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Echoes, Specters and the Work of Critical Theory

Abstract. The fashion of post-theory seems itself outdated now. After almost two decades of attacks on critical theory, on the political Left and on the intersection between aesthetics and politics, the tide is certainly turning. Faced with a world in which the violence of neoliberalism and the failures of multiculturalism are more and more obvious, contemporary art is rediscovering its critical edge. It is not so much a return to critical theory, as a repeat of its essential gesture: the courage to question, to invent and to explore. In short, we are probably witnessing a return to an authentic freedom of thought after the prohibition on thinking demanded by the post-historical times that have now themselves passed. The present is again open to alternatives and it is the function of art to explore them.

Keywords: critical theory, contemporary art, avant garde, disutopia, courage.

The farce of being post

There is a lesson in Marx that the proponents of post-history (along with all the other *post* – this and that) are reluctant to hear. Namely, that history doesn't simply end, it always returns and it does so with a catch, a derailment, a symptom or even a farce. The joke, to put it another way, is always on the one who thinks he has done away with history, the one who pretends he and it has reached closure. In our age (post-historical, post-critical, post-human, etc.), almost 30 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, we are farther than ever from the perfect, multicultural, liberal democracy that was triumphantly announced and naively accepted by the majority of writers, experts and politicians in the West. On the contrary, hatred, racism and fascism are the dominant dimensions of current-day politics.

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The death of multiculturalism is now announced from leaders as diverse (or maybe this diversity is now revealed as fragile) as Angela Merkel or Donald Trump, while liberalism has mutated (perhaps definitively) into neoliberalism and the continuous redistribution of wealth from the poor towards the rich. Capitalism has entered its final phase, according to Nobel Prize winners or key figures of the world right now (from Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg to Paul Krugman or Thomas Piketty). And in all this (politics, culture and obviously art criticism) we have tried to stay – and have claimed it a sign of free thought – post-critical. That is: being careful to avoid any Idea with an I (for they are dangerous), reluctant to a mingling of ethics into the domains of knowledge (for it would question their neutrality, without which any pretension to scientificity becomes weak) and most of all eagerness to be up-to-date with all the new ‘cool’ (academic) approaches (which expose critical theory as so 20th century that one cannot be seen around it without embarrassing herself). In all this, there is no doubt that revisiting Marx is not that cool. Most likely, revisiting Brecht would trigger a similar reaction. And that’s exactly why we are going to revisit them right now.

Brecht famously observed that when something seems “the most obvious thing in the world,” it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up.¹ This is of course the point where ideology thrives: it pretends that a certain perspective or convention is in fact objective, natural. No critical thinking is then necessary. As in the famous rebuke of Barthes by Antoine Compagnon, it is a matter of “common sense,” and all would be well with that if Barthes himself had not already exposed common sense as the most dangerous ideology.² First as tragedy (one exposes ideology at the core of modern myths), then as farce (another thinks common sense is a position outside ideology. In spite of the demonstration of Barthes. Just because one has to do away with Barthes to be up-to-date. To be *post*). To return to Brecht, in order to get out of the attraction and pitfalls of the “obvious thing,” criticism should be enacted at all levels. Among those levels, the key one remains art. “The theme of art is the dislocation of the world.”³

So what about the famous “first as tragedy, then as farce” adage of Marx?⁴ The unified Germany, eager to rewrite its history according to the current liberal dogmas, decided to resurrect the Kaiser’s castle in Berlin on the exact site where – during East German times – the *Palast der Republik* existed, as a site of Parliament but also of various activities for the public. The return of the castle is the symptom of the farcical times we live in and also of how post-history works: by resurrecting an icon of the past (with as little attention to its contextual creation and articulations within the social and historical epoch), this past is in fact reduced to three uses: a touristic consumption (tourism, as we know from Barthes, reduces a country to a set of monuments that build its desired narrative), a state/ system logo (it creates the desired official identity) and an erasure of uncomfortable periods and moments (in this case, it excludes and portrays the communist past as an external intruder, completely different from the German essential identity). The resurrection of the

castle is equivalent to the desired putting-to-death of the uncomfortable communist past. The political decision of the German parliament is symptomatic. The castle is not only a spectre that returns (the desired return to the past is caught in this inability of an authentic/ complete return), as it is much more a revealing of the becoming-spectre of a present unable to find any justification in itself. Liberalism is nowadays its own spectre: nobody takes it seriously but everybody is resigned to it, repeating the mantra that it is the least dangerous position of all.

