



Question, Cantor Center for the Visual Arts, Stanford University Museum of Arts, Stanford, CA, USA, 2004
(Works for this exhibition are selected from their permanent collection from Ancient Greek to contemporary art)



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Stanford show poses more questions than answers

Kenneth Baker
Galleries

A fine idea misfires dishearteningly in "Question," the new exhibition at Stanford's Cantor Center. Several curators have cooperated on the project, organizing works drawn from the center's permanent collection around 20 questions presumed to weigh on the minds of museum visitors.

Many of the questions go to the heart of art experience and its framing conventions: What is artistic quality? Why should I look at something that is disturbing? Are ideas more important than physical objects? How is value determined? Where is the meaning of a work of art?

The trouble starts with the variety of ways the show provides — and in places, withholds — answers.

The section devoted to "How is value determined?" presents several objects, including a Burmese antique silver "Zodiac bowl" and a pair of Ponca moccasins, each sensibly accompanied by a tag that gives the cost of its acquisition and a brief explanation of its importance to the collection.

The question "This looks like something a child could do; why is it in an art museum?" does not appear stenciled on the wall, as many of the others do. Instead, the curators leave it to viewers to guess the question and puzzle out answers by displaying several naive-looking artworks, including prints by Joan Miro and Josef Albers, tacked with colorful magnets to the front of an old refrigerator.

Large spiral binders punctuate the show, containing explanatory

and background information not available elsewhere in the gallery.

Some guidance comes in a wall panel that flags the adjoining section on "What is quality in art?" It prompts viewers to scan a cluster of paintings for various aspects of aesthetics and content. But why did the curators think it helpful to display the paintings on the sort of mesh rack on which they hang in storage?

Several art shipping crates opposite (each marked "Empty") enhance the impression of walking behind the scenes in a museum. But this paraphernalia overlaps confusingly with four connected pieces in several media by Joseph Kosuth, anchoring the question "Are ideas more important than physical objects?"

Nearby, a nook lined with galvanized zinc contains reproductions of four images of Romantic temper by Alan Ross, Max Klinger, Nathan Oliveira and Alexander Cozens. (The originals hang close by.) Word magnets scatter over the metallic walls, apparently inviting visitors to compose descriptions of or reactions to the images.

On the day of my visit, no one seemed to take that challenge very seriously. Perhaps when they do, visitors will answer willy-nilly the question at hand: "How does art provoke an emotional response?" But here again, the exhibition design makes the question harder to find than answers.

At many points "Question" leaves its questions hanging along with the exemplary artworks. Lampo Leong's calligraphic page "Nature" (2001) will move those unable to read Chinese — and perhaps also those who can — to wonder "Where is the meaning in a work of art?" and what sort of answers make sense.

Many people may find most troubling the pieces by Goya, Bruce Nauman, Robert Arneson grouped under "Why should I look at something that is disturbing?"

That question, unanswered, rebounds on the mess that is "Question" as a whole, though the show disturbs by pulling in too many directions and trying too hard to entertain.

One show in recent memory clarified in a most involving way some of the questions "Question" raises.



"Nature," by Lampo Leong, is one of the enigmatic works on display in the "Question" exhibition at Stanford University.

"Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt," an in-house exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1996, achieved what "Question" tries to do without gimmickry or burdensome text. It arrayed works in several media formerly attributed to Rembrandt alongside comparable works now firmly judged authentic. With terse promptings from labels, viewers could descry for themselves the evidence of authenticity, quality, value and the determinants of meaning.

"Global Priority" at Arts Commission Gallery: "The eyes are the organs of asking," Paul Valery wrote. Art exhibitions prove their social value by making us feel more entitled to question the world, so much of which we meet via images.

"Global Priority" at the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery surveys artists' responses to globalization. But the Americanization of globalization may be the true target here.

A topic so embracing courts a

vast range of responses. One inevitably walks away from such a show with little more than memories of a few amusing pieces, plus the sense that critical thinking about globalization today might begin just about anywhere.

Allan Sekula presents three photos taken surreptitiously from the lake Bill Gates' colossal house overlooks, plus a letter voicing a wish to look at a Winslow Homer painting Gates bought at auction for \$30 million. Gates, of whom we see nothing, comes as near as anyone to globalization personified.

Finnish artist Pia Lindman collected newspaper pictures of mourners at the sites of various violent incidents and developed from them an international lexicon for the body language of grief. We see it here in drawings and in her performance on video.

David Opdyke turned in a device in which three motorized "word wheels" momentarily recombine media speak into bitterly funny headlines. "Grandma rules



"The Russkoe Bistro and McDonalds" at "Global Priority."

out air strikes." "Suburban family mulls over land offensive." "Defense contractor botches Jell-O salad."

Igor Makarevich and Elena Elagina contribute photographs of McDonald's in Russia, paired with representative shots of a much

smaller counterpart, Russkoe Bistro. An old Cold War metaphor comes back to life in the images of these vendors competing to colonize a shrinking world.

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Question Thematic exhibition including prints, paintings, sculpture and decorative arts. Through Jan. 2. Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Visual Arts, Stanford University, Stanford. (650) 723-4177, www.stanford.edu/dept/ccva.

Global Priority Works in many media by 63 artists from 33 countries. Through Aug. 14. San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. (415) 554-6080, www.sfacgallery.org.

