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From Criticism to Critique to Criticality

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This text is the first section of "What is a Theorist?", see http://kein.org/node/62. You can find Irit Rogoff's extended deliberations on criticality in her recent text: 'Smuggling' – An Embodied Criticality

A theorist is one who has been undone by theory.

Rather than the accumulation of theoretical tools and materials, models of analysis, perspectives and positions, the work of theory is to unravel the very ground on which it stands. To introduce questions and uncertainties in those places where formerly there was some seeming consensus about what one did and how one went about it.

In the context of a question regarding what an artist might be, I would want to raise the question of what a theorist might be, to signal how inextricably linked these existences and practices might be. The old boundaries between making and theorising, historicizing and displaying, criticising and affirming have long been eroded.

Artistic practice is being acknowledged as the production of knowledge and theoretical and curatorial endeavours have taken on a far more experimental and inventive dimension, both existing in the realm of potentiality and possibility rather than that of exclusively material production.

The former pragmatic links in which one area 'serviced' another have given way to an understanding that we face cultural issues in common and produce cultural insights in common. Instead of 'criticism' being an act of judgement addressed to a clear cut object of criticism, we now recognise not just our own imbrication in the object or the cultural moment but also the performative nature of any action or stance we might be taking in relation to it. Now we think of all of these practices as linked in a complex process of knowledge production instead of the earlier separation into creativity and criticism, production and application. If one shares this set of perspectives then one cannot ask the question of 'what is an artist?' without asking 'what is a theorist?'.

The narrative of theoretical unravelling, of being undone is a journey of phases in which the thought we are immersed in is invalidated. Those moment of silent epiphany in which we have realised that things might not necessarily be so, that there might be a whole other way to think them, moments in which the paradigms we inhabit cease to be self legitimating and in a flash are revealed to be nothing more than what they are, paradigms. In my own particular case this was a journey from a discipline called art history, via great roads of critical, theoretical study to some other and less disciplined place which for the moment and very provisionally we might call Visual Culture.

Furthermore, I come to the formations of Visual Culture from a slightly different perspective of cultural difference, and it is one of the privileges of the culturally displaced that their view is always awkward and askance, never frontally positioned and often exists in an uneasy relation to dominant paradigms. Initially I came from a long, conventional and very anti intellectual training in art history which left me at its end at a complete loss on how to navigate the interstices between who I was, what I did and the world that I inhabited.

In my own particular case the distance between these three was such, that fairly acceptable exercises in stretching and expanding a professional practice to make it accommodate one's concerns seem in retrospect to have not been able to bridge the gaps. Therefore in the first instance my attention was caught by what possibilities there might be for formulating a project not out of a set of given materials or existent categories, but out of what seemed

at each historical moment, a set of urgent concerns.

Roughly speaking these emerged for me as: in the 1980s a concern with gender and sexual difference which resulted in an exploration of feminist epistemologies. In the 1990s a concern with race and cultural difference which resulted in trying to take on the authority of 'geography' as a body of knowledge with political implications and currently a concern with questions of democracy and of what modes, parliamentarian and performative, might be open to us to take part in it, which I am currently thinking about as an exploration of participation and of what does it mean to take part in visual culture beyond the roles it allots us as viewers or listeners.

Obviously I am speaking of a long journey of some 18 years now, which has included encounters with on the one hand the ways in which global politics constantly reformulate and reformat themselves and on the other, tremendously exciting encounters with critical theory that asserted that things are'nt necessarily what they seem and gave me the tools to see through them. But have no fear, I am not about to rehearse upon you the long march from Structuralism to Deleuze with detours through feminism, psychoanalysis and colonialism. Instead I am concerned with the dynamics of loss, of giving up and of moving away and of being without.

These dynamics are for me a necessary part of my understanding of Visual Culture, for whatever it may be it is NOT an accumulative, an additive project in which bits of newly discovered perspectives are pasted on to an existing structure, seemingly augmenting and enriching it, seemingly making it acceptable to the pressures of the times. In my own thinking it is not possible to divorce the notion of 'criticality' which I see as foundational for Visual Culture from the processes of exiting bodies of knowledge and leaving behind theoretical models of analysis and doing without certain allegiances.

'Criticality' as I perceive it is precisely in the operations of recognising the limitations of one's thought for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure.

It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique to criticality - from finding fault, to examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to operating from an uncertain ground which while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames.

In the project of ‘criticism’ we are mainly preoccupied with the application of values and judgements, operating from a barely acknowledged humanist index of measure sustained in turn by naturalised beliefs and disavowed interests. The project of ‘critique’ which negated that of ‘criticism’ through numerous layers of poststructuralist theory and the linked spheres of sexual difference and post colonialism, has served as an extraordinary examination of all of the assumptions and naturalised values and thought structures that have sustained the inherited truth claims of knowledge.

Critique, in all of its myriad complexities has allowed us to unveil, uncover and critically re-examine the convincing logics and operations of such truth claims. However, for all of its mighty critical apparatus and its immense and continuing value, critique has sustained a certain external knowingness, a certain ability to look in from the outside and unravel and examine and expose that which had seemingly lay hidden within the folds of structured knowledge. The ever increasing emphasis on allocating blames and pointing out elisions and injustices has created alliances between critique and such political projects as ‘identity politics’ and diminished the complex potentiality of occupying culture through a set of productive dualities and ambiguities.

One is after all always at fault, this is a permanent and ongoing condition, since every year we become aware of a

new and hitherto unrealised perspective which illuminates further internal cultural injustices. The more current phase of cultural theory, which I am calling ‘criticality’ (perhaps not the best term but the one I have at my disposal for the moment), is taking shape through an emphasis on the present, of living out a situation, of understanding culture as a series of effects rather than of causes, of the possibilities of actualising some of its potential rather than revealing its faults. Obviously influenced by the work of Deleuze, Nancy and Agamben, by their undoing of the dichotomies of ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ through numerous emergent categories such as rhizomatics, folds, singularities, etc.’ that collapse such binarities and replace them with a complex multi-inhabitation, ‘criticality ‘is therefore connected in my mind with risk, with a cultural inhabitation that performatively acknowledges what it is risking without yet fully being able to articulate it.

In ‘criticality’ we have that double occupation in which we are both fully armed with the knowledges of critique, able to analyse and unveil while at the same time sharing and living out the very conditions which we are able to see through. As such we live out a duality that requires at the same time both an analytical mode and a demand to produce new subjectivities that acknowledge that we are what Hannah Arendt has termed ‘fellow sufferers’ of the very conditions we are critically examining.