

Art History after the End of History

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About ten years ago I did an interview with Félix González Torres, actually I did a couple. But in one we talked about the whole question of History and its relation with the contemporary art, and he said: "We have an explosion of information but an implosion of meaning. It's like Casablanca when Humphrey Bogart says to Ingrid Bergman '...long ago, last night.' People don't remember last night."

I think that's a wonderful and concise way of describing actual phenomena. That forgetfulness is, in fact, almost enforced by the way in which we are smothered with information. It is in fact, in some cases, designed to be the product of that excess of information and the historical consciousness of people might have or that they do have but at a subconscious level is increasingly precarious, increasingly compromised, if you will, by a host of factors even as large scale clichés about history are all around us. And I would note the recent address of President Bush.

A fact on the absurd side: Prince Harry of England, not exactly a royal skinhead, recently got into trouble for wearing a Nazi uniform to a party, part stupidity, part proof that his family is genetically unqualified for the job. It is a host of many things, but it also represents a genuine state of consciousness in a large part of the population, and one can, in a sense, take it seriously symptomatically because what he was doing was no so much support Fascism as responding to the allure, the perennial allure of Fascist style. Stripped of all of its content, of its historical content it is, in fact, one of the most enduring styles that one can think of in the Modern Era. One might usually compare Communism and Fascism on only the level of uniforms and a variety of other aspects of party décor, obviously post the avant-garde period, and say that Fascism have survived very, very well indeed, because they had very, very good designers. Under other circumstances, perhaps we would see skinhead gangs wearing other kinds of uniforms.

In the tabloids there was again, great hankering about the fact that he said this, and how anybody could have said this at his age. But some clever Brit did a poll, an opinion poll, and found out that of the entire British population only forty percent of the people knew what Auschwitz was or at least could say in any detail what it was, other than the recognition of the name. That's a pretty extraordinary statistic since probably no general category of history has been more publicized as the Holocaust, and no name is more representative of that Holocaust than Auschwitz.

What is happening indeed is that people are taking in loads of information, which registers only perhaps as disconnected signs and symbols or sounds, and in the meantime, as I said, they are also taking other things like the styling. So, one can simultaneously like Prince Harry and think it's cute, and actually rather chic, to wear a Nazi armband without any malice of intent, although somebody also pointed out that this particular party was dedicated to the Colonial's, it was a Colonial ball of a particular fraternity which is probably even more overtly offensive than the uniform since that they could not have missed.

This style, again, is everywhere; it recuperates in a very peculiar way an awful lot of what is probably well-intentioned efforts to educate people to history, from films like *Sophie's Choice* and *Schindler's List*, there are all kinds of efforts by the film industry to, somehow, dramatize, create narratives with characters that

are in three dimensions, or at least maybe in one and a half to 2, to tell people what it was like. But the styling of those films is so extreme, the stylization of the Holocaust is so extreme, that sooner or later the cast of characters ends up, more or less, like a long catalogue of Nazi uniformed officers from different films. Again, it is a style that is amusing, and leveling and averaging at the same time.

I think part of the problem with those films, and part of the problem with the great deal of the literature—and I'm not going to stay with the Holocaust much longer—, but the literature of the Holocaust raises a whole set of issues that relate to the way in which history is, generally speaking, dealt with in this culture, particularly the history of the generation of the fathers and the mothers as opposed to very distant history. Which is to say, it's built on the notion that is the direct testimony of those who lived it that should dominate, and in some way, should be made dramatic again, poetic, rather than recognizing the intense Oedipal dynamic involved in this all along. Again, Prince Harry's gesture was to spite his parents as much as anything else.

Built into any account of past historical disasters—or, occasionally there are some historical reasons to be proud—is the manner of trying in some way to identify the subjectivity of those people to whom you are supposedly conveying this information rather than having them rely entirely on the subjectivity of the person who lived it, and who is trying to convey it.

It is interesting also the question of medium; because film is one medium but most of the films that we see about historical events are predictable, full of historical conventions and film conventions. But there are other mediums that have been effectively used, much more effectively used to speak to younger audiences. In terms of the Holocaust, I think the most effective one is Art Spiegelman, two-volume book *Mouse* where he took comic books, the very name itself suggests that the subject could be inappropriate, and created a narrative of Auschwitz, describing his experience of being the son of a survivor and then made the central dynamic of the book, not just describing what the Holocaust was, but describing his profoundly ambivalent relationships towards his parents; his sense of the burden of this knowledge; of the resentment of the father who, in one case would explain and in other case, would not; his ambivalence about his mother who committed suicide; his whole awareness of his father, the victim, 's own racism towards black people. And so that the whole constellation of questions around which the Holocaust itself centers were relocated in the present in the voice of somebody who was near to, if not identical with the reader in age and historical experience, and out of which all the connections and all the complications could be teased. In other words, anything but a simple, moralizing, linear narrative of events. I will say that in fact, insofar as people attempt to do standard narrative histories of some kind or another—and by standard I only mean in a sense that they move forward, more or less directionally—, the comic should turn out to be medium of choice for some of the most interesting experience.

