

During my three months in residency at Griffin Art Projects I have been writing and editing a longstanding work in progress: laying out my interest in a group who came into themselves in 1920's London called The Bright Young People. Known for their prodigious poetic talents as for their dandyism, and in retrospect for the tragic dissipation of their promise; the dandy being forever doomed to defeat as a part of their enterprise. Their generation was caught between in the shadow of one war and the accumulating shadows of another: a transitory penumbra where homosexuality was permitted to thrive. The provisional freedoms they enjoyed have become analogies for similarly bracketed moments of aesthetic energy, coupled with cultural tragedy, from which my work has always been drawn: the erudition and aesthetics at work within the production of erotic material during the early years of gay-liberation, all but laid waste by the AIDS crisis; and the brief ascent of art-for-art's-sake put forth by James McNeill Whistler and his set in the late nineteenth century who indulged their twin obsessions: *Japonisme*, and the disruption of Victorian social mores, during the fragile preamble to the upheavals of the coming century.

Writer Nancy Mitford, who belonged to the Bright Young People, wrote in her essay *Reading for Pleasure* (1952): "I still read more biography, memoirs and letters than anything else; I like to get into some lively set, and observe its behaviour. The Encyclopaedists or Byron and his friends are supreme entertainers, but any small society will provide an interesting study in human relationships if one or two of its members can write." For this exhibition I am interested in the impulses within intimate milieux, whether dandy, bohemian, Beat, or otherwise, which prioritize aesthetic and social ideals - often to the point of fantasy - as a form of insolence to the general sway of philistinism and moral indignation that dominates. When it occurs, I see it as an impulse towards civilization.

Civilization is a contentious word, one that struggles to maintain its ancient meaning. Plato in *The Symposium* raised a line of questioning wherein he states that "love is in need of beautiful things [since it is impossible to love ugly things]," from which he concludes that "good things are beautiful," and therefore people "would be in need of good things." Over two thousand years later, in the era of the World Wars, the writer and editor, Cyril Connolly, reaching to concretize the notion of 'good things' called it that "world of affection and reason and freedom and justice." Clive Bell, the Bloomsbury critic and conscientious objector, named it "sweetness and light" in his essay *Civilization* (1928); that impulse to "sacrifice obvious and immediate goods to the more subtle and remote." He advanced that our one aim, be it personal or societal, should be to possess good states of mind. Good states of mind are those that last for the longest amount of time, and are enjoyed by the greatest amount of people possible. He was emphatic that the "one morality no thoroughly civilized person will ever accept is the morality which aims at the greatest happiness of the majority of an arbitrarily and indiscriminately chosen few." Bell was acutely aware that all western societies that had hitherto attempted to approach civilization's aims (the ancient Greeks, the Italian Renaissance, 18th Century France) were ones that relied in part on the suffering of others for their gains; the conundrum was how to develop a cultured class that was not at all exploitive.

Governments, and those with financial power, have for a long time hijacked the word civilization and nefariously inverted its meaning, making a pernicious tool for enabling classism, colonialism, oppressive laws that serve reactionary dogmatism, religious superstition and, finally, as a justification for war. Civilization is entirely incompatible with war; it is irreconcilable even with policing, for as soon as anybody accepts the potential for brutality their claim to civilization dissolves. Yet in wartime civilization is always unflinchingly and propagandistically employed by governments that do not truly aspire to its tenants. As Bell warns us: "a highly civilized person can never unquestionably accept the ethics of patriotism."

In other cases, this time the fault of liberal thinking, civilization has been made erroneously synonymous with progress. Progress is the unlofty vagary of Capitalism. Norman

Douglas, speaking through a character in his novel *South Wind* (1917) explains the conflict: "What I mean by progress is the welding together of society for whatever ends. Progress is a centripetal movement, obliterating man in the mass. Civilization is centrifugal; it permits, it postulates, the assertion of personality. The terms are, therefore, not synonymous. They stand for hostile and divergent movements. Progress subordinates. Civilization co-ordinates. The individual emerges in civilization. He is submerged in progress."

Cyril Connolly compiled a list of ten indications of a civilized community, which he published in *Horizon* magazine just after the Second World War. In summary:

No death penalty; model prisons meant to rehabilitate criminals; no slums; light and heat supplied free; vocations for all, not just work; full toleration of opinion, no censorship, no passports or identity cards, all travel encouraged; no laws prejudiced by religion regarding homosexuality, divorce, abortion, bigamy, etc.; limits on property, wealth and inheritance: no one to own more property than he can see; a passionate curiosity for art, science and the purpose of life; no discrimination against race, class or creed.

He adds, "other versions are welcome."

These aims can be gathered under the umbrella of 'a sense of values.' While no society has ever lived up to them, they have always been alive within small groups of people. Anecdotally, Bell locates humanity's initial act towards civilization at the moment when our first ancestors, after hunting a rabbit in a field, chose *not* to eat it there on the spot and satisfy their hunger immediately, but instead followed a vague notion, and took it away to see what else might be done with it. The assertion of Art-for-Art's-Sake by Whistler, and other Victorian reformers, was a stand taken in civilization's defense, as was the energy of gay-liberation preceding the AIDS crisis, albeit through more corporeal and amorous means of expression. All were periods of lives lived with intense oppositional intentions.

The subjective resonance of one era is a measure to explain what is afoot now: once one radical milieu perishes we can anticipate the reoccurrence of another, and its eventual fate, reminding us of the fragility of our freedoms. Every other generation or so, often in the aftermath of war or other seismic instance of societal regression, artists and writers become impelled to reinstate civilization's meaning, and refresh the pursuit of its open and fantastic possibility. Perhaps their heightened state of anxiety manifests a super-sensitivity or prescience that calls them to action, or they are spurred by a wave of philistinism that portends yet another war. Civilization is a climate in which no artist would be compelled to expend their talents on protesting injustice; that is a role "forced on them by the malevolence of their contemporaries...civilization tends to make protestation unnecessary." The dream of civilization is a world in which beauty is never superfluous, and where art and invention is paramount. Stephen Spender wrote in *World Within World* (1951): "yesterday there was that complexity which made the Renaissance prolific, wonderful, rich, mysterious: and tomorrow there must be the miracle of a just civilization which is also capable of the complex folly of building a Venice."

Collected above are the concerns of some who were active nearly one hundred years ago. Articulate forbearers who bore their pursuit of civilization along the tides of two wars, and in a time when homosexuals were so brutally persecuted as to make life during peacetime equally fearful. Their dandyism was a purposeful affront to their elders, an insolence towards all authority. Simultaneously it made an image that prioritized art and aesthetics, and shunned typical masculinity. Yet, however tenuously, they were privileged, by their class and race, with the luxury of sitting down to contemplate society's injustices. Today, superficial acts of dandyism are rarely feasible as acts of insolence by gay, white, educated men who, as a whole, have tacitly relinquished their claim on radicalism through the concessions they've made to 'progress'. Future breakthroughs in resistance lay in the hands of more marginal groups. The dandy's

postures, while they make sense to admire are, at least temporarily, divested of power in and of themselves. It is their conception of civilization, marked by innate care – however imperfect for our present – that retains its use as a *sensibility* suitable to flex and accommodate current thinking about the eternal struggle. Caught in the rise and fall of their isolated community, they may provide parables with a practical application. Their acts of futility, were, in spirit, a continuation of the Neanderthal's notion to take the rabbit away: for it was surely after many doing exactly so, that one of them eventually arrived at cuisine. To recognize small daring acts across the distance of time relieves them somewhat of their insignificance and futility, and proposes that civilization, while an increasingly distant prospect, is not impossible.