

“How to Be ‘Artsy,’ and Mean It”

Though it is widely and naively assumed that “artsy” people are the way they are simply from reading too much, “Artsiness” is in fact defined by a strict and complex set of codes, codes based on long-standing historical conceptions of sensitivity and self-absorption. In some circles no reading is done at all. These days a tremendous amount of the artsy person’s time and energy must be devoted to considerations of declamatory style, literary allusion, self-reference, and dress, and to the potential threat posed by those around one who are better-dressed, thin, distracted-looking, nobly impoverished, etc.

In fact artsiness is a raunchy and competitive affair: the degree of one’s perceived artsiness (which is, of course, identical to artsiness itself) varies inversely with the perceived artsiness of those around one. When confronting another artsy person, be prepared to go all out to damage that person’s self-esteem. One or two well-placed remarks or questions will do nicely (especially those to which the person should, but cannot, respond). A few examples:

- 1) “I heard your reading last week and just **loved** it. And I wouldn’t worry; I didn’t even notice the dreadful stammering.”
- 2) “Dictionary? I don’t own a dictionary. Fouls the intuitive process. Just the other day Jon Anderson was telling me that poets don’t need dictionaries. Do **you** own a dictionary?”
- 3) “You didn’t enjoy the book? Well, it’s true that it is terribly . . . **inaccessible**.”
- 4) “Have you seen the dust jacket on the new Borges book? No? Listen, go down to the store and have a look. Telling you for your own good. Run, don’t walk.

Basic guidelines of public conduct comprise the milieu in which we all live and move. Master them. Be able whenever appropriate to say things like “The **ambience** surrounding a conversation is absolutely essential to a meaningful *tête à tête*.” This mastery can change what is by definition a pose into a way of life. This requires a discipline of the most profound kind, so give yourself rules. Here are a few examples of my own, which I have stapled to the ceiling above my futon:

- 1) Whenever someone makes a joke at your expense, simply smile with your mouth and not with your eyes. Look the person over later.
- 2) Whenever forced to be silent, still, and attentive, particularly at a long reading, try for as long as you can to imitate the pose of your favorite impressionist painting. Flowerpots are especially fun.
- 3) In your spare time, acquire an understanding of fine wine and food from a popular gourmet guide, then pretend at parties that this knowledge is the sign of a good upbringing.
- 4) Always use a high-toned, dramatic voice when speaking about literature or your own writing.

signed Robert Kim

(Mark Branaman & David Foster Wallace,
March 1986, published in
The Piety Center Newsletter, April 1st, 1986)
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