

Art, Objectivity and Engagement

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At seven on a summer's evening, the eye perceives the depth of a landscape yet, on the contrary, things seem flattened at the height of noon. The 20th century abhorred the depth of landscape and condensed reality until managing to reduce it to a surface, almost to a flat screen. Thanks to the flash used to throw close-ups into a flood of light, our vision of things was conducted through a world of layers and superpositions, each struggling with the other to acquire the status of visibility. This state of affairs might well be changing in the 21st century. In the slow twilight of the evening, those old planes re-emerge now as a ruin of juxtaposed cuttings and silhouettes, burnt, like the remains of the narrative illusions of modernism. Those artists wishing to stroll through the ruins of that old map must necessarily acquire new techniques of "recognition" and "orientation". They will have to avoid a memory *unable to leave the present* — a "nowness" that was kidnapped by the fatal light of noon, when things are bathed in it, still unable to decide whether they are sharing space with others or, aware of their existence, simply ignoring each other. In other words, a new art practice being configured in that old space left over from the conflict between a diversity of presents, fighting each other for the recognition of an exclusive one-idea system: now we must admit that the elements of the present inform an *eminently cultural conflict*.

The informatization of the relationships of a world which, unlike electricity, does not transport an inert current but information and power"¹; the technological portability apparently defocusing that power, atomising it and placing the autobiographical narrative as a starting point of an

¹ Bernard Stiegler, *La técnica y el tiempo. La desorientación*, Hiru, Hondarribia, 2002 (Paris, 1996)

inductive vision of landscape; therefore, the transformation of objectivity, no longer a professional property but a value predicated on its potential to become a *contextual and punctual* source of *credit*, for its ability to convey verisimilitude around itself, in a precise time and place; the ubiquity and transposition of questions and answers in a global system of influences; in other words: replacing a culture registering prediction by a culture predicting the register. Those are the premises that any present-day cultural practice is confronted with when dealing with a “landscape” virtualised by an inductive reflection of reality. From what is mine to what is alien: suppositions of a common reality to be explored through mock-ups, models and projections.

Contemporary art practices are suffused by a profound deconstructive will. They no longer have anything to destroy, hence the feeling that the modern no longer offers expectations. Neither have they anything to construct, for artists are no longer architects and they cannot, any more, transform — in the name of art — whole quarters into straight avenues in which to render their clinical disregard for the exasperating wounds imposed by history. Deconstruction has been turned into a powerful aesthetic and political driving force. Deconstruction as a way to move freely through the construction of inherited narratives, but even more so as a way of viewing those still to come, narratives that are glimpsed in those paragraphs already within our sight.

The invocations to deconstruction, so recurrent in the language of art since the 1970s, can no longer be taken as a possible stylistic model, or as a form of fertilising the cultural field: today it is no longer a referent, but the very nucleus in which the cultural remains have been condensed. Deconstruction (and not its perpetrators) is culture, just as today critique (not critics) is art. Having said that, any endeavour to cast a look over this

deconstructive reality needs to provision itself with horizons anticipating a fatal “return effect”: deconstruction as art.

The modern formalism running through a large part of the 20th century allowed creators to mould experience by locating objectivity in the final link in the chain of command: the work of art. This latter object terminally and determinedly summarised the level of reification of the artist’s signifying will, his/her subjectivity. The work of art reflected the process by which expression triumphed over communication: a good example of that could be found in the gradual emergence of prestidigitation (we do not know how it is made) and in the progressive disappearance of ventriloquism (we do know how it is made)². The work of art articulated the artist, and not the other way round — it summarised in its physical and cultural boundaries the huge illusory charge projected by subjectivity over the space, the potential of the subjective to be transformed into an actual event, around whose axis the world would revolve. As the by-product of the artist’s effort to represent itself as historical truth, the objectivity of the artwork produced a surprising and lasting effect whereby the interpretation of art was displaced towards cultural objects rather than towards the world that created them. In other words, the work of art seemed capable of providing a better explanation of the world thanks to the use of psychological and codifying schema, that surpassed or circumvented the logical or mechanistic interpretation that the new media-driven universe was putting in place. Thanks to the passive perception of the new audiovisual language generated by capital, modern formalism thought it had managed to elude the problem by provoking dislodgements that could break through the most established models of knowledge, thanks, above all else, to a number of points of contact with science that could allow it to overcome a certain pedagogism, just as the perception that 20th century

² See J. L. Marzo, “La ventriloquía: un modelo de comunicación”, QUAM, 2002; in <http://www.soymenos.net/ventriloquia.pdf>

man had of modern physics was of a purely symbolic nature (even still very few of us are able to provide a clear explanation of the theory of relativity, though it has served as an almost inexhaustible source to reason a huge amount of human phenomena).

