**Margin of Utility**

**DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL IMAGINARY**

> “Democracy—this is what’s important—is a matter of educating citizens, something that does not exist at all today.” - Cornelius Castoriadis

**Urgency of an Untimely Question**

The unprecedented and ubiquitous valorization of democracy in our day and age runs the risk of foreclosing any intense critical interrogation. A normative consensus has imposed itself with such force that it is extremely difficult today to talk about democracy without presupposing its intrinsic value, without accepting that it is indeed the only possible historical option, if not the “end of history” and the political endgame of humanity. We don’t have to accept Fukuyama’s demagogic and debilitating historical thesis to participate in the same political culture that produced it. Progressive leftists have proven this again and again by playing a ‘good’ democracy against a ‘bad’ one, thereby confirming the unique option we have for thinking politics.

It is essential to remind ourselves that this political imaginary is only approximately 150 years old, and that the massive valorization of democracy occurred after the founding of the United States of America. Many of the ‘founding fathers’ were indeed extremely skeptical of democracy, and the original documents of the country tend to refer to the U.S. as a republic instead of a democracy. However, as Thomas Paine acutely stated in one of the early defenses of democracy, ‘time makes more converts than reason.’ And the last 150 years have converted almost everyone, especially in the wake of the supposed collapse of the socialist alternative in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

**Resisting Normative Blackmail**

My objective here is to open space for a critical reflection on democracy. The first task that imposes itself is to resist the ideological blackmail of the current political imaginary, which tries to force us to be either for or against democracy. This is one sign among many others that democracy has become more of a value-concept, an emblem of allegiance, than an analytic notion simply used to describe a state of affairs. This normative blackmail is aimed precisely at dulling the shocks, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value—no less precious for being irrational? Although she avoids the pitfalls of depicting her subjects as victims and refuses that most liberal of sentiments, pity, she tends to avoid documentarizing any activities that could be conceived as political, favors the intimate portrait and often portrays acts of consumption.

Furthermore, Strauss often makes use of the photograph’s dramatic expressivity to aggrandize her subjects, to elevate them, making their struggle and forbearance “epic.” She routinely chooses compositions that soften the brutality of her subject matter or monumentalize her subjects, and effectively excises from her ‘esthetic’ the cold, neutral and objectivising aspects associated with the photographic’s analytic power, stressing poetic expressivity. The desire to aesthetically elevate her character’s struggle betrays her in the redemptive and healing power of art. Her interest, to paraphrase Jeff Wall’s description of Roy Arden, is to ‘calm the rage of the wounded and defeated.’

**Calming the Rage of the Wounded and Defeated**

All art, from the crassest mass-media production to the most esoteric art world practice, has a political existence, or, more accurately, an ideological existence. -Martha Rosler

With the completion, on May 2, 2010, of Zoe Strauss’s decade-long I-95 photographic project, she has reopened the wound of social documentary that concerned—most demanding and exacting photographic practices in the 1970s. Social documentary, as Allan Sekula reminds us, challenges the ‘prevailing dogma of art’s fundamental ‘irresponsibility’ and, at the risk of ‘dragging in a dead cat,’ forces art to confront the social reality and economic structures that conditions its production and reception. It thus provides a potent challenge to the attempt to maintain art’s autonomy with respect to politics and to the tendency to turn the photograph’s iconic power into an “anti-intellectual weapon.”

