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WE: Collectivities, Mutualities, Participations.

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Collectivity is something that takes place as we arbitrarily gather to take part in different forms of cultural activity such as looking at art. If we countenance that beyond all the roles that are allotted to us in culture – roles such as those of being viewers, listeners or audience members in one capacity or another – there are other emergent possibilities for the exchange of shared perspectives or insights or subjectivities – we allow for some form of emergent collectivity. Furthermore that performative collectivity, one that is produced in the very act of being together in the same space and compelled by similar edicts, might just alert us to a form of mutuality which cannot be recognised in the normative modes of shared beliefs, interests or kinship.

To speak of collectivities is to de-nativise community, to argue it away from the numerous essential roots of place and race and kinship structures that have for so long been the glue that has held it together.

Equally, to speak of mutualities is to think against the grain of ideological mobilisations that are grounded in the pursuit of an end, of a conclusion, of a resolution. To replace that ideological imperative with the ongoing processes of low key participations that ebbs and flows at a barely conscious level.

To think of the experience of the exhibition viewer as inscribed in any of the dynamics of collectivity and mutuality is to theorise it away from the realm of individual edification, curiosity and the pursuit of cultural capital. Away from the isolating imperatives of lost identification and absolute attention demanded of us by the traditional edicts of artistic engagement.

Despite the prevailing mythologies that continue to link the experience of art to individual reflection, we do look at art, inhabit the spaces of art in various forms of collectivity and in the process we produce new forms of mutuality, of relations between viewers and spaces rather than relations between viewers and objects. Beyond the shared categories of class, or taste or political or sexual orientations another form of 'WE' is produced in these processes of viewing and it in turn shifts the very nature of meaning and its relation to the notion of displayed visual culture. It is the notion of the 'WE' that is produced on these occasions and of its own subsequent production that I am trying to get at here. To that end I need to evacuate an array of other notions of art world collectivities, the ones I do not want to pay attention to, the ones I would like to dispense with so that some other notion might just come into being and become clearer. The following WEs are the ones I do not have in mind;

WE the visitors to the museums and exhibitions

WE the lovers of art

WE charter citizens of the art world

WE critical theorists who pursue the hidden meanings and the covert agendas of both art works and of exhibiting institutions.

WE who believe that contemporary art has a stake in cultural citizenship.

None of the above are in any way lamentable or invalid modes of inhabiting the spaces of contemporary art, but they do limit us to a kind of frontal relation which continues to posit the work of art at the centre of all processes of producing meaning. By introducing the notion of WE as central to the experience of art I am insisting on several elements;

On the fact that meaning is never produced in isolation or through isolating processes but rather through intricate webs of connectedness.

On the fact that audiences produce meaning not simply through the subjectivities they project on art works whose circuits of meanings they complete, but that they produce meaning through relations with one another and through the temporality of the event of the exhibition or the display.

On the fact that art works and thematic exhibitions that continue to re-produce them into view, do not have immanent meanings but function as fields of possibilities for different audiences in different cultural circumstances and wildly divergent moods to produce significances.

On the fact that in a reflective shift from the analytical to the performative function of observation and of participation we can agree that meaning is not excavated for but that it 'Takes Place' in the present.

The latter exemplifies not just the dynamics of looking at and interacting with works of art in exhibitions and in public spaces but echoes also the modes by which we have inhabited the critical and the theoretical over the recent past. It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique to what I am calling at present criticality. That is that we have moved from criticism which is a form of finding fault and of exercising judgement according to a consensus of values, to critique which is examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to criticality which is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness. By this I mean that criticality while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames. One is after all always operating out of a contingent position, always seemingly at fault, this is a permanent and ongoing condition, since every year we become aware of a new and hitherto unrealised perspective which illuminates further internal cultural injustices. Criticality is therefore connected in my mind with risk, with a cultural inhabitation that acknowledges what it is risking without yet fully being able to articulate it. 'Criticality' as I perceive it is precisely in the operations of recognising the limitations of one's thought for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure. In this mode of criticality I perceive some possibility of narrowing the gap between some beings out there who have been called the 'general audience' of culture and those of us who have been more critically informed and therefore inhabit some notion of 'critical distance'. If we take seriously the potential of performative audiences to allow meaning to take place in the present we also allow that criticism does not have to be enacted at a distance but can take place and shape in the realm of the participatory.

