

REPORT: BULLSHIT! CALLING OUT CONTEMPORARY ART

Joanna Fiduccia examines the refusal of meaning as artistic strategy in the work of Eric Duyckaerts, Jimmy Raskin, Benoît Maire and Falke Pisano



Horsepucky, poppycock, baloney, bull butter, bull feathers, humbug – as many names for what philosopher Harry Frankfurt called one of the most salient features of our culture: bullshit. If it is true that the contemporary world is swimming in it from the discourse of the previous US administration to the profusion of empty language and images jamming up cyberspace, it is also far from seeming all bad. No sooner is bullshit condemned as an enemy to truth or the symptom of a broader idiocy, than advocates rush to defend it as a creative exercise of extrapolation or even, to the mind of Harvard professor William Perry Jr writing on academic bulling in 1963, an expression of the highest values in a liberal education, namely, the capacity to understand someone else's form of thought well enough to expound upon it, with confidence, if without data.¹ This is a skill, the 'art' of bullshitting.

A fitting term. If bullshitting is an art (as craft as well as cunning), it is just as often pinned on art itself, which has shouldered that accusation since Plato maligned mimesis. A history of 20th century art could even be sketched as the punctual embrace of this fundament: consider that two of its most paradigmatic works are Duchamp's 'Fountain', 1917, and Piero Manzoni's 'Merda d'artista', 1961, and that one of its most influential thinkers was christened the 'excremental philosopher' (Georges Bataille) – to say little of Yves Klein's (hot) air architecture and his 'Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity', 1959, or even Pollock's excretory drips. These cases can be likened to what Philip Eubanks and John D Schaeffer call the 'gamesmanship' of bullshitting: showboating, often among friends, that is 'at once grandiose and difficult to be sure of: it gets away with something audacious while also putting it plainly on display.'² Or, it gets away with something audacious because it puts it plainly on display. It nearly goes without saying that contemporary artists reckon with this strategy, and that artists failing to do so risk seeming fey and sincere. Bullshit's presence in art seems no longer a threat to its integrity, but rather an integral part of its mechanisms.

Yet, that is surely only half the story. Pedagogy and 'the educational turn' have come to be recognised as widespread preoccupations for artists, institutions and art structures alike. And since bullshit and pedagogy rarely make easy bedfellows, even if you admit their entanglement on the student's side, it seems high time to recalibrate the bullshit of contemporary art. First, a caveat. There are numerous annexes of bullshit that will not be discussed here, the consideration of which would likely lead to different conclusions. In art, these

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include bullshit as conspiracy theory, bullshit as historical pastiche, bullshit as ethnographic study (cf, in much more nuanced terms, Hal Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer' in *The Return of the Real*, 1996), and the bullshit revelation of bullshit. Instead, I'll limit myself to a few examples restricted to bullshit language or speech in contemporary art.

Given the rich history of art and bull, exactly what kind of bullshit is in question? In Harry Frankfurt's essay 'On Bullshit', originally published in 1986 in the *Raritan Quarterly Review* and reprinted in 2005 as a small, widely popular volume, Frankfurt defines bullshit against its kindred deception, lying. He concludes that, whereas the liar 'design[s] his falsehood under the guidance of... truth' and is therefore 'inescapably concerned with truth values'³, the bullshitter spins a yarn in complete disregard or indifference for the truth. Frankfurt's success precipitated articles in the popular press as well as sociological and philosophical journals, some of which reference a second disquisition, GA Cohen's 2002 analysis 'Deeper into Bullshit'. Cohen's target is academic bullshit, the opaque and arcane language understood by many to be the true legacy of structuralist/post-structuralist thought (in his article, Cohen references the hoax played on the esteemed journal *Social Text* by Alan Sokal, a mathematics and physics professor, who successfully submitted an article of pure and intended gibberish). Cohen construes bullshit not as a disregard for truth, but rather a disregard for meaning, or even, a refusal to mean. It is 'discourse that is by nature unclarifiable',⁴ whether produced sincerely or constructed in the interest of cowing an audience through excessive, abstruse language.