So times have indeed mutated. We no longer witness the conflict between a strong liberalism and the communist specter haunting it (as was the case for Marx), but rather we live among specters of all kinds. This idea of the present and of the places of the present as haunted times and haunted spaces is rendered very well – in relation to this replacement of the *Palast der Republik* with the resurrected Kaiser's castle – by the 2009-2010 work of Bettina Pousttchi entitled *Echo*. The German parliament, eager to turn attention away from its decision to erase everything that belonged to the communist past (which was and is regarded as so alien that it cannot and should not be confused with the liberal present), allowed a temporary building on the site (of the former *Palast* and during the rebuilding of the castle) to showcase contemporary art. Pousttchi embraced the moment and her work exposed the political decision of the parliament as both tragic and farcical. She covered the temporary building with digitally processed images of the former facade of the *Palast*. Although minimal, several alterations in relation to the former building were made. For example, instead of one clock the artist chose to represent two on the facade, in the full knowledge that time is never one, but always plural and indeed haunted. *Echo* is thus a proper example of how critical theory still influences contemporary art not only in its meditation on history, memory and spectrality, but also in its deconstruction of the new forms of ideology. Places are presented as haunted spaces and institutions (as the German Parliament) are unable to purify them. The wished-for post-history is in fact brimming with all the histories that were put to death after 1990. Jacques Derrida's lesson from *Specters of Marx* is more alive than ever: revenants are everywhere. Far from the capitalist paradise of the end of history, "precisely there the historicity of history begins, there finally it has the chance of heralding itself – of promising itself."⁵ The French philosopher made this remark in 1993, just as the post-history trend was created, even if it took a few years for it to really be in fashion. From the perspective of our present, that fashion (although still institutionally safe, from political areas up to academic ones) has transformed itself in a lingering aftertaste of another naivety taken as common sense. Perhaps we should again meditate on our "dis-located time of the present, at the joining of a radically dis-jointed time."⁶ Even critical theory has the right to spectrality. To keep close to Derrida's text, the inheritance that critical theory has bestowed upon us is what defines us: "the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not."⁷

There are no alternatives without critique

In front of the hysterical fashion of *post-critical* thought or even the becoming-institution of post-theory, Hal Foster has the following answer: "I understand the fatigue that many feel with the negativity of critique, its presumption of authority, its sheer out-of-date-ness in a world-that-couldn't-care-less, but it still beats the shallowness of flip opinion and the passivity of cynical reason, not to mention other options on offer. (In lieu of criticality comes what exactly – beauty? affect? celebration? any other pills to pop?)." ⁸ One answer would be that a return to method is forced upon us: an obsession with evidence (necessary in order to make the case for humanist studies in the middle of a market-oriented academic system), the imposition of scientific criteria on humanist studies or even an adaptation of humanist thought to the demands for data and statistical understanding that could be of use to corporatist and military strategies of all kinds. In this context, the short-lived fashion of quantitative analysis or the digital humanities is symptomatic. Their refusal of high theory has been made in the full (cynical) knowledge that when one cannot defeat the neoliberal system, one might as well join it. There is of course an essential difference between theory and method, one that in fact permitted the birth of Russian formalism as *theory* and not as another moment in the history of literary history's methods of analysis. Another argument against critical theory (made on the Left and thus far from the strict neoliberal arguments that used to talk about the dangers to Western civilization as early as the 1980s) is that in the fight against the system, the complex (and complicated) study of concepts, texts and philosophical meditations is of little use. Noam Chomsky would be one name representing this line of thought while someone like Franco Moretti would repeatedly treat theory with sarcasm as (just) the pretense of explaining everything through complicated and obtuse language. It is not enough here to prove that in all these arguments, theory itself is at work, allowing presuppositions to turn into evidences and statements to appear as a representation of facts and reality. The case was made against these naivities by several authors (like Jonathan Culler in *The Literary in Theory*, J. Hillis Miller in *For Derrida* or Terry Eagleton in *The Event of Literature*) and as far as the post-theory fashion is concerned it should be a little outdated by now. The problem lies not so much with the fragile arguments against theory, but with the stubborn resistance to it. This latter attitude leads directly to a prohibition on thinking, especially when thinking focuses on key aspects of our contemporary times. As Slavoj Žižek observes, "perhaps for the first time in the history of humankind, our daily experience (of biogenetics, ecology, cyberspace and Virtual Reality) compels *all* of us to confront basic philosophical issues of the nature of freedom and human identity, and so on."⁹ It is becoming more and more clear that the neoliberal system is and will remain unable to solve problems related to ecology, unemployment, inequality or even the human genetical identity. Its attacks on theory are in fact attacks on the enactment and development of alternatives. And for Žižek, theory is exactly what needs to be done "to suspend the

