

Artists Are Not Born: An Interview with Jake Chapman

Brian Curtin

These days one can attend art school with the realistic aim of becoming an artist, or, establishing a professional career as one. Art schools are now shaping an idea of the artist different from before. Witness the spate of recent and current books that historicize a shift. The apocalyptic-sounding *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1968-1978* (MIT Press, 2012) closes a history of pedagogical avant-gardism that began with the Bauhaus and continued through Black Mountain College. Gavin Butt's *No Machos or Pop Stars: When the Leeds Art Experiment Went Punk* (Duke University Press, 2022) creates a narrative of bygone subversive interests: the art school as an incubator of radical creativity that is irreducible to discipline and profession or career. Others include *Blank Canvas* (Intellect, 2022) which is premised on a question of how modern education might, to quote the jacket blurb, 'suffocate the soul and inhibit the impact of the bohemian artist.' There are more.

If no longer centres of creative experimentation and counter-cultural interests, how do art schools now function? Around the early 1990s, the mantle of 'practice' became common among art students and thus claimed the work of an artist to be on a par with any specialist profession-from doctor to plumber in terms of a set of skills and aims. This was underwritten by the institutionalizing of research, a rationalizing of the processes of artists' labour as a set of steps to which they are accountable, akin to the work of a scientist. (And graduates are just as likely to emerge with a PhD as with a MFA these days). The net result was a displacing of romantic ideas of the artist, as one involved in unfettered creativity and experimentation which required no justification but as art. And also a replacement of discussions of the artist's personality, so typical of traditional profiles, with a solid account of the ideas their works communicated.

Artist Jake Chapman was at the epicentre of this shift, or on its cusp, when he was an art student in London during the 1980s. Establishing a remarkable career in collaboration with his brother Dinos, he recently decided to work solo and was in Thailand to participate in the Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB) 2022. I was interested in asking him about his experience of the shifts and changes his education would have provided. But, as an authentic product of his time, Chapman had no interest on discussing his "feelings" or personal opinions about the changing status of the artist and instead steadfastly kept me focused on the structural-political, social-contexts that shaped his practice[s]. In this respect, we can perhaps learn that the violence and grotesqueries of much of his art is not about his particular imagination but a means of thinking about the world at large.

Who were your contemporaries at art school, and who was teaching at the time?

I don't want to talk about personalities.

You recently published the novel $2 + 2 = 5$ (Urbanomic, 2021) which is a rewriting of George Orwell's famed *1984*. The fact of rewriting points to many of your interests as an artist: the appropriation of form; questions of authorship and originality; and, specifically, the aesthetics of dystopia. Further, there is a question of how you see the difference between writing and making visual art.

In *1984* Winston Smith is employed to rectify propaganda. Working with my brother Dinos over the years, we've rectified many artists' works including Goya and Hitler. I thought it appropriate to rectify Smith's work in order to contribute to discourses on Orwell. Initially the Orwell Estate blocked publication because they were bothered that my version was too close to the original and worried about commercial exploitation. But I got rid of the narrative of surveillance, exchanging it instead for a scenario of neoliberal utopianism. Dystopia in $2 + 2 = 5$ is not typically Orwellian.

1984 is interesting to me because it became a kind of liberal bible. When someone says "Orwellian" the conversation has already been had. We think about it in terms of surveillance or data-mining. This dominates the discourses of dystopia. To list Smith's concerns is to describe a liberal nightmare about ideas of identity and choice, self-expression etc. He doesn't like his hair cut a certain way and wearing a uniform or eating bad food. And so on. This is a superficial understanding of notions of attacks on freedom and *1984* itself obliterates different ways of thinking about dystopia, becoming tyrannical itself. Orwell's vision was an insipid version of dystopia.

I also turned to Orwell because of our current times. "Fake news," for example, is an interesting idea. I think the idea exists because Trump couldn't spell propaganda. When information is re-framed, there is a concern about "false" politics, false ideology *et al*. But propaganda has been around forever. All news is propaganda. $2 + 2 = 5$ aims to tell us about dystopia, not indulge a particular version of it.

And the relationship of writing to making visual art for you?

I've written loads of books! In ways, I think writing is more interesting because art can be reduced to ocular dependence. People are more prone to having an opinion about art simply on the basis of having eyes rather than thinking about it in a complex way. When you write a book, there is no sense of how it will be read by others because you can't experience it in a communal way; but when making art you are already imagining an audience through

exhibitions etc. It's a semi-gregarious activity. Otherwise, there is no guarantee that anyone will read your book except your Mum and Dad.

