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Criticality or truth?

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1.

A specter haunts the world of cultural production, the specter of criticality. All too often, this specter is truthless, little more than a caricature of a ruthless critique. Its appearance invokes an "aesthetic of administration," born of too many compromises between market, state, and freelance rebellion. This kind of criticality pretends to found upon Foucauldian *parrhesia* or Brechtian *plumpes Denken*, but it does not articulate the interests of "class conscious culture workers." Instead, it is the global petit bourgeoisie's version of what was called *paideia* in late antiquity, the polite and deferent gestural-discursive code of conduct for educated (i.e. recognized) subjects at court.

This weak criticality is what distinguishes the "reasonable" petit bourgeois from a run-of-the-mill consumer of decorative-spectacular kitsch; criticality is a hallmark of enlightened citizenship. But of course, today, criticality is also an industrial product, a bit like bio-food. Its function is supply a semi-privatized "public sector" a new aura of governmentality, to the irrational, maddening glory of an "intelligent" or "soft" power that pretends to yield and change to your benefit when you tell it the "naked truth." This, of course, is a lie.

2.

To be truthful, it has become very hard for cultural producers to tell the truth. "Telling the truth" always meant going beyond the vagaries of personal experience. It meant putting things into focus. It involved making a clear, collectively responsible statement that would finally grasp, describe and reflect a social totality. Today, the position of the speaker is all-important. Critical truths become necessarily vague. A multiplicity of dissenting (often divergent) interests drift and collide on the continental trade winds of capital. Here, the only possible master narrative is the idea that there is no outside, that we (as the makers of culture) are all somehow implicated and involved, more part of the problem than of its solution.

"It seems to me," says Irit Rogoff of Goldsmiths College, "that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique to what I am calling at present criticality. That is that we have moved from criticism which is a form of finding fault and of exercising judgement according to a consensus of values, to critique which is examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to criticality which is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embededness." This actually mirrors the hegemonic version of authenticity: from within (i.e. from the position of the embedded critic), everthing is so beautifully vague, wobbly, and somehow authentic, like the spotted green nightscope naturalism of another war on CNN (cf. Hito Steyerl, The Uncertainty of Documentarism, in: Chto delat, Make Film Politically, 2007, online at http://chtodelat.org/)

Attempting to clarify and focus this vagueness through self-reflection, criticality can make great strides towards a new realism, as in Steyerl's films and essays. But it can also go wrong, beginning to look like the urban neurosis of a Woody Allen movie, choked by the golden umbilical chord, a parody of the tragic revolutionary's “unhappy soul” (Hegel), marking the trajectory from the folksong of the partisan to the vaudeville of the partisan review, perhaps. Self-clarification is not always a truth procedure.

3.

- So how can criticality tell the truth, how can it set the vague optics of embeddedness into focus?

- Only through a materialist analysis of the world that exists both without us and for us.

- But what is this materialism, actually?

One position in this discussion, as voiced by critic Isabelle Graw in *Texte zur Kunst*, is that we first need to know in how far criticality's "artistic compentencies (research, teamwork, communication, personal initiative) can be fed into [...] the 'new spirit of capitalism'." Then, we should search for concrete artistic material sensibilities that are not so easily swallowed. To find these resistant sensibilities, we would have to expand our view of the artistic institution to include traditional studio work. This concrete materiality of art produced one-on-one in the studio has always contained a place for inner emigration ("exodus"). The material truth is refocused around the artwork and the artist who produces it as an object, a material product that survives in an institutional context and beyond.

Another position, as put forth by philosopher Gerald Raunig from Vienna on the transversal web-journal, is that we should be careful not to draw ultra-conservative consequences from a timely analysis: our critique should actualize critical truth-telling as the insistence on the possibility of another mode of handling collective self-governance and singular subjectivation, one that does not take place between the same old archaic interior and the shopping center's fake agora, but in the "publicity without a public" of general intellect, as ideology becomes its own productive force. Here, so argues Raunig, it becomes possible to invent "instituent practices" based on the possibility of disciplinary "transversal," a combination of crossing-over and translation.The material truth is with the producers and the originality of their discourses, which self-institute a politically productive "flight to the fore," to the avant-garde of immaterial production.

A third position is voiced by Prelom kolektiv from Belgrade. Combating the tendency toward idealism, they say it is time to refocus the discussion around a real materialist practice of critique. Methodologically, this means breaking with both the transcendental horizon of abstract humanism and the overly metaphysical metaphorics of immanence. It means calling things by their proper names: engaging in a more radical form of *parrhesia* that is not (yet) normative, calling the NGO an NGO, as it were. But it also means intervening in the etiquette of multicultural criticality by insisting upon the "existent impossibility" of communism (in Prelom's case, through the partisan traditions of Yugoslavia). This means articulating its images and imaginaries in a de-culturalized form, unbound from the dominant narrative, which depoliticizes communism as a utopia. The concrete (material) aesthetic of socialist altera-modernism has not yet lost its claim to absolute truth, precisely because it can be actualized and used as a weapon in what is ultimately a neo-colonial, post-socialist struggle of the marginalized semi-periphery. The material truth is with this struggle and the practices it demands.

