

## Ghetto Child

As a 24-hour facebooker, psychotic tweeter, part-time electronic musician and all-around digital native, I'm probably the least likely candidate amongst my friends to call the internet a ghetto. But as art criticism has rapidly disappeared from print outside of art world specific publications, I find it alarmingly short-sighted to see how quietly into the night criticism was herded over to a completely new medium, almost entirely unquestioningly. Like Dylan going electric, David Lynch working with video and James Franco's art career, significant shifts in media definitively transform the shape of the message and what ends up in print left on the train, at the laundromat or sitting on the café table is undeniably different that what ends up in a Twitter feed or as a tumblr meme. What should be mapped out is how print and digital criticism can utilize medium specificity given their respective fixity and placelessness, the importance of cultivating "regional dialects" and how images that are generated by exhibitions (and circulated digitally) are also generative of exhibition practices.<sup>1</sup>

What a curator like Charles Esche so diplomatically terms as the "planetary consciousness" of 2012's art world, I would call "globalized capitalist" in the good old fashioned Reagan/Bush/Clinton tradition. The uniform use of English in the art world and even more left publications like e-flux<sup>2</sup>, the biennializing of artistic production in art schools worldwide<sup>3</sup>, and the promotion of cosmopolitanism amongst curators<sup>4</sup>, historians and critics among other factors, have contributed to a two way mirror of false unification in art world politics, practice and actual material production. Art begins to look like art whether you see it in Korea, Venice, Sharjah, or the Americas. Contemporary art looks like an eternal meme, as now contentless gestures, the art-not-art "casual sculpture" that I would argue as embodied by a gesture that constantly appears in university galleries, alternative spaces and museums of contemporary art—a stick, often painted but sometimes not, leaning against a wall.

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond the boundaries of digital work and "internet aware art", the seemingly "ideal" exhibition, installation image or .jpg of a specific work lacks any visible mark or geography

<sup>2</sup> many of the e-flux ilk are convinced that there is a specific art world jargon called "globish" that describes the English that circulates around the art world—Jennifer Allen's essay "Speak Easy" (<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/speak-easy/>) is almost frightening in its warm embrace and unquestioning forgiveness for the propagation of the colonizer's language

<sup>3</sup> Students are constantly asked to think of what a work would look like in a gallery, and to create works that are both personal and universal, without even a rudimentary idea of the myriad politics of exhibition practices and often without being taught the differences between galleries and museums—Boris Groys' "The Politics of Installation" is more elucidating in 10-page than this authors' 7 years of arts education

<sup>4</sup> Martha Nussbaum's "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" validly argues against nationalistic pride and instead advocates goodwill and good citizenship that allows for an individual to be at home anywhere and subvert arbitrary difference in favor of acceptance—however, in curatorial practice, cosmopolitanism has become a vehicle for elitist jet-setting, superficial pseudo-ethnography of international art scenes and has re-inscribed the class boundaries that have long plagued the art world

The internet has medium-specificity, something long understood by both educated and casual hackers, veterans of Arpanet and the more savvy of the younger branch of the millenials. It should be no contradiction to be both a digital native and an advocate of criticism in print. Rather than having all critical material being dumped into the annals of google, weekly printed columns of art criticism could be an important localized cultural pulse or at the very least a magnet for a richer discussion than can be found amongst the merely descriptive material of most online and what is left of printed “criticism”.

One of the arguments that I use to uphold the importance of printed art criticism is due to the power of short-range broadcast media. Short-range broadcast media, by its very definition (I’m talking here of newspapers, radio, public access tv) addresses a geographically limited audience. For this reason, working within this media (to any degree of success or receptiveness) requires taking into account the audience that could potentially be tuned in and to offer locally relevant discourse.

Just as the art installation has marked its territory of a different political ilk (through its specific dealings with space and bodies) than that of the art object (which can be displaced, transported and commodified in a very different way), the “site-specific” criticism of online publication is inevitably bound to function differently than criticism that is invested in cultivating regional dialects.

I would never advocate a “dumbing-down” of ideas, nor would I suggest the erection of rigid theoretical or intellectual territorial boundaries, the hyperbolic antithesis to rampant academicized cosmopolitanism. Something close to Kenneth Frampton’s “Critical Regionalism”<sup>5</sup> could be a useful and important conceptual foundation for distilling “regional dialects” in contemporary art. Instead of encouraging artists to create for a presumed general audience of an international biennial, an important role for critics could be to mark out the emergent “regional dialects” that arise over time from either individual or groups of artists working within a given geographical context for a certain amount of time. I don’t meant to mythologize the geographical, or exalt the superficial uses of geographical or street images but to also say that the regional and local inevitably find their way into the work of any artist. Although the digitally published text is jettisoned to a utopian nowhere, accessible to anyone (except perhaps China<sup>6</sup>) the writing and the work that it discusses nevertheless are generated from some kind aggregate of locally-derived phenomena.

