

# Disaster as a Condition

*Some Reflections on Contemporary Artistic Practice*<sup>1</sup>

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The academic manuals presume that arts, technology and representative democracy have finally become one in the poetic totality of an absolute presence. Now it remains only to sustain this presence at any price. The city is evoked, but cities no longer exist, since they have already been replaced, as Rem Koolhaas recently pointed out, by vast post-urban landscapes perforated by junk-spaces. The street is hailed time and again by cliques of the petit-bourgeoisie, while Baudelaire's street and its *passante* have been reduced to the new open-air malls containing showcases of some archaeological heritage from the glorious past of the early capitalist city.<sup>2</sup> Any consideration about the conditions of artistic practices requires a conceptually bracketing of this presence and its communication hubs without falling back to any utopian or ironic asceticism.

## 1. Ageing of Art Theory

A brief historical exposé serves here as our point of departure. The French wave of semiotic and structuralist art theory from the Sixties aimed to break the dominant framework of Art History based on naive conceptions of mimesis and taste. Both Lacan and Marxism influenced this renewal of art studies.

1. This paper is based on a lecture delivered at Undercurrents06, Gothenburg Museum of Fine Art, Winter 2006.
2. See Fredric Jameson, "Future City", *New Left Review*, nr 21, 2003.

During the Seventies and Eighties, the semiotic-psychoanalytical framework was itself revised, criticised, and in some cases abandoned by authors as diverse as Hubert Damish, Georges Didi-Huberman or Raymond Bellour. Meanwhile new philosophical works, notably by François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida marked a new way for interaction between philosophy and art beyond the boundaries of the aesthetic tradition.

In the English-speaking world during the Seventies and onwards, the theoretical and artistic avant-garde, receptive to the French theoretical discussions and indirectly under the influence of such continental authors such as Roman Jakobson, started to criticise traditional Art History and Literature Studies.

An Anglo-American variety of structuralism and semiotics was introduced into Comparative Literature, Film Studies, Women Studies and Art History. Soon, a limited set of early Lacanian terms, notably the 'Mirror Stage' and 'The Gaze', were also integrated into this new theoretical framework. The set of questions and thinkable answers were more or less different in the Anglo-American context for a variety of reasons, above all due to the hostility of philosophers. Consequently, both semiotics and other new theoretical approaches were perceived inside the broad context of Cultural Studies. (The term has never denoted, except for some odd places on this planet, such as sociology of culture.)

The main issue quite rapidly came to account for the reception of artwork and the identification of the interpellated subject. The Althusserian, Foucauldian and Lacanian notions and arguments were brought together in a project of 'reading the visual', which aimed to detect the ideological construction of individuality in the visual field: the gender-based gaze, the colonised subject and so on. Journals such as *Screen* and *October* became dynamic forums that gathered theoreticians of art, radical thinkers and artists. The whole movement considered itself, in one or another, as a part of the avant-garde, often close to the New Left, but at any rate as part of a critical movement.

To summarise, there was a configuration of different theoretical strategies aiming at de-naturalisation of 'natural' perception. Analysis of discursive construction of 'spectatorship' was supposed to detect the ideological techniques of domination that shaped the modalities of production of meaning in visual representations. The important question for us in the present context is to designate the hinging point at which this chain of changes became a historical remote theoretical heritage.

## 1:1 Revolution?

In 1996, Rosalind Krauss in her commentary on W. T. J. Mitchell and his book *Picture Theory* (a return to Panofsky's academism), unwillingly formulated the ambiguities inherent to this radical critical movement:

*But whether this revolution is indeed an insurgency, or whether it — as an unexceptional case of "cultural revolution" — serves an ever more technologised structure of knowledge and helps to acclimate subjects of that knowledge to increasingly alienated condition of experience.<sup>3</sup>*

3. "Welcome to the Revolution"  
In *October*, 77, summer 1996.