I make these claims and these observations in the footsteps of Jean Luc Nancy's recent and exciting work in "Being Singular Plural", a body of thought that has done much to enable us to detach 'singularity' from individuality and the politics of autonomous selves. Although Nancy's starting point is quite different from the one being rehearsed here – he is not concerned with rewriting the role of the audience and of its performative potential to

participate in culture but rather taking up a 20th century philosophical discussion of 'being', a modern interpretative process of what Plato had called the 'dialogue of the soul with itself'. In his argument, his contribution to this ongoing debate Nancy breaks down the 'with' of with itself to another, less inward, more plural set of links. He is doing so in the names of a complex and very contemporary politics of what he calls "the places, groups, or authorities (Bosnian Serbs, Tutsis, Hutus, Tamil Tigers, Casamnce, ETA Militia, Roma of Slovenia.) that constitute the theatre of bloody conflicts among identities, as well as what is at stake in these conflicts. These days it is not always possible to say with any assurance whether these identities are intranational, infranational, or transnational; whether they are 'cultural' , 'religious' , 'ethnic' , or 'historical' : whether they are legitimate or not - not to mention the question about which law would provide such legitimation: whether they are real, mythical, or imaginary; whether they are independent or 'instrumentalised' by other groups who wield political, economic, and ideological power. This is the 'earth' we are supposed to 'inhabit' today, the earth for which Sarajevo will become the martyr-name, the testimonial name: this is us, we who are supposed to say we as if we know what we are saying and who we are talking about. This earth is anything but a sharing of humanity. What I am talking about here is compassion, but not compassion as pity that feels sorry for itself and feeds on itself. Com-*passion* is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil."(pages xii-xiii). Nancy proceeds to take on the proper names of collectivity "we" and "us" and their relation to meaning and he does so obviously against the grain of the claims of identity and their ability to separate and to segregate. He takes up the notion of meaning precisely because of this proliferation that has no other meaning than the indeterminate multiplication of centripetal meanings, meanings closed in on themselves and supersaturated with significance, that are no longer meaningful because they refer to their own closure, to their horizon of appropriation and have to spread nothing but destruction, hatred and the denial of existence (page xiii); To these ends he has to go back to both 'we' and 'meaning' as the building blocks of another form of relatedness that is not founded on the articulation of identity.

"We do not 'have' meaning any more, because we ourselves are meaning - entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no more meaning other than 'us' "(page 1). . . . "Being itself is given to us as meaning, being does not have meaning. 'Being itself', the phenomenon of 'being' is meaning that is in turn its own circulation - and we are this circulation. (page 3)

"There is no meaning then if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of being". (page 2)

In what way then does it enable us to think of 'audience' when we think of being as meaning and of ourselves as the circulation of meaning. Surely this enables us to somewhat diminish the object / viewer dichotomy we have been labouring with and to begin to think of the ways in which meaning circulates. After all "there is no meaning if meaning is not shared".

In Nancy's assertion that "everything, then, passes between us" do we not also have the conditions of the exhibition? And in these conditions do we not have the possibilities to shift the gaze away from art works that might critically alert us to certain untenable states of the world, away from exhibitions that make those states of hegemonic breach and unease the subject and focal point of saturated vision, and towards everything that passes between us in the process of those confrontations. Therefor we do not necessarily undergo an experience of being informed, of being cautioned, of being forced to look at that which we might so comfortably avert our gaze from, but perhaps we recognise how deeply embedded we are in the problematic, of how mutual our disturbance and fear and that we in Nancy's words 'share this turmoil' as the very production of its meanings. I am not arguing for the centrality of the art exhibition as a political space on the basis of what it

exhibits, of the kind of work that the objects on display might do in the world, of the kind of issues that the thematic exhibition might alert us to. I am arguing instead for the art exhibition as what Nancy has termed "The Spectacle of Society";

"If being-with is the sharing of a simultaneous space-time, then it involves a presentation of this space-time as such. In order to say 'we' one must present the 'here and now' of this 'we'. Or rather saying 'we' brings about the presentation of the 'here and now', however it is determined; as a room, a region, a group of friends, an association, a 'people'.

