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# **“BORING THINGS”**

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**“BORING THINGS”**

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**“ I like boring things...”** Andy Warhol.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

How can we define boredom in art? 'What appears boring is the elimination of incident, accident, story or sound'. If the role of art and the artist is to communicate, then in the post-modern era when we are visually bombarded by a plethora of complex imagery, art that is understated to the point of vacancy arguably has validity.

In terms of the aesthetics of boredom, repetition and vacant space are used as tools to create this feeling. On Warhol's films, Patrick Smith claims that 'the so called "boredom" of life becomes his pastime' (Smith, 1981, p.143). In contrast, Bill Viola twenty years on, uses slow movement and real time to produce visual meditation to counteract the visual bombardment in the age of multimedia. Minimalism and Pop art have been referred to as boring art, and indeed critical analysis of this work frequently labelled it as both boring and interesting. A paradox is created by the novelty of the work which seduces the viewer's interest while simultaneously being vacant images. "Theoretically new and aesthetically mute", was a common reaction to minimalist art. Barbara Rose 'found it boring because it is basically theoretical' (Rose, 1985, p.360). Is this because she is looking for the 'incident, the accident or the story?'

The word boredom is understood as a negative phrase, yet Andy Warhol deemed his works boring, stating that "I like boring things because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away and the better and emptier you feel" (Warhol, 1980, p.50). Looking at boredom as a separate issue, it becomes possible to appreciate the validity it can hold when it balances the excess of visual stimulation to which we are becoming apathetic. Both Viola and Warhol use boring, stagnant images to illustrate the validity in boredom; one to relax, the other to indulge.

Donald Judd's belief that the true strength of art lay in its simplest forms or lines can be applied when criticising Warhol's and Viola's work .

Warhol, by using repetition and his copied images, always considered the production of the image as a job for the factory. Consequently the artist's role is purely that of a decision-maker. Viola's reduction of images to express a slow meditative visual contemplation indulges the senses; Judd believed that the simpler work was, the more clearly it could express ideas. By using Judd, Warhol and Viola as key examples of people in the past three decades who used boring images in their work, I will show that 'boring art' has an important role to play in contemporary art.

I intend to illustrate this by placing Judd, Warhol and Viola in a historical context. Both Judd and Warhol chronologically followed abstract expressionism, and Viola gradually developed his video work during the materialistic 80's and "caring 90's". This work if taken out of context is basic to the point of being boring, but if the surrounding art is analysed then their work is progressive and refreshing.

Novelty was defined by Alfred North Whitehead as follows: "Creativity is the principle of novelty. Creativity introduces novelty into the context of the many, which are the universe disjunctively. The creative advance is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which it originates" (Whitehead, 1997, p.1).

Whitehead refers to the timing as essential to produce a novelty. The mathematician Terence Mc Kenna produced a mathematical formula which calculated that novelties came in timewaves. Were Warhol and Judd in a novel timewave?

In the case of Harvey Nichol's advertising campaign in the early nineties, placing dull muted packaging on the shelves caught the attention of the consumer as it stood out among the bright screaming packages surrounding it. The novelty works. Bill Viola who deals with art in a larger context than that of western culture, is perhaps not as obvious a candidate for the novelty theory as Warhol and Judd, but his work's strength is relative to its surrounds.

All three artists' approach to art is progressive, yet within the work there is little or no active exploration. Although Viola claims to a certain extent that his work is interactive with the viewer, it is not in the traditional sense of the word (that is allowing a two-way flow of information between it and a user, responding to the user's input).

Why did I choose Donald Judd, Andy Warhol and Bill Viola to illustrate 'boring art'? The three different artists' produced work with similar detachment, creating a cool effect that became central in all these works. Judd has this cooling effect as the conscious theme in his work. Warhol neglects any link with conscious awareness, whereas Viola's claustrophobic awareness still produces cool/boring images. It can be concluded from this that the content of boring art is irrelevant. All their work is responsive to the art surrounding it and was perhaps produced at an appropriate time.

In this thesis I intend to explore the reactions of the critics to 'boring art' and discover why these artists simplified their art at times of obscurity. The most important issue in 'boring art' is that of originality. By originality, here, I mean more than just the kinds of revolt against tradition that echo in Ezra Pound's " 'Make it new'!... More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, Avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from a grand zero, a birth" (Krauss, 1981, p.106). This reference to birth from an original source holds no validity this century with the move away from primary sources. Originality (even if from secondary sources) is probably one of the stable components in art as it is redefining itself constantly. 'Pop art' and 'Minimalism' would not have survived if the novelty in the work was not considered original. It intrigued critics to contemplate the boring art. The belief that fine art will unfold and a learning event will take place is one that the critics and viewers are not keen to let go of, as it gives art a safe intellectual base to work from. Warhol perhaps posed the biggest threat to this safety. Coming



from a commercial background and with his nihilistic approach to art theory, he undermined the intellectual grid the avant garde had previously relied upon.

## CHAPTER 2: MINIMALISM

“I was impressed once at an exhibition of Cezanne’s even in his work the lack of colour. The quality of a work of art is produced by those elements that are most visual, colour, surface, proportion and structure. The more clear and dominant these are, the more clear and dominant the quality of the work” (Judd, 1975, p.38). (SIC).

Donald Judd believed that simplicity showed the true strength of art images and objects. Simplicity can offer a contrast to the abstract expressionist’s spontaneous free flowing images. Judd’s total devotion to purity of form, line and colour, produced confusion amongst critics. As with Warhol, the confusion stemmed from applying the criticism associated with abstract expressionism.

