

The Many Guises of Sincerity

Regine Basha

Fitting that a magazine called **ARTLIES** decides to tackle the issue of "Sincerity." When editor Anjali Gupta asked me to guest edit the following themed section, I was thrilled at the chance to hunt down this slippery subject, which isn't really a subject or an "issue" at all but more of a *tone*. You can hear sincerity or the lack of it. You can recognize it in the way a musical note is played, in the lilt of vocal intonation (like the way some people speak as if each sentence is a question), in gestures (closing your eyes when making a point), in handwritten script (dotting little *i*'s with curlicues) or the way certain people sign an email (♡!!!).

For these reasons, sincerity is suspect. Through overuse and abuse, it loses its operative value and becomes harder to locate. Maybe it would be useful, for the purpose of clarity, to refer to sincerity in two modes, the first being *involuntary sincerity*—sincerity with a small *s*, i.e., the warmth one feels when looking at sleeping babies, holding purring kittens, laughing, crying or exposing any unmediated emotion. The second mode, big *S* Sincerity, is a communicative expression produced through culture that is specifically performed with both an audience and a positive reception in mind, i.e., banjo-playing, Spoken Word, Hello Kitty items and so on. Between these two modes are varying degrees of usage and abuse (see the adjacent list), which accounts for why Sincerity is so difficult to pin down. But that doesn't mean there aren't valiant efforts out there.

Sincerity as truth
Sincerity as authenticity
Sincerity as irony
Sincerity as cloak
Sincerity as suspect
Sincerity as ambiguity
Sincerity as satire
Sincerity as pain
Sincerity as failure
Sincerity as violence
Sincerity as revelation
Sincerity as poetics
Sincerity as radical
Sincerity as revolutionary
Sincerity as essence
Sincerity as fakery
Sincerity as directness
Sincerity as leap of faith
Sincerity as crudeness
Sincerity as rawness
Sincerity as trickery
Sincerity as death
Sincerity as generosity
Sincerity as marginality
Sincerity as mirror
Sincerity as narcissism
Sincerity as community
Sincerity as utopia
Sincerity as horror

DEAR SINCERITY,
DO NOT START AGAIN
WITH THE REAL AND
THE SEEING. THERE
IS SOMETIMES AN
ALWAYS AND ALWAYS
A SOMETIMES AND
YOU HAVE BEEN BOTH.
THE KNOWING AND
THE TIMING AND THE
ALL THAT. I GIVE UP
ON SOME OF IT AND
SOME OF IT. IS THERE
A NUMBER I CAN
REACH YOU AT?
SINCERELY,
MY HEART

Dave Bryant and Sam de la Rosa, *Untitled*, 2005
Ink on paper
8 1/2 x 11 inches
Courtesy the artists

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In Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, an excellent, timeless read from 1972, the author offers a wise approach: "Irony is one of those words, like love, which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning—other such words are sincerity and authenticity." If best not talked about, what, then, can be said about Sincerity? Is it the opposite of irony? When facing Sincerity in art, it often seems that irony lurks close behind. One clearly needs the other for self-definition. Yet, alternately, an ironic incident can be sincere and a sincere moment can be ironic. So, can we only assume that Sincerity is purely relational and operates according to context and good timing?

Besides how Sincerity operates, there is also the question of what is attributed to it. (Interestingly, the word's sixteenth-century etymological root *sin cera*, meaning literally "without wax," was applied to things and not to persons; one spoke of sincere wine or wood or a sincere religious doctrine, which simply meant that the material had not been doctored or tampered with. It was only used in regard to human behavior in a metaphorical sense.¹) One of the dangers of Sincerity is its presumed association with morality or goodness, but we all know that Sincerity and morality are strange bedfellows. Sincerity can arise out of malice, rage or madness. (Just read Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 2003, to understand what a Sincere act of abuse might be like.) Artists like Nan Goldin, Larry Clark, Tracy Emin, Lars Von Trier and Dogma films—even the toughest snuff movies—all rally on the side of Sincerity in terms of impetus. In these works resides the notion that Sincerity drives our basest desires, which can ultimately be detrimental to the public good.²

Another dangerous notion is that Sincerity is somehow more "real" or "the truth," which in itself is suspect and very much under scrutiny in today's media-saturated world. For extreme suspicion of this notion we can turn to Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek:

*I'm sorry, but hypocrisy is the basis of civilization. Rituals and appearances do matter. If you drop the appearances and go to the thing itself, it's sometimes pretty horrible.*³

...or a more gallant approach from Oscar Wilde: "the truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks."⁴

So, can Sincerity be found most effective in the fakest of fakeries? Since it operates best through contrast, we should, perhaps, first consider *when* and *where* Sincerity rears its head in our culture to understand the *why* and *how*. When folk music phenomenon Devendra Barnhart can casually say "that end sound [in the song] is that sound that my dear mother made to put me to sleep as an infant and when I see her to this day,"⁵ we know we must be living through bleak times.

