

contemporary realization of this promise possess the means and possibilities to be sites of critical discourse. Given our current cultural climate the art museum is practically the only place where we can actually step back from our own present and compare it with other historical eras. In these terms, the museum is irreplaceable because it is particularly well suited to critically analyze and challenge the claims of the media-driven *zeitgeist*. The museum is a place where we are reminded of the egalitarian art projects of the past so that we can measure our own time against them.

Art and politics: Resistance and Re-Appropriation

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In spite of my essay's very general title, I will obviously not attempt to consider the totality of the debate about the relationship between art and politics. I simply wish to reopen it to make a small contribution to the understanding of current art and politics.

I.

The nineteenth-century avant-garde artist occupied a double political space: one's political commitment was expressed through work in art as well as through direct political action. Painter Jacques-Louis David rendered homage to the Roman style in art with his commitment to the neoclassical style and yet he also played a role as a representative at the Convention during the French Revolution. Another example of this twofold artistic and political involvement is that of Gustave Courbet, an anti-academic painter but also a militant for the Revolution of 1848 and, later, a supporter of the Commune. Courbet was at once committed in the struggle against bourgeois power in politics and

against academic power in art. Seurat also exemplifies this double commitment: *Un apres-midi a la Grande Jatte* was the formal manifesto of avant-garde painting in the 1890s, but its creator also worked in schools for laborers as a teacher of the working class. Artists remained faithful to this twofold form of commitment for a long time. Berlin School Dadaists took part in the revolutionary uprising and, similarly, many Russian constructivists fought alongside the Bolshevik revolutionaries. Not much later, after WWII, Picasso or Leger created avant-garde art forms but also went to the meetings of the local Communist party cell (though not very often, to tell the truth), signed manifestos, took sides.

Existentialist intellectuals also had this type of commitment: their reflections and the form that their intellectual creations took were, in principle, formally committed; on the other hand, their political choices made them committed intellectuals. They signed manifestos, wrote petitions and joined the militant struggle. Jean-Paul Sartre fought alongside opponents to colonialism and then joined the Maoists in the 1970's. To this philosopher, art for art's sake and purism are guilty illusions.

The problem with this double commitment is that the coherence between the two spheres is not logically guaranteed. This means that the political message expressed is not necessarily congruent with the form, and that the individual's effective commitment is not necessarily related to his or her artistic commitment. Picasso's painting after WWII—as that of American abstract expressionists from 1945 to 1950—was not acceptable to the proletariat at whose side the artists nonetheless fought. While the people expected something realistic and legible—a kind of new historical or allegorical painting—they were given distortion and abstraction. The same can be said of other artists who preceded the aforesaid: Seurat, Malevitch, Kandinsky, Raoul Hausman or Fernand Léger.

Neither is the coherence of the commitments in any way guaranteed the other way around: that is, someone's political stances do not necessarily correspond to his or her art practice. In political terms, Cézanne was a reactionary, trapped in provincial bourgeois

conservatism; but his painting was deeply revolutionary from the point of view of the history of formal evolutions and opened the way to Cubism and abstraction. Inversely, realist socialist art demonstrates that one can be very conventional stylistically and still be politically committed to the proletariat —let us consider for instance André Fougeron or Boris Tazlitsky. Similarly, in the 1960s and 70s, French painters of the narrative figurative vein re-appropriated the visual devices of American Pop Art and advertising in order to convey a leftist political message that soon became banal under the pressure of its own rhetoric of advertising. The same can be said of Eduardo Arroyo in Spain.

These commitments' possible incongruity or laboriously-resolved congruity and, in any case, the difficulty of coordinating them posits problems that artists and politicians have answered in different ways. The most widespread answer is the one that, by disassociating consciousness, allows one to accept the incongruity between the two levels.

