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You are here

Suhail Malik

Some truisms to begin: ever since conceptual art's radicalisation of Duchamp's 'undefining' of art, no-one, famously, knows what art is. This necessary ignorance is more usually put as an affirmation that art can be anything at all, limitless, an avowal of the unexpected, and so on. This is a truism because it is the unquestionable primary condition for contemporary art (the term being used to describe a genre rather than an art that addresses its present, a distinction to which we return later). As such, it generates the second, infrequently and certainly less openly avowed, truism of contemporary art: that no-one knows, no-one can know, what is 'good' art and what is not or why. If there is no definition of what art can be then there is no 'itself' of art and art cannot provide any basis by which it be judged or its value determined. No basis, that is, apart from the testimony it is said to pay to the avowals of the unexpected or the new or the underived, of difference or transformation or singularity, or the X that is the alias for the assertion of contemporary art's undefining. And since that cannot be known, the only basis for its judgments and the values given to it, values that the art in fact subtends, are those of the concerns of its circulation at any point in time. So you may know it when you see it – because one or another institution tells you it is art, because it's advertised or declared as such, because you have the experience to call it, and so on - but against art's horizon of indefinition such (pre-)recognitions are limitations on what it can be because they rely upon conventions of what art is, be it through authority, history, education, enthusiasm, or just a generally acknowledged assertion. Which is only the operation of a social field, a set of interests that avow themselves and those who hold them, attributed in the determination of the art to some quasi-objective activity or thing. On this basis, in the initial formulations of the current project, contemporary art itself is an 'unknown known'. The sheer contingency of what contemporary art 'itself' may be is constrained and stabilised by a set of interests that the art stands for. These social valuations are however themselves no less contingent since they are only the instantiation of a set of interests circulating at any given moment, shaped entirely by the fortunes of their own formation. Though the contingency of art's indefinition is distinct from the contingency of social fact, art's contingency in principle requires its over-determination by the social contingencies of its valuations, which is its primary and only determination, how it is preserved as art. Contingency against contingency, contingency in the service of contingency: art is its (e)valuation, a demand for interests to find sense for its indefinition - not least the sense that it is in fact art. In principle, this is for sure a wildly democratic adventure – everyone has interests. Yet it is at once the invitation to demonstrate power, and is in fact always and only a manifestation of power. Specifically, it is the operation of a conventionalism. If only for the banal and self-evident reason that at a given moment some 'interests' are themselves more valuable than others, more prominent than others, more favoured by institutions with prestige and wealth (symbolic as well as financial), more likely to have a reputation that matters in the

current circulation of interests. The truism that art operates as a reputational economy is a politely theoretical way of phrasing the less comfortable fact that today the indefinability of contemporary art serves conventions of power. There is no single guise for this assertion of power. It is manifest according to the contingent demands of whoever's interests need to be met at that given moment, although such demands can never be openly declared since it is also a truism that an interest in contemporary art avows values that do not correspond to the establishment of social power but, precisely, to a counter-conventionalism that affects an ethics of democratisation - asserting equalities, tolerance, personal and collective liberation, and other similar ideological commitments of what is more likely a soft liberalism. Caught between these two demands, power acts and disguises itself through choice terms such as 'quality' (in the commercial sector), 'exchange' (in the left-political activist sector), openness, criticality, experience, beauty, potentiality, education, difference, dialogue, singularity, commitment (mostly due to the anodyne cause of 'making you think'), various kinds of pathos and solidarity, and so on. These are importantly neutral terms, not giving too much away and abstract enough for the purported 'anyone' of contemporary art's democratic wish to be accommodated, but also not so specific that the particularity of those whose interests in fact dominate the valuation of art can be exposed and positioned as the power it is. It's easy enough to discover and criticise such operations when they are commercially organised because there the effects of power are commercially organized because they are there directly shaped by wealth exposed as price (although such exposure is carefully prevented in the primary market). It's somewhat harder to do so with regard to public or activist-oriented contemporary art because the interests prevailing there have the critique of power as their putative content. But this does not mean that the power of those who espouse such content is any less enforced, nor is it less formidable. It is only more reproachful than the imposition of power through wealth because it can always place the condemnation of the class distinction and exploitation that wealth implies at the centre of its avowed concerns. Worse than that, it can legitimise/deny its own conventionalism through recourse to the (increasingly stagnant) givens of theoretical critique, whose main effort is to wend a way past the constraints of convention. The self-conscious, non-mastery of critique is itself a masterful way of gaining power while declaring itself to be anything but power. As wealth or critique, contemporary art invites a democracy in principle but in fact serves the conventions of power all too well. Such power is a social fact channeled through contemporary art on the precondition of its contingency, so it is to be expected that the operation of such conventionalism shapes contemporary art's social organisation. Such art is ostensibly open to all. Yet it is another truism is that to get anywhere one must cozy up to certain players who can serve you well according to the kind of art you are interested in (no matter what aspect you are involved in - making, curating, distributing, discoursing, exhibiting, purchasing, etc). Without the establishment of mutual self-recognition - a consolidation of power interests - one gets nowhere in terms of finance, reputation or career (not that such prosaic topics should ever raise their ungainly heads in the 'proper' discussion of art as concerning quality or critical