What Krauss, in her critique, singled out as a problematic dimension of new art theoretical approaches, could today be conceived as the changed role of

academic discourse in the commodification process of contemporary capitalism. Seemingly, the question to be asked should be whether visual art studies have already joined the main bulk of Art History in the sleepy confines of university discourse? Yet I think that the question is somewhat inaccurate, since it does not clearly take into account the complex relationship between Critical Theory and artistic practice during the last three decades. In fact, Art Theory itself has been more or less a part of the transformations of the conditions of artistic practices for two main reasons. Firstly, visual art itself became increasingly dependent upon different processes of condensation and displacement of conceptual components. Secondly, these same conceptual components emerged as embedded into a new form of commodity: knowledge.

## 1:II Communicative Foundation

For the sake of clarity, I will use a general term here, namely *art-text* by which I mean simply the textual activities surrounding visual products. The relationship between *art-text* and artwork is complex. It is a question of distance and intimacy, complicity and alienation. As Stephen Melville once formulated it:

*What, one might say, 'theory' above all wants is not to be touched by its object — as if a permanent and immeasurable distance were to be secretly maintained as the condition of what we nevertheless claim as theory's approach to its object.<sup>4</sup>*

The question is how to account for the limits of the conceptual matrix that determined the *art-text* in its relation to the artwork and the exhibition apparatus. In order to better understand the conceptual matrices for Visual Studies and Art Theory, I would like to put forward a small thesis.

I call communicative foundation the dominant framework of both artistic activities and art-texts from the Seventies onwards. This point requires further justification. First of all, this is not somewhat belatedly taking sides in the discussion of a visual turn against a supposedly linguistic turn. Secondly, the importance and vitality of the discussions and exchange of ideas during a two-decade period of Anglo-American theoretical literature and its role in the transformation of academic structures, remains an undeniable point of reference.

What the notion of communicative foundation implies, is that firstly art theories and critical studies have relied on a definite set of dichotomies: Language versus Retina; Representation versus Meaning; Sight versus Sign. In both the iconic and the sign-based theoretical frameworks, the reception and transmission of codes in the visual field is assumed to be the exclusive foundation of all visual meaning in the work of art. The basic scheme, regardless of variations (including those, such as by Lyotard, which were the antithesis to all communicative foundation) remains the same: The dual pattern of receptor and emitter, construed by the very transmitted code inside the restraints of a given differential system. Assumptions inherent to communicative foundation relied basically on the conception that subjectivity as such is only conceivable inside the temporally designated space of a communicative act, either through the language games, or by indicative gestures.

The same ground is shared by those strategies that either frustrate the communication or propose recourse to pastiches and alterations of performative

4. p. 112, Melville, Stephen, "Division of the Gaze", in *Vision in Context, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, ed. Teresa Brennan, Routledge, 1996.
5. The Seventh thesis, in *Tractatus Logic-Philosophicus*, translated from the German by C.K. Ogden, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922.

acts. In fact, one could find a point of convergence between a certain rational conception of language in analytical philosophy and communicative foundation. The most prominent voice of this convergence is to be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent".<sup>3</sup> Such a definition of the ultimate limit has an unmistakably ethical dimension. This ultimate limit, which inevitably prescribes a politics of silence, has been determining for the artistic and art-textual practices in the last decades of the Twentieth century.

The main implication of the communicative foundation is that it limits imagination, since it obliterates the dialectical ground of the artwork. The real inwardness of the art-object founds this object in the visual field and at the same time remains alien to all vision. The specificity of the artwork resides in the fact that it continues to imagine things about which we can neither talk, nor remain silent. The limitation of imagination to the visual field, organised according to communicative models and implicit ethical limits, reduces the specificity of the artistic practice to what Krauss called 'acclimation of subject'.

The question is how to approach any coherent theory beyond the boundaries of communication patterns without falling back into the romanticism of bodies and body parts of Bataillian base materialism, the allegedly Lacanian notion of 'transgressive desire', or the epic romanticism of social realism?

