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ROBERT HUGHES AND THE ROYAL ACADEMY



BY MILES MATHIS

[The image above is a painting by *Edward Robert Hughes* from about 1890, which I use to confuse and consternate all concerned—and because it is public domain.]

For some reason I just became aware of [an article](#) the art critic Robert Hughes wrote for *The Guardian*, London, way back in 2004. Could be because I quit reading magazines and newspapers about 20 years ago. Could be because I have been living in a semi-porous shell—which I secrete myself each night—and this shell has a one-way membrane, like an osmotic cell, which prevents anything written by art critics from getting by. Could be because I immersed myself in physics at about that time, and I now write ten science papers for every art paper. Whatever the reason, *es muss sein*, it must be, but I can make up for it now.

Any old-fashioned artist who has read Hughes' article must be thrilled, I imagine, and I am partially thrilled myself. Just as I am thrilled to see [Adam Gopnik hanging out with Jacob Collins](#), I am thrilled to see Hughes' admitting I was right (even if he won't give me any credit). Most readers will assume I am just stroking my own hair again, without valid reason, but as usual I can prove my point, and will do so at agonizing length until you demand I give your arm back and quit gnawing on it. No, actually I will astonish you with efficiency:

1) Hughes said in 1994, in *The Culture of Complaint*, “Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy,” that art is no longer a social force because “What really changes political opinion is events, argument, press photographs, and TV.” He also claimed that art is not “morally ennobling” or even “therapeutic” because it does not have an effect on everyone who comes in contact with it.

2) In 1995, I called him on this in my letter “On Robert Hughes,” portions of which I sent to him at TIME magazine (the Art Renewal Center published [the whole letter](#) in 2004). As I put it, “this is like saying that because some boats sink, water is not buoyant. And judging art

politically is simply to misjudge it.” You may say that he never got this letter, and maybe he didn't, but I know that his editors were receiving my letters at that time, because they were nice enough to write me and tell me so. This was one of many letters at that time, as you can see by visiting my [“letters to the editor”](#) pages, where you will see two letters I wrote in 1994 to Hughes as Whistler. The editors at TIME admitted they were amused by these letters and told me they had sent them on to Hughes. Whether Hughes actually got any of these letters is impossible to prove one way or the other, since he never answered me; but if he didn't get them, he just happened to change course right toward me at precisely that time, for other reasons.

3) In his 2004 article in *The Guardian*, Hughes says, “In the 45 years that I've been writing criticism there has been a tragic depreciation in the traditional skills of painting and drawing, the nuts and bolts of the profession. In part it has been caused by the assumption that it's photography and its cognate media—film and TV—that tell the most truth about the visual.”

Wow, in less than ten years he turned 180 degrees. I wonder why? He says that this “tragic depreciation” happened in the 45 years since he started writing criticism, so we may assume he means to imply that the problem started around 1960 but only became chronic when he began to notice it, around the turn of the century. Does that fit the facts? No. The depreciation in traditional skills had already reached tragic proportions by the 1940's, at the latest. In the 50's it was what we might call post-tragic, and in the 60's the tragedy was already so old the forensic experts couldn't have found a spot of fresh blood. The trail was cold by then, and no bloodhounds were on it. Nobody cared, because by then all the people in the arts didn't think of it as a tragedy. It had been the desired outcome since around 1917, when Duchamp put the urinal in the museum.

So, if Hughes' timeline is only his own, and is about 50 years lagging behind the historical timeline, what caused him to switch directions? Only he knows, but I find it curious that many of his main talking points are talking points I began hammering into the mainstream in the mid and late 90's. As another example, look at this quote from his 2004 article:

I believe it's not just desirable but culturally necessary that England should have a great institution through which the opinions of artists about artistic value can be crystallised and seen, there on the wall, unpressured by market politics.

That is one of the rarest statements you will see in print in the contemporary art world: that the opinions of artists about artistic value matter at all. I have never heard it from any living person, *ever*, but especially not from an art critic or art administrator. I defy you to find anyone else published saying it, beyond me, and here Hughes. Of course this is one of the pillars of my counter-criticism: that art has fallen because the artist lost control of his own field. I could link you to 40 papers where I say it explicitly, and it is implicit in everything I write.