Abstract expressionism developed abstract art towards a subjective emotional expression of an ideal rather than an image of a physical object. The detached forms produced by Judd were clearly intended to move away from the emotionalism of abstract expressionism. Yet if contemporary art can be described as the undoing (anti-art) of the work previously produced, minimalism should have been embraced by the critics. Donald Judd’s ‘specific objects’ outlined the ideals of minimalism with his concise ideas about criticism. This laid the foundation for his work. The ‘monochrome’ and the ‘ready-made’ had already become established facts of art, images and objects with nothing added to them and nothing taken away. Judd’s sculpture strove to reduce objects to their bare essentials. Using the negative space around the sculpture became as important as the object. Judd rejected the notion that his work could be referred to as sculpture, calling it ‘three dimensional work’. The audience to this three dimensional work often felt cheated by the artists. The work appeared lacking in a personal effort from the artist.

The later abstract expressionists had offered the spectator pure egocentric painterliness with boundless room for inspection and interpretation. Minimalism provided a visual strike for such an audience; critics described minimalism as 'know nothing nihilism'.

Barbara Rose 'found it boring because it is basically theoretical'. For Lucy Lippard the emptiness of statement in the work became the statement of intent and interest. As Judd said, "the work need only be interesting" (Judd, 1985, p.361). The three-dimensional work in minimalism is boring unless viewed in a historical context. Minimalism was a cleanser to wipe away the self-indulgent abstraction of the expressionists.

What precisely makes an art work interesting? Is it to create some curiosity or is it to have lasting impression on the audience? Judd expanded his art towards the notion of absence, including absence as one of the important elements of the decision-making when producing the object. This realisation of the importance of negative space is illustrated by Judd in his Marfa project. Judd had developed his work to such a scale that he needed more gallery space. In New York he had already renovated a building to house his work but he wanted the surrounds to reflect the barren work.

Marfa, a small town outside Texas, was the place he chose as the permanent installation for his work. He bought warehouses, banks and other large vacant buildings, where he was able to put his art in context. Judd thought art had in the past lost its original meaning through the gallery system. The gallery system has no obligation to show work as the artist may have intended it to be shown. For example a Picasso painting in the National Gallery of Ireland has a different impact (and audience) to perhaps a showing in the Royal Hibernian Academy.

Judd's total control of the surrounds of his work meant he was able to place his square series in a building that mimicked the squares precisely. For example, the axial space between the boxes becomes as important as the boxes.

Judd believed that with his purification of form every detail must be purified to make it work. "If we cannot see things clearly we will at least see clearly what the obscurities are" (Freud, 1926, p.424).

The writer Knud W. Jensen described minimalism as "Art free of spontaneity and associations" (Jensen, 1992, p.213). The artist Eva Hesse said "It is something, it is nothing" (Hesse, 1968, p.424). Minimalism based on the reduction of forms can virtually end up as nothing, such as a blank canvas or an empty space. It is this nothing that has been described as aesthetically boring, if we use the word 'nothing' to mean "non existence; what does not exist" (Concise O.E.D., 1995, p.931).

The implication of Judd's work automatically starts to unsettle the traditional notions of art. Judd never exhibited an empty space, but he set the stage for artists to think about the validity of emptiness.

Although Jensen describes minimalism as 'free form' contradicting this Judd treated it as a tightening of art that had become so free and fluid that he started to implement a critical analysis (through his magazine articles) to pave the way for his work. During Judd's career, other artists such as Dan Flavin (also a minimalist) and pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Liechtenstein were employing this break with abstract expressionism using a display of simple bold images/objects. This movement towards minimalising, although not as conceptual as Marcel Duchamp's 1913's ready-mades, was based on the problem concerning the 'ABC of Art' (Barbara Rose). Judd however succeeded in revealing the classical aesthetics of industrial elements.

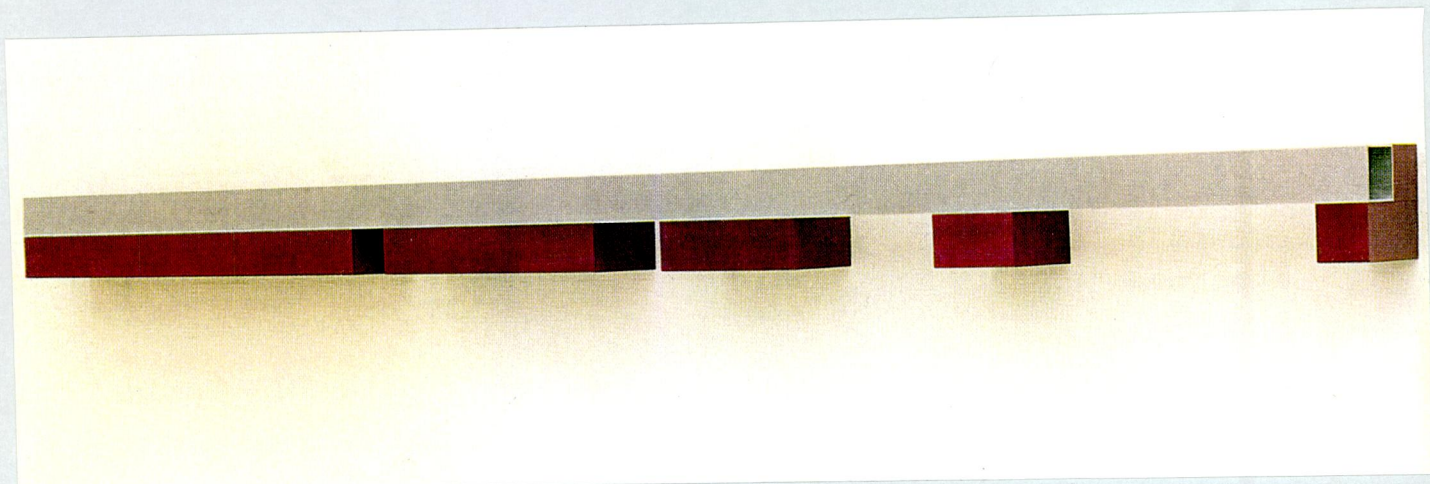


fig 1 - "Daniel" Donald Judd

'Daniel' (see fig.1) is a typical example, forms reduced to a few modules, arranged horizontally across a wall, giving higher priority to repetition and continuity than, as the writer Jensen put it, "to the dynamics inherent in more traditional principles of composition" (Jensen, 1992, p.221). This move away from 'principles of composition', gave this boring/interesting movement an important place in the history of contemporary art. The important question is, how is minimal art seen today? Is it a novelty of the 1960's? Or does it hold validity within its statement of nothingness?

