

Andrea
Geyer

**NOW,
THEN AND
HOW.**

NOTES
ON ARTISTIC
PRACTICE.

2004.

»I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer – to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks....« and she continues: »At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial ... one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here – how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and made it work in and out of my daily life. I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; ...»It is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the wastepaper basket and forget all about it.«

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957), p. 4.

I decided to borrow Virginia Woolf's opening words from her famous paper *A Room of One's Own*¹ because Woolf addresses a set of ideas that I find useful to (re)visit when thinking about the figure of the public intellectual.

As Woolf does, I would suggest that gender and a woman's need for a space are still today – even though quite differently than in her times – major issues when it comes to an examination of the role of the intellectual. This is especially the case when the intellectual is a public one, given that this role is predominantly associated with the figure of a man, not only but also within the publicly visible field of contemporary art.

Moving beyond this rather obvious observation, I am interested in Woolf's attention to the forces that made her the »one« standing up front, speaking as the lecturer. Woolf describes her experience of suddenly finding herself confronted with the expectation of delivering »a nugget of pure truth.« She refers to the audience in front of her as being part of those forces, identifying them as part of the »you« who have put her in the position of being »... bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders.« And she emphasizes their role and responsibility, their selective perception, their choice in attaching themselves to what she is about to narrate. She therefore reminds them of their role as active readers and producers of the meaning of her talk, co-dependently making her the one who speaks and consequently the one that is supposed to be heard.

Another relevant aspect of Woolf's quote is her refusal to address the given topic of the lecture as an abstract matter, outside of life. She points out that to understand or address any topic – in her case women and fiction, and in our case the public intellectual – as outside social and political spheres, to observe it from an artificial distance, can only be a claim based on a set of assumptions, and is therefore for Woolf nothing more than an illusion. Focusing the attention on artists, I completely agree with Woolf: every artist always works within her respective social and political spheres, and I would claim is inseparable from them. By that, I do not mean to say that artists can only or should only address issues from within that particular sphere, but rather that each artist is grounded in (a form of) reason as well as specific modes of production that are particular to her respective social and political spheres.

¹ This paper was originally addressed to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtaa at Girton.

Living in the United States today, in this very moment, in the particularity of the current political condition, it seems urgent to understand artists as part of the larger contingency of those politically active. To be publically thinking, to address issues of politics and ideology in a public manner in the recent past has had unexpected consequences within the U.S. American context. Artists and cultural practitioners of all kinds, and their activities, have been subjected to different forms of state repression and censorship. From teenagers being suspended from school for making T-shirts critical of the U.S. president, to an art space threatened with losing its not-for-profit status for mounting an Anti-Bush exhibition during the Republican National Convention 2004 in New York, to the Buffalo artist Steve Kurtz, a member of the well-known and established Critical Art Ensemble, arrested under bioterrorism charges and now being indicted on mail fraud and facing a prison sentence – such cultural practices are understood and treated as political acts. This condition is not unheard of and finds its predecessors in (not only U.S.) history. It therefore requires that we ask ourselves, yet again and urgently, a set of questions, questions that do not apply only to the artist, or to the intellectual but to every single critical U.S. citizen/resident: what role can the artist assume under such circumstances? What are the productive spaces of action that remain for the political subject? What and how can urgent issues be addressed and be heard? How does one need to work in order not to be subjected to individualizing state harassment? What forms of organization can be utilized to activate political discourse, rather than stereotype and confine it? How can this discourse happen in an active, and not just responsive way? How can one, in a collective sense, overcome the desperate feeling of powerlessness in the face of massive state actions against one's own understanding of ethics and democracy?

