

American Cool

by Dave Hickey

For a while there, during the nineteen sixties and seventies, it seemed as if every work of art that I found refreshingly self-evident—whose presence in the visible world seemed to be informed by nothing more duplicitous than quiet candor and generous equanimity—was almost immediately dubbed "cool and ironic" by some mainstream pundit. The genre or style of the work didn't seem to matter: An Alex Katz *fête*, an Andy Warhol soup can, a John McCracken plank, an Ed Ruscha wordscape, a John Baldessari photo-Giotto, or a Barry Le Va installation—all were labeled "cool and ironic" and remained so-labeled for a decade or more. The fact that none of these works were plausibly disingenuous, that not one of them bore any visible signifier that might be cited as evidence of ironic self-repudiation, didn't seem to matter. Cool and ironic they were, by critical fiat. As a consequence, I have come to regard the application of this cheap epithet as the critical equivalent of date-rape—embracing as it does the arrogant presumption that "no" means "yes" and "yes" means "no," since all of these works were cool, all existed in a condition of blatant positivity, and none of them were ironic.

Then, the other night, as I was being introduced before delivering a lecture at an American university, I heard my host describe my life's work as "a personal testament that constitutes a cool and ironic critique of contemporary culture." I mounted the podium and delivered my lecture anyway, too stunned to respond. It would have hardly mattered if I had. By dubbing my "personal testament" cool and ironic—by inferring that my meanings were other and more private than I have always declared them to be—my host had effectively robbed my words of all clarity and immediacy, preempted any consideration of their public relevance, and prepared the ground for his own post-lecture seminar during which he would reassert his and his university's analytical authority over the utterances of any private citizen who

might venture onto their turf. This may seem a small thing, and certainly, in this instance, it was. Still, the imputation of irony to objects and utterances that are demonstrably *not* ironic, along with the *ad hominem* trivialization of any citizen's effort at public discourse, constitute the primary preemptive maneuver of entrenched power when confronted with individual expression in the late twentieth century.

Private citizens, according to this logic, have only private interests (and private problems), while public servants have . . . well, you know. So, had I been able to blurt something out as I mounted the podium, I should have insisted that, Yes, I *was* trying to be cool, since cool is a mode of democratic politesse. And yes, I was trying to be witty as well, since wit is a civilized virtue. But *ironic*? Never! Why *should* I be? Having nothing to hide and nothing to lose, I had no *need* of irony. Nor does any other critic have any urgent need of it. There is no money in criticism; no power accrues to its practice; and, sadly enough, hardly anyone wants to have sex with a critic (for fear, I suppose, of being criticized during sex). In fact, the worst fate that could possibly befall me personally, on account of something I might say or write, would be banishment from the art world. This would force me to play cards in gaudy casinos all weekend rather than disporting myself in provincial hotel rooms from which one may, if one wishes, stare out a sealed window at the eternal snow.

As a consequence, excepting a few remarks at faculty meetings, I have *never* been ironic. Irony presumes repression, and presuming repression where none exists is melodramatic self-aggrandizement, a wanker's ploy. Having been personally accused of being cool and ironic, however, I have been giving some thought to their incompatibility as rhetorical modes of expression. I have begun to suspect that the abyss papered-over by the catch-phrase "cool and ironic" marks a major fissure in the transatlantic visual-arts culture that came into being during the nineteen sixties and seventies. Put simply: the intellectual visual cultures of New York, Cologne, Milan, Los Angeles, Paris, and London may all be united under the auspices of

"cool and ironic" (or its contrary, "uncool and unironic"), which is to say, they *could* be so united if the terms were rhetorically compatible.

They are not. Irony and cool are incompatible means to the same end. They are both modes of deniable disclosure. Each enables us to speak our minds while maintaining a small margin for disclaimer. When we use irony, we suppress the sense of what we mean. When we resort to cool, we suppress the urgency we attach to that meaning. Those who fear "death from above," who dwell in bureaucratic, clerical, or academic cultures where speech is regulated, relationships are permanent, and there is no free expression *must* resort to irony. Cool, on the other hand, is a modality of expression for those who live in a world where there are no hierarchies, no permanent enfranchisements, and, perhaps, a surfeit of free expression. Irony is a way of eluding the wrath of your superiors; cool is a way of not imposing on your peers.

So let me propose this rule of thumb: Generally speaking, Europeans (who no longer have any concept of cool) do irony best, while Americans (who are only now learning how to dissemble with aplomb) are best at cool. Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Bertholt Brecht, Marcel Duchamp, and Francis Picabia are ironists—counterintuitive creatures of the spirit, seekers after covert truths, masters of the opaque agenda. George Washington, Charles S. Peirce, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Andy Warhol, and Alex Katz are cool. Presuming to embody their beliefs, they decline to plead them—yet wish to be *seen* embodying them, declining to plead. The presumption that one may be too cool to betray one's irony, however, is to confuse cool with cowardice, because cool irony is neither cool nor ironic; it is sarcasm—a parochial form of site-specific sneer local to the schoolyard and the faculty lounge. The speaker simply lies and depends upon the norms of the dominant context to render that lie, sort of, ironic. This mode of expression, of course, affords *total* deniability; it enables us to speak bureaucratically, which is not to speak at all.

