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Art - the real, the political: returns

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Preliminary notes, towards a postmodern and antagonistic art praxis

During the process of writing this piece, it has become something more I had intended, though in its current state it is also something less. Initially, I had intended to reflect on the way that certain artistic and cultural practices currently operate from what Nancy Fraser calls their «postsocialist» condition. The purpose of the text was to widen the debate on what the conditions — and the functions, possibilities and goals — of a political art praxis should be in this country, for an antagonistic practise from the area of culture. Nevertheless, leaving specific examples to one side for a moment, I eventually decided that before offering any contribution to this debate, I would first need to set out a number of premises that might help us disentangle certain issues. Firstly, as I see it, we need to establish a clear critical approach on the forms currently being taken by the classic model of idealist theory in the local art institution (structurally established, for example, in educational bodies and in a very important number of the institutions of critical and museum mediation). However it is also essential — and this is perhaps all the more pressing because it has not been attended to — to examine how the focus of a certain postmodern (and thus supposedly anti-idealist) local criticism has been honed over two decades. What has happened is that it has based itself on theoretical premises borrowed from versions of the hegemonic postmodernism which in the recent past have worked effectively, whether consciously or unconsciously, to drive an explicit rift between postmodern theory and any type of critical theory with an emancipatory perspective — despite occasional claims to the contrary. Such a rift, in *de facto* terms, hinders any possibility of developing an *effective* model of cultural practice of opposition today, where terms such as «social», «real», «subject», «political» and «public sphere» have something that is substantially different to a fetishistic function, in its most literal sense: they are

substitutes for a deficiency, compensatory responses to the unrecognisable dread provoked by the threat of the real and the political that return and overwhelm. In short, my aim here is to set down a series of ideas in order to prefigure a cultural criticism that is intended to be explicitly counter-hegemonic. My clear aim is to address the reality of the different forms of critical theory and political antagonism that are today driving a new cycle of democratising struggles, unimaginable though that might have seemed to many just a few years ago.

This text, then, has turned out to be something less than I initially intended. It is less, in its brevity and in the fact that is a series of unfinished notes. And it is also less, insofar that any criticism of the different dominant or hegemonic models with the art institution should be accompanied by a type of restoration of those manifestly heterodox practices of the last few decades (not only in historiographic terms: although it is essential to write a sort of *counter-history*, this type of recovery cannot be crammed into a narrow historicist pigeonhole: a counter-history needs to be placed at the service of a reactivation and an updating of practices). And finally, it is less because a series of reflective notes and glimpses of an analysis that is meant to point towards a counter-hegemonic practise, necessarily requires the reality of a continuous and complex work of political articulation by a significant number of agents. And it is that work of counter-hegemonic articulation and antagonism that we truly lack: in this regard, this piece also has an ill-concealed exhortative nature.

«This, then, is the “postsocialist” condition: an absence of any credible and overarching emancipatory project despite the proliferation of fronts of struggle; a general decoupling of the cultural policies of recognition from the social politics of redistribution; and a decentering of claims for equality in the face of aggressive marketization and sharply rising

material inequality [...] [C]rucial “postsocialist” tasks: first, interrogating the distinction between culture and economy; second, understanding how both work together to produce injustices; and third, figuring out how, as a prerequisite for remedying injustices, claims for recognition can be integrated with claims for redistribution in a comprehensive political project.

(Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus. Critical reflections on the «postsocialist» condition*, 1997).

«In the postmodernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward what we will call biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another... Our political task [...] is not simply to resist these processes but to reorganize them and redirect them toward new ends. The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges. The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself – indeed, such new struggles have already begun to emerge. Through these struggles and many others like them, the multitude will have to invent new democratic forms and a new constituent power that will one day take us through and beyond Empire.»

(Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 2000).

When Hardt and Negri argued in *Empire* that the response to the postmodernization of the global economy and dominion must come from a consequent postmodernization of the political and of autonomous social struggles, they are merely acknowledging (in contrast to various left-wing attempts to tackle the current crisis with responses that still cling to an outdated and ineffectual political imaginary) the depth of the irreversible changes that have taken place in our culture, the systems of which were analysed over two decades ago by Jean-François Lyotard in his controversial report on the state of knowledge in computerised societies¹.

For many, unlike the examples with which I began this piece, the capital sentence handed down by Lyotard on the great account embodied by the Marxist historical metanarrative² was an invitation to strip social theory of a critical project that sufficed for its era. In the most serious cases — and there were many — the curfew strictly forbade any form of thinking that might be reminiscent of the classical terms of emancipatory political thought; the impossibility of a project of radical change that set its sights beyond cynicism, fatalism or verification; no analysis that can be expressed using more complex tools than the microscopic focus, no narrative that can be enunciated in any tense other than the present contemplative.

