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Does Critical Activism Matter?

The Concept of Horizon and the Radical Desire for Transversality

It is time to radically rethink the question of the political – is how contemporary theorist Enrique Dussel explained the motivation to write his *20 Tesis de política* (20 Theses on Politics) four years ago. In one of his theses he precisely stated that “the radical transmutation” of the political system is actually a “response to new interventions by the oppressed and excluded” (Dussel, 2008: 112); in other words, it relies on the other places and impulses of the political, or those which are dedicated to engaging in critical, namely liberating actions.

I will start my reflections from this very specific angle. As my entry of re-vision I have taken “Women’s House”, a project created by Sanja Iveković that was in advance of and without inhibition, unjustifiable in the prevailing political light. Entitled “A work-in-progress” (1998–2002) and developed internationally in association with different shelters for women who have been victims or survivors of male violence in Luxembourg, Bangkok and Pristina, the project had its first appearance as a public event on the main square in Zagreb in 1998.

The art research project consisted of several significantly related parallel activities: an installation, a presentation of the moulds of the faces of each of the women from the Autonomous Women’s House Zagreb, accompanied by their respective personal stories, along with video presentations, lectures and postcards given to passers-by. But the most embarrassing part was the floor plan of the House, namely the first shelter for women victims of violence in Croatia. By literally drawing the floor plan of the 200m² of the existing shelter on the surface of the main square, namely, by (re)inscribing violence into a public space, and by mapping the public space with existing violence, Sanja Iveković consciously displaced the issue of violence against women, shifting it from the private to the public by making it “visible”, and resisted the logic of a homogenous and patriarchal structure of violence itself by confronting its private and public face(s). With this act she opened up questions approaching the epistemological shift before today’s contemporary artistic practice. Along with addressing the demand to the city’s political authorities to support women who needed such a shelter in order to survive, she simultaneously claimed for the possibility of unframing the discussions regarding violence against women. Its real and symbolic representation such as domestic violence’s “invisibility” and public mimicry embedded by heterosexist norms and stereotypes and the co-habitation of male and militaristic violence within a concrete space-time framework signified the “normality” of its existence on a local as well as global scale, very often voided of any social/spatial or historical interconnectedness, and therefore of any appeal for response/-ibility. With this public event Sanja Iveković also turned a critical eye to the efforts of women trying to gain control over their lives that underlie the discriminatory relation between gender(s) and power to the greatest extent.

The first question that appears when rethinking her work yet again not only addresses its ethical and political potency, but how this type of artistic practice activates a place from where one is able to speak “that unspoken”, to ask the questions which, through their critical texture, allow the creation of a politic/-ality of spaces; more precisely, through which types of procedures, by which critical codes or production of meanings, through which modes of discursive as transversal activities, by use of what critical lenses?

Certainly, we are in the terrain of exploring critical activism, where in order to articulate a particular problem we simultaneously face the multiple (“urgent matters”) problems and anxieties of the complex social realm(s), along with its contested histories created by dominant, or rather hege-

monic power matrices and its maps of human suffering, oppressed communities and subjugated knowledge. Alongside the problem of public space, or public as political space, the above-mentioned project by Sanja Ivekovi clearly outlines two concerns on which I would like to focus. The first is embedded within the syntagm “pedagogy of discomfort” as both an exploring critical method and a tool for approaching and articulating liberating knowledge through critical consciousness; the second is connected with the resistant drive of different public (artistic, feminist, civil, peace etc.) activities that have produced distinctive heterogeneous spaces as alternative or counter ones. Or, spaces “without permission”, if I may borrow the energizing slogan of street art activism in San Francisco during the nineties.

The question of how to transform our discomfort invoked and perpetuated constantly through the normality of various types of human damage across the globe (exploitative practices, oppression, “modern slavery”, destruction of human dignity, humility, loss, unbearable human wounds) into other practices, as Walter D. Mignolo posed in his endeavour to conceptualise “the grammar of de-coloniality” (Mignolo, 2007: 449-514) as a basis for a “critical cosmopolitanism”, comprises two inseparable procedures. On one hand, to work on unfolding the concept of coloniality that, according to Walter Mignolo and Anibal Quijano, involves the coloniality of knowledge and of being (gender, subjectivity, subjectivity and knowledge) as an extension of coloniality of the political, namely economic power (Mignolo, *ibid*, 451); and, on the other hand, to enter within the educational framework, as Michalinos Zembylas & Megan Boler wrote “the risky areas of contradictory and ambiguous ethical and moral differences” (Zembylas & Boler, 2002:2) in order to see and act beyond the normal, namely, normative guidelines referring to hetero-normativism, nationalism, racism, patriotism, and beliefs or “habits of mind” (a phrase by John Dewey) linked with it. In other words – if I follow Zembylas & Boler’s explanation further – to see the world actively and consciously is to be made uncomfortable.

