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How Art Ought to Think
Resuscitating the epistemological project

To situate its critique and, by extension, its value, Art has often proposed itself as a space that eludes or opposes reason. Through this, art's critique can afford us certain temporal and spatial freedoms from the dominance that reason brings. This type of thinking is most often non-specific; it is not directed towards any type of thought, or thought in particular, and in this sense, art transcends aesthetic categorization and works in the field of non-representational economies that refuse the casual explanations of Kantian sufficient reason. This critique as an antagonist of reason is evidenced in paradigms of the sublime as well as in poststructuralist deconstructions of meaning across the work of Baudrillard, Lyotard and Derrida. Here we find a proliferation of images in what Eco discussed as 'the open work,'¹ which guarantees a form of adolescent anarchism of the image that reason cannot order, reproduce or comprehend: an immanent critique beats the normativity of reason.

The dominance that critique affords to reason conjures reason within the dogmatism of a faith in the Enlightenment and its diabolical affects. The view of reason and its stamp in the political can be traced all the way from Colonial power to now, in societies of control, the ordering of minds and bodies, spaces and meaning itself, where we confront what in many senses appears to us as a world that we cannot reconcile with reason but is a product of it. Today, we are well aware that this world borne from reason is a world of complex immaterial labors, elusive markets and ubiquitous forms of power; a world that exacerbates and sustains ruthless hierarchical divisions whose naturalization further aids and abets further abuses of power.

The equivalence between reason, representationalism and over determining forms of political power is a narrative that subtends and pervades modern and contemporary philosophical critique, but this view is not only shared by the Left. It is also highlighted by the Right in a popular suspicion of the public intellectual that pervades global media and society, where suspicion towards any demonstration of thinking remains live. Both Left and Right share an opposition to order in this sense; the Left in the name of egalitarianism, and the Right in the name of a politics of individuation, difference and accumulation. Together, these condemnations of reason identify reason as a cultic value that is destined to evil forms of dominance. Reason is a threat to both community and self-hood.

But, from the studio to the essay, it is normatively expected that the work of contemporary art is to make us *think*. What is this thinking? The answer is that, for contemporary art, the general claim *to think* must operate without telos, project or aim. It discloses the bottom-line belief that by dint of *being constructed*, by simply *being*, art (ironically) represents the opposition to the normativity of reason itself from the side of critique as a mode of a non-representational being as presence.

To make some first observations, these accounts fail to make a distinction between reason as cult, reason as the base constitution of what it means to be human (as nature), and reason as labor or work.² These distinctions are key to diagnosing the characterization of reason that

¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Trans. Anna Concogni, Harvard University Press, 1989.

² Ernst Junger's diagnosis of the labor of reason in his book *The Worker, Dominion and Form*, (1932) clarifies these errors.

has defined a critical culture for some time, where critique as resistance precedes reason. Due to these unproductive demarcations and *indistinctions*, reason is overdetermined as a fateful inevitability that manifests ruthless hierarchies in the political; it is a patsy for the status quo. These characterizations of reason therefore require re-thinking with reason itself.

Robert Brandom's work has dealt in detail with what he refers to as the discursive space of reasons. Across many works he writes about how reason demands a public space where we navigate and construct norms. In "the space of reasons" we live in the image, but ask each other to agree on conditions by which to live, and to orientate a future that we take seriously. What reason asks for, and the thing that might scare us the most today, is the offer of potential for agreement that we might then have to act on; i.e. that there is no easy way to communitarian consensus and that voluntaristic free will is a myth. Reason is the act of thinking that justifies itself through producing arguments. It is the space where we make sense of what is given to us, and through this we produce material and conceptual inferences that constitute the basis for life, and therefore it is the space where what is given is contested. Reason then is thinking in context, but it is also the space in which the future is oriented. The logical processes of conceptual inference do not call upon empirical grounds that correlate a claim to a thing, but are abductive and demand commitments that lead us to other forms of thought, where premises generate conclusions in future dynamics. Reason then, is the space within which judgements are made and formed, and the discursive space of reasons is where the task of reason is taken, not just to think in public, but to reason better. Here, reason is marked as a political project as opposed to a description of the nature of thinking.