Subsequently, formalist objectivity is the result of the artist's interest in advancing his/her potential to raise sufficient subjectivity, which, by reaching a critical symbolic mass, attains exactitude. This dynamic led to a lust of the self, and to an indiscriminate buying and selling of niches of objectivity — to a *kermesse* to reach levels of self-reference that would be taken as general models of interpretation, as useful equations at the service of a huge diversity of realities. That notwithstanding, the objectivity of modern art (of the subjective) has been unable to explain the constitution of the objective in each subject, providing only the tools to turn what seems to be objective realities into something subjective. It could not be otherwise, for the artist seldom questioned himself about his configuration as framework or scaffolding, instead being convinced of his status as lighthouse.

Thus, the illusion of art at the service of the register of the subjective as a means of explaining reality while at once circumventing it, dominated the processes of creative *demiurgy* for decades. But, what do we have today, when the passive relationship between producers and consumers, between the makers of real events and the end users of those events has been replaced by feedback, by the response, by interaction, by the net, by the proliferation of tools openly questioning informational, communicational and symbolic hierarchies? What is the true nature of the register in this new paradigm?

A substantial amount of those works self-denominated as artistic from recent years are exerting an open influence on the reading of the social,

psychological, political and cultural phenomena taking place in a wide variety of contexts. Many of them share two common features: they strive to ground their interpretation of the register in deconstructive keys and they put into question the conventional notion of the subjective as a hermeneutic paradigm. We could list infinite questions, as many as the works of art devoted to registering the reasons why the world is as it is: sexual and gender behaviours and settings placed in socio-political contexts; research into the impact of labour conditions in systems of social and symbolic relationship; analyses of the forms by which the modern urban landscape is configured; revisions of the methods of symbolic appropriation of the media; the archaeology of the Art Institution; an immersion into the conditions of cultural reception and production.

Hundreds of metaphors and allegories are elaborated out of films, photographs and other consistently verifiable documents. In this regard, the gradual *audiovisualisation* of art practices that some artists have contemplated as one of the main vectors of inflection, should not be seen as a drive toward spectacularisation, but rather as a quest for the objectivisation of the artwork refusing to accept the artist as a source for its legitimacy. The *reporterisation* of many works would seem to verify as much. The register seems to consolidate itself around the information, something anathema to the mental universe of formalism. It would therefore seem that communication is regaining lost ground in relation to expression, that the artistic ventriloquist is winning over the public at the illusionist's expense.

This increasingly more recurrent use of documentary narrative is owing to many reasons. One of them may be the readiness to tackle questions directly concerning social and political life, now divested of certain ethereal sensibilities and fuzzy self-references. Another might be the enormous mark left by the ubiquity of graphic and multimedia design, which has co-

opted more than a significant part of the formalist discourse, forcing many artists to opt out from a relationship that is now seen as excessively contaminated by commercial and industrial guidelines and interests. Nor should we discard the search for a *transparency* that would sideline the usual “culinary” secrecy associated with the artistic personality³. At present, that transparency is defined in discourses on digital mobility and interaction. Thus, the “digital solution” of the global communication and information media, and their social mobility among large sectors of the population, are probably the last word on the matter.

Not so long ago, I wondered about the possible transformation of the value of the objective in the photographic medium of information as a consequence of the widespread use of digital cameras and their crossing with distribution on the Net⁴. The proliferation of portable technology for image recording and broadcasting that a substantial part of the news we currently consume feeds from has resulted in a clear crisis in the perception of the “objectivity” and “realism” of information, in other times a territory belonging exclusively to journalists. But technology is not, as it is so often considered under the influence of an industrial determinism, responsible for that shift, with this crisis in fact being the by-product of the failure to achieve independent education and information media.

It would be timely to address this question in the field of the fine arts. The use of technical narrative formulations formerly owned by the media, but also the growing appropriation of sociological, anthropological and archivist methods in art processes and works, respond to a need — not to say to an urge/ncy — to approach the chosen subjects from increasingly “objectivable” perspectives of recording. But, who is to legitimise the

³ See J. L. Marzo, “Ilusionismo y transparencia”, *MediaLab*, Madrid, 2007; in http://www.soymenos.net/revision_magia.pdf

⁴ J. L. Marzo (ed), “Introducción”, *Fotografía y activismo*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2006, pp. 7-22; in http://www.soymenos.net/intro_gg.pdf

“objective”? The artist and anthropologist Pep Dardanyà has rightly pointed out the boom of “artists as ethnographers” (an expression borrowed from Hal Foster) among those art practitioners who define themselves in terms of the creation of a “social art”, together with an increasing use of techniques grounded in the social sciences: “[...] they use a technique known as *ethnographic mapping* consisting of determining a physical or symbolic space of action and then immerse themselves in it, dissect the various meanings and reorganise them with an interpretative attitude.”⁵ All in all, the recent appropriation of the “work field” by many artists together with the assumption of a “chronicler’s” attitude to the social and political realities that have been buried by institutional discourses does not seem to be accompanied by a parallel reflection on the contradictory nature of the witness of that process, as noticed by Dardanyà. The great debate in recent anthropology and sociology has been the analysis of the observer rather than a study of the observed fact. The more and more common recourse to the “interview” in many of the creative works with an “objectivity” drive should not disguise the fact that, by the mere act of putting a microphone and a camera before someone, the observer is automatically manipulating his/her interlocutor, his/her object of study. That however does not seem to be a reason for reflection: there is an appropriation of tools from other (let us say) disciplines, but with a total disregard for the critical apparatus that was using them. Nevertheless, this aspect, underpinning many present-day creative practices, must be read in the light of a wider and more complex perspective. If, on one hand, we may infer the presence of remains from the traditional formalist *kunstwollen* — that is, that artists *can* and *must* distance themselves from the methodological and ethical determinant factors of tools and media, entering into a paradoxical relationship with socially oriented practices, precisely aimed at doing away with romantic subjectivity — it is also true that in the perception of the