Looking back to the work of some other feminists, both theorists and cultural activists, from Audre Lorde to bell hooks and Toni Morrison, from Ana Mendieta to Sara Suleri and Trinh T. Minh-ha, I can recognise the various ways the idea of “pedagogy of discomfort” has been presented by opening and extending the possibility to challenge so-called comfort zones in order to oppose, to shape inquiry, to act, to create. “The ceaseless war against dehumanisation” is how Trinh T. Minh-ha (Minh-ha, 2007:197) clearly explained an appeal to another sensibility and another consciousness of the condition of “marginality”. This appeal requires new forms of subjectivities and a relationship to others in the same way, for Walter Mignolo, a de-colonial epistemic shift presupposes moving to other principles, to knowledge and understanding, to other-universality, namely toward “a geo- and body politics of knowledge ” (Mignolo, *ibid*, 453).

However, the critical epistemology we are addressing here is always a project that deals both with a positional perspective that concerns gender, racial or political dimensions of one’s own subjectivity as well as with the complexity of creative radical work in favour of social change, or to produce transformative knowledge that leads to transgressive social action. Different counter-hegemonic processes as well as different counter-discourses function within these procedures of critical activism. I will argue that regardless of how and within which place an act or an idea appears and how it creates a mode of transversality, from art toward active protest, from civil activism toward artistic conceptualisation, from the poetics of the mind toward human experience, a notion of criticality (Kincheloe, 2008) as a critical exercise of awareness of this particular moment is what matters. Evolving criticality, according to Joe L. Kincheloe, engages various senses and human abilities in order to incorporate a subjugated perspective (feminist, antiracist, anticolonial etc.) in rethinking the multiple reality beyond dominant cultural practices that moves human beings to a new level of cognition” (Kincheloe, 2008: 52-53) and new forms of connected-

ness. In this regard, spaces or network-becoming spaces (Kaši , 2006) function simultaneously as an inquiry of invitation and a call to action by which counter-cartographies take place.

What do I mean by counter-cartographies? Precisely those real, sensual, imaginary meeting points where both modes of acting, dismantling and resisting the arrogance of hegemonic violent normality that caught us in the position – and which Irit Rogoff so powerfully expressed as the “multi-inhabitation of a problematic” (Rogoff, 2000: 35) as well as the multiplicity of its effects, go together. As an example, consider the following: The bodily resistance to war as an artistic ritual of disobedience that the Women in Black (Žene u crnom) created every Wednesday on the city square in Belgrade in the nineties during the war in the former Yugoslavia was a joint bodily thought, desire and space of resistance that produced a web of political spaces through the crossing of borders, at the same time engaging and creating an international women’s solidarity network. It is always this very moment of critically aware connectedness, a kind of contact-zone as human zone, that evolves various layers of applied work in order to achieve and expose critical stands accompanied by emotional investment and radical commitment – in order to move to cognition as a liberating act, if I refer once more to Kincheloe’s notion of criticality.

When Bill Ashcroft elaborated the idea of horizon as a possibility, he was thinking precisely of this moment, signifying that the contextual horizon as both spatial and temporal “initiates a process of transversal by the act of consciousness”; or, following his words: “We do not only see that the horizon is there (in metaphoric space) but move through it (in time) in the process of contextualising the object of meaning.” (Ashcroft, 2001:185). What I found to be the most powerful and most intriguing of these moments is the “collective witnessing” of transformation (Zembylas & Boler, *ibid*, 7) as a liberating meeting place of connectedness, but above all, as a political act.

If I try to embrace the various resistant voices of women across the globe (from the “joint performative voice” of Women in Black to various kinds of testimonies as a distinctive mode of El Taller’s alternative courts of justice) by which women testify, scream, remind, evoke, expose, denounce, disturb, challenge, transgress, I can experience this exceptional moment fully. Desiring “voice” as an enactment, in the Butlerian sense, re-signifies and re-articulates the possibilities for speaking and hearing and therefore enables a radical desire for transversality to take place.

Bearing in mind Bill Ashcroft’s thoughts on horizon as a productive threshold of the political, I would like to go back to Enrique Dussel’s thoughts on the political. By political places as places of possible transformation and liberation, Enrique Dussel refers primarily to the various places within which actors create serious and continuous “critical political justice claims” to defend a reason given for an action. To quote Dussel: “So now we do not refer to liberty but instead to liberation as a process, as the negation of a point of departure, and as a tension pressing toward a point of arrival. (Dussel1, *ibid*, 137).” In my view critical activism creates this very tension to be exciting and, I hope, promising.

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