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A farewell to identity / Who critiques the critic's critics?

Shahin Zarinbal, Berlin, 3rd February 2024

Read during the closing event of "Tell me you belong" to accompany Berger's "Mute Point".

Introduction

"I am going to read a text in two parts. And as if that wasn't enough, because I am the sole reader I am also going to read a small introduction which might work as an attempt to indeed do as I say in the text and "encourage the showing of a flawed and inconsistent person rather than a promise of an artist trope."

I am exhausted and many more adjectives, in more ways than one, I am sure, so are you. I know because when I write a story on my instagram saying that "it should be socially accepted to suddenly start screaming" many of you like it. It is excruciating to witness a genocide unfold in our hands every day, on a small screen, helplessly watching horror. And then witness this horror escalating, constantly, defended and justified by the countries in which we live.

It is a feckless task to attempt to cling on to sanity right now. None of this is sane. It is a travesty. And in this new reality we are faced with overwhelming dilemmas. And beyond the very obvious ones, and as this is solely an intellectual exercise. I think a lot about the futility of luxuries. Luxuries such as making art.

The dilemma of futility vs activity (of course for an artist that also means productivity). In these last few months, I have many times, in my sickbed, considered how to vacate the sickbed of the world in which we live. Move to a kind of nowhere-land - which is actually where I am from - grow vegetables, homeschool our daughter; write and stock my walk-in-larder with thoughts foraged within my own internal landscape instead of being fed from this banquet of malaise, a constant consumption of the spectacle of the world crumbling in on itself, onto us, whilst intermittently being advertised skincare and ergonomic indoor slippers. But it feels like I would renege on a deal if I left the world, and by world I right now mean Berlin. Which leads me to my second thought and fear. I feel felled by circumstance making institutional critique at this moment in time. I both realise the finally acute and urgent element since people know something's rotten in Denmark and are talking about it. But I also realise how ironic it would be to make institutional critique entirely outside of the institution, from which, I am surely blacklisted as someone who exercises freedom of thought and expression which blatantly negates the existing orders... But the truth is that many aspects of my work are only effective within the cultural apparatus it questions. The irony is never lost on me either and the fear of having narcissistic delusions of critical work leading to social redemptions is never far away. But the fear of excluding myself from something I, perhaps right now shamefully, want to belong to, is something rarely admitted in public. But since I do question making critical work to only an already in agreement audience, the idea of only acting in the alternative makes no sense.

But those internal qualms and puerile longing for acceptance pales in comparison to the urge for all artists to have the right to freedom of speech and expression and absolutely no fear of becoming reprimanded for either. And whilst not every artist has to make political art, all art is political and so without those basics protected, art cannot be and will be replaced by a manufacturing of culture."

A farewell to identity

When counternarratives to the notion that people, depending on their identities, have a variable worth, are desperately needed, and thoughts of responsible action vs responsibility for inaction must be philosophised. It seems logical to analyse the elements of our projected selves, before characterising others.

Another logical conclusion might be attempting to de-formalise the identity of the artist as on a higher plane of existence or encourage the showing of a flawed and inconsistent person rather than a promise of a trope.

But how to expose the formulated identity of an artist - the persona, an artist is asked to enact. Or asked? Asked as much as we know that a premeditated idea of an artist still appeals as much as any trope of a creative still has a powerful decree in marketing the curious intellect as a quirk. But as added criterias include conformity and neutrality can we fulfil a role shaped for us by a servile system?

In order to charm the bourgeoisie it is allowed to be a little outlandish, a little flamboyant, a smidge outspoken, the flavour of the party - a cute eccentric. Since no matter the seriousness of an artist, they'll always be, to some, to many, a kind of jester.

And because of these preconceived ideas, identifying as an artist is a performance in itself.

Identity as a concept has long been overhauled by branding, by our ability and desire to be logos, by our innate need to belong. It might appear a mere flimsy surface level symptom, of the side effects of living in an economic model, where the great con that individual capital is gained in mass-consumption, has been pulled off with such a flair that one finds it hard to distinguish between one's own scent and that which has been manufactured for us.

I think perfume is a good analogy for the opulent illusion of the identity of individualism because the charade is so smart, it tricks so many. Even though a scent can be produced and worn en masse, in millions of multitudes, it still signals an idea of the one self. By which we identify ourselves to others and identify others by, both by brand which makes us feel exclusive and by scent which makes us feel ourselves. You smell another and how odd because they smell just like your mother who wears the same scent, but who does not only wear it as a fragrance, as a synthetic layer but, but who's scent it is. Even in a mass manufactured similitude, the identity of individualism can be produced.

An identity can easily become a dogma. A strong identity, an over time, reinforced and cemented identity, an unmovable, unshakable identity inevitably leads to dichotomies of beings. Because if you so clearly are one thing - you cannot be another.

And now a little respite from the reading with a small spectacle to say farewell to a large part of my own identity...

(nail hair to wall)

...and that other might seem a threat to your fully formed self. And in times when the need to reposition oneself to understand the position of the other, this has been made considerably harder by our excessive alignment with the one identity, which we keep being told is a sign of individuality and this is a sign of exclusivity, originality and authenticity. A sales pitch which is a crucial cog in the capitalist system, which expects a return on its investment, where we're sold everything from attire to politics to attitude to the promise of safety and security through identity. Which is why, critical examination of the self and this pinpointing of selfhood according to its accessories, packaging and environment might be a timely and necessary check-up.

When I became a mother, my identity shifted and changed and became a kind of chimaera. Elements of my former self in an entirely new body, the mind slowed but focused, the heart pulsating with, at times, unbearable empathy. It felt like the consequences of a very healthy sickness. When I turned 40 I decided to relinquish the idea of who I might, one day, become and settle into who I found myself being. But with an option to revise, re-educate and reassess.