The lag of Hughes' personal timeline can also be seen in *The Shock of the New*, which he published in 1980. Of course by that time the new in art was some 50 to 100 years past shocking. Manet shocked some people in 1863 with *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Gauguin shocked some people in 1889 with his *Yellow Christ*, Picasso shocked some people with his *Demaiselles d'Avignon* in 1907, Duchamp shocked some people with his *Fountain* in 1917, but by 1980 no one in the arts could have been honestly shocked by anything. Living in a firecracker factory tends to diminish your startle response. The only people still shocked by art in 1980 were born-again Christians without TVs and old ladies with no memory before 1980. By 1980, the new was so *unshocking* it was a problem for art. The volume had already been turned up all the way, and people weren't proving to be anything but annoyed.

Honest people were only shocked that artists were still trying the same old gags after 100 years. Despite this, Hughes was selling 20th century art as something still both new and shocking, in both print and on TV. Although Hughes soon cooled on postmodernism, we must remember that the *Shock of the New* did as much or more than anything to continue the propaganda of Modernism, and to push it into the last two decades of the 20th century.

We now see some implicit regret in that from Hughes, but he could be far more explicit. In the same way, we see Hughes moving toward real painting and sculpture, but he could be moving more quickly and in a more rational manner, as I will show.

Another thing that jumped out at me in Hughes' 2004 article was his discussion of Blake and Reynolds. On at least two occasions I have sent Hughes pictures of [my triptych](#), and in the triptych literature I point out that I am doing something not done since Blake: combining poetry and painting by the same artist. Beyond that, Hughes says that Reynold's antipathy to Blake is one of the "pious legends of modernism." That statement is also so rare in its content it bears a closer look. Where else have you seen anyone telling you that modernism is a pious legend? How about in my writings on Whistler, where I point out that Whistler's formalism and Modern formalism are two different things, making the claim that his paintings or theories are pre-Modern a grubby myth. I didn't get a lot of things published before 2004, so some will think I am on thin ice, but this Whistler/formalism idea is already in full form by 1994 in those letters to TIME, as well as in [my three-part series](#) for *Art Connoisseur* in 1999. As is the idea that Modernism creates these myths as purposeful misdirection. In the second letter to TIME in 1994, I say,

This is not "art for art's sake"; it is "art for the sake of art theory." Which explains why the critics and their darlings are so glad to perpetuate the misunderstanding.

No one else that I know of was saying things like that in 1994, either concerning Whistler, concerning formalism, or concerning Modernism as purposeful myth.

In that same letter, I say, through Whistler,

may I remind them that the establishment, whether it was the Royal Academy in my time or the various Institutions of yours, has never created, or promoted, an artist and never will.

Interestingly, Hughes begins his 2004 article with much the same idea:

Many years ago, when I was still cutting my first pearly fangs as an art critic, one thing used to be taken for granted by me and practically everyone I knew in what is so optimistically termed the "art world". That thing was that all Academies were bad, the enemies of progress.

A close reader won't give me that coincidence, since Hughes goes on to argue *for* the Royal Academy. That is what his article is about. Above, he says that the opinions of artists not only have to be crystallised and heard, he says that they have to be heard *via an institution*: "the best existing candidate for such an institution is a revitalised Royal Academy, which always was dedicated to contemporary art."

But this only means he still hadn't learned the full lesson in 2004. He has learned a partial lesson by going back to a time when artists controlled important artistic institutions, but he needs to go back even further, to the time when artists could be heard talking straight from their mouths, without ossified

hornpipes granted them by Kings or clergies or any other groups. You have to go back almost to the Renaissance to encounter that blessed phenomenon.

We can see Hughes is again off-track just by looking at his consistency within the article. Higher up he admits that Alfred Munnings, the head of the Academy at the time, was *not* dedicated to contemporary art in the 1940's, and we know from our friend Whistler that the Academy was *not* dedicated to contemporary art in the late 19th century either. In fact, the Royal Academy was almost always a stick in the mud, even by my standards, and one of the reasons we needed such huge (and ultimately illogical) corrections to art in the 20th century was that the various Academies—especially in France and England—had been sitting on artists for centuries. Once artists got a sniff of freedom in the late 1800's, they went wild. Like a dog kept in a cage for years, they hit the ground running and didn't stop even when they came to the cliff. Better a long fall than a cage.

