

**An egalitarian culture,  
Through participatory means,  
For all those willing to start right now**

Sometimes you have to face the facts, the ones you do not choose. I am what is called an art critic. I produce an apparently endless stream of descriptions, analyses and reflections on certain kinds of objects, images and practices. There is so much to be seen, to be known, to be experienced. But sometimes it seems that all this frenetic activity begs the basic questions. For me, they are these: What is art today? How is its critique carried out? And for whom can it be useful?

The answers I aim to give here are quite personal. They stem from a specific desire, a specific curiosity. But they are also the product of a history, with all its overwhelming force. What we do not choose is what we can most easily share, or what we can't avoid sharing. So the answers to the basic questions always end up in some un-decidable place, between the singular and the ineluctable.

I have always approached the question of art's definition by way of a reflection on the frame. Not only as that which both physically and discursively defines a particular category of object, but also as that which can be transgressed, surpassed, subverted, and exceeded. But of course, this kind of approach is not exactly personal. Overcoming the beaux-arts frame was the ambition of the historical vanguards. Think of the Dada tours, performed with such spontaneity and irreverence by Hausmann and Van Doesburg. Think of the Futurists, exalting the beauty of technology against the beaux-arts tradition. Think of Surrealist collage, integrating the detritus of everyday experience into art. Think of Neoplasticism, extending pictorial forms into architectural space. Think of Duchamp, pointing simultaneously to the museum as the legitimating context of art objects, and to the beholder's gaze as the free co-creator of artistic experience. Each time, the overcoming of the traditional artistic frame stands for a larger desire to throw off the old cultural disciplines and values, in the name of progress or emancipation. And these vanguard transgressions, after a long interruption in the 1930s and 40s, finally reached a point of culmination in the late 1960s and early 70s, with a general collapse of the old generic definitions of painting and sculpture and a tremendous overflow of the visual arts, not only into other genres or fields – poetry, music, dance, philosophy, sociology, design, etc. – but above all, into

the anonymous experience of everyday life in the complex technological societies. The vanguard ambition, once a minority project of the enlightened bourgeoisie, was extended to a vastly larger number of potential actors through the subversive effects of mass education in the postwar world. Now, it seemed, the desire to move beyond art could finally be realized – suppressing the specialized class of individuals who had conceived and nurtured it.

From a post-vanguard perspective, the artistic experiments of the 1960s and 70s – Fluxus, Lettrism, Situationism, Arte Povera, Minimalism, Conceptualism, Performance, Body Art, etc. – should have marked the beginning of a sweeping redefinition of art and of the artistic frame, that is to say, of the place and limits attributed to the practices that experiment with perception, sensation, cognition and expression. The paradigm of the work should have been definitively replaced by the paradigm of activity (or process). Art could then have become a kind of collective workshop or mobile theater for exploring the transformations of intimate and social relations that are produced by participatory experiments. Or at least, this was the promise that I personally sensed in the kinds of art that referred to the late 60s and early 70s.

But this promise was not fulfilled. What one encountered in the mainstream treatment of art in the 1990s was a suspension and academicization of the vanguard practices, which had been seized and frozen at exactly the historical moment when they began massively to overflow their status as authorized works within the beaux-arts frame. In the course of the 1980s this final moment of the vanguards had become the foundational reference for an entire institutional construction of so-called "contemporary art," and also for an expanding institutional market which, through the proliferation of biennials and other megashows, has now attained a global scale. Within the new frame experimental practices are carried out, not for the risk of an experience, but for the accessory objects and recorded traces that they leave behind. These traces, signed by a single individual or logotyped by a group, are then contemplated in the place of traditional works, fulfilling the functional need to have something to exhibit, and supplying a necessary legitimacy for activities that in reality no longer conform in any way to the old definitions of the art object.

This suspension and academicization of experimental processes underlies the presentation of even the more classical forms (painting, sculpture, sculptural installations, pictorial photography), because it is what guarantees the radicality of contemporary art as a kind of meta-genre, or as a specialized division within the revamped canons of an expanded beaux-arts

system, whose principle function is no longer the generation of cultural capital, but the fluidification of symbolic commerce and the stimulation of tourism. The operations of this new norm have been particularly obvious since the mid-1990s, with the emergence and rapid success of so-called "relational art," which revives the paradigm of artistic activity and retools it for exploitation within the institutional market. As a necessary correlate to the whole process, the moment of the late 1960s becomes the object of a renewed fascination, or indeed, a fetishization, covering up the fact that what is now produced are not open-ended experiments that overstep generic boundaries and infiltrate everyday life, but instead, recorded or staged simulacra of such experiments, developed by a highly specialized caste of individuals for a clearly defined market, according to an elaborate academic code under relatively strict institutional control. The advantage of this process is that publics, normatively conceived as bodies consuming products, can still be made to file silently past the waiting simulacra – something that would be quite impossible with experimental processes involving everyone as a participant.

