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## 4. Aesthetics and Distribution Case (1): Preliminary Notes on Art's Ability to Radicalize Academia

By WALEAD BESHTY | Published: 7. MAY 2012



*"...each encounter produces a new position of assemblages, even as it simultaneously defines a new use for these assemblages"*

-Gilles Deleuze

In this posting, I would like to pursue an earlier tangent, and redirect it. If we start with the idea that a medium is constituted by a dialectic of applied use and technological development, and that it is further defined by the conventionalization of the relationship between the two (a process that occurs over time and is in a state of constant revision) it follows that a medium is never freed from its use, nor is it freed from its position between some agents in a transaction, meaning that it can never stand apart from these conditions. It also follows that it is always steeped in the inertia of its conventions, for this is how, by comparison, each new relation between shifting technologies and new applications is self-historicizing and legible, i.e. able to be understood an expression of that medium. The rhetorical transformation of a series of disconnected relations between technology and use into a singular entity is the becoming of a "medium." In short, the institutionalization of these instances of negotiation is completed by the use of a name in an abstract trans-historical sense, as in when a name is invoked in and of itself as a stable entity. The identification of a medium is an act of institutional reification par excellence, in fact, it is *the* institutional act, that which makes the institution concrete, like air made solid.

This institutionalization is the medium's "memory." Just as the collective understanding of a medium (not to mention its practice) is transformed by how it is recorded (if we think of various institutions as a kind of material tracing of the history of a medium), we should likewise remember that the medium also changes the institution, altering its methodologies, and transforming its conditions as they are molded around one another. A comparable example is the development of recording devices and music: music adapted to the conditions available for its recording as much as recording technology was adapted to the conditions of music; it would be pointless to discuss the development of one, without concerning oneself with the development of the other. Thus each inform the other dialectically, while the seeming stability of the terms we use for each (the topic which has occupied my postings up until this point the most, i.e. the problem of the term photography) conceals these transformations, and makes the term seem transhistorical, or akin to the fallacy of Jerry Fodor's radical nativism, the notion that concepts preexist the terms which refer to them. This applies as much to the term "photography," as it does "art," as it does to the "museum," or for that matter "art history." The solidity of the terms conceals the active negotiations that arise around their borders and the constant ongoing renegotiations of these borders. Regardless, we could say that one form of institutionalization is the museum (we could think of what Rosalind Krauss called "exhibitionality" as a quality of the art object formed in response to the museum), and another is the educational complex, or academia, which is another extremely powerful vehicle for the distribution and maintenance of

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aesthetic discourse (whether it be via practical/vocational, meta-critical/disciplinary means, or both). I might offer that the term "critique," as it is applied to art objects as a quality that they contain rather than something external to them, occurred as a result of the academy.

In the case of art, high level education has taken the form, at least in the U.S., of the Master of Fine Arts degree. Within the University, the MFA is what one would call a "professional" degree. What this usually means is that the majority of those with these degrees are destined for work outside of academia (i.e. in the for-profit world), and that the degree qualifies the recipient for the demands of that system. Business degrees, medical degrees, architecture degrees, law degrees, etc. are the best examples of professional degrees. Into this mix, art is a particularly strange addition, specifically because the MFA is a required degree to become a teacher, and that many art students cite teaching as their reason for obtaining the degree. But this is beside the point. Art qualifies as a professional degree because it has direct points of sale to which the general public might participate. Like law or medicine, individuals can get access to art directly. This is unlike science, mathematics, or the humanities, where the market products are several steps removed from the discipline itself. Each of these fields require intermediary producers (say book publishers, or pharmaceutical firms, or car manufacturers etc.) to bring them to market.