There are those who thought that all this involved a new way of doing politics par excellence. And at that point, if my readers will pardon the levity, feminism once more came to our aid. One of the most relevant examples was the investigation of a new articulation, half-way between political theory and practice. It was alert to changes, without renouncing a project of radical transformation that saw itself as being linked to a history of emancipatory struggles, as offered in a piece by Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson from the late 1980s: «Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism»³. The authors of the piece advocate a postmodern critical theory

(in this case feminist) that is pragmatic and reliable. It is one which, in Fraser's words, would maintain the force of the emancipatory social criticism while at the same time avoiding the traditional philosophical basics, thus overcoming the false antithesis between critical theory and postmodernism (and other «posts»). An articulation of the great historical narratives with the local or inferior narratives, for example, would be feasible within a committed historiography that excluded the essentialist, monocausal meta-narratives, that hold just one group to be the subject of history⁴.

As for the area of artistic and cultural practices, which is what I am concerned with here, one should remember that an important counterpoint came from a series of theoretical reformulations. These firstly considered what interests were actually served in practise by the type of «universal abandonment» advocated by a hegemonic postmodernism⁵. Two highly influential compilations of texts on aesthetics and culture from the Anglo-Saxon world were written by Hal Foster and Brian Wallis. These blazed the trail for a determined process of «repoliticization of postmodernism», which also came to represent a «postmodernization of critical theory». Foster's remark that «in the face of a culture of reaction on all sides, a practice of resistance is needed»⁶, and Wallis open recognition of himself in a type of «interventionist» criticism that accepts its political and social function⁷ marked the tone of this urgent critical project. Ultimately, the abandonment of critical and social theory by a hegemonic postmodernism did not result in a move in modernism towards the historically subaltern groups or those who had suffered the negative effects of modernisation. Instead it worked directly or indirectly at the service of the serious neoconservative attack that struck the balance of opposing forces on which the welfare state had been built following the Second World War (moving it towards capital), such as the advance in democratisation processes and

the renewal of forms of social life promoted during the complex cycle of the struggles of 1968. Critical postmodernism or the postmodernism of resistance sought to demarcate a democratic public counter-sphere within cultural institutions, wishing to be identified at the same time with a wider project involving the reconfiguration of social practices of resistance. This urgent project became all the more pressing with the onset of a new series of circumstances, such as the AIDS crisis and the open remilitarization of international relations embodied in the Gulf War. After 1989, we should remember, we ceased to live in the world we had known for decades. Initially, following the disappearance of its historical antagonist, rampant capitalism seemed unstoppable with its belief that history was finished, until the reality of the systemic crisis burst out in all its clarity.

Those who worked during this period to promote a policy of opposition from the cultural and artistic field knew that they were responsible for the social function of their practices in a historical situation characterised among other aspects by an overlapping of the economic, political and cultural spheres. At the same a massively expansionist capitalism took on a new *de facto* cultural form. It is important to bear in mind the specific situation of these issues in this country; our historical, cultural and social conditions were different in several aspects. The criticism of the liberal democratic and social democratic model, which sparked the struggles of 1968 amongst our neighbours, could not emerge with the same intensity in a country that was still living under the yoke of a dictatorship, where the needs for democratisation were still of the most basic kind. Whatever the insistent historiographic dogma of recent years may say, the contradictory years of Spain's transition to democracy laid the foundation for a growing formalisation of democracy. Sustained by the deficiencies we have

already discussed, it has left behind it a legacy of delegation of citizen power; overstatement of state authority and opacity in its decision-making processes; and suspicion, or even outright discredit and demonization, of institutions that are oriented towards autonomous forms of political action, arising from the social grass roots. Indeed, the happy marriage between culture and art and institutional politics during this country's Social Democrat period meant that they were completely divorced from the reformulation of autonomous and antagonist social and political practices that took place during the long trail of what is conventionally known as the «eighties». And leaving to one side for a moment the more recalcitrant and/or premodern aspects of our *establishment*, critical sectors that embraced the postmodern theory generally did so in such a way that defused the implicit political project of urgency —where it did exist amongst some of the postmodern expressions used as a reference point. Thus a questioning of the subject, essentially the subject of social change, did not lead to a reformulation of emancipatory subjectivity and the way this could be embodied in new *real* political subjectivities; instead it culminated in a treatment of «the political» that was *alienated* from real conditions; in the worst of cases, we saw a refusal to accept that some type of new political subjectivity could be *effective* outside the area of private or extremely focalized practices, or the abstract and liberal-loving celebration of cultural difference, with the thousand ragged versions of ideological preconceptions about «the end of ideologies» being repeated *ad nauseam* while the ethical and political issue of postmodernism focused on certain critical projects by questioning the type of shifts that operate in modernism, in order to elucidate in favour of whom they operate —with a view to reconsidering effectively and on real bases the issue of political subjectivity and new historical subjects of social change— our dominant