stale existing (post-)ideological co-ordinates, the debilitating *Denkverbot* (prohibition on thinking) in which we live – it simply means we are allowed to think again.”¹⁰

The situation is especially symptomatic in the case of contemporary art. The neoliberal age manifests itself pregnantly in especially two areas: an art market that has adapted very well to the demands of the economic system (including in the transformation of museums into corporate-like entities driven by the search for profit) and a circuit of biennials that are now safely included in the tourism circuit. There are artists quite comfortable with the system (like Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin) and others that have adapted pretty well (like Marina Abramović). Art events find it harder and harder to resist easy consumption as image-events (they are often concocted with this consumption in mind) and the attacks on critical theory have had as a predictable outcome the inability to open towards experiences that are not scripted or even expected.

The relation between politics and culture (when it is not framed within the options exposed in the previous paragraph) is caught between two options that are illustrated by two contemporary magazines of the Left. The position of *Jacobin* is that only mass culture is interesting, there is no longer any (political) sense in covering an opera or a play, or especially avant-garde culture. The political message or effect is what counts and although this cannot be made visible without the mechanisms of theory, *Jacobin* at least prefers to limit itself to an apparently simpler art. The position of *Nation* is different. In the words of its critic, Barry Schwabsky, “I work from within – within the particular artwork, within the history and conventions of art as a whole – to find the edges where art, as Duchamp said, ‘comes into contact with the external world’.”¹¹ The art critic is a perpetual guest and his position, by maintaining a critical distance between art and politics, illustrates their unusual connections: “perhaps the profound connection between art and politics is in their being essentially unfinished and unfinishable.”¹² In many ways, this is exactly the position of critical theory. Suspicious towards any attempt to finish, to complete, to end, it is itself always radically unfinished and only thus operative in every present. Attempts to end it are in fact attempts to end the critical distance of the spectator and especially her possible activation, in the words of Jacques Rancière, into an emancipated spectator.¹³ Over the last three decades, the case has been repeatedly made that on the one hand the neoliberal system is the only one desirable (the Right rejoicing in this, while the Left being resigned to it) and on the other hand that, in this economic system, education, art, and criticism should adapt to the new no-longer-contested realities. To put it shortly, the case has been pushed on us to renounce any Ideas, to give up alternatives. And of course, as Hal Foster observes, “there are no alternatives without critique.”¹⁴

The case for art is the case for theory

The question of how one does art today is related to how one does (or pretends not to do) theory. For this text, two contrasting examples will suffice. In 2005, Marina