Yet the inclusion of art in the umbrella term "professional degree" isn't a natural fit either. Art objects, unlike other disciplines for which professional degrees are granted, are separate from the world of instrumental use. In other words, they are a discourse about aesthetics through aesthetics, and thus are more like a philosophical discourse (a discourse on language through language), than they are like law (a discourse on social interaction through language, which is tested by its ability to be applied to social interaction). In the case of professional degrees, the criteria of success or failure is not abstract. This is not the case for art, where the criteria of success or failure is constantly being disputed on a fundamental level, and is wholly abstract. Even more so, art is meant to stand apart from the direct function of aesthetics. If one doubts this, one only need to think of the meaning a stop sign has on the street, versus the meaning it might have in the museum or gallery. On the street we ask, "what does it mean?" and act accordingly, in the museum or gallery, we ask "how does it create meaning?" Of course, this is for good reason, because if we stopped to ask this question on the street, we would likely injure ourselves or others. In most instances, in daily life, aesthetics function habitually, and without thought, and that is a necessity. The political implications of art lie in the second question (the "how does it create meaning?" question), for art creates a transparency about how aesthetics elicit meaning, which can, after examination, be extrapolated and applied to daily life. This possibility to make the habitual function of aesthetics transparent, not only holds the potential to upend power relationships, but also makes art wholly separate from daily life, for it requires this separation in order to ask how aesthetics produce meaning (meaning being less a message, and more so the production of subject relations, i.e. that of dominance and subordination, or communality etc.).

This questioning of meaning is inextricable from a concrete material object. So unlike philosophical discourse, where the mode and form of distribution is treated as being "outside" of the content of the discourse, the form of the discourse (medium), is inextricable from art's meaning, and moreover, that form of discourse is always object based, or accountable to objecthood, and objects are never freed from exchange. Art thus offers a way to comprehend the transactive elements of intellectual thought, a reality of all modes of discourse (for economic transaction is a ubiquitous form of simple communication), which art is uniquely capable of drawing forward.

Rather than be too exhaustive here, I'll state plainly a few ideas:

1) There is no such thing as an art which is untainted by the market economy and that in no way means that art either supports or rejects the notion of a market

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order painting photojournalism politics  
promiscuity real realism Renger-Patzsch  
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transaction but is simply, by definition, based in market transaction.

2) This does not mean that art is incapable of progressive political change despite its dependence on the marketplace for there is no place "outside" of economic transaction. Yet, the radical proposition is art's greater capacity for transparency (as transparency is a core artistic value).

3) This proximity or "coming to terms with the exchange rate of objects" is in essence one of art's most radical potentials. It contains the possibility to leverage the world of progressive philosophical, intellectual, and political thought into the sphere of daily life, and collapse the idea of "meta" discourse, or critique, to make all discourse continuous with the world it is meant to describe. It is the destruction of the fantasy of an outside. When, in *New Spirit of Capitalism*, Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski offer that, "Artistic critique is currently paralysed by what, depending on one's viewpoint, may be regarded as its success or its failure." I believe they are referring to this collapsing. The untenable position of critique as that which stands to the side of its chosen object is fully realized in the art object.

To conclude, theoretical discourse always avoids confronting its own monetization, its own instrumentality, and in those rare moments when it does, it fails to fully comprehend the stakes of conflict. Art cannot avoid this confrontation, and must, in order to operate as art (i.e. as a reflexive discourse about aesthetics through aesthetics) comprehend its own monetization, or exchange value, as inextricable from its meaning or message. Art, after all, has thankfully abandoned the content/form divide, whereas other disciplines have been unable to do so, and because of this inability, they cannot fully embrace their own material condition, and their role in the monetization of thought.

This entry was posted in *Blogger Post* and tagged "*New Spirit of Capitalism*", *academia*, *aesthetics*, *Beshty*, *Boltanski/Chiapello*, *critique*, *Deleuze*, *exhibitionality*, *hermeneutics*, *identification*, *institution*, *Jerry Fodor*, *market*, *medium*, *memory*, *meta discourse*, *museum*, *philosophy*, *power*, *Rosalind Krauss*, *technology*, *transparency*, *use*. Bookmark the *permalink*. Post a comment or leave a *trackback*: *Trackback URL*.

