

On Belief

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To a theorist, the choice of words can and must be critical. What do we mean when we talk about Belief in relations to Art? As the two words 'Belief' and 'Art' are put together there is a basic assumption that we find one in the other. But is this assumption false?

First let us ask how we formulate the word "belief." We say "I believe in" or "I believe that," such that the subject is always the "I." When I believe, I take over the referent. I internalize it. I acknowledge the referent. Its responsibility is not held by anyone else. There is no Other.

As an act of acknowledgment, belief does not demand acceptance. I can believe in something without having faith in it. Since my belief is always reflected back to the "I" it can not extend outward. It never leaves the self. I may acknowledge what I address with belief, but I keep it at a distance. I do not go towards it. I do not enter into a relationship with it. As long I keep distance from the Other I have taken no risk. I use belief as the separator a distancing tool. I treat the Other as an object, without life or any significant meaning. I treat it as semiology, something to read, digest its meaning and possibly put in to action later. A sign that can be put up to keep people away, while defining myself to them for ease of use. In this way belief becomes like a badge used to identify me. Who am I? Well I believe in this, I believe in that. Therefore this is who I am.

In contrast there is "Faith." Faith is always given over to an Other: "I have faith in you." Faith is the passing or handing over of the referent into another's hands. It is not an abdication, on the contrary it is an accepting of the Other in oneself. It is a process of *becoming*. In this sense of integration it is a magical process.

If we look at Vilém Flusser's formulation on the three stages of the image, we can start to understand how this integrates. He starts with the traditional image, an image *untainted* by the text. It is self-contained and self-referential. It is its own reality. This makes the relationship of the image to itself magical, as it is separate but parallel to our own. This quality also demands the same relationship with the viewer. You absorb the image in a way that takes on the Otherness of the image. You are the Other to it as it is to you. In this way you complete the image. This is not an uncritical process, rather it is one in which the space between you and the image becomes a unity. The gap is filled.

We can only enter into this relationship with the image because of our relationship with its Otherness. Saying that it is Other means much more than saying it is not us. It means that we enter into a relationship with it. It becomes an entity. It exists, and because it exists we must deal with it on a moral and ethical level. It can not exist without us, as its very meaning is dependent on our being there as viewer. It is not complete without us. Martin Buber says "I" can not exist without "YOU." We are locked into an ethical relationship between the two. If we use the basic nature of the relationship as a method to solely self-affirm then we negate the entire situation. We deny the very existence of the Other.

Just as Thomas, in Maurice Blanchot's *Aminadab*, chooses to answer the beckoning gesture of the woman in the window,¹ we have to make the choice of entering the work and becoming part of that reality. We can lose ourselves in the image. But we can

¹ Blanchot, Maurice, *Aminadab*. University of Nebraska Press.

only enter into the image if we relate to it as an Other. It may try to speak to us, but we have to be able to receive its message. If we stand alienated from this in any way the relationship can not happen. Personally, this is a call that I can never answer with Medieval religious painting. In terms of my cultural learning I can understand the images as part of Western Art history. I can know their significance to art history, but for other reasons I can not enter into a relationship with the images. Such a relationship would entail having faith in the image. Not a simple religious faith demanding this, but a true giving over to the image, demanding that I touch it and it touch me. A dialogue must ensue. Belief lets me explain it, understand its place in history, unpack its meanings, but in the end all I am doing is demonstrating my own knowledge. I need not even confront the original work. A reproduction will do fine. Probably better, since I am treating the work at a great distance anyway. But when confronted with a work that I give myself over to there is an experience, an event. The relationship changes me. I am not the same person that I was before. The memories that I carry after the event will stay with me and I will understand them later, away from the event.

Coming back to Flusser, the solution to this problem was the text. The text gives us an image that is separated from the physical. This separation is the birth of the concept as opposed to the dialogue, it is the *cogito*. The textural image becomes the 'body without organs'. As Gilles Deleuze says, "all the dualisms of Descartes, even passion and action, depend strictly on this operation of the cogito, which consists of relating statements to a subject of enunciation, which will consequently split the subject in two: the subject of the statement, and the subject of enunciation."² This is where belief resides. This dialectical separation takes us out of the world. It denies the ability to experience the faith in the Other that the work of art is about. It demands a dematerialization of the work. It must

² Deleuze, Gilles, *Dualism, Monism and Multiplicities (Desire-Pleasure-Jouissance)*, Daniel W. Smith, translator. *Contretemps* 2 May, 2001.

stand for something. It has to present itself in a semiological fashion. We see it as a system of signs, which I am clever enough to understand. Again going back to its function as an object demonstrating my own cleverness ("Look at how well cultured I am! I get this!"). Since culture is good and I am cultured therefore I am good -- or at least better than you.