Art forms that are formal advances though they lack political content then come to be considered as politically committed; indeed, the absence of effective political commitment does not in any way affect our judgment of them as committed. This is the thesis concerning the aesthetic sublimation of political commitment in the thinking of Greenberg when he wrote *Avant-garde and Kitsch*. Pollock was formally revolutionary and therefore politically revolutionary. Cozanne's and Matisse's political conservatism and Duchamp's apolitical stance are thus effaced in the face of their art practice's radicalism, which inoculates them against the sternness of political judgment. When we take this logic to its final consequences, to be on the cutting edge in artistic terms becomes romantic proof of efficacy on the political level. Let us paint revolutionary canvases and the revolution will emerge out of their folds.

This option features a great advantage: it essentially eliminates the need to posit the question of the relationship between artwork and public. The public is nothing but a third, clumsy audience that, in the best of cases, one can only aspire to educate. As Greenberg stated in 1939, the masses prefer kitsch, which represents a substitute for culture

in the form of entertainment. Jean-Paul Sartre, in an article from 1950 about the artist and his or her conscience, writes without blinking: "The social revolution demands aesthetic conservatism, while the aesthetic revolution, in spite of the selfsame artist, requires social conservatism. As a sincere Communist, censured by Soviet leaders, and as a habitual supplier for rich clients in the United States, Picasso is the very image of this contradiction. As far as Fougeron is concerned, his paintings stopped appealing to the elite but never sparked the interest of the proletariat".

II.

What happens then when we are not dealing with revolution or the kind of efficacy that can change life or disrupt it? What happens when one can no longer imagine a public at which to direct a message —the famous "people" haunting revolutionary manifestos or the famous proletariat haunting leftist consciences? And what happens, moreover, when formal revolutions have become such a common-place, banal phenomenon that they no longer stir anyone's emotions? In a text that, I must emphasize, dates from 1968, Rosenberg summed up in a few words how the situation of formal ruptures had become banal: "Today, the aesthetic avant-garde is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, by regional councils, museums, industrial and banking associations. Grants are given to alternative movies and magazines, to small presses, to creators of happenings and electronic music, to the Merce Cunningham Company. Newspapers about art history totally blend in with those directed at the general public; commercial design and decoration obey the motto of 'art for the community's sake.'

Meanwhile, commercial films, suspense movies and even TV advertising have become so daringly experimental from a formal point of view that they no longer simply require one's understanding of the message but rather the immediate and total response given to a work of art."

Thirty years later there is not much to add, though this most certainly does not resolve anything from an artist's point of view, and we have reached an apex of confusion and ambiguity. The considerations that

follow deal with this ambivalence, and are based on certain precise examples. I will begin with the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko who, in 1988, conceived the project of a vehicle for homeless people. It is a totally serious project about a platform or base for survival made for the homeless in large cities in the US or other parts of the world. We know about the devices for survival fabricated by the poor —those with no fixed address. How does one survive when one cannot have anything, store anything, put anything away, when one does not even have the means to own anything, when one camps in the middle of the city rather than in nature, without a tent to put up or a backpack on one's shoulder since, in any case, there are no walks to go on nor camping gear to set up?

There is the plastic bag solution; we have all seen those individuals wrapped up in supermarket bags like balloons inflated almost to the point of popping, transforming them into fantastic characters like the puppets in *King Ubu* or patched-up blimps. There is also the slightly better solution of supermarket shopping carts, the homeless person carrying his or her gear and scant belongings around crammed into an overflowing metal cart. Others who are cleverer, better mechanics or have a bigger load of recycled possessions transform their carts and start to create actual vehicles, like inventive car of the impoverished fringe. Himself trained as an industrial designer, Wodiczko has taken on this challenge. He did his best to conceive a functional vehicle that responded to a homeless person's needs: sleeping, bathing, storing, being on the lookout, moving. His vehicle is nothing but a series of contradictory, paradoxical and provocative elements.

The fact is we do not want to admit that the state of being homeless can be a permanent situation —one that can be improved without disappearing. In the sphere of the social, we want to be blind: we are called upon to shut our eyes. One way of shutting our eyes is to conceive of situations as all or nothing: poverty, housing shortages, can-not exist. Or they are suppressed: eliminating poverty, as all political platforms promise. Or else it must remain as such; intolerable conditions should not be improved. No to reformism! Wodiczko's vehicle, conceived to be manufactured serially and to be of efficient

use, exists on the contrary as a provocative revelation of a social state of homelessness involving thousands of people (there are over two 000 home-less in New York alone) who form a population with its own needs, resources and —why not?— demands. Wodiczko's clever, functional and inexpensive vehicle, with its storage and sleeping compartments and bare-bones waste disposal system, exemplifies and presents in an obvious, concrete manner an abnormal situation that cannot be considered a mere anomaly but rather must be taken into account as one of the aspects of modern social life in general.