These observations about reason ask us first to think about how art thinks, but also how art has defined this in its history. Given this historical claim to art's nature as critique and the self-delimiting factors of this approach, what are alternative and different comprehensions of art's claim to a critical project now, and can these be made in the name of reason?

With this question I explore the limits of both Art's claim to criticality as much as its claim against reason. From this I determine an art that is undeterred by the thought of thinking as the work of reason. In this site of a different and possible world of and for Art, I seek to reorganize art's epistemological project; a place that enables art to direct itself to how it ought to think.

Art and Consciousness

Art has demonstrated its critical explication of art as manifest thought in a self-conscious critique of the means of its own production. In the history of Art we have seen art produce pictures of "human consciousness" as a point of reflection on the question of what we can and cannot know; what is within and what is beyond our control. Here, explicates a thinking about itself in itself, where the means and ends of consciousness are manifest in aesthetic appearance: The existential primacy of consciousness has been taken by art as an object of artistic inquiry – art about the author for instance.³ This means that Art has attempted to

³ Gustav Courbet's work "The Desperate Man" 1843-45, lubricates this problem of reason where we apparently swing between this depiction of the artist's mind, and a "Modernist-scientific rendition" of realist life in such works as *The Artist's Studio: A Real Allegory* 1855, in his empirical realism of everyday life, to its apparent opposite, the manifest ego of private artistic suffering in the romance of his self-portrait. Obviously, Courbet's realism is fascinating in this regard as the realist works all aggrandize the artist in some form or other, the joy of self-reference as person.

understand what consciousness is by distancing us, our selves, from it as if it were a thing that could be represented but not understood. It therefore abolishes the very idea that knowledge can be reproduced, or be causally determined, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*, as in the case of Didactic art. We see this gesture to the irreducible in the Romantic art of the sublime through to Surrealism and psycho-analysis inspired practices that would mine the subconscious. Via these Modernisms, Art has been asserted as an epistemological project, a place to know what knowing is, to question what knowing is, and in doing so to state the condition of what it means to be human. In this category, art claims a form of understanding beyond mechanized power.

Modern antirealist Art shows us a curve in this story, since its work is central to the shift in the task of explicating knowledge as a process and a system subtended by logic. Here, we encounter an art that focusses on making explicit the form and mechanism of language that constitutes world. A structuralist inspired analytical Conceptual art furnishes this example, where we see a turn away from a (Greenbergian) formalism - that would focus on art's content (or meaning) *as form* - to an anti-formalism that would make art's content its process. A Benjaminian aesthetics of inauthenticity and reproducibility dominates this landscape, as well as non-human art as tool-like means of production. Significantly, both Formalism and Conceptualism indulge in explicit conversations with the definition of art as ontology seeking to explore and achieve Art's relation to freedom, whether this is set as autonomy to come - a linear historiographic becoming towards an essential beginning of art - or in the latter, an impossible extraction from the given of subjective perspectivism; a performance played out in the construction of tautological circles made through the repetition of this knowledge.

Conceptual works such as those by Kossuth, Nauman, Haacke, Martin, Lippard and many others, narrated the paradox of art as an epistemological project. This project of thinking consciousness would re-instate a form of delirious immersion in systems, and that reignited a spectre of unreason at the heart of reason itself.⁴ In such cases, the desire to know 'what consciousness is' is eclipsed by an acknowledgement of a fundamental limitation: that is the impossibility to extract ourselves from our own perspective or state of the situation. We cannot be free from our own thoughts and, therefore, we can never know absolutely what consciousness is. The mind constructs the values that it judges.⁵ Contemporary critical practices defined critique in the late Twentieth Century by demonstrating this knowledge. They articulated the project of knowing as a feedback loop often manifest in an aesthetics of tautological performative gestures. This knowledge of ourselves as trapped within the conditions of our own judgements, unable to escape from our own pathologies, desires, spontaneities and myths, has communicated (in a very Adornian sense⁶) our tragic condition - that we are constrained to the unreality of our lived experience.