According to Bradshaw's second law, "Novelty is easy to come by. Creativity is much harder" (Bradshaw, 1996, p.1), yet perhaps Bradshaw's view can be paralleled to that of the critics of minimal art. Art from Duchamp, Judd, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst has proved that novelty is the most important element in a successful piece of work. By successful I refer to influence and historical notoriety of the person or work. The word creative means inventive and imaginative. As art is supersaturated with people disciplined in various areas, it has become accepted that the inventors rather than the technicians will become masters of the contemporary field.

The question of quality that had been important to critics such as Clement Greenberg was becoming irrelevant. "What difference should it make to say that Rembrandt is a greater painter than Mark Rothko, if Rothko, for obvious reasons, "interests" us more?" (Clark, 1994, p.26). The ideas and theory of the work were more important than the work itself. Evading this, Judd's work was produced to a highly polished finish. Judd commented "the term interesting, in a colloquial sense, typically implies a reluctance to make a value judgement" (Judd, 1966, p.360).

A viewer's description of a work of art as "interesting" means that he or she does not know if it is good or bad? It could be suggested that critics such as Barbara Rose (who used the word boring positively) were uninhibited by minimalist work, in contrast to Lucy Lippard's comments on monochrome

paintings as “originally boring, eventually contemplative and finally motivated by interest” (Lippard, 1966, p.360). Morris rejected the term “boring” in discussion about minimalist work, stating “such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness the experience of which reassures their superior perception” (Morris, 1966, p.43).

Kramer reflected the frustration amongst the critics: “I cannot recall another exhibition of contemporary art that has to the same extent, left me feeling so completely that I had not so much encountered works of art as taken a course in them” (Kramer, 1966, p.23). Susan Santag recognised that this frustration belonged to the critics: “boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration. And the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating to the sensibilities of educated people” (Santag, 1966, p.361). Kant criticised over-theorised work, expressing the view that there was no “free play of the imagination” resulting in “answers prepared in advance” (Kant, 1985, p.360).

However, as Lippard stressed, minimal art was new, even to the point of appearing “novel”. What was the novelty in minimal art? Both pop art and minimalism are creations not only of artists, but of ancillary art-world professionals-curators, critics etc., who render art palatable to a public hungry to assimilate novelties and impatient with specifics. The term “Minimalism” is part of the linguistics of this subsidiary industry that processes terms for public consumption.

The artist John Graham published “Systems and Dialectics of Art” in which he describes Minimal Art as the “reducing of painting to the minimum ingredients for the sake of discovering the ultimate, logical destination of painting in the process of abstracting. Painting starts with a virgin uniform surface and if one work ad infinitum it reverts again to a plain uniform surface, but enriched by process and experiences lived through” (Graham, 1966, p.18). Why reduce forms and paintings to a repetitive uniformity?

The answer to this is the 20th century quest for new meaning and the establishment of direction.

“ Man is nothing but what he makes of himself” (Satre, 1969, p.18).

Is minimal art defining shape and form or is it suggesting that nothing is definable? “ Minimalists believe that no definition of self or of art are possible” (Leepa, 1969, p.206).

I believe that Minimalists were using simple shapes to show fact in art and to remove all ambiguity which was previously associated with an art piece and also the re-establishing of consciousness concerning the line or the block . By using standardised, repetitious, boring forms, the artist strives forward the most primal and ageless completion of an art object possible.

This trend of an ‘indefinable art’ has been a continuing part of conceptual theory since Judd. Moving semantics, criticism and art philosophy into a gallery piece for public contemplation, alienated people who deemed art to be ‘the expression of self’.

As minimalism sought to move away from ‘self’ it believed each experience of self was irrelevant to the individual viewer. Minimalism wished to address the issue of art and life ‘if the meeting point between inner and outer worlds is placed in the mind’s eye of the observer, the work itself becomes to all intents and purposes redundant’ (Leepa, 1969, p.206).

If the meeting point is in the work, then crystal clear, concrete statements of fact and preciseness of relationships are paramount. Judd based his writing and work on this clarity .



### CHAPTER 3 : ANDY WARHOL.

Pop art was born from the realisation that advertising and the media had become man's natural environment. The mystery surrounding Andy Warhol is the vacant expression, the one word answers that all became part of the media hype he surrounded himself in a medium can be described as a substance or surroundings in which something exists or moves or is transmitted. To transmit means to send out a signal. Why send a signal of vacancy to the world? The simple answer is to be a novelty. Warhol's work feeds completely off the mass media - especially 'Life' magazine. Warhol proved, to paraphrase the Sprite advertising campaign "image is everything and thirst is nothing" (Sprite, 1966). His work pushed out towards the area that the rest of the art world was particularly afraid of 'the media'. Warhol originally a graphic designer, saw that if fine art was to continue to have some place in society, it must venture out into the media rather than striving to protect the old school. Clones and copies of 'unique images' had become commonplace, as people started to absorb images rather than inspect them. Pop art brought these images to the gallery for inspection.

Artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had taken images well known to the popular media and woven them into their work. Rauschenberg used media signs to develop the 'city' in his work, Johns using the American flag and targets to challenge the viewers expectations of the object. What takes Warhol's work a step further? Do images copied from magazines screen printed on canvas? Jean Baudrillard said "art entered the phrase of its own indefinite reproduction, everything that redoubles in itself even ordinary everyday reality, falls in the same stroke under the sign of art" (Baudrillard, 1976, p.1051).

The image redoubling itself - the Campbell's soup cans, an image made by advertisers to sell to the public, repeated on a canvas displayed in a gallery. Warhol's idea "the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away and the better and emptier you feel" (Warhol, 1980, p.50) taking a look at the over signified images and give them status as 'high art' by

placing it in a gallery. "I like boring things" this statement describes Warhol's play on his image, the creator who likes dull, inactive, repetitious objects.