## **2. Global Conditions and the Notion of Catastrophe**

Any claim to a distanced position against the regimes of representation means a restoration of imagination outside the visual field as defined by communicative schemata. Such an imaginative faculty could only maintain its post-romantic position, when firmly rooted in a reflection on a global situation from a singular viewpoint. A singularity presents itself as an obstruction to the sets of established social relations. Representations, of what is commonly called 'Globalisation', take a significant role in both contemporary works of art and at major artistic venues.

### **2:1 Heterotopic Totality**

Santiago Serra's installation in the Spanish pavilion at Venice Biennale in 2003; Alex Rivera's work on the Mexican immigrant labour force at Whitney one year earlier; or works in projects such as Tamaas; are all illustrations of a rich and diverse imaginary produced out of issues related to the inequalities and possibilities generated inside the boundaries of the contemporary stage of capitalism. In this regard, one of the current themes in both contemporary artistic practice and theory can be summed up as the defence of local particularities. This defence is usually presented as a radical point of view. It is based upon the following line of thought: Since the dominant global order, under hegemonic American consumerist culture, threatens the unique diversity of cultural and artistic expressions, a critical artistic strategy should make the supposedly threatened particularity visible. It should undermine the uniform tendency of power exercise.' This theme was once based upon a deconstructionist critique of grand narratives and their Eurocentric lack of understanding regarding cultural and ethnic sensibilities. Today, it is more or less a spontaneous idea that unproblematically follows the critique of globalisation.

But isn't this threat of uniformity itself a part of the imaginary of the global, and as such one of the fantasies that enables the globalised order to function

qua a totality, determining the horizon of thought and imagination? Fredric Jameson once formulated the critique of such a strategy in these words:

*All cultural politics necessarily confronts this rhetorical alternation between an overweening pride in the affirmation of the cultural group's strength, and a strategic demeaning of it: and this for political reasons. For such a politics can foreground the heroic, and embody forth stirring images of the heroism of the subaltern—strong women, black heroes, Fanonian resistance of the colonised—in order to encourage the public in question; or it can insist on that group's miseries, the oppression of women, or of black people, or the colonised. These portrayals of suffering may be necessary—to arouse indignation, to make the situation of the oppressed more widely known, even to convert sections of the ruling class to their cause. But the risk is that the more you insist on this misery and powerlessness, the more its subjects come to seem like weak and passive victims, easily dominated, in what can then be taken as offensive images that can even be said to dis-empower those they concern.<sup>6</sup>*

While Jameson's cautious critique back in 2000 pointed out the risks associated with some aspects of the discourse of anti-globalism, it is today more than ever evident that the critique of the universal propositions of modernity only reproduces the myth that the universality is a culturally, theologically or ethnically inherent part of what is called 'The West' and ignores earlier claims to historical and political universal propositions.

The more important point is that the idea of a threat of uniformity neglects the capitalist reality. The capitalist logic does not promote uniformity, but rather the transformation of all diversity into exchangeable signs. The global order tends towards totalisation of diversity, of particular ethnic and cultural identities, since the exchange of differences on the global market place is dependent upon the supply of particular and cultural flavours. The global order is structured as a *heterotopic totality* based upon the circulation of signs, increasing security measures, and established communicative codes.

The relationship between the artistic practice and the heterotopic totality is a key issue that should be viewed in the light of recent transformations of the productive forces. As Antonio Negri argues in *Empire*, we are left today with the pulsating surface of a capitalist global order that itself invents its own new limits and possibilities of expansion. Additionally, the closely monitored and medialised space of everyday life and the dominance of what Guy Debord once called the society of spectacle, results in what I would call a state of constant fear. This 'constant fear' should not be understood as a psychological notion, and it has nothing in common with any theory of a state of exception either.

What is at stake today, and probably more than ever, is the diminishing intensity of existence on behalf of a constant fear before an unfathomable threat. If the Presence of Now is all, and if no other time than this presence can be grasped from inside the system of signs and its ethical principle, then an ultimate end of all existence, even though a real threat, remains incomprehensible in the everyday reality of our deeds beyond whatever we declare publicly.

