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*What is a Theorist?*

Undone

A theorist is one who has been undone by theory.

Rather than the accumulation of theoretical tools and materials, models of analysis, perspectives and positions, the work of theory is to unravel the very ground on which it stands. To introduce questions and uncertainties in those places where formerly there was some seeming consensus about what one did and how one went about it. In the context of a question regarding what an artist might be, I would want to raise the question of what a theorist might be, to signal how inextricably linked these existences and practices might be. The old boundaries between making and theorizing, historicizing and displaying, criticizing and affirming have long been eroded. Artistic

practice is being acknowledged as the production of knowledge and theoretical and curatorial endeavors have taken on a far more experimental and inventive dimension, both existing in the realm of potentiality and possibility rather than that of exclusively material production. The former pragmatic links in which one area “serviced” another have given way to an understanding that we face cultural issues in common and produce cultural insights in common. Instead of “criticism” being an act of judgment addressed to a clear cut object of criticism, we now recognize not just our own imbrication in the object or the cultural moment but also the performative nature of any action or stance we might be taking in relation to it. Now we think of all of these practices as linked in a complex process of knowledge production instead of the earlier separation into creativity and criticism, production and application. If one shares this set of perspectives then one cannot ask the question of “what is an artist?” without asking “what is a theorist?”

The narrative of theoretical unraveling, of being undone, is a journey of phases in which the thought we are immersed in is invalidated: those moments of silent epiphany in which we have realized that things might not necessarily be so, that there might be a whole other way to think them, moments in which the paradigms we inhabit cease to be self legitimating and in a flash are revealed to be nothing more than what they are, paradigms. In my own particular case this was a journey from a discipline called art history, via great roads of critical,

theoretical study to some other and less disciplined place which for the moment and very provisionally we might call “Visual Culture.”

Furthermore, I come to the formations of visual culture from a slightly different perspective of cultural difference, and it is one of the privileges of the culturally displaced that their view is always awkward and askance, never frontally positioned, and often exists in an uneasy relation to dominant paradigms. Initially I came from a long, conventional, and very anti-intellectual training in art history which left me at its end at a complete loss on how to navigate the interstices between who I was, what I did, and the world that I inhabited.

In my own particular case the distance between these three was such that fairly acceptable exercises in stretching and expanding a professional practice to make it accommodate one's concerns seem in retrospect to have not been able to bridge the gaps. Therefore in the first instance my attention was caught by what possibilities there might be for formulating a project not out of a set of given materials or existent categories, but out of what seemed at each historical moment a set of urgent concerns. Roughly speaking these emerged for me as:

- × in the 1980s a concern with gender and sexual difference which resulted in an exploration of feminist epistemologies;
- × in the 1990s a concern with colonialism, race, and cultural difference which resulted in trying to take on the authority

of “geography” as a body of knowledge with political implications;

- × and currently, a concern with questions of democracy and of what modes—parliamentarian and performative—might be open to us to take part in it, which I am currently thinking about as an exploration of participation and of what it means to take part in visual culture beyond the roles it allots us as viewers or listeners.

Obviously I am speaking of a long journey of some twenty years now, which has included encounters with, on the one hand, the ways in which global politics constantly reformulate and reformat themselves and on the other, tremendously exciting encounters with critical theory that asserted that things aren't necessarily what they seem and gave me the tools to see through them.

But have no fear, I am not about to rehearse upon you the long march from structuralism to Deleuze with detours through feminism, psychoanalysis, and colonialism. Instead I am concerned with the dynamics of loss, of giving up, and of moving away and of being without. These dynamics are for me a necessary part of my understanding of visual culture, for whatever it may be it is not an accumulative, additive project in which bits of newly discovered perspectives are pasted on to an existing structure, seemingly augmenting and enriching it, seemingly making it acceptable to the pressures of the times. In my own