Evidently, it is hard —or rather, extremely uncomfortable— to imagine the proliferation of this kind of vehicle, creating traffic jams of suddenly very visible poor people in the heart of cities: poor people who are also suddenly a little less ill-provided and thus also a little stronger and more stable in their situation and —why not?— almost affluent. With the same growing malaise, we imagine these vehicles' production lines, the acknowledgment of a poverty-level market where agents could set up shop, one that could eventually even attract speculators. Charitable organizations could find a new impetus there. Wodiczko also shifts the issue in other ways: lending the homeless the relative autonomy of displacement and survival but also lending a central visibility to individuals who have always been confined to the margins —the margins of charity, the margins of social assistance, the margins of citizenship and legality— and always been considered second-class citizens. Finally, he shifts the problem by presenting as art that which categorically refuses to be art. How can one imagine such a vehicle categorized as a work of art? As a unique piece for a rich, provocative collector or a valuable piece for a committed museum? Or as a Don Juanesque insult to the poor? Provocation implies something as gentle as it is implacable.

In 1992 Wodiczko developed another project entitled *The Alien Staff*. The object consists of a miniature video screen attached to the curved section of an aluminum staff and connected to a camera carried by the bearer. On it, passersby can see the same immigrant whom they meet on the street without really seeing him or her or, from a distance, they will be able to see and listen to his or her story. In a world where people consider that what they see in the media is as believable as direct

experience, the paradox of credibility arises: if we do not believe what we really see in the flesh, we might more readily believe what we see

"on TV." Wodiczko also works with the effect of the doubling of image and discourse, not positing them as opposing forces but rather as a means of approach: the video image should attract the passerby's gaze until he or she effectively approaches and ascertains that what he or she is seeing on the screen is in fact the same immigrant who is holding the staff-the same face in the image and in person. The piece focuses our attention on a displacement and on overcoming a distance: of establishing communication in a world where we know well enough what communication is when we are trying to sell slogans or detergent but where we become shy whenever we try to address others as "others." But as we very well know society contains excess and readjusts its rescue systems. This is how a social version of the SAMU (Emergency Medical Aid Service) was created in order to follow up on the excluded and offer them care, food and shelter. Alerts are issued in case of extreme cold or heat waves. Ad campaigns are also launched to raise awareness about the lot of the underprivileged and raise funds for NGOs.

III.

How should art posit itself vis-a-vis this endless, triumphant process of re-appropriation? It should also be ambiguous. I shall illustrate this with the work of artist Dennis Adams, but the same stands for Jeff Adams or Andres Serrano when they portray the homeless or underprivileged.

In Dennis Adams' case, the work is made for public spaces -kiosks, rooftops, bus stops, signs in pedestrian zones- using images inspired by advertising in order to convey a strange, ambiguous, hard to interpret message. Adams' installations are conceived to produce a kind of experience that is at once that which the artist desired and constructed and that or those experiences which passersby undergo when they find themselves trapped in his device. These works are fundamentally site-specific, arising from the artist's strolling around the city and from his personal, experiential and then documentary approach to the site.

From the outset, the work is destined to passers-by or whoever happens to be in transit through the space; it is luck or -who knows?- the viewer's accessibility, distraction or meandering attention that allow him or her to be fleetingly exposed to the effect of the signs displaced by Dennis Adams.