⁴ See for example Bruce Nauman's *Slow Angle Walk, (Beckett Walk)*, 1968, and Agnes Martin's *Grids* that would allocate no place for the ego and associate this with a unique emancipator gesture within life systems.

⁵ This has been described as the "Third Man Problem" by Aristotle, derived from Plato's *Parmenides*; discussed in Quine's account of translation, regressive ontology and his critique of indeterminacy in *Word and Object* (1960) and Kurt Godel's "Second Incompleteness Theorem" in which a system cannot demonstrate its own consistency (1931).

⁶ See the work of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* that proposed that the mistake of dialectics was to envisage a way through and out of the conditions of nature as given. In response, negative dialectics takes the condition of power as already given; and this notion of power is identified as capital and its culture industry.

What we see here is how a crisis of knowledge becomes embraced as the highest form of expressing human understanding in *and as* crisis. Explication forecloses reason in the name of knowledge. It would seem that art cannot live without this regressive and dark epistemology, since this expression of finitude as absolute has characterized our contemporary definition of critique and sustained an art market – a healthy economy of critique.

The fact is remarkable enough that we have to restate it: This expression of knowledge (as a traumatic space of no return and no future) claims to critique dominant power. It is remarkable because it is easy to see how this expression has sustained the myth of the art-market's good subconscious. It maps directly onto our comprehension of capitalism as process and figure, and how this fails to interact within this space. It is this critique that defines both the flexibility and banality of a pseudo-conceptualism, embedded more than ever in the nomenclature of a post-conceptual art today.

Through this gluing together of un-freedom and knowledge, art becomes a form of self-mapping via self-reference. Criticality, or what we might call art's epistemological project, is defined by the narration of us and our quest to know 'self' by producing abstract images of 'self' as the inaccessible real. What might have started as a set of questions regarding how systems of knowledge, language and representation work at the level of human *use*, now slides into forms of self-conscious practice founded upon a recursive formation of art with human identity. And so, we have the three figures conjoined in a theistic nature – art, human, knowledge.

Two forms of reason

Wilfrid Sellars in his text "Mental Events"⁷ makes a distinction between two forms of reason; that of sapience and that of sentience. It is the "recognizing something as something" that forms the basic sentience of all humans. Reflecting on Sellars's point, we could say that this basic form of reason, where self-reference constructs world and makes life possible, is equivalent to the ultimate critical gesture of Conceptual Art. This is the life of this primitive form of thought as a performative nominalism.

I refer this to the base notion of a Duchampian claim most synonymous with the Ready-made, that "This is Art". This nominalism could be understood as art's sentient nature – a thing that might precede its sapient abilities. A Duchampian conceptualism is ironic in that it makes artistic nominalism its nature through the very process of de-naturalizing art's claim to represent Art. Here, art's *right to be* is brought into the foreground through explicating art as a system - the means of production, structure and mechanism becomes content. Ultimately, however, these forms remain unquestioned because they are highlighted as mere semantics that can never match the ideal of art, but will always be enough to stand in for this in the moment. Whilst conceptual art's skeptical project de-naturalizes art at the level of the sensible in specific gestures - in that each gesture, each object, each sound is claimed and therefore questioned discretely - this move ultimately naturalizes critique as the generic definition of art, because without a fully articulated ideal, and without a serious commitment to language, then we are left with art as an infinite process. To make an art that explicates the notion that nominalism is the nature of art as the claim of critique is trivial, since in

⁷ *In The Space of Reasons, Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, Eds. Kevin Scharp, Robert B. Brandom, Cambridge, Mass, 2007, 282-302.

sustaining a critique of sufficient reason art only engages with its necessary condition.

We could say that many artistic practices are not concerned with defining what art is or what art is *not* anymore – who cares about the art-life argument, or the distinction between reality and appearance? Who cares about claiming the crisis of meaning and bemoaning the loss of project? We have seen how a turn to the local has abated these desires, as well as claims to action and experience ... but we know that this localism fails to deal with the larger universal problem and desire for meaning that catalyzed this action in the first place.

