

Honesty with the real

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Art today would seem to be the spearhead of a re-politicisation of contemporary creation. Its themes, spilling into the real, and its processes, increasingly collective and open to public space, appear to attest to this. Yet, such transformations are not necessarily the guarantee of a re-encounter between the creation and the political. We see how easily they reproduce new forms of banality and new spaces for self-consumption and recognition. That themes of art should be dealing with political themes does not mean that this art deals honestly with the real. Honesty with the real is the virtue that defines the material power of art that is engaged with the problems of a time and of a world we share. As we shall see, honesty with the real is not defined by its themes, by its processes or by its places but by the power of its involvement and by its yearnings: a yearning for *truth*, a yearning for *us* and a yearning for the *world*.

FORMS OF TREATMENT

Both in art and beyond it, the questions of the modern West about reality have essentially been two: how to think about it and how to transform it, which is to say questions concerned with representation and intervention. The re-politicisation of contemporary creation also moves within the framework of these two questions. Hence, documentalism has returned the real to the centre of representation, and activism is setting the pace for creative practice.

The standpoint of honesty introduces a new question. How do we handle reality and deal with reality? There are forms of representation, forms of intervention and forms of treatment. With treatment, it is not just the action of a subject on an object, measurable on the basis of a cause and some effects, that is at stake. With treatment, there is a way of being, of perceiving, of sustaining, or having something in hand, or situating oneself and so on. Treatment is not decided in action and there may not even be action. Treatment is a positioning and at once a surrendering of one self that modifies all the parts at stake. There is a politics that is related with this third dimension of our relationship with the real. This politics has its own virtues and its own horizons, and it is my aim to discuss them in this article.

“Honesty with the real” is the standpoint from which theology of liberation inscribes its gaze on a world of both suffering and struggle¹ in which the victims are the key to reading, and index of the truth of a reality that constructs its power of domination on their relegation to oblivion and non-existence. Dealing honestly with the real would be, then, invoking this oblivion in order to combat power. This does not mean speaking *of* victims, turning them into a theme, but dealing with the real in such a way that includes their position and their *outcry*. It is not a matter of adding the vision of victims to the image of the world but changing at root our way of looking at it and understanding it. This change can only and necessarily lead to combating the forms of power that cause so much suffering.

Honesty, then, is not the virtue of a moral code that a subject removed from the world can apply to himself or herself without heeding the surroundings. There is, therefore, no “honest man” capable of coexisting, beyond his honesty, with the hypocrisy and barbarism of his milieu. Honesty is both an inclination and a force that run through body and consciousness to inscribe them, under a stance, in reality. Accordingly, honesty is, in some sense, always violent and exercises violence. This violence is two-way: towards oneself and towards the real—towards oneself since it means *letting oneself be affected* and towards the real because it means *entering on to the scene*.

Letting oneself be affected has nothing to do with interest and may even run counter to one's own interests. It is painful to hear an artist or academic presenting his or her “themes” always with the gloss of, “Such-and-such interests me”, or “I am interested in ...” the suburbs, for example. How can the suburbs interest someone? They either concern him or they do not concern him; either affect her or do not affect her. Being affected is learning to listen, taking things in and transforming oneself, breaking something of oneself and recomposing oneself with new alliances. This requires integrity, humility and gratitude. Learning to listen, in this way, is to take in the outcry of reality in its dual sense, or in its innumerable senses: an outcry that is suffering, an outcry that is the impossible-to-codify richness of voices, of expressions, of challenges, of forms of life. Both former and latter, both the suffering and the richness of the world are what power cannot withstand without cracking, without losing its sway over the real, which is based on divide and rule, the identification of forms, the privatisation of resources and of worlds. This is why contemporary power is an immunising power. Not only is it immunising in a security-minded, but also in an anaesthetising sense.² On the one hand, it protects our lives (makes us live) while, on the other, it attenuates them, neutralising them, setting them at a remove from others and from the world. This is what *Tiqqun* calls existential liberalism: “living as if we weren't in the world”.³ The first violence of honesty with the real is, then, that we

ourselves must make ourselves, breaking through our besiegement by immunity and neutralisation. This involves ceasing to make of the world a remote field of interests and turning it into a battlefield in which we ourselves, our identity and our certainties will end up being the first affected.

Dealing honestly with reality means, therefore, *entering on to the scene*. As a cartoonist said recently, "I'm not objective but just trying to be honest. So I enter on to the scene ..."4 The image is literal, given that he includes himself in his cartoons. They are not what his eyes see but fragments of the world in which he himself is engaged. Being honest with the real is not, thus, staying true to one's principles. It is exposing oneself and getting involved.