Abramović recreated seven key moments from the history of art at the Guggenheim Museum. The series of performances was recorded and is available on dvd with the title *Seven Easy Pieces*. In her view, there is now a necessity to archive these iconic works and she felt it to be her responsibility to do that. Among these performances of the past, Abramović recreated Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* from 1965. In an interview given to *New York Times* she talked about her relation to the pieces: "the moment the public is there, I'll go from a lower self to a kind of higher self."¹⁵ She also pointed to her mission: "There's nobody to keep the history straight. I felt almost, like, obliged. I felt like I have this function to do it."¹⁶ There are however several problems with these re-enactments. On the one hand, they are part of an increasing trend for museums nowadays to institutionalize performances. A taste for the past is cultivated inside the very core of the post-historical world, but it is a past presented with and from a distance. In the case of these seven performances, they have become cultural objects to recognize and admire, without the shock, surprise and unease that they have created originally. In the case of the Beuys piece, this goes even contrary to the original's attempt to meditate and deconstruct the very distance that a viewer would keep and rationalize in relation to images and art. On the other hand, in the words of Hal Foster, "what is staged is less a historical performance than an image of that performance; the performance appears as a simulation, one destined to produce more images for circulation in the media."¹⁷ The key difference between Beuys' piece and Abramović's re-enactment lies in the audience: "in the 1960s the audience was almost as constitutive of the performance as the performer was (this was taken to be one of its signal differences from theater); however, in reenactments we are positioned as incidental witnesses to an event that could as readily occur without us."¹⁸ The event has thus been transformed into an image, ready to be captured by the camera and already defined as art. The public is once again relegated from the active (and even emancipated) spectator of the Beuys piece to a passive witness that has no other function but to guarantee the institutionalization of the performance.

Abramović's choice can be contrasted with a different reenactment of the Beuys piece, one that succeeds in avoiding the traps exposed above and to preserve at least some of the eventual quality of the original. Thomas Hirschhorn is well-known for the four monuments he executed for four important philosophers: Spinoza, Bataille, Deleuze and Gramsci. They were constructed as sites open to performances, all kinds of events and especially collaborations with the local citizens of four carefully-chosen areas: the red-light district of Amsterdam, the North-African quarter of Avignon, the Turkish area of Kassel and Bronx, New York. The public in these areas was obviously not the one that one would usually find in museums. It was also not a passive audience, required as a witness and a guarantee of an art performance. The distinctions between workers on the monument and visitors, performers and public were in each case blurred. The four philosophers were thus brought into play by each monument and in the case of the Spinoza monument so was the history of contemporary art. The

Amsterdam monument in 2009 featured reenactments of several key performances among which the Beuys piece. The difference from the Abramović reenactment was that this time it was done by children: one girl was holding a poster with Beuys during his performance, another one was holding a teddy bear in her arms to whom she whispered all the time while walking on an improvised stage and a third girl offered through a microphone details regarding the performance.

The dangers of an institutionalized art in which the public returns as a passive witness can be exposed in several key areas. Most of contemporary art is caught in the mechanism of imagistic production. Images – and works of art and even buildings themselves as is the case with the trend launched by the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao – function along the marketing strategies of branding. Artists (like Abramović) are brands, and so are museums themselves (MoMA or the Louvre) and the works of art. Their critical dimension is erased, negated or simply isn't there from the start. For an economic system desperate to keep consumerism high, display is the key strategy. Architecture and art at large thus serve as both stager and staged. Art is both the setting for fine commodities and the fairest commodity of them all. The corporate model is triumphant: the only thing that counts is the spectacular (from architecture functioning as logo to art performances obsessed with their mediatic effects to the digital humanities creating the appearance that literature can be reduced to clearly-defined structures built in the good spirit of the multiculturalist wholistic definition of identities.)¹⁹

The spectacular is often a good enough substitute for the democratic. The distinction between civic and critical space and touristic space is blurred. The spectator is not required to think anymore, just to pay attention. As Erich Schmidt, from Google, puts it, we now live in an *attention economy* in which corporations compete for eyeballs. The spectator is a consumer to a show that goes on for 24 hours on all screens and in every form of discourse. Art has exacerbated its exhibitionist potential, and what is exhibited is not just the artist or the logo or a lifestyle but even the act of consuming itself. Pop Art was perceived as the prime stager of the spectacle of consumerism returned to the consumer. The irony of that affirmation, inspired by Marcel Duchamp, was not a challenge to the official culture. It became that culture. The trend in neoliberal architecture is often to prefer glass buildings, in the hope of activating the message that liberal politics are transparent. Architecture and engineering have entered “in the service not only of corporate logo-making but also of mass moral uplift.”²⁰ The show has to move hysterically on, because capital does and capital needs it.²¹ A postmodern compromise is at work between what remains of communitarian articulations and the commercial webs that engulf everything. The technocratic optimism that pervades contemporary culture is in tune with the postmodern focus on surface (contrasted with the modern focus on structure). Everything becomes image and everything has to circulate. But where – in such a context – is the civic dimension? The Hirschhorn example is an answer in this

