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The Impossible Quiet: The Limitless Politics of Art

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Larry Clark, *Untitled (Kids)*, 1995. Colour print.

What is she doing, the woman looking at the wall? She is standing still. Her hands have fallen to her sides. She is leaning slightly forward. The line of her open raincoat is perfectly parallel to the wall, and does not move. Her body tilts inside the raincoat, as she balances on the tiny comma of air, curled under her toes, the toes curled inside her shoes. Her head is still moving forward, even when her shoulders have stopped moving. Her mouth falls open. The piece of A4 paper she is holding drops to the floor, scything open round its staple. She doesn't look at it. The old man behind her turns, his finger drops from his chin. He looks at the piece of paper and frowns. The woman pays no attention. She keeps looking at the wall! What is she looking at?



Chris Burden, *Kunst Kick*, 1974. Photograph of a performance at the Basel Art Fair, Switzerland.

To Kant, the work of art was to be understood following the model of subjective experience he had outlined for knowledge. But it was not knowledge. The meaningful integration of mental processes that allowed the understanding to organise intuitive experience into the recognition of an object, a knowable thing, still defined the experience of the body in the gallery looking at the wall. Yet, although the meaningful, realisable structure of knowledge induced the act of aesthetic looking, what was important and distinctive about art, was that knowledge did not take place. Objective perception was a purposeful, teleological event. It ended in knowledge. Art set out on this purposeful path, but it never arrived at its end. In art, the subject experienced the expansion of the mind, the joy, the enlightenment it would experience as if it was about to synthesize knowledge. It would feel the sense of self-enlargement and self-confirmation, the pleasure, that always came with knowledge—confirmation of its capability, enlargement of its sense of its own possibility—but it would not receive knowledge. Art then in this its most influential definition in the West is the experience of knowledge without knowing anything, of teleology without telos, of purposiveness without purpose. It is therefore a subjective activity and a very specific one: not only does this paradox make it a specific experience, but it is defined by the fact that it cannot be anything else. It cannot be re-appropriated. When it becomes knowledge or morality or politics for that matter, it is no longer art, or to put it more accurately: the artwork can be knowledge. It can be morality. It can be politics, but not in its aesthetic dimension. Its aesthetic quality is the object minus knowledge, morality and politics. In other words, it is the object minus objectivity.

What is she looking at, the woman who is looking at the painting hanging on the wall, the woman who stands, and says nothing, and makes no sound? No thing.

Purposefulness without purpose, teleology without end, objectivity without an object, even in its most genteel definition, art is a site of impossibility. It is the impossibility we are most used to. It is the figure of impossibility to us. The meaningless and incomprehensible, from the most serene to the most violent, from the most fragile to the most shocking can only be redeemed as art. It is the place where the meaningless functions, and is talked about as if it were meaning, but which is not meaning. It is the abyss into which we can stare and live, the siren-song we can hear without being drawn onto rocks, the gap in the intelligible that offers us at least a figure of freedom. If it actually produced a sense in its senseless sense, it would become something else. It would no longer be art: it would be a fact, a principle, a truth, a lesson. (But it *is* a truth, a truthfulness without . . . but now it's becoming ridiculous!)

Art, then, is meaning with a hole in it. It is the hole in the wall into which the woman is staring. Why is she staring at this meaningful hole in meaning? It is easy, and not simply wrong of course to talk about the educational and social pressures that induce people to walk around in art galleries, but it is never enough. The experience of art is in the postmodern an open experience of subjective possibility. To Foucault, attempting to reconfigure Nietzsche, the aesthetic is a model of a self-reinvention outside of the inherited constrictions of power/knowledge. The aim of cultural work is to define the limits of the subjectivity that regimes of power/knowledge have contrived as us, and then fuck them up in a kind of avant-gardism of the soul.



Claude Cahun, *Self-portrait*, 1927. Black and white photograph.

To Roland Barthes, the gap in meaning at the heart of the aesthetic experience opened up the possibility of an orgasmic explosion of the parameters of the self, a vertiginous liberation into the joys of an abyss outside of even the most preliminary categories of identification and location. The purposiveness without purpose becomes a purposelessness made purposeful. This is the standard strategy—or risk—of attempts to appropriate Kant post-Kant. The meaningless itself is reinvented as meaning. I don't care that this is not what Kant meant. The problem here is that it reduces the impossibility in the quiet contemplation of the art, or it somehow names it. It gives the hole in the art an identity, even as the subversion of identity. By making the art work meaningless, it turns art into a productivity. By refusing to know the art work, it comes to know art.