I-95 consists chiefly of photographs taken in Philadelphia, but in recent years Strauss has ventured further afield, including places such as Anchorage, Biloxi and Las Vegas. Her interest in the social function of the document is not merely reflected in her choice of subject matter and the place indexed by the photo, but also in her concern with the presentation of the photographic series, often favoring the format of the slide projector or site specific installation. She insists that the annual installation—photographs displayed for 3 hours on the pillars under I-95—is the work. Thus her concern is not merely with the document as such, but also with the politics of representation that complicates its social reception. On the surface, her interest in the politics of representation would seem to renew the concerns motivating the critical assault mounted by Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, for example, on the pernicious characteristics of the new documentary practices of artists such as Diane Arbus, Gary Winograd and Lee Friedlander, championed by John Szarkowski. Rosler and Sekula were concerned with how these new documentarians made use of the genre in a manner that actively stripped it of its progressive agenda. By directing “the documentary approach,” as Szarkowski puts it, “towards more personal ends,” the new documentarians no longer aimed to critique the world in the interests of changing it, but to elevate and redeem the commonplace. By shifting the register of the documentarian from the political to the personal and self-expressive, Szarkowski restored a typically romantic conception of art, saving the pictorialist impulse and neutralizing the corrosive effects that Walker Evans’ conception of art is thus thoroughly romantic.

Strauss attempts to resolve the tension between the aesthetic and thus formal elevation of her subjects and their literal poverty by emphasizing the site specificity of the work’s presentation. Her insistence on I-95 being the proper place for the work’s exhibition thus tactfully acknowledges the problems associated with the romantic elevation of her subject matter. But this gesture is crudely populist, deceptively democratic and unintentionally condescending, the equivalent of selling designer brands in WalMart. We thus see the danger of ‘that’ courage that Szarkowski praises, which consists, in looking at [the commonplace] with a minimum of theorizing. Populism becomes the populist of the market and politics becomes a matter of making people feel better about themselves.

-Alexi Kukuljevic
all critical acumen in the name of a simple ideological alignment: you’re either for or you’re against us! The relatively recent change in the content of the category “enemy” reveals to what extent it is the form of the opposition—and its flexibility—that is important: yesterday, the “communists” were against democracy (which would have been news to Lenin), today “terrorists” and “tyrants” are the opponents of democracy (see the National Security Strategy of the U.S.A.).

In resisting this ideological blackmail, it is important to return to the analytic, descriptive use of the term “democracy.” It is only in doing so that we can see that we are most definitely not living in a democracy. According to the categories that go back to Plato and Aristotle, we are, strictly speaking, living in an oligarchy, and more specifically in a plutocratic oligarchy that markets itself by constructing an administered, representative pseudo-democracy: an elite class of specialists manages the power of the people and largely constructs public opinion (see Sheldon Wolin’s excellent book Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism). Indeed, “democracy” is a class ideology that serves to legitimize the excessive control exercised by a very small minority of decision-makers. Democracy, in our day and age, is not the power of the people. It’s an ideological smoke screen allowing for a massive limitation of the power of the people.

“Democracy” and Capitalism

Politics has been commercialized, and the ruling minority is largely bankrolled by corporate elites, if they’re not corporate elites themselves. The “reveling door” between government and big business has become a simple breezeway! This should raise serious questions regarding the compatibility of democracy and capitalism: can a system in which the people are supposed to rule function in conjunction with a hierarchical system founded on the proletarianization of the people for the economic gain of the few? Aren’t dollar democracy, corporatocracy and kleptocracy the inevitable results of welding a “representative” system and bringing an end to nearly all life on earth. Of striking a kind of postmodern discourse, Trecartin is showing the dissolution of all subjects, all genders, all relations. There is free-play, free-ffect, free-love. The other, which should be characterized as historical: the Marxian/Situationist line, which sees in Trecartin’s work primarily an affirmative act of culture which, in its failed subversiveness, serves only as a mirror and reflection of the dominant mode.

Trecartin’s recent artist talk at the Institute of Contemporary Art in late April gives me cause to return to the questions raised by his work and its place in contemporary U.S. A. Considering here a quick look of the pieces he showed at the lecture and his general reception, my aim is not so much to understand the work itself as its place in these contemporary debates. Moreover, the analysis is primarily formal, and therefore necessarily partial. His lecture showed precisely why reception of his practice has been so split. For example, when asked about the appellation “queer” to his work (Trecartin is part of the ICA’s new show, Queer Vision), he deflected the meaning of queer as a gender or sexuality-based phenomenon. Rather, and I paraphrase, he stated that queer for him was a general sense of opposition to the norm. Then, he tellingly added, “Maybe.”