Moving into film work Warhol's film of a friend sleeping employs a technique called silent speed to make the film more mesmerising than reality. "Warhol's work stemmed from his fascination of time..." (Francis, 1997). Is Warhol's work testing the commitment of the viewers? In the sixties when Warhol's work was first produced, it certainly tested the commitment of the critics and frequent visitors to galleries. Some people saw his work as the suicide of fine art, where it actually brought the general public's eye to the gallery associating it with the world of media. Although still keeping it safely within the gallery building, Warhol's work proved the public's interest was drawn by the image of the superstar and that has been the strongest part of Warhol's legacy. "Warholism" as it became known, was the selling point, illustrated perfectly at the auction of his cookie jars. Jean Baudrillard who wrote in 1970 "of the end of subversion" and of a total integration of Andy Warhol's art into the political economy of commodity signs. Who were Warhol's 'plastic icons' and what was Warhol's interest in them? The actress Liz Taylor, a face still familiar to today's media, became one of Warhol's plastic icons. The bust image of Liz Taylor as Cleopatra repeatedly screened on to a canvas has an exceptionally flat look. In retrospect one can consider the ambiguity of the work to take place on the canvas. A single layer screenprinted suggesting the superficial nature of the icon and the searching for depth is displayed by the repetition of the single image. Reducing the glamour of Liz Taylor to the systematically dull process of obvious reproduction inserts a complicated element into the equation that defines what Popism is. Warhol himself became as famous as his 'plastic icons' was this contrived to sell 'boring art'.

Warhol took images from the popular press that pushed away from the traditional notion of portraiture, as direct information from the source, for example the subject would sit for a painting or photograph. What did he achieve by using second-hand images? Patrick Smith expresses the view that 'the artist tends to be anti-analytical and to allow confusion concerning irony' (Smith, 1981, p.143). Warhol forces viewers to see an image of Hollywoodized glamour through its own flat reality. These second-hand images allowed the viewer direct access to inspect the image. The critic Joanna Magloff felt that 'Liz as Cleopatra' was like "the photos of the dead reproduced on the tombstones seen in Italian cemeteries" (Magloff, 1966, p.83). Other critics reacted to his work strongly "there is a moral dilemma implicit in these latest vulgarities" (Kozloffs, 1961, p.83) although these vulgarities perhaps refer to the detached techniques that mimicked commercial art which posed a severe challenge to the notion of artistic originality and authorship. At this time snobbery from the art intellectuals left them behind, pushing the role of the gallery curator to the front. The role of the curator became that which was previously associated with the critic.

Car crashes, soup cans and portraits of superstars displayed in the same way using the same medium, meant the viewer was left with no particular point of view and therefore had to make a decision about the work without any signs or focal points from the artist. "When things retreat into their images the way they do on TV they lose their solidity, their palpability, their presence. Images have a weightlessness that is both mysterious and soothing" (Shaviro, 1997, p.1). Popism was previously understood to mean "I like". Now it has changed to mean 'I am aware of the superficial'. By watching and recording the surface image, Warhol is aware of the fragility of Liz Taylor's facade. He places this image within the gallery walls and therefore invites us to inspect her fragility ourselves.

The superficial Warhol, the glancing voyeur takes Taylor at the peak of her career (in terms of media coverage, as her affair with Richard Burton becomes

public knowledge) and the world awaits the release of the film Cleopatra (which subsequently turned out to be a box office flop). Taylor is immortalised by Warhol in her fragile costume, (see fig.2). Warhol's ultimate subject has to be glamour and how to generate it. First from creating sources, he finds them ( ready made perhaps) with their sparkling qualities intact, after which he intensifies the sparkle . Warhol exposes the machinery of glamour yet he does not make a personal comment about it.

Duchamp, more deeply and earlier than any other modern artist, turned these primary tendencies outward in forms of pure publicity, by-passing critically the already conventionalised and sentimentalised avant-garde attitudes. At this time, television and the mass media in general were spreading explosively. In 1950, eleven per cent of American households owned a television. In 1960 this had jumped to 88 per cent. Those who had televisions watched them for between four and five hours per day.

MacLuhan was writing at this time, introducing words as 'global village' i.e. "the world considered as a single community linked by telecommunications" (Concise O.E.D., 1995, p.576). If this single community is exposed to the same information regularly the mass media can reach a large audience quickly and effectively. Warhol's images may have been described as mundane but he was one of the artists who recognised the value of this mass-culture. Warhol embraced the entertainment industry and breaking the struggle some artists had had with bridging the academic gap and popular culture.

Michael Robinson sights Warhol as a still "Maestros" who like Picasso cannot simply be looked at as grotesque parodies of genius, because they are in fact classical modern artists of enormous achievement. In a historical context, Warhol's work fits into this classical pattern to which Michael Robinson refers. So why the shock value of the Campbell's Soup Cans? It was a blatant reference to emptiness and vacancy and was considered to be aggressive against other artists.



fig 2 - "Blue Liz as Cleopatra" Andy Warhol

Pop art was widely taken as an insult to the hopes and value of these artists and to the modernist tradition that they were trying to sustain.

Minimalism started the 'cool' impersonal look of pop art. Warhol differed from Judd for example in his responses to his own work.

"If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me and there I am. There's nothing behind it", (Warhol, 1964, p.47). Warhol's use of words draws the listener to search for the hidden, all the more because his imagery looks to be veiling something, maybe something disturbing and if it's about culture it's about everyone. This is the paradox that made Warhol the commodity of the art world. "You see, to pretend something is real, I would have to fake it. Then people would think I am doing it real" (Warhol, 1965, p.43).

His desire to be a machine, his seeming inability to experience made up the empty boredom in his work. Warhol's announcement that he was finishing making images and becoming a film maker leads to what I find the most interestingly boring work of Warhol's career. Warhol said that his best actor is one who blinked only three times in ten minutes. When asked if he was confusing blinking with acting, he replied "Yes".