4.

All three positions are based on different aspects of the same material truth, the same contradictory reality. Though they arise from a polemic and contradict one another, we should not make the mistake of seeing them as an irreversible dialectic. Instead, we could consider them as three productive aspects of the same phenomenon, three lens rings that could focus the optics of embedded criticality, if adjusted properly. The point, as Dmitry Vilensky has pointed out in earlier texts, is to find the proper constellation. In our view, this constellation can be obtained through a collective reconsideration of critical realism. In brief, there are three moments that we might think about for now.

The first moment is that critical realism must make the abstract diagnosis of "the wrong whole" – and this is the only real content of vague and diffuse criticality – more concrete. First and foremost, its narrative of "typical people under typical situations" (and isn't this the narrative of embeddedness?) must become stereoscopic through the precise, “virtuosic” use of mimetic procedures to show the contradictory nature of reality. These are sensuous material, social, and practical movements that approximate the truth in its becoming, turning the whole rotten fishsoup into an aquarium, as the Moscow artist Dmitry Gutov once put it. The eye becomes a human eye. In that sense, the mimetic labor of critical realism, if rethought today, will inevitably have to have to involve sensualist, Epicurean “craftsmanship.” But the point is to use this mimetic craftsmanship critically, even barbarically, never forgetting that each mimetic device is also a practice or know-how that the dominant cultural discourse of criticality would like to neutralize as a form of embedded "non-representative" mimesis.

The second moment has to do with the self-constitution that mimetic labor always entails, and the desire to flee from those conditions of production that threaten to subsume it completely. Mimetic procedures are always-already instituent practices that create their own visual, textual, and narrative spaces, their own optics, their own realm of freedom beyond the realm of necessity. Cultural producers are translators; their work always "flees" or "deviates" from the original (and here I am vaguely reflecting upon my own embeddedness). Cultural producers today are also eternal dilettantes, and dilettantes can never quite get it right. In the 19th century, critical realism emerged from dilettante genre painting, which, in turn, imitated academic classicism, but it slowly moved out through strange jokes and ironic mutterings via the grotesque, finally to embrace the political vitality of the tragicomic everyday. It is precisely this deviation that allowed the critical realists to make such convincing otherworlds. But these otherworlds are very much here and now when they become exoteric, and launch themselves into broader reality, facing a "publicity without public," producing a constellation that must make its own audience when it is put to practice.

It is this moment of double reflection that still seems so inspiring if one looks at the Peredvizhniki, the Russian 19th century critical realist painters known as the Itinerants in the West. On a painterly level, their brutal critique was sensual and almost loving, full of both comedy and tragedy, full of a humanity often far beyond the theoretical abstract humanism of its time. This quality – a combination of painterly virtuosity and narrative subtlety – made the nascent idea of communism plausible in the flesh, as it were, for years to come. And on an institutional level, their traveling exhibitions were actually a counter-institutional practice or exodus that broke with the previous feudal academic mode of production. Are the different self-organizing critical institutions like the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policy in Vienna, Chto delat in St. Petersburg, Prelom in Belgrade, or 16Beaver in New York the basis for new "itinerant practices," new critical realisms? And will they share the fate of the Itinerants, if there is the sort of political transition we are all working towards? As we know, critical realism eventually produced the institution of “official” Soviet art...

This brings me to the third moment that seems so important today, namely the possibility of seeing the discredited legacy of the socialist alternative to modernism as a weapon for a class struggle that will come into focus in future years, perhaps sooner rather than later. This does not only have to do with the return of class consciousness to outsourced, precarious content providers from the semi-periphery, who are then cultivated and exploited (i.e. institutionalized and culturalized) by the Western industry’s “non-profit” branch, whose representatives are often almost just as precarious...: a straightforward institutional critique of this intricately embedded position could never go beyond criticality. Instead, it is also the material, physical awareness of a constant double-agency: of miming socialism altera-modernism for the Western camera and the local capitalists, and actually exploring its truly alternative and emancipatory content in a materialist mimesis that does not only think but feels the transhistorical immanence of communism as a community to come. Yet such “weak messianism” of the communist imaginary is unthinkable without its concrete articulation in the everyday, retelling its tragicomedy in the prose of a contradictory reality that has not yet found its truthful voice, its consistent articulation. This would be the contradictory dialectical materialism and communist

sensibility of Andrei Platonov (the critical realist per se, according to Georg Lukacs), the materialism of the subaltern, one that literally "grows weak when the truth drains from its body," a feeling we know very well, whenever we see that capital has already appropriated the world we have just made.