Of course, 'discourse that is by nature unclarifiable' seems to touch on what some maintain is a tenet of art, that is, its resistance to effective paraphrase, its 'capacity to invite repeated response' (TJ Clark), or conversely, in the words of Paul Valéry, A work of art, if it does not leave us mute, is of little value. Furthermore, if art can be intentionally indecipherable, it can also disregard certain truths in order to access others (historically, the truth of subjective perception or some such). This presents a difficult case for defining bullshit in or as art; even holding on to certain characterisations (a refusal to mean, unconcerned with truth-values), bullshit in art can run from playful virtuosity to po-faced camouflage.

On the side of the former is the work of Belgian artist Eric Duyckaerts, whose didactic lectures cover such subjects as diagonals, couples and Sheffer strokes, at one clownish and erudite and just this side of aporia. Duyckaerts plays at turns the enthusiastic assistant professor and the bumbling instructor, implicitly calling into question both his authority and your attentiveness to it. The back cover of his book on certainty, *Hégel ou la vie en rose*, reads 'the adoption of a truth for one person [...] transforms progressively into a certainty for that person and that, during the process of appropriation, the truth has continued on its merry way to find itself, in fact, far beyond the certainty of that person.' These are lines that could also describe the experience of absorbing Duyckaerts' lessons: charmed into believing a probable proposition, you're soon led down a path that seems to have never seen the light of reason.

Similarly virtuosic is New York-based artist Jimmy Raskin, who for over 20 years has pursued an aesthetic-philosophical investigation in the form of sculptures, videos, lectures, diagrams and texts. Its tagline of sorts, 'There is a disciple who is permanently confused!' is drawn from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1883-85, from the chapter in which Zarathustra endeavors to explain the difference between the Poet Pure and the New Poet-Philosopher (the disciple, obviously, doesn't get it). Raskin explains, in terms not unlike Cohen's, '[The disciple] does not yet know that the folly of Poets is a self-created doom. Lacking deep knowledge and obligated "to lie" (even to himself), the unenlightened Poet flounders in an excess of language.'⁵ Raskin has empathetically drawn up five so-called timeless lessons with which to direct the disciple's transition into a New Being. Number Two is Lying Just Enough v Passive to the Lie; Number Five, Being Paradoxical, Subversive v Self-Contradictory. With such references, Raskin's work emerges as an inspired mix

of philosophical themes, convoluted associations and incisive self-reference. His recent exhibitions almost recklessly merged Zarathustra's tightrope walker with a character Pinn (Pinocchio, piñata), Rimbaud's Voyelles with Stephen Hawking's black hole – a flirtation with virtuosic bullshit, anchored by real existential weight.

Paris-based artist Benoît Maire has an academic pedigree behind his densely philosophical works: a discontinued doctorate that would seem to give him special purchase on academic arcana. His earlier projects such as 'The Spider Web', 2006, a heterodox selection of objects that served as a pretext for a conversation with Arthur Danto – had a frontal engagement with philosophy, yet were sufficiently removed from academic procedures to create a large margin for bulling. A more recent work inherits the linguistic contortions of its references (Lyotard, Lacan, Badiou...) often exacerbated by their ludic position in the artwork ('4.3 – description of the elements of the game: / a – the mechanical transcendent, / b – the general mirror of transcendental indexation / c – investigation A (defeated) following the position / d – the empty subject, which only speaks through the scream [...]'). In November 2009, Maire discussed the source of these quotes, his reflections on the Aesthetics of the Differends, with academic Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield at Hollybush Gardens in London – a conversation that illuminated the subtly humorous side to Maire's near-impenetrable language: the absurdity of using academic philosophical discourse to debate work that has expressly abandoned the academic philosophical context.

