

Benjamin And Struggle

I feel that contemporary discourse around cultural entitlement has taken on a rhetorical role in support of a globalised neo liberal agenda that goes relatively unquestioned by arts professionals. The people it is supposed to help critique cultural policy as tokenistic.

In the rush to embrace Otherness the demand made by Benjamin to make work that not only questions but alters the dynamic of the false divide between artist and audience, culture and politics is conveniently obscured, masking a lack of attention to the ways that capitalist markets produce inequalities in terms of access and outcomes within culture. Peter Suchin raised this issue in his review of Hal Fosters writing about this replacement of the preoccupation of class with otherness;

" the artist as ethnographer". No longer championing the downtrodden proletariat (itself an extreme denomination of alterity)", contemporary practitioners have changed the site of their gaze to that of the "other" in terms of racial and cultural difference".

The ethnographic limits of the current discourse seem to reinforce economic and cultural inequalities and diminish the hope of change. We are all reduced to statistics and labelled as organisations struggle to meet targets dictated by funding agendas, in turn dictated by capitalisms need to absorb and neutralise difference and to sell it back to us in the form of regeneration projects. The old traditional distance between bourgeois intellectual and proletariat is dismantled and replaced with categories of otherness that we can all be segregated into, thus fragmenting and diminishing the voice of resistance as previously established and solidified along class lines.

If culture is bent through political adaptation to market forces, a concept such as cultural entitlement is undermined by questions of ownership and by control of the means of expression and process. Far from addressing inequality the current lapse of philosophical integrity and historical critique opens the way for the market to adopt and exploit the language of fairness.

For me Benjamin's' critical hermeneutics of the everyday are important in that they allow us to understand that reality is not a given, and that through awareness of being in praxis, and through self conscious practical activity we transform the world and the people in it. It is for us to recover the tradition of thought from Marx, Lukacs, Benjamin, Gramsci and Lefebvre for whom everyday banality concealed complex realities, in order to counter the ignorance that allows the market to sell our entitlement to culture, our cultural citizenship of the world back to us.

This for me is the struggle, the struggle to know enough to be able to understand the historical, philosophical and cultural context I find myself in and to formulate a strategy, to articulate a response, to engage with these questions as an artist and curator in a way that moves the discussion forwards. In a way that allows for the

blurring of the class boundaries, for the multifaceted nature of post modern peoples identities.

How artists and curators sense and respond to this call is different from individual to individual. We can engage with the struggle to change the status quo, not only through content or 'tendency' as Benjamin called it, but also through the ways we work, through technique or the 'quality'. Benjamin asserts that to deal with one is to deal with the other;

" I want to show you that the political tendency of a work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That means that the correct political tendency includes a literary tendency. For, just to clarify things right away, this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency - that, and nothing else constitutes the quality of a work. The correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency."

Benjamin's' assertion that the political tendency of a work and the technique that an artist employs are the same thing, in that a work can not be politically correct without taking into account an awareness, an engagement with the history of art and with the means of production has ramifications for the autonomy of the artist and the work of art. Benjamin identifies that in serving a political agenda an artists' autonomy is sacrificed;

"His decision is determined on the basis of the class struggle when he places himself on the side of the proletariat. But then his autonomy is done for"

In his speech titled 'The Artist As Producer In times Of Crisis' Okwui Enwezor' discussed Benjamin's' address to the 'Institute For The Study Of Fascism' and identified the question he feels is still pertinent today;

"namely to what degree does political awareness in a work of art become a tool for the deracination of the autonomy of the work and that of the author?"

Or how much does political engagement remove the autonomy of the art and the artist? Enwezor goes on to identify a return of;

"collectivity in contemporary artistic practice and in so insistent a manner, across a broad geographic area that to ignore the consequences is to miss the vital power of dissonance that is part of its appeal to contemporary thinkers and artists".

and to describe the function of collectivity;

"Collectivity performs an operation of irruption and transformation on traditional mechanisms and activities of artistic production which locates the sole figure of the individual artist at the centre of authorship."

The power of this disruption to raise concerns over the authorship of a work reveals the insistence at the heart of a modernist model of production for the

artist to be an *"actor in the economic sphere"* Enwezor is suggesting collectivization as a form of resistance in which artists retain their autonomy in spite of their tendencies and resist being reduced to economic pawns.

This brings me back to a central assertion in Benjamin's text that the form is correct if the content is correct, we see that Benjamin's insistence that tendency and quality are inseparable overcomes the divide between serving art and politics, art serves neither well if it does not address both.

The divide between the intellectual and the proletariat is not as clear and rigid as it was in Benjamin's time;

"The revolutionary intellectual appears, first and foremost, as a traitor to his class of origin."

My betrayal would somehow lie in becoming de-politicised, in forgetting the struggles of the past. It is for us not to forget, to build upon the struggles and achievements of our predecessors and not to be oppressed by the weight of them.

Reality is after all there for the shaping it can be whatever we want it to be.

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References

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Peter Suchin

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Benjamin, Walter

The Author As Producer