



How to Give a Shit No.1

JOSHUA HAGLER

I am sitting in a small theater within the Orange County Museum of Art on Friday, April 15th between two of my favorite artists, my girlfriend Maja Ruznic and one of my closest friends Kim Kei. We're watching the new documentary "Eva Hesse" while eating some sweet and sour turkey jerky that we snuck in, and sobbing. We're watching the documentary after having visited Hesse's work twice at the new Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel, recently opened and just a short walk from our studios. It's not just Hesse, but Borgeois, Bontecou, Benglis, Kusama, and many other soulful women sculptors who shock me into a state of cosmic alertness. Hesse seems to have defined absurdity as "extreme feeling." She said her work concerned "soul, presence, and guts." Can an artist today still say something like that and be taken seriously?

These days, I hear the word "romantic" used to describe this kind of sentiment, with its implicit dismissal of work that comes off as overly emotional, vulnerable, or even too sincere. It's as if to say, work that expresses "too much" is melodramatic or sentimental, and I sense a fear in those viewers who eschew extreme feeling, not just of the feeling itself, but also of being seen feeling it. Maja has an expression. When something is good, she says, "I can feel it in my feelings." Are we afraid that in giving an all-the-way-deep-down-full-involvement sort of shit, we risk exposing what we don't know, or what the "in" group has lead us to believe we ought to know? Defenses down, do we risk losing social rank among our hyper-intelligent, correct-thinking peers? Does the political nature of the art world threaten our ability to feel it in our feelings?

MOCA curator Helen Molesworth, during her walk-through of *Don't Look Back: The 1990's at MOCA*, discussing the work of Jim Hodges and her embarrassment of being emotionally affected by AT&T commercials, said that we, in the art world, hate the sentimental because we realize our emotions are not individual. I think neither she nor I want to say that art should be sentimental, but what I'm sensing now is that the difference between melodrama and drama-drama are being confused as the same. What most of the work at Hauser, Wirth & Schimmel have in common is that it is deeply felt, especially the work that was made in the 60's and 70's. Talking with friends and colleagues privately, I sense that, actually, the deeply felt is what we want more of. In February 2010, art critic Roberta Smith wrote in *The New York Times* that what museums were missing was work made from "intense personal necessity." That is, in fact (as an artist) the only type of art that I know how to give a shit about and like Roberta Smith did then, I still want more of it today.

So how does one give a shit? Is there a proper kind of shit to give and a proper time and place to give it? Although I doubt myself qualified to say, and quite against better judgement, *How to Give a Shit* aims to chase



down clues and invent reliably absurd instructions on how to do just that. Since turning myself into an art critic would be sure and immediate death, I won't review art shows. But as a person without credibility or analytical distance, I feel pretty good about reviewing day or a week-long experiences pertaining to looking at art. So, I can't review Hauser, Wirth, & Schimmel's inaugural *Abstract Sculpture by Women* exhibition, the Eva Hesse documentary or the 90's show at MOCA, but what I can offer are helpful hints on what to do to give a shit when you feel like you're just not capable. Am I being serious? Yes, of course not.

Let's say you're walking into MOCA's Geffen Center to see the current show about the 90's. You stumble upon a suspended, transparent, mint green silk house sewn together in such a way that what would have been the wood trim around the windows and even the light switches are considered and recreated in stitched silk. You're back hurts. You've been looking at art all day. You think, "this seems like a pretty nice work of art, but I don't think that I can look at another thing!" Here is when HTGAS can help. First, approach the silk house and stand directly beneath it. Lie down. Yes, right there. Just plop down, partner. You're not touching the art, so the guards can only grump to themselves. And the other museum-goers will actually give you more space than if you're standing up, so your view is less obstructed than usual. All you're doing is getting a better view. Now how does your back feel? Better, right? Now you're going to try to "understand" the silk house.

Rookie mistake. You could Google a few facts about Seoul Home and its creator, Do Ho Suh, but I'm not revealing any facts just now because if I do, it will become a summary of Do Ho Suh's practice and that's not what we're here for. I'm serious. That's not how to give a shit, at least for now. Just rest with the art. The art is resting, you're resting; we're all happy and at rest.