Warhol's films were based on simple everyday occurrences such as smoking, eating, sleeping etc. The idea that the screen was a mirror for everyday life was later used by the video artist Bill Viola who televised (during an advertising break) people sitting on a sofa looking at the viewers. Warhol's actual filming was the essence of this work. The camera panning and zooming were used in an arbitrary fashion that they did not serve to make the film's events any clearer, but to a certain extent a formalised reorientation to themselves. The zoom expresses itself as a zoom and the pan as a pan. This type of film work was considered anti-film as it did not make use of the extra dimension that the camera had movement. Warhol's films, although anti-movement in their approach, did achieve the reflection of his fascination with boredom in reality.

Warhol reduced the spread to over emphasise this producing the mesmerising effect. The films were not supposed to be viewed as ordinary films but to be lived with as with background music. Warhol was not so much testing the commitment of the viewer as the testing of the subtlety of television.

Today it is common place to find that households have television on as background or company when performing other tasks such as housework, homework etc. Perhaps Warhol was the forerunner to daytime television.

This intentional slowing and extended viewing could be considered a comment on the extent of the content of the viewing necessary to hold an image on the screen. The Taylor Prize this year was given to Gillian Wearing who set up a portrait of the police on video, but it appears in the form of a traditional photographic image, only when one of the policemen coughs or looks away are we made aware of the video medium. Warhol's film work (although not as subtle as Gillian Wearing's) was perhaps one of the first bridges made between the still and the moving. Although the idea is inventive and original, it is a very boring thing to watch eight hours of a person sleeping. Such a film received the 'Independent Film Award' by the magazine 'Film Culture' in recognition of its originality. Once the viewer is aware of the idea the film becomes boring. This expectation that the viewer had and has for visual movement on the screen or a happening perhaps would be one of the most difficult boundaries to cross. For example, with a still, there is the capturing of a brief movement before, during and after the event; but to watch it from a screen creates an illusion of reality unassociated with any other medium.

Warhol's persona, no doubt created by himself, was a comment (whether conscious or not) on the fact and fiction of the media world. Later with Bill Viola ( who is trying to address this issue today), I will comment on whether I consider Warhol's work as positively boring or epically boring. Either way he is one of America's most famous artists.

#### CHAPTER 4: BILL VIOLA

The video artist Bill Viola, although never associated with minimalism, reduces images to a simple, slowed-down form. Working with video for over twenty-five years he states that it has become as efficient as his own eye. He refers to the video as his "inner eye". Viola uses art as a transformative medium for the "conflict between the inner and outer eye" (Syring, 1993, p.21) seeing art as part of self-knowledge. Viola's work is concerned with the "breath", which signifies the beginning and ending of life, as recognised by the visuals of birth and death. Here he connects his work with eastern meditation and combines it with a western medium (video). The Buddhist belief that "he who has knowledge of breath has knowledge of the whole world" (Syring, 1993, p.21) is central to the exaggerated use of sound in his work. For example in Anthem, the single piercing scream of a girl is extended in time and shifted in frequency to produce a meditative scale. Viola relates this sound to the function of a religious chant, particularly Tantric Buddhist and Gregorian Chants. The concepts light and time are also essential materials with which he conducts his metaphysical (suggesting "spiritual" at times) search to know and define the self. Light and time are used to define a symbolic language of the unconscious and consciousness. These concepts relate to the "inner and outer landscapes".

The word mesmerising (which can also be used in reference to Andy Warhol's film work) can best describe the effect Viola's work has on the spectator. The hypnotic gaze that holds the viewer perhaps leads Viola to believe that his work is meditative, but meditation means "to think deeply and quietly, to plan in one's mind" (Concise O.E.D., 1995 p.846). Placing his work "The Messenger" in Durham Cathedral is typical of Viola's desire to push his work into a religious context. Classifying this work as a part of religion, alienates the non-religious. The Messenger is slow, simple and is spoiled by over theorised explanations. By turning strong images into religious commodities, the



viewer has no room for inspection, contemplation or meditation. Viola's work could have intrinsic value if he did not over intellectualise the work, he appears to be so concerned with the art world that he alienates the general public. "The Passing" being the most literal of his body of work, and perhaps the most egocentric. The large three- screen installations are of his wife giving birth, a man swimming and his mother dying. An imposing altar to himself perhaps? Viola's personal illustration of birth, baptism (or re-birth) and death distracts the spectator from a contemplation of the cycle (of life) to wondering 'Is that Viola in the middle?'. The obvious criticism of my cynical approach is not to read his literature on the work. Viola, like Judd, realised how important the surround of the work is for interpretation. Unlike Judd however, Viola achieves this by making the viewer walk through a chamber (or small room). This room contains literature about his work which is to attract the viewer to read it before experiencing the installation (as in the Douglas Hyde's exhibition of the Messenger). Viola's dictatorship over his own work is disillusioning for this viewer and increases awareness of the plastically rendered medium.

Considering all the previously mentioned factors, Viola's work is still refreshing, in the visually-bombarded post modern era. Viola communicates through his understated, almost vacant images. This is a change from fast-moving video imagery employed by artists in video making. Viola can be compared to Judd in this manner. As Judd did in painting and sculpture, calling for the redefining and purification of an over worked medium, Viola signifies an artist who has come to terms with video as tool rather than an overwhelming collector of fast visual images. Warhol used silent slow time in his films that played for hours as background, in the factory or in an exhibition. Viola's use of slow time is not as background but as the central display of his ideas or notions. "There is no excuse to ignore the larger picture any more, in science, in philosophy as well as art history" (Viola, 1993, p.102). Bill Viola's life work has been based on the ideal that within the age of information technology, the artist

and even the entire human race for that matter, should transcend the superficial western reality to a more spiritual level. By this he includes the unseen "to see the unseen is an essential skill to be developed at the close of the 20th century" (Viola, 1993, p.99).