Also writing is an inherited method. You don't invent the form. Who was it who said that if you chuck a typewriter down the stairs five million times it will write *Macbeth*. Or by underlining certain words in the bible you could get *120 Days of Sodom*. The problem or advantage of making art is that it tends towards novelty. You have to find new ways of making things. New forms. The meaning of the work is included in the form. Words are still restricted to the idea of language.

I could be a snob and say that art that is not related to any literary discourse is more honest. But any artist can make idiotic art and lots of artists do. The notion of what it is to be a person and consider yourself an artist has a lot to do with self-entitlement, to create, to self-express.

Self-expression was one conceit of neo-expressionism which would have been on the wane, as a predominant mode in the art world, when you were a student in England in the late 1980s. You were associated with the famed Young British Artists, or YBAs, in the 1990s, whose popularity was a game-changer in terms of how artists could be popularly perceived. But the UK also had a relatively recent history of POC artists engaged with identity politics such as Sonia Boyce, Sunil Gupta, and Keith Tyson. How would you describe the shift your generation represented, given the attention or profiles you achieved?

I am not British and I refuse to be. The YBA phenomenon was a sort of cultural imperialism, like the CIA sent Abstract Expressionism out into the world. What was interesting about the YBAs was that in England before them, no-one was interested in art. No-one went to art school to be an artist. The idea of it being a career, let alone a spectacular one, didn't exist. The artists we knew at college were Bacon, Freud, and other old guys. So the understanding was that you would do your thing and then become old and maybe an artist. The accelerated, commodified notion of the artist as young, vivacious, competitive, and forward-moving didn't exist until the YBAs and then it only began to exist because of an upsurge in financial markets and financial speculation, what we call neoliberalism.

The 1970s was a hugely political time in England and artists weren't media personalities but by the early 1980s artists such as Julian Schnabel and other neo-expressionists had begun to dominate international exhibitions. They were celebrated as individuals and the whole context was ego-driven. If we trace neo-expressionism to artists such as Otto Dix you can see that they were facing war and social crises. What the hell was Schnabel facing? Queues at fancy restaurants in New York?

Please say more about neoliberalism and the emergence of the YBAs.

Well, if you look at artists now in the famed district of Montmartre, you see what they leave out: all the cars. They are selecting cathedrals and other scenic views to paint. This is a temporal injunction to reject modernity. Artists that were very influential on my generation such as Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, and John Miller, did the opposite: forget the cathedral, only have the cars. But what this ultimately means is there was a point at which the artwork doesn't look upon the world and describes what it sees, but becomes that "thing." Or, if the artwork describes a capitalist landscape, the work is then part of that landscape. Koons does this brilliantly. He consolidated the art object as a capitalist object, even to the extent that the surface reflected everything. In this respect, the object had no objectivity, no objectness. It is pure exchange-value. This resonates with Marx's claim, all that is solid melts into air.

Some of the YBAs work, like Damien Hirst's shark, caught the current of extreme capital accumulation and speculation. They were not concerned with their "feelings" as artists but responded to the influence of money. Their work expressed the conditions of its time in being capitalist in and of itself, not a reflection on capitalism. It absolutely dissolved into exchange-value, because, there is no existential, personal or identitarian expressiveness. Where's the existential aura in what Hirst makes? And, also, there is no novelty if we think of an artist like Seurat who advanced canonical painting through his use of dots. Hirst's art is pure capital.

All this is philosophically interesting. The art of painting was flattened out through the trajectory of modernity because the painting became an object in and for itself, not a picture of something. As Clement Greenberg suggested, illusion is a lie.

What were you and others reading at the time?

At the time, there was Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* which said we have reached the endpoint of history, that liberalism is how the world will be forever, the endpoint. Many artists seemed to be reading Georges Bataille or Guy Debord, or their works looked like they did. But none of the artists actually read those writers. I will put my children's lives on that!

The recent proliferation of culture, and what type of artists it shaped, resulted from the injection of money into all forms of cultural life. There was basically a shift in the type of art being made as a reaction to the influence of money. You can talk about this in two ways: an aesthetic response to what was happening that looked cool; or a response to reading

Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and trying to make art as a political, tactical, adjustment to capitalism, but to undermine capitalism in some way.

To think about Koons, his exhibition titles included *Banality* or *The Gift*. What his superficially coated objects do is reflect their circumstances. The art is shiny objects that has no being, just suggests a perpetual becoming. As Bataille puts it, this is water in the world as water. Again, these are not objects that address what an artist thinks or feels about the world. In fact, art can now be in the world without artists. What does it matter what an artist says about them?

