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The intellectual turn:

Dialogue with Peter Osborne, London, 22nd February, 2008

Zeigam Azizov: You talked about art being a discursive space. In your words:” the exhibition and discursive self-reflection have been increasingly intertwined’¹. Would it be possible to describe this kind of situation as an intellectual turn in contemporary art?

Peter Osborne: I think it is an intellectual turn, but also I think that it is an institutional turn on the basis of the intellectual developments of 1960s. Basically, I think it represents a convergence between the post-conceptual character of the artwork, which was established in the 1960s and early 1970s, and various institutional transformations. One is the changing cultural economy of the art world, its transnationalization in particular, and the circulation of work through such transnational spaces. It is only essentially possible on the basis of the post-conceptual work. We are talking about work that is not tied to a particular object. Obviously some materializations do have a limited circulation. But there is a redefinition of the work in relation to the connection between its idea and its materializations, which makes possible this broader circulation. Within this broader circulation, art becomes primarily defined discursively although it requires materialization for its specific art function. It is quite a complicated relation. But the main point is the convergence of a transformed ontology of the work with institutional conditions and particularly with transnationalization. The confusing thing is that the artistic conditions were established in the 1960s and early 1970s, but the institutional conditions were only established after 1989. Everything changed internationally after

¹ Peter Osborne, Documenta 12 Magazine project, *Radical Philosophy*, 141, March/April, 2007

1989. Previously, there was a sort of institutional lack, so the full potentiality of the post-conceptual character of contemporary art could be realized only after 1989, because of the change in the institutional situation.

ZA: Could you elaborate a little bit more on this particular date, 1989?

PO: Well, 1989 represents the end of historical communism and a major transformation in the space of the geo-political. ‘Three World’ theory (you know, First World, Second World, Third World) loses its credibility. There is rather now an internally differentiated global capitalist modernity, where capital is driving all of the new forms of social and political interconnectiveness and the art market is – or the artworld is – at the cultural forefront of making these transnational connections. So it is a distinctively post-communist situation!

ZA: In your words again: “...the recent Deleuzian revival of Bergsonian philosophy of time has entered into alliance with Negri’s post-Marxian philosophy of revolution”².

Revolution is a huge thing; of course! Would you say that part of this revolution is to find new forms of meaning production?

PO: What I am referring to specifically is a very recent recoding of the political trajectory of Deleuze and Guattari by the Negri-Hardt appropriation of Deleuzianism. It is primarily an anti-institutionalism in the space of international post-capitalist movements. It is a recoding under the sign of ‘revolution’. Revolution needs to be thought here in inverted commas very strongly, because revolution is a rhetorical marker for some kind of continuity with the radical Left of the 60s, but it is a continuity which is as yet unthought and unactualized. It is the marker for the desire to continue the history, which currently has no effective forms.

ZA: A ubiquitous concept which is used in relation to artistic production is immaterial labour ...

PO: I have a problem with the concept of immaterial labour for the same reason I have a problem with the understanding of conceptual art in terms of the dematerialization of the artwork. These are interestingly parallel conceptual errors. For me, it involves a mistaken concept of the immaterial. Only a 19th-century physicalist concept of materiality conceives these processes as dematerialization or immateriality. I prefer to think of these

² Peter Osborne, Marx and Philosophy of time, *Radical Philosophy*, 146, November/December, 2008

processes in terms of new forms of materialization. They are essentially communicative processes depend upon particular materializations, particular technologies and particular social relations. So immaterial labour is a misleading formulation for communicative practices and conceptual work. Nevertheless it draws connections between the conceptual art of the 1960s and the subsequent development of information technologies. It is that connection, for me, that is the basis of the convergence between the post-conceptual status of the artwork and these new international institutions; communication technologies are mediums for both.

ZA: There is nevertheless an interesting moment in the understanding of the articulation of what Maurizio Lazzarato calls the ‘neo-archaic’ with very new means.

