

The Power of Art

Events



From left: Jonatan Habib Engqvist, David Joselit, Laura Wexler, Boris Groys and Meena Alexander. 'The Power of Art', 11 July 2009

'The Bremen German literature conference was highly eventful,' Roberto Bolaño reports in *2666*: 'Pelletier, backed by Morini and Espinoza, went on the attack like Napoleon at Jena, assaulting the unsuspecting German Archimboldi scholars, and the downed flags of Pohl, Schwarz and Borchmeyer were soon routed to the cafés and taverns of Bremen.'

In reality, few conferences are this dramatic. The fraternal complicities of academic politics create echo chambers more readily than they do intellectual routs. The format is familiar: a couple of superstars assemble their various allies and, in the liveliest cases, work up an exhilarating spectacle from which everyone goes home happy. The audience is flattered with the impression that something radical is happening; the speakers enjoy the prestige that comes with exposure. Seldom, alas, are two opposed networks brought together for combat.

Held last week at the Drawing Center in New York, 'The Power of Art' was something different. Also sadly bereft of martial incident, the eccentricity of the programme, which included both the brain scientist Bruce Wexler and imp of perversity Boris Groys, produced something different from another well-rehearsed event. Organized, in the words of John Welchman, by 'the irrepressible Warren Neidich', a Berlin-based artist and curator with an apparently unquenchable appetite for cultural theory, the peculiarity of what was to follow was foreshadowed by the chair of the first

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session, the poet and English professor Meena Alexander, who used the word 'feast' three times in her opening remarks, finishing with the phrase 'marvelously delicious', before spending eight minutes reading out the various different speakers' credentials. The latter gesture raised some questions of its own about the power of titles. Perhaps it would be easier if everyone in the cultural sphere simply agreed on a system and began wearing epaulettes?

'The Power of Art' derived its title from *Art Power*, Groys' 2008 collection of essays. The book argued that art has 'always strived to capture the most absolute power' and that the radical pluralism which underpins contemporary art follows naturally from the death of God, which is to say, the death of transcendence. As the Berlin-based painter Alexis Knowlton remarked during her own lecture, the conference also shared its title with a 2006 BBC television series presented by Simon Schama.

Knowlton's paper was the breeziest and most polemical of the day. Under the title 'Intention Attention', she delivered an engaging anti-curator screed, with the enemy figured in the form of 'the middleman': a no-talent thematizing schemer comparable to sub-prime mortgage dealers. The middleman, Knowlton claimed, worked to systematically corrupt the purity of artistic intentions in the service of crafting false points of convergence. The talk was as entertaining as it was critically dubious. Accompanying herself with a slide-projector, the high-point arrived when she pulled up a picture of Daniel Birnbaum looking leonine, and called him bad names to much mirth and applause.

If Knowlton was the least recognizable name on the programme, the most recognizable was undoubtedly Groys, who spoke under the title 'Mass Culture, Phase 2', and dominated the first session with his nihilist irony. The contemporary situation, he claimed, was 'exactly the opposite' to the one theorized by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). There are no longer any spectators, or even an audience. 'We are all on stage', he argued from the stage, as we watched from the audience, and wrote down what he said. Reflecting on the profusion of the blogs and the mysteries of the readership, Groys mused, 'I am convinced they are being written for God,' later clarifying, 'who, of course, is dead.'

Groys spoke third out of four in the morning session, following the Yale professor Laura Wexler's opening disquisition on 'Pregnant Pictures' and her colleague David Joselit's noble attempt to formulate 'The Laws of Images'. Completing the set was Jonatan Habib Engqvist's dramatically-titled 'Long Live Degenerate Art!' The quartet then came together for a morning panel, which was too brief to throw any additional light, except for one excellently

observed point by Wexler. The embodiment of contemporary ideology, she suggested, is no longer the Althusserian policeman shouting 'Hey you!' but the traffic cop, waving cars past a car crash, affectlessly repeating, 'Move along, nothing to see here.' Wexler attributed the insight to one of her Yale colleagues but a quick Google search reveals that it seems to have been made by several people independently, including Jacques Ranciere, Paul Helliwell (in the course of attacking Ranciere) and Cai Guo-Qiang.