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### 3 Comments

#### Jan-Erik Lundström

Posted 9. May 2012 at 2:32 am | *Permalink*

Animated by Beshty's astute thinking across the notions or concepts of discipline, medium and institution, including also the nature of art as discourse in and of itself, I am jolted back to the idea of photography as a metamedium. Not only does photography seem capable of intervening within or occupying (being instrumentalised and instrumentalising) a remarkable variety of disciplines, but it does also operate interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, extradisciplinary. Given the extraordinarily varied properties or modalities or means of operating that photography is offered/chooses throughout the panorama of disciplines (which I, nonetheless, would read quite differently from for example John Tagg's idea of the non-identity of photography, shaped, simply, by the institutional space that it might happen to operate in), it is possibly a kind of fascinating reversal of Fodor's nativist concern (the world is as it is and we must only find concepts, human intervention, i.e. that photography indeed turns out to be a practice that redefines – or explodes, fractures,... – concepts such as medium, discipline, genre. Or, more precisely, photography compels us and, now, implicates us in a kind of simultaneous collapse and remake of what we comprehend as a medium, as a discipline, as a cultural practice. The crystalline challenge of photography is how its development, lead and provoked by three simultaneous processes – technological innovation, expanding practices or uses, as well as particular conceptualizations (or institutionalisations) (Beshty's post-Marxist reading of photography from within a system of exchange and surplus value being one such particularly luminous reconceptualizations of the medium and, i.e., the challenge of being both an observation and an invention) asks of us to redefine what it is that we know as

photography. Which we still, remarkably, seem to think that we know to name.

*Reply*

### **Nicola Trezzi**

Posted 15. May 2012 at 11:37 am | [Permalink](#)

Both Beshty's and Lundström's stimulating interventions have been germinating in my mind for a few days now. There is so much to discuss about the notion of medium nowadays since, like few other cultural categories, it seems to be completely outdated and yet we are still here talking about its future, its current state and its legacy.

In this scenario the discussion around the photographic medium becomes even more fun than others (even more than the old motto "painting is dead") for the simple reason that – unlike any other medium – photography embraces many different kinds of application: from visual art photography to photography tout court – and here someone might already be confused; from science photography to pictures on facebook.

In other words the advent of photography brought the dichotomy "bohemian artist versus Sunday painter" to a new level, which is more complex, confusing and therefore exciting and problematic. Trying to avoid another digression and stay in the short format of the blog I would like to quote a paragraph written by Beshty that really stripped me:

"This institutionalization is the medium's "memory." Just as the collective understanding of a medium (not to mention its practice) is transformed by how it is recorded (if we think of various institutions as a kind of material tracing of the history of a medium), we should likewise remember that the medium also changes the institution, altering its methodologies, and transforming its conditions as they are molded around one another. A comparable example is the development of recording devices and music: music adapted to the conditions available for its recording as much as recording technology was adapted to the conditions of music; it would be pointless to discuss the development of one, without concerning oneself with the development of the other."

This very wise analysis of what I would call "cultural distribution" brought me back to one of the big questions I pose myself everyday as a cultural operator or content provider: "When and why does art become a commodity?" I always thought or believed that the power of 'commodification' was the strongest ever meaning that any work of art presented in the realm of capitalism, post-capitalism or neo-liberalism will eventually become a commodity. It doesn't matter if the Futurist Manifesto said "We want to demolish museums and libraries," they all ended up there. Even Fluxus – which I still considered probably the most successful kind of art in terms of avoiding the risk of becoming commodity – failed when MoMA acquired the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection of Fluxus Art in 2008.

It doesn't matter if the performance artists from the 70s thought their works were NOT going to become a commodity: the works all went to the museum and here the misunderstanding or underestimation of the power of photography was instrumental. In other words they didn't realize that what was meant to remain ephemeral could instead being diabolically transformed into pure commodities, thanks to the photographic medium and its malleability to move from fine art to mere documentation – a division that in this very case completely collapsed and betrayed the initial intensions of many of the artists who took pictures of their performances to have a record not to see it framed in a museum with a caption, a market, a secondary market and so on.

