

## **The Pedagogical (Re)Turn in Contemporary Art El Retorno Pedagógica en el Arte Contemporáneo**

They must be trying to find something.

Thai farmers responding to Millet's *The Gleaners*,  
from Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *The Two Planets*  
series (2008)

In her series *Two Planets* (2008) the artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook presented small groups of Thai villagers with images from the history of European modernist painting (Millet's *The Gleaners*, Van Gogh's *The Midday Sleep*, etc.) and recorded their responses. Their reactions are both speculative and pragmatic, drawing on their own experiences of labor and perceived commonalities with the subjects of the paintings. This unusual encounter complicates the circuit of identification typical in modern art, in which the bourgeois artist claims to speak from a position of empathy with a class Other (peasant, proletarian, revolutionary), evoking their lived experience in images intended to shock, shame or discomfit other members of the bourgeoisie. In some cases (Millet or Van Gogh) this class ventriloquism takes the form of an aesthetic tribute in which the poor are portrayed as exemplars of a nobility, fortitude or innocence that is singularly lacking among the bourgeoisie. And in others their exhausted or coerced bodies are presented as a calculated affront, intended to force viewers into awareness of their own class privilege, in a tradition that extends from Courbet to Santiago Sierra.

A significant strand in the history of modern art involves this rhetorical mode of address, in which the artist speaks both to a hypothetical bourgeois

viewer, and past them to the knowing critic. The result is a set of normative assumptions shared by artists and critics in which actual viewers, in their concrete particularity and diversity, seldom figure. Rasdjarmrearnsook's *Two Planets* series complicate this line of transmission. In many ways her work can function as an emblem for the broader orientation of the MDE11. What does it mean to treat those who have so often served as the object of the artist's romanticizing, and instrumentalizing, gaze as subjects in their own right? This question provides one point of entry into Joseph Beuys' famous 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf. Beuys, his head covered in honey and gold leaf, carries a dead rabbit through the gallery, pausing before each painting to engage in a whispered dialog over the work at hand. The subject of the artistic gaze is both honored and destroyed in a single gesture. The peasant is reduced to a one-dimensional icon of perseverance, the working class to a caricature of revolutionary purity, and the viewer to a hapless philistine.

This reifying effect is symptomatic of a displacement that originates in the late nineteenth century rapprochement between artistic practices concerned with the transgression of specific aesthetic norms and vanguard political formations that sought to attack and overthrow the institutions of bourgeois power. The rapprochement produced a decisive shift in which the frustrated militance of the street protest was transposed to a symbolic aggression enacted against the viewer, who stands simultaneously for the forces of rationalist reaction and their benumbed victims, in need of both a punishing attack and a cathartic awakening.

The result was a form of artistic practice in which provocation itself is assigned a pedagogical role, and an increasingly standardized implied viewer (the bourgeois who refuses to see the suffering in which he is complicit), whose static identity is the necessary concomitant of this same pedagogical function.

As I argued in my presentation at MDE11, while the concept of a “pedagogical turn” can be useful in accounting for the recent proliferation of academic and quasi-academic activities in contemporary art (reading groups, “alternative” schools, self-taught classes, etc.) it should not prevent us from recognizing the underlying continuity of a pedagogical impulse within modernism. The locus classicus of this impulse is, of course, Friedrich Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education*, which remains a key text for many artists and theorists today. For Schiller the work of art trains us for social interactions that we aren’t yet prepared for in real life, due to humanity’s flawed and imperfect nature. Actual social or political change is deferred to an indefinite and idealized future, when the process of aesthetic education will finally complete its civilizing mission. Thus we have Schiller’s fearful reaction to the excesses of the French Revolution, as he warns his readers of the dangers posed by a new public freed from the bonds of absolutist tyranny.

Nature in her physical creation points the way we have to take in the moral. Not until the strife of elemental forces in the lower organisms has been assuaged does she turn to the nobler creation of physical man. In the same way, the strife of elements in moral man, the conflict of blind impulses, has first to be appeased, and crude antagonisms first have ceased within him, before we can take the risk of promoting diversity.<sup>1</sup>

It’s not simply the belief that artistic experience is in some essential ways distinct

from political experience, but the more extreme proposition that any form of political action (“promoting diversity” rather than domination) is premature until humanity allows itself to be guided by aesthetic principles. This same argument, that human consciousness must be reformed before action in the world can be proceed, is reiterated by the influential French curator Nicholas Bourriaud over two centuries later.

Nothing is possible without a far-reaching ecological transformation of subjectivities, without an awareness of the various forms of founding interdependence of subjectivity.<sup>2</sup>

The prematurity of change is linked with a second condition specific to contemporary art, which we might describe as the “textuality” of the artwork. A textual paradigm of artistic production emerges out of the intermingling of post-conceptual art practice and continental theory during the 1980s. Semiotics allowed for the initial consolidation of a textual paradigm, as a body of theory designed to reveal the contingency of *linguistic* meaning was transposed into discussions of visual art. This was a decisive shift, leading to the concept of the work of art as a subversive text that would denaturalize photographic truth and thereby trigger a cascading series of insights into the contingency of all forms of coherent meaning. By the 1990s this model had become largely naturalized, and formed the implicit ground of a much broader range of artistic production from installation and sculpture to various performance-based practices. Here the work of art functions as a hermeneutic device intended to destabilize fixed oppositions via some form of embodied conceptual provocation. Importantly, the work,

whether it's a painting, installation or event, is conceived by the artist beforehand and subsequently set in place before the viewer.