One need only wonder why reality TV and karaoke are so popular right now to ascertain why artists like Phil Collins are repositioning these acts in the art world. Are he and artists like him finding irony in how sincere certain acts of fakery are? Is it the unapologetic premise of total fakery that makes rare and surprising instances of Sincerity more precious—more potent? In the casting phase of a new reality show, *Faking It*, I heard that some people invented phony personas to audition for it—an act probably more sincere to the requirement of the part than any attempt to "be themselves" for the show. Artist Eileen Maxson predated this with her own work *Amy Goodrow*, a video in which she dons a wig and performs an audition as an invented persona—a teenage molestation victim—with utterly painful Sincerity for an MTV *Real World* casting director.

Amidst fakery, the desire for Sincerity has taken on urgency in terms of artmaking in the past decade, perhaps in response to the glut of eighties and nineties postmodern irony. Artists have awakened Sincerity-seeking manifestations such as the renewed interest in drawings and sketches and handmade or craft-oriented work, a fascination with amateur hobbies, the revisiting of early '70s video styles, the proliferation of homespun zines, a DIY ethos, community-oriented initiatives, blogs, collaborations, Neo-Romantic painting, the persistence of "lo-tech" techniques in face of ever-expanding hi-tech ones, a diaristic or subjective tone, the documentary effect and so on. Not since the days of Felix Gonzalez-Torres has Sincerity seemed so radical.

Take, for example, *learningtoloveyoumore.com*, a collaborative project by Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July, which prompts people to carry out basic "assignments" in their respective communities, for instance,

Christopher K. Ho, *Classifieds*, 2006
Altered classified ads placed in various publications
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

"act out someone else's argument," "describe what to do with your body when you die" or "make a child's outfit in an adult size." Though it emerged from an art-centric context, this particular project seeks to slip into the fabric of daily life, calling for a radical micro-movement of renegade acts of extreme Sincerity through proliferation afforded by the Internet.

Performance, too, has become an especially effective generator of current questions related to Sincerity, particularly regarding issues of authenticity, relational aesthetics and generosity. Just recently, Marina Abramovic endeavored to reenact several seminal performances in order to "really know" them outside of their photographic or video documentation. In *Seven Easy Pieces*, she alternately became Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Valie Export and others, bringing forward a debate on the Sincerity of the "cover," a longstanding practice—and arguably its own genre—in the music world. This piece, however, created a divide in the art world between those who held on to the sacredness of each original act and those who relished in the Sincerity of Abramovic's reenactments, taking them for what they were—her version (since she confesses to not having seen most of the work in person herself). One has to ask, isn't it still Sincere if Abramovic actually masturbated in the gallery while reenacting Acconci's *Seedbed*?

Other artists concerned with Sincerity and performative acts include Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose generous Thai food offerings for gallery visitors prompted theorist Nicolas Bourriaud to coin the term "relational aesthetics" in the late '90s.⁶ Tiravanija, however, recognizes the threshold of Sincerity; once his body of work became a stylistic form, it held little agency in the context of an ever-devouring art world. For the 2006 Whitney Biennial, instead of cooking or offering any kind of ludic service in the gallery, he will help Mark di Suvero remake his *Peace Tower* (1966). Tiravanija reminds us that Sincerity needs constant rebooting: never let it get old and predictable—always keep it radical!

Bulgarian-American artist Daniel Bozhkov also considers relational aesthetics and its intrinsic limits and assumptions but takes action a step further. In *Training in Assertive Hospitality*, Bozhkov challenges art's idea of generosity within the framework of the

customer-service industry, testing the sincerity of "Sincerity" as marketed by Wal-Mart. In 2002, he took a job as a greeter ("Hello, welcome to Wal-Mart!"). Over the course of a summer, the artist greeted and helped customers walking into Wal-Mart for a meager \$4.75/hr. Placing himself in this position—on the front line, so to speak—Bozhkov enters a realm in which the act of generosity requires extreme measures.