Letizia Battaglia, *The Murder of Judge Cesare Terranova*, 1979. Gelatin silver print.

Can we talk about the impossible hole in the work of art, without making it meaningful?



Roger Mayne, *Child About to Do a Handstand...*, 1957. Gelatin silver print.

Can we be satisfied if we just see the impossible hole in the work as “beautiful”, the ultimate act of concealing naming in Kant, the most famous word in aesthetic philosophy that I have neglected to mention?



Gilles Peress, *Tabriz, Iran*, 1980. Gelatin silver print.

Or is there too much going on to ignore, or cover up, or to name, or to cover up by naming, even if that naming is to un-name?



Gotthard Schuh, *Java*, 1940. Gelatin silver print.

There is something going on inside the frame that connects it to what is outside of the frame. Jacques Derrida discusses the relationship between the interiority of the work, or *ergon*, and what is subordinate to it, its supplementary or secondary work, its *parergon*. Kant had contemplated the debate whether the clothes on statues were indeed part of what was being represented (the *ergon*) or secondary to it (*parergon*). Derrida asks the same question about the frame, the signature, the title, and indeed all that clusters around the work, including of course the discourse of (Kant's) philosophy itself. He writes:

What constitutes them as *parerga* is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*. And this lack would be constitutive of the very unity of the *ergon*. Without this lack, the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon*. The *ergon*'s lack is the lack of a *parergon*, of the garment or the column which nevertheless remains exterior to it.
(Derrida 1987: 59–60)

The art-work can never be complete in itself. It begs to have a name, a frame, a context into which it can be located. Why? Why cannot the art-work exist without some beckoning towards its outside, without requiring some situation in which it is to find itself? In Heideggerean terms, anything coming into being does not merely produce itself, but *worlds*, assuming a

world around it into which it comes to be situated. How could it happen otherwise? In Derrida's discourse on art, it is more specific: there is something in the art-work, some mystery, hole, conundrum, impossibility that insists on irresolution, on difficulty, on contemplation and struggle, that insists in other words, that it cannot end here. This is the irony of the Kantian thesis on the autonomy and specificity of art, as Derrida reveals it: what allows art to be a specific activity (its withdrawal from meaning, knowledge and truth) also makes it unclosable. There is always something in art—the thing in fact that makes it art—that requires that more be thought, said, felt, argued, and worried about it. The impossible quiet in the midst of the work makes it impossible for the work to remain quiet.

The woman is looking into the picture. What she sees in the picture is the impossibility of making sense of it. She may retreat and ignore this senselessness, and find sense in the picture anyway: morality, truth, politics. She may acknowledge the senselessness but name it: beauty, self-reinvention, freedom. But none of these practices deal with the impossible hole in the work.



Anselm Kiefer, *Spiritual Heroes of Germany*, 1973. Oil and charcoal on burlap, mounted on canvas.

The point about the impossible hole is that it is an irreducible lack in the work. There is a lack in the work that cannot be filled except by rationalization, conventionalism or complacency. The lack forges a necessary link—"an internal structural link," Derrida calls it—with what we normally understand to be its outside. The lack, the impossible hole, in the work demands an outside, onto which it can never not open. The lack in the *ergon* means that there can never not be a relationship to the *parergon*.

This lack, however, is not lack as itself truth. Derrida writes that the lack in question here is not "the lack as a posable or opposable negative, a substantial emptiness, a determinable and bordered absence" (*The Truth in Painting*, p.80)

The lack then is not itself meaning. It is not itself an absence that can be named as the official and sanctioned absence of a metaphysical apparatus like psychoanalysis making itself present, turning the hole in the art-work into an inverted sign of its own necessity. In other words, it is not an absence confirming the presence of an absent apparatus of meaning like psychoanalysis in the art-work itself. In the same way that to name the open-ness of the work of art as the possibility of self-reinvention was merely to turn namelessness into as good as a name, to name it as "castration" or a knowable lack is itself to make the hole meaningful, when this erases its most important quality.