Here in Mexico, Rius who did *Los agachados*, did in the 1970s a history of the Cuban revolution, which I remember vividly as one of the first examples that I saw in any case. In Canada, recently an artist

did the story of Louis Riel, who was a renegade maverick character who was executed by the State, and was one of the basic legends of early Canadian history in a comic. And you find also Joe Sacco who has recently done comic books on Palestine, the war in Yugoslavia and so on.

One of the questions is, in what medium do you communicate and how you represent to other generations these things, rather than putting yourself in a position of simply signing up for the established conventions of the generation to whom it happened?

There are other complications, among them are, in terms of visual arts—that's what I'll concentrate on—a series of taboos. One of those taboos has to do with North-American Formalism and another one has to do with certain modernist ideas of the avant-garde in general.

In North-American Formalism the emphasis was, in fact, to get away, as far as possible, from any attempt to narrate anything, from any art that was in any sense whatsoever didactic, indeed, involving illusionism, representation and so on.

That formal logic, very neatly, eliminates a whole set of classifications of art without actually addressing the question of what's lost on the process, and without allowing for an argument about whether or not these forms might coexist in certain ways and not be deemed antithetical categorically.

The avant-garde notion adds to that, of course, in a host of other ways, which I won't go into but I think, will be sufficiently obvious. So forgetfulness is encouraged by the idea that you are moving forward in the progress of an aesthetic time that allows you, in fact to forget. And the simplest case, and the most obvious one that we can speak here is the way in which the entire Mexican contribution to Jackson Pollock was diminished, if not entirely eliminated in explanations of how Pollock became Pollock.

Now, a second set of issues comes up with how you make these representations and what viewer's experience of particular photographs, particular films, particular drawings, particular paintings is. There is a reason brought by Susan Sontag, which I don't agree with altogether, but is interesting nonetheless, where she talks about the representation of cruelty to the other, and of course, it has on its cover an image of Goya's disasters of war, and she talks about all the complicated, moral and cultural and political implications of representing violence, of voyeurism, of latent sadism, of the objectification of the victim, and so on. And one of the things she says here is that the tendency is, after a certain period of time, that people remember the photograph but they do not remember the thing the photograph represents. That, in fact, certain kinds of image making crystallize moments, then those crystallized moments are relocated into a aesthetic context and those aesthetic contexts become increasingly, if you will, muffled, in relation of what anybody might actually bring into that space, and that finally what you see is a beautiful, beautiful photograph of a horrible, horrible thing about which you cannot recall any significant details. I think she is right about this, I think that criticism of the way in which, for example Robert Capa famous photograph of a soldier in the Civil War dying on a hill, or the young woman running with napalm in her back on a road in Vietnam, had become in a sense detached from their context.

Now, if you take that as the terminal state of all of these arguments, then we are stuck, basically. If you take it another way around, and say that you begin now with the fact of enforced forgetfulness in the culture at large, and you begin with the fact that there is this tendency for images to become emblematic and then exclusive of their content almost, you raise another set of possibilities, I see frankly as opportunities. And the artists who are dealing with this kind of material now, are representing the first serious cluster of artists working in this area, that we have seen in a long, long time.

It's indeed, by and large, although not exclusively, a generation of artists who are precisely rebelling against restrictive notions of avant-garde progress towards the elimination of imagery, the elimination of narrative, the elimination of this and that. Or simply they are shrugging them off, they aren't even arguing with it, they are simply saying I have a reason to do this and this is how I will do it.

There is an understanding that they have also gained both through their own experience—and, frankly I would say their own genius—but also through the long-term effects of critical discourse, which now I think in many ways has done the work that it can do. But we are also beginning to see the fruits in a positive sense, and that is that they are acutely aware that in going into the area of narrative, you must be weary of not creating the new “master narrative”. On the other hand, they are aware simultaneously—and this is why I think critique has in some way run its course—endlessly disputing the previous “master narrative”, which does not in fact create alternative understandings, but only challenges an existent one, and in a curious reverse way empowers it by saying it is still dominant in cases where it may have already radically cracked.

