PLZKLME

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Ross Liew, Please Kill Me, B/W photography, 2005.

And what I feel unites you and me is: we can locate in one another a similar yearning to be in a more just world. So I tried to evoke the idea that if we could come together in that site of desire and longing, it might be a potential place for community-building (hooks, 1991: 83).

I.

These sentences are from an interview with bell hooks where she discusses problems of female and Afro-American identity. What I find remarkable in her statement is the implicit idea of a universal notion of justice, and of overcoming potential or actual differences (between individuals, different genders, classes and ethnicities), toward a (utopian) realm of yearning and desire as "a potential place for community-building".

The realm of longing and desire for a more just world can be opposed to the world as it is (and, with little nuances, probably always has been): divided by ethnic, cultural, religious, economic and political differences, which affect some simply as an accumulation of economic and thereby political power; and others, since the twentieth century, as continuing economic and cultural depravation, prolonging colonization and imperialism.

Of course, one could dismiss bell hook's ideas as utopian, in the face of an accumulation of violent conflicts, waged in the name of 'justice' and, like the conflict in the Middle-East, cruelly ending in an almost infinite spiral of violence.

1. Nussbaum (1999: 129). On the same topic of *Female Genital Mutilation*, see Michael Ignatieff's surprisingly relativistic position *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (2001: 72). He comments on Chinese politics: "The Great Leap Forward in China, in which between twenty-three and thirty million people perished as a result of irrational government policies implacably pursued in the face of their obvious failure, would never have been allowed to take place in a country with the selfcorrecting mechanisms of free press and political opposition. So much for the argument so often heard in Asia that people's 'right to development', to economic progress, should come before their right to free speech and democratic government" (90). Regarding the problems of "honour killing", or *namus*: in its name, six women were killed in Berlin in 2004, within six months. Until 2003, Turkish civil law, amended in 2005, provided in Art. 462 for mitigation in cases of provoked killings. In rural areas of Turkey, honour killings still hardly attract punishment. See also Schirrmacher (2007) and Böhmecke (2005).

2. See Anderson (1999: 115): "The claim to universalism is a shame. Universalism is mere globalism and a globalism, moreover, whose key terms are established by capital." See also Pollis & Schwab (1979: 1): Human rights are a "Western construct of limited applicability".

And, of course, there are valid arguments against the universalism (in the name of cultural diversity and different, culturally relative ideas of justice) implicit in hooks' text. From the perspective of liberal democracies female genital mutilation, honour killings and forced marriage, human rights violations in China, the caste system in India, etc., do not jell with the idea of a more just world, although they are often defended with reference to a particular cultural identity, or to a specific evolutionary situation.[1]

The assertion of universal human rights can also be rejected using the argument that they represent nothing more than the continuation of colonial expansion, the pursuit of class interests,[2] the globalization of Western Enlightenment principles, or the realization of a global 'internal politics', dominated by the West. However, this could be controverted by the juridical argument that the signatory states to the Declaration of Human Rights are obligated to accept and respect it, as a common law at least, and that by no means only Western delegates were involved in its drafting. There were also representatives of a multitude of ethnic and religious groups (see Morsink, 1999), which means that the colonial argument fails. In turn, this could be refuted by stating that Australian Aboriginals, American Hopi or New Zealand Māori (and an infinite number of other ethnic groups and indigenous nations, whose identity was, and still is, overarched by a post-colonial government) hardly had the opportunity to express their opinion of this document, let alone have it included.

Whereby the colonial argument regains its relevance. And so on. And so on.

There is no way that this text could solve what legions of lawyers, politicians and scholars could not. Therefore, I prefer to move on to my core subject and, having now sketched its approximate horizon, become more concise.

II.

What interests me is to explore how bell hooks' statement is relevant to the field of visual arts. I am a critic of 'identity-art' which centres, with tiresome obstinateness, on one's own particular cultural conditioning (or even simply one's own biographical background). No examples necessary. At each Bienniale or Trienniale, curators compete to present new artistic examples, and to demonstrate the theme's topicality. Globalization, migration, identity: in a globalized and migrating art business, these are the central catchwords that many exhibition concepts hinge on.