"But wait!" you say, "What about extreme feeling? Am I not supposed to feel it in your feelings?" Of course. Eva Hesse listed "soul, presence, and guts" as features of extreme feeling, an lying beneath Seoul Home is both an act of presence and observing it. What is quiet and meditative is extreme in that it is such a rare exception to the experience of daily life. To understand the art is not necessarily to give a shit about it, and to rest is not necessarily to be devoid of feeling. If anything, it is a reclaiming of a quality of feeling perhaps inaccessible otherwise.

So now, here we are again resting beneath Seoul Home, and because we're at rest, along comes a faint memory, nothing specific yet, but something vague and needed, sort of like in the Pink Floyd song "Comfortably Numb" where he goes, "when I was a child, I caught a fleeting glimpse, out of the corner of my eye, I cannot put my finger on it..." etc. (Note: This is an important song. It and "I Cover the Waterfront" by Billy Holiday, for the record, are the two songs I will ask those closest to me to play on my deathbed if I'm so lucky as to have the lights go out slowly rather than all-of-a-sudden.)



Now you are beneath the house, which, although suspended from the ceiling, now obviously feels as if it's levitating while you rest with the art. Later, after you've let yourself feel it in your feelings, you may do some research. It's okay to do research after seeing great work, as it can be a valuable way to give an even bigger shit. I suggest you start with his interview on the PBS program Art: 21. On it, you're going to hear him say this:

"...in order to make that piece, you have to measure every inch of the space. And you really get to know the space, and you often find little marks that you did when you were a kid, and that brings all the memories of your childhood. And when you go through that process, this space becomes part of you, and you really feel like you know it. It's in you, and you can actually leave home without any kind of attachments. Does that make sense? I mean, I would say it's one way of dealing with homesickness."

Now you're thinking I read that before I brought up all the parts about being at rest, and memory and Pink Floyd's lyrics, but you're just going to have to take it on my word that I promise, promise, promise, I absolutely did not.

I teach art at a small private university in Riverside, and each class begins with me saying this: "Art is for survival." And some of them laugh, which is fine because they don't know. But it is. Here's why: Let's say you now officially give several shits about Seoul Home and you're looking up Do Ho Suh and his other work, but then you're looking at other artists' work like Eva Hesse, Jackie Winsor and Louise Bourgeois on the same day, and you're realizing that all these artists are dealing with memory and nostalgia and experience, maybe in its tranquility, maybe in its horror, or maybe in its absurdity. The next day, you're watching some ridiculous video in your Facebook feed where Donald Trump is trying to make America great again, and you're like, this is just absolute batshit because you can tell his performance art isn't very good, and it's impossible to give a shit about CYNICAL art. And then, (just a little further now, dear reader) a passing thought rears its quizzical head that perhaps a lifetime of Trump and his tribe, not knowing how to give a shit, (why didn't I start this column earlier?) about anything requiring abstract thought is itself the leadup to the unthinkable consequence of his taking power! It's too much to bear!

So yes, here on *How to Give a Shit*, I will drop some bombs and give zero shits about some art that I see, such as Raymond Pettibon's at Honor Fraser, because he's redoing everyone else's art but sucking the soul out of it in the process ("soul" is a permissible word here on HTGAS because we don't demand narrow-minded, one-dimensional readings ironically resulting from thinking ourselves smarter than people we deem too religious, sentimental, or superstitious). Now when I say I don't give a shit about the Honor Fraser show, that's not me telling you that you shouldn't give a shit. ACTUALLY, THE OPPOSITE!



I'm begging for your help. Give me a guide on how I might better give a sincere shit or two about this show. Usually, I will provide reasons. Today, my introduction is too lengthy. Next time, I won't have to waste space with it, and we'll get down to brass tacks.

One more thing: We have the Scato-Scale here on HTGAS. If I don't give a shit, that means I couldn't get anything sincerely felt from the work. Art, as we all know, is a subjective experience and I'm very subjective. We'll take that for granted for now on, so I won't have to repeat it later. My point is, I never want to say that other people shouldn't give a shit. But when I don't give a shit, I'd be sincerely grateful to any who can help me out. If I give a shit, that's good on the Scato-Scale. Two shits is better. Three shits is as many shits as I can give. That's maximum dung. Not the undesired sort of dung, but the kind we all look forward to, the Ofilian sort.

-JOSHUA HAGLER