Everything is Relevant

Lum, Ken, Scott, Kitty

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Lum, Ken and Kitty Scott.
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To Say or Not to Say

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Twelve years ago I visited an exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris titled *Face à l’Histoire* (Confronting History). The exhibition brought together art objects and archival documents that dealt with French history between the years 1933 and 1996. Themes focused on the French experience of the Second World War and the German occupation of France. Other themes included the events of the Algerian War of Independence as well as the Indochina Wars. The archival documents were displayed in long glass vitrines located along the central corridor that connected large galleries on either side where art was displayed. The vitrines formed the spine of the exhibition, with photographs, street pamphlets, and posters anchoring history in an agonistic face-off against the historicity of art. The galleries contained major works by artists such as Salvador Dali and Gerhard Richter, and were historiographic in nature.

I experienced an epiphany while walking through the exhibition. It was not the sort of epiphany I recall experiencing when I first encountered a Jackson Pollock painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as a young artist. It was 1981 and I had just abandoned my studies in science for art because I believed that the latter had a liberating potential for me that I had not found in science. Art could allow me to say things that I could not otherwise. These things related to feelings that were and continue to be very difficult to express in terms of language. Art seemed capable of expressing the deepest wounds of a person. A famous work by Bruce Nauman asserts that *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967).

My epiphany at the Pompidou had to do with the fact that the archival component of the exhibition was utterly packed with people. The attention being paid to the materials in vitrines was unrivalled by the attention paid to the art. Many people leaned over the glass surfaces in order to more closely examine photographs or read letters. Some of the older visitors appeared to be revisiting a place of trauma. It seemed to me that the archival material had the capacity to expose an underlying anguish that had never been fully reconciled. In sharp contrast, the galleries seemed staid and were relatively empty of people.

This experience at the Pompidou has stayed with me. It offered me a lesson in terms of the effectiveness of art in the face of the Real. It should be said that my reading of the exhibition was inflected to a large degree by a deep dissatisfaction that I felt toward art at that time. I was finding it increasingly difficult to believe in the endeavour of art. I had started to look to places largely ignored by the art world that I knew. More and more of my time would soon be spent working on projects in
such places as Senegal and China in order to learn to see art differently. As a result of these projects, the borders of art began to widen again.

When I started out as an artist the category of art seemed borderless to me. Anything seemed possible as potential subject matter for art. But as I established a position in the art world, I began to see that there were many limits in terms of what defined art. These limits I have found are often socially and economically determined. They are fuelled by the myth that entry into the art world is somehow unencumbered by categories of race, gender, and class. These limits are not necessarily made explicit, but they are there. At some point, I found such limits intolerable because it was as if the art world had become a plenum, described by Gaston Bachelard as a space utterly contained.

I had been feeling for some time that much of art, and my life within it, had become cliché—perhaps not so much because of art itself but because of the ways in which art has become culturally dominated by the social structures in which it is incorporated, the habitus of the art system. Part of what the art system often does is to commodify categories of the intolerable behind the curtain of universality, thus expunging such categories of their discontinuity.

Increasingly, I was seeing a chasm between that which could be spoken about in art and that which can be actually spoken as art. According to Pierre Bourdieu, “the invisibility of domination is founded on the concordance of a social structure with a habitus inculcated by the same social structure.”¹

But a paradox is that as art increasingly follows the logic of capital, it becomes deterritorialized to itself. As Sylvère Lotringer stated in a recent interview:

> The art market has expanded exponentially and has been losing its shape to achieve monstrous proportions. It is occupying all the space, wildly metastasizing in every possible direction. It is so bloated at the core that it does not seem able anymore to digest all the data. It is on its way to surpass its function.²

So perhaps the purpose of art is to concentrate on discontinuities in order to flag those lackeys of capitalism: clichés. Gilles Deleuze defined clichés as “floating images which circulate in the external world, but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute our internal world so that everyone possesses only psychic clichés of what he thinks and feels, is thought and is felt, being himself a cliché among others in a world which surrounds him.”³ Deleuze claimed that, “physical, optical,
and auditory clichés and psychic clichés mutually feed on each other. In order for people to be able to bear themselves and the world, misery has to reach the inside of consciousness and the inside has to be like an outside."⁴