Viola thinks that if culture accepts the need for unification of the mind and body, we will be able to embrace the outer landscapes of this world. "The key underlying common element now is not appearance, it is use. This is what is defining value and the key currency of the interchange of this value is the image" (Viola, 1993, p.102). Essentially Viola has pin-pointed this question as an artist's main concern. Viola's installation work stemmed from his interest in sound that he regards as a sense that unites mind and body. Using sound as the basis for his visual work, Viola is trying to bridge the senses in his work. The Dionysian that has been rejected since Christianity is essential to Viola's belief that humans' emotional needs and desires can no longer be suppressed. Viola blames "the patent combination of a narrow aesthetic approach with the extreme progression of a commodity based commercial system which is largely responsible for the dismal state of the art of the world and the preponderance of trite, frivolous, empty art objects over the past decade" (Viola, 1993, p.105). Seeing art as denying its own use within society, he alerts the audience to the commercial materialism that Viola believes cannot fulfil the physical/emotional needs of society.

He sees art as a medium that can reflect on the visual bombardment of today and act as a translator for the gap between fact and propaganda. Viola recognises this move into the visual as alarming for the intellectuals as it relies on the reactions rather than the reasons as we move away from deductive reasoning and towards associative patterning. "This associative patterning is surely a signal that art is stepping back into the main stream after the dark shadows of the gallery" (Viola, 1993, p.103).

The introduction of the video medium is as significant an achievement as the introduction of perspective in the fourteen twenties. The success of Viola's work is perhaps due to his still video images which move sufficiently, so that the viewer can contemplate and inspect the imagery intertwined with graduating sound and movement. Viola is aware of the cold reaction that the mention of religion brings, he feels this is related to the suppression normally associated with religion. Denial of the sexual body is part of the problem which Viola links with the Institutionalised Christianity of today. The more his work has progressed the simpler it has become. From an aesthetic point of view, this makes the work more pleasing to the eye. Unfortunately his messages seem to become less concentrated and less fascinating with this simplification. Realising how much weight Viola places on the theory in his work it is not surprising that his original thought has been distorted.

As the scandal of the nudity of the figure in "The Messenger" (see fig.3) placed in Durham Cathedral is discussed in the newspaper, one wonders how appropriate the Cathedral is for transcending into another world. Viola's work can be difficult to watch in terms of the length of time, yet it does envelop the viewer to stand still and reflect on the contrast between it and the world occurring around us.

Viola's video work, as a contrast to Warhol's film work, has a strong conceptual tone yet the effect is similar. The slow mesmerising effect of the dedicated spectator can induce a mind numbing experience or a hypnotic gaze which in Viola's case hopefully results in rising above and crossing dimensions. In the sixties Warhol was perhaps toying with the viewer but in the 90's Viola seriously makes a statement about birth, death, art, religion and materialism. Warhol was aware of the boring nature of his films, which he exploited, this leads us to adopt a cynical view of Viola's work.

Viola avoids or neglects to recognise the importance of the vacancy in his work.  
Without this vacancy his work would blend with it's surrounds and therefore lose  
it's impact.

