



Dear Tom

by Michael Blum

Script of a video-letter to Thomas Hoving, former director at the MET and author of the unforgivable *Art for Dummies*.

Dear Tom,

I am talking to you today regarding your book, *Art for Dummies*. I am an artist myself and have a strong interest in art and particularly in its mediation, that's why I was so interested in your book. Furthermore, I've been familiar with the Dummies collection for a while and liked the idea that art, like the iMac or Photoshop, could be the subject matter of one of these ugly but useful books.

After a few pages, my enthusiasm was showered as I noticed that the book was not funny (despite your numberless attempts), hardly informative and quite boring on top. But that was still OK, nothing but the average production of mediocre publishers, I can handle that.

Reading further, I have to admit I became very upset, Tom... The more I was reading, the more I was becoming horrified. Along my reading, I was finding always more evidences of approximation, ignorance, self-sufficiency and stupidity.

I'm sure you wonder why I care so much about you, Tom, why I would lose time and videotape to reply your ineptitudes. But don't worry: I have a very good reason. You're aware that you're speaking from quite a power position, Former Director at the MET is a title that allows you to speak for the art community altogether, you're - let's say - our ambassador. And it's because you say what you say also in my name, Tom, which I feel entitled to protest with whatever words might prove necessary.

What I can't stand at first in your book, Tom, is your contemptuous and disdainful tone towards the reader. Did you really think you were writing for actual dummies, or do you always despise your audience? Or would you be so full of yourself that you're losing any sense of critical judgment?

Beyond your contempt for the audience, you're insulting the art world, reinforcing more than fighting against the image of a snobbish, arrogant and vain art world, hardly worth attention but for a greasy joke. By always putting the laughter on your side, you do nothing but happily swim the mainstream in its lack of understanding of art, a rather pathetic position for a former museum director. It is not noble popularization that you're doing, Tom, you're maybe bringing a little knowledge to the reader, indeed, but you're definitely not changing his or her perspective. Your book seems to be more a guide for amateur collectors (that I imagine white and retired) than *Art for Dummies*, as dumb as they are. Page 253, the paragraph *Artspeak Unmasked* is a clear example of your supposedly ironic contempt of what you call *Art Lingo*. Always easier to laugh upon than clarify, isn't it? Dear Tom, don't you think it's a little too easy to get away with this topic by only mimicking an incomprehensible dialect that exists in all specialized fields anyway ?

And what's wrong with you when you write, page 249 "*Reading about art is OK, but looking at it is the only way to get to appreciate it*"? Is it so bad to read? Has a librarian threatened you with books when you were a kid, Tom? Even then, stating that books are useless is merely irresponsible, I hope you realize that. And your next peremptory sentence: "*Art and politics never mix*". My poor Tom, you seem so much out of the picture; if some activists have read your prose, I wouldn't guarantee you a quiet weekend...

After going through the ages of art in 13 chapters and 182 pages, your landing on the territory of modern and contemporary art – page 162, "*Modern art: the bold, the beautiful and the not-so-beautiful*" and page 175, "*Contemporary art and its ISMs (Not always so nice, but ever exciting)*" – seems to reveal your true nature. First sentence, page 163:



"The birth of modern art didn't come in flash with Pablo Picasso or Georges Braque, the co-inventor of Cubism, suddenly seeing a still-life or figure break down into squares and rectangles colored beige or light-silver, surrounded by black lines". *And your following sub-chapter* Is Modern art something of a joke? – *I hope it's a joke too... what a sense of humor, Tom, I'm very impressed...*

Then, still page 172. First sentence: "*The Bauhaus is the name of the "laboratory" for modern art established in Munich in the 1920's*". 4 lines below, first sentence of the next paragraph: "*The Bauhaus was established in Weimar in 1919 and then moved to Dessau in 1925*". If you're quizzed to death, Tom, I would advise you to go for the latter option.

Next page now, about the history of photography, you write: "*1856 to 1867, the early period of experimentation*". It doesn't hurt and that's fine with me, but what about before 1856? And why 56? As far as I know, photography has been invented by Niepce and Daguerre in 1839. Even if you go for the British version, it was by Fox Talbot in 1840. A point which leads you to ignore the first 17 years of photography, merely thrown away into the trashcan of history - a pretty nice shortcut.

