

NAIRY BAGHTAMIAN  
A TALK WITHOUT IMAGE OBJECTS

LE MÉPRIS#1

**SUBJECT TO OBJECT AND VICE VERSA**

In the last few years the status of a work of art has risen beyond that of mere autonomous existence, to the point where works are sometimes treated like quasi-subjects capable of their own autonomous thinking. From a philosophical point of view, this may be an interesting approach; in practice, however, the consequence is that this autonomous, thinking work begins to take action by itself as well. It might for instance, apparently enter into direct dialogue with the curator: generating a relationship in which art objects (of course including image based work) function like active purveyors of their own alliances and affinities with other objects.

One sometimes gets the impression that a work of art can speak, live, and even outlive the artist and hence also artistic discourse. I believe that this work-turned-subject is a kind of monster. Curators, art historians, and critics sometimes nurse this monster by talking about the work as an isolated entity thus effectively releasing artists from their responsibility to contribute to current discourse. In contrast to this, I believe that artistic discourse is of fundamental importance. I think that artists should risk controversy and stake contentious claims. In doing so they should not just act as mere advocates of their own work but also position themselves to more general questions relating the ongoing debate on art and its principles. This is an important challenge, particularly because many artists today prefer to style themselves as victims of these discourses rather than participate actively in them.

The tendency of the art work to be turned into a subject is further promoted by the growing silence of the artist-subject, who thereby threatens to turn him or herself into a self-mystifying object. This objectified artist-subject seems willing to effectively annul him or herself, in order to become a silent producer. That turns the artist into something like a fetish object; with the only agents in art discourse left being curators, commentators and market players exercising control. Faced with this, traditionally the self-mystifying artist might seek to lend legitimacy to their status as an artist by appealing to immortality or the infinite; a state of being and making beyond daily concerns of the world – but in doing so what happens to the discursive potential of art?

My point is not that we need to re-debate questions about the autonomy of the work of art over and over again. But still: shouldn't we take a critical look on the fact that these days works of art have actually returned to a status of such autonomy they held up to the 1960s, considering that, had they retained it to begin with, there would have been no institutional critique and no debate over aesthetic experience in general? These debates, it is true, considered the possibility of the work existing as thought objectified, but only in their relation to the beholder and to their institutional and social conditions. In Robert Morris's "Untitled (Box for standing)" (1961), for example, the beholder is invited to stand inside a life-sized upright rectangular wooden box, to become part of the work and the institution exhibiting it. At the same time, the empty box marks the absence of the beholder as well as of the artist-subject and thus points to their agency beyond the object.

If the idealizing view of the idea of a work's autonomy effectively renders that work a subject in its own right, the structures surrounding the work of art – of which we, as beholders, are part – come under threat; we are as though under the work's spell, responding to it like schizophrenics. At the same time, there is the danger that the art critic comes to believe that it is enough to negotiate matters in intimate exchange with the work alone: now it speaks for itself, now it is part of the curator's concept: the work of art becomes a projection screen that talks back.

## **TIME FRAMES**

One example to show the opposite could be this year's exhibition "Claes Oldenburg. The Sixties" at the MUMOK in Vienna. Curated by Achim Hochdörfer in close collaboration with Oldenburg, the show gathered works from that decade and dissolved the autonomy of individual works, whose meaning instead grew out of the ensemble in which they were embedded. The exhibition functioned like a study, both in the rhetoric of the rooms and in the placement of the works, and the connections were established by deliberately tying everything back to their specific history. The work of art was not presented as a spectral, free-floating existence detached from everything else.

By connecting the art to the contemporary historical and sociopolitical discourse of the 1960s, Hochdörfer allowed meanings to emerge in dialogue; thus it became apparent for instance, that Oldenburg's formal decisions were deeply motivated by the circumstances of his time and that the discourse of the 1960s remains worthy of our interest today. Taking the train of thought demonstrated by this exhibition to its logical conclusion, it seems that art

must always be seen in relation to its context. In its encounter with the beholder, the work of art exercises an indirect influence on cultural habits, drawing our attention by contradicting or rejecting them, and thus providing a frame for the transformative power of aesthetics and politics that reaches beyond these fields.

## **WHY THIS QUESTION NOW?**

Setting out from the hypothesis that what we see looks back at us— a claim put forward in the book of the same title by Georges Didi-Huberman in 1992 – and thinking about the 1960s and Minimal art, we can see that the writings of Minimalism were sometimes quite at odds with the art it produced. The most exciting debates within Minimalism were those that the artists themselves provoked by generating contradictions of conflict. These contradictions in the discourse-object relations generated parallel works that permeate the attitude toward Minimalism and are capable of turning monotone understandings of Minimalism on their head. One example could be Donald Judd’s essay “Art and Architecture” (1983):

“I will consider some of the questions of art, not primarily from the outside, but as they occur in my work. An artist is certainly not without ideas and principles but these cannot be completely formulated beforehand, before the work is developed, and then simply embodied. It is an essential of art that the process of making it and the use of all that comprises it influences, suggests and enforces ideas and qualities. The ideas and qualities and the materials and techniques build each other. A red seems to have a particular quality of its own. In the work it retains that quality and yet it is altered and amplified by the context. Its original quality may have suggested the alteration. The idea or quality desired may have required the red.”