local version of postmodernism proved truly unworkable in providing answers; indeed, it could not even manage to ask the right questions. To provide a short casuistry: whereas the criticism of visual representations in critical postmodernism, as we have seen, was considered to be inseparable from a reflection on the forms of social power, its local manifestations focused on an allegoric approach to the crisis of representation. This ignored, undervalued or avoided drawing the inevitable conclusions from the fact that its introducer, Craig Owens, barely three years after publishing *The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism*, had subjected his own thesis to a severe correction in *The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism* — in which, and not by chance, he discovered how feminists were exploring ways of rearticulating critical theory and practice from a postmodern condition, most notably in the visual arts⁸. They dodged the fact that the project of criticism of the aforementioned visual representations knew itself to be a continuation of «the artistic production that arose between the late 1960s and the 1970s, [which] took on the challenge of deviating from certain clearly defined modern aesthetic categories» (Wallis): any rigorous review of our local output during that same period became impossible. Among other reasons, this was due to the radical separation imposed by the local artistic institution during the transition years on any production that explored the articulation between art and antagonistic politics, or at least that assumed some type of social responsibility as a discursive practice. This was a reflex effect of the global rejection of non-institutional political activity and the fear of political antagonism that took place here from the years of the «disillusionment»; in our context this kind of practise essentially occurred within a climate of radicalisation of anti-Franco opposition during the first half of the 1970s and in the early years of the transition. To mention one final aspect, whereas some heeded Benjamin Buchloh's call to interpret the procedures of appropriation and montage,

centrally important in artistic production from the 1960s, as «allegoric procedures», they inexcusably ignored one historiographic aspect: a critical recovery of overshadowed or stifled moments of modern art that broke with the idealist theory and the modernist canon by identifying with projects of radical social change (e.g. Heartfield's political photomontage, Soviet productivism)⁹; and it is here that our local criticism and historiography have been gravely negligent when it comes to encouraging a subsequent investigation into ways in which the echoes of such moments of our particular history (debates on questions of art, society and politics during the Second Republic, *cartelismo*, cinema and the theory of political cinema during the Spanish Civil War, etc.) might be reactivated in order to devise a political art practice with historical roots.

I am aware that this summary is simplified, ignoring as it does many details and nuances. For example, the fact that the local reception of American critical postmodernism occurred to a great extent at a time at which many of its utopian vectors or its politicised rough edges were polished down by its relatively hegemonic nature, the most successful proposals of the criticism of representation having been neutralized to a great extent in their time by the artistic institution; the ambiguous introduction of the «postmodernist paradigm» embodied in Dan Cameron's exhibition *Art and Its Double* in 1986 (*commodity* sculpture and feminist criticism of representation on the same plane); that it was precisely through the reductionist Anglo-American academic filter that many local critics adopted the very diverse European «posts» (post-structuralism, etc.); etc. Evidently, my summary also ignores some important details of a more contextualized cultural history of critical postmodernism, as well as nuances on the not insignificant sediment that were in some cases visible here¹⁰; and of course it barely touches on all the aspects worth considering with regard to

the complex historical period in this country before and after the death of General Franco, and the reflections it provoked in artistic and cultural spheres¹¹.

Despite all this, I believe I may conclude this short text in the same terms as I began it: what is needed at this time is a two-way criticism of idealism and hegemonic postmodernism, which —in their different ways— have been creating a dis-identification between artistic and cultural practice, and antagonist politics. We need to reintroduce a politicised perspective on the crisis of the subject, which consists not of pseudo-theoretical formalisms, but instead draws consequences from the very different ways in which the antagonistic practices have configured new political subjectivities following the cycle of 1968¹². Such a perspective must take into account the way the structural transformations effected by the new stage of capitalism favour the renewal of forms of organisation of emancipatory politics; overcoming the rift Nancy Fraser criticised between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution and, for example, bringing together policies of identity and a criticism of political economics (terms such as «class», «labour» and «production» have been practically a taboo in the language of local artistic criticism for at least two decades; for their part, some of today's left-wing criticisms of the «multiculturalist paradigm» visibly mistake the political perspective). Nor would we lose sight of the fact that it is precisely through culture and institutional politics affecting the sphere of art, that is, through the overlaps between culture, politics and economics, that many of the mutations of our time occur. Recognising this fact, with all its consequences, is, for all of us, a sort of inescapable social responsibility. These mutations, which in themselves constitute a complexitisation of the forms of sociability and of cooperation in life production, can be mined in an emancipatory sense; on the contrary they can be led towards heretofore inconceivable forms of overexploitation and

dominion. Art and culture cannot help being affected by the fact that it is in their space as social institutions that this conflict is being decisively waged. All of this means that we can position ourselves with critical force in a social area that constitutes a privileged crossroads if we really want to build a type of counter-hegemony that will help to promote the new cycle of struggles that appear to be illuminating the antagonistic movements of the present.

