

A standard comprehension of curatorial practice is conditioned upon the organizing of relations between objects and meaning, between art and its perception and between objects and other objects. Art becomes a system of management-power.

A widespread tendency established in a culture of critique in art and curatorial practice responds to this 'primacy of the organizational' by employing it to produce 'open frameworks of interaction'. Here we see the claim that the art world is the provider of a framework that allows us to indulge within a form of egalitarian 'openness' through coalescence with the 'open' nature of the image. These frameworks of Art, whether they are built around the thrills of theatrical anxiety (antagonism) and/or an experience of participatory social inclusion ask us to move through experiences, sensations and encounters within the realm of the curatorial, where the object-image becomes a relative part of a wider organizational whole. The hope for the present and defining conditions of curatorship is this claim: the regulatory powers of art world systems (curation for example as one of those systems) will be able to insure themselves against problematic instrumentalisms of the image, and its due entanglement with dominance. Through organization art can be free. Following this logic, curation protects us – even from itself! A key consequence of this principle of the organizational image is that it results in irony. This is most visible when we see that this organizational attitude is equally available in practices that appear as the opposite; in an aesthetics of inaesthetics, flux and chaos, practices that privilege the sense of material over the idealism of representational concepts. However, both these visibly organized and disorganized forms of the curatorial turn out to be a form of social realism, that is an ideal realism, and result in a comprehensive reflection of power as a site of totalization. The curatorial in this vein of the free, disorganized and experiential expression as much as in the trenches of systems aesthetics tells us that we are all subject to central and defining conditions of power from which we cannot move one inch away. Both these positions – that of the open, or of the self-consciously constrained – turn out to correlate a theory of constraint to the materialities of economic dominance and consequently naturalize both.

As these attitudes to power, and the role of art become entrenched within the artworld; valorized by left wing critics, enjoyed by students, believed in by artists, purchased by collectors and funded by agencies, it is clear that the terms of these mirrors of consciousness, the mythologies of critique, power and the image must be addressed because their time is outdone. They have exceeded the crisis that has fuelled them. Indeed, these weak and dreamlike attitudes to what art can be, tell us that curators, artists and artworks simply aid and abet the conditions of the capitalistic status quo. These attitudes to critique present us with forms that are at best commodities. In the face of this desperate and compelling problem for art, for our understanding of the image, and for our comprehension of the political role that culture plays, we must ask what it would mean to work with images and understand their potential for a politics. What would it be to move past these problematic realisms as ideal experiences and reflections to examine the possibility for a future of the image without limits? Is such thinking possible, and if it is, what does this demand for our actions?

Following the narrative, or 'literary turn' in philosophy that gained influence with mid-1960s structuralism, we have now also become familiar with the curatorial turn. The two moves have particular similarities: The curatorial turn has also meant a form of linguistic turn, a turn towards the materiality of language. It has meant a renewed focus on the mechanisms of the distribution of the image, its placing, its siting and the management of its interpretative field. Alongside this, just as the narrative turn reversed the direction of traditional metaphysics and pointed any mark of transcendence back to its linguistic, local, material and substantive claims in a committed post-structuralism, the curatorial turn has also moved away from representational elements of the image, and instead has looked to a world of objects and their place in systems, arrangements, choreography and organization.

This primacy of 'the organizational' viewed through the axis of the curatorial, whilst appearing to be deeply administrative, as I have already indicated above, has actually understood itself as a bulwark against, on the one hand, the instrumentalization of the image *within the political*, and on the other hand, against the idealization of the image *for the political*. In many senses it has pressed hard to avoid its authority of the organizational impulse towards re-configuring spaces in the name of security and freedom. By doing so, curation, not unlike late 20th Century critical arts practices, has attacked essentially what it sees to be the representational problem of the image. This is namely that the image is dogmatic and non-dialogical, that it

attaches itself to a normative (universal) referent that aims beyond itself and us to a true reality that we cannot contest. Now, this representationalist problem is also an instrumentalist problem: It is a problem of language and of power, where forms of bad power are understood to be connected with, indeed to produce, the stability between image and meaning, and cause and effect. A 'good' left-wing practice would necessarily then seek to dislodge what it sees to be the representational conditions that lock in interpretation between signs and signifiers for these inhibit our basic freedom to create new meanings and new identities.