According to this quote, it was not just object strategies or pure production that were at issue at the time. Rather, the discourse simultaneous to their artistic work enabled artists to question what they were doing and to engage in contentions.

During the 1980s, by contrast, artist and art work had been brought together so closely that, especially within the discourse on painting, artists/painters were blamed to act as too much of a dominant subject. In the 1990s then, a period when the 1960s were reconsidered, generally we saw again the prevalence of a critical approach to the work of art, and skepticism about artist-subjects. When the artist spoke, he or she did so primarily as a socio-political person – a

cultural producer – who sought to generate discourses. The aim was to try and circumnavigate the problem of the marketable art object. Ironically, the works produced in parallel, or as a byproduct, would later be reclassified as works of art.

Moving to the present, these days, artists have begun to introduce a great number of references into their work, not to fall into line with the 1990s' emphasis on the work's context, but to exhibit the reference itself, effectively pre-historicizing themselves. The reference becomes the advocate of the work, becomes its surrogate instead of serving as a footnote. Some observers object to this tendency, arguing that artists are trying to secure themselves and produce surplus value by means of the strategic deployment of references, while seeing themselves as mystified producers whose works need to be decoded by third parties. This blunt disapproval may be why artists have become ever more cautious in their statements, a reticence in which they have now made themselves comfortable.

Curators and critics in fact find this emphasis on reference rather congenial – the works are understood to convey a shared interest, but the critics are better at articulating it. As a consequence third party commentators, not artists, are at a discursive advantage; one that sometimes gives the impression that artists now devise their production with the interests of critics and curators in mind. The result can be: a plethora of un-positioned, mystical art objects and the fashionability of works with a dubious formal resemblance to process-based art and *arte povera*. While the formal and aesthetic decision in the 1960's were the result of heated political debates so that the selection of so called "poor materials" was a provocative statement against the conditions of the institutions, one rather empathizes today with these "poor materials" as they appear in light of contemporary production solely as formalistic constructions representing authentic studio work. The results in an art made to order where the artist is asked to submit proposals, comparable to "Percent for Art" programs, and the art work is being commissioned to be perfectly tailored to the curatorial concept. What motivates this rapprochement on the artist's side is the fact that the only art statement being made by the artists here is the bare fact of their making or doing. Today, artists apparently can simply produce objects and images, without triggering cultural processes or political debates.

Contemporary experience shows that the less the artist speaks, the more autonomous the work becomes. It has become a stock trope to say that we should "let the work speak for itself." The artists themselves speak only because, in the best of case, they can help produce the surplus value for their work. The boundary between subject and object is blurred, but not as an intentional technique, as in Andrea Fraser's work "Untitled" (2003), where she illustrated the artist's marketing of herself through the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation

by taking it to the extreme of having sex with a collector; this objectification of the artist is just collateral damage in the struggle for visibility. Of course, there have always been and still are artists who continue to pursue, besides their art production, the fundamental goal of raising questions pertinent to the art system and the performative act, or declaring themselves part of the art. In these instances, the person, the artist as a subject, is an essential component of the artistic practice. The work of art, in the widest sense of the term, insofar as it is reflective, must be regarded as performative. The performative process is initiated by the encounter between beholder and work in the context of the latter's presentation. The interrelationships this encounter subsequently generates can change fundamental attitudes regarding cultural issues and, in a next step, animate us to think beyond the pure subject-object relationship and its dialectic.

### **THINGS TO PRACTICE: WRITING & DISCOURSE**

In rare instances, the need to participate actively in generating discourse is imposed on the artist from outside, for instance, when he or she is approached by a journal such as *Texte zur Kunst*, which asks artists to articulate reasoned views about something other than their own production. Last Fall, I was asked to say something about feminism, an issue the public debate often describes as having been laid to rest. I would like to read an excerpt from my text:

*“YOU GO FIRST ...*

...Most recently, we have observed a return to curatorial assertions that largely rely on the ostensibly significant facts, and either build on the feminism debate without articulating their own stake or disregard it altogether. The results are shows that once again reproduce traditional stereotypes about femininity. Exhibitions of the sixties and seventies such as “Issue,” held at the ICA, London, in 1980 and curated by Lucy L. Lippard, which featured artists such as Margaret Harrison, Mary Kelly, Nancy Spero, May Stevens, Kate Walker, and Marie Yates, or “Künstlerinnen International 1877–1977,” held at the NGBK, Berlin, in 1977, which included works by Barbara Morgan, Helen Frankenthaler, Ulrike Ottinger, Miriam Shapiro, Carolee Schneemann, Judy Chicago, Valie Export, Hannah Wilke, and others shows that fostered substantial debate over feminist issues—are at once assessed as purely historical

phenomena. The ties that bind certain genres such as performance, video, and participatory art to historical contexts imply the renewed danger of a dualism pitting such artistic practices against their ostensible opposites, the media of sculpture and painting. The latter, it is suggested, can speak for themselves by virtue of their form, and can stand the test of tempestuous times thanks to their physical permanence and historical standing. The consequence of this problematic characterization is that painting and sculpture are described today as incapable of contributing to the debate over feminism or, more generally, of being a vehicle of political content. Works that initially became visible by virtue of that debate now appear as the products of an autonomous artistic subject, catering to the promise that we can escape the haunting “discontent” of the category of gender.