This isn’t some conservative call for the nostalgic age where great writers like Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin or even Baudelaire published cultural criticism in popular media. For all the perennial Chicken Little-ing and the claims of doomsayers that any medium will ever be eradicated, we still have trains, radio and even (perhaps the biggest LOL of all) Major Record Labels. All these things have

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<sup>5</sup> “Towards a Critical Regionalism”—here Frampton uses the example of air-conditioning and central heating as offering architects and planners to ignore the environmental realities of a region in their design. Frampton also mentions the use of artificial lighting in art galleries as muting the poetics of light and space possible by the introduction of natural light in exhibition spaces.

<sup>6</sup> ;)

adapted. But instead of adapting, becoming sharper and more assertive, contemporary art criticism has become coy when it comes to judgment and relentlessly raising its collective hands to the sky and asking what can be done. I'd like to come out and plainly say, "Let's try short range broadcast media".

In "The Politics of Installation" Boris Groys describes art fairs and exhibitions as no longer for a cultural elite or in service of art buyers and instead becoming a part of mass culture as administrated and organized by the artist. For Groys, installation becomes political in the artists' use of space and a public to generate site specific work that cannot be exchanged. The artist in this case refuses the elite, who would once be responsible for the purchase and exchange of artwork, and through an administration of space, generates a democracy through authorship. However, through the propagation of images of shows from an unlimited geographical range of exhibitions, the general neutrality of exhibition spaces and the absence of any spatio-temporal significance in images of artworks, internet art criticism does promote an elite. With sites looking as neutral as gallery walls, images without any spatial specificity are able to be removed from a context and arranged alongside other images just as paintings can be purchased from galleries and arranged along with any of the buyers' home furnishings. The ideal .jpg of a painting is unmarred by specific lighting conditions or its location in space. Any shot of the work in space is typically only supplementary and shown in an effort to describe the scale of the given artwork.<sup>7</sup> By not being able to quantify and therefore propagate the experience of installation work, work that can be bought and sold, travel, move and be removed from the context of its exhibition becomes an easier material subject for internet art criticism to deal with. Art that can be distilled and reduced into a single image subjects itself to the tenets of commodity exchange. In this way, there is almost no difference between looking at an artists website, looking at installation images on a gallery website, and visiting the gallery itself. Writing that doesn't pique a viewer interest or necessitate a visit to the exhibition alongside images that tend to summarize the work(s) of art on exhibit tend to be generative of exhibitions that are disappointing in their use of actual exhibition space. The exhibition becomes merely a foundation for the creation of installation images that generate more physical exhibitions for the artist. Having access to images of inaccessible places is a useless and inert state of affairs which can generate only further inertness. Reading about exhibitions in Tokyo is interesting but if the only things t (as there is no local art criticism) the critics' job becomes to merely describe with one or two .jpgs and 500 words that can and perhaps should do nothing more than read like the opening of an uninteresting short story.

Boris Groys describes the installation as dependent on institutional support for generating frameworks to house the work or for the work to react to, this kind of

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<sup>7</sup> Brian O'Doherty "Inside the White Cube describes the aesthetics of installation shots. Your humble author would describe a few that should bring an image to the reader's mind—Pensive young woman, Bespectacled man holding drink, and once in awhile, child pointing in awe

short range media would be dependent upon institutional support. Net criticism is more like painting in that as painting's only demand is that canvas continue to be woven and oil continues to be refined, art criticism online is dependent upon domain hosting and, I don't know, the cloud maybe. This accounts for much of the utopian feeling of online criticism and as someone vehemently opposed to the market who also directed a vocally anti-capitalist gallery devoted to the experiential, I'm skeptical of running cover under the umbrella of an institution. But there are institutional frameworks that offer something locally important and an active critical discourse in the Chicago Tribune, the Philadelphia Inquirer or the Baltimore Sun for example, would be able to track the course of these cities and their cultural output—keeping them from being merely jumping off points for artists who as of now are pressured to embrace the real-estate nightmare and ever-present gentrification of New York. Local cultural criticism from this standpoint is as green as rooftop gardening, sustainable and perhaps better for the local economy.

This digital native culture, with ever cheaper and constantly obsolescent devices, supposedly short-attention spans (I don't buy into this one) and the speed of networking, searching and reposting, may not believe in the future in the way that previous generations (the generations that clamored for more, better and faster and blame surprisingly well-adjusted millennials who find themselves born into it for all of the problems) believed in the future. This essay risks nihilism at this point, but I assert with complete sincerity that, just as theater can offer a different experience than cinema and just as the physicality of audiocassettes saw its long-deserved renaissance alongside the release of the ipod touch, there are things that the daily newspaper has to offer that the constantly aggregating and personally tailored Google search can't. Cultivating regional art dialects will further enrich and perhaps shock the system of contemporary art back into a place that can be responsive to critical (critical as in temporally urgent) needs as opposed to making broadstroked attempts to connect to fickle international tastes. Thanks to networked communication, an international art world is always at hand in enriching ways, but unfortunately, despite 2.0s offering of an incredible amount of user-generated content, the relationship is by definition lop-sided. The international can be seen by the local but the local is all but invisible to the international. Though it can and will be archived and stored both digitally and physically, the material publication of the newspaper has a social finality, definitive broadcast range and limited temporality, the appeal and importance of which can begin to reveal themselves when forced into the harsh light of contemporary media practices that demand print media adapt and provide something that digital information technology cannot.