Maire has collaborated with Amsterdam-based artist Falke Pisano, whose work is another example of abstruse language. Like Raskin, Pisano has a repertory of preoccupations or theses that are reincarnated in her lecture-performances, sculptures, installations and text-based videos. Yet unlike Maire and Raskin, Pisano forfeits an absurd or virtuosic angle by producing hermetic work, composed of systems outlining its own apprehension. One of the most recent iterations of this appeared in the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009. Composed of panels of text and diagrams suspended in steel frames, 'Silent Element (Figures of Speech) II' expands upon a series of works ('The Complex Object – Affecting Abstraction #3', 2007; 'Object and Disintegration: The Object of Three', 2008; and 'O Eu e O Tu / The I and The You', 2008) that concern the relationship between speech and visual apprehension – however without having, or claiming to have, a relationship to phenomenology. But its language seems to belie that Pisano's diagrams were narrated by statements such as 'Duration can only be experienced when perception takes place from one structure to another; consequently temporal values are transferred to a continuous present experience of time' and that 'The figure spoke with the intention of installing a logic of transformation between disparate conditions'.⁶ In the context of the biennial, namely its conjunction of high seriousness and a general public, this language appeared deeply alienating and hopelessly obscure. Invested with the authority of a precise, vaguely phenomenological lexicon and, of course, the authority of the biennale itself, Pisano's failure to communicate could be felt to reflect on her audience rather than on the obscurity, emptiness and disregard of meaning(fulness) in her language.

Yet aside from a poorly judged relationship to audience (for which the artist cannot solely be faulted), how reasonable is it to claim that Pisano's work is intimidating and alienating whereas Duyckaerts's is rousing or Raskin's self-reflexive? I speculate it is precisely because her presentation aestheticised rather than parodied pedagogy. The panels, which recall didactic devices such as wall texts or labels, produce the expectation that knowledge will be delivered by Pisano through her art, while the obtuse content refuses communication, refuses to mean.

However it is not entirely fair to say that this expectation is produced only or even primarily by the work itself. Ought we not to see its source in the zeitgeist of 'the educational turn', a return to a conservative perspective on the function of art – namely, to instruct? Although part of the allure of recent pedagogical tendencies in art is their ambiguous seriousness, very few discount entirely the objective of instructing their audience. In this light, Frankfurt's definition –

disregard for truth and the subsequent degradation of the social relations that hinge upon it – suddenly looks far more significant. Indeed, it only becomes a problem once the art world starts looking like a plausible place for academic learning. For whether bullshit is endemic to art or redeemed by it, it's there, and it might not always take the virtuosic route. Perhaps the one who should on the chopping block is not the bullshitter at all, but those who would seek to remake art in the vision of the classroom.

Joanna Fiduccia is on MAP's editorial advisory board

Endnotes

1. William Perry Jr, 'Examship and the Liberal Arts: A Study in Educational Epistemology', <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~lipoff/miscellaneous/exams.html>. Originally published in *Examining in Harvard College: A Collection of Essays by Members of the Harvard Faculty*, ed. Leon Bramson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 1963
2. Philip Eubanks and John D Schaeffer, 'A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing', *College Composition and Communication* 59.3, 2008, 380
3. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 32
4. GA Cohen, 'Deeper into Bullshit' in *Contours of Agency: Themes from the Philosophy of Harry Frankfurt*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, 332
5. Miguel Abreu, 'Interview with Jimmy Raskin' in *Blinding the Ears – Accecare l'ascolto* (Milan: Kaleidoscope, 2009), 24
6. Cf Cohen on the Althusserian texts he confronted as a student: '[They] possessed a surface allure, but it often seemed impossible to determine whether or not the theses [...] were true, and, at other times, those theses seemed capable of just two interpretations: on one of them, they were true but uninteresting, and, on the other, they were interesting, but quite obviously false.' Cohen, 322 try catch(err)