For my generation, and I studied at the YBA hotbed of Goldsmiths, there were many artists making work but were not aware of the political ramifications. But, I guess, a lot of those American artists must have been reading that shit.

I've met Koons and cornered him about his apparent concerns. But he has to assert no difference from what he makes. Because it has to be asserted that there is no distance from capitalism. Koon hits every intellectual note from his and our generation; if asked what we get from an artwork, he answers "nothing." This underlines titles like *Banality* as performative. He can't have a distance from his practice in order to comment. If the aim is to make the artwork productively banal and benign, he cannot then discuss it in some critically distanced way. He has to go through with the project that art is not an expressive object.

Finally, I'd like to get back to a discussion of your studio work in all these regards. How do you specifically address this repudiation of expressiveness, or subjectivity, and stage the problems of capitalism without taking a distant position from "it." What happens daily in your studio in terms of making, and this includes your formidable practical skills, and also research?

My work is completely alienated! To think of a racist metaphor: for example, virtuoso Japanese violinists. The West sees them as robotic, claiming they have no soul because their technique is learned. The notion of "soul" is the "I" I am trying to get rid of. So, in the work that was made as part of the Chapman Brothers, be it African tribal art or some-such, we had to adopt the persona of the person we were mimicking. The point is to make sure you are not being yourself: "How do I make art?" as a stylistic, personal, signature? What we did was make sure we made different types of art all of the time. There isn't one type of continuum; there isn't a linear path to follow but schizophrenia.

Once I was teaching a kid at Goldsmiths who was failing to execute a photorealist painting. I told him that in order to execute the painting you have to not be yourself, otherwise, in your failure, you are showing yourself. That is, showing the limitation of your ability, expressing who you are. Imagine if I kidnapped your family and threatened to shoot them,

you would then do the painting! This existential notion of selfhood is the limit of what this person is doing. What they found was a point at which they would sigh instead of approaching it like a virtuoso violinist who just learns. Instead its "I tried my best." Once you try your best you are expressing a form of identity; what you are actually doing is resisting going beyond that. Like, if I do a drawing that isn't any good, I am only expressing the idea that I cannot go beyond myself. There is no reason why someone can't do a photorealist painting.

I don't experience what I make as a so-called traditional artist. I have no interest in subjectivity. I am not interested in saying that there is some correlation between the things I make and my experience in a literal way. Making is a sham. The idea of me working with Dinos was to explode the identity of an artist as one. The idea of having two or three people make the artwork is that the work is the outcome of a conversation. If one person makes a piece of art, it is more an act of introspection, of a question of how do I feel. Again, I am not interested in the question of the "I," of subjectivity. We aimed to get rid of the preponderance of the notion of the thinking subject.

My practice is about modernity, about industrialization. When I make my work I am interacting with my surroundings, genocides, industrial genocides, political arguments, and capitalism as the prevailing theology of everything. If you are an artist, you are speculatively poking to work out where you are but the endpoint is modernity, not deserts or a return to an authentic state of beauty.

I remember my tutors at the Royal College of Art (RCA) saying that an artist is created, not made. Fuck off. As if the line between your thoughts and your actions should be pure, not deviate or be influenced by anything else. No, it should be influenced by everything. This is why art needs research. People need to read books. "An artist is born" is bullshit; artists should be influenced by everything. To criticize the idea of research, or intellectual inquiry, is to say that art is a kind of self-enabling activity. That's bullshit. It's like saying you shouldn't read a book if you are going to write a book.

I am interested in following rules, like, say, Samuel Beckett. He produces these types of psychotic languages, caught in feedback loops. I am interested in this rather than any existential inquiry into the self. Beckett describes the limits of language as how language works. This also invokes the figure of the schizophrenic as one who doesn't conform to any particular identity. The schizo is one who is absolute in all of their avatars while not reserved for any of them. They are disorientated personalities. If you don't want to make art that is a reflection of yourself, then you are going to have to be able to make every different type of art to demonstrate that the art is not you. This is the difference between production and creation: artists who create are artists who will discuss their work as if it has some metaphysical, poetic, connection between them and the world. I would never use "create." Artists who *produce* discuss their work as manufacture, as a commodity. If you have

someone putting a wheel on a car in a factory and saying “I am doing the best I can,” the wheel will fall off.

Brian Curtin is an Irish-born art critic based in Bangkok. www.brianacurtin.com