The underlying, and constantly rehashed, formula can be described as follows: with 'globalization' as a rather diffuse but looming backdrop, an attempt is made to describe, or at least briefly illuminate and exemplify, the loss and reconfiguration of identity, and the conflict between different and specific cultural concepts of identity. The basic pattern: here, we find a multi-faceted and fragmented field of different ethnicities, cultural micro systems and individual biographies – a myriad of minorities fighting against oppression, depravation, razing and extermination; there, an aggressive, globalized and monolithic capitalism of Western provenance, whose expansion is accompanied by endangerment, colonization, if not effacement, of non-European concepts of life, self and world.

The art business dedicates itself to this undoubtedly serious struggle with a kind of preventative and simultaneously belated admission of guilt. Thus, it repeats, knowingly or unwittingly, what the colonialist West (who first produced the art business) has already inflicted on the rest of the world: assimilation, instrumentalization, incapacitation and paternalism. The resulting impression of a bad conscience does not seem to be without reason. The very same imperialist and colonialist West that, globally, caused endless, literally murderous, and still ongoing conflicts generates a concept of art, and especially a concept of modernism, which annexes without residue what assimilates itself to it (and radically expels as local, traditional and "anthropological" all that is not compatible). The art system is Western; the concept of art is Western; the concept of modernism is Western; the concept of contemporary art is Western. The big circus of the Bienniales touring around the world disseminates these concepts, with philanthropic missionary zeal and downright uncompromising, totalitarian commitment to the Good, until even the remotest archipelago has been reached.

Within the realm of art, as a realm of the 'As-If', the West provides platforms for the restitution and re-configuration of identity (and barely an artist rejects the offer to present him- or herself). The West allows – as a way to relieve its own guilt – what in reality continues to be denied: the right to be heard; the actual (that is, comprehensive and, particularly, economic) rather than the symbolic redress of colonial injustice; equal rights; the realization of an undamaged life. Because charges can be laid there, no justice has to be served here.

The realm of the 'As-If', of autonomous art, is exclusively legitimated by and beholden to its own laws and is independent of commissioners. In its autonomy, this art leaves the society it criticises ultimately unchallenged (Adorno, 1997: 226). However, this is exactly the problem of autonomous art, and of politically/ socially committed art, which is the poorer the more it wants to be directly involved. The relationship between art and society, between art and the problems it deals with, is reciprocally analogous to a fraternity sword-fight.[3] While the latter, staged in the realm of the 'As-If', has consequences in reality, the former confrontation is staged because the lack of consequences is guaranteed. Not even the little scandals about elephant's dung on paintings of the Virgin Mary can belie this fact.[4] And that provocations are still possible does not refute the argument that art, in its autonomy, is only very indirectly related to the real of society.

Therefore, in art business, the game with identities is precarious, and whoever has decided to play the game has decided to play the game of the West. 'Identity' is itself a Western idea, central to European philosophy since Aristotle, challenged for the first time by Nietzche and psychoanalysis, and, subsequently, shattered by deconstructivism and post-structuralism (see Hetherington, 1998). According to Lacan (1977), a rift passes right through us: nothing can heal it, just as nothing can heal us from the desire to close it. Without the notion of the self, without the notion of identity, the individual cannot exist. However, one can differentiate between the concept of personal, individual identity – as an anthropological necessity – and the concept of cultural identity – as a system of imprints we experience more or less passively, which we affirm more or less actively, and which we question, criticize, reject or endorse.

3. Lorenz (1974: 94). The English translation of "Comment Kampf", which Lorenz used in his text "Das Sogenannte Böse" (Vienna 1963) as fraternity sword-fight or "Chivalry" does not transport the meaning of the French "Comment" which can be translated as "Like…". It nevertheless transports the meaning of "Comment" as a rule of behaviour, especially in groups, which are defined by class distinctions.

4. In September 1999, the Brooklyn Museum of Art displayed an exhibit called "Sensations", in which a work by Chris Ofili was shown, a depiction of a half naked Virgin Mary, covered in elephant faeces. In October 1999, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said that the BMA should have its funding pulled and should not be sponsored by the City of New York.

III.

5. This, of course, is also the case with theatre, literature and music.

6. See Emmerling (2006: 5).

7. See Garrett (2007: 46).

If I consider the work of art as an autonomous system that follows its own rules and objectifies subjectivity through the law of form, then this art work contains, on the one hand, more than the author could have intended. On the other, in the art work that generates objectifying propositions, she or he dissolves as a life-world subject. The art work is situated in a different frame of reference from any statement with non-artistic intentions, even if it is only by being positioned in the context of Art – that is, the entire institutional framework of art.[5]

Whoever positions his or her work in the context of Art (and where else should or could it be placed?) can no longer go back. The work is out there, contextualized by exhibitions, texts, interpretations. It is now, not only the product of objectification, but an object, a fact. The author's identity as a person – her/his individual and cultural identity – is irrelevant in the face of the work. What counts is the form into which the artistic subject has diffused.