The idea of challenging forms of dominance, by revealing the truth of the construction of power that subtends it, also seems unviable in the pluralist era of neo-liberal capitalism. These Marxian inspired conclusions seem to be weakly-made points when the everyday is always already hyper-commoditized, when there is no such thing as nature, and when we are always already implicated in any judgment no matter how objectively it is proposed.

As an apparent corollary to the historicization and devolution of these critical methods are practices that involve themselves in research methodologies that are connected to other disciplines. These might be sociological, literary, scientific, and philosophical, or occupy other modes of distributive mechanisms that are less associated with the aesthetics of *art-for-art's sake or an interrogation of art's politics*. These aesthetic signs that indicate the idea that art has taken up another discipline, that it has become something else, might make us think that art had other things to talk about than itself, but this would be wrong. Instead, these practices fulfill the very same ethics of difference and the same dualisms that I have described within the normative critical processes of art's history. Art is busy pretending it is something else, taking up residencies in science labs, turning abstract data into equally frivolous decorative abstractions. These shifts to pseudo-function disclose the desire to flee from the conditions of its own ontology of art that is decidedly Kantian – a functional dysfunctionism. This ontology provides grounds for escape; a weak epistemology subtends a naïve naturalism.

The difference between these trans-Modern, or trans-disciplinary contemporary works and works that engage more directly with the question of art is therefore trivial. Both produce an inward spiral - a regressive ontology in either an expansionist ethics of difference or the involuted practice of art's self-explication; they rely upon and produce the *same world*.

Art as Ontology Machine

Problematically, critical conceptualism sustains a conservative portrait of culture according to a liberal paradigm that valorizes the figure of a specific humanity recaptured more than ever in theories of the post-Anthropocene – a world where discourses of the post-human tend to remain obsessed with the human condition at the level of identity, and the question of the *after us* dwells upon the *us*. Self-conception continues to be the limitation and terminus for art because art is given an absolute character that is set to mirror an ontological definition of a particularly liberal subject; the kind whose freedom is innate, and therefore whose task is to retrieve this freedom, to regain it at all costs from all power in life.⁸ My point here is that this

⁸ This (non) philosophical reading of freedom is totalizing in that 'critique by nature' relativizes critical paradigms where each and every critical approach is claimed to have some value by dint of simply *offering* a perspective in a field where all voices seek to be heard. The impossibility to extricate ourselves from norms therefore engenders the organization of Art as a special humanistic transcendental expression, which ultimately denies the significance of

claim to critique against reason is not fit for purpose. Critique stands in Sellarsian terms for the first order of a pathological reason.

These moves underscore art as an ontology machine - a self-generating, self-mapping enterprise, inside of which art cites itself as its own problem to be solved. It is at once *the problem and the solution*, caught in infinitudinal tracks of a non-becoming. These dead ends and repetitions might make us give up on the idea of art as having any epistemological force because the task of scientific knowledge slides into the essentiality of *being as appearance*. On the one hand, we might say that the fate of epistemology is narcissism, and, on the other hand, we could complain that the irony of any explication of knowledge only mythologizes it as inaccessible and yet representable nature. Therefore, in the context of contemporary art, the gesture to vanquish any claim to a principle of sufficient reason evacuates the means to participate in the space of reason.

It is, therefore, very much worth rethinking what art's capacity for conceptual inquiry is today, because it is not the identity of art that should act as the focus for our interest in the "yet to be known". Art's ultimate task is not to determine what Art is. Art cannot be redeemed by refusing its identity as art, or by going down the old liberationists path of freeing itself from its discipline. A strong epistemological project for art includes the emancipatory gesture from freedom and reason as totality in its various forms. The freedom that is afforded to reason de-stabilizes the very idea of art as a space beyond philosophy and instead instantiates art as a place to manifest thought.

