush the artifice, re-measuring the value of my positioning, leaving the landscape less cluttered—disconcertingly void.

I am open; there is hope.