This might sound as though the viewer and the work could enter into a relationship that is not disturbed or burdened by external (historical, political, cultural) differences and their inherent problems of understanding; as though the pure, completely transparent work existed on one side, and the completely unconditioned gaze on the other; as if, between the work and the viewer, an all but pure, uncontaminated flow of information and perception existed, in which every contingency has been extinguished. Of course, this is not my opinion; iconography, iconology and iconics (or what is now called *Bildwissenschaft* – science of the image) have demonstrated to what extent it is necessary to draw on all kinds of information (biographical and artist related information included) to be able to embed the work in a horizon of understanding and, thus, to make it accessible. However, this is relevant particularly for the arts which have become historical and, with the passing of time, have become records of their time. In contrast, what is required from a contemporary work of art (beyond the effort of understanding it) is to critique it. The more it is simply a symptom of its time, the poorer it is. What we may ask for, with good reason, is that the work of art provides us with an image of our time, or the opportunity to think the present in the mode of the concrete (Amman, 1997: 40f). This could almost be a definition of 'contemporary art'. When it comes to the determination of quality, a decisive criterion might be the degree to which this thinking of the present in the mode of the concrete succeeds, and with what degree of complexity and density. To assess this is not an authoritative act, but a taken-for-granted, and permanently demanded, capability of orientation in the present.

To clarify: it goes without saying that works like Francisco de Goya's, "Desastres de la Guerra" (1810–1820); Théodore Géricault's, "Raft of the Medusa" (1819); Otto Dix' graphic cycle, "The War" (1924); Peter Robinson's, "One lives" (2006);[6] or Michael Parekowhai's, "The Indefinite Article" (1990)[7] - and this is a quite random collection - partially gain their strength, as well as their appellative and emotional power, from their frames of reference. However, they owe this power primarily to the density by which they render formally objective subject matter, or the information contained in their frames of reference: that is, to the clarity of their elaboration.

Contrast this with art to which the buzzword 'relational aesthetics' (Nicolas Bourriaud) is often applied. This art operates quite differently: it derives its legitimacy entirely from extra-aesthetic categories, such as sincere political convictions, or the indictment of economic, political, or cultural grievances. Works by the Hohenbüchlers, by Thomas Hirschhorn,[8] or by the Long March Project claim legitimacy, not as autonomous works, but as 'committed art'. It is unclear what renders them formally different from the hands-on work of a street worker, and it is unlikely that these activities would attract much attention, were it not for the sleight of hand of locating them in the arts milieu (Auckland Art Gallery, 2007: 112-23). The infamy essentially consists in making temporary interventions that poke fun at severe minority problems through, for instance, funny architecture competitions and exhibitions for the notoriously humanistic art audience: in the end nobody stands to gain but the artist himself. He or she then moves on to the next critical engagement, a superficial globetrotter of starry-eyed idealism. Formally trivial and morally questionable, the artist uses the benefits both spheres provide – that of art and that of social and political engagement. In the sphere of art, he or she poses as a critic of the art work and as an agent of a new concept of art; in the sphere of politics, he or she purports to be an honest humanist and fighter for minority rights. I don't know what else to add, except that both the ethics of the arts, and the ethics of a social engagement that is lastingly committed to its object are, in the end, betrayed.

IV.

My objection to identity art is that, all too easily, it plays the game of the West, and all too compliantly accepts the 'As-If' compensation proffered by the art business. Willingly, one plays the trump card of minority-identity (against which there is no argument to win the trick), while the migrating, globalized art business unfurls, with a sorrowful face, the post-colonial backdrop and paints it black. Discussion about an art work as autonomous is hardly possible since, from the outset, the game is contaminated by a discourse of power.

It is not only that the post-colonialist discourse suffers, as does half the world, from the fact that colonialism survives in countless disguises (of which globalization is surely one) but it now involves new players. Nations like India, China, Iran and Northern Korea are among them and, in different ways, form our perception of the world while other, older protagonists play only modest roles. Not only has colonialism dropped its poison in every zone of contact, this demon is also passionately nurtured in the realm of the 'As-If' because nobody has to make real efforts to solve real problems: the art business is a palliative.