We are all to a certain extent complicit in this fascination, this fetishization, this freeze of the transformative potential. The proof is that we are collaborating on yet another exhibition of experimental practices, and sharing, in various ways, the anxiety that this collaboration produces. With these reflections, I do not only speak of the artists and writers and organizers, but also of what is called the public – those whom I understand, with Duchamp, as the co-creators of the works (or the simulacra). Anxiety is one of the things that we share without choosing. It stems from the pressures (the manipulations) to which everyone in a complex society is subject. But can this anxiety about the artistic frame, about what art is today, not become something more interesting, more passionate, more useful? Is there not another way of telling the story of art's development over the last ten years?

The rupture, in my experience, was brought by history. But this was also a personal thing, a matter of finding an outside, or a way into something better. The massive transport strikes in France in the winter of 1995-96 – the largest and longest in the country since '68 – shut down the routine flow of traffic and reopened a space for artistic experimentation in the streets, while at the same time linking that experimentation to the most pressing social and political issues (notably the issues of inclusion to and exclusion from the neoliberal mode of production, or what is now called the cultural-informational economy). The experiences of the street – the experience of confrontation, on a national scale, with the global economic order – could then be

discussed and analyzed over the following years, within the experimental discursive spaces that were being developed on a world scale via the internet. And this theoretical discussion, which took place outside of any academic frame – admitting many different kinds of expression (or many different subject-positions), but not excluding references to scientific studies, artistic works, philosophical ideas – proved to be extremely useful in building a sense of autonomy and a capacity for participation in self-organizing processes, which would no longer need the institutional relays, with all their manipulative budgets, their coercive calendars, their censoring filters. Looking backwards, I would say that the parallel public space that emerged from these experimental uses of the net acted as something like art's critique of its normative frame – but also as something like technology's critique of its industrial standardization (hacking), and politics' critique of party structures and disciplines (activism). I began to participate in the production of these three critiques, which continue to evolve collectively, as a ceaseless give-and-take of ideas, affects and sensations. And at the same time, I began to understand them as forming a single critique of reality, beyond the neutralizing and paralyzing boundaries that separate the genres and the disciplines.

If post-vanguard art opens up new spaces of encounter and circuits of exchange for individuals and groups to participate in exploratory or transformative experiments with perception, sensation, cognition and expression – experiments which, by their egalitarian and direct-democratic nature, lead almost inevitably to confrontations with repressive and normalizing forces – then the critique of this kind of art cannot only be the description of its practices, the analysis of its principles, the assessment of its relative successes or failures. That's one aspect, an important and interesting one, a beautiful one I would say, which contributes to people's capacity for self-organization, which shares inspiration and motivation, and which helps to expand the realm of the namable and sayable in a participatory an innovative way, just as the artistic experiments help to expand the realms of the sensible and the expressible. In fact, the experimentation of writing in the give-and-take of autonomous exchange, under the new horizons of self-organization, with the aim of throwing in one's two (kilo) bits into an ever-changing and ever-responding mix, is really the pleasure of my life, as an intellectual anyway. But at the same time, the critique of post-vanguard art – by which I mean critique in the strong sense, a critique that emanates from this kind of art, and from its tendency to dissolve disciplinary boundaries, to meld with technological innovation and political activism – has really no choice but to investigate all the forces which constitute its restraining and limiting frames. First, the institutional structures discussed above, whose function is to halt the overflow, the

excess, the proliferation of experimental practices. But also, on a far broader scale, the normative economic, technological and political structures, which operate as so many different levels of coercion and control, channeling subjectivities, capturing autonomous energies, repressing the counter-behaviors that continually spring from some mysterious human aspiration to solidarity and freedom. The mapping impulse that has become so compelling over the past five years has everything to do with this critical research, which attempts to locate, understand, and if possible, push back the very real material (technological) and discursive (legal, ideological) frames that increasingly to fence in our existence. There is a vital need to understand and to represent those frames.