“How,” Deleuze asked, “can one not believe in a powerful concerted organization, which has found a way to make clichés circulate, from outside to inside, from inside to outside?”⁵ My own interest in the cliché has to do with how clichés mitigate reality by denying us the ability to examine life more deeply, particularly in terms of the category of the intolerable. There is no way for habituated perceptions to reach the intolerable through language given the compromising force of the cliché. What art must do is open itself up to the intolerable so as to render the cliché strange. To render strange is to overturn the habitual. Here I would like to consider the term “catastrophe” for a moment. The etymology of this term is from the Greek *katastrepein*, meaning “to overturn.” It was only later that “catastrophe” came to be associated with “sudden disaster.” This later association of “catastrophe” with “sudden disaster” took this term in a slightly different direction: from the concerted act of a body to an unexpected accident. So this later association shifts the meaning of this term from a political act to an act of nature, much as Barthes saw myth as that which turns history into nature.

“To overturn” suggests a desire to see that which was previously concealed. So in this way, the catastrophic implies a desire to experience otherwise. At the Pompidou, the central corridor functioned like an open wound of the Real in all of its gore. How does one reconcile a past that includes Nazi collaboration and unspeakable colonial acts? Perhaps it is not a matter of reconciliation. Perhaps it is more a matter of realization. So the question would then be:

How does one realize a past that includes Nazi collaboration and unspeakable colonial acts? To realize is to understand clearly, to bring into existence, and to make real the crimes that have been committed against those who have been so gravely Othered. To reconcile is to come to terms with, to agree that this is necessary, and to “sew up” the wound, so to speak.

One of greatest atrocities in modern times took place in the Belgian Congo—now the Democratic Republic of Congo—during the late nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century. Up to an estimated fifteen million Congolese were killed working as forced labourers in the colony’s many mines and rubber plantations. Working conditions were especially gruesome on the rubber plantations, as King Leopold II of Belgium decreed an accelerated harvesting of rubber following the
From 1885 to 1908, the Congo Free State was the personal fiefdom of Leopold II of Belgium (1835–1909), who extracted great wealth in ivory, rubber, and minerals. Reports of human rights abuses and atrocities became an increasing source of embarrassment for the Belgian government, which reluctantly annexed the colony in 1908.

This phrase is usually attributed to Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947), an accomplished poet whose literary achievements are vastly overshadowed by his career of five decades in the Department of Indian Affairs. As the department’s deputy superintendent from 1913 to 1932, Scott oversaw the expansion of the residential school system.

Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in June 2008 and formally concluded in December 2015. It received testimony from over 6,500 individuals and issued a six-volume report, including ninety-four calls to action.

The invention of the inflatable rubber tire. The bloodshed eventually incited protests around the world by those who wished to speak out against the atrocities.

These protesters wanted the world to know the truth of what was going on in the Belgian Congo. In response to widening accusations of crimes against humanity, including from cultural figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, and Booker T. Washington, Leopold engineered the creation of numerous “philanthropic” public relations agencies. Money was spent building hospitals and schools in the Congo with the aim of reconciliation, of “showing” and “telling” the world that all was well in this part of Africa. Meanwhile blood continues to be shed in the names of “progress” and “profit.”

In recent years following the example of post-apartheid South Africa, there have been numerous states that have instituted their own “truth and reconciliation” commissions to address past atrocities committed by the state upon those deemed Other in that state. An example of this is the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was formally established here in Canada by the Stephen Harper government two years ago. The aim of this commission was to discursively redress the deep wound inflicted by the residential school system on First Nations children and their families.

In 1894 the Department of Indian Affairs began to remove First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children from their homes and take them to residential schools. These schools were operated by churches of various denominations and funded by the federal government under the Indian Act. In 1920, it was mandatory for all First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children between the ages of 7 and 15 to attend residential school. Priests, Indian agents, and police officers confiscated children from their families so as to “kill the Indian in the child.”

In 1931 there were eighty residential schools operating in Canada. During the 1980s residential school students began disclosing forms of abuse at these schools. In 1996 the last federally run residential school closed near the town of Punnichy, Saskatchewan.

Harper had a public relations coup with the public apology that he delivered in Parliament ten days after the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission was introduced. Like King Leopold of the Belgian Congo, Harper understood the power that could be gained by “reconciling” wrongs through cliché. The question that I have is: What has this apology actually wrought for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis survivors of the residential school system and their relationship to Canada?
The French artist Bracha L. Ettinger has stated that the place of art is for her the transport-station of trauma. If we consider that the term “trauma” originally signified a “physical wound,” then the relationship between the injured body and the memory that it carries is of the utmost importance to attend to in art.

