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WHAT IS A THEORIST?¹

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Undone

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 theorizing, historicizing and displaying, criticizing and affirming have long been eroded. Artistic practice is being acknowledged as the production of knowledge and theoretical and curatorial endeavors 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 judgment addressed to a clear-cut object of criticism, we now recognize 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 to creativity and criticism, production and application. If one shares this set of perspectives, then one cannot ask the question "what is an artist?" without asking "what is a theorist?"

The narrative of theoretical unraveling, of being undone, is a journey of phases in which the thought we are immersed in is invalidated. Those moments of silent epiphany in which we have realized 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-legitimizing 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 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; parliamentary 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 eighteen 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 aren't 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 recognizing 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. 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 unrealized perspective which illuminates further internal cultural injustices. Criticality is therefore connected, in my mind, with risk, with a cultural inhabitation that acknowledges what it is risking without yet fully being able to articulate it.

Without

I have called this section "Without" because for some time now I have been very interested in this condition as a starting point for embarking on new thought and new research projects. It seems to me to indicate a state in which we acknowledge that we had some navigational principles and some models of critical analysis to hand, but that they no longer quite serve us in relation to a new and emergent conjunction of problems. And more than simply acknowledge them, we pay them the respect due by recognizing what strong supports these models of analysis had been to us, of how aware we are of their lack. The events of 9/11 are for me a very actual example for the state I am trying to articulate. In the context of critical thought, these events, dreadful and tragic, came in the wake of a slowly growing realization that the twin models of post-colonial theory on the one hand and discourses of globalization on the other, were no longer equal to the task of trying to think through intercultural relations on a global scale. Suddenly we were faced with what I have called elsewhere "geography in real time." Real time is the moment in which some nebulous half-acknowledged entity, previously no more than a vague unease or a partially avowed recognition, crashes into our own reality by becoming a reality itself. The events of 9/11 were an instance of suddenly being forced to live in real time. But with hindsight, many of us will confess to having been uneasy for over a year then; G8 summit meetings in Seattle, Gothenburg, and Genoa disrupted by increasingly violent protests, the Intifada in Palestine and Israeli response spiraling out of control, evermore exasperated spokespersons for international aid agencies trying to warn of impending disaster, cities in which NGOs are the only infrastructure still in place, open discussion of the consequences of slavery and

racial violence across the globe taking place in Durban. Therefore intellectuals who have been thinking about geopolitical power relations through their cultural manifestations found themselves for a moment in a state of being "without." The old ordering of the world between colonizers and colonized was not sufficient to come to terms and analyze these events, nor was the more recent ordering viewed through the logics of multinational corporations and free trade agreements and Internet blurrings of national, cultural boundaries. Had we not been through those models of analysis, post-colonialism, and globalization, we would not have understood our state of simultaneously knowing and being unable to know, which characterizes the condition of being "without." I will come back to the moment crystallized by these events at the end of this paper, but I would like to return to a more detailed characterization of my understanding of visual culture as a state of being without.

What is it that has been given up in the shift from the investigative and the analytical to the performative and the participatory? Most people would say that it is the absence of a solid sense of history that anchors and legitimates everything that is the source of greatest insecurity. I myself do not feel that, since I have always seen it as an amalgam of tropes and narrative structures. Historical research often contains fascinating materials but rarely actually explains anything at the level at which I want it explained, as dissonances and disruptions and trivial performances that say as much about us as they do about the outside world. The answer lies, to my mind at least, in substituting the historical specificity of that being studied with the historical specificity of he/she/they doing the studying. In order to effect such a shift without falling prey to endless anecdotal and autobiographical ruminating which stipulate experience as a basis for knowledge, we attempt to read each culture through other, often hostile and competitive, cultural narratives. This process of continuous translation and negotiation is often exhausting in its denial of a fixed and firm position, but it does allow us to shift the burden of specificity from the material to the reader or viewer and prevents us from the dangers of complete dislocation. Perhaps it might even help us to understand that at the very moment in which historical specificity can provide liberation and political strength to some of the dispossessed, it also imprisons others within an old binary structure that no longer

reflects the conditions and realities of their current existence. The Deleuze-inspired replacement of working with a model of a culture of *singularity* (singular to a logic of its own organization) rather than one of *specificity* (specific to one particular location) has been of great importance to this discussion.