direction. It exposes an art that is not shy to rediscover its critical dimension and it presupposes a horizon of critical theory. If Beuys could still perform in a gallery it was because that space was still radical enough and the distinction between the museum and the street was not yet that strong: the events of May 68 were in a way themselves forms of urban art performances that made no distinction between the aesthetic and the political dimension. Perhaps critical art nowadays has to reinvent and recapture spaces. It is what the four monuments of Hirschhorn do: the space is reclaimed in an event that is at the same time communitarian and universal:²² philosophy, art and people contribute to reaffirm this political and emancipatory link.

The same affirmation is made by the Occupy movements²³ around the world who were not only traversed by artistic inventions and were mainly organized by artists, but were interested in radically blurring the distinctions between art and social politics. In this sense their example is not only one of how to do art nowadays, but also one of how to do theory. The key to critical theory after all has always been that the revolution is always radically unfinished. And in such a point it meets art in its profoundest essence.

World maps, not world data

There are new-media enthusiasts that think that *montage* (the critical invention of modernity) is now absorbed by the digital world. It is not the error of Franco Moretti, but it certainly defines the framework of the ideas of most of his followers. Digital humanities (or for that matter quantitative analysis) have not absorbed the idea of *montage*, for the simple fact that the latter names an act, which is always singular and always radical. As such, instead of focusing on the act of addition and connection, it is more a matter of dis-location, of creating a redistribution of the visible. Modernism invented montage not as a method, but as a critical attitude that functions as an event: one does not create an archive through montage (at least in a definition of the archive that is structural, attracted to an objective/ positivist organization of data), but a change of perception. For Proust already the real form of travelling was defined by the act of changing one's eyes. It is true that many contemporary art products produce "an image of the local for circulation to the global."²⁴ The example of Guggenheim in Bilbao is now suggestive of this focus on image-making and space shaping with the hope of introducing a place (like Bilbao) into the flows of tourism and capital. The local is thus branded in its specificity but not in a radical way: it must still respect the rules of the system, which are mainly those of marketing surface difference inside frames that are never questioned. For neoliberal art, style has become a primary function, it's no longer a problem of style over function. It is also not a problem of distant reading over close reading. Distant reading has already become the primary mapping of the world in tune with a system that is scared by the noise around structures, the differences that might upset the functioning of the machine. Can we – in such a context – rescue a different kind of mapping? Are world maps

anything else nowadays but the organization of the circulation of data? The answer is again in how we *read* the world and who is an active part of that reading. While the opposition seems to be between a subjective map coordinated by a privileged eye and the objective mapping that data itself reveals, perhaps there is another option: a mapping that is neither subjective nor objective, but collective and thus critical.

Alighiero Boetti's world maps done in collaboration with Afghan craftsmanship may represent the perfect example for such a position. Between 1971 and 1994 the Italian artist produced more than 150 maps of the world, at first with the help of Afghan craftswomen who created tapestries following his design and then increasingly in a dialogue and form of co-creation with his Persian collaborators. The idea was that each country will be colored according to its national flag and an Italian and Persian text would frame the canvas referring to the date and place of fabrication. The control of the artist was little by little balanced by the intrusion of chance: for example, at one point, due to the fact that the craftswomen had a plentiful stock of pink, they used that thread to color the oceans. Boetti loved the idea and the next maps left more and more control to the makers, including the Persian texts connected to each canvas. Another key aspect of the maps is that they began as a graphical account of a changing world, a world-in-progress. Although each map would try to represent the existing world as such, due to the long process of embroidery (which could take more than a year), by the time they were finished, maps were already part of a different temporality. As such, they are not just a collective representation of the world, but a meditation on its mobile geography and temporality. In a word, a *montage*. Conscious of its mediating act, the Boetti-Afghan mapping of the world is an understanding of two things at once: that to comprehend history is to always be caught in its dislocation and that to see is to always see a mediated image.