PO: One thing that it reveals is the problematic status of the category of immaterial labour in, for example, the way Hardt and Negri use it to refer to *affective labour*. Affective labour is characterized by immediately embodied relations between persons. ‘Immaterial’ is a particularly inappropriate description of affective labour. That is one thing. With regard to Lazzarato, I have a problem in relation to the theory of modernity with the category of ‘neo-archaic’. I think what he describes as ‘neo-archaic’ is internal to modernity, and so misleadingly described as archaic, despite the registration of its modernity by the prefix ‘neo’. I think it is a mistake to think of various religious fundamentalisms, , for example, particularly of fundamentalist Islam, as in any way a neo-archaicism. That is misleading and it is close to a conservative discourse that misunderstands their essentially political – rather than cultural – dynamics, their integral production within the existing system. They are as modern as they are opposite.

Further confusions arise as a result of the desire by Lazzarato and Hardt and Negri to distance themselves from Marx’s political economy and to reject Marx’s value theory, while nonetheless still using some of its terminology (‘real subsumption’ for example). They use ‘immaterial’ to mark the fact that they don’t think that value is regulated by labour time anymore. But I don’t think this is the best route to marking the difference, because I think it marks the way too undialectically. They want to mark their way undialectically, of course. Their break with Marx is a rejection of dialectics, so they need to put this mark undialectically. But I don’t think it is helpful!

ZA: The notion of *time* is one of the basic notions for understanding this question. But I think the concept of time is also interesting in the it challenges definitions. There is a phrase in your work on conceptual art: “Definitions make bad philosophy, but for a time they make good art”³. What do you think of the role of definition as a strategic tool in this particular complex and contradictory period of globalization?

PO: This particular phrase is addressed to Joseph Kosuth. It offers Kosuth an artistic redemption to compensate for his bad philosophy. When I wrote ‘definitions for a time made good art’ I was referring to conceptual art’s appropriation of definition as a cultural form: a cultural form that is, on the one hand, pseudo-intellectual, on the other hand, from my point of view, precisely non-philosophical. Anything that fixes meaning in advance is inherently unphilosophical. I take the better side of the presentation of definition as a cultural form in conceptual art to be playing with that fixity, through its artistic presentation of definition, which destabilizes meaning by moving it from one cultural space to another. So it goes *against* the very category of definition, by the way it presents it, and plays on fixity in an interesting way. It uses fixity of meaning to reflect on the theory of meaning. I think that was a very productive moment, but I don’t agree with Kosuth’s self-understanding of it, which is through analytical philosophy, and a misunderstanding of analytical philosophy as well. But from the point of view of understanding the art I don’t think that matters.

ZA: Would you say that art is the space where the artist can be forgiven for misunderstanding? As in Adorno: the best way of identifying is misidentifying?

PO: I think one needs to draw a distinction between the use of philosophy within art critical discourse, including art critical discourse by artists, and the use of philosophy as artistic material within an artistic practice. The second use can include the artist adopting a critical persona and displacing it into art space. The problem with Kosuth is that he wanted to be simultaneously hegemonizing independent art critical space with the same discourse. You need to register the distinction, if only in order to be able to play with it in artistic practice.

ZA: In the current artworld attempts are being made to redevelop ideas coming from 1960s and 70s, certainly in artistic terms, but also in art theory: for example, Nicholas

³ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon Press, London 2002

Bourriaud. He talks about the ‘post-production’⁴. There are a lot of arguments around it, but I find the term post-production very interesting. I know that Bourriaud uses the term from film theory. My perception of it is that art has entered into a space that art always wanted too, a space of considering objects rather than making them. Looking at objects philosophically...

PO: I find the notion of *post-production* much more productive than the work on relational aesthetics. It is a quite dialectical concept if it is properly understood. Often it is misleadingly understood, in the same way that immaterial labour is misunderstood, as if it means that art is now beyond materiality. Of course, the term post-production is taken from the film industry, it refers to the processes which happen in the later stage of the total production process. It has quite a specific meaning. It does not imply that there is no production – that we are in some period ‘after’ production – but that there is new kind of production, which takes previously produced objects as its means. Personally, I don’t think there is a structural difference between that kind of production and the production of any inorganic work of art. The logic of post-production is a version of the logic of construction. In its early 20th-century manifestations, construction represented the move from the organic to an inorganic work; on Adorno’s account, the principle of production changed from composition to construction. Construction is modeled on collage or montage, whereby the constructive relation is between preexisting elements, rather than the immanent production of elements during the composition. That is the basic logic of the work. With later technological and social developments, this immanent logic is maintained with an expanded range of artistic materials, which are included within the logic of construction. With Bourriaud’s notion, we have a concept that includes staging certain relations as the elements of its construction, but it is just an expansion and socialization of the artistic material. I don’t think the structure of the production has changed.