So although Hughes appears to understand that artists themselves have to be re-empowered, he is not yet clear how to do that. It won't be done by a re-invigorated Royal Academy. The Academies should be re-fortified as schools, as he says, since that is what they originally were and should be. But we don't need them as a gathering of peers or as setters of policy. Any group that becomes a setter of policy tends toward a bureaucracy, and the UK, like the US, is already full up with those. I learned that lesson the hard way when I submitted several works to the Royal Society of British Artists in 2006. When you “democratize” such a group, you don't get more fairness or openness in judging, you get mediocrities expelling the exceptional, because it makes them look bad.

I will be told that groups have always done that, democratic or no, but there is a difference. The old group mentality was dismissive of anything *different*, which is why Reynold's group marginalized Blake. But the new group mentality purposefully marginalizes the most talented, and even admits that this is what it is doing. See for example the published regimen of the Getty Center or of MOMA, where talent is *forbidden* as a concept. The new group is not only defined by conformity, it is defined by resentment—the naked regressive *ressentiment* of Nietzsche's lastman, whereby the middle tier seeks vengeance against the top tier. We see any number of instances of this in contemporary culture: it is the entrenched norm, and you have to be in serious denial to miss it. Peer-review works the same way now, in a newly “democratized” science. And any Royal Academy which sprang out of current culture would be expected to plot against skill and beauty in the same way that Modernism has plotted against skill and beauty. If you think I am wrong, you tell me why all the societies in the Federation of British Artists in the Mall Galleries continue to this day to move along the lines of Modernism, despite being sold as a reaction against it.

My reader will say, “What? Those people are following the lines of Modernism? They aren't exhibiting installations and concept pieces. I don't see sharks in tanks at the Mall Galleries. I see painted figures.” Yes, you see painted figures, but you see figures painted purposefully without skill or beauty. The Mall Gallery painters may find their own ways to prove to you how edgy and avant garde they are, but they are still doing exactly that. It is clear that they feel the same pressure the Turner Prize people feel to be *au courant* and cool, although they choose to express it with slightly less exaggerated arcs of hysteria. Peer review has become peer pressure, and though some may think responding to peer pressure is the same as responding to contemporary culture, it isn't. The most relevant artist isn't the artist who has bowed most perfectly to society: the most relevant artist is the one who has remained most true to his Muse, adding something truly personal and unique to society. It is by this measure of relevance that contemporary art has most conspicuously failed, and how both the Turner Prize people and the Mall Gallery people have failed. They are trying to impress each other, the press, and the galleries, when they should be trying to impress their own Muses. Most of these “artists”

won't even understand what I mean by that, since they don't hear any Muses. Well, that is precisely why I put "artists" in quotes.

So Hughes' decision to support academies instead of artists is simply an error. And this error in the article is caused by a previous error. It is here:

The Royal Academy once had very pronounced views on what constituted the great and the good in art. These views are now so out of currency that no one holds them. The idea that a revived Academy would or could clamp an iron fist of conformity on English painting and sculpture is simply absurd. It did not do that even in the 18th century.

Hughes implies by that wording and progression of argument that contemporary art is free of that iron fist (aesthetics) and all others. He implies that some people may be concerned a revived Academy would install conformity, and this implies that conformity doesn't *already* exist. Only those who think themselves free would fear a new "conformity." Unfortunately, Hughes' argument once again does not fit the facts, for we are living in the most rigidly controlled art markets that one could imagine. Just because we do not have the iron fist of a Royal Academy does not mean we do not have an iron fist. In the 20th century, the iron fist of the Academy was replaced by the iron fists of politics, theory, criticism, and the galleries, none of which the artists control or even have a voice in. In the Renaissance, the artist had one iron fist to wiggle beneath: that of the client. Beginning in the late 17th century, the artist had to wiggle under two fists, those of the client and the Academy. In the 20th century, the artist wiggled under four fists at least, not including the degraded fist of the client (the client was now also under several fists). Only someone who has never been a practicing artist could be under the misconception that artists are now free, or that pluralism actually means anything. Artists are now free to pander to multiple bodies, but that is about it.

We know that Hughes hasn't learned the big lesson, because he says in this article,

I don't want to disparage dealers, collectors or museum directors, by the way.

