

How to be

The point is, don't become an asshole. As art-world participants we should be mindful of this, particularly at a moment when the current logics and cults of interaction, participation, production and performance feel especially social. Most of us are over-institutionalized and yet only partially professionalized. 'Don't become an asshole', is demanded of Pecker, the emerging artist depicted in the 1998 John Waters film *Pecker*. Making this petition is Pecker's girlfriend and muse, who reluctantly remains supportive when, unwittingly, the photographer is discovered by a New York commercial gallery (and, as the film progresses, is also picked up by its gallerina). Pecker never does become an asshole, but he inadvertently flirts with the idea, as the gravitational pull of success, celebrity and unbridled adoration draws him away from his hometown Baltimore and into the New York scene. The girlfriend's threat comes into focus again when Cindy Sherman, playing herself, toasts Pecker with a drunkenly exuberant 'death to irony' at his post-opening dinner. Waters's directorial solution to asshole-ism materializes as a celebration of earnestness.

The cursory frequently passes as stylized, full-flavored criticality. It is a nonchalant shrug of sorts: all reaction, no reflection. The cursory regularly infiltrates art criticism, art writing, curation and art-making. I guess I'm doing it right now. A reliance on this formula for engagement and commentary equates to being an asshole. And yet there is a constant call for dialogue and discussion: like a dog chasing its own tail. Ruff! Is 'the riff' a kind of work, or labour? Riffing is a key indicator of this shruggery. We seem to talk about it a lot. Riffing on subject matter, on raw material, riffing on different kinds or modes of action and gestures. And we make it lazy in art, unlike it is in music, where it is less ecstatic, less a result of being mesmerized and rapturous; a kind of productive reverence. In art, we also fear overstating this term 'riff', because it teeters on the edge of cliché. It suggests a solution to inactivity, to uneasy 'juxtapositions' (cliché) and speaks of bridging these things that intuitively relate, but don't easily match. What we are saying when we use this term is that we needn't understand or analyse our own or surrounding creative impulses, that engaging in a rigorous way is earnest, and earnestness is to be avoided. When I speak in this way and write in this way, I am being an asshole.

The fields of artistic production and curation appear increasingly narrow. Not

necessarily through inactivity, but as a result of their structure. As these roles and what they then offer taper, the space for labour dwindles. And beyond this we are also deskilling as viewers. Some evidence of this is perhaps the architectural over-writing of the gallery space. Inextricable from the history of curating, we need to question why architectural collaboration and intervention continues to be relevant, or broadcast as relevant. More often than not the result is a de-emphasis of the artwork that the circumferent architecture is purportedly in support of and in service to, particularly in gallery spaces which, over time, become laden with their own history. A moralistic tool of post and lintel meaning-making which shrinks us as viewers, making architecture an asshole.

'Fuckin' lousy art galleries are ruining this whole neighborhood. Stupid blank paintings and out of focus pictures and those ugly-ass sculptures.' This observation, made by a homeless New Yorker in *Pecker*, suggests that whole areas of the city can become an asshole too.

The increased socialization of art has enhanced the lie of casual. Looming large in this arena are the not-so-young YBAs—full of their own art gods of course—serving as a guide for the careerist-casual. From slap-dash to cash. As artists, writers and curators, and as a result of these kinds of influences, does this mean that we have allowed ourselves to de-skill? Because we are certainly getting paid like assholes. Government-funded organizations regularly request invoices for artist fees that equate to less than one week's worth of studio rent. Getting paid and paying rent are also the blur of once distinct, now competing ideologies of commercial, project and independent gallery spaces. I wonder when the slow-cooking revolution will seep into curatorial and artistic practice, where working from show to show rather than project to project divests practices of rigorous engagement with research and necessary failure (and, hence, editing).

The public interpretation (and performance) of art is often a forum for assholes. I recently attended a series of talks by relatively inexperienced emerging artists and, while each participant displayed his and her inexperience, which is no crime, it was in fact the institution who was the asshole. The artists speaking about their work needed prompting and challenging. This should have been the supportive role of the in-house curators, but it was not, since nervousness hid behind reticence. The role of the curator in this situation is not to be a nervous asshole, but rather the generous (and yes perhaps nervous) host. Language itself can also be an asshole as we are regularly hemmed in by its various applications, rules and

rationales in relation to art, not only during times of public performance. The secret code of exhibition applications and grant writing should be available as a course by correspondence. Within this code a whole section regarding artist statements should be detailed. This particular language function frequently trips-up even experienced practitioners and can even work to restrain the production of new work or at least the form it takes.

To play the gentleman's game, cricketers must wear all white. All white attire being a sign of neatly pressed respect and etiquette pre the scuff marks and grass stains of competitive play. So where does this position us in the arts, in our uniforms of black? Etiquette is strangely out of focus in an industry where the professional and the personal must play nice so frequently. The equivalent of inviting a stranger to watch you undress describes the complex choreography of the studio visit. Its unwritten codes of conduct require articulation and interrogation since it is fertile ground for assholes. Asshole-like behavior can emerge even from experienced artists and curators. What should we expect when expecting a studio visit? I have experienced being called into a studio to take a look at a harried, over-traveled biennale curator (guess who don't sue) curled up on a artist's couch. After yawning through the first 15 minutes of the visit, the artist suggested that the curator apply one of her home-knitted knee-rugs, while he caught some Zs before his taxi arrived to ferry him back to the airport.

So when exhibiting asshole-like behavior, the antidote should be to stop work, but not to nap. In the film *Pecker*, Waters's solution is to have his protagonist switch professions, declaring he would retire as a photographer to take up filmmaking. But we needn't go that far. We should, however, reflect on the means of our investment, not only by analysing our 'product' (the artwork, the exhibition, the writing), but by scrutinizing the way we communicate and participate. We must reflect and assess our own personal strategy (be it engineered or intuited), in order to engage with empathy, with generosity, or with rigor. And if you aren't reflecting, then you're probably being an asshole.

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