But, this dark side of representationalism is alive and well in a society that adopts art as an icon of freedom as well as an actor of social change. The ambivalence of these two roles for art (as change maker and agent of freedom) can be read in common genres of public production in their tendency to oscillate between promoting art as the monumental and yet entertaining object of our united pleasure, and art as the pedagogic friend of civil society – what we commonly refer to as 'socially engaged practice'. The primary genres we are given here are two forms of cultural and political economy that invariably come at us from above and below: the thrills of entertainment and tourism in a spiraling industrial mediatized environment of shock and awe – big bucks big art – or the ethical moment of artistic practice – an art that knows us, and sits and talks with us 'on the ground'. The social instrumentalism of the image by art and its managers alike has awakened an increasing fear of art's critical and political purchase, especially when the options that lie outside these modes of practice seem to locate art only within the small white stables of the international art fair. But the deeper horror is that the image might be a mere referent of the reality of power in the material world – that images are incapable of a politics that would move beyond propaganda, since in this schema images are only means to particular ends. This is the totalitarian horror that Walter Benjamin identified in his *Work of Art* essay as the aestheticization of politics that leads to the technologizing of society and its self-imprisonment.

Given this, it is easy to see why the curatorial turn's disavowal of hypostatizing meaning and its predilection for method seem necessary. And as we know, this has taken the form of a hyper-relationality; where the making of art and curation share a focus on methodology as form and content – the image becomes curation that spotlights the processional, the unlocated ambiguity, interdisciplinarity and border-crossing (transgression).

This approach to curation as an attitude to art, and its exhibition has been played out in various antirealisms and phenomenological practices, as well as tangled combinations of the two. As this is a Biennial essay, it's suitable that we address the problem through other large scale art exhibitions. So to develop these points, let's turn to another Biennale, in Venice.

In Robert Storr's 2007 Venice Biennale we are encouraged to 'think with the senses and feel with the mind', an instruction that tries to conjure exactly a world in which knowledge is overcome in a denial of all forms of reference, and where instead we are asked to embrace a world of the sensory in which we can luxuriate, where experience embodies meaning in a deep ambience of colour, image and form. This all-encompassing curatorial attitude of the Biennale goes hand in hand with its sprawling geography, but also its marketization in an increasingly global context. Here the curatorial approach aids and abets the coalescence of physical, ideological and economic forces across a horizontal plane of affectual experience. A curatorial attitude ostensibly premised on the articulation of a deeper freedom turns out to be absolutely commensurate with the index of neo-liberal politics. The kind of warm sentiment expressed by Storr's Biennale that implies that *everything is included and welcomed in its diversity* quickly becomes an exclusive statement, because what is censored is the thought that thinks beyond difference¹.

¹ See Alain Badiou (2010), specifically his comparison between the notion of Gesamkunst- werke and the totalizing operations of global capital. Badiou comments on the dream of totalization in art, and this certainly is analogous to this approach to curation: "Some artists today are thinking that there is a possibility to fuse all the artistic forms, it's the dream of a complete multimedia. But it's not a new idea. As you probably know, it was the idea of Richard Wagner, the total art, with pictures, music, poetry and so on. So the first multimedia artist was Richard Wagner. And, I think multimedia is a false idea because it's the power of absolute integration and it's something like the projection in art of the dream of globalization. It's a question of the unity of art like the unity of the world but it's an abstraction too."

Here the administrative world of the curatorial remains paramount, because we are asked once more to focus on *a theory of relations*, one that must deny the possibility that the operations of curation, and within them the interpretations of particular artworks, could be capable of being or meditating something else. Instead, the constructions that we encounter are understood as dumb but 'feeling' objects. In this world where all forms of reference are denied, we encounter two problems: (1) that a politics of the image is bought at the price of an impoverishment of its meaning and (2) that in doing so we enter a deep(er) form of administrative power since the symbolic power of art as being always already intact extends to the regimes of belief that support and justify its production.