ZA: Before going further I would like to ask you about Marx. Marx is becoming more popular and very essential to all the discourses today especially in relation to production. It is also true of the Moscow art scene. In what ways is Marx’s notion of production still relevant?

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lukas and Sternberg, NY, 2002

PO: There are two different aspects to Marx's treatment of this problem and social production is the intermediate term. The two main concepts are, first, practice/praxis, which is theorized in the 'Theses on Feuerbach', and second, commodity-production, theorized in *Capital*. I would theorise art practice as a specification of Marx's concept of practice. One of the things specific to contemporary art practice is its contradictory relations to commodification. The second aspect, the commodification of art, is one half of the dialectic of contemporary art. But it is not commodified at the level of production, which is why the notion of social production does not work so well. It is commodified primarily through distribution and exchange. In Marx's terms it is only 'formally' subsumed. The peculiarity of art production is that it is petty-commodity production within the latest state of development of capitalism. Art production itself remains petty-commodity production. To the extent art production becomes fully commodified, it becomes just one part of the culture industry. So I want to maintain this distinction between autonomous art, in an extended sense, and the culture industry, in terms of the difference of the logic of production from commodity production. But that doesn't separate the work from the commodity relations of exchange and distribution. So Marx is crucial to understanding art in terms of practice and commodity exchange, but less so in terms of social production.

In relation to the significance of Marx in ex-communist countries, I think, Marx is only now beginning to be read as a theorist of capitalism there, which is the way he was always primarily read in the West. My own experience in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s was that, then, it was impossible to talk about Marx, because Marx was still perceived only as a theorist of communism. They didn't know Marx as an analyst of capitalism. Now that is beginning to come through, but it will take a little bit longer. It is becoming a culturally possible space.

ZA: In terms of the commodity, it is not only in newly redeveloped post-socialist societies that capitalism is becoming important to art, but also as a way of serving certain ideologies, national ideology, for example. The Biennale structure is expanding now into the former Soviet republics, like Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Moscow itself is entering into a certain competition with already existing Western institutions through the demonstration of wealth coming from the oil and gas industries. In this sense, Marx is

back into his real role, which has been misunderstood for some times in this part of the world. The Biennale makes us think of artistic production differently; it looks as if art is over, but artistic work is being supported in order to represent a certain ideology.

PO: My own view is that these are structurally contradictory spaces. They are highly economically mediated as part of the art market. There is no question about that. They generate value and they perform ideological functions in relation to nation, region, etc. On the other hand, they are spaces that allow art to function in a way different from economical and ideological terms. If they cease to be art spaces, in which some critical claims can be made on behalf of the art, then they will revert to being modes of international exposition, commodity fair as propaganda, display etc. Ironically, the ideological and economic functions are completely dependent on these also remaining critical art spaces. It is contradictory. In that respect, there is an extra-territoriality, if you like. The critical functioning of art remains a condition of these particular territorialization, which are national, ideological, political and economical.

ZA: Could we speak of it in Deleuzian terms of territorialization?

PO: Yes, I think so. Territorialization is a productive concept. In Deleuze and Guattari there is a cycle of territorialization, re-territorialization, de-territorialization, I find it very useful. Essentially, I understand it as a spatialisation of the temporal logic of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*⁵. It is taken from Sartre's logic of totalisation, de-totalisation, and re-totalisation. What Deleuze and Guattari did was to take Sartre's cycle of time and spatialise it. The difference is that in Sartre the emphasis is on totalization: de-totalization and re-totalization are moments of the process of totalisation. In Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, the whole emphasis lies on de-territorialization, so re-territorialization is wholly negative. Personally, I think of de-territorialization as a kind of machinery of movement, but de-territorialization is not an achievable state. I find it a particularly productive concept from Deleuze and Guattari.

ZA: Today in most of art circles there is a question: What kind of critique is possible today from within art itself? Is their possibility for resistance? I certainly think that it is very much possible, coming back to the Deleuzian concept of art or rather philosophy taking on what is left over, what has gone missing in some ways. I think bringing back

⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J. Humanities Press, 1976

what has gone missing may work as a resistance to modernity's obsession with instantaneity. But someone like Žižek refuses to take on this idea saying that fascism is also something left out, repressed... What do you think of this paradox?