Notes and references

- 1 The original French edition of *The Postmodern Condition* was published in 1979; an English translation was published in 1984 by Manchester University Press.
- 2 In simplified terms: the ideal of a necessary quasi-linear economic and social progress through capitalism to be superseded by communism following the cathartic moment of revolutionary rift, a progress that would have to be guided by a political subject of change, the proletariat, destined to move history forward through the heightening of the principal antagonism, which places capital and labour in confrontation. **Nancy Fraser** reminds us that the paradigm for the construction of such an essentialist and mono-causal account is the Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness*, as well as other influential symptomatic attacks which are parallel —although not necessarily assimilable— to **Lyotard's**, by **Baudrillard** and **Fukuyama**.
- 3 Published, inter alia, in **Nicholson, L.** (ed.), *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge, 1989. A good summary of the problematic relations between postmodernism and feminism, oriented towards a reflection on the influence of this debate on the visual arts and the work of feminist women artists, can be found in **Carmen Navarrete**: «Mujeres y práctica artística: algunas notas sobre nuevas y viejas estrategias de representación y resistencia», in the catalogue of the exhibition *Futuro presente. Prácticas artísticas en el cambio de milenio*, Madrid: Sala de Exposiciones de la Comunidad de Madrid, 1999.
- 4 **Fraser, N.**, «False Antithesis. A Response to Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler» (1994), *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the «Postsocialist» Condition*, Routledge 1997 p. 209.
- 5 «If we accept nonetheless, at the largest philosophical level of the debate, that the political status of claims to universality is at stake, then the following question ought to be addressed: In whose interests is it, exactly, to declare the abandonment of universals? For it is here that we may face the ethical question of postmodernism, a question about its political “horizon” (or lack thereof)», states **Andrew Ross** in his introduction to the collection of texts edited by him: *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1989, p. xiv.
- 6 «Introducción al posmodernismo», in **Foster, H.** (ed.), *La posmodernidad* (1983), Barcelona: Kairós, 1985, p. 17.
- 7 On the side of the artistic practices that sought to develop a criticism of representations in explicitly political terms, against a backdrop of institutional criticism whose approach of course encompasses the modernist myths on which the artistic institution is built: «Considered in social terms, representation stands for the interests of power. Consciously or unconsciously, all institutionalized forms of representation certify corresponding institutions of power» (**Wallis**, «Introduction», in **Wallis, B.** (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p. xv).

- 8 «The Allegorical Impulse» was published in *October* in 1980, reprinted in *El arte después de la modernidad*, 1984; «El discurso de los otros...» which appeared in *La posmodernidad*, 1983. I use this example which illustrates the issue of local criticism to refer to two texts by **José Luis Brea** which have recently been raised to the status of manifestos of postmodern art, included inter alia by **Anna María Guasch** in her compilation *Los manifiestos del arte posmoderno. Textos de exposiciones, 1980- 1995*, Madrid: Akal, 2000.
- 9 **Buchloh, B.** «Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art», *Artforum* 21.1 [September 1982].
- 10 For a more precise approach to this history, see the detailed review (which indirectly depicts a critical itinerary of its own) in Juan Vicente Aliaga, «¿Disidencias? ¿Normalizaciones? Acerca del arte reciente en Estados Unidos», in **Picazo, G.** (ed.), *Sobre la crítica de arte y su toma de posición*, Barcelona: Macba, Llibres de recerca, 1996.
- 11 I have written some other modest pieces on this subject elsewhere; for example, in a dialogue with **Jorge Ribalta** which we entitled «Un epílogo sobre arte y Estado, democratización y subalternidad en el mundo administrado», in **Ribalta, J.** (ed.), *Servicio público. Conversaciones sobre financiación pública y arte contemporáneo*, Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, Unión de asociaciones de artistas visuales, 1998.
- 12 «In response to the recent and massive transformations of contemporary society, many authors (often grouped vaguely under the banner of postmodernism) have argued that we abandon theories of social subjects, recognising subjectivities in purely individualist terms, if at all! Such arguments, we believe, may have recognised a real transformation but have drawn from it a mistaken conclusion. [...] In this new critical and reflective space, then, a new theory of subjectivity has room to be expressed, and this new definition of subjectivity is also a great theoretical innovation in the design of communism. [...] Actually, grasping the real historical process is what liberates us from any illusion about “the disappearance of the subject”» (**Hardt, M.** and **Negri, A.**, *Labor of Dionysus: a Critique of the State-Form*, U of Minnesota Press, 1994.