value, which expulsion is itself an index of power *qua* convention of what matters about contemporary art). What you are wholly obliged to observe is a keen reflexive interest in who you know, when you know them and to what degree of intimacy, and that in turn is nothing more than the formation of a social milieu coordinated by power. Faced with this, let us take seriously for a moment the identification of the unknown knowns of any system with the unconscious. What results from positing that a non-psychic system has its own unconscious? Since Freud, we know that the unconscious generates fantasies that regulate the conscious – the known – operation of the system in question. What then are the fantasies of contemporary art, our fantasies? Those that allow the disavowal or foreclosure of the recognition of the arbitrariness of power, even its condemnation, while taking full advantage of it. It is the fantasy of a populism. The *socius* of contemporary art adopts this populism in its general antagonism to the exclusionary mechanisms of formalised institutional structures, replacing them with the informality of transformational networks, scenes, worlds and milieus which are putatively open to all comers who get art's contingency-in-principle. The informality of contemporary art's social mechanisms, of how the power that determines what is of value and what that value in fact is at any given moment, allows anyone who might be held to have power to quickly deny or refuse any such status. This is especially important in the left-critical milieu where avowals of power as such are immediately suspect. It allows for grand abuses between the powerful and the relatively powerless without recourse to any institution other than law (when art's mutually-enforcing reputational network swings into concerted action); it allows for imperious displays of power without responsibility, recourse or sanction; it forces a system of social relations that is at once very close to, and completely different from, the one Hannah Arendt describes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The difference is clear: of course there is no leader, no Hitler or Stalin, around whom the network turns and whose every arbitrary wish has to be met or pre-empted in the desire to serve, at the cost of expulsion or worse. In its undefining, contemporary art and its *socius* are necessarily plural. The similarity is not in the structure in the social field but in its informal organisation: because there is no centre or recognised structure of power, because anyone and everyone can or could have power at some point if they do not already have so, contemporary art's anti-power fantasy (which finds succor in its condition of contingency-in-principle) leads to there being only supplication to whatever or whoever is assumed to be 'relevant' (which is to say: having an assumed influence), so that one is always attuned and in service of another's wishes, known or anticipated, which may be more or less arbitrary, and which may turn at a moment's notice. This is a definition in other terms of a conventionalism, be it one that is shaped through anxieties of doing the wrong thing (and who knows what that might be? - that it could be anything is the point) and permanently subject to a capricious turn of favour by the more powerful. Such is the condition of contemporary art, the primary valuation that must take place if its contingency is to be rendered non-arbitrary. Contemporary art is contemporary because it addresses its time by anticipating the informally regulated conventions of its milieu. It is in this sense an open-ended genre. And it is then an eminently political field because

art *in any case* assumes and returns to power, and power is classically the preserve of politics. *In any case*: that is, irrespective of the ostensible content and claims of the art. Faced with the arbitrariness of power that is contemporary art's condition, the temptation might be to return to the art itself to secure one's interests and, in the case of the artist, one's own terms and values. But turning to the art 'itself' is to deny the insecurity of its contingency and so it becomes your self-banishment from what contemporary art is as much as from the consequently power-laden determinations of value required for it to persevere at all. If you do have an interest in art at all, of doing something in and with it, then you had better busy yourself with those more powerful than you, however that power is determined and however much power you may already have, since those who are more powerful set the terms of what matters in art and, exposed by and to the contingency of its own value, why.