

Clarity of Expression

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Sample artwork

The artwork above presents itself as a question. And that is how it speaks. The now-idiomatic expression “where words fail, art speaks”—a revision of “where words fail, music speaks”, a phrase originally penned by some highly gifted canonical writer which has quickly entered popular consciousness and become a kind of common sense or conventional wisdom—is presented as a question, in the form in which it is materially expressed in the commonplace. The activities corner of the community centre, the stargazing teenager’s bedroom, or wherever else a supposedly genuine enthusiasm for life and its creative possibilities is to be had. To be precise, the artwork does not simply ask “where words fail, art speaks?”, but presents that common sense in the way in which it typically manifests in reality as a question. The work places a small question mark on itself, its reality-artified self, and that is its speaking. The ultimate fantasy here, of course, is that the statement “where words fail, art speaks”, as a magazine cut-out montage on the walls of the community centre, will be a question to itself. It will be self-critical and speak its own self-questioning. In this, the community centre montage will start to find its own idealization of art’s magical powers amusing and deeply heartwarming.

What is likely the case however, is that the community centre montage already develops a kind of reflexivity on other terms. Ignorant to art and its fantasies. In the present condition of

network sociality, everyday observations and experiences become valuable resource for the construction of both personal and collective identities. We no longer express experiences, but produce curated, stylized, and strategic rehashings of them, correlated to how exactly we want to be seen by our specific publics at any given point in time. For theorist Suhail Malik, it is our “cognitively-engaged consumption” of the decorative elements of our everyday environment, and the subsequent sharing of our subjective interpretations of those decorative elements, that is what constitutes network sociality in a new system of capital accumulation.¹ So when we are, for example, presented with a photograph of a “where words fail, art speaks” magazine cut-out montage, it is our ability to provisionally say that the montage would fit into the activities corner of a community centre, or be something that we associate with stargazing teenagers, that makes us applicable to this new kind of social formation. Within this scenario, where capital accumulation depends on the everyday being memorised, internalised and creatively reimagined by the social whole, something like “where words fail, art speaks” becomes many different things. It is intentionally misspelt, it is an ironic caption, it is the advertising slogan for a body spray, it is part of some lame meme, it is a funny quote t-shirt, it is the backdrop for a ‘community centre activities corner meets stargazing teenager’ fashion shoot, it has morphed into “where words fail, emojis speak” or something a lot wilder, more out of this world. In such a sense then, this condition is one where common sense goes viral all the time. Equally, the most common occurrences become conceptual moments or ‘ideas worth sharing’. The alleged commonness of the commonplace is identifiable, remarkable and shareable, in the space of the commonplace itself. The “where words fail, art speaks” magazine cut-out montage on the walls of the community centre—in its subjection to the forces of this new expanded creative field—has the potential to be interpreted, reiterated and critiqued in ways that are scarily similar to the methods of the artwork above. The community centre montage becomes questionable, or a ‘question worth sharing’, in the non-art space and art space alike. For the artwork above, this is annoying. And we can see why.

Where the artwork that presents reality as a question was once understood to be the most profound artistic proposition, it is now quite possibly the most banal. Current processes of capital accumulation already do the work of subverting the established meaning of any given reality via a creative and critical repackaging of that reality’s contents. “Where words fail, art speaks” is the exact logic of this total creative condition.² If art then wants to have any purchase on such a reality, to work against this productive process of endless question asking, surely it will have to give up the idea that it magically speaks, where words fail. This will also mean accepting that it is not an emoji. It is heavily worded in its constitution and operations, and can speak as such. The demand for clarity of expression is then less ‘leave no photo uncaptioned’—which already serves as ideological inspiration for the press release, panic at the private view, and deeply enriching intellectual discussion at the artist talk and wherever thereafter—and more that the artwork has to be captioned in itself and set definitive terms for all the speaking that is done about it. It is then an art that is worded in, not despite, its creative being. As a highly visionary singer-songwriter once said: “If our reality’s creativity, art will be our clarity.”

¹ Suhail Malik, “Contemporary Art → Ex-art: Retro-transfiguration Into the Commonplace (Youtube)”.

² We would more traditionally call this a derivative, extractivist, or uncreative kind of creativity.