The same mechanism is already at work in Robert Smithson's *The Monuments of Passaic*, a series of photographs in the form of a travelogue in the city of Passaic. On September 30, 1967, the artist made a trip by bus through New Jersey that he would later call a tour of monuments. The first key element here is his use of the monument denomination for objects or details of banal reality: bridges, highways walls, construction pumps, etc. The second is in the way he justifies their importance: "noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an overexposed *picture*. Photographing it with with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank."²⁵ Like in W. G. Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn*, in the images that Smithson produced, we encounter grainy snapshots of the post-industrial era in which images are always of something that was already an image. To see is thus to always see a mediated image. For Barry Schwabsky, "one begins to wonder whether the grainy snapshots with which Smithson illustrated his text are secretly

not photographs of the monuments but in fact monuments themselves. For Smithson, the image is always of something that was already an image."²⁶ Smithson died in a plane crash in 1972. In a way, his work is more relevant than ever, nowadays after the advent of the media culture, the complete takeover of advertising and marketing and the dominating structures of social networks. Instagram, for example, (at its best) reaffirms Smithson's post-Duchampian idea that art is in the gaze and (at its worst) constructs reality as an inescapable box in which we are ideologically caught.

We can end this section with another example, the work of Palestinian photographer Ahlam Shibli, entitled *Death*, from 2011 and 2012. It names a series of 68 photographs that reveal how the Palestinian people structure the public sphere through references to the absent fighters who fell in their struggle against the occupation. The photographs are often images of images of martyrdom (for example, she takes photos of posters of fighters that cover the walls of buildings). The question lies again in how we choose to read them. The existing montage (both in the sense of image as a montage and the exhibited series of images as montage) recalls another one. While there are of course bureaucratic phrases to normalize practices of exploitation or even killing (one can always refer to Nazi, Israeli, US or Palestinian rhetorics), what happens to the images themselves? Can anyone read them in the absence of the horizon of critical theory that supposes a continuous meditation on what history is, what identity can be based upon and how memory and archive should work? The key distinction that critical theory proposed as early as Walter Benjamin's texts of the 1930s was the one between rhetorical and dialectical images. The first ones are nowadays inundating our world, be it in marketing (brands, logos, icons), in dogmas and ideology, but also in forms of contemporary art that consider themselves post-critical. The second ones function in the linking and even in the multiplicity of linkages that a montage permits and in fact demands. Dialectical images are, in Benjamin's view, the only genuine images because they have a historical index. This index "not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain legibility only at a particular time."²⁷ Could this distinction be made outside critical theory? Could images be read outside a perspective rooted in critical theory?

Out of the farce, into the avant-garde

In 1974 Peter Burger, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, observed that "to fail in its critique, as the historical avant-garde did, is one thing, but to repeat such a failure – more, to recoup this critique as style – is to risk farce."²⁸ This farce is very much what defines the post-critical art/ theory, from Damien Hirst to the *Seven Easy Pieces* of Marina Abramović. It names this reduction of the critique to a stylistic feature or even a parenthesis in the history of art that must be – in a postmodern way – either revisited or archived as something that belongs to (the museum of) art. There is also the distinction between local and global, which exposes the dangers of contemporary art. On the one hand, this distinction (based on a holistic understanding of identities)

points to a conservative and identitarian tendency. As long as identities are defined as wholes (a set of essential features that specifies what an identity/ culture is) their encounter can only be possible through a form of wished-for rational negotiation (in the sense of the Habermasian model) or a co-existence through the tolerance of a multicultural model. As Žižek however observes, this tolerance is often a form of disguised racism: political correctness is often based on a presumption of superiority in which the Other is accepted (with her imperfections) because of a higher moral ground from which we have the possibility to accept. On the other hand, the capitalist rationality functions in order to create the only acceptable common background that allows the meeting of such identities. This is defined not only by the globalization of criteria and forms of organization that protect the flow of capital (and this form of protection paradoxically includes the emergence of new wars and the exclusion of all kinds of communities including entire states such as Somalia or Congo), but also by the regime that regulates encounters through international rules and prevailing sets of values (which include the differential positioning of lives that are grievable and lives that are not²⁹). The perversity of liberalism today is the combination of the two.