In many interviews, Adams has insistently spoken of this margin-al, collateral and subliminal effect of his devices. He has also referred to the methodology of the temporal and of bewilderment, to a distracted gaze, to moments of strangeness, to a methodology of innocence and loss, to the dislocation of conventional relationships, to a fragile voice and a grammar of hesitation, to work on the edge of visibility. It is the city that provides the situation of instability in which his artwork operates. Not the heart of the city, not a place of centered, organized harmony. There are nothing but passersby in the modern city: people in transit who carry out their multiple, changing transactions. Due to habit, occupation, their staidness and need to work, they end up not seeing anything around them. However, they are trapped in a situation of virtual exile: inattentive as they walk about or distressed by fear precisely because they have to move through architectural fragments and zones of existence of varying intensity Dennis Adams describes this situation in the following way: in the city there are only "multiple and changing configurations of displaced identities."

Only, things can sometimes go wrong. In Germany, Adams placed the portrait of M. Verges in a bus stop: he is the French defense attorney of Algerian FNL (National Front of Liberation) militants during the Algerian War. This is indeed the portrait of an ambiguous man, a vehement anti-Semite, defender of Klaus Barbie, who vanished for about a decade in Cambodia among Pot Pot's forces. Elsewhere, Adams will exhibit posters bearing pictures of the Algerian War. What do they mean to say? Besides referring to a colonial tragedy, do they also now refer to the fact that time has passed, to the oppression of women, to imperialism in general... or even to fundamentalism? If Dennis Adams' devices were only aimed at reproducing the generalized ambiguity of all of our post-modern universe's transmissions and interferences, we would be tempted to respond to him in Virginia Woolf's radical

manner: "Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the two is more amply sufficient." But this answer is in no way flip-pant. We wonder why the simplest, most mind-numbing advertising and city-planning mechanisms need to be sublimated in art and vice-versa. We no longer need Benetton to "sublimate" Alfredo Jaar, nor for Kruger to "sublimate" the luminous signs rented by leagues against the unrestricted sale of firearms to private citizens, or for the IFP to ape the Saatchi & Saatchi agency Dennis Adams suggests that the works of art that we are left with amidst the glut of consumer products surrounding and bombarding us, even when they are exhibited in museums, must have recourse to this necessary element.

The paradox that artists like Wodiczko or Adams face is the paradox of a society whose various institutions, both private and public, absorb criticism by dint of repetition and remain undisturbed, trivializing it in the tidal wave of images and information or re-channeling it into mechanisms of communication for their own benefit.

From this point of view, politics then becomes a field like any other to the artist, a terrain that he or she can occupy professionally and efficiently, a zone of inscription where, paradoxically, political matters blend with the artistic, conserving their political symbolism but losing their political efficacy. This is the frontal attack that can be launched at such artists as Dennis Adams, Alfredo Jaar, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Barbara Kruger and also Hans Haacke. Nor are we dealing with politicized or political art but rather with aestheticized politics as yet another object. These artists' work focuses on political topics and actions without ever reaching beyond the sphere of art. The art becomes the activist and replaces action. There is thus a twofold advantage: one earns money for a salaried activity —"a niche," to use marketing terminology— and one discovers with a sigh of relief the apparent belief that someone is still taking care of politics, that the latter activity has not succumbed to apathy, that a commitment still exists. Is there nothing to fear in this appropriation of the political by artists to the extent that they cultivate the illusory feeling that the world could at least be transformed and saved by art? This would be the last refuge for bad consciences and political correction. Unless, in saying this, I do nothing but sustain the illusion of a critical-critical art.

IV.

But what if, on the contrary, the time of critical-critical art had passed, replaced by an art that has a different relationship with reality?

Technical and technological society, the society of communication, does not indeed stop generating representations of itself, of its workings and of what takes place within it. We live amid a flood of images and reality is penetrated, imbued with images. Events and images are interwoven to form reality. This continues to be reflected, so to speak, and conceived through thousands of very different kinds of reflections which, however, do not cease to be reflections: advertising images, reports, surveillance videotapes, interviews, documentaries, talk shows, television series, political commentary, editorial columns, theoretical essays, works of art, etc. Through these processes, society becomes a reflexive or reflecting society, in all senses of the term. It is a society that, through reflections of itself becomes aware of itself thinks about itself posits a disordered yet continual reflection of itself Also based on this reflection, it acts upon itself through all these representations which allow it to organize and control itself. Yet, this does not mean that a "grand theory" exists—a unique representation from the point of view of God, of Sirius or (it conies to the same) of nothing at all: merely a mirror's glimmers that spread out into infinity and that never provide a total image but instead constantly moving perspectives and points of view.