Is it at all possible to conceive any counter-position against the dominant

6. Fredric Jameson, "Globalisation and Political Strategy", *New Left Review*, Nr 4, 2000.

imperial reproduction of visual signs? Alain Badiou has quite recently formulated a series of theses that may be understood as a provocative answer to such a question:

*14. Since empire is sure of its ability to control the entire domain of the visible and the audible via the laws governing commercial circulation and democratic communication, Empire no longer censors anything. All art, and all thought, is ruined when we accept this permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy. We should become the pitiless censors of ourselves.*

*15. It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognises as existent.*

Badiou's conclusion should rather be seen as a diagnosis, it accentuates the need of revisions of the objectives and horizons of artistic practice. Such a revision requires that a set of circumstances and structural variables are taken into consideration: the replacement of the personal patronage system by the modern gallery; the introduction of exhibition apparatus into new speculative network of financial relations; the academisation of artistic practice which is increasingly conflated with state interests and sustained by a wide range of subsidiary systems; and finally the emergence of new technologies and their impact upon the artistic practice.

Contemporary technological development does not only concern the computer-based and digital modes of expression, it has also provided new technical devices in a diverse range of areas, from those immediately connected to visual and audio representation to the 'newly developed construction material'. The recent technical advances in architecture has, for instance, led to the construction of new and spectacular buildings, among which we find new museums and exhibition spaces of monumental dimensions.

Buildings such as Kunsthau in Graz, and figures such as Frank Gehry are the better-known and iconic figures of this new development. This architectural development imposes new conditions, not only for the organisational forms of exhibitions, but above all for the artwork. These new spaces dictate their conditions and impose new demands of both scale and size upon the artworks. Hence, the technological achievements directly affect the very spatial condition of art through both computer-based interactive works and new material constructions.

These contemporary circumstances seem to provide a new field of possibilities. Yet the emergence of new techniques: digitalisation; internet; and so on, regardless of their potential to produce new margins for action (for instance the extension or suspension of absolute property right over internet, etc), do not per se produce or connect to antagonisms related to artistic practices. They remain, perhaps not unsurprisingly, a growing appendix to artistic practice. That is why we should turn our attention to two aesthetically basic terms.

## **2:II Space and Visual Sign**

Any new strategy requires that visual signs (in the form and content of capital hyper-accumulation (Debord), and space (as the problematic keyword of our

7. See "Esquisse pour un premier manifeste de l'affirmationisme", in Utopia 3, Généalogie critique et axiomatique minimale, Paris, Germs, 2002.

time), be viewed in the light of a wider notion of imagination (a radicalisation of the term beyond its aesthetic background). Imagination, to mention the obvious but easily neglected fact, is neither confined to the visual, nor inevitably opposed to the intelligible. To explain this point further, the best starting point would be the recent discussion about democracy and its crisis. Some time ago, Jacques Rancière delivered some forceful arguments against the critique of democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Democracy is not a form of government, but rather, a double movement both beneath the level of state (as its necessary neglected base that once gave rise to the idea of political governability), and beyond it (as the democratic rights of the governed to reclaim the political). Such a dynamic is basically Rancière's matrix for delivering his arguments against both those who see the confiscation of the private sphere by the state as the consequence of democracy, and those that point out the frivolity of consumers and their egoist interests as the ruin of society. To sum up, such critiques of the democratic state participate in what Rancière would call the state ambition to eradicate the traces of its own contingency. In other words, the struggle and the division of society and consequently the possibility of the governed to change their situation is considerably neglected in these perspectives.