But what is also censored here is the potentiality of meaning in itself. The curatorial as it is described here allows us to think about the connected but open field of relations that the image is seen to symbolize. In fact, the proposed reading of the curatorial as an attitude to the form of the image *as use* (as a means to free the potentiality of relations), paradoxically, constrains relations to the possibilities of what can happen, delimiting what objects and experiences mean, and what can be imagined. To that extent art, under this condition, becomes an empty metaphor, or in other words a sign that is full of nothing: a vessel for the ethics of social hope.

The problems that the curatorial turn faces are not only evidenced in this mixture of affectual idealism and administrative formalism, but are equally alive in forms of antirealism. Skip forward two years, same location, the Venice Biennale 2009.

Elmgreen and Dragset curate the Nordic and the Danish Pavilions. The Nordic Pavilion plays the role of a form of private gallery space and the Danish Pavilion takes the role of the private home of the art collector. This is part of the curatorial statement:

The public will be guided on a tour by a real estate agent through a 'For Sale' Danish Pavilion, and will be told the story of the Ingmar Bergman-style family dramas that used to haunt this house. A long swimming pool will lead the visitors to the neighbouring Nordic Pavilion – a flamboyant bachelor's pad. Inside they will encounter the domestic remnants of the mysterious Mr. B, and be met by a group of young male hustlers sipping vodka tonics in an environment that could be a case study motif taken from a David Hockney painting.

- Danish and Nordic Pavilion (2009)

The experience is one of subversion, excess and power gone wrong. A body lies face down in a swimming pool, art supplies the dark erotic demands of private vanity, and as we move to the darker recesses of the private home, things get worse. This is a journey through the truth of the cultural psyche in neo-liberal capital. The show excavates the psychology of art through the figure of the nihilistic, egoistic consumer who has too much money to care. Thus, the show enjoys the idea that the economic value of art is art's big dirty secret, forcing its point through by eclipsing this with the revelations of illicit sex and death as ambiguous suicide-murder. Elmgreen and Dragset's hyper-fictionalized film set, B-movie-style pleasuredrome further spectacularizes the money-sex-death dimension as the dramatic-real of the art world. This in an exposé that manages an aesthetics of excess in order to smuggle in our education to art's deep reality.

This approach to the image seems thoroughly Adornian, since for Adorno, in order for the image to remain valent it must escape its own nature – it must wrest itself away from its potential to become the thing that it mediates. As Ray Brassier has put it, this articulation of the nature of the image is centred upon a terror of its mimetic power: the image is capable of becoming like the thing that it resembles, "but without resembling it according to any criterion of conceptual equivalence." (Brassier 2007: 45) This concept-less similitude spells out an 'identitarian fear', a formalism that smacks of later post-structuralist fears of realism that haunt both Lyotard's and Baudrillard's theorizations of a politics of the image. For them, this notion of realism is complicit

with power, and marks a dimension of the 'evil' nature of the image; and for Adorno it is the image's success at simulation that weakens self-mastery and signals a regression to animal compulsion.

Quite clearly the response to understanding power as 'nature' (uncontrollable, autonomous and irrational) takes the form of antirealism, but whether curation seeks to manage itself and power through the construction of self-contained fictions (Venice Biennale, Danish and Nordic Pavilions 2009) or seeks to immerse us in this world without bounds (Venice Biennale 2007), what we end up with across these practices is the construction of twisted anthropocentric reflections of either the 'real art-world' or the 'real world'. The territories that are produced are little pseudo-democracies that invest in weak fictions of freedom, and that are actually non-distinct from the regimes of power and belief that define the politics of neoliberalism. But, incredibly, it is here that the image is charged with the potential to subvert normative forms of dominant power by accessing its own deeper reality. The image is natural and contingent, but at the same time it is an active agent with a role in a particular process. Crucially, this contradiction bears out the consequence of an erroneous connection between empiricism and naturalism, where an objective material knowledge of world is capable of accessing a true nature. Such false realisms are a result of a belief in and a fear of bad power, and can only be replied to with *another* idealism: the notion that the curatorial can trump the real from the inside because it can shed, undermine and incapacitate the referentiality of language.

Here we see the *difficulty* of producing a knowledge of the image as the center for a politics of it. This reaction to both image and power is written through the Nordic and Danish curation, where we see the same desire to rationalize the image as a means to manage power – and the same fear that image/power is essentially irrational. The exhibition works in a mode of self-destruction, disavowing its own content in pantomime style, this deliberate self-annihilation of burlesque excess and decadence over-identifying the power of the collector in the form of satirical caricature made larger.