Why not? No one in this world, except maybe bankers, deserves more disparagement than these people. Not even the bankers who have put us trillions in debt are as incompetent as the dealers, collectors, and museum directors of Modernism.* The only reason you would *not* want to disparage dealers and so on is that you depend on them for your livelihood, and critics, like artists, do. So we can take from this a tacit admission from Hughes that he is not ready for the real revolution. He is ready to talk partial revolution, while nodding to the dealers. But he is not ready to tell them all to take a flying fuck, as I have. Partial revolutions never succeed, as anyone who studies history knows. Slaves don't get free by starting clubs, or even by running away, they get free by overthrowing their masters.

This is why I have never lobbied for the return of the Salon, like so many of my colleagues have. The Art Renewal Center thought this was a great idea, but I never got on board. You don't free yourself of fists by starting a new hand and glove. Even Jacob Collins' Academy is a danger. Right now it is just a school, but such things have a habit of morphing into institutions. Yes we need good schools and yes we need proper shows, but even more we need patrons. With good patrons, artists can exist without schools or shows, but the reverse is not true. All the schools and shows in the world are meaningless without a market for the work, as we have seen in the past decade. We have more schools and more shows, but since we have the same vulgar market, the artists have to paint for this market or do something else for money. That is not progress, it is just a further tool of corruption.

Many will drop out in that last paragraph, I predict. They will shout, “What? Schools and shows not necessary?” To answer, we return to Michelangelo. Why was he a success by the time he was 17? Not because of schools or shows, but because of a patron, de' Medici. Yes, he enrolled in the de' Medici Academy, but he spent very little time there. Like most great sculptors, he could carve well the first time he tried. He didn't need years of coursework, he just needed stones, tools, and a patron. We could say this about most great artists.

We are told one of two things about art instruction, both of them false. We are told either that art is a common skill, like learning your ABC's, that anyone can do if they wish. Or we are told that art is an incredible discipline that takes years of practice and toil. Neither one is true. The level of skill of a top artist is neither common nor (most often) the outcome of toil. It is an instinct, an innate ability. The Michelangelos and Titians of history could draw well the first time they tried, and we know that. This doesn't mean we should dismantle all the schools, since other people exist besides these top artists. But it does mean that patrons are far more important to art history than schools or shows. Art history is made by the top artists, and top artists can do just as well or better without schools or shows.

As it goes for the academies, so it goes for the critics. For the critics to be of any use, they have to actually embrace an artist. Embracing the Royal Academy is futile and counterproductive. Gopnik's nod to Collins was a step in the right direction, but his article was still more about himself than about Collins. It was about drawing, as a sort of nebulous subject, and about his own disability. But it was not a Greenbergian panegyric, which is what Collins really needs.

I will be told that no traditional realists merit that kind of enthusiasm, and I answer, “Oh, and Bruce Nauman can? Robert Ryman can? Jeff Koons can? Damien Hirst can? C'mon. If these critics spent one hundredth the time looking for an artist to get excited about as they spend reacting to the propaganda of Serota or Saatchi or Arne Glim- or Larry Gag-, they could create a new pantheon in a week. If Peter Schjeldahl, instead of [whining about how criticism has been trumped by rich people](#), started singing the praises of someone he really believed in, he could save himself and art at the same time. And praising people that can really draw and paint is so much easier to sell to the public than Modernism, since you don't have to sell them an empty bag of goods. You sell them something they want instead of something they don't want. Like the music of Yo-Yo Ma or Anne-Sophie Mutter, traditional art sells itself, as long as it isn't corrupted and reviled and constantly defamed.

Although I am thrilled to see Robert Hughes moving toward my position, for whatever internal reasons, I could wish he would join the revolution with a much bigger bang. He may look to be out on a limb already with this embracing of the Royal Academy, but he might as well climb on out with the leaves, and give up on the trunk altogether. The trunk of this tree is rotten, and when the inevitable fall occurs, it will be best to be out in a cushioning bough. Besides, Hughes is an old man now, and should have some money in the bank. Does he really need to continue saying things like, “I don't want to disparage dealers, collectors or museum directors.” It is precisely the professors emeriti that are supposed to have earned the freedom to tell the unvarnished truth.

To continue reading about Hughes, go to my latest paper, where I look at his 2008 film [The Mona Lisa Curse](#).

*I assume the bankers have a plan, which makes them evil but not necessarily incompetent.

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