This separation leaves no room for experiencing the thing itself. As the work gets separated from its "message" it is separated from its very physicality. It is not allowed to exist in time and space. It is just a stand in for a concept. It is denied its ability to be an Event. The pure present of it as an Event must be deferred at all costs. This demands that the viewer enter into a relationship with the work. The viewer would have to give him/herself over to the work. A true act of Faith, bring oneself to the Other. It demands vulnerability. A letting go must happen, while Belief just demands an acknowledgment of the work, a meaningless nod of the head. It is safer, and much less scary. Though it is also a refusal to enter into life.

The logic of the cogito is the logic of belief. In both cases it is the subject of the enunciation that is important. This is why the subject is always reflexive when it believes. The "I" of "I believe in..." is the subject of the act. What is believed is of no importance. With this dualism the subject of the statement gets separated from the subject of enunciation. The relation to Otherness gets suppressed. The Other becomes that which is not "I", that which is no longer part of the self that unifies one to the world. Belief becomes easy. It functions more as self affirmation.

The relationship of the two subjects in belief becomes fractured. It does not matter what the belief is in, just that there is a belief. Emmanuel Levinas defines our relationship with the Other as one of debt³. The Other is larger than us. We owe the Other a debt larger

³ Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis, Translator. Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 1969.

than we can ever repay. To use the cogito as a way of bypassing our debt to the Other is at best a moral betrayal of reality. It creates a world that is self-centered, one where the "I" is all that remains. This is a fantasy, a construction that is not based on any form of possible actuality, just a self-referential world found only in the mind.

At this point the demand is for art to have a meaning, a thought, a subject, yet in the end what that meaning becomes is meaningless. Art's existence means that it must be treated like a living being, which is to say in a relationship of "You and I." It is only when we use art as a reflection to see ourselves, and not as a voice that can reflect on us by the very fact that it is not us, that the relationship breaks down. Everything becomes a form of self congratulation. Art becomes an artifact there to show the world what good taste we have. What it is and what it has to say is rejected. The thingness of its existence is all that matters. It becomes a mirror or a proclamation of the wonder that is me (e.g. "I have good taste therefore I am special").⁴ As an entity in the work, it naturally seeks to enter into relationship with its Other. Art's Other is the Real, namely those who create and view it. It does not exist unless it enters into relation with the Other. It was Marcel Duchamp who said that an art work is not complete until it is shown.

This is where the sublime enters. We create the sublime out of this dual conflict. It is the desire for meaning that we put into the work of art through the *concept* that we find lacking. It is the pain of this lack, our inability to enter into the work, which then becomes the basis of the aesthetic experience. The supreme point of the aesthetic experience is the sublime. In *the Critique of Judgment* Immanuel Kant says that the sublime must have an element of pain within it . It goes back to the tension in seeming to be able to experience the Other through the work of art, yet in the end knowing that the subject of the experience will always remain one's own enunciation. In this way belief makes itself central to art by

⁴ This is why can the Western democracies embraced Soviet Constructivism when ironically its ideology advocated the very overthrow of Western democracy.

re-instituting the enunciation, the subject of the sublime. Art becomes the place of the becoming of the subject.

As the desire-tension-release process of the sublime becomes more and more central to art, art is forced to be less material. Again we are back to the Deleuzian body without organs. Art demands to be treated as the Real yet it retreats from the physicality of the world. This withdrawal leaves no room for Faith. Instead it opens the gap between the work and the viewer to belief. As belief has the appearance of completing the process of drawing this gap shut, while in reality it is filling this gap with the subject. In this way the work becomes a self congratulatory celebration of the viewer as subject. The conceptualism of the work tends toward being the cleverness of an inside joke. It is as if Descartes' "I think therefore, I am," is replaced by "I get it, therefore I'm smart." It still is based on the dualist split of the subject and the enunciation of the subject.

The function of the sublime is that of the Event, "It is a feeling of 'there' (Voilà). There is nothing to 'consume'"⁵. To self affirm is to avoid the 'there'. If the work becomes something just to prove your own intelligence then the 'I get it' becomes paramount. This is not a moment of recognizing a 'here'. It is the act of processing from the image a moment of the future. "Thought works over what is received, it seeks to reflect on it and overcome it."⁶ Or to put it simply, it is an avoidance of the Event. It is taking that which is a here and turning it into something for consumption, back into the economic order where things are safer and easier.

The main conflict is therefore a question of who the subject of the enunciation is. As the work becomes more and more a concept, a body without organs, the conflict is between the artist and the viewer for the right to claim the subject-hood of its enunciation. We find this conflict often in the work of the conceptualists and the new generation of

⁵ Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Polity Press Cambridge, UK, p80.

⁶ *Ibid*, p90

computer code artists. Here we find the image fading away. It either becomes interchangeable, as part of a database, solely described, as in the primacy of the descriptive plaque, or a voiced over time-based work. Even under the claim of fine art the image is relegated to the status of illustration. In this way the work has not changed from the images found in medieval illuminated manuscripts. Images created in service to a written text. The work enters into pure semiology, it only exists as sign. It is not allowed to have any true presence. The beauty of the code is talked about, the quality of the idea is discussed. The work is denied the right to be physical, to have an actual presence. It is judged by how well it holds up to the concept. It is not allowed to embody the concept, to possess it and transform it by its physicality.