Now Tom, would you please follow me into the contemporary section? At first, your division into movements seems to be very personal. In terms of geography, you seem to deny legitimacy to anything that hasn't made the trip to Manhattan, in the best case you probably flew to Chicago, wow... You mention the Hairy Whoism and Chicago Imagism by painters Roger Brown and Jim Nutt in 4 lines. That's very nice of you, I'm sure they appreciate. But only 5 lines are dedicated to conceptual art, in which 4 names appear: Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, John Baldessari and Joseph Kosuth. I'm not trying to give you trouble, Tom, but you're not exactly fishing for compliments here. Any art student would tell you that Joseph Beuys had not much to do with conceptual art, and that the choice of Hans Haacke for illustrating conceptual art is like having George W. Bush as a member of a poetry club. Tom, have you ever heard of Lawrence Weiner or Vito Acconci, your neighbors even if not your favorites?

And last but not least, I want to go to your *Ten artists worth watching* chapter, where, among Frank Stella, Anselm Kiefer and Robert Rauschenberg, two names caught my attention.

The first one, Andrew Wyeth, who also wrote a trying-to-be-funny and flattering foreword to the book, I've never heard about. You wrote about his work: "*His creations are observant, independent, quitoxic, romantic, and never "merely real"*". I'm sorry Tom, but this clearly falls into the category of *Artspeak Unmasked*, which you define as following on page 253:

"Artspeak is today's arcane, jumbled, confusing way of writing about fine art preferred by many academics, curators, and a few art critics in which you will understand every word but have no idea what whole sentences or entire paragraphs mean". Thank you for your convincing demonstration Tom, if you don't understand your own lingo, how should I?

The second artist that caught my attention in your top ten list is Jenny Saville, born 1970 page 248 but born 1977 in the chronology page 262. I was just wondering what made you pick her up. Are her "*sometimes bloated, naked women*" truly exceptional or is she some kind of favorite student or secret lover that you wanted to offer a commercial boost? Or do you need to increase the value of the works before you sell them, maybe? Please don't see any voyeuristic curiosity here, she's the only artist of this generation and the only woman at all (aside of Helen Frankenthaler, maybe an ex-lover in the good old times?). In other words, the question is relevant and legitimate.

I can imagine you're getting quite impatient Tom, and I don't want to keep you away from your activities. Please let me just mention a last point before I leave you in peace. It's about the cover... I start with the back-cover, which proudly announces "*Includes full-color gallery of great works of art*". I like the idea of including color reproductions in a cheap book like this one, very nice. The first insert is - let's say - OK, but the second one is rather painful, Tom. First, you happily mix everything together, displaying Rembrandt, Gauguin and a French tapestry of the 15th century on the same page. Then, it's a carnival of mistakes: spelling mistakes (Gauguin, Massacio), not one single date, no first names for artists and image credits printed along the frame, almost as big as the captions.



Now, let me get to the front cover. In a classic black and yellow *dummies* layout, a photograph is displayed in the center, representing the archetype of the seductive and sexy housewife, bored at home, and who comes to the museum to check out some paintings. She's looking at art, head inclined and legs crossed, in a cliché of contemplation. But the way your portrait medallion is inserted, it looks like the sexy lady is looking at you, and not at the painting! Medallion which is repeated on the spine, so that the shameless self-satisfied expression of your face is still on display after the book is closed and stored...

And by the way, did you check out the caption, Tom? The image looks like Claude Monet's *Nymphéas* and the caption says: "Cover Art: *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin, French, 1840-1917". Tom, how many drinks did you have with the editor before it went to press?

I don't want to harass you, Tom, but now I hope that you understand better the reason for my unhappiness with your book. I purchased it on amazon.com, from Europe, and paid 25 Euros for it. I don't know what your financial situation is right now, but I would be grateful if you could reimburse my purchase, and please let me know if I should return the book to you. If you can't, I would have to sell it to a second-hand shop or give it away, but I would prefer to stop the circulation of this copy and prevent too many people from reading it.

Before finishing, I want to give you a tip, Tom, which you can pass on to other unsatisfied readers. If you need to update your knowledge or just have a good time, I would strongly recommend this book. It's called the *History of Art*, by Ernst Gombrich; it has been translated in numberless languages and is merely fantastic. A great page-turner, Tom. Ask your local bookshop, I'm sure they can help you.

Have a nice day - and say hi to Jenny,

Michael Blum
Paris, October 18th, 2002