PO: The idea of an aesthetic remainder of some sort is certainly important. It is a point of convergence between Adorno and Deleuze in many ways. But there is a problem with the language of resistance, because the language of resistance allows for a confusion of semantic and political spaces. It makes sense to speak about the aesthetic reminder of the work resisting the fixing of meaning, for example: keeping meaning going, producing new meaning, is the basis of the semiotic concept of aesthetic. However, if that resistance is figured immediately politically, such that the political function of art is understood to reside in the aesthetic moment of resistance alone, I have a problem with it. For me, political concepts of resistance relate to art insofar as the critical or semantic function of art provides resources for social movements that are themselves politically resistant. In other words, politically, I think resistance has to reside within social movements, which can appropriate and instrumentalise art in various ways. Resistance internal to the artwork is only metaphorically and figuratively political. This is one of the main barriers for the production of resistant left, political subcultures: you don't have to produce the subculture, because you think it is already in the work. One of the main problems for the production of critical art is the erosion of the political constituency out of which such work has, historically, been produced. If you only think about the resistance within the work you miss its enabling condition, which is another kind of resistance, which comes from somewhere else. It doesn't come from art.

ZA: One of the books widely read in the artworld is British cultural theorist Dick Hebdige's 'Subculture: the meaning of style'.⁶ Reading this book on style takes us back to the 1970s and shows how much the notion of resistance is used in the artworld metaphorically. There was street culture which was appropriated by art. Today it is more visible how style is appropriated from the past. It is eclectic, and although I like eclectic, it often looks like a gesture. It is like unvoiced song, as Deleuze would say. The period when art became unvoiced song...

⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style*, Routledge, London and NY, 1989

PO: Dick Hebdige's work came out of the collective Birmingham project called *Resistance through rituals*⁷. That work was focused in large part on working class masculine subcultures. The important work of this period is Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour*⁸, which is about young, white, working class boys and the cultural processes that condemned them to a subordinate place in the division of labour via their masculinity. Their practices were treated either as merely cultural or as being in some ways anti-social. The idea was to try to recover the political meaning of these particular practices through an anthropological notion of ritual, as elements of resistance within these very specific practices. Dick Hebdige generalized and recontextualized the argument in his book *Subculture: the meaning of style*. But it was never a theory of resistance, it was a theory of subcultures and how they functioned to resist. It should not be confused with a theory of resistance. One thing that happened with the culturalist turn within the political discourse was that the two became confused: the idea of political resistance and resistance through style. That situation has been made worse by the subsequent increased appropriation of street culture and style by the international fashion industry, which is now much more immediate. The subcultural space for these styles is much smaller and more fleeting than it was. It is difficult to invest it in the way it was in the 1970s. Nonetheless, retrospectively, all those stylistic subcultures that were formed in Britain in relation to punk and post-punk in the late 1970s and first couple of years of the 1980s remain a critical cultural resource, in the same way as I consider the conceptual art of the 1960s to remain a critical moment in relation to the current artworld – for all its subsequent degraded, essentially *stylistic* appropriations. Culture is still a point of reference for a national-popular critical moment.

ZA: What about the centrality of cultural space or what are sometimes called art centres? London has become one of the trendy cities in the world in cultural and intellectual terms.

PO: This has to do with the concentration and density of relations. I agree with Saskia Sassen's concept of global cities:⁹ the idea that the world is being geopolitically reorganized in relation to cultural and economic processes that are spatialized in relation

⁷ Stuart, Hall, T. Jefferson (ed), Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, *Resistance through rituals*, Routledge, London, 1976

⁸ Paul Willis's "Learning to Labor", 1977

⁹ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City :NY, London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001

to metropolitan centres, which are nodes and relate to each other in a quite direct way, often independently of national-political mediations. The Biennale system is a rather formal version of that kind of network of nodes. That has been happening in London. I wrote something about these processes for the Sydney Biennale.¹⁰ They classified artists in two ways: country of origin (meaning place of birth) and country of habitation. There were about 100 artists from over 60 countries, most of whom were now living in big cities, overwhelmingly Amsterdam, Berlin and New York. There is an incredible need for artists to relocate to metropolitan centres in order to function as contemporary artists: not in the way they relocated a hundred years ago, in exile or as migrants, but living in places for a certain sustained period of time – maybe ten or twenty years – and during that period traveling a great deal, but also remaining in close cultural and social contact with the places where they are no longer living. Obviously information technologies are a primary means as well as cheap travel. This means that these days spatialization is rather different. There are nodal centres and these centres are themselves concentrations of socio-spatial relations, which may be completely external. In that sense, they are strangely de-nationalized spaces, and it is out of these relations that artists make their art. Socio-spatial relations are one of the main artistic materials out of which artists now make art – which is related to the notion of post-production, of course.