Here is where mechanical reproduction enters the game, and what Flusser calls a “technical image.”⁷ As we know, when the hand is taken out of the image there is a technological veritas replacing it. This is of course summed up in the cliché, “seeing is believing,” because here we are appearing to be dealing with objective truth, yet the image is still about the fact that I am seeing and therefore believing. Instead of proving an objective reality, it is re-enforcing the cogito. It is still focused on the subjective enunciation: I am seeing, I am believing. And if I can put myself into the image, I am seeing myself, therefore I have proof that I am.

This substitution of a slice of the real for the complete real of the traditional image not only places the subjective enunciation into the image, but also replaces the Other with this enunciation. The question of the relation of the image to the real and the responsibility it puts on the viewer in relation to Otherness is completely short-circuited. The technical image still has to be conceptual, and yet it appears to be the same as a traditional image. It is neither one nor the other, but an image in search of an identity which tends to

⁷ Flusser, Vilem, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*.

aestheticize the real and make the process of belief more appealing. Within this process all functions of the technical image get equalized. The technical image is used as proof of the existence of objective reality. It is also an aesthetic image, as the proof and the aesthetic become interchangeable. The news image and the scientific image can thus be seen as fine art images, as they all are based on a belief in the World. Yet none of them demand the relationship of the Other from the viewer that the traditional image had. Belief still trumps Faith because these images are still based on this subjective split, and because the enunciation of the subject is central, which distances the viewer from the image. When this happens, with images that we take as slices of the Real, powerlessness occurs. This powerlessness or lack brings back the formulation of the sublime -- lack leading to a tension -- which causes a pain that the sublime releases. In this way we feel as if this image is actually doing the opposite of what it is doing. We try to experience this action as if it was an Event, a reality unto itself. The Event, like Faith, demands the active presence of the viewer's Otherness, and an active connection of yourself to the work and the work to you. But in the end this tension causes pain when we realize that that we are not experiencing an Event. Such an experience would be a unity, not a splitting. We could not have the enunciation so central to belief in such a case.

So where does this leave the image? It continues to transform texts instead of bringing us to the World. As all technical images become equalized, the work becomes a Readymade, an object that only has meaning as art because it has been chosen to be such. As Baudrillard says in *The Conspiracy of Art*, as we aestheticize everything through the Readymade, art becomes null.⁸ What was once art becomes just another part of the economic order. Aesthetics follows value, just as form follows function, with no room left for art to function. This Duchampian gesture bestows the honour of the label of art and the

⁸Baudrillard, Jean, *The Conspiracy of Art*

attention that goes with it on everyday objects. Whereas Duchamp saw this as the act of the artist and an attack on reality, he also saw it as an attack on Art itself, a question of art's meaning and function. The point of such a work as Fountain (the inverted urinal) was that something that was not Art was being inserted into Art, making us question what was Art and its function. It was a provocation, an intervention. As such it was truly an Event. In its wake we have seen many artists who have turned this into a trope. They have taken what was an Event (an act of calling into question the very Faith that Art possesses) and brought it back over to Belief, eviscerating it of all that it originally had. This makes objectness important, while at the same time denying the living physicality of the work as a whole. The artist reverses a critique of Art and turns it into a new form of the dialectic of the curator and the collector. As the work becomes null, its only function is to reflect back on the people who use it. It becomes a physical embodiment of the belief-cogito. Its value is not that of the accursed share⁹, but purely economic. It only exists as an object of status. In the case of the professional freelance curator, it justifies their concepts and business transactions. While in the case of the collector it symbolizes their good taste and high-mindedness.

For the new class of freelance curator, the nullity of the work is most important because they get to be the ones who define how and what we see in the work. The ever growing Biennale circuit is a good example of this trend, wherein the curator is the true star, creating a theme and finding works that fit this theme. It is no longer their job to try to show us where the world of art is at any given moment. The work must be neutralised by being subservient to the concept of the curator. The show will have a theme, a sign to submit all the work to. This is main job of the curator. S/he is judged by how works fit into this concept. Success is measured by the number of star artists that are showing and the

⁹ Bataille, Georges, *The Accursed Share Volume I: An Essay on the General Economy*. Zone Books, New York 1995

quality of the work in relation to the theme. As is true with all freelancers, the curator is only as good as their last job. The importance of exhibition as a career move means that the works of art found in any given show reflect the curator more than the artists. This is a very specific implementation of the function of the belief-cogito. Going beyond the “I get it therefore I am smart” function it evolves into “I am smart therefore I get to define it”. This function turns the art and artists into employees of the curator. It only can happen because the nullity of art leaves room for the self reflection of belief. There is no room left for the expansive nature of faith in art. The place and function of Art is not to give over to an Other. The Other has systematically been excluded from this equation, having become just another feel good tonic to make us think that we are superior because we “get it.”