Exposing oneself and getting involved are ways of assaulting the reality that the democratic channels of participation and freedom of choice are constantly neutralising in all spheres of life in our societies. In the domain of politics it is evident. Participating is not getting involved. This is the basis on which the whole system of political representation is organised. However, the same thing happens, in a more subtle and deceptive fashion, in the cultural sphere, from mass leisure through to the more elitist, alternative and minority forms of artistic creation. In all these cases, we are offered times and spaces for choosing and participating that annul our chances of involvement and that offer a place to any one of us who does not alter the general map of reality. For electors, consumers and even interactive public ... (social, artistic, etc.), creativity is what is shown, exhibited and sold, not what is proposed. Hence, what is offered to us is a map of options but not one of positions.5 A map of possibles with already-fixed coordinates. Dealing honestly with the real means entering on to the scene, not to participate in it and choose some of its possibles, but to take a stance and, along with others, to strike at the validity of its coordinates.

INTERVENTION, COMMITMENT, ENGAGEMENT

From this point, we need to reconsider two basic assumptions of modern and contemporary creation: commitment as a condition of the creator and intervention as a horizon of his or her creative activity. The issues of commitment and intervention appear as historically bound to the figure of the artist-intellectual as a *separate* entity: separate because of a class status and capacities that are clearly different from those of the rest of the population. Thus, commitment can only be lived at a distance, as the decision of a separate will that intervenes over the world. The doubt that then opens up is whether commitment cancels or reinforces this distance, whether the engaged intellectual affirms or denies by voluntary action, his or her link with the world.

[...]

Does this mean that this figure must disappear or remain silent forevermore? Does it mean that there is no longer any space for criticism? Quite the contrary. It means that one must be more demanding and more honest. That it is no longer a matter of being committed to the world's causes but to be involved in the world. What does this engagement mean?

Sloterdijk has some interesting thoughts on the matter, even though he is not exactly an example of an engaged thinker:

If things have come close enough to burn us, there should appear a critique that expresses this burn. It is not so much a matter of a proper distance (Benjamin) as one of proper proximity. The success of the word 'engaged' grows over this soil; it is the seed of Critical Theory that germinates in new forms today [...]. The new criticism is preparing to descend from the head through the whole body.⁷

From proper distance to proper proximity. From head to body. This is not a displacement between counterposed polarities but between reversibilities. Getting involved is discovering that distance is not the opposite of proximity and that there is no head that is not body. In other words, one cannot see the world without travelling it and one only thinks in a way that is inscribed and situated. It looks simple but it is more difficult since it requires changing the place and the way of looking. As I noted at the start, **one must allow oneself to be affected before being able to enter on to the scene.** One has to forsake the securities of the front-on gaze in order to enter into a battle in which we do not see all the fronts.⁸ This combat is not decided by one's free will or, as noted above, in accordance with one's own interests. It is at once a decision and a discovery: being engaged is discovering that one is involved. Being engaged is retaking "the situation to make it tangible"⁹ and thus transformable. Before transforming reality one must make it transformable. This is what power today constantly neutralises, when it makes us live, as I have already said, self-referential, privatised, preoccupied, anaesthetised, immunised lives, as if we were not in the world. Lives drowned in the angst of not being able get our teeth into reality.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jon Sobrino, *Terremoto, terrorismo, barbarie y utopia* [Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarism and Utopia] (Barcelona: Editorial Trotta, 2002). I am grateful to my friend Ricardo Barba for giving me an approach to these lives and points of view.

2. The reflections of Roberto Esposito on the “immunitarian paradigm” of modernity (in *Communitas*, *Inmunitas* and *Bios*, all three books translated into Spanish in the editions published by Amorrurtu, while the first and third are available in English in the Stanford University Press and University of Minnesota Press editions, respectively) are interesting, as are those of Alain Brossat on the relationship between democracy and anaesthesia, in *La democracia inmunitaria* [Immunitarian Democracy], Palinodia, 2008.
3. See *Tiqqun Llamamiento y otros fogonazos* [Summons and Other Flashes] (Madrid: Acuarela Libros, 2009).
4. Joe Sacco, in *El País*, October 25, 2009.
5. Marina Garcés have elaborated on this idea of culture as an instrument of the new capitalism that depoliticises the experience of freedom and participation in her article *Abrir los posibles* [Opening Up the Possibles], see <http://www.menoslobos.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/abrir-los-posibles-marina-garces-cast.pdf> (accessed November 11, 2012).
7. P. Sloterdijk, *Crítica de la razón cínica*, Siruela, Madrid 2003 [Critique of Cynical Reason] (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 23. The quote is a translation from the Spanish edition [translator].
8. I have discussed the relationship between engagement and *peripheral vision* in “Visión periférica. Ojos para un mundo común” [Peripheral Vision: Eyes for a Common World], in *Arquitectura de la mirada* [Architecture of the Gaze], ed. Ana Buitrago (Barcelona: Cuerpo de letra, 2009).
9. *Tiqqun*, “Cómo hacer?” [How to Do?], in *La fuerza del anonimato* [The Power of Anonymity], Espai en Blanc, N° 5–6, ed. Bellaterra (Barcelona, 2008).