Art loses its ability of resistance. It becomes an effective token or an atmospheric effect in a world of banal cosmopolitanism. The expression was coined by sociologist Ulrich Beck and it is already developed in his *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*³⁰ in which modernity is understood largely as a retroactive myth that promised mobility and tried to aestheticize everything. Walter Benjamin famously distinguished in his epochal *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* between the aestheticization of politics that leads through capitalism to fascism and the politicization of aesthetics that is the work of communism and critical spirit. We seem to have lost track of this distinction, or at least of its second term. The solution for art may be in a recovering of the avant-garde spirit. Just as a reenactment of the emancipatory core of critical theory may be the only way out of the *Denkverbot* that defines our age. Art and critical theory seem to still have a long path to trod together, especially given the *disutopia*³¹ in which we live. The authentic avant-garde act that would define our epoch should definitely emerge right here: in the revitalization of an (understanding of) art that is not afraid to question (the current status-quo) and to invent (forms of a different social and cultural world). This is “the point on which one cannot and should not concede: today, actual freedom of thought means freedom to question the prevailing liberal-democratic ‘post-ideological’ consensus – or it means nothing.”³² Inventions are needed in order to change perception and without a change in perception there could be no alternatives.

Notes

- 1 Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, New York, MacMillan, 1964, p. 71.
- 2 For more details see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2012 and Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory and Common Sense*, translated by Carol Cosman, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

- 3 Bertolt Brecht, *L'Art du comédien. Écrits sur le théâtre*, Paris, L'Arche, 1999.
- 4 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in *Surveys from Exile. Political Writings*, volume 2, edited and introduced by David Fernbach, London and New York, Verso, 2010, p. 146.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated from the French by Peggy Kamuf, New York and London, Routledge, 1994, p. 93.
- 6 *Ibidem*, p. 20.
- 7 *Ibidem*, p. 68.
- 8 Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, London and New York, Verso, 2011, p. XIII.
- 9 Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, London and New York, Verso, 2002, p. 4.
- 10 *Ibidem*, p. 11.
- 11 Barry Schwabsky, *The Perpetual Guest. Art in the Unfinished Present*, London and New York, Verso, 2016, p. Xii.
- 12 *Ibidem*.
- 13 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated by Gregory Elliott, London, Verso, 2011.
- 14 Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, p. Xiii.
- 15 Marina Abramović interview in Randy Kennedy, *Self-Mutilation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery*, New York Times, November 6, 2005.
- 16 *Ibidem*.
- 17 Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, London and New York, Verso, 2015, p. 129.
- 18 *Ibidem*, p. 130.
- 19 In such a view identities are wholes, monads defined by certain essential features and their meeting, while open to adaptations, negotiations, remains blind to the noise and exclusions that such clarified mapping produces.
- 20 Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, p. 252.
- 21 According to Zygmunt Bauman, the second stage of modernity is liquid modernity. The force of capital uproots everything and carries it along in its flow. For more details, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 2000.
- 22 The public in all four cases can mostly be defined through its belonging to a community, albeit an open one. The Amsterdam quarter for example is home to over 150 nationalities. What is the key element here is not that this people represent a multicultural example, but that they function as a link between the particular and the universal. As such, the girl with the teddy bear is the proper inheritor to Beuys, in spite of all the visible differences: the color of the skin, the sex, the age, the cultural horizon, etc.
- 23 The key theoretical reference for the aesthetic and political dimensions of the Occupy movements is Yates McKee, *Strike Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2016.
- 24 Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, p. X.
- 25 Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flem, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, p. 70.
- 26 Barry Schwabsky, *The Perpetual Guest*, p. 37.
- 27 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Rolf Tiedemann, New York, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 456.
- 28 Apud Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, p. 85.

- 29 See Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*, London and New York, Verso, 2009.
- 30 See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, translated by Mark Ritter, London, Sage Publications, 1992.
- 31 The term is defined by Anna Dinnerstein and Mike Neary as “not just the temporary absence of Utopia, but the political celebration of the end of social dreams” (apud Peter McLaren, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*, Oxford, Rowan & Littlefield, 2000, p. XXV). We are obviously inundated with forms of disutopia not only in the political discourse of liberalism, but also in many books on art and (post)theory that celebrate the end of the intersection between aesthetics and politics. The simultaneity between post-theory and post-history should be both revealing (for the ideological assumptions they share) and worrying (for the effect on art and theory that they have).
- 32 Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, p. 168.