The difficulties with changing perspectives is also the narrowing down of the parameters of the already existing ones, they can be narrow and tight and constantly shrinking or they can be wide and overwhelming, like an expanding plaza which stretches into an infinity pool towards the horizon in which you wade knee deep searching with fingers for eyes on the bottom for lost metaphorical keys to whom you might be.

Which is why memes like "this is my taste" and on the absolute opposite spectrum, "also my taste" is funny with the right examples but also particularly complex when we find ourselves in a situation in which a surge of dichotomies, no longer limited to memes and tastes and thus identities but to human rights exists. And when the pending pseudo-democratic effacements of our artistic proposition's credibility are juxtaposed by our identity, we're forced to reevaluate the rigidity or mobility of said identity and by what standards it is maintained. And although it'll appear to be an oxymoron, there might need to be some intention for us to break, for us to bend.

Who critiques the critic's critics?

Beuys said everyone's an artist and since we all know everyone's a critic, where does that leave us? When critics are reprimanded for their opinions and artists are becoming systematically censored and chastised for their critical capacity.

Does institutional critique only work if it ends up, retrospectively being housed and celebrated within the institution itself? Should we apply a little Spinoza to Andrea Fraser rubbing herself against the pillars of the Guggenheim in 2001 only to be purchased by The Tate in 2007, supported by Christie's?

Or when staff of the New Museum met with Hans Haacke in a New York *Le Pain Quotidien*, which is really of no importance to the story but fun to say, to let him know that they were unionising and planning to strike when Hans Haacke, grandfather of institutional critique, tells them he can only support their

protest after the opening of his major retrospective with The new Museum because he has visitors arriving from both the US and abroad. (There is of course a “the pain in Le pain” joke to be made here but...)

Inside the plastic covering, if you haven't already suspected, sits an Art Forum magazine. It's a sculpture as allegory for a mute point which is a play on words on the term moot point, which became clear long before Art forum literally, no pun intended, de-professionalized its own critic as a frontier of the de-platforming of critical voices which proved to be only the very first batch in a long list of cancelled, redacted, negated and reprimanded opinions.

We all know the story by now since it's become a kind of cancellation lore. The critical agency that we already knew was purchased and sold, finally lost its emperor's new clothes, ironically landed in a death by advertisers and cash-rich lobbyists.

Counternarratives are desperately needed when a logical conclusion of being in favour of all, offending no one, assuring one's own belonging and future successes is to offer sterile objective Laconic responses when afforded critical agency.

It might all seem like anti-market sentimentalism, and this is after all the high period of the manageably, moderately sceptical, never dogmatic, ambiguously arguing without offending advertisers, financier's patronage or the magnitude of the idea that artists should be keeping to the arts, instead of politics - whatever that may mean.

When an already many times mis-stepping self-professed beacon of critique of discourses of art becomes unable to critique the discourses of powers of cultural and critical politics the aspirations of a critical practice quietens in a deafening fall, echoing a death rattle sounding like the often referred to “philanthropy” of the bought and sold foundational condition for commodifying culture by the pseudo-liberal grand bourgeoisie.

If there is no Separation of discursive borders between critic and advertiser, lobbyist and collector, artist and institution then where can the legitimization of critical autonomy begin if the corrupt purchase-power doesn't stop at their own displeasure.

It is of course a not-so-new reality of cultural production as an ecosystem where the same beneficiaries find, buy, promote, acknowledge, collect, escalate, amplify, celebrate, sell, and might condition and reprimand. Which leads to inevitable submission to philistines posing as patrons, with caveats, parameters and conditional support who attempt mass-cultural control and ideological prohibitions, censoring under the conditions of affluence.

We exist, we work and we express ourselves in an era where I find myself confused and frustrated with the need to somehow always be careful to appear pleasing, that is, never polemic, dogmatic or categorical but stoic and articulate, god forbid emotional or angry. What exhausting effort it is to be a presence endlessly oscillating between a self-censoring and a self-circulating critical agency, suitably between, invention and negativity, production and promotion.

A recognisable steal within the economy of presence, entirely definable, acting with gestures and manners which adhere to a quasi-conformity, blending in with one's surroundings, one's social scene and its furnishings and calling it the avant-garde, but sticking a mere performative toe into the waters of dissidence. Awake to the illusion that one could remain at a purifying distance, from the marketable identity of self as a product.

The artist's proximity to professionalism, career potentials and paid labour is codependent on this skill of manoeuvring the ever narrowing idea of modeste industry-etiquette. Critical agency has become a fine bouquet, notes of suitably innocuous, agreeable thought in theory which hides the personal opinion and abides to an institutional tenet, in reality, which is a tight-knit woven blanket article of faith, good for taking cover, instead of the threadbare mere individual opinion which leaves you hanging.

The advert it creates for silence is systematically camouflaged by cultural techniques, which promise successes only to those within the system of their own satisfaction. But If art institutions are left to only promote servile and innocuous art and artists then it must be rendered as a futile and dangerously dilapidated home for the arts, and we risk not only the crumbling of any moral ground, we also burn down the house which has rooms for the avant-garde, art which has ability to change opinion, affect, refuse or critique and let the entire premise be overrun by the business of arts and the ability to account without accountability.

To be of opinions and still infiltrate the machine, depends on the skill of appearing aloof whilst being an urgent object, a trojan horse adhering to a set of standards and the familiar uncanny powers but sneak in, speaking a dialectical niche and staying careful to remain charming.