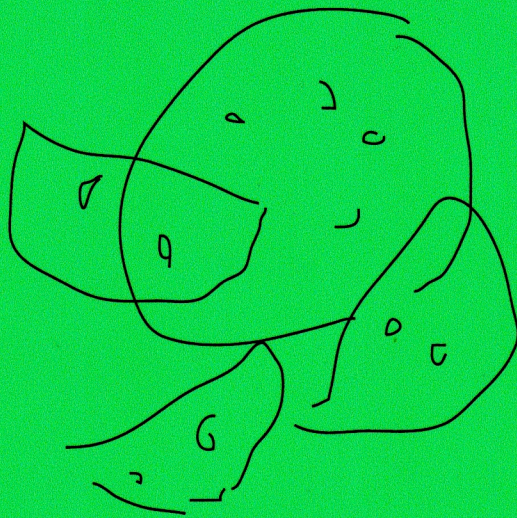


Snacks



short - salty - sweet

you don't get it?

well, that's
the point.

Ardit
Hoxha

Capital makes a mockery of all barriers. Under its reign, the commodity has subsumed and colonised all aspects of our cultural horizons, making popularity, of course, its prime arbiter of value. Art, *high* art, is often derided for committing a grave sin: for being pretentious, elitist, and, god forbid, inaccessible. Under these terms and conditions, the gallery is a moribund institution, a dusty has-been to be discarded in the rubbish tip of history. In our 'democratic' and all-encompassing consumer culture, the gallery falls short (not necessarily for lack of trying, more on this later).

This confrontation, between the inaccessibility of art and the dogged requests of the consumer, are on full display in an infamous prank pulled at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In 2016 two teenagers, Kevin Nguyen and TJ Khayatan, placed a pair of unassuming glasses on the gallery floor.¹ Not long after, a group of attendees circled the object, contemplating its presence. Surprised by the attention the glasses received, Nguyen and Khayatan took pictures and later uploaded the images on Twitter.

LMAO WE PUT GLASSES ON THE FLOOR AT
AN ART GALLERY AND...

Diatribes flooded in, as the image took flight across the wide reaches of the internet. Many, predictably, lamented the 'stupidity' of the duped viewers, venting their frustrations at the state of contemporary art. *This is why i hate art.*² Others laughed at the faux pas, at the attendees who had misrecognised their significance. *IM deceased.*³ The circulating image was definitely a 'joke', a joke at the expense of those who had clearly 'missed' it. Who had, unknowingly, elevated the glasses to the dignity of an object worth contemplating. And who had, ultimately, failed to register them for what they 'really' were – a pair of ordinary glasses!

But who are the real dupes here? Is it the gallery attendees, who earnestly approach the pair of glasses as art? Or those who cynically jeer? Whose laughter insists that the

1. Elle Hunt, 'Pair of Glasses Left on US Gallery Floor Mistaken for Art', *The Guardian*, 27 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/27/pair-of-glasses-left-on-us-gallery-floor-mistaken-for-art> (accessed 8 August 2023).

2. Javier Moreno, 'This Teen Pulled Off The Ultimate Joke At An Art Gallery', *BuzzFeed News*, 25 May 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/javiermoreno/people-are-loving-this-teens-art-gallery-prank> (accessed 8 August 2023).

3. *Ibid.*

signifier, the spectacles, have a fixed, indexical relationship to the object, to the tangled piece of wire and glass that they've been assigned to? Insisting, in their laughter, that those who doubt this relationship are mad! Pure idiots!

As fun as it may be, the response online is a properly neurotic one. A stubborn huff that disavows the uncertainty at the heart of this encounter; the ambiguity that sits between the attendees and the unknown object that they have happened upon. In contrast to the 'duped' viewers, who embrace this uncertainty, the online diatribes recoil and snide. It was Freud who first diagnosed neurotics as subjects who, among other hang-ups, cannot tolerate ambiguity; who at all costs must defend themselves against uncertainty. The unassuming glasses, placed on the gallery floor, provoke such a strong response by mobilising exactly what the obsessive neurotic most fears – alterity and strangeness. In short, the enigma of the Other's desire. Suddenly, by virtue of the gallery context, the familiarity of the spectacles, their everydayness, is turned into something strange. A strangeness that makes the symbolic order falter, overturning what is normally taken for granted and transforming it into something different, unusual.

In contrast to those who mock them, the earnest gallery attendees, in good faith, attempt to engage the enigma they are presented with. Their curiosity is piqued by the question mark they encounter, a question mark that lurks behind every sign (emerging only in the right conditions). Unlike their critics, they do not seek refuge in the established symbolic framework, by insisting *They are just glasses!* Instead, they confront the ambiguity – the gap at the heart of the symbolic, placing themselves where it lacks. *Why have these glasses been placed here? What do they want from me?* Confronted with the task of interpretation and the inaccessibility of the object's meaning, the viewer is put to work. Asked to creatively respond. To make an art of interpretation.