An important characteristic of this "reflexive or reflecting" reality lies in the fact that it cannot be disassociated from the devices and models used to decipher it. The reflexive devices produce model-images that, at the heart of things, allow one to apprehend and decode them. These devices penetrate reality and, once inside it, allow us to adapt to it. Scale models, diagrams, images, visualizations, as they are called, are not a substitute for reality: they form part of it. Faced with this world full of images and representations, and equipped with visualization devices, artists find themselves in a new and delicate situation. We could sum up the paradox by saying that the artist of mimesis has no other rival than reality itself since, in this reflecting world, he or she thenceforth faces all sources of image production as his or her

competitors. Without even calling the mass media into play, we all carry around our own video-cameras, tape recorders, cameras and information records of this kind of source... art not longer manages to extricate itself from the flow of images to assume its own position. There have been attempts at defense, bragging and resistance. In its effort to distinguish between avant-garde and kitsch, formalism was a heroic attempt to lend art a pure environment where it could not be confused with the primary bulk of images and technical reproduction. There have been other attempts at introducing a critical dimension at the heart of images. Pop Art carries implied this last ambiguity putting in circulation the same images as that of consumer society accompanied, however, by critical commentary, though it dealt with a process of amazement by elevating the commercial sign to the level of icon. But the failures in this quest for a critical dimension are visible in post-mimetic art's evident need to guarantee its critical nature by confining itself to spaces of celebration like museums and avant-garde institutions that differentiate in an elitist manner what is not fundamentally different from the main mass of advertising, press, television and cultural industry images if not for the labels that are attached to them.

In fact, artists are once again faced with the paradox of a society where any critical, distanced image is in the process of being re-appropriated by the system of images that tirelessly absorbs every-thing that at first claims to escape it. Mondrian becomes a textile motif, Picasso sells Paloma Picasso's perfumes and silk scarves. Art is no longer in a situation of expressing a critical opinion that would be more perceptive, more lucid, that would help us see more clearly. It can no longer assume a particular stance that allows it to better perceive things and hence call things into account, shape things or make us understand: every image claims to make us see better than others for the simple reason that it is new. Mimesis is so ubiquitous that it no longer has descriptive functions. Art may no longer be creating decoys and illusions, but rather mere entertainment, glimmers, disorientation, fireworks.

In its own way, art-making becomes an element of the reflexive process, a piece of the world's and its own self-representation. Here we

could refer to the ideas of such thinkers as Luhmann and Giddens: there is an immanent logic of the world's self-representation through its successive fragments, consciousnesses and identities. All representation takes part in this game of reflexive representation. In my opinion, what counts from now on is not the gaze that an directs towards reality or society, hut rather art that affects the ninetioning of society, following the same principles of operation and using the same technologies. This is why there can effectively no longer be neither critical nor distanced nor visionary art, but rather only modes of action that are re-appropriated from the outset. Not even re-appropriated, in fact, given that they never transcended social functioning or social production, never managed to distance them-selves from the latter. From now on, we are all trapped in this circle of reflection, this reflecting circle. What becomes meaningful is the society-reflection of society dyad, and yet it is practically impossible to apprehend if not fleetingly or in flashes, through a way of thinking akin to those glimmers of reflection. A new Hegel might allow us to imagine this dizzying circle of self-reflection.

¹*Art and Culture*, p.16 of French translation

²*Situations III*, p.26 of French edition

Resistance and beyond

Cuauhtémoc Medina

"Resistance" is above all the signifier of post-revolutionary politics. To "resist" has become the motto of alternative global activism, and the way we read the passivity or evasive maneuvers by means of which the subjugated no longer seek to oppose the hegemony with the promise of another hegemony (allegedly, their own), but rather through the multiform tactics of erosion, deviation, postponement, dissuasion and fraud. Instead of using the master's own violence against him or her (Lenin's classic expression was "The workers..., need the State to squash