What these artists are doing is taking details of narrative and slipping into those cracks which simultaneously widen the rupture that exists in the monolithic version, and secondarily demonstrates that one can be, if you will, polyphonic or polyvocal, polymorphous perverse even in some cases and create multiple overlaid conflicting narratives in which case you redeem the possibility of narrative forms without necessarily falling into the category of insisting on the fact that your narrative is the one ultimately synthetic one.

One of the places where this is happening the most is in Germany, and for very obvious reasons connected to what I said before. Then if on the one hand you have Spiegelman narrating the story of the Holocaust through his father and from his father, on the other hand you have a host of German artists, some of whom lived the war, some of them who remember it in some minor detail as part of their lives, and others who did not live the war, but who, first of all, had to find out about it from somebody and sometimes had to find out that they would not find about it from their families or from the State.

Hans Haacke, who talked to you yesterday, has dealt with this, particularly in his installation in Venice, and Sam Kiefer has dealt with this in many, many paintings. Beuys both dealt with it and didn't deal with it in ways extremely problematic but still lastingly rich in ways of thinking. And you can go on down the list. An artist I like very much, who is not very popular these days, Immendorf, has also dealt with it; and it would be interesting to make a comparison between Immendorf's painting, for example, and some of Gabriel Orozco's painting where literally symbols clash. Where pictures are full of emblems of

ideologies in tense relationships with each other, and forcefully stated each one of them, so that it capitalizes on the irresolvable residue of this kind of historical drama. Gerhard Richter, with whom I've worked, is one of the chief people in this category, and as I said, if you look at the ambivalence in the case of Spiegelman, you'll find the same thing in the case of Richter. Richter, who has made paintings, and made them in the 1960s, by the way, when there was virtually no art about the Holocaust that wasn't memorial or ideological in overt ways, being made in Germany, where he made paintings, three paintings in particular, actually there is a fourth one which counts... One is a picture of his uncle Rudy, smiling in a Nazi uniform. One is a picture of himself with his aunt; he's in on a sort of bear-skin rug and she's hovering over him. One is a picture of a man named Dr. Heyder, being shadowed by a police officer. And the fourth one is a family photograph of a group of people gathered together under the paternal gaze of a single man who smiles down. The first picture is like the picture of a young Nazi officer in many, if not most, German families, if you will, the picture that you had in your family album in the end of the war, as well as in the beginning of the war, but about which all the meanings had changed over that time. The second is a picture of his aunt who was killed in the pilot-project for the Holocaust called T4, which was the euthanasia program used to kill people who were mentally retarded or psychologically ill or otherwise frail. And the third picture is the picture of the doctor who killed her, Dr. Heyder, who ran this program. And the fourth picture is a family photograph, the content of which have only recently become apparent. It is Richter's father-in-law, who turns out also was involved in the T4 program. And these are four different positions of a young man that survives the war and looks at all directions, instead of giving a historical part or a correct posture, simply describes the history.

Kappelhoff has been working since the 1960s, he's been known in the West, outside of a small circle of friends in Moscow for only about seventeen years. Kappelhoff demonstrates that there are other mediums appropriate to this other than painting. I already suggested comic books as one, another, one of course, is film. But he has shown that installation art is a way of creating narratives in which the viewer is also a participant creator of meaning. Where you explore a space and find the clues to describe a complex reality, but where the subjectivity of understanding history is enhanced or in fact, predicated upon the fact that you, as the reader, will choose something that some other reader chooses second, and you will move to third, when they move to something else fourth. And that there is, in fact, no possible, definitive reading, partly because the very nature of narrative in sequencing cannot be replicated and undone once it's begun. In other words, there is no medium-specificity to this, but specific opportunities in a variety of mediums, and in the case of Kappelhoff he is playing both of the roles I described by simultaneously making installations that will be shown to a young Russian who did not grow up in the Soviet period and doesn't know what it was like. And he is also going, for example, through the narratives that his mother's told him, like Art Spiegelman, to recuperate those parts of the experience that he himself didn't have.

There are a host of others to be dealt with. Adriana Varejão in Brazil, for example, has been using a variety of colonial-art forms to describe the colonial experience, but those varieties include varieties that are not rooted in simple-minded identity politics, but rather they cross-reference the China's trade with things that are specifically Brazilian, and open up the categories. Carol Walker has done this by offending just about every member of the old Black Power movement, by taking up racial stereotypes and using the forms of anti-bellum southern decors, southern living, the silhouette, and doing a lampoon that utterly explodes all those racial stereotypes, but explodes them in the face of virtually everyone.