The strength of the gallery, its critical potential, emerges



Glasses placed
by Kevin Nguyen
and TJ Khayatan
at the Museum of
Modern Art in San
Francisco, May
2018. Image credit:
TJ Khayatan/
twitter

from these questions, precisely *because* meaning is rendered inaccessible. At best, such experiences provoke us, turning us into hysterics. Here, even the artist cannot be relied upon to fix the meaning of their work into place. As many of us know, artists are often as bewildered by their own creations as we are – despite their attempts to intellectualise their practice. To borrow a line from Lacan (who borrowed it from Hegel), the secrets of the Egyptian hieroglyphs were a mystery to the ancient Egyptians as well.⁴

In a desperate attempt to remain relevant, our art institutions are increasingly committed to doing away with the pesky trouble of interpretation. Abstracts, pamphlets

4. Slavoj Žižek, "The Most Sublime of Hysterics: Hegel with Lacan" (translated by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens; first published in English in Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (eds), *Interrogating the Real*, Continuum, London, 2006), Lacan.com, <https://www.lacan.com/zizlacan2.htm> (accessed 8 August 2023).

and wall texts written in 'inclusive' language now provide definitive explanations to help the viewer along. Increasingly, even these didactic offerings are foregone in favour of more 'experiential' art – what I like to call the 'fun-housification' of the art viewing experience, or the Yayoi-Kusamafication of the art object. (Anne Imhof's work provides a 'cool' and 'edgy' alternative along the same lines.) With the rising popularity of installation work, the uncanny art object is seldom encountered. Here, artworks need not be interpreted, but simply felt. Fully immersive, these installations envelope the senses – drawing us into their aura by minimising the space between us and the work itself.

Experiences of this kind are reassuring because, unlike our attempts at interpretation, our feelings are never 'wrong'. Unsurprisingly, these multi-sensory exhibits are plastered with reflective surfaces – materials that are primed with opportunities for self-portraiture. Plunged in this hall of mirrors, we catch glimpses of ourselves – glimpses which protect us against the shock of encountering difference; a mirror-image that shields us from the unknowable desires of the Other. In the midst of these blockbuster spectacles, the simple act of viewing a contained art object just won't do. Which is why even the paintings of van Gogh, Monet can't just be looked at now – *How boring!* No, they need to be experienced in full immersion; their brush strokes enlarged and projected, their plateaus and vistas walked through. Sold-out tours of such work, for-profit events programmed by the likes of Live Nation, are gaining traction the world over, with audiences flocking to submerge themselves in fully enclosed worlds.

The 'democratisation' of art into the experiential domain does not signal an increased sensitivity to 'inclusion', but rather the wholesale commodification of the gallery. This shift sees the art object stripped of its uncanny potential, domesticating its excesses. Unfortunately, what the calls for inclusion and accessibility miss is that, to remain critically useful, the art object needs to be inaccessible

at the level of content, at the level of its meaning. More importantly, these gestures ignore what truly renders the art object inaccessible. This problem is found not at the level of content but rather at the level of form: the *form* art takes under capitalist relations, a system that relies on a disenfranchised class who have only their labour to sell. This reserve army of labour is left not only poor in terms of resources, but time poor, unable to pursue activities that require more of us than the instantly gratifying commodity. Our institutions are far more willing to tackle the issue at a cosmetic level – which means rendering the ‘meaning’ of artworks legible and transparent for us dummies – than alienate their patrons and donors by using their platforms to advocate for radically transformed social relations. In facing accusations of elitism, it is much easier for them to do away with the interpretive mode altogether; to foreclose the space that enables us to craft understandings of art that are our own.

In the wake of this transformation, we are left with artworks deprived of their dangerous dimension, that simply placate us in engagements that are only ever self-preserving. An oft-quoted line by Slavoj Žižek is of some help here: this is the art world’s version of ‘coffee without caffeine, cream without fat’, Coke without sugar.⁵ To which I’d like to add: the phenomenon of art *without* Otherness. What we should bear in mind, when confronted with an unassuming pair of glasses placed as a joke on the gallery floor, is that in risking being made a fool of, of making the ‘wrong’ interpretations, we gain something else entirely: the opportunity to look and see *differently*.

5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, 148.

Snacks is a collection of short, salty and sweet art essays and texts from 12 participants in the Chez Derriere art writing programme, hosted by Felixe Laing from November 2022 to July 2023.

Alena Kavka

Samantha Cheng

Ana Garcia

Mairātea Mohi

Gabi Lardies

Eleanor Cooper

Felixe Laing

Alanna O'Riley

Ardit Hoxha

Annie Bradley

James Tapsell-Kururangi

Liam Jacobson

:CHEZ:DERRIERE:

