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BLENDED MARKS

From then on, the struggle is, as it were, on the very ground of representation—on the very ground the interpellations of the subject in reality by ideology; art as displacement in so far as it holds representation at a distance—the distance, precisely, of politics.

—Stephen Heath¹

THERE IS A FORCE behind many forms of compromise. You compromise when you might be able to reject a condition but you don't want to lose it entirely and so you would rather compromise to accomplish at least part of what you want. I am using the word 'compromise' in the sense of an agreement, an agreement forced through a punishment and reward system. By compromising with a system, we accept to be part of it and benefit from our collaboration. The opposite is negation. Negation doesn't play the game but faces the consequences.

Thinking about 'artistic compromise' and 'artistic negation' leads me to a question of deeper urgency: "*what is my relationship to art, how I compromise or negate, and how do these conditions affect my art?*"

One way of thinking about artistic compromise is to view it as an agreement between artist/artwork and educational, sociopolitical, and financial institutions. By adhering to the expectations of

external institutions and their way of using language, our artwork begins within these predetermined contexts. We compromise when we adopt conditions that are not ideal for ourselves or the artwork; political ideals may be compromised by the economic actualities of institutional funding, artistic ideals may be compromised by the necessity to fulfill certain expectations, etc. What differentiates a compromise from full consent is our awareness of the conflicts between what we want and what the external institutions expect. On the other hand, by artistic negation, I mean any form of social, cultural, political resistance and critique of the institutional expectations, definitions, and identification of art and its outcomes. Where compromise marks an agreement between an artist and the existing artistic order, negation has the potential to produce new ideas and new discourses in art.



I can see a real example of artistic negation in the works of Aliza Shvarts. In her performance, *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* (2008), Shvarts explored questions of material and discursive

reproduction through biological and epistemological language. She used semen samples (collected from ‘fabricators’) to privately self-inseminate; on the 28th day of her menstrual cycle, she would ingest an herbal abortifacient that caused her cramps and heavy bleeding. Shvarts intended her piece to exist in its telling, a telling through textual, visual, spatial, temporal, and performative forms. The video and final installation for this work were censored and deemed a “creative fiction” by the Yale University administration and the piece only exists as a narrative circulation. Even the sculptural installation for this work was banned by Yale University and the artist decided not to release any visual representation of the piece for the following decade.²

Between a full consent and compromise, and finally, a refusal of any agreements, there are many interconnected and shifting paradigms to consider. There are various positions to occupy that would create a dialectical form of compromise between acceptance and negation. These positions of compromise allow for heterogeneous politics/forms of representational practice and a diverse discursive eco-system. Dialectical positions allow the image-maker to rethink the image, revise it, scratch it, wipe it, smudge it, erase it, correct it, crumble it, break it and start a new one. As an artist who compromises and/or aspires to pure negation, art has the potential to be a liberation strategy. It has the possibility of offering new forms of pleasure through the act of deconstruction and can make sense of new worlds through art’s role in the production of knowledge and language, and for its ability to offer new patterns of identification.

Formal art education is a mechanism that teaches us how to use the language of art rather than how it has been made.³ Institutionalized education is focused on producing and consuming already established language, a ready-made language accredited by art institutions. In this education, ‘understanding’ requires no more knowledge than the consumption of the dominant language.

We think through language. We make art, interpret, and critique artworks within this language. We make theories and understand our everyday life by the agency of this language. If we don’t have a language of our own for what we are trying to say, we compromise with the already arranged language offered to us.

Art history is a powerful institution that defines and divides ‘art’ from non-art practices and grades artworks on hierarchical bases. Art history names image-makers, identifying and legitimating them, thereby setting them apart. There are no names for an image-breaker. Image-breakers belong to a different institution and ideology than the image-makers. The image-breakers’ visual language is always yet to come. Image-breakers are held by a negative space circumscribed by oppressive systems, their aesthetics come into emergence through the negation of established images. The identity of an image-breaker can survive and become visible through non-mimetic negative marks. The image-breakers’ marks are not the marks of an individual signature but rather the documentation of being there in a specific time and space. Image-breaker’s impersonal marks fail to represent the genius artist as a unique individual who reinforces identity as a condition of self-expression. Image-breakers are no one in particular, have no personal style or body of work; they cut the mark away from its identifiable maker and put it in a distance from its source.⁴

I am interested in image-breakers’ wry and crooked negation rather than the compromising synthetic marks of the image-maker. Through the perforation of the illusory surface, image-breakers disturb the illusion of the image as representation and take the image back to its material, to its real ground, *to what the image is made of*. Image-breakers’ practices are ‘dis-identificatory,’ they ‘distanciate’ and defamiliarize the image, liberating the viewers from their capture by image; they interpellate the passive identification of narrative and illusion of the image.⁵

The distancing marks of the image-breaker are not a style but an erosion of the dominant structures of cultural consumption, distant from the projected politics/forms. Image-breakers negate the knowledge and ideologies which are dominant and have become normalized as the common senses. Image-breakers reject established languages, their oppressive structures, and status quo functions. Image-breakers create a new language that works for them, and if they don't have that language yet, they create one by ravaging the old one. Iconoclastic, non-compromising, deconstructive acts open space for 'other' forms of language. Forcefully, negation opens space for the alternative, for the 'other' to appear and become visible, and possibly legible. Therefore, negation can be productive.

What can negation afford to a condition of art production? Can I expect new meanings in art if I displace iconoclastic politics/form into art disciplines? Can a non-compromising artistic act hack dominant institutionalized definitions and accepted limits of what art is and how it should be consumed? Can a non-compromising artistic act fight against dominant systems of meaning and the positions and identities which they attempt to secure? Can a non-compromising artistic act maintain a relation to the art world in order to be accredited as art, to be socially effective and legible?

In attempting to answer the questions above an artist might begin to think of compromise as a strategy that operates between the poles of acceptance and negation of the system outlined. To make an image, an image-maker may have to navigate through different compromises. For example, compromise with the institution's rules of 'a representable work' in a designated space or compromise with a way of using language to avoid censorship. The image-maker's decisions are made through various compromises, negations, mistakes, adjustments, tactics, twisting of established conditions for image-making.

In contrast to consent, which supports the project of fixing meaning, negation breaks up the meanings and multiply them. Image-breaker's negation is not to seek a new meaning for already established signs but rather a total dissolution of the system by which those signs are organized to function as the criterion upon which institutionalized treatments are assigned and naturalized. Compromise can create a choice in a repressive space that doesn't offer any choices. In the absence of choice, compromise can be a powerful alternative for a dissatisfied artist to strategically delve a furtive 'underground' for art-making conditions within an oppressive system where negation might otherwise seem impossible. Similar to negation, which can open space for an 'other' image to appear on the same ground, an image-maker's compromise can be a choice to pave a way for an image to be made (or break) within an institution. It is important to consider this choice because so many artistic practices across the world, intentionally or unintentionally, are rewarded for running on the treadmill of dominant discourses without really getting anywhere. These artistic practices claim to be understood within their non-hegemonic discourses and infrastructures as they demand to rest through their own languages.



Notes

1. Stephen Heath, "Lessons from Brecht," *Screen*, 1974, 15 (2), 123
2. Aliza Shvarts, *Untitled [Senior Thesis]*, 2008. https://alizashvarts.com/2008_senior-thesis.html
3. Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement* (New York: Pandora, 1987)
4. Amy Knight Powel, "Segers' Iconoclastic Vernacular," *Oxford Art Journal*, 2015, 38 (3), 343-364
5. I am using the term 'distanciation' from Brecht's terminology, "Lessons from Brecht," 1974. Distancing or alienation effect is a technique used in theatre and cinema that prevents the audience from losing itself completely in the narrative, instead making it a conscious critical observer. The actor accomplishes this by directly addressing the audience, barring them from feeling empathy (film), interrupting the narrative (cinema), or drawing attention to the film making or theatrical process.

Images

1. UK anti-racism protesters topple statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston, June 2020.
2. Hadley Howes, *Garden of Future Follies*, 2016, Toronto, Canada. "The Garden of Future Follies is a sculpture garden that brings together elements from over 80 existing public sculptures and architectural details from around the City of Toronto. To create the garden, fragments of existing Toronto sculpture were cast using a Cine-foil casting technique—pressing material directly onto a sculpted surface—to generate over 150 unique impressions that were subsequently cast in bronze. The resulting sculptural collage invites visitors to imagine their own configurations as they visit not only the Garden of Future Follies, but also other sites around the city, inspiring acts of co-creation beyond a single site. Much of Toronto's public sculpture commemorates colonial power and reflects the permanent dwelling of dominant histories throughout the city. They are often larger than life and out of reach. The Garden of Future Follies adjusts the hierarchy, scale and orientation of these sculptures, freeing existing figures to be re-imagined by the public and to challenge the limits of our political, social and architectural imaginations."