Certainly the security of a discipline and with it all the comforts of a coherent identity, of having clear sources for funding applications, of knowing which subject panel your work should be sent to for assessment. Even the simple question of knowing what to answer when you are asked at a party "And what do you do?", which always elicits panic-stricken silences and particularly lame answers. Now I am bolder and more confident and look them straight in the eye and say "Visual culture" and wait for *them* to look away in embarrassment, when they clearly have not a clue what I am talking about. In the recent *Manifesta* exhibition in Ljubljana there was a piece by Lithuanian artist Arturo Raila called "The Girl is Innocent," which simply tracked on video a group of professors at the Vilnius Art Academy doing end of the year critics of the students' work and assigning final grades.² In the simplest form this piece rehearsed the ways in which aesthetics and ideologies are linked at moments of crisis and demise to a point that none of the participants, who had made their name in a previous era, had any principles by which to navigate the current moment. They spoke of their loss, insecurity, confusion—one bearded, middle-aged professor said in a sorrow-choked voice: "and now we can't even speak of beauty." The piece did not assign progressive or retrograde positions to the protagonists, did not rehearse all the obvious political arguments around communism vs. democracy, but simply staged the confusion inherent around teaching, judging and locating art within dramatically redefined paradigms.

What else has been given up? More problematic to give up has been the very notion of a methodology, of the certainty of an approach, of a problematic, of a set of analytical frames which we can use to tackle whatever issue of problematic we are preoccupied with. It was relatively easy to give up notions of history or notions of disciplines because we had inherited them and had to either accept or agitate to make changes within them, but methodology was something we struggled for and invested in its operations all of our hopes for producing an intellectually broader, a politically more inclusive,

and a subjectively more imaginative field of activity. I have for some time been interested in space and spatialization and have been very excited about what is commonly called "the discourse on space," and particularly in those discussions which seemed able to unravel some less familiar manifestations of both sexual and cultural difference. However, recently and to my surprise, I understood that it is not space as such that interests me but rather what it has allowed me to perceive about the dynamics and performances of ambivalence and of disavowal in public-sphere culture.

Which leads me to understand that perhaps the thorniest of the forsaken elements has been the notion of the subject of the work one is doing. Increasingly I have become wary of occupying areas which have an agreed-upon and sanctioned subject for their activities. In the wake of all the posts we have read and internalized, I understand that both the consensus around a subject (for example, that we all understand each other perfectly when we say "I am working on the representation of female subjectivity in domestic interior paintings at the turn of the century," or the ways in which everyone hummed reassuringly when someone said they were working on the "The Body") and the assumptions, systems and boundaries sustain its very existence in the world as a subject. Instead I think we are in that phase when all of the work goes into the constitution of a subject for the work. We have a set of concerns, of issues, and we have a set of nagging doubts about what lies behind the manifest, and we have a certain investigative freedom, and we set those to work and wait to see what comes up. So many of our PhD supervisions now dance around the inconvenience of what the dissertation is about, of what its subject is, of what we might name it when it finally comes into the full exploration of its concerns. Increasingly we seem to interview potential research students for the motivation that underlies their project and not for what they want to do. The less they seem certain of what precisely their project is, the more we seem to like them, but the less likely they are to receive AHRB [since 2005, the AHRC] funding unless we can rally to repackage all of that uncertainty into a set of plausible questions, methods, and assertions, and perhaps the work is really in this translation between the twin poles of doubt and certainty.

So what then, where is the work located? Perhaps that is the wrong question, perhaps a "where" intimates a fixed and known

location where we might conceivably go and look for and actually find the work. Perhaps even better is the notion of how does the work function and what does it produce, of what effects it has in the world rather than of what existing meanings it uncovers.

Again and again in recent years I have found myself dealing with a particular question, critically analyzing the contexts and conditions of its emergence, the assumptions on which it might rest, and the languages in which its is articulated. But having gone through all of these analytical steps, I would find myself at a loss to imagine the next step: the one that would go beyond critical analysis into the possible imagining of an alternative formulation, an actual signification of that "disrupted-through-analysis" cultural phenomenon. On occasion, certain encounters with Conceptual artworks which are taking up the same issues I am preoccupied with, would provide a bridge to the next step for thought: an actual cultural making, not an analysis, of a condition I perceived of theoretically. They address how culture is perceived when it is viewed from the back door or from an oblique angle, through miscomprehension and mistranslation, and what it means to be in a position of culturally longing for that which is historically and politically forbidden to you.