Sitting here in a provincial city in Argentina (Rosario is the name), writing this text on a hot afternoon that melts gradually into evening, what obsesses me, what orients everything I have been trying to say, is actually the global division of labor. For me, this is the shocking fact of social existence today: the extreme ignorance that prevails concerning the realities of the global division of labor (and of unemployment, and of expropriation and pollution). Capitalism in its most recent phase of tremendous expansion has totally transformed the map of human relations, of hierarchies, of subordinations, rendering exploitation, poverty and hunger invisible, even while the agents of domination are dispersed, multiplied, depersonalized, made more effective and cold (that is, whenever the repressive operations they are called on to perform cannot be automated and written into the code of machines). Meanwhile, as here in Rosario, the zone of center-city opulence continues to expand and the innumerable ice-cream parlors, whose proliferation is underwritten by the wealth of genetically modified soybeans grown exclusively for export, are apparently there to cover up the fact that at least 40% of the population now lives under the poverty line (calculated at less than \$1 a day for a family of four) and some 15% of the country is indigent (without enough to eat). You can read these official statistics in the daily paper, and you can discuss their urgency with the extremely intelligent, well-educated people of what was once (and probably still is) Latin America's most highly developed middle class. What you cannot do is discuss the conditions and qualities of life in Argentina in any reasonably meaningful way with the educated, middle-class people of other societies, despite the fact that even in the richest countries, the public education and health systems are deteriorating, the levels of poverty and inequality are rising, and the basic operations that produce the fundamentals of human existence are withdrawing behind a cultural-informational veil, to be performed either by machines whose functions and potentials we do not understand, or by people working under foreign control in far-off countries, or by

immigrants living next door, whose language we do not speak and whose reasons for living remain obscure to us. The highly flexible, constantly changing game of inclusion/exclusion has expanded to a world scale, involving all of us in highly unequal relations that we do not choose. And these relations are exactly what we could come to understand, in an attempt to go beyond the ignorance that is imposed upon us.

But maybe the question to ask right now is, for whom is all this verbiage potentially useful? Who can say "we," or at least feel uncomfortable with the use of the "we" in the discourse I am now producing? The answer I would like to throw out for discussion is that in both the institutional and alternative circuits of so-called contemporary art, we are the literate middle classes, the so-called "planetary petty bourgeoisie" (as Giorgio Agamben says with disdain), the people who grew up amidst the decline and disappearance of the Fordist industrial system, who went through its public educational systems and then went on to pursue some line of autonomous thought and sensibility while hanging on the threads of the new environment of cultural and informational labor that has become the common coin of daily existence – whether in Rosario where it now looks impossible and unsustainable, or in Zagreb where it still might expand beyond the city limits, or in Kassel where it undoubtedly appears like a destiny. This new environment, however painfully stupid it can sometimes be, is *our* existential and cultural condition, and it is massive, global. The inherited contempt that surrounds the words "middle class" and "petty bourgeois" is something to throw out the window, even if those designations are not particularly interesting or worth keeping either. What depends on the possibility of saying "we" (or at least of imagining it) is the realization that people of all different kinds of origins and class levels can now collaborate on the increasingly daunting project of preserving and transforming the egalitarian ideals and structures to which we owe our very existence, our aesthetic experimentalism or capacity for philosophical inquiry, our understanding and our pleasure, our ability to juggle concepts and move through a complex environment. The gradual slide and decay of the downwardly mobile middle classes is precisely what opens up the necessity for new solidarities with other classes and cultural horizons: an opportunity worth seizing.

I owe to a fascinating conversation with an older fellow named Juan Carlos Marín (whose books you may be able to find, in Spanish, on the planetary marketplace) what seems to me like a vital insight: that research into the global division of labor, and therefore into the diversity of the global class composition, is precisely what has been suppressed in the developed and

developing societies, since the "troubles" of the 1960s and 70s (in favor of studies on governability). It is worth mentioning that this suppression could, and in many cases did, go all the way to the point of assassination. The possibility for artists to collaborate with social scientists in a deep and serious way has thereby been cut back; and with the decline of that possibility, any chance of understanding the global labyrinth would disappear. But as we all can see, precisely that kind of collaboration has been undergoing a serious renewal in the last few years, within and beyond the triple form of critique that I mentioned above. Here is something really worth defending, against the attacks from those who want to get back to more pure (and more easily controllable) forms of artistic inquiry and expression. The anxiety about the museum appears rather minor in the face of this new development, even if one should never forget that only the existence of autonomous circuits makes any critical use of the art institutions possible (because only those autonomous circuits give you the strength to say no when the demands of the merchants or the bureaucrats become unacceptable).

But with all this, I don't mean to say that art practice is just substitute sociology, a way of dressing up statistics. What is most enigmatic about the world situation today are the cultural differences, the diverging motivations, the multiple reasons for preferring subordination or, on the contrary, for revolting in immediate or complex ways against an absurd and dangerous system. What we are seeing in the self-organized art practices are vastly different and increasingly precise, increasingly activist forms of research into this multiplicity. The ineluctable and the intimately personal, the global division of labor and the global divergence of desire: I may be called an art critic, but this is what looks worth exploring to me.

Next time we meet, in whatever space or medium, please tell me your idea.

Brian Holmes