Art As Authority

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Family Matters

by Richard Gleaves

RG discussing the show with Uncle Brian in Oscar Prinsen's art. Photo Lori Lipsman.

Part I

Family Matters is a series of multimedia events centered around a key curauteurial idea: the ineluctably social nature of what passes in our culture for art.

The event series — curated by visual artist and teacher Brian Goeltzenleuchter, and presented at Sushi — has included a music concert, film screening, panel discussion, and visual arts exhibition. The time-based events are now past, but the art remains on view at Sushi until April 24.

Why curauteurial? Because the themes and ideas embodied in *Family Matters* are part autobiography, and part prone to the same sorts of eccentric category slippages as the ones in *Institutional Wellbeing*, Goeltzenleuchter's 2009 show at the Oceanside Museum of Art.

In essence, for *Family Matters* Goeltzenleuchter the artist commandeered the role of Goeltzenleuchter the curator and assembled a meta-event with aspects unmistakably similar to Goeltzenleuchter the artist's own work: specifically, the deadpan proffering of a set of propositions purporting to explain the work, which in turn are subverted by a second set of propositions immanent in the work itself. The result is a semantic instability characteristic of the finest satire.

This quality is amplified by Goeltzenleuchter's presentation of self in everyday life: against type he radiates the same sort of earnest Boy Scout vibe as his crypto-archetype Jeff Koons, but minus Koons' signature smarm and plus an order-of-magnitude increase in the conceptual complexity of his work.

Which, in the case of *Family Matters*, consists wholly of the show's superstructure and support information, given that the primary information — songs sung and artwork shown — is the work of seven seriously good artists, at least four of whom are Goeltzenleuchter's colleagues or former students.

Part II

Lately, creative people of all stripes have been referring to what they do as a practice. Artists, dancers, poets, they all do it. The unselfconscious use of the term can be borderline annoying to those who have thought about how to classify what exactly they do in the creative domain. Is it a practice? An occupation? A discipline? A passion? A therapy? A calling? For some of us, what you call it provides an important distinction because it frames the way we think about what we do, and it suggests our relationship to the public at large.

For instance, *if* art is an occupation, which is to say an activity that serves as one's regular source of *livelihood*, then why is it that so many first rate artists seek out teaching contracts at colleges and universities? Do these great artists share a common benevolent attitude about shaping young minds? Or maybe it's that these first rate artists are not by definition successful at their occupation. So how do they refer to what they do? God knows that with every utterance of that word, "occupation", the great art professor is reminded of his failure to live up to its meaning. And that would inevitably chip away at his self-esteem.

So maybe he calls what he does a practice. A practice — like law or medicine is considered a practice. A practice implies a rich history of practitioners innovating within or pushing against historic precedents. Hmmm. Discipline without guarantee of remuneration. We're getting closer. But in this scenario of the university subsidized art professor, the use of the term practice functions as a sort of euphemism. *What I do is a highly respectable, though economically unviable activity. So I'll call it a practice*. But then why not just refer to it as a calling? Maybe we'll see the artist colony reemerge in the form of a cultural monastery.

To be sure, graduate study in the arts is, in many ways, a leap of faith. In her essay *Work Ethic*, Helen Molesworth cited the following statistics compiled by Howard Singerman for his book *Art Subjects*. In the early 1940s, there were 60 candidates for graduate degrees in studio art enrolled in eleven American institutions. By 1950-51, there were 322 candidates at thirty-two institutions. The trend continued through the end of the century. Thirty-one new Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs opened in the 1960s, and forty-four in the 1970s. From 1990 to 1995, ten thousand MFA degrees were awarded in the United States.

Well… that's a lot of culture. How is it organized? Having directed an MFA program during my tenure as that university subsidized art professor, I can speak personally to the fact that advising graduate students in career management and professional practices is a precarious responsibility. The university educated artist is so often aware of the critical domain (or the precedents) surrounding his or her work, but often so unaware of the tactics involved in situating his or her own work in that critical domain. *How do I get what I want?*

Enter nepotism — a word which has taken on an overwhelmingly derogatory meaning: Favoritism granted to relatives or friends, without regard to their merit. I would like to suggest for the duration of this film screening and panel discussion that we consider the optimistic potential of nepotism, as just one of *many* tactics that can be productively used to develop and sustain a creative practice.