During his tenure, Bozhkov also persuaded his manager to allow him to paint an ambitious fresco in the layaway department, adorned with folkloric scenes from Wal-Mart and local sites and attractions. This act was not an endearingly mocking take on consumer culture à la Christopher Guest,⁷ nor was it necessarily a judgmental kind of institutional critique. Instead, his project effectively blurred the boundaries between art, hospitality, labor and generosity, offering up revolutionary aspirations in the most mundane of situations.

In speaking of Sincerity as revolution in contemporary art, we must return to Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Gonzalez-Torres' Sincerity cut like a knife; it was a weapon he used to fight for relevance, survival and devotion. To this day it lingers and haunts other artists—and curators, collectors and dealers—like a torch for others to pick up and run with. For this issue, we reprinted an homage to Felix written by **Dario Robleto** in *ARTLIES* (Issue No. 32) as a sort of homage to an homage, prompted by curator **Kelly Baum**'s rereading of a recently rediscovered copy of Robleto's text.

Varied formats also appear in the themed part of this issue: art projects, anecdotes, diary entries, cartoons, texts related to Sincerity (and perhaps to irony as well) and images gathered by *Glasstire.com* Editor **Rachel Cook** in *VISUAL SPACE*. Some projects occur in the form of "insertions," like **Christopher Ho**'s ads placed here—a nod to those tiny New Yorker ads modestly embedded alongside a body of text yet eagerly vying for attention—and a **Dave Bryant** and **Sam de la Rosa** handwritten letter to Sincerity.

A somewhat accidental sub-theme of this issue became artists musing about other artists, which, in many ways, demonstrates a true-blue form of Sincerity. **Alejandro Cesarco** pays homage to his favorite artists by sending them flowers; this issue



Daniel Bozhkov, *Training in Assertive Hospitality*, 2002
Intervention and mural
Courtesy the artist

features the receipt for the calla lilies Cesarco sent to Vija Celmins. **Sina Najafi**, Editor-in-chief of *Cabinet* magazine and **Harrell Fletcher** consider the slip-pages of Sincerity in anecdotal stories, while **Michael Smith** and **Terence Gower** explore the comic casualties of success and failure of the artist's role. **Stuart Horodner** provides a diaristic account as an art viewer, ranging from witnessing Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* to missing Leon Golub and relishing in Rick Rubin's sincere desire to catalyze a comeback for Johnny Cash.

Another artist who carries the torch of Sincerity for many is the late Bas Jan Ader; **Linda Norden** takes on his complicated history in *i shall talk of things which are sometimes accidentally true*. **November Paynter** examines why two particular masterpieces of fakery at the 2005 International Istanbul Biennial—one by Michael Blum and the other by Khalil Rabah—pissed some viewers off.

The latest in radical, Sincerity-seeking acts comes from Pierre Pinoncelli. The 77-year old French Neo-Dadaist, fed up with the inflated status of Duchamp's urinal at a recent show at the Pompidou, attacked it with a hammer (Pinoncelli urinated in a different version of it in 1993) in an effort to re-instate the original, subversive intent of Dada. This extreme example acts as a reminder that when Sincerity with a big S sells, it's time to radicalize—again.

1 It is Shakespeare who begins to use the word in regard to persons "with no apparent awareness of its ever having been used metaphorically." Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York and London, 1974. p. 14.

2 According to Rousseau, the idea of sincerity as base-ness came from the French, whereas sincerity as propriety came from the English.

3 See: <http://www.time.com/time/europe/specials/ff/trip5/zizek.html> accessed on 12/15/05.

4 Wilde, Oscar. "The Truth of Masks" in *The Artist As Critic*. Ed. by Richard Ellmann. Random House. New York, 1968. p. 432.

5 www.younggods.com.

6 See Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Relational Aesthetics." *La presse du reel*, 1998.

7 Film director Christopher Guest—one of my favorites—was responsible for *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind*, all of which endearingly mock earnestness and sincerity.



Eileen Maxson, *Amy Goodrow*, 2002
Video; 6 minutes 33 seconds
Courtesy the artist