We can never simply be the 'the we' understood as a unique subject. 'We' always expresses a plurality, expresses 'our' being divided and entangled; 'one' is not 'with' in some general sort of way, but each time according to determined modes that are themselves multiple and simultaneous (people, culture, language, lineage, network, group, couple, band and so on). What is presented in this way, each time, is a stage (scène) on which several can say 'I' each on his own account, each in turn"

On this stage, as part of this spectacle we can begin to perceive the possibilities for some form of action that is not the planned demonstrations of political activism with their binaries of the blamed and the blaming. This stage functions as the 'space of appearance' Hannah Arendt invoked in attempting to enlarge the understanding of how and where political action takes place;

The peculiarity of this 'space of appearance' says Arendt "...is that unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men..... but with the disappearance or the arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever." In partial, only very partial, reply I might say that it is because Arendt's thought links speech and action to the very constitution of power, not power as a mode of representation, nor power as the concrete articulations of ideological belief and their consequent translation into various structures of speech and of government. "What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of actions has passed (what we today call 'organisation'), and what at the same time they keep alive through remaining together, is power". Neither Force, strength nor violence nor the apparatuses of the State or the law, this power conceptualised by Arendt is the fleeting coming together in momentary gestures of speech and action by communities whose only mutuality lies in their ability to both stage these actions and to read them for what they are. The space of appearance in which these momentary actions take place are the staging grounds of protests, refusals, affirmations or celebrations and like Lefevbre's 'space in the process of production' they do not bear the markings of traditional political spaces but rather galvanise the spaces of everyday life and temporarily transform them by throwing flitting mantles of power over them.

"... action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as they appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly".

The reason I would wish to think of 'art' in relation to such a 'space of appearance' is recognition that when something called 'art' becomes an open interconnective field, then the potential to engage with it as a form of cultural participation rather than as a form of either reification, of representation or of contemplative edification, comes into being. The engagement with 'art' can provide a similar space of appearance to that described by Arendt, not by following the required set of interpellated, pensive gestures but rather seeking out, staging and perceiving an alternative set of responses.

What is it that we do when we look away from art by producing such a 'space of appearance', by attending to the circulation of meaning which passes between us and constitutes a 'we'?

Rather than claim that we are staging a politics which has direct resonance in the world

and direct corollary in the regimes of policies and directives, I would want to say that we are staging the possibility of a 'politics without a plan'. By this I mean that the staging of our knowledge concerning everything that is consciously wrong can and must be divorced from an illusion of its instant translatability into a method and a course for action. This desire for a form of instant translation from the 'pace of appearance' to state action is already somewhat halted by the earlier articulation of com-passion as a form of entanglement as a clear sighted position of mutual imbrication. It is further halted when Nancy states that "Contemporary political plural existence is one of intersection - an incessant process of acting without a model" . If we can claim a politics for the space of the exhibition it is one in which the 'model' for action, for resolution, for consequences is kept at bay in favour of that incessant process, constantly shifting and renewing itself as the audience changes, its mutualities shift and remake themselves. The very fact that the space of the exhibition has never been taken very seriously as apolitical space is what guarantees that it be the most serious space for the enactment, in full sight, of what Giorgio Agamben has termed "Means without End". This in the context of cinema which Agamben claims "has its center in the gesture and not in the image and thus it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics and not simply to that of aesthetics." "What characterises gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture in other words, opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human. But in what way is an action endured and supported?. In what way does a simple act become an event ? In the distinction between production and action; if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyses morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends." In one of those illuminating bursts of insight Agamben articulates for us the mistaken conception at the heart of art masquerading as politics through the assumption of political subject matter and or the investment with the clear navigational principles between right and wrong and how to achieve these. "Nothing is more misleading for an understanding of gesture, therefor, than representing, on the one hand a sphere of means as addressing a goal (for example marching seen as a means of moving the body from point A to point B) and, on the other hand, a separate and superior sphere of gesture as a movement that has its end in itself (for example, dance seen as an aesthetic dimension). The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality : it is the process of making a means visible as such".

What I am proposing then is that the space of the exhibition is Arendt's "Space of Appearance" in which a form of political action takes place that is not just ephemeral and based in speech as action but that is also founded on "acting with out a model" and on making "its means as visible as possible". If we can accept the space of the exhibition as the arena for such enactments, in which it is we the audience who produce the meanings through our 'being' and our acknowledgement of mutualities and imbrications - then what we have is the possibility of another political space. Instead of an occasion for the translation of various sets of politics into the realm of aesthetics and language, instead of a series of exercises in moral navigations that take place in and through the art exhibition, we have the possibility of an actual political space tout court.