⁵ Pep Dardanyà, “Contaminats i contaminants”, *Boletín del Centre d’Art Santa Mònica*, Barcelona, no. 30, December 2006, pp. 11-13

artistic, the ability to subvert the prevailing logics of the academicist and deterministic thought is seen as growingly important. A good example of that is the artistic use of information and communication technologies.

If, to a large extent, technologies are the results of their practices and — an irrefutable fact — of the uses each individual makes of them, then, why should we not read electronically assisted art (or the artistically treated media), in the same way?⁶ A significant part of the electronic or digital art made today massively reinforces a contextualistic reading of technology. Many of the artists currently working with technologies subvert, manipulate, twist or redirect the functions, guidelines and directions those technologies were designed for, showing what, at the end of the day, the street itself underlines in an even more widespread way: that technology and the media are largely “practices of use.” If, in the field of users of media, all adaptations, appropriations and expropriations — and even contingencies — point at the life pattern of machines, in the domain of art production that is further reinforced by the traditional device, characteristic of critical creations, of “revealing” reality outside the logic of the system. Thus, a different approach to the real and to its symbolic representation implies a distinct use of the media it uses to implement it.

The contradictory communion between the borrowing of social research methods that have nonetheless been exempted from their own critical load, and the appropriation of technology with a view to rewriting it and freeing it from determinism, define the limits of a murky territory in which “deconstructive” practice takes place. It is precisely this situation that defines present-day art as an *eminently cultural conflict*. The problematic shift from a delimited environment of reflection within the “art environment” towards a larger framework in which questions and answers

⁶ For a closer look at this thesis, see J. L. Marzo, “Arte y tecnología: las prácticas sociales vs el discurso industrialista”, *Telos*, Madrid, 2001; in <http://www.soymenos.net/artnologia.pdf>

must be generated in new environments, indelibly contours any artistic rapprochement to the “objective.” But also the contexts where that objectivity wishes to reveal itself.

The dissemination in the sphere of art of the technical and narrative models from cinema, television, and also from other more removed environments, like social and political activism (or is it perhaps the use of the media in activist environments?) may also be read under the light of the will shown by many art practitioners to cross over disciplines and contextual territories helping them to break through the traditional fence that divides contemporary art and the public. Something that is seldom achieved, basically because the pressure exerted by the art context on its own agents is too powerful, sometimes even resembling a sort of “Stockholm syndrome” by which the kidnap victim is unable to live without a clear and definite diktat over his/her goals. In that sense, the art context favours a multiple and paradoxical dynamics vis-à-vis the visibility of the works: on one hand, a work of art acquires visibility in an environment that has been codified as artistic (for instance, a museum or an art biennial) that it would not achieve in the anonymity of the visual signs from the street or from any other space not specifically destined to art. But, on the other hand, an artwork, once successfully camouflaged in a context in which nobody is expecting it, may provoke short-circuits and bypasses of meaning that it would scarcely manage to achieve in an artistically signified environment.

If the artistic coding does not take place in the object, but rather in the context in which it makes itself present, it would seem all too logical that many artists, eager to break with the status of the work as a “monument providing sense to the plaza”, want, on the contrary, to focus totally on the space connoting the monument. That could explain the huge emphasis that many present-day practices put on the notion and image of *process*,

both in an intrinsically creative sense and in the constitution of the chosen subject. Frequently, that resource is used precisely to “objectivate,” showing the “objective” determining factors affecting one reality or another. However, the ultimate sensation in view of many of the results rather underscores the opposite direction: the monumentalisation of those determinant factors, of those foldings, of the vanishing points — the aesthetisation, through the resource to *reporterisation*, of the least visible elements making up the various phenomena of a multidimensional reality. Something that would define the problem we pointed out at the beginning of this essay: the appearance of that fatal “return effect,” of the consolidation of deconstruction as an art style, for the problem does not appear in the object, but in the proposal of the process as object, forgetting that the context in which that work will be *represented* continues being codified as artistic.

For all the above, the pretence of an objective register, the will to become the “scribe” of the deconstructive processes of the cultural narrative we have inherited and continue inheriting, together with the interest to remove ourselves from a formalist memory unable to elude the diktat of an endogamic present, directly clash with the lack of critical expectations in relation to the perceptive environment in which we inform our artistic activity. All those paradoxes do not make a given practice in the art field any better or worse, but they do promote it in the general and complex domain of culture as yet another art practice.