

Mimetic Strategies in Contemporary Art

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Speaking in confidence, for I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe --but I do not mind saying to you, that all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them.

Socrates, in Plato's *The Republic*¹

As with many other issues that have plagued and delighted thinkers for millennia, Plato established the dialogue on imitation with provocative statements from the ever-gregarious Socrates. Plato uses the character, Socrates, to lay out an argument against art, specifically poetry, based on claims that imitation has the capacity to disturb the fundamental ontological beliefs that help to organize society.² Socrates concludes that, if poetry and art cannot be banished from the Republic entirely, it should be employed by the state to reinforce its own ideology.

History is replete with examples of artworks that serve to reinforce dominant ideologies: Soviet propaganda, WPA murals, and nearly every work of art and architecture funded by the church. However, if we do not simply take Plato at face value, this section of the Republic can also be seen as guide for artists, who have a diabolical impulse or a desire to improve their world. Mimetic works of art can never serve as a simple and objective mirror of the real. Rather,

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Jowett, Benjamin (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html>).

² *ibid.* Book X.

each work is, on some level, a proposition to be accepted or rejected by the viewer. Mimetic works, depending on their social and philosophical context, do have the capacity to confound the viewers understanding of the real, thereby creating opportunities to posit new ideologies. From religious effigies to Duchamp's fountain, the subversive use of mimesis also has a rich history.

In order to better understand the ways in which mimetic strategies are employed, let us look at some contemporary and its social and philosophical context. Andrea Fraser is known as a principle artist engaged in "institutional critique," as well an articulate author on how art can perform critique. Her reply to the question "what makes a work of art 'political'?" explains the performative aspect that she expects a critical work to exercise:

That's a difficult question. One answer is that all art is political, the problem is that most of it is reactionary, that is, passively affirmative of the relations of power in which it is produced. This includes most symbolically transgressive art, which is perfectly suited to express and legitimize the freedom afforded by social and economic power: freedom from need, constraint, inhibition, rule, even law. But if all art is political, how do we define political art? I would define political art as art that consciously sets out to intervene in (and not just reflect on) relations of power, and this necessarily means on relations of power in which it exists. And there's one more condition: This intervention must be the organizing principle of the work in all its aspects, not only its "form" and its "content" but also its mode of production and circulation. This kind of intervention can be attempted either self-reflectively, within the field of art, or through an effective insertion into another field. However, I'm rather pessimistic about the latter approach, except in cases of cultural activism based in collective movements. Most other artistic "excursions" into the so-called "real-world" end up reducing that world to signifiers to be appropriated as a form of capital within art discourse.³

³ Bordowitz, Gregg, "Tactics inside and out: Gregg Bordowitz on Critical Art Ensemble" *ArtForum*, (Sept, 2004). (http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_1_43/ai_n7069052/pg_2)

These criteria are no small challenge. However, we can see that Fraser adopts this approach in her own work. In *Damaged Goods Gallery Talk Starts Here*, a performance at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, Fraser adopts the role of museum docent Jane Castleton to parody the "desire of the museum." She leads visitors through the museum, providing a gallery talk on the main exhibition. At one point in the tour she stops and says to her audience:

Move in closer- this is a small work and I want you all to be able to see it. The consideration of material support in this work, with its brilliant appeal to the contextual function of the image undermines, uh, really undermines the art work's traditional claim to autonomy, to transcendent meaning or truth. This particular image - as those of you familiar with so-called international symbols may already know - is supposed to represent a woman.... In this sense it can be situated in a tradition that stretches from the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf to the paintings of Willem de Kooning. (When asked how he felt about women, de Kooning said, uh, "I like women but they irritate me, they bother me." There we have it: " I like women but they irritate me.")...⁴

All of this speech is given about the sign on the women's restroom in the gallery. This work uses *parody*, the typical form of imitation in the *political* structure. Parody, when it performs covertly, holds the capacity to rupture assumptions that the viewer may hold. This approach parallels the strategies in Russian avant-garde cinema where the illusionistic narrative passively accepted by the viewer as real is ruptured by abrupt editing or other methods. If the viewer does not recognize the parody as imitation, he may accept what is presented to him by the artist. In the course of the work, the viewer may realize, perhaps due to exaggerations that approach ridiculous or to the arrival at an uncomfortable

⁴Fraser, Andrea, *Andrea Fraser: Works 1984-2003*, ed. Dziewior, Yilmaz (Dumont 2004).

conclusion, that he has been fooled by the parody. In this case, the viewer will typically attempt to distance himself from the assumptions that have been ridiculed in this process and, most likely, embrace the alternative belief made present by the artist. In this process the viewer does not necessarily ever consciously evaluate any of his beliefs. He merely substitutes one for the other. The effect is more one of propaganda than liberation, but is effective politically, nonetheless.