If we give up on asserting a cause that precedes Art as a means to explain its social function then the very basis for the name Art must be determined otherwise:

- Art is to invest in the task of making judgements and distinctions between what are correct and incorrect forms of reason, including a healthy skepticism towards this rethinking of the claims of critique as means to hold reason in check. The implications of this are to understand how rationalism is not equal to a principle of sufficient reason, and the work of explication is not the means to determine an inevitable fate.
- Art is to participate in a space that gives and asks for reasons; it is not limited to the explication of how things are so and so ... or this and that ... This extraction from the empirical and the referential must be supported by the idea of reason for reason in itself.
- Art is to take language and thought seriously. To generate a philosophical and linguistic project, it must give up on the idea that it can deliver to us and be for us everything that reason can and cannot communicate. As we have seen, the price of this knowledge has been to lose our grip upon and our claim to future.

As I have described, a suspicion of reason from the Left, and what is often seen in the history of Art, has often presumed a romantic escape from the strictures of power and dominance. On one side, we see this in the tradition of the sublime that goes so far as Lyotardian poststructuralism, where art offering a form of difference that holds a form of wildness,

aesthetic gestures that this knowledge expresses in favor of a trivial concept of Art.

ambiguity, and ineffability through its complex construction, constructing temporal judgements.⁹ On the other side we have seen art approach a more analytical project that would narrate the *impossibility* of both escape and redemption from the inside; this might be recognized in Conceptual Art, for instance, as much as the ironic form of neo-Dadaism in the 1990's. Here, art becomes a site where its knowledge of self is explicated, ironically when the knowledge of self is claimed as irreducible. We result in a knowledge that 'knows' but has no axis to make inferences beyond what it knows. I have also mentioned how this self-narration has been manifest in the discourse of a tragic form of consciousness, where artworks that recognize their limits in the face of the conundrum of reason hinge this very identification on a kind of perverse form of art's redemptive knowledge.

I have outlined how these naïve approaches to solving the problem of reason, as well as the means by which reason has been defined as a problem, can be seen as naïve and incorrect. In this view, I argue that any desire to free us from reason slides into the voice of a conservative bourgeois theism. Ultimately, a rejection of reason in the name of freedom from cause is not only impossible but also stultifying. Cause is essential to building.

Epistemology again

Our working terms set out in this text, *possible* and *world*, are now key, since the construction of the possible demands extensions to novel and different forms and ideas - but these must be seen *as possible*. These constructions *must come from somewhere*, but this place is a world in which we find ourselves alienated. This fact of alienation should not be a deterrent to the production of modal vocabularies, since totalized knowledge is not the goal. A "possible world" invokes the work of the imagination, but this is not to construct a spontaneous hypothesis of "other places", for we know that situating the human as the agent *ex nihilo* – the one who comes from nowhere, without cause or reason to produce the event of change is a dream that merely reproduces the given in the guise of reason.

A different approach is to deal with the condition of the imagination in and as rational processes that extract new forms from the conditions of existence, without over-determining "world as it is", as a means to think the possible. It is important to recognise also that the imagination in and as rational processes does not necessarily fantasize that we are *cause ex nihilo*, where we occupy the space of the real, set as nothingness and nowhere in order to enact the blast of the full potentiality of a God-like creation before reason takes hold. Our possible world is not set within the fictions of 'the anything whatsoever,' for not *any world* will do. Nor does it appeal to the facticity of contingency in a metaphysical sense, where the real is made tacit in empirical reality. Rather, identifying the conditions of the possible from the field of contingency as idea is the means by which the fact of the possible sustains another drive by reason; to picture the world as it ought to be.

⁹ Jean Francois Lyotard's work on the problem of reason as correlative to dominance can be seen across the books *Libidinal Economy* (1974), *Le Differend* (1983) as well as in his work on the Postmodern, where "an art of negation, a perpetual negation . . . based on a never-ending critique of representation that should contribute to the preservation of heterogeneity, of optimal dissensus . . . [it] does not lead towards a resolution; the confrontation with the unrepresentable leads to radical openness" *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* Routledge, 1995, 133.