And I would like to frame the term in a specific way. I offer the following four propositions to which I hope our panel and you the audience might comment on, add to or otherwise test:

First: Nepotism is not inherently bad. Consider that the latter part of the definition of nepotism, favoritism *without regard for merit* neither confirms nor denies incompetence on the part of the beneficiary of nepotism.

Second: *You can fool the fans but not the players*. By this I mean that in the pluralistic art world(s) that have emerged since the 1960s, art has often been created for highly specific audiences. It stands to reason that those at the forefront of creating elite art cultures are often the ones best equipped to distinguish merit.

Third: Nepotism is not necessarily partial. All that is required to profit from this kind of opportunity is a willingness to take advantage of it. To make friends. And if one is meritorious but not well-liked, well, whose fault is that?

Fourth: In a period of globalization, in which access to systems of communication and distribution are becoming increasingly affordable, nepotism can extend its purview globally. In so doing, it can avoid the inbreeding common to regionalism, and instead open itself up to hybrid cultural sources.

— Brian Goeltzenleuchter, *A Defense of Nepotism* (talk transcript from the *Family Matters* panel discussion)

Part III

The concert component of *Family Matters* consisted of the Canadian musicians and visual artists Dan Wong and Mary-Anne McTrowe, who — performing as the musical duo The Cedar Tavern Singers — sang self-penned folk songs about art-historical knowledge of the sort acquired through a typical undergraduate art program.

This event was arguably the most popular part of *Family Matters*, with a full house in the Sushi performance space singing along with the performers.

Part IV

The film screening/panel discussion — titled *Nepotism and other character flaws* — was more problematic (and thus more interesting). The panel consisted of Goeltzenleuchter as moderator and four artists from the show (Lisa Hutton, Andrew Kaufman, Lauren Tyler Norby, Donna Stack). Each of the artists had been asked to introduce and then screen a short film of their own, followed by another short film made by someone "to whom you owe something or from whom you want something." The event format was as follows:

< opening speech> < talk_1> < film_1-1> < film_1-2> < talk_2> < film_2-1> < film_2-2> … < talk_4> < film_4-1> < film_4-2> < panel discussion>

The film screening alone stretched to well over an hour, with the result that by the time the event reached the panel discussion and Q&A, the audience had been so thoroughly film-saturated they'd forgotten whatever had been said by the panelists in-between. This cognitive overload was amplified by the criteria used for film selection, which effectively resulted in a Cagean mini-fest of random cinema. All of which conspired with a light audience turnout and bad acoustics to make for an evening of tough sledding.

A week after the panel discussion I buttonholed Goeltzenleuchter about the event format, and in particular what he thought of audience members' efforts to make sense of it. Here is his response: *[Regarding] K's critique of the videos as self-indulgent, and your desire to try to find common ground between the presenter and his or her chosen artist(s): neither comment was germane to the panel as advertised. Merit and rationale mean little or nothing to the concept of nepotism. That's why I made the comment that if I were a panelist, and I knew that by showing a WalMart commercial I would reap some favorable relationship to WalMart, then I would cheerfully show it.*

Part V

Finally, the visual art exhibition, which resides in Sushi's gallery space: a small group show, it includes work by all seven artists in *Family Matters*, and is billed as referencing "the esoteric legacies of the avant-garde through work that is formally — if paradoxically — influenced by popular entertainment."

I know of two art-savvy people who actively dislike this show, but I think I know why: they're not seeing something that is both unusual for a contemporary art show and (characteristic of a Goeltzenleuchter production) far more interesting than the thing the show is billed as doing. What I'm referring to here is a strong performative aspect which ties together an otherwise disparate set of works: to experience the show the viewer is invited to climb a ladder; to sit on the floor and watch a video; to put on headphones; to wipe their feet; to put on a new set of clothes; or to avoid spilling the water.

In other words, the art is for doing something — anything — other than standing on one's ass in a gallery. In this respect it has as much to do with a typical show at the New Children's Museum as it does with anything that happens in the adjacent Sushi performance space. The popular entertainment influence is there as advertised — but it's the wrong one.

The most interesting work in the show is Oscar Prinsen's seating sculpture (shown above) which has been acquired by Sushi as a permanent addition to its gallery space. I can highly recommend venturing up the ladder to enjoy the view.

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