In his re-reading of Freud, Lacan has stringently elaborated the corrosion of substantial notions of identity that were initiated by structuralistic linguistics. For Lacan, desire is motivated by the subject's suffering from its insufficient capability to get hold of itself completely. The rupture between *je* and *moi* suffered by the subject fuels the endless play of longing and desire; and as the desired wholeness of the subject (which could claim identity beyond discourse) is continually missed, the conversation between *je* and *moi* never stops. It is this inherent difference that tears us apart, forces us to speak, even if this speaking is only fantasizing and prattling.

However, the concept of identity deployed in the art business operates with an ideal of substantiality, not with systems of difference, no matter to what extent the post-colonialist discourse of identity insists on difference. In identity art, difference, located by Lacan within the subject, can never be found in the individual or cultural subject itself. Difference is used only as a means to constitute otherness. This otherness is always conceived of as essential, block-like, monolithic and unhistorical: unhistorical, because identity art holds fast to the idea of a substantial identity, despite all recourse to historical developments. However, substance can only be conceived as not deformable by transformations that occur because of economic, political or cultural changes.

Even if Makere Stewart-Harawira insists that her description of traditional onto-logies and principles of indigenous knowledge is not intended to be essentialist (2005: 155),[9] I am at a loss what to see in it if not an essentialist generalization of indigenous knowledge, eyeball to eyeball with its mirror image of an essentialist, generalizing criticism of Western scientific principles (which certainly deserve criticism for many reasons). When I place Stewart-Harawira's sentence, "the important task was to find the proper pattern of interpretation" (155) in relation to René Descartes' idea that the most important task is "rightly to apply (the) vigorous mind" (1986: 3), I see it as an indication of how close both systems of knowledge are with regard to claims for universality. And did Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) not show that the possibilities for both freedom *and* barbarism are founded in exactly this idea: the "right" use of the "right" principles?

In a secular world, the substantial I (*Ich*) is the atrophied form of the soul; hence the martyr's, the prophet's and the saviour's gestures are deployed in the 'As-If' realm of art business, when the tales of the world's problems, grievances and salvation are spun.

However, if conversation, discourse, language and speech are not only motivated by the difference between the subject and all others, but also by the difference between me and myself; between what I am and what I know about myself (and also between what I know about myself and what I long to be); between *je* and *moi*, then the assertion of a substantial I (*Ich*) in identity art is radically anticommunicative.

Thus, there is a question about how communication can be conceived of in this constellation. As a leaning of the viewer towards the work, to listen and learn from what it, and the subject behind it, might say? As an opening of boundaries, a transgression of limits, a change of habits of reception? This is how scholars have defined the task of contemporary art for decades – a passepartout that sounds seditious but is really no more than a bourgeois bonmot.

When taken at its word, identity art does not seek communication, but simply posts statements. It is conservative in its continual delineation and consolidation of what has already been said, thought and asserted. It is affirmative, hermetic and (despite its pronouncement of substantiality) an art of the closed surface, not of plastic dimension.

The substance behind this surface is accessible neither to vision nor to discourse. Two surfaces clash which cannot enter into any form of communication because they are hermetically sealed.

The subject of identity art has always taken hold of itself, even if as imperilled. It is hieratic, lonely, fragile and tragic, and demands to be taken seriously. What imperils it never lies within itself, but always outside, with the Other, which it claims to be: one Other as monolithic as the other Other.

V.

The game of identity art is to establish an ambivalence that always impresses the stain of power on the Other. In terms of a substantial I (*Ich*), identity art produces a monadic closedness and ideal intactness (or evokes it in the image of damage) in which every threat to its integrity is blamed on the outer world. In a perfidious and paradox manner, identity art closes itself off from the world, while, nevertheless, shifting all the blame onto it. Because of these structural attributes, identity art is the perfect medium for the art business as a system of the 'As-If'. All too willingly, the artist intervenes where he or she has nothing to contribute, nor wants to contribute, to the solution of the problems he or she juggles with.

Identity art as a conservative art, as the manifestation or evocation of "This is me!", is incapable of unfurling the utopian horizon bell hooks and Adorno speak of. Utopia, not as a state that could be achieved offhand, right here and right now, if only everybody were full of good will and best intentions; utopia, rather, as a state, which to give up as impossible to achieve, even facing the uttermost improbability of its achievement, would simply mean to declare that the world, as it is, is the best of all possible worlds.