If the parody is overt from the beginning, then it simply serves to reinforce the beliefs that the artist and viewer share. If one encounters *Damaged Goods Gallery Talk Starts Here* outside of its performance (in Fraser's monograph for instance) the work seems to play out in this manner. Furthermore, once known for this type of work, the possibility for covert operations become more difficult for Fraser. In this scenario, works like *Damaged Goods Gallery Talk Starts Here* cease to exercise any real critique. They may still be seen as valuable contributions in terms of Fredric Jameson's "cognitive mapping."⁵ However, if these works use the forms of critical art, but fail to provide any critique, they may slip into *cynical mockery*.

Many artists have indulged in a cocktail of spirit and catchphrases derived from postmodern theory that inspires a flippant cynicism. Within the dominant ontology of this circle, most clearly defined by Baudrillard, imitation exists as simulation.⁶ Given the structure of Baudrillard's ontology, that everything in

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991). (<http://marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/jameson.htm>)

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean O, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Faria Glaser Trans. (University of Michigan Press: February 15, 1995).

contemporary society is a simulation, imitation cannot be employed to a transgressive end. Baudrillard creates a dichotomous ontology that severs us from real with a simplistic temporal divide. Because the real exists only in the pre-contemporary, it is impossible for us dwellers of the contemporary world to know the real. This ontological bisection is akin to that of mysticism, which asserts that God is the most real but also claims that God is ineffable. Though Baudrillard's ontology is an attempt to reject "the real" (or precisely because of this), it is fixated upon something that, according to this ideology, cannot be consciously known.

Lacan locates the real outside of language (by definition), which suggests his ontology may also fall into this category of mysticism. However, within Lacanian theory we can still experience the real (as a missed encounter that induces trauma). Furthermore, the real is addressed by consciousness; though not known by consciousness, the real is evaporated by it. In Hal Foster's *Return of the Real*, Lacan creates additional problems when Foster addresses "the gaze."⁷ Perhaps via a conflation of "the gaze" and "the real" Foster shifts the focus away from relational issues relevant to a performative critique to issues as determined by "the object."

Perhaps more helpful than the theories rooted in Lacan is Foster's elucidation upon the cynical stance of many contemporary artists, which Foster bases on writings of Peter Sloterdijk. Foster explains:

⁷Foster, Hal, Ch 5 "Return of the Real," *Return of the Real* (The MIT Press: October 1, 1996).

The cynic knows his beliefs to be false or ideological, but he holds to them nonetheless for the sake of self-protection, as a way to negotiate the contradictory demands placed upon them....Yet the cynic does not disavow this reality so much as he ignores it, and this structure renders him almost impervious to ideology critique, for he is already demystified, already enlightened about his ideological relation to the world (this allows the cynic to feel superior to ideology critics as well).⁸

The cynic's position is essentially a nihilistic one. However, as an artist, to make a work is, in effect an affirmation. Thus, any creation made with this view is a mockery and functions as an ironic distancing. By imitating a failure, the artist locates the failure of his own work in that which it imitates, thus avoiding the risk of failing himself.

Discussing her more recent work, Andrea Fraser explains her own attempt to avoid the trap of cynicism:

I think of the grotesque as what's beyond irony. It's what happens when you eliminate ironic distance by collapsing, for example, the performance and the embodiment... That's why the most difficult thing to do as an artist is to perform the inseparability of freedom and determination: to perform that contradiction without distancing it in facile irony or collapsing it in cynicism, and without forgetting that you can't escape it through an act of will or reflection or gesture of transgression. It's what I am always trying to do but fear I'm failing⁹.

One detects a sense of despair in Fraser that is created by honestly confronting the issues of modernity that brought us to our postmodern condition. By compounding freedom and determination, the artist and the performance, and the real and the imitation, she seems to be striving for a line between nihilism and absurdity.

