

Folkestone Triennial – Amanda Beech

Panel Discussion: Art and Resistance

Folkestone

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Art and Resistance - Art and Change

How do we understand societal change to happen, and the role of art within these processes?

First, I'd like to look at three comprehensions of resistance and change:

1) Art has laboured under the ideal that it leads social change, that it is instrumental to it. It achieves this claim by asserting itself as transcendent to the political, as if it can effect our circumstances from the outside. This is of course the claim of a resistant political left. However, this freedom *from* and *over* the political has been largely understood to fail, since we know that art cannot be free from power, money, beliefs, and ideas that art participates within the space it occupies. Any art that would have faith in such a freedom would be understood as naive, idealistic and theological, as it returns a politics of resistance to the conditions that it had fought against.

2) This attempt to deal with the real factors of a politics of art has led to an interest in un-freedom. This lack of freedom, the finitude of art that is now defined by its circumstances, has, for some, articulated the crisis for art. However, through art this crisis is expressed as a pleasure in constraint; it's a form of tragic art. This is where artists spend hours making art that revels in the success of its failure, brokenness, or lack of achievement.

3) We have also seen strategies that seek to place themselves within the system, to appropriate the language of the 'other' with some aim to manipulate it, turn it around, and to change the conditions of power from within. For some this is called private irony, for others over-identification, and there are other terms too, that we could apply here.

Choice – origin and end

Each of these approaches is settled within a discourse of freedom, this is their goal. Each also share the principle of *choice* as the defining point of such a freedom. They *need this freedom of*

choice to effect the freedom that they seek to achieve. This already sounds a little contradictory and also perhaps ironic.

More specifically, the positions that are chosen in the examples I have just mentioned all presuppose an originary *location* of choice in itself. In example one, we see the assumption that a stable position against power can be occupied. In the second case, art becomes a self-knowing description of its status as the product of power – spawned but nevertheless distinct from it – a bad reflection of the real of power. In the third case, there is the assumption that we can participate with power, behaving in the same way and using the same language, but all the time knowing that we have different ends in mind – here we see the distorted reflection of power that works through a discourse on camouflage.

The problem here is more telling when we see that the choices that are available to us, and those that we take, are limited by the ideology of choice and its bedfellow the principle of our individual freedom. Choice, here, has meant: do we choose to make political art? Or, do we make aesthetic art? Do we make art for the market? Or, do we make art for the unprivileged: those that have no voice and are not heard? Do we make ‘alternative art’, or ‘mainstream art’? Avant-gardist or neo-con? Political or ethical?

Choice privileges a type of mastery, a type of distance that we can afford; it’s a luxury economy. But our choices are constituent of standardized options, categories of action, and these limit choice towards habit formation where strict connections between what things look like and what they mean are correlated by us and for us and defined by this concept of an inalienable right to choice itself. All of this furthers our sense of crisis for the image, and a crisis for choice itself. But as I have argued, choice is not a part of a politics. It is, moreover, the operational structure of neo-liberalism. And, to reiterate, the type of finitude or crisis that this knowledge produces, where art is caught up in either ironic self-consciousness or a logic of failure and redemption, were not and are no longer correct for a politics.

So, rather than allow this to return us to our second example – that is, ‘the crisis and failure loving art’ that knows just how it’s *not working* – we must ask: what would it be to move past this dimension of choice, this fascination with the individual subjective rights, and the privileging of art as a form that must reflect on its own nature or transcend it?

Should we march?

What type of art can face up and meet the demands of the conditions of the reality in which it finds itself? The current conditions of protest across Europe and the Middle East, and, of course, our own, very local experiences of meeting the education cuts, have highlighted further that a politics based on choice and freedom no longer makes any sense in terms of the crisis we now face. The freedom-based worry about whether we are making art or marching, fighting or talking, should now be put to one side. These are worries about the ritualisation of politics and art - that art and politics might become confined to separate folk traditions if they don't seek to learn lessons from each other. In other words, the march isn't imaginative enough and art is not programmatic enough.

But problematically, the slogan for *this* particular protest often goes: "If only we could overcome the image". Here, the symbolic economies that are central to art, as much as the power of numbers attending a protest march, are wrongly understood to be superficial, unworkable and detrimental to change. This anxiety about art and politics is rooted in an ethics of choice, and eventually turns out to be an aesthetic complaint that worries about the image as a category-form of finitude. To put this another way: this is a worry that the image is not able to produce difference outside of what are understood to be its own traditions.

In opposition to this, it's important to think about how the images that we go to work with in order to challenge, get and keep power are crucial to politics. Instead, art must forget its love affair with difference as its categorical imperative - and as the core of its self-traditionalisation. Instead, art must now assert its claim to a redefinition of what it can be according to truth.

Decision time

When it comes to *truth*, we are in the context of decision not choice. We are not choosing *between* things, laying out objects for re-categorization and modification; i.e. the moving about *of the same* just to make slightly different modificatory patterns. Rather, decisions are now prescient and these shape new political formations. This turns us away from 'art as the novelty of new forms', where choice *must* express our freedom, and towards the courage of our convictions. In that sense, art is not the key to social change. Instead, it is capable (as are other forms of creative,

imaginative and critical actions and images) of generating *new truths*. This force of naming is what art offers as its politics. Remember, this is not at the cost of art's freedom - since this never existed in the first place - and complaining, feeling sad, or even making this lack of freedom a point of interest results in its deeper recession to the private.

Art, therefore, cannot promise change, nor is it capable of resistance. Both of these demands to art are based on a concept of freedom and choice, and both play back into the logic of neo-liberalist privileging of subjectivity, privacy, self-interest and gain. The bad faith that choice, freedom, change and resistance offer are namely that we can work instrumentally, we can create a system of 'cause and effect' conditions towards the achievement of some final emancipatory goal. We know already from Darwin that this is some form of humanist fantasy. And, we know from Adorno and Horkheimer that this concept of mastery becomes the central dialectic of another nature, a 'human nature'.

What I've tried to lay out here briefly is the problem of three forms of attitude, or even three attitudes of form, which are: a resistant, a dialectical, and a constructive politics. Each, and sometimes despite themselves, take choice, freedom and change as the assumed entitlement of and goal for a politics. Duly, this faces deep contradictions. First, the work of achieving freedom can't be done without institutionalizing an inalienable and therefore naturalized notion of *freedom of choice* from the start. And, second, we can see that this theory of action is limited due to its calling upon the same principles of the power that it is opposed to.

Finally, to come back to our theme for the panel today in particular, a world without resistance (explicit, covert or otherwise) asks us to think how a politics might now be thought. Significantly, if we think about our condition in the context of materialism, we need to understand our situation as contingent, that is, our actions aren't guaranteed. However the fact of our actions being contingent does not lead us to passivity, but rather it leads us to the demand that we rethink both art *and* politics - that we rethink our assumptions on causation. Whilst a lot of art still goes to work with this faith in resistance and choice intact, this *doesn't mean that we can't* shift our focus to an art that *can* meet the terms of the realism that I am describing. Such an approach should not mean that art is caught in the dilemma of being, on the one hand, 'the ideal, and, on the other hand, 'unreal'. Rather, the image being free from freedom and from faith can now exercise another form of power.