Identity art insists on 'difference' but does not incorporate it. In this regard, it differs significantly, in two respects, from what contemporary art can do and what is only fair to expect of it. It affirms prevailing circumstances without unfurling a horizon which would allow us to think beyond the current state of affairs. Identity art also suffers from a lack of self-reflexivity, which it tries to compensate for by an excess of moral appeals. This excess is fed by references to the discourse of power.

Moreover, in its insistence on 'difference', identity art is probably opposed to what Richard Rorty described as an indication of some form of progress – progress being defined as "an increase in our ability to see more and more differences among people as morally irrelevant" (1998: 11). When the discourse of 'art' and the discourse of 'power' intersect, difference becomes a moral category, and differences become morally relevant. Therein lies the tragic aspect of identity art. Beyond doubt, the West has deprived uncounted nations and peoples of their right to self-determination, their cultural integrity, their identity, and their economic potential. And, without doubt, art and cultural praxis can be a medium to restore this damaged integrity. However, I doubt that art is the appropriate arena to fight the fights that should be fought in the spheres where the real grievances still prevail: politics and economics.

VI.

My own arguments, too, suffer from an underlying universalism: the application of certain criteria, hopes, ideas in connection with art, which collide with other

10. "From a theoretical point of view, the very notion of particularity presupposes that of totality (even total separation cannot escape the fact that separation is still a type of relation between entities - the monads require a 'pre-established harmony' as a condition of their non-interaction). And, politically speaking, the right of particular groups of agents - ethnics, national or sexual minorities, for instance - can be formulated only as universal rights. The appeal to the universal is unavoidable once, on the one hand, no agent can claim to speak directly for the 'totality' while, on the other, reference to the latter remains an essential component of the hegemonic-discursive operation. The universal is an empty place, a void, which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness, produces a series of crucial effects in the structuration/destructuration of social relations. It is in this sense that it is both an impossible and a necessary object" (2000: 58).

11. "If rights conflict and there is no unarguable order of moral priority in rights claims, we cannot speak of rights as trumps. The idea of rights as trumps implies that when rights are introduced into a political discussion, they serve to resolve the discussion. In fact, the opposite is the case. When political demands are turned into rights claims, there is a real risk that the issue at stake will become irreconcilable, since to call a claim a right is to call it nonnegotiable, at least in popular parlance. Compromise is not facilitated by the use of rights claim language. So if rights are not trumps, and if they create a spirit of nonnegotiable confrontation, what is their use? At best, rights create a common framework, a common set of reference points that can assist parties in conflict to deliberate together" (2001: 20). Cf. Ignatieff (2000: 22 and elsewhere).

criteria, hopes and ideas, which in turn demand and deserve, if not universality, then at least unconditional respect. My argument against the essentialism of identity art is itself based on a concept of identity (Lacan), which can be criticized as essentialist and ahistoric, or transhistoric or a-temporal. In its radical criticism of an essentialist notion of the I and identity, Lacan's concept of identity is itself essentialist.

And even if Butler's concept of performativity (1990) could offer a way out – how could I be sure that this concept is not essentialist (nor, in this context, colonialist or imperialist)? The same question applies to Habermas' concept of discursive rationality (1981), Laclau's idea that all universalisms are subject to constant negotiation (by definition, incomplete and necessary at the same time) (2000),[10] or to Michael Ignatieff's concept of deliberation (2001).[11]

The only possible option seems to be to keep the discourse going, the argument or conversation between particularity and universalism. It bears affinity with the conversation between the *je* and the *moi*, it arises from a desire: the desire to understand (not to possess); the desire to be at home in a world, which is less characterized by boundaries and 'difference' but more by the quest for commonalities.

VII.

Assuming that the globetrotting curators' sophisticated diagnoses are right and we do live in a globalized world, then their much favoured identity art is a strange relic. It is also dishonest, hypocritical and bourgeois: an agent of political correctness in a world of the 'As-If'; a totalitarian instrument for the production of silence; the death-knell for all thought that moves outside the institutional framework; the end of communication.

Rather, what is needed is a culture of curiosity, of not-knowing, of constant questioning. In the place of the cult of identity, a culture of communication, of the insecure, of the debatable, of desire. A culture of doubt, of consultation, where identity is as precious as the dirt under everybody's fingernail: a bit that is left, impossible to get rid off.

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