I'd like to just put down a variety of conditions, if you will. First of all, this kind of historical art is utterly separate from historicism, which we saw a lot of in the 1980s. The self-conscious referencing of historical styles, not all of that self-conscious referencing of the Fascist period is crypto-fascist and there, I think, many postmodernist critics of the left are mistaken. On the other hand, some of it does; and the fact that most of it is unexamined even though it may be rich poetically, makes it, seems to me, a lesser statement, although not one to be scorned altogether.

It is significant that this work is also not about what history painting was traditionally about. History painting is a genre from the eighteenth century that was about those things on which culture should agree or could agree, it was about the collective values that were, in a sense, reinforced by the entire the political-social entity.

The kind of work I'm talking about does the exact opposite and Richter is a prime case, particularly, for example, in the paintings he made about the Badermeinhoff group in 18 October 1977. He makes work—and these other artists make work—about things, about which people do not agree. Where they don't know what their own position and relation to the events are, or whether information is not equivalent or equal. Where there is, in fact, no single conclusion to be drawn, and the historical nature of it is that it encourages a number of activities. One, it creates in the viewer not the idea of somehow moving back in time nostalgically but, to use what I will call the historical imagination, as a dynamic factor, where the viewer takes on the responsibility of imagining what this reference might be, without being, again, lost in sentimentality about them, but then also using them as a material rather than simply reading them as a completed sentence by somebody else.

It marks a distinction between recalling and reminding. Some historical art of the present reminds people of things they have forgotten, and some people recall things that they have actually experienced. But while reminding can involve recalling—but doesn't always—it can also mean reminding of things that people have learned but forgotten. In which case you are dealing with, on one hand perhaps, someone who experienced a trauma and repressed it; or experienced trauma and didn't find the forms, words, symbols and images to express it, but did not repress the impulse to deal with it, but simply failed being articulate. In other cases, again we are dealing with younger generations who have been taught, mis-taught or not taught that there are certain things... and you are reminding them that they exist, and

you're bringing them back to the table after the school-teacher has left the room, after the critic of discourse has been silenced, and they are again posed with the same problem of what do you do with this stuff.

I began with Felix and I will like to end with Felix. Felix did a series of works, which are datelines. The first was a public version of what he'd done in Sheridan Square in New York, in the heart of the Gay community. And it was a series of dates relative to gay liberation or the lack of it. He did many others; sometimes they were personal narratives, somebody's biography (their portrait). In other cases he dealt with a variety of things. In almost every one of them he self-consciously mixed two kinds of information: utter trivia and dramatic events, hula-hoops and the My Lai massacre, the Watergate hearings and a particular pop song. Secondly, he scrambled the dates; he made what I will call anachronologies rather than chronologies, things that were deliberate dis-dissembling the comfort, if you will, of moving through time in linear, numerical fashion, and putting them forward in public view so that the task of the viewer was to associate those dates in a pattern not dictated by the artist, where, in fact, it turns out that the trivia of the hula-hoop is the thing that triggers the historical imagination, which then is able to address the disasters which normally that imagination would either respond to by a predictable response—the response inculcated by the society—or simply recoil from and not respond to it at all. The subtlety of what Felix did seems to me, is allied, in a lot of respects, to many of these other practices where references to history are prevalent but the combinations are open; not absolutely relativistically open, but open to the extent that one can do something with them, that is, where one is not simply an audience for somebody's opinion, the receiver of a rhetoric, but again is a collaborator in the building of it.

I'll just end with a response to Marina who again, has done this herself; but its interesting that in the piece she talked this afternoon, she talked a great deal about the present, living in the present. That is one of the basic tendencies of contemporary art. This is one of the aspirations: to live absolutely in the present to not, in a sense, endure the nightmare that is history according to Joyce, but to be free of those contradictions which have imprisoned people and to start fresh. That is a primary impulse that I respect enormously. But then, she said "and then I wore the shoes that I wore in the Great Wall of China", and in a most direct kind of way which is not just stylistic, she showed that in every case where one is in the present, one lives with the past. Now, historical art, which wants to live in the past, is in my view ipso-facto bad news. Not news by the way, also. But this other factor, this dynamic o dialectic fact between an intense desire to be here as we are now and at the same time to understand that all this material is there already in part, and that that which is not there is our job to go back and find, and that which is there is our job to constantly rethink is the task—and is the task remarkably enough after two generations of scorning historically based art—that is being picked up by a lot of people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s.

Thank you.