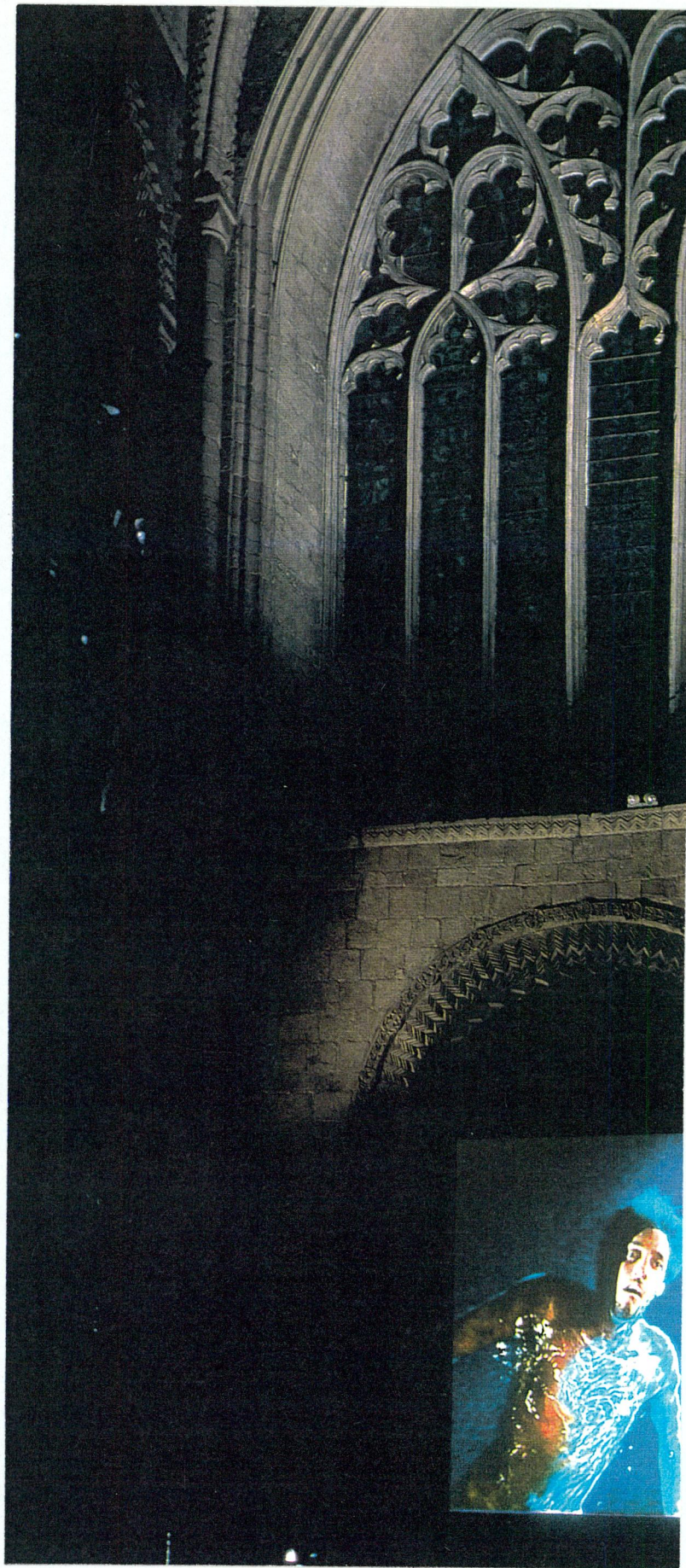
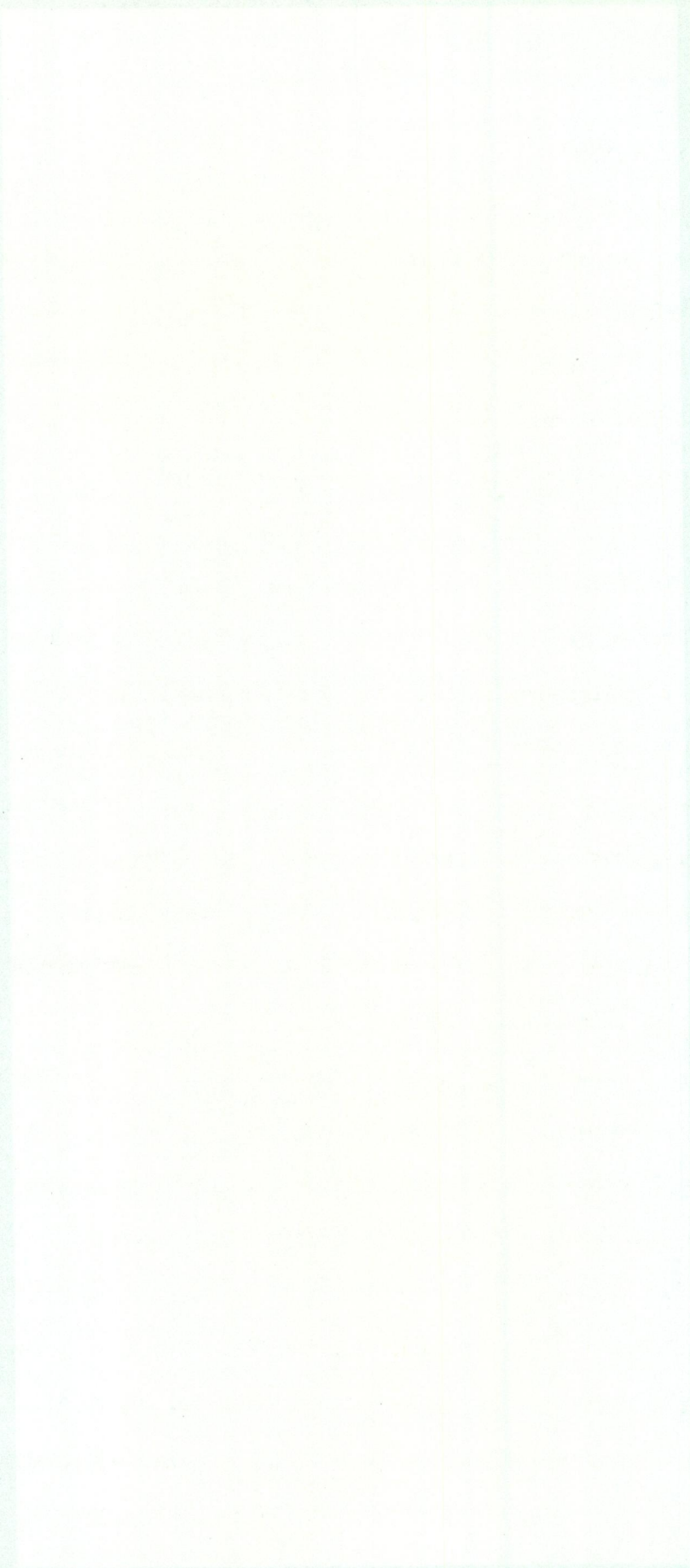


fig 3 - "Messenger" Bill Viola



## CHAPTER 5 : CONCLUSION

Terminology would be one of the most important issues for the criteria of “boring art”. For example negative space is very important in bringing about change in traditional form, so the word “negativism” [meaning the denial of accepted beliefs (Concise O.E.D., 1995, p.912)] could be considered as firstly a signifier that negative space is important and secondly in its literal meaning. The artist must be working in a “purple patch” [a period of success(Concise O.E.D., 1995, p.1113)] such as the sixties so the novelty of the work can be appreciated. By reducing forms to a minimum thus producing a simple method of working, the term “simple” can be used to remove the fussiness of art work. The policy of “the simplex” could take any ambiguity from the work so it is intentionally boring for the viewer. Frank Stella (a minimalist painter) felt that minimalism did not need any new terminology as it still had the practical problems associated with all art. Perhaps no neologism need be formulated, but terminology that accepts the boring as interesting within the context of its surrounds is appropriate. The followers of boring art would be called “puritans” as they would worship regulated, simplified forms.

This activity-challenged work could be interpreted as reactionary art. For example the next boring art could be anti-interactive. How did I come to that conclusion? Perhaps it is due to the fashion within art today for interactive art which most people feel is the only way art can survive into the next millennium. Yet take interaction too far and it will breed apathy. The resulting movement could be called “isolationism”, isolating the viewer into obscurity. The equivalent to Yves Klein (in 1958) empty white walled gallery in Paris, it could be Nikki Slack’s exhibition invitation only (and of course I would not send out any invitations) so that people would feel totally excluded.

Advertising would be essential to the success of "isolationism", because you cannot feel excluded from something you know nothing about. To isolate the community as well as the art world would take a considerable amount of advertising communication.

