

# THE CURIOUS ESSAYS BY GEORGE LUIS FERDINAND

There is a painter of American origin who caused a recent, well-publicized scandal with a series of fake newspaper articles that he had written. These articles reviewed six art exhibitions in Manhattan, all of which were complete fictions, as though they were real. The artist, as I am sure you are aware, was George Luis Ferdinand.

Each of the reviews supposedly examined an exhibition by (his invented) artist, Lupe Delsarius. Delsarius created works which seemed to defy all sensibility. Each of the articles, and hence each of the exhibitions, became more improbable than the previous. As the work became increasingly eccentric, there were also many bizarre circumstances revealed in the artist's life. It seemed Delsarius had become confused. His creation of paradoxical artworks was said to have taken him to the brink of madness and he had come to mistake his fantasy for reality.

An interesting turn in these events happened when a translator at a French national newspaper mistook the articles as true. With the nuances of languages being as subtle as they are, the fictional aspects of the writing were missed in translation. The sixth, and strangest, review was reprinted verbatim, without any reference to its falsehood. This story was soon run in many newspapers not only in France, but also in Belgium, parts of northern Italy and in Switzerland.

Of course the sensation quickly spread to most of Western Europe and within a few days was fodder for many a radio commentary or late night television comedian. The Europeans were quick to laugh at America for producing artwork with such ridiculous premises.

One scholar though praised the artwork in spite of popular opinion. He was quite vocal and hailed it as the most appropriate voice yet to comment on contemporary times. This scholar, an assistant professor at a little known art school, the Ecole d'Art d'Aix-en-Provence, was named Jean-Lucien Bouillaud. His opinion was referenced on many media broadcasts for ridicule.

Within a few days of printing, the supposed hoax was revealed. The articles were identified as made up by Ferdinand. There was a great collective chuckle and the matter was dismissed in the European media.

It is commonly assumed that Bouillaud was embarrassed by his stake in the scandal, or that he withdrew his praise of the work. In fact Bouillaud has stood by his initial comments. If anything, he has become more resolute in his support of Ferdinand's writing. He says that the work of Delsarius is even more relevant *as a fiction* than had the man actually existed.

My curiosity in these matters of false art exhibitions and reviews was piqued by these comments of the little known scholar. One would be hard pressed to find his recent essays anywhere, but I was lucky enough to come across a short quote in a small academic journal. I have since journeyed to the University in Aix-en-Provence to speak with the professor. His arguments are quite compelling.

Bouillaud tells us that within the work of Ferdinand, what we should be evaluating is

not merely the intention of the artist. While art does function as a communicative medium, this is not its only function (nor its most interesting, Bouillaud would say). What is much more revealing is what occurs at the intersection of expression and *interference*.

Interference, as used by Bouillaud, is a relatively simple concept. Artists have intentions, but there are always factors which modify the object that results. These variables adjust the work in ways that create a different meaning than the artist intended. An artist's attempt to realize an idea is *expression*, while these interrupting factors are *interference*.

The most obvious forms of interference are artistic skills: such as the ability to draw, render or to manipulate paint in certain ways. These skills affect how a concept is manifested. The process of painting, for example, is laborious and there is much that can happen between the concept and the resulting object. This translation of idea into object, which is mediated through the skills of the artist, is what Bouillaud calls *skill set interference*.

Ferdinand's fictions to a certain extent bypass skill set interference since these works, rather than being created, are merely described. But the art of writing also involves its own form of skill set interference (since writing is not merely a translation of idea into language, but a process of development and creation). To complicate matters, the framing mechanism (the fiction within a fiction that his essays are based around) is also subject to these forms of interference.

Interestingly, what has happened in the events I described at the beginning of this article involves another form of interference: *projected interference*. Projected interference occurs when the work is changed by meanings that have been imposed on a work by outside forces or individuals. The erroneous translation and subsequent media hoopla surrounding Ferdinand's writing has changed it. It created an accidental meaning that has supplanted the original meaning.

There are countless other forms of interference at work in the arts and Bouillaud makes convincing arguments for the importance of investigating these interruptions. In previous art movements there was a high value placed on works which closely married idea and object with a minimum amount of interference. Thus we saw the rise of formalist and minimalist art. These movements exercised a tight control over details, all of which had to serve the intentions.

In our current era, we find that the exclusion of interference no longer allows us to freely explore our relationship with the world. Rather than thinking of these breaks as extraneous or supplementary, it may in fact be that they are an essential part of art and life.

Within Ferdinand's fictions, there is a complex tangling of various forms of interference which makes a straightforward evaluation of meaning quite complicated. Bouillaud is interested in artists who allow interference to show through in the work or who explore and cast light on how these concepts operate. He suggests that Ferdinand's fictions accomplish both these goals. Bouillaud is also quick to admit that Ferdinand is not the first or only person to display these qualities, merely that his work is well known and successfully encapsulates this theory.

Back in America, Gorge Luis Ferdinand has published his first book, *Fictional Memoirs*. As the name implies, it is a modified autobiography. Fortunately (or

unfortunately) Ferdinand's novel will not likely be subject to the same sort of misappropriation as the earlier works. While the book is interesting, I found that it is not quite as powerful as the series of six reviews which provoked the European scandal. Perhaps that is because it does not have such a good story surrounding its making and presentation. Bouillaud admits that he too does not find it as compelling as Ferdinand's original essays.

As for myself, I have been commissioned to write a series of essays on this subject for *The Critical Review*, in collaboration with Jean-Lucien Bouillaud. The article you are currently reading will likely serve, in some edited form, as the introduction. If Bouillaud's explanations of interference still seem underdeveloped, it is because the ideas are still so new. We intend to present more details in the upcoming essays and to include a much more comprehensive description of the theory and its practice. I hope this article piques your interest and leaves you looking forward to our forthcoming essays.