Yet, Rancière's analysis does not include the problem of space in the current stage of politics. Regardless of the accuracy of constitutive moments delineated in Rancière's analysis of democracy, these constitutive moments are defined from the perspective of a definite space attached to classic bourgeois society. In Rancière, the presentation of the non-represented, the excluded, the division of forces, the dialectic of all and parts, are all determined by the one and same locality, the spatial framework of the nation state.<sup>8</sup> The innerness of a particular historical entity, namely the Bourgeois Society, the Cartesian spatial locality measured and controlled by the state power, determines the framework of Rancière's analysis and subsequently fails to account for the fact that the emergence of a split in a given situation is a function of connections that transcend the determinations of Cartesian definition of a given place. Faced with this theoretical unthought, Rancière could not designate the conditions of possibility of what his analysis evokes as "singular and precarious actions" as the defining terms of a democratic space. Hence, both agents and the conditions of the advent of a singularity remain equally unnamed.

At the age of Bourgeois Capitalism, the site of antagonism and its universality have been coupled through Internationalism. This was the case, since the site was the nation. Any given antagonism in a given locality is (insofar as it is a real division of social forces) a re-definition of the boundaries that separate that locality from the rest of the world beyond the mapping operations of Capitalist ideology. From such a perspective, the distance that separates isolated islands of Bourgeois society and its surrounding capitalist circulation (the gap that isolates the site of accumulation from the spaces of value production), is the unstable, but real site of the new singular.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, any micro conflict, in a suburbia in some distant European or non-European country mobilises names, forces, and signifiers from a heterogeneous collection of places and creates a new spatial location as a challenge to the heterotopic totality in contemporary capitalism. The new logic of spatial determinations means that we should at every step take into account the doubling of the capitalist logic of circulation and accumulation in terms of displacements, migratory trajectories, re-segregation of urban landscapes and

8. Jacques Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie*, La fabrique, 2005.

9. For a further discussion about the differentiation of space, see David Harvey, "Space as A Keyword", in *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2006.

the reproduction of old forms of religious or ethnic identities. It means also that the diagonal movement across Cartesian space follows the direction of those inventions that bring forth the universal claims of parts, the presentation of the suppressed and subsequently a new imaginative field that cannot entirely be captured by visual signs.

## 2:III Two Points of Departure Instead of One Conclusion and Catastrophe

Firstly, artistic practice, insofar as it is related to the temporal axis around which all spatiality should organise itself, plays a crucial role in this radicalisation of imagination beyond its visual boundaries. Not only because this practice is obviously linked to the conditions of concrete labour and its outcome, which is the peculiar form of art-object, but also because the person who assumes the name of artist is at the same time and ever more increasingly a part of capitalist social relations.

He or she participates both in the new forms of commodity production and he or she gets stuck in the passport controls and police stations in a variety of countries through which the artist and the artwork are forced to move. Any radical aspiration in the field of artistic practice, at a distance from the regimes of representation, remains precisely the investment of time consumed in the production of a movement across the spaces of ethnographic mania, extinct deities, and security measures. Today, an artist is the figure of universal abstract value and concrete labour.

Secondly, a widening of imaginative power relies upon the internal procedures of artistic practice. The intensity associated with the dialectic between the playful and seriousness is the imaginative and internal part of art procedures, which has surprisingly escaped conceptual attention after the demise of romanticism. Adorno articulates this dialectic in the clearest manner:

*What can, without stirring up the musty odours of idealism, justly be called serious in art is the pathos of an objectivity that confronts the individual with what is more and other than he is in his historically imperative insufficiency. The risk taken by artworks participates in their seriousness.<sup>10</sup>*

It is this dialectic, with its profoundly human scale for action, that could empower a radical imagination that brackets the three points that we have so far treated: the appropriation of criticality by the communicative schemata in the heterotopic totality of contemporary capitalism; the transformations of means of production and their impact on artistic practice; and finally the re-definition of spatial boundaries of the political.

Nevertheless, it should be clear that such an a-romantic dialectic relies on a real horizon inherent to the current global conjuncture. This horizon could not be articulated other than as an occasion for new certainties. Either the material possibility of a decent life for all human beings, for the first time in man's history, or the current deliberate suppression of this possibility, which only leads to catastrophe for all. The most secret link between art and the socially determined mode of production is conceivable from such a horizon.

10. Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory*, "Situation", p. 38-39.