⁸ Foster, Hal, Ch 4 "The Art of Cynical Reason," *Return of the Real* (The MIT Press: October 1, 1996).

⁹ Fraser, Andrea, *Andrea Fraser: Works 1984-2003*, ed.Dziewior, Yilmaz (Dumont 2004).

Though one may not be comfortable with calling the work a success, Fraser may have achieved this goal in her work *Untitled, 2003*. Fraser had a gallery arrange for a collector to pay \$20,000 to participate in the creation of a 60 minute DVD where the collector and artist had sex in a hotel room. There is no character that distances the artist from the performance. More than just a sensationalist platitude about the art world, perhaps this work introduces, as an alternative to the *dividing* force of the critique, a *compounding* force to interact with notions of the real. As a kind of social experiment, such work could serve to desubliminate emerging ontologies or perhaps even play a role in generating a new understanding of "the real."

One can see this strategy of compounding "the real" and "the performance" in Avant Garde theatre, "happenings", and the life of Andy Warhol. In the work of Warhol, we see that he often quotes advertising and fashion. Warhol's mimetic referent however was, something slightly more elusive, consumerist ideology. His work functioned as "product" as much as "art." The "real Andy" was inseparable from the performed (?) vacuous character constructed by consumer society. This performance, not just *realistic* but possibly *real*, and served to make apparent (and historically define) the ontological rise of the "product" that came to fruition in America during the 1980's.

Santiago Sierra is contemporary artist who more overtly addresses the relationship of art, economics, and ethics. He references a later

economic model, the service economy, in its relationship the art world. In many of his works, he pays disenfranchised members of society (often immigrants) small sums of money to perform pointless tasks in the gallery. A typical Sierra work is "The Wall of a Gallery Pulled Out, Inclined 60 from the Ground and Sustained by 5 People" is exactly as the title implies. Also from the year 2000, "160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People" permanently marks the backs of four female prostitutes addicted to heroine in exchange for approximately \$67 (the price of one shot). On one level, this piece is an ironic critique of the exploitative practices of a bourgeois art world. However, the artist deliberately (we must assume) implicates himself in this world. Given that this work does little, if anything, to change these socio-economic conditions, it seems to only exacerbate the issue. This work has created some level of moral outcry because does more than just represent suffering, it senselessly exploits, marks, and /or harms real people. Though referencing a "service economy", Sierra may be miming the "experience economy." Nothing seems to add a sense of authenticity to an experience more than real suffering of people who must have had no other choice.

This issue of suffering and the real has been discussed quite lucidly by Susan Sontag, particularly in "Regarding the Pain of Others." She criticizes French intellectuals for their "breathtaking provincialism" when they imply that the suffering of others is simply spectacle and somehow unreal. She certainly seems correct in this critique. Just because an

affluent Westerner can watch war as a spectacle, does not make it any less real for those suffering through it. However, Sontag seems to consistently privilege suffering ontologically.

Sontag is not alone in this belief. As a society, we expect that suffering should have the capacity to export its reality via photographs, television, and pleas for help. We are troubled when we find that this is not the case because it is incompatible with our ideal vision of a sympathetic human nature. Perhaps more importantly, it calls into question the reality of suffering which is intimately linked to a dominant mode of thinking in our culture, pathology. The logic of suffering is one that is rarely called into doubt. It explains and often excuses individual's actions and societal conditions. To pathologize is to understand. This may be rooted in a sense of determinism linked to suffering; no one would choose suffering if it could be avoided.

Sierra's work, taking into consideration the larger social reaction, could be seen as an imitation of our reaction to suffering that is indistinguishable from a "real" reaction. However, like a scientist's experiment, reflection on this experience can yield an understanding of our ontological assumptions that we may not be able to see in the real world. The sense of determinism Frasier seeks to add to her "performance" can be seen as the desire to pathologize herself, thus adding an element of "reality" to her work.

This speculation offered here is not intended to imply that other people's or one's own suffering is not real. Rather, it is only meant to desubliminate and interrogate the pathological as a dominant ontology. The nature of the mimetic approach used by Sierra and Frasier could be classified as "experimental" and as such does not have a built in alternative to offer. However, it leaves the viewer with greater knowledge and agency to construct their own world view.