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Honesty with the real

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Abstract

This article explores the re-politization of art that is taking place nowadays, with the aim to go beyond the duality representation/transformation as the two activities of political art. It proposes the concept of “honesty with the real”, as a way to think about art as a form of treatment. How do we handle reality and deal with reality? This question leads us to think about affect as a form of violence and to propose a new sense of engagement and intervention.



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Keywords: *political art; engagement; honesty; affect; intervention; anonymity*

With my burnt hand I write about the nature of fire.

FLAUBERT

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

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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.

In the days in which the figure of the engaged intellectual acquired gigantic and emblematic dimensions in the person of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, to a certain point friend and comrade in their shared journey, wrote, "Commitment in the Sartrean sense is denial of the link between us and the world he appears to be affirming" and "one commits oneself no more than in order to detach oneself from the world".⁶ These are strong words, written with the pain of an impossible friendship and the need to take a stand at a time, in the 1950s, in which momentous collective destinies were at stake in revolutionary movements that were occurring all around the world. What Merleau-Ponty is telling us is that commitment is an act that reinforces the distance of a consciousness that positions itself before

the world and that establishes as the only link with its problems, the emptiness of a free decision of the will. "I, from my principles and my thinking, freely commit myself to such-and-such a cause and decide to intervene ...". Thus, the committed artist-intellectual would argue, making of his or her "natural" and unquestionable distance the condition of the critique and intervention.

What sense does it make to resume this discussion in our own times? Although the global world has not abolished social inequalities but, rather, has aggravated them, it has indeed annulled the privileged place from which to look at the world and the monopoly of the capacities for interpreting it all and giving it sense. The places have proliferated to the point that they seem to have disappeared and the capacities have been dispersed. Who is speaking? Who is thinking? Who is creating? Beyond the unitary phantasmagoria of globalisation and its market products, we do not know today from which garage, neighbourhood or language the tools for constructing the senses of reality are being forged. Against the single reality of the global market is opened out the uncertain shadow of an anonymous (not-)knowing for which nobody holds the keys of interpretation. Projecting the luminous and well-located horizons of commitment and intervention over this shadow of the world not only makes no sense but also it is an act of total dishonesty. Honesty with the real does not countenance re-editing today the game of distances that gave life to the artist-intellectual. 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.

Accordingly, the sense of involvement unfolds on multiple planes:

(1) Discovering that one is engaged is to *interrupt the sense of the world*. There is no need to dwell at length on what the sense of the world is. "It is what there is": the unquestionable reality of capitalism as a system and way of life, and the complexity of a system of interdependencies that is presented to us as incommensurable, uncontrollable and ungovernable. Managing one's own life¹⁰ in this context is our place and our role. And we must meet the challenge under threat of being left "out of the deal". Discovering that one is involved breaks this sense that locks our lives into impotence and places them under threat. Like any interruption, it opens up a distance. But does not presuppose it. Unlike criticism, which needs distance to unfold, the implication is the

emptiness of sense that is opened up when we make an experience of our proximity with the world and with others. This proximity is our "unthought-of". This proximity is what distances us and detaches us from the sense of the world. This proximity is what brings about the crisis of sense that forces us to start to think, to speak and to create.

- (2) Discovering that one is engaged is to *find the power of anonymity*.¹¹ In this experience of our unthought-of proximity with the world and with others, a void is opened up while at once an encounter is taking place. We are dislodged from our managed lives, from our "I-brand",¹² and we find ourselves among things and among others, made of the same material as the world. "The real? That is us", writes Jon Sobrino.¹³ This *us*[AQ] declines to be an image of itself. Real is not representable nor does it fit into any identity, although it can harbour multiple singularities. This *us* has taken as its own the power of anonymity, the power of a sense that nobody can appropriate. From the separate logic of commitment, the name was becoming a signature, a star in the darkness. In the experience of engagement, names became clues in a game of shadows. The power of anonymity does not need to renounce names. A name borne with honesty is always one sign among many of the existence of a shared world that "living is waking in the interweaving".¹⁴
- (3) Discovering that one is engaged, then, is to *acquire inappropriate passions*.¹⁵ They are neither appropriate in the sense of the world nor can we appropriate them. These passions are the positions that do not correspond with any option. This is no wordplay. They are the possibles that are not chosen and that disarticulate the coordinates of our reality. For the theology of liberation these unchosen possibles are the victims, truth incarnate in their wounded bodies, in their battered lives. In them and with them is the passion that power cannot appropriate for itself, although it may cover it up with all sorts of strategies of victimisation and therapeutics. Discovering our inappropriate passions today means taking a stand. The stand of the victims, the stand of dissidence, the stand of resistance ... in brief, the stand delineated by gestures of

dignity in a pliant reality where everything seems to have been made possible. Dignity imposes a shared limit on reality because in the dignity of each person that of everyone else is at stake. It marks out a position that must be avowed or defended in each case, in each situation, providing its own sense in each context. It is not summed up in a code of values applicable to any time and place (as the neo-conservative exit to modernity proposes) nor does it need to resort to pure externality (as western gazes towards “the other” would seem to suggest). It is on the line in every life to the extent that it is engaged with a shared world.