ZA: this is certainly true of someone like Ilya Kabakov who makes his art outside Russia about Russia...

PO: ...and in relation to Russia.

ZA: You wrote a book called *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*.¹¹ At the moment of emergence of Cultural Studies, the cultural-theoretical aspect became strongly influential. But interestingly enough, Stuart Hall told me that one thing Cultural Studies people were not reading was philosophy...

PO: Yes, this is important. It has to do with the limitations of the national philosophical culture during the 1960s and 1970s; that is to say, the self-enclosed disciplinary character of Anglo-American philosophy and its legitimation of itself institutionally by virtue of its autonomy from any positive relation to other disciplines;

¹⁰ Peter Osborne, *The Power of Assembly: Art, World, Industry*, in *Zones of contact*, catalogue of the 2006 Sydney Biennale, Sydney, 2006, pp. 125-8

¹¹ Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural theory*, Routledge, London, NY, 2000

and any other relation to positivity, in a philosophical sense. That rendered that kind of philosophy useless as a conceptual resource. The main conceptual resource was consequently Marxism and semiotics. So-called ‘continental’ philosophy also inherited the limitations of the existing institutional forms, not so much in their intellectual forms. The Anglo-American version of continental philosophy is fixated with the importation, translation and appropriation of canonical authors and their texts. This process was initially quite closely connected to literary studies and the hermeneutic tradition; subsequently it has been very much tied up with branding in the academic publishing industry. As a result, the question of the application or the development of concepts is often cut-off short. In my view, conceptual development in philosophy is integrally tied to its relations to non-philosophical material. One can philosophize only in relation to non-philosophical material and produce philosophical concepts out of relations to this material. On the other hand, self-sufficient philosophy, as Marx used to call it (it was what he was criticizing in *The German Ideology*), is in principle no use as a critical or cultural resource. In this respect, I belong to the post-Hegelian tradition, which is not necessarily itself particularly Hegelian, because I take Walter Benjamin as one of the primary thinkers of this tradition. To philosophize with and in relation to cultural material allows one to conceive philosophy in a broad and essentially productive (or constructive) way.

ZA: “*The German ideology*”¹² was an important book for most Russian artists, as well as theorists. Filmmakers like Sergey Eisenstein, or an important theorist like Bakhtin, but also someone like Lifshitz who has become an object of research for Dimitriy Gutov in our day. And in the Moscow artworld, alongside with Gutov, there is an interest in Marx. They are going back to Marx, in search of what has gone missing in that space, in a space where Marx was everywhere, but appropriated for the wrong reasons.

PO: I met Dimitriy Gutov at Documenta 12 and of course I have read *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*¹³ by Lifshitz. It was an important book for Lukacs, of course. I found the work Gutov showed with David Riff around Reading Marx, at the 2007 Venice Biennale very interesting. It relates to the distinction I drew earlier between using

¹² Karl Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1974

¹³ Michail Lifshitz, *Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, Pluto Press, London, 1973

philosophy as artistic material and intertwining philosophy with critical discourse, and in particular, the attempt to produce productive and interesting relations between these two uses of philosophical material. They are doing this with the philosophical material of Marx, and they are functioning at an intellectual level, keeping it alive as a discourse, using it critically, but also using it as an artistic material. In the work that was in the Venice Biennale, in the Arsenale, the staging of their reading group, the group seems to function as a transfer between these two realms. From the point of view of intellectual work, the reading group is an established cultural form in its own right, but from point of view of art, it figures itself as a kind of ritual, a kind of post-Dadaist and futurist type of performance. From point of view of its critical use, it is a reproduction of the philosophical resource of Marx. This relation between these spheres is very interesting.