"A tall white room, high over Manhattan; it is empty, even of light fixtures and window frames; wind, air and sky fill the space. 'You must be kidding. Where's the art?', 'It's nothing, nothing at all', 'I like it -all that emptiness', 'Is this a hoax?'" (Lippard, 1967, p.103). Lucy Lippard collected these quotations from the disconcerted public who went to look at a Micheal Asher exhibition. Here is one of the problems with art - as it serves no functional role the general public is automatically alienated. As art is not essential to man's survival, it has a tendency to make and re-make its own meanings. Spontaneity in abstract expressionism, hard line in minimalism, women's issues in feminist art, all "-ism's" shouting about their own importance. In this context boring art is part of the pendulum swing of fashion. Art that is constantly searching for definition will continue the pendulum swing and so where there is interesting art there will be boring art too.

Warhol, Viola and Judd's art all belong on the same side of the pendulum swing. The strongest of these common denominators is the work's visual simplicity, which in each of the artist's works produces a sense of detachment. This lack of sentimentality often leaves the spectator exasperated as they search in vain for the message. Both Judd and Viola's work are heavily theory based whereas Warhol can be read and evaluated in so many different ways. Warhol appears as a cynic to one person, a social critic to the next, and as an outstanding artist to a third and none of the above, but Warhol never theorised his work although he wrote and said a great deal.

"I like to be the right thing in the wrong space and the wrong thing in the right space... because something funny always happens. Believe me, because I've made a career out of being the right thing in the wrong space and



the wrong thing in the right space. That's one thing I really do know about" (Warhol, 1975, p.53). His evasive approach that avoided any theorising made more people intrigued to find the hidden agenda in Warhol's work.

This is in contrast to Judd's strong beliefs about reducing form, in his anti-European (art) statements he attacked the European art for balancing composition. Judd generally held an aggressive belief in his own work "No, I don't consider it nihilistic or negative or cool or anything else. Also I don't think my objection to the Western tradition is a positive quality of my work. It's just something I don't want to do that's all. I want to do something else" (Judd, 1966, p.58). Although Judd is very definite about his work he does not come near to the lengths Viola goes to in theorising his work. In recent years, art has come to play an increasingly important role in the search for new meanings in life. Viola raises our consciousness above the ordinary "the quest for the self and reality in the world; the insight into inner and outer reality as an integral world concept" (Viola, 1993, p.100).

The artist's work achieves similar stillness. Warhol's films and Viola's video, although possessing movement have an eerie stillness that moves gradually and slowly. These works of "boring art" display the artist's interest in emptiness. Boring art intended to indulge the viewer in the artist's fascination for the mundane. These works are bemusing to the virgin spectator yet refreshing for the apathy of the visually bombarded visitor. Christian Shapiro a person who has reviewed pornographic films for over a decade, states that "Our only interest in viewing explicit materials is to see some disgrace that we have yet to witness" (Shapiro, 1987, p.214).

I think the same review process is central with contemporary art, as the narrow audience tends to have a certain immunity to art, due to a good knowledge of its contemporary surrounds. Warhol, Viola and Judd all had (or have) a strong contrast to their contemporaries and a certain awareness (within the art world). Warhol's Campbell's soup cans caused instant reactions, when

first shown by Irving Blum in Los Angeles. The gallery up the road displayed actual soup cans in the window, offering them at a cheap price. The controversy that the soup cans caused in the media as well as in the art world, set Warhol above artists such as Roy Lichtenstein. Judd and Viola achieved a contrast through visual decisions rather than novelty sensationalism. Judd 's critical writing backed his hard, cold paintings and three-dimensional forms later. Viola's mesmerising lengthy videos provide a door for western art towards eastern spirituality.

The absence in these artists' works provides the sometimes only content definable in the work. This inactive vacancy provides the boredom in the work. Boredom is associated more with the nineteenth century than with the twentieth century. That association comes from the idea that boredom induces weariness. For example if a person had never experienced any paintings before and one showed a Sam Francis and a Judd painting side by side, what would the result be? Automatically the Francis painting would be more stimulating, the busy paint strokes, bright erratic colours mixing on the canvas compared with the flat lifeless diagonals of Judd. So essentially Judds work would look boring. Presented with two hundred abstract expressionist paintings and one Judd painting the person would muse and perhaps see Judd's work as interesting. From this one can deduce the importance of boring art for the consumption of the gallery visitor.

Aesthetically all three produce strong clean images and for me the question of quality does not arise, only to comment on the professionalism in the work. "Boring art" for me cannot include failed attempts at being interesting or weakly constructed objects. In order to hold validity the work must not be struggling with any practical issues.

The word novelty means 'a new or unusual thing or occurrence'. The three artists show elements of novelty in their work, whether they are aware of it or not. Judd's paintings were compared to Mondrian's paintings which Judd

refuted as he felt that the European pattern making relied on balance of composition that he denied existed in his work. This claim of originality placed Judd as the father of Minimalism. Warhol claimed the opposite, his originality lay in the total lack of original images in his work. Viola's claims that dealing with a Western medium to explore Eastern philosophy is part of the move forward into the big picture, removing the division of culture (Warhol removing the division between commercial and fine art). The emphasis on an unusual thing allows the artists enough status to produce in essentially boring art.

Marcel Duchamp in 'The Slackers Official Handbook' is claimed to be one of the all time great slackers of this century, as he "produced a small body of work, mostly before 1925, then he retired to play chess". Duchamp marked the art worlds move into conceptual meaning. Warhol (and Pop art) moved art away from the conceptual into 'I like' and Viola unites all the worlds meaning into the human experience of birth, life and death. Does Viola mark the departure of concept and return of human experience? Although Viola deals with universal human experiences, the detachment in his work suggests an as yet unresolved comment (although his writing would lead us to believe differently)

Were these artists going through a purple patch? I think the need for change created the opportunity for them to display their work. If abstract expressionism had not been overdone, would Judd and Warhol have had the space to emerge?. With Viola, if video work had not been so energetic and consumed with the medium would he have been able to show the world his inner eye? Judd the minimalist aggressor, Warhol the vacant indulgence and Viola embracing his sixth sense.

The all time great "boring art" artists.

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