But it is this form of thinking that persists within the dominant and visible formats of a championed art-world critique. The image is understood as always already inconsistent, decentred and unstable, whilst at the same time, and because of this, it is predisposed to similitude, unity and normativity. Thus, according to this bad logic, to remain political the image must be rescued from its terminus – the location of meaning.

The two generic approaches to the image identified above, which on the face of it might seem to be diametrically opposed, bear a shared identification: both return an apparent interest in the agency and operations of the image to a skepticism of the image itself (as opposed to an interrogation of the correctness of the language that is employed for such descriptions) that is borne out in a confusion between naturalism and empiricism; and both ultimately struggle to do away with the causal yardstick of instrumentality that they seek to move against. It is here that we access the core of the curatorial conceit and the paradox that it cannot resolve: that the distributory mechanisms of curation – whether this is measuring, comparing, uniting or antagonizing – crash up against its desire to access and secure the 'openness' of language. Rehearsing this problematic, an ideal realism is matched across these two genres – conflicted within themselves – expressed on the one hand in a mastering of the relation between the image and its social and political meaning, and on the other hand, the asserting of the image as the expressive form of the 'pure' relation in itself.

Bearing this in mind my central point about these approaches to meaning is that they assume too quickly: (1) that the work of producing meaning is tied to a *theory* of causation that is always already a force of bad power; (2) that the mechanism that destabilizes meaning is free from the problems of myth, power and representation that it seeks to transcend; and (3) that the image itself is naturally 'free'. Consequently, these practices present a nonsense argument that is impossible to actually put into practice. This is because the image must be understood in two distinct ways at the same time: as mutually weak and special or evil and banal – a tool for power – but at the same time the figure for freedom. In this schema the last stop for the image is unreason.

The charge of the Irish Biennial is to comprehend the processes of the agitational. And this is a labour. It is also to understand that power is not something that is/has a negative affect. Agitationism as a category, defined here as flows of events, naturalizes agitation to our experiences. As the notion of imperceptible peace

and the persistence of conflict saturates our lives as well as the persistent understanding of neo-liberal capitalist democracy as the site where we clamour for our rights in an ever complex field of difference, we might say that the identity of agitationism is capitalist. But by naturalizing agitation, agitation as a thing in itself, now falls into the background as some kind of passive universalism, and we are asked to turn to the empirical complexities of our experience. The idealism that would define agitationism as a means to secure some re-definition of the human is not called for. Instead we are asked to think through the systems we produce and value; the contract between capitalist universals and the potentiality for the project of naming (a kind of non-idealized and unfree autonomy).

In the face of the illogical and non-redemptive failure of these art-world critiques we now can think about a radical untying of what we understand to be the necessary and the instrumental. This is to understand in particular not just what the image can mean, but to comprehend the function of images without a figure or a measure of the human, its power, or its freedom as its central means or end. This is a question of meaning *without us*, and the shuffling off of a habitual understanding of interpretation as that specifically plural site for these freedoms that produces our individuated identities – as if art was a personal message to us and a general message about us.

The thought of the fact of the inaccessibility to what it is that we share confirms that we can no longer identify the political task of the image as the means to any event that would secure our becoming. However, it is crucial to point out that, although this faith in the correspondence between image and reality is undone, the possibility of a politics that requires images to model reality is not undermined but potentialized. We cannot theorize the relation *between* image and reality but the image is capable of a reason that can understand reality beyond the reach of current representations that, as we have witnessed, return us to the realism of capitalist power. This is certainly not a return in any sense to the bad faith that we encountered earlier, the unhappy consciousness where failure measured is our negative space of freedom. Instead, it speaks of how we can read the destruction of other monolithic and socializing concepts of life and the image that include a concept of society.

This leads to a final proposition, which must remain unexplored here, that faces the question of the artwork anew. This is the question of the artwork as an organizing force in the world. Its informational capacity metered in its presence and its operation. As a start, we have untied the image from these anxieties of relation by acknowledging the habits and traditions within which our theories of freedom, affect and access preside.

With this destruction, we can turn to understanding the image as reason without principle and cause without ontology, turning us to navigate a different and alien world.

References

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