THE ART OF ENGAGEMENT

To speak of the art of engagement is no longer to speak of art and much less of the spaces, dynamics and leading lights of the art-institution. In every case, it is to incorporate artistic creation into something that includes it, goes beyond it and needs it. Every society needs honest art, although it may not call it art, because every society needs languages in order to deal honestly with reality.

Can the art that we know contribute something along these lines? Can it somehow contribute to the task of finding ourselves engaged, which is to say, of interrupting the sense of the world, rediscovering the power of anonymity and acquiring inappropriate passions? It is hard for me to know but I do not stop wanting it. I want art, poetry, philosophy, teaching that are not the instruments and pastime of a capitalism that is at once colourful and brutal, that do not contribute towards the hypocrisy with which we can get on with things here as if nothing were happening, or as if what is happening was not with us. For this wish it is not sufficient to denounce the banalisation and functionality of art in the predominant structures of power. This critical task is indispensable but unfortunately we do not hope that it will reveal something that we might not know or something that might surprise us. For this wish it is not sufficient, either, to keep wishing.

This text is a gamble and a call, a vote of confidence and also a demand. Art, if it wishes to be political must, more than anything else, be

honest in the sense that I have defined the word to this point: not so much in its themes or its desire to intervene but in its way of dealing with reality and with us, ourselves. With honest art, whatever it is talking about, whatever it touches, we always find some trace of three longings, or three spirits: a longing for truth, a longing for us and a longing for the world. First is a longing for *truth* because, as the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann once said and wrote, every creation “educates us in a new perception, in a new feeling, in a new awareness”.¹⁶ Without these yearnings, without this longing for truth, only the creator’s movement would be left to us. In our world of today, in the artist in movement, in the constant elaborating of a curriculum vitae and innumerable projects, “We see the foam on his or her lips and we applaud. The only thing that moves then is this fatal applause.”¹⁷

Second is the longing for *us*. The new possibility for perception, for feeling and for awareness that is opened up in an artistic creation necessarily summons us. It does not summon us as audience. In every creation, in every true idea, the effect of self-summoning occurs. Although we all think and we all create, there is no need to fall into the pseudo-democratic trap of saying we are all artists and are all thinkers. Yet the true idea opens up the field of an *us*, which is run through by the unease of not being able to be consumers, spectators or specialists. A disquiet we can only share and transmit. This is the effect of taking the stand that disarticulates the map of possibles, “an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us”.¹⁸

A longing, finally, for the *world*. Art that deals honestly with the real will necessarily contribute towards teaching us to see the world that is among us. This world, as I have said, will not be encapsulated or represented in its works. It will be offered to us as a non-renounceable possibility in its ways of looking, of listening, of speaking and of touching, in the way it summons us and disturbs us, in the stance it takes and makes us take.

... And if at some point art ceases to be run through by the violence of engagement and these three longings, if the word “art” itself prevents and blocks this inclination and this power that we have called honesty with the real, there is no need to fear. We can stop speaking of art in the singular, can leave art to one side and seek new names for

these creations in which men and women of any time or place have struggled together for a life that is worthy of being life.

Translation from Spanish: Julie Wark

Notes

1. See, for example, Jon Sobrino, *Terremoto, terrorismo, barbarie y utopía* [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-garcés-cast.pdf> (accessed November 11, 2012).
6. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 269, 265.
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).
10. See S. López Petit, *La movilización global. Breve tratado para atacar la realidad* [Global Mobilisation: A Brief Treatise for Attacking Reality] (Madrid: Traficantes de sueños, 2009).
11. See the collective *Tiqqun*, “Cómo hacer?”, Espai en Blanc.
12. López Petit, *La movilización global*.
13. Sobrino, *Terremoto, terrorismo*, 18.
14. Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de*, 225.
15. J. Rancière, “Les paradoxes de l’art politique”, in *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: la Fabrique, 2008), 69.
16. I. Bachmann, *Leçons de Francfort. Problèmes de poésie contemporaine* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1986), 28.
17. *Ibid.*, 30.
18. F. Kafka, Letter to Oskar Pollack, January 27, 1904.