My current theoretical articulations locate the artists' work within a set of cultural debates in which the visual arts rarely find representation. It assumes the form of a practice, of a "writing with" an artist's work rather than writing about it, a dehierarchization of the question of whether the artist, the critic, or the historian, the advertising copy-writer or the commercial sponsor, the studio or the director, has the final word in determining the meaning of a work in visual culture.

Unfitting

When we began to theorize visual culture as an entity in the mid-1990s, it was very much geared towards an amalgam of all of the "withouts" that I have just tried to elaborate here. In a sense, what prompted that enterprise—and I am speaking in the context of the United States, where I was working at the time—was a recognition shared by many of us that it was simply no longer productive to continue a battle with the strictures of art history as a discipline and

with all the efforts to force it to expand its boundaries. Boundaries, small or large, limited or expanded, are in the end just that, setting the limits of the possible. What was required instead would be an open and fluid space in which numerous forms of experimental conjunctions between ideas, politics, images, and effects might take place. Furthermore, in this space neither materials nor methodologies would dominate, and the endless taxonomy of constitutive components that characterizes so-called interdisciplinarity could be suspended with. Depending on the problematic one was investigating or thinking through, one would bring into the discussion anything that seemed important or illuminating without having to align it with the histories of the disciplines it might have been culled from. Here we return to the argument of singularity vs. specificity I mentioned earlier, and to the Deleuzian view of matter as being self-organizing rather than filling up previously structured organizing principles.

Since then a certain amount of institutionalization has inevitably taken place in the field; departments and programs, readers and monographs, journals and teaching curriculums are proliferating. Fair enough, and since I am at the heart of all this and know full well that no one actually knows what visual culture is in that simple form of definition, what we were experiencing was perhaps a slightly more organized form of that same hoped-for fluidity. However, more recently I have been hearing about a certain kind of policing of what visual culture is—apparently it is this not that, can be defined in this manner not that one, can be spoken by these but not by those. In short, the processes of territorialization have begun, and in their wake will probably trail the entire gamut of subject fixing and method valorizing, of inclusions and exclusions which we had tried to escape from a few years ago in the aim of fixing our attention on what needs to be thought rather than on arguing with what had already been thought. I would have wanted to reiterate my belief that the work of *unfitting* ourselves is as complex, as rigorous, and as important as the work that goes into fitting within a disciplinary paradigm or that of expanding it in order to accommodate our concerns. That it shares much with Derridean deconstruction though its is perhaps less preoccupied with shifting consciousness and is more focused on enactments and cultural effects.

Most recently we have all, in our different countries and

institutions and practices, had to think about the institutionalization of what we do. About the newly emergent names and titles and so called "fields" which we inhabit and of how they might interface both with each other as well as with funding structures and job descriptions, as witnessed by my friend, the artist ShuLea Chang, who has now begun to call herself a "conceptualizer" to the great envy of all of us.

These thoughts are for me an unwelcome diversion, though obviously a necessary one in the circumstances, for what I had really wanted to think about here was—seven years on from writing texts that had tried to characterize the study of visual culture—what it was like to actually be in visual culture, working in it and living it out, rather than to talk about its coming into being. To me the most surprising thing that has happened recently has been a shift in the direction I am facing. At the beginnings I had described earlier I was firmly facing the academy and intellectual work; they were the frames of references through which I arrived at artworks and they were the arenas in which the work circulated, albeit with many hiccups, and with which it was in dialogue. Suddenly I find myself facing the art world, by which I mean not simply that this is where the work is gaining response but is spurring something in response. The process is still much the same, a lot of eclectic reading, going to talks and exhibitions, and finally writing. The effects, however, are very different. I have not had enough time fully to understand or to think about the implications of this shift, but it does seem to me to have something to do with the shift to a performative phase of cultural work in which meaning *takes place*, takes place in the present rather than is excavated for. Where its operations are not through signifying processes or through entering a symbolic order, which I suppose are the hallmarks of academic intellectual work, but through forms of enactment. Through languages and modes of writing that focus on address rather than on what Barthes called the filial operations of texts. As Peggy Phelan says, "I am also interested in the ways in which the performative *inspires* new terms; I think that's one of the *performances* the term performativity enacts." Perhaps what I am trying to say is that it is my understanding of a response that has changed. Perhaps it has moved from response as affirmation of what you have said, which is what happens when someone quotes

your work, to response perceived as the spur to make something as yet nonexistent.