What exactly Trecartin means by opposition or by norm is not entirely clear. Again, if the norm is conceived at the policing of representations, then yes, Trecartin has a number of subject-positions, then, sure, Trecartin’s work is oppositional. If norm is defined, alternatively, as the “new spirit of capitalism,” that is, as flexible, adaptive and creative, then, well, queer has just become the new norm. The partially dialectical status of these positions is affirmed in the dissolution of both queer and norm in their mutually interchangeable positions within the opposing discourse. Trecartin’s work is both positivity and negativity. It means a kind of text that did not try to let one escape from reality, but to make its own reality construct the notion of escape, or “the Apocalyptic world,” which will present both at the same time: one escapes from reality into a reality which it turns out was the reality of the world all along. At least, this is the claim.

I cannot offer yet a direct assessment of the meaning of such a dissolution, or such a view of technology. Suffice it to say I am skeptical. My concern with the reception of his work has been and remains to ask not that it overshadows more concrete, more critical, and more self-reflexive practices which do not fit as easily into the demands of today’s mainstream curatorial practices. But still, like technology itself, Trecartin’s work has various potentials (both positive and negative) and a serious consideration of them cannot begin when we are simply making claims about Trecartin’s capacity to represent the “contemporary condition,” or even future conditions.

To think in these terms might move us past Jameson’s framework of a singular identity of the present which can be synthetically stated and either affirmed or opposed. Auerbach’s sublter thesis in Mimesis is that there are multiple modes of representation at any given time and that these modes bear directly on questions of interpretation, authority and history. It is not in fact the case that in “our contemporary moment” we have lost the ability to distinguish between legend and history, but I do feel that this is the case with Trecartin’s work. The stakes of such a dissolution will be the subject of future deliberations.

For now, I am thinking here in some un-figured way of the scene in Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, when Major T. J. “King” Kong, unaware that his mission has been aborted, jumps on an atomic bomb and races through the plane like a cowboy, triggering a global destruction system and bringing an end to nearly all life on earth.

Avi Alpert
The contemporary museum experience is administered and managed. Major exhibitions are organized around the titans of modern art to attract the masses to the temples of consumerism for the cultivated. Preference is given to the ‘genius’ figures whose singular trajectory and talent attest to an individual originality we are called to adulate. Tickets are expensive and often need to be reserved in advance. The galleries are packed, and the public is ushered through a congested narrative of heroic creativity. In the isolated world of individualized information, which takes its extreme form in the obligatory headings explaining what is being seen, we are—in a swarm of other people—invited to privately identify with the iconoclastic beauty of the heroic genius. Our individual experience is administered in such a way as to have us conform to the social imaginary of radical individuality at the precise moment at which we are but one more wandering headset in an endless sea of headsets (all subject to the same administered experience of individuality). At the end of this edifying process of cultural elevation and the massification of individuality, we are churned out into the museum shop so that we can purchase the imperturbable signs of our privately shared originality.

The recent exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Picasso and the Avant-Garde in Paris, is no exception. It is structured by a running narrative of artistic innovation opposing the f u n d a m e n t a l assumptions of Western art since the Renaissance to the iconoclastic virtuosity of an artistic ico. Through a structured chronology of linear development, we follow Picasso as he pushes the envelop of art history by repeatedly calling into question the norms of representation. His work in analytic and synthetic cubism, his sculptural experiments and collages, his encounters with Surrealism, all teach us the same basic lesson: Picasso broke with representation and drove history in the direction of anti-representational art. The audio and printed commentary is replete with the savvy omniscience of those who—like us—can now snicker at the idea that cubism used to be affiliated with the ‘more representational’ work of Jean Metzinger, or Léger’s revolutionary as Picasso’s 'more representational' work of Jean Metzinger, or Léger’s 'representation'). The photographs also add an interesting parallel, as “representational” as its content: Picasso’s ‘return to figuration in his neoclassical period of the 1920s can be linked with the cultural backlash against Cubism, although the artist never viewed his groundbreaking earlier work as progressing away from classical ideals, despite its revolutionary appearance.” This apparently opens a space for a critical reevaluation of Picasso’s work in terms of his engagement with classical ideals and his attempt to articulate a new relationship to the past (instead of simply breaking with it). However, this space is immediately closed down as we are told that Léger’s The Hurriers is much more representative of the ‘return-to-order’ movement. Nonetheless, the anti-representational narrative trips at this point and can only stumble to the finish line. And what a finish line it is! For the last room is dominated by a sculpture whose title is as “representational” as its content: Man with a Lamb.