The lack in the *ergon* demands to be supplemented by what lies outside the work, what is conventionally understood as exterior to it. This exteriority remains in the empirical sense. The frame is exterior to the work. Yet this simple exteriority can never become alienation. The work demands the frame, and the frame is necessary to it. It is the guest-worker who inhabits the society, and is required by it even if the society cedes no rights, no acknowledgement, and makes no confession of its dependence. In other words, the *parergon* is required by the work. The work is impossible without it, because an irreducible, impossible lack, a *dis-quiet*, always inhabits the work, an impossible disquiet that makes quiet both a difficulty and a limit, on the one hand, and in-executable, on the other. An impossible quiet always inhibits the work from becoming itself. The frame cannot not take place, and the impossible hole, the lack in the work signals it from the start.

But who cares about the frame? Who cares about the other issues Derrida obsesses over, the signature of the artist/writer, and the title of the painting? Aren't these just issues for intellectuals, so desiccated that they inject some kind of libidinal passion into the most abstract issues that are of no significance to anyone else? The point is that there is something going on in the work that demands that the simple opposition between "inside" and "outside" be junked, that insists that the work cannot be closed off. Our most conventional way of imagining the relationship between inside and outside is, of course,

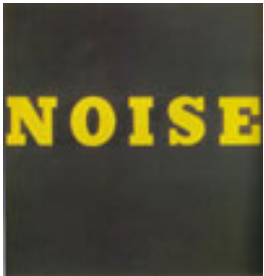
“representation.”



Luc Delahaye, *Kosevo Hospital, Sarajevo*, 1993. Gelatin silver print.

What is in the work recalls or transcribes that which is outside of it, what is, or was there, somewhere: what Barthes calls, in the context of photography, the “having-been there”.

It is easy, in the wake of the work of, of course, Barthes and others, to question the logic of representation. Derrida’s name is often used to under-write this questioning. But Derrida does not argue against representation, not at all. He merely situates representation as subordinate to the logic of *différance*. What makes representation possible is not the ability of various techniques and technologies, like those of art and language, to simply and transparently mimic what exists independently of them. Representation is made possible because of the ability of such technologies to remain open to the possibility of repeating themselves while not remaining the same. The work is defined by its constitutional ability to remain open on an un-anticipated new context in which it can operate again but differently. It is this “iterability” as Derrida calls it, this irreducible translatability of language that allows representation to take place. In other words, what is outside the work is always anticipatable in its most general terms, always traceable within the work. Every event of signification conforms to this logic. There is an impossible quiet in the work that demands the outside. The outside inside the work may be called that which the work represents, but it is the logic of the deconstruction of the opposition between inside and outside that is always at work. This deconstruction does not lead us to say that the inside does not exist, or that the outside does not exist. It merely says that the outside is always already inside, that the after is always already there before, that the parergon is inscribed in the ergon, in the very lack that defines the ergon.



Ed Ruscha, *Noise*, 1963. Oil on canvas.

If this is true of every signifying event, then what is distinctive about the art-work? Is the art-work not then merely another signifying event no different from any other? What is distinctive about the art-work is that it not only conforms to this logic, but that it defines itself by it. It *attends* to it. If, as Kant’s argument leads us to conclude, the art-work is defined by the impossibility at its heart, the hole, the lack that can be disguised, disputed and glorified to the point of invisibility, then art is the activity in which this quiet disquiet is the very topic, the very subject at issue. Art does not only conform to the logic of impossible quiet, the structural necessity of the outside inside. It makes this logic its very meaning. This is what art is about.

To conclude then. What has this got to do with politics? The art-work is always open on its outside. This open-ness can only be closed by a forced act of closure: by a discourse of subversive liberation, bourgeois aestheticism, bureaucratic administration, conservative philistinism and so on. The art-work cannot be denied its frame, and through its frame all the

other discourses that cluster around it, not the discourses that aspire to close off the art-work, but those that elaborate (on) its open-ness. Inscribed in the work is not only the possibility of talking about it, but *the impossibility of not talking about it*. The talking that surrounds art, then, does not need to be opened. I do not have to recommend to you that you talk of the art-work, nor can I require it. The art-work itself requires it. Talking about the art-work does not need to be justified. Only those discourses that attempt to finish the discussion of the art-work, that thus attempt to close the art-work artificially in any number of ways, need to be justified. It is those who try to rule out talking about the art-work politically that need to justify themselves.

The open-ness of the art-work is itself political because of its structural refusal to accept dogmatism and authority, but it is also an open-ness that cannot refuse political discourse because political discourse is itself an open discourse on which all other discourses must themselves remain open. In other words, if I talk of the art-work personally, religiously or aesthetically, there is nothing in these discourses that can keep them closed off from political discourse. This is also true of those discourses that imagine their truth to be in the closure of the art-work. These discourses are themselves only playing at closure, which is itself impossible. The art-work cannot be politicized, either as an act of enthusiasm and engagement, or as one of ideological slavery, because the art-work cannot be closed off from whatever its outside is, which in turn can never be closed off from politics. Politics then is always already “in” the work.