We can observe the interdependence of the textual and the pedagogical in the recent work of French theorist Jacques Ranciere. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a book widely read in the contemporary art world, Ranciere contrasts conventional pedagogical models (in which the world is divided “into the intelligent and the stupid”) with the work of the early nineteenth century French educational theorist Joseph Jacotot.<sup>3</sup> Jacotot will replace the “stultification” produced by traditional educational methods (in which the instructor seeks to replicate a pre-existing knowledge in the mind of the student), with “emancipation,” in which students create their own knowledge in response to their own needs. The ideal schoolmaster is “ignorant,” a kind of medium who disavows his pedagogical authority and serves merely to liberate a capacity for learning already latent, but unrealized, in each individual. The teacher doesn't impart a quantifiable “knowledge,” but awakens instead a kind of self-esteem in the downtrodden.

The problem is not to create scholars. It is to raise up those that believe themselves inferior in intelligence, to make them leave the swamp where they are stagnating—not the swamp of ignorance, but the swamp of self-contempt, of contempt in and of itself for the reasonable creature.<sup>4</sup>

If Ranciere is eager to do away with the hierarchical distinction between teacher and student he is less prepared to sacrifice a spatialized concept of authority *per se*. Whether in the form of catalyst or content, agency must always

be located somewhere else. Thus, the teacher is displaced by the book. The book allows each student the freedom to produce his or her own autonomous meaning via a process of creative “translation” (“It is the power to translate in their own way what they are looking at”). Rather than conveying a pre-existing and fixed meaning, like the teacher, the meaning of the book is intrinsically fluid and available. Ranciere discovers in Jacotot a precedent for Roland Barthes’ writerly text a century and a half later.

Oral instruction, via the embodied teacher, is only ever authoritarian and logocentric. The book, the text, on the other hand, is more, rather than less, dialogical and reciprocal than another human being. The text, the “mediating third” that both links and bifurcates author and reader, viewer and work, self and other, is necessary to guard against the objectification and instrumentalization that are the inevitable consequence of any attempt to achieve a more direct relationship to others (one mediated by spoken, rather than written language). Like the work of art, the book is a prosthetic device that simultaneously frees the reader to construct her own “translation,” insulates her from the violence of the authoritarian teacher, and reminds her of the contingency of all meaning. Authority as such, as I already noted, is not challenged but displaced. And in each case (whether that of the stultifying master or the emancipatory book) the world remains divided into those who compose texts and those who consume them, those who fabricate spectacles and those who view them.

Ranciere retains key elements of Schiller’s “aesthetic education,” as the bringing-to-consciousness of the un-enlightened by an advanced cadre of artists

and poets. He naturalizes a compositional system in which the artist guides the viewer, through the fabrication of exemplary texts. The textual paradigm advocated by Ranciere is defined by a spatial concept of agency in which compositional and receptive roles are fixed. Artistic production in this mode is both teleological (resolved in the creation of a final, formally-delimited object, text or event) and mimetic (the work of art functions as the physical manifestation of an idea first developed in the artists imagination). Ranciere thus forecloses the possibility that reflective mediation might occur through less proprietary forms of compositional agency. That is, rather than viewing (creative, pedagogical) agency as the unique property of specific individuals, seeing it instead as fluid and transpositional over the course of a given compositional process.

Rather than a “pedagogical turn,” we might think instead of two pedagogical paradigms active in contemporary art. We are familiar enough with the first, sanctioned as it is by decades of critical and theoretical validation and institutional support. The second paradigm is emergent, dispersed, but increasingly evident in the practice of younger artists. It is this second paradigm that leads us back to MDE11, where a range of projects have unfolded through residencies, collaborations and public platforms, from the Centro de Desarrollo Cultural de Moravia to the classrooms of Medellin, and from artist-run spaces like Taller 7 and Casa Tres Patios, to the rooftops of the favellas that surround the city. We encounter here, imbedded in the fabric of the city, projects by Bijari, Transductores, Slanguage, Tranvía Cero, Frente 3 de Fevereiro, Estacio Tijuana, and many others. In MDE11 collaboration points in two directions, both to the

micro-politics of encounters at the local and situational level, across institutional, social and geographic boundaries, and to the inevitable complicity between cultural institutions in the city and a power structure that carries with it the burden of a violent and destructive past. The present moment in the city is both vibrant and fragile, as the city's residents are poised between Pablo's ghost and the spectre of Bilbao, and between the divisive forces of incipient gentrification and the promise of something both beautiful and entirely unexpected.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, edited and translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Oxford University Press/The Clarendon Press, 1987), p.45.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002),

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated by Kristin Ross (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press), p.6-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.101-102.