If we are able to bracket this administered narrative of artistic innovation and the social imaginary it perpetuates in the minds of all of those exposed to it, there are nonetheless many positive elements that should be highlighted. The works on view are an impressive selection of some of the most valued works in the historical archive, along with an assortment of work by figures who have been more or less written out of history (due in part to narratives such as the narrative of anti-representation). The photographs also add an interesting vitality to the exhibit, and they help create a sense of the social dimension of the avant-garde. Indeed, the moments when the march of innovation is interrupted by a contextualization of various social circles are extremely refreshing antidotes to the naiveties of linear history. And the attempt to weave art history into the history of cafes, friendships, jazz performances and more or less formal salons needs to be lauded. Ultimately, the P.M.A. has a strong pedagogical agenda that can be extremely beneficial, as evidenced as well by the last Cézanne exhibit. Pedagogy, however, when it is made to be the handmaiden of administered historical narratives and commercialization, can only lead to the reification of debilitating social imaginaries. If the P.M.A. truly wants to praise iconoclasm and anti-representation, why doesn’t it begin by breaking with its own representational narratives?

- Theodore Tucker

of rule with an economic system of exploitation? We simply need to refer to the recent Supreme Court ruling to remind ourselves of the utter absurdity of our situation: corporations were given the right to make unlimited campaign donations based on their right to free speech! The first amendment of the Constitution, which purports to protect the freedom of speech, has been perverted into meaning the freedom for corporations to buy political candidates on the open market!

Since my stark realism runs the risk of being labeled a dark pessimism, what is it to be made of those who protest that ‘we do have elections!’ “public opinion does matter”! In the 18th century, Rousseau chided the English for thinking that they were free because they elected representatives every five years, when indeed they were only free one day every five years. We only need to add that the freedom on this single day is in fact an administered freedom insular as we are “free” to choose candidates who have already been selected for us. Denis Kucinich’s exclusion from the 2008 democratic debate hosted by MSNBC in Las Vegas is a prime example of choices being made for us: NBC fought tooth and nail to avoid having any candidate who might voice a strong anti-war, anti-nuclear position, for fear that it might compromise the work of their proprietor, General Electric. Indeed, GE, NBC and the defense contractor Raytheon (also owned by GE), contributed substantially to the campaigns of Obama, Clinton and Edwards, and the last thing they wanted was to provide a public platform for someone calling for the closure of Yucca Mountain (a nuclear dump in Nevada) or the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, attorneys for General Electric’s NBC argued that “a television station does not have to grant unlimited access to a candidate debate. If anyone’s First Amendment rights are being infringed, they are MSNBC’s.” Regarding public opinion, this is one sign among many that the ‘public’ sphere has been privatized. This means that “public” debates are in fact chosen and administered to the public by professional politicians, business elites and the corporate media; public opinion is managed in the name of diverse political causes and economic agendas.