In her recent publication of four talks called *Thinking Past Terror*² Susan Buck-Morss describes artistic practice in a deep crisis: »The contemporary art world values artists, not art. No art objects are necessary. No social or political usefulness is required. Artistic practices have been deregulated. They are strategies chosen by artists themselves as an expression of their individual and uncensored freedom. Artists are iconic embodiments, almost advertisements, for the slogan (if not the reality) of »freedom of speech.«« She continues: »In short, artistic »freedom« exists in proportion to the artists' irrelevance.« What Buck-Morss addresses is an expanding understanding of art, mostly generated by the commercial machinery of the art market, where art has been thoroughly

² Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), pp. 68, 69.

commodified and is barely legible beyond its market value. Even though I do not fully agree with Buck-Morss' assessment of the state of art at large, I find her argument interesting to consider as it responds to the specific circumstances and political conditions that artists experience in the USA today. Her statement, written in a moment of crisis (in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001), turns to culture as a potential resource in the overwhelming struggle to mark territory for political agency and social responsibility. Reading it reminded me of another talk, in another moment of time, during another moment of crisis – Walter Benjamin's famous lecture and essay »Author as Producer.« Originally delivered in the political climate of 1934, at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris, this talk followed a trajectory similar to Buck-Morss' ideas. In his talk Benjamin urges the artist (presumably a member of the bourgeoisie) to side with the proletariat. But Benjamin suggests not just choosing a political attitude or an artistic theme addressing such condition but including within the artist's practice a true solidarity to the cause, an attention to her material practice by challenging not only her surroundings but also her own mode of production. Benjamin writes: »[The author's]... work will never be merely work on products, but always at the same time, on the means of production. In other words his products must have, over and above their character as works, an organizing function, and in no way must their organizational usefulness be confined to their value as propaganda. Their political tendency alone is not enough.«

Benjamin delivered his speech as a reaction to the gradual aesthetization of politics in fascism, to what he identifies as the separation of form and content. Therefore his talk emphasizes the need to counteract this enforced separation. He suggests doing so by binding form and content together inseparably into a mode of production, an agency, into a form that exists not only as pure representation but also as a form of action. Benjamin challenges the author to do more than comment or analyze any topic or issue. He also asks her to assume an active position within the struggle and to understand the artist's own practice as the very site of it. Raymond Williams employs a similar idea in his 1977 text *Marxism and Literature*³ when he writes: »Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle it can take many forms.« Williams names creative practice as the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation. The quote continues:

³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 212.

»[Creative practice] ... can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness: a process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind – not casting off an ideology but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships.« These quotes describe the radical links of the content of a work to what Benjamin calls the »mode of production,« and what Williams describes in »creative practice« as an inherent self-reflexivity. The questions – *Who am I?*, *Who is speaking?*, *What are the structures that form identity and the position from which it is spoken?*, *Who is listening?* – even though very basic, still offer useful insights for contemporary art practice. Artists today, yet again, should aim not only to analyze or represent but also to actively create a site that suggests a reflective environment, contesting, not as struggle but as presence, the site of production.

Virginia Woolf followed that idea in her talk and instead of talking about women and fiction she told a story, the story of struggle as fiction. I have attempted myself to use such reflective strategies of storytelling in my recent work. I understand narration (as Woolf and also Benjamin did) as the retelling of an event or an occurrence by means of a storyteller. What is represented through narration is not so much a claim for an objective truth but the account of an event through experience. Personal, particular experience as opposed to a purported universalized account of an event that is usually constructed to serve the genealogy of history. A storyteller never aims to convey the pure essence of things but rather integrates the subjects into her own experience, makes them part of her being. In that form – as an integral part of the storyteller – they exist indeterminately but in no static or fixed form; they are available to be re-articulated at any given moment, any number of times. And in its repetition the narrative will be woven and spun and therefore shifted and changed, in accordance with the conditions of its retelling and of course in relation to its listener.⁴ As an artistic tool, the presence of a storyteller as such acknowledges the presence of an active listener in a form of situational consciousness, in which at least two parties generate a double presence of realities joined on the basis of the same narrative. In its telling and retelling, a story is constantly moved, partially forgotten and reinvented at the same time. But nevertheless it will always stay true to itself in relation to the storyteller and consequently to the listener. Thus one could claim that such a condition generates a potential within narration for an immanent criticality, a

⁴ »The Storyteller« in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 90.

criticality that is derived from the constant awareness of the context and edges of the stories, the edges of their inherent information. I would claim that when a story is told there is always an ambivalence involved and it is that ambivalence that points to the immanent challenges of knowledge and to its impossible wholeness. As such the meaning of narrative in representing a history, a condition or a situation, stands opposed, with its continuous slippages, to the determined forms of ideological formation of ›a history,‹ ›a truth‹ or ›a reality‹ as a hegemonic whole.