To employ the full expressive figure of irony, one must assert

something in a manner that insists upon its meaning something else entirely—that suggests by some sign an altogether antagonistic meaning. Thus, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is recognizably ironic, since it is neither modest nor a proposal, and Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is recognizably ironic in the disproportionality of its terms. To employ the figure of cool, one simply practices that mode of Senecan "plain declaration" so beloved of the Founding Fathers. One doesn't assert anything. One simply declares some truth to be self-evident on one's own embodied authority as a citizen, without deigning to invest it with fancy justifications, personal explanations, or expressive urgency. One simply paints the soup can, or mounts the board in the slough of the wave, and proceeds, sans drama, into the fray. Cool, then, is theater without drama, demonstration without pleading, distinction without status, and dissent without violence—a discourse of peers and citizens.

One may infer the classical exemplum of cool from a passage in Cicero's *De Oratore* in which the author declares that he can enter the Forum at its far end and, observing a speaker on the podium from that distance (over a hundred yards), without hearing a word, ascertain the quality, effectiveness, and justice of the speaker's case. From this example, Cicero derives his concept of the ideal orator—the orator who need not speak at all, who need only mount the dais and stand before his fellow citizens to make the quality of his virtue and of his case visible through the presence of his body. The deep historical link between classical rhetoric and visual art resides in this ideal of the orator as an embodied figment of virtue. Later, in Christian times, this idea of visible virtue would be reconstituted as a condition of grace; but it remains the very emblem of cool, of that which need only be seen to be believed.

To make the American connection, I should remind you that the historical embodiment of Cicero's oratorical ideal was the Father of Our Country, George Washington. He was recognized as such in his time, and, when you consider his enigmatic virtues, he has always seemed to

me the best Dad any country could ever want. To begin with, Washington was never that much of a thinker, nor really that much of a masterful doer. His writings and speeches are thoughtfully considered and straightforward, the farthest thing from brilliant. His generalship was fierce, brave and intelligent—good enough to win the Revolutionary War with a little luck and the fortuitous intervention of the French, but nowhere near the quality of Napoleon Bonaparte's or Robert Lee's. His presidency was studious and professional, but notable mostly for the power he refused, the powers he limited, and the alliances he didn't make. And yet, for the citizens of that tiny republic on the edge of the Atlantic, and, for all the brilliant, erratic lawyers, farmers, and adventurers who constituted its power elite, he was the one indispensable creature.

And he didn't really stand *for* anything. He simply stood, the embodiment of everything the republic might be. Thus, when you read accounts of his power and influence, they always begin with his carriage; the way he stood, sat, walked, or rode. (Washington was evidently a rider of serene grace; he had that surfer's poise.) Accounts of Washington's physical grace, however, are all informed by the assumption that these physical graces, far from being cosmetic, are embodiments of republican virtue, and (excepting occasional flashes of violent anger) he never did or said anything to disabuse anyone of this notion. There were no perfidies, hypocrisies, vendettas, secret vices, or outstanding debts to sully that image, nor have any been uncovered since. Washington's "image," in other words, wasn't an image. He was that man—the incarnation of his own construction of virtue. In this, of course, Washington was not a "modern man," and he has thus proved himself to be virtually invulnerable to the ironies and disclosures of contemporary tell-all biography. About Washington there was nothing to tell beyond the memories of those who saw him ride.

My favorite Washington story concerns his deportment at the Second Continental Congress, which could never have been assembled without his guaranteed presence. Throughout the deliberations, the

shouting and wrangling, the nitpicking and backbiting, Washington sat there, hands in his lap with his legs crossed, saying little or nothing. Occasionally, however, when the debate became especially heated or seemed to divagate from its purposes, Washington would shift his weight in his chair and cross his legs the other way and, at that moment, as if he had turned the tiller of the Ship of State, the debate would take a new direction. That, my friends, is cool. It is also the very emblem of the way cool art functions in a secular society. It sits there, like Washington at the Continental Congress, or hangs there, like a Warhol in the living room, a seamless, secretless incarnation of recognizable power, less an object than a location around which our anxious quarrels about value, virtue, and meaning may swirl.

What I am suggesting here is that the idea of cool as an incarnation of democratic, secular virtue is a peculiarly American one, and that the fate of cool American art in the nineteen seventies, after its apotheosis in the sixties, may be attributed to the European turn of critical fashion during those years—specifically to the institutional triumph of a discourse only marginally concerned with art, totally unconcerned with incarnation, and deeply obsessed with a Germanic construction of culture informed by the presumptive ironies of "repression" and "false consciousness." With the triumph of these ideologies, the democratic politesse of cool American art—the fact that it eschews signifiers of angst, struggle, and aggression—was taken to signify its lack of "commitment." And, since repression was presumed, any art that lacked "commitment" or the signs thereof must necessarily be "ironic" by default. It was not *visibly* ironic, of course, since there was nothing visible at issue here, but *culturally* ironic—which is to say, ironic within the raised consciousness of the beholder.

Thus, the cool opacity of Alex Katz's *beau monde*, John McCracken's gonzo spirituality, and Ed Ruscha's meditations on the word incarnate were damned with the imputation of irony—their mysteries reconstrued as petty secrets. Warhol's vertiginous embrace of commodity capitalism was magically transformed into a critique of it,

simply because his egalitarian vision of taste and desire was ideologically inconceivable at that moment, and because Warhol, as a presence, *had* to be coöpted, lest the whole agenda seem as marginal as it really was. The real issue, however, and the one that remains as critical fashions change, is the question of how art might best serve the ends of democracy. Does it do so by presuming repression and adopting the servile ironies that must ultimately make it so, or does the work of art simply behave in a democratic manner, presenting itself to us as a cool, decorous embodiment of these values? Does it treat us as fellow slaves, in other words, or as fellow citizens? Speaking for myself, I prefer the latter, and remain beguiled by the possibility that the generous equanimity and visible integrity of cool objects might, by their very presence, like Washington at the Continental Congress, create a democracy around them.