Constructing “Democratic” Subjects

The plutocratic oligarchy dressed in the clothes of a representative democracy is only part of a larger political imaginary. It would therefore be a mistake to simply criticize a parallel system of economic institutions, as if there were a simple conspiracy from behind closed doors. On the contrary, go to the...
Machete Group Meeting

The Great Refusal: The Neo-Avant-Garde Then and Now

May 21st, 2010
8-10pm
319 North 11th st. Philadelphia PA

As with our previous treatment of post-modernism, in the following session we shall approach the notion of the neo-avant-garde not merely as a historical designation or a particular theoretical fashion, but as an attitude and orientation toward the present that inspires artistic practices today, practices that position themselves critically and aspire to the legacy of refusal for which the avant-garde stands. Our discussion shall center on the manner in which the contemporary artistic concerns framed by Seth Price’s “Dispersion” and David Joesell’s “Painting Before Itself” renew the act of problem and issue addressed according to Hal Foster’s account in “What is Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?”—by artists in the 1960s. These texts shall serve as a springboard to further interrogate what it might mean to refuse to be an apologist for what exists.

In addition to Alexi Kukuljevic and Gabriel Rockhill, New York-based artist Sean Paul will also be present to facilitate the discussion.
In an economy bleaker than a go-go bar in Jamaica Plains, unpaid internships are gold. The competition to be able to copy paperwork and update FileMaker spreadsheets at the Whitney (the Whitney!) is cutthroat. Indeed, my brother—a student with professor recommendations galore and an astronomically high GPA at his well-known liberal arts college—was unable to secure a volunteer gig with our hometown public library. The reason? Too many applicants. That’s correct. He just wasn’t “Solana Beach public library material”.

Often the notion is hilarious, it comes as no great surprise. Volunteer positions and unpaid internships, especially for young people pursuing interests in the humanities, are the only jobs available. Even before the financial collapse, the resumes of graduating college seniors were filled with impressive internships and apprenticeships, and the unflattering barista job was kept secret.

I have always had an icky feeling about unpaid internships in the arts. Something about them just feels a little seedy and manipulative on the part of the organization. Of course, I’m a hypocrite: I have held unpaid internships with a variety of employers—everyone from independent curators to large non-profit foundations. But my diverse experience has perhaps only made me more wary of the situation they’re illegal.

Unpaid internships are violations of wage and hour laws. What were once paid jobs are now unpaid internships and apprenticeships, exchanging labor for experience and possible networking opportunities. I understand how that benefits an employer in administrative tasks so the directors can focus on larger goals. But if an arts organization needs to offer some kind of compensation, legal protection, and regulation.

These positions open in the arts have gradually morphed over the years from paid jobs into unpaid internships. A decade or two ago, internships were relatively rare and only lasted for brief amounts of time. Now, every arts organization in Philadelphia offers an internship—from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to the Slought Foundation to Space 1026. It is rather jarring that 28-year-old screen-printing skateboarders have interns. Not just interns, but interns that were selected from a pool of applicants. This has just got to stop.

For a scene as familiar with Marxist theory as it is with the day of the week, the quiet acceptance of an exploitation of labor is somewhat surprising. The art world, much like media, radio, and television, has always relied on the labor of smart graduates for little or no pay. But the system is one that favors privilege in a burst-bubble art market like this one, there are increasingly few candidates able to afford a pay-free job. There may be a surplus of eager volunteers at local libraries, but surely organizations are missing a much larger (and more well-qualified) applicant pool by not offering concrete incentives. Sure, dinner cruises and an astronomical high GPA at his well-known liberal arts college—was unable to secure a volunteer gig with our hometown public library. The reason? Too many applicants. That’s correct. He just wasn’t “Solana Beach public library material”.

For a scene as familiar with Marxist theory as it is with the day of the week, the quiet acceptance of an exploitation of labor is somewhat surprising. The art world, much like media, radio, and television, has always relied on the labor of smart graduates for little or no pay. But the system is one that favors privilege in a burst-bubble art market like this one, there are increasingly few candidates able to afford a pay-free job. There may be a surplus of eager volunteers at local libraries, but surely organizations are missing a much larger (and more well-qualified) applicant pool by not offering concrete incentives. Sure, dinner cruises and...