Walking past one of the vitrines at the Pompidou, I noticed an opening in the crowd, which I immediately filled. I found myself looking at a photograph of a young French Resistance fighter running across a street with a rifle in his hands. The accompanying label indicated that this photograph was taken in the Marais: the same quartier as where I stood in the Centre Pompidou. At that moment I was made acutely aware of my own existence in relation to the material laid out in front of my eyes.

The gap between the spectrum of human experience and all the possible subject matter contained within this spectrum and the general constitution of art is startling. Art has become less and less important as it transforms into an industry. New information technologies have opened up spaces for creative and critical expression not reliant upon the art system. An example of this is YouTube, which functions as a site where people can be creative without having to vet themselves as artists through the art system. Despite YouTube’s corporate ownership by Google and increasing problems with copyright infringement issues, it can function as a direct repository for all kinds of spontaneous, creative works that can be posted and accessed by just about anyone.

But sites such as YouTube are not immune to the politics of the art world. I attended a symposium in Chicago two years ago that dealt with the relationship between globalization and the emergence of new aesthetic forms. One of the presentations under the panel discussion “Challenging Cultural, Political, and Formal Boundaries,” included a YouTube clip featuring the Back Dorm Boys lip-synching the Backstreet Boys’ song “I Want It That Way.” The two performers are wearing Houston Rockets jerseys, the team of Chinese basketball star Yao Ming. Significantly, no mention was made of the fact that the Back Dorm Boys were art school students from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in China. Huang Yixin and Wei Wei have spoken about how their art-school education played an important role in determining the composition, visual effects, and lighting in their videos. Their YouTube posts garnered them international success and they were signed as spokespersons for Motorola mobile phones while still in school. A few months before they graduated, the Back Dorm Boys signed a five-year contract with the Beijing media company Taihe Rye to continue making lip-sync videos. In Chicago, the audience was completely enthralled by the video.
They assumed that it was a non-art expression of creativity. But when I pointed out that Huang and Wei were art school students making works of art, the initial excitement in the room dissipated. We live in a time when knowing something is art may actually detract from an appreciation of the affect of a work. Deleuze said, “the modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us.”

I have just returned from the West Bank of Israel/Palestine to see the Riwaq Biennale. During the conference that was organized in conjunction with the exhibition, the following question was posed: How does one make art in an agonistic context where artists are caught between the oppression of occupation and the acculturating process of the normalization of occupation? This question is a difficult one to answer. But it can be extended to other contexts besides that of Palestine. So perhaps the question can be slightly reworded: How does one make art recognizing—not reconciling—the agonistic contexts that many live in at this very moment in time?

In 1986 I returned to New York for a solo exhibition. My grandmother was living in Brooklyn and so I visited her and told her about the show. Like my other relatives in New York, she worked in a sweatshop sewing garments together. Her experience of the city was almost exclusively restricted to her place of home and her place of work near Chinatown. She knew not a word of English.

Halfway through the gallery opening, I suddenly heard my grandmother’s voice over the din of chatter. She was loudly calling out my Cantonese name. I remember thinking: Is that my grandmother’s voice? Is she here? Moments later I saw her emerge from the crowd dressed in poor Cantonese attire. She was holding a gallery invitation card in her hand. It was this card that she had shown to strangers in order to find her way to the gallery. At first I was completely stunned, even mortified, for I felt completely exposed. My family. My class. My race. My private self as opposed to my public self. My non-artist self as opposed to my artist self. They had been made painfully visible to me and for all to see. My grandmother had lived through so many difficulties. She had witnessed the murder of her younger sister at the hands of Japanese soldiers. She had left her homeland and lived in a tiny, cockroach infested, one-bedroom apartment with several family members in the Lower East Side of Manhattan before moving to better premises in Brooklyn many years later. I could go on but I will not. I think that I have said enough. What I will say is that the presence of my grandmother at that gallery opening revealed to me a deep disjuncture between art and the real. My grandmother did not know anything about the art world, or what
contemporary art could even be. And yet there she was. As we stood next to one another in that space, she asked repeatedly: Who are all these people? She wanted to know.

Foucault wrote that “one cannot speak of anything at any time; it is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground.”¹⁰ This should be the challenge put to art today.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 44.