Entangled

In closing I wish to go back to that process of recognition of the limitations of post-colonial and of globalization discourses I mentioned in relation to the moment of 9/11. Earlier in my thinking I had been interested in the possibilities that visual culture might offer as a field constituted out of sexual or cultural difference, out of performativity or out of multiplicities, rather than these becoming the subject of the work or that they be applied as critical models of analysis to various materials. That these would produce questions rather than characterize conditions, and that those questions could be taken anywhere at all, far from their seemingly appropriate materials.

More recently I have been wondering about the possibilities inherent in notions of creolization to provide more complex and more appropriate modes of cultural engagement. Wondering whether within notions of creolization we might enable to get away from binaries of colonizers and colonized as well as from later notions of hybridity in which this and that came together into something else, some newer and more contemporary cultural formation. In particular, I have been trying to think of what the creolized museum might seem like as a form of encounter between the structure of the museum and issues of cultural difference.

At the Documenta platform of Creolite and Creolization, which took place in St. Lucia in January 2002, a model began to emerge that does seem to have potential as an alternative to some of the post-colonial, post-feudal paradigms. In this understanding, as articulated by Stuart Hall, Gerardo Mosqueras, Derek Walcott, and many other participants, creolization is a process of cultural mixings, an entanglement of cultures in the result of slavery, colonialism and plantation culture. Its components are highly slippery signifiers, since the originals Creoles are Whites who, through long exposure, have lost their originary identity. White settlers who have become indiginized, facing black slaves, Africans born in the location of their enslavement. Creolite is the construction of a project out of these entangled mixings.

The existence of a culture as a form of entanglements which have lost their origins and exist as mutual interlocutions rather than as, for example, hybridized outcomes seems very intriguing. While thinking of it I was also watching hours of video work by Kutlug Ataman, trying to write the catalogue for his exhibition in at the BAWAG Foundation in Vienna. In one of the works, "Women Who Wear Wigs,"³ which was shown at the Venice Biennale and in London at the Lux Gallery in 2000, we meet four Turkish women who wear wigs for various reasons. One is a political activist who has been on the run for thirty years and who uses wigs as part of her disguises. One is a sophisticated journalist who has breast cancer and has lost her hair through chemotherapy; she wears a wig to reproduce the luxuriant hair she has lost and of which she was so proud. One is a devout Muslim student who is not allowed to cover her head with a scarf at the secular university, so she experiments with a wig as some form of covering protection. The fourth is Demet Demir, transsexual, prostitute, political activist for left-wing youth associations, human rights, the environment, feminism, experimenter with Lesbian relationships, ironic raconteur of personal melodramas, teller of hair-raising tales of police brutality which included repeated harassment, beatings and the shaving of her head.

Demet Demir became a student in 1982 immediately following the military coup in Turkey by joining a night school where she organized a meeting to mark the 1st of May, and was ultimately expelled from the left-wing youth Association for Homosexuality. She was the first transvestite to become a member of the Human Rights association, had an early sex change operation, educated herself to become, she says, a feminist and an environmentalist, has fought long legal battles with the police. All this side by side with ruminations about clients who are disappointed to find out that she doesn't have both a penis and a vagina, for these days, she says, one needs both. All of these are not contradictions, they are entanglements and mixings that produce a rich field of possibilities. In this work Ataman has produced a new subject in the world, a creolized subject in which something called WWW unframes all the tedious narratives about women and Islam, women and the Muslim state told in the West about the East, and produces instead a heady mix of women and sexuality and Islam and patriarchy and the state

and vanity and desire and rebellion and melodramatic sentiment—all connected through wigs and exceeding the boundaries of anything that might actually circulate under the aegis of the proper name of woman.

In a sense that is what I wish for us in visual culture, that we become a field of complex and growing entanglements that can never be translated back to originary or constitutive components. That we never be able to hold on to the divisions that have separated artist from theorist, since like the White settlers and the Black slaves of Caribbean culture in the eighteenth century, we endlessly mimic one another. That we produce new subjects in the world out of that entanglement and that we have the wisdom and courage to argue for their legitimacy while avoiding the temptation to translate them, or apply them, or separate them.

Notes

1. This essay originally appeared in German as "*Was Ist ein Künstler?*" edited by Katharyna Sykord et al. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2004).
2. Arturas Raila, "The Girl is Innocent" in *Borderline Syndrome—Energies of Defence*, catalogue of Manifesta—European Biennial of Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, Slovenia 2000.
3. www.kutluataman.com, Women Who Wear Wigs, 1999.