Here, by contrast, is what Judith Butler wrote in *Gender Trouble*:

“The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.”

END QUOTE

## **TIMING VERSUS PLACING**

Restoring the subject-object relation urgently requires a sustainable work of institutions. Institutions must be the sites where important discourses are conducted and ensure that they can be carried on. Today’s budget cuts and the resulting constraints must not endanger the lasting preservation of institutional structures. The current boom of biennials, triennials, Manifestas, documentas, etc. unfortunately can also pose a threat to institution and its lasting quality. Mega-exhibitions, conceived as spectacular events, used primarily as a way of summing up a period and reflecting on trends in art, also with a view to setting signals for the future. In today’s globalized world, you can go and see several of these shows at any given time. The consequence is a permanent *déjà-vu*: the same works come up again and again. Timing supersedes placing: a development that parallels the difference between the definitions of “process” mentioned earlier. This global trend-setting cannot be stopped; so we need to think harder about these temporary ‘grand’ exhibitions; works of art must not just be seen as subordinate to the overarching theme of the show they happen to be in.

## **SITE-SPECIFIC**

Thinking of institutions and timing brings me to the question of site-specificity and surprisingly back to Oldenburg's works in the MUMOK exhibition. Usually, Oldenburg's works had heretofore been displayed in institutions as autonomous centerpieces in exhibitions. This form of their presentation only fulfilled expectations about the Oldenburgian Pop-art object. In contrast, the selection and display of the works included in the MUMOK show contradicted these expectations with great precision. The individual works were set back into their historical and local contexts, establishing the performative nature of Oldenburg's approach. The takeaway assertion of the exhibition was that it is overly simplistic to place his oeuvre solely in the context of Pop art. The curator's close attention to context and his efforts to bring out a different perspective brought to light that Oldenburg's work had much more in common with, say, Eva Hesse's than formerly assumed; engaging with Minimal art, too, seemed to have been much more important to him than merely meeting the parameters of Pop art.

## **ESSENCE OF THE HOUSE**

If one assumes that a work of art was first and foremost an autonomous object extracted from its original context, one that has been transferred to the mode of representation – through its exposure in an institution specially conceived for this purpose – and thus becoming what was later validated as art in museums, then this raises the question of to what extent similar mechanisms are applied in the opposite direction today.

Historically, the need to build a place for art – a museum or other institutions associated with the circulation of art objects (thus establishing a semiotic for the “art” ideological structure) – was originally triggered by the desire to display objects brought by travelers, which were considered significant to the place where they were found. Consequently, artists began to investigate buildings constructed for this purpose, along with the resulting conditions of the exhibition, in order to establish that, like the metaphor of the house in philosophical paradigms, constant return is inevitable. With this, the discourse inherent to the artwork becomes inseparable from the surrounding parameters of the presentation, and as such can be experienced as a specific site.

Site-specificity is therefore to be understood as an artistic method that does not presume the autonomy of the artwork, but rather one that reflects on contextual conditions and referential

possibilities relating to various economic, political, social, and cultural registers. These can be tested on the basis of institutions and their own networks of conditions. The increasing tendency of both curatorial and artistic practices – that is, to connect less to the specific relationship between time and space and instead allow for large group exhibitions conceived hastily under tight deadlines – can all too easily transform artworks into in-demand, easy-to-manage exhibition pieces. With this, site-specific negotiations threaten to become obsolete, and self-reflexive institutional concepts are at risk. To put it bluntly, this means that the discursive artwork will travel in reverse and, having landed in a blind spot, can only hope to be discovered purely as an exhibit.

## **LE MÉPRIS**

Today's proximity between subject and objects tends to lead to confusion between the two, and to misattributions; we are left with an exhibit that is adrift and a producer who has fallen silent, a creator without qualities. When faced with this issue it is important to remember that in the past some people used to have an alternative, positively exaggerated idea about the fusion of art objects and artist-subjects – even someone like Andy Warhol (although he is admittedly perhaps the evil of all evils in terms of thinking about subjects and objects and the artistic production of discourse), but furthermore all kinds of wild groups of artists, actors, writers, women publishers, drag queens, etc., who shared an interest in social utopias and created worlds beyond their aesthetic ambitions directed as weapons against repression and conformity.

### Note

1 This text is based on a lecture that was held firstly in January 2012 at Vera List Center for Art and Politics and Sculpture Center New York and is published in the “Conflict” issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, September 2012