Considering what I wrote in relationship to Beshty's surgical analysis of the relationship between the medium and its institutionalization (I call it commodification because I think capitalism has a great deal here) I would like to reformulate my question from "When and why does art become a commodity?" to "How art and the notion of commodity inform each other?" For me this is quite a turning point in terms of my understanding of reality, since I recently realized I might stop being naïf and bring some cynicism into the conversation. In other words I cannot continue to think that artists were doing things and the

power of commodification (the dealer, the museum, etc.) was 'coming after' transforming everything from the most ephemeral ephemera to the most commodified commodity.

Quite differently – but not quite in opposition since we live in an anti-dialogical reality – sometimes the notion of commodity influences the notion of art and some other times (this is the unbearable truth) the notion of art influences that of commodity. Let's just consider how certain kind of visual art associated to the notion of "Relational Aesthetics" was in fact not bringing a new kind of openness towards the viewer but rather was providing a populist and manipulative approach trying to capitalize on participation without giving anything back. In other words when Rirkrit Tiravanija was serving food to everyone with no distinction it was actually exploiting (a word that was very much used in the 80s and not in the 90s) the audience, using it, asking it to be part of it in order to make the piece successful and therefore relevant for the institution (= sellable). Is there a consistent difference between this act and the growth of temporary employment agencies, which flourished at the same time? Who was giving the recipe to whom? The recent evolution of Tiravanija's practice made clear the intentions were not those people thought they were, as much as it was clear that the notion of temp job became from something to get "extra cash" for students and housewives to the main – if not only – way to conceive labor nowadays. In this regard we must all understand what Antonio Negri calls "social capital" and read his book *Empire* (co-authored with Michael Hardt) the way people used to read the Apocalypse and see the art of Tino Sehgal – here photography or the lack thereof comes on full bloom – the way Saint John speaks of the locusts.

In this scenario the role of photography and the understanding of the photographic medium and its relationship to the institution and its ability to acrobatically move from high to low without risking its stature becomes a very healthy exercise, which can symbolically illuminate us regarding our own future.

*Reply*

### **Jörg Scheller**

Posted 20. May 2012 at 10:07 pm | [Permalink](#)

Dear Walead Beshty,

it is certainly true that art inevitably has to embrace its material condition in order to qualify as a discourse on aesthetics through aesthetics. On the other hand, platonic divisions are still frequent in the art world if one focuses on the modes of production and distribution rather than on the artwork as such – for instance, the form/content division is pretty much alive in the current renaissance of the artist's workshop (e.g. Jeff Koons), which is constituted by the symbiosis of one platonic "brain" (the artist) and several helping hands who carry out the factual, material artwork. Moreover, there is a certain tendency, at least here in the German speaking parts of Europe, not to radicalize academia through art, but to discipline art through academia. In several institutions of higher art education, "artistic research" simply means that the platonic division is reestablished, that is, in some MFA and PhD degree programs, the (material) artwork is considered ultimately as the substrate for a theoretical paper which is to be submitted by the respective artist to prove that she or he is capable of imposing the alleged transsubjective standards of the academia onto her or his material, subjective practice. This is certainly a doubtful development of artistic research within the academia, which should actually imply a pluralization of the notion of research, as for instance Dieter Lesage has argued convincingly. In this regard, Foucault's decidedly anti-platonic notion of discourse in "L'Ordre du Discours" may serve as a helpful theoretical backup: for Foucault, discourse was necessarily deeply enmeshed in material concretisations. To give but one example: the much discussed "panopticon" is in itself, in its very spatial structure, a discursive setting. "Language" is thus not restricted to written or spoken text, although, as this blog shows, in the end all ways seem to lead back to the written word again and again. Anyhow, if we go back to photography once more, Rosalind Krauss' thesis from the 70s that photography as "index" creates a specific mode of meaninglessness which can only be compensated through the addition of text, now appears as grist to the mill of those proponents of artistic research who are about to subordinate the specific aspects of aesthetic (or visual) discourse to the seemingly transparent, transsubjective discourse of the

written word again...

Best wishes from Jörg Scheller, Sofia Bempeza, Rubén Fructuoso, Zurich University of the Arts, Department of Art & Media, Specialization Photography

*Reply*

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