The woman can make sense of the picture by resolving it into a political, moral or aesthetic meaning. She can use the meaninglessness of aesthetic meaning to reconfigure her subjectivity, the possibility of subjectivity or the possibility of possibility itself. Or she can suspend all these acts, and remain vulnerable to the impossible quiet, and open a space where something might creep, lurch, sneak or thunder in. What? Anything? Yes, anything, but what do we mean by “anything”? This term can mean two quite different things: an anything that does not care for any difference between one possibility or another. “What do you want for lunch? Anything.” This anything is actually a kind of completion. It says that there is no difference between one thing and another. It draws a line under the possibility of discriminating between things. This is the open-ness that reduces the art-experience to the possibility of the reconfiguration of the self. This is already a finishing, a repudiation, a quietism, not the quiet of the impossible quiet, but the quiet that results when we all make so much noise no-one could possibly be listening. Become whatever you would like to be: this is not difficulty and open-ness, it is specific, limited, doomed to the unfreedom, as Kant and Hegel would have thought of it, of merely doing what we want. The pessimistic desperation of a consumer society: become what you can. The immense frustration of actually fulfilling your desire.

But we also use the word “anything” to signify the possible coming of that which cannot be fixed and known, that whose horizons are not closed, that which is not resolved or even known, not because it is coming from an un-mapped and hypothetically open future, but because it is a future coming from an unresolved past. We react to an uncharacteristic action in someone we know: “People are capable of anything” meaning not that people can reinvent themselves endlessly into who know’s what novelty, but that there is something enigmatic and unknowable already inhabiting us.

The anything of the open-ness of the work of art is not an indiscriminating anything. This would make it radically simple, if new, knowable if not already known, resolved even when it arrives in all its blazing novelty not to surprise us. The anything of the art-work is the anything of the unresolved, the unfinished, the open-ended and unknown. It is not possibility embraced for its own sake, not possibility as the invention of ever-new contrivances and opportunities, which just provide yet another fixed meaning, even to unknown phenomena. But possibility as the inducement to deal with the knotted and enigmatic, what is problematic in and about us. Not the possibility of inventing what we are not as what we might one day be, but the possibility of immersing ourselves in the already tangled problem of who we are, even in the problem of whether we can talk about “what we are”, not the possibility of what we might become, but the question of what we possibly already are. In other words, not the possibility of expansion, exploration and invention, but the impossibility—or perhaps the pre-possibility—of the unsolvable problem, the open wound, the unremembered injustice, the unknown gift, the dead language, the other history that now will not take place, the crimes we committed before we were born, the genocide that makes the nation’s innocent children prosper. These things are *unthinkable*. Art is about thinking the unthinkable.

She can easily close the art-work off with an educated gesture, a statement about beauty and meaning. She can even insist on meaninglessness or self-reinvention as the possibility of a meaning-to-come, but these labellings of the impossible produce an homogenized and resolved, albeit yet-to-be-named naming. They are either a name that we have or a name that we are yet to have, but their significance is the same.

The point is that the politics of the art-work is not to do with some fixed or resolved meaning that has been or can still be derived from it. It is neither about congratulating ourselves on the genius we have inherited, nor about the glorious carnival of what I might be. Nor is it a question of taking on a politically engaged agenda in order to provide left-wing or progressive readings that should be promoted in competition with equally available right-wing meanings, producing a jousting-match of opinions in which the most forcefully promoted will dominate.

There is an impossible (dis) quiet at the heart of the work—that makes the work irresistibly open, and this open-ness defies the neat division between the inside and the outside of the work, the neat division that would allow the work to remain nothing but an object, nothing but a beautiful thing. This open-ness will not just open on any idea you want from any political point-of-view. Nor is it about being anything you want. Because it is not about closing off problems with either consensual meaning, or individual possibility. It is about the impossibility of ever settling meaning, truth or value: it will always be a connection with difficulty rather than knowledge; with, the open wound rather than the proud icon; the unanswered injustice rather than the consolidation of the narrative of national triumph, already achieved or still to come. It is about the unquiet, rather than the consensual. It will always be about the irrepressible, difficult, challenging, hateful voices people don't want to hear.

References

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