The American Studies professor Wexler avoided contemporary art topics to criticize the representation of pregnant bodies in the mass media, from Annie Leibovitz's hugely controversial photograph of the pregnant Demi Moore, published in *Vanity Fair* in 1991 (vendors outside the permissive Sodom of New York City insisted in sheathing the issue in a protective layer of plastic), to the more recent images of Thomas Beattie - the pregnant man. Wexler claimed that the images of Moore, which depicted the bronzed actress as powerful and in command (glittering diamonds placed across her body, her hands protecting her belly-product), slotted into a neoliberal paradigm of defensive ownership. The Beattie photographs apparently broke with this paradigm, by showing the expectant father/mother proudly displaying his/her swollen stomach without the same sense of protectiveness. I wasn't wholly convinced by this, but Wexler's concluding speculative question was well-judged: will the image of a pregnant man change an abortion debate, when that debate rests on men telling women what they can do with their bodies?

While Wexler's paper was essentially a single-issue concern, Joselit was more ambitious. The chair of the Yale Art History department opened by establishing that he meant the idea of 'laws' in the sense of physical laws, like the laws of thermodynamics, rather than moral or legal laws. Talking about placement, source and frequency, and itemizing three laws in particular, Joselit proposed that: images engender, by producing new images and by establishes genres of being; images crystallize as icons; and icons display inertia. His main point of departure was the unregulated documentation of Abu Ghraib; his hero was Thomas Hirschorn and his collage *Visions of a New Millennium* (2002), which Joselit interpreted as having the Brechtian aim of compelling its viewers to take a position. The main distinction was between 'governed' and 'ungoverned' images, the latter corresponding to the images which proliferate beyond state control (as with the Abu Ghraib pictures), and the former represented by Hirschorn's reproduced pictures of viscera.

After the brief panel, and then a break for lunch, Meena Alexander returned and resumed proceedings with an impromptu reading of some of her war poems. She was

followed by Knowlton, and then the Swiss curator and doctoral student Susanne Neubauer, who delivered a scholarly disquisition on Channa Horwitz and Paul Thek. John Welchman then brought up the field.

Part of the Thatcher-inspired academic exodus to California in the early '80s which drove a raft of Leftist-minded UK art historians (Peter Wollen, Victor Burgin, Laura Mulvey, T.J. Clark) to the American West Coast, Welchman began by revealing that he has known conference organizer Neidich for 30 years. His erudite, jolly paper focussed on the finer points of Paul McCarthy's ongoing 'Pirate Project' (started in 2004) and ended with a dramatic *Usual Suspects*-like twist, in which McCarthy was revealed to be none other than... Walt Disney: both represent myth-generators *par excellence*, the former is only the dark side of the latter.

In the aftermath of this bombshell, and a brief cigarette break, Welchman returned to introduce the hybrid third session, which opened with a scholarly talk on the invention of aesthetics by Sven Olov Wallenstein, the prolific Swedish philosopher and translator, and editor of the brilliant geek-philosophy and art journal *Site*. Wallenstein had arrived in New York armed with copies of the new issue; the cover star was Husserl.

Time constraints prevented Warren Neidich himself for speaking; scheduled to lecture on 'neuropolitics' his remarks were restricted to a few brief closing remarks that gestured towards a synthesis, that, under the circumstances, could not be made. Realistically, an additional day, devoted entirely to discussions, would have been needed to digest this sprawling smorgasbord, and that day apparently wasn't available. Nonetheless, problems were posed and tentative new correspondences established, and on these grounds the conference was undeniably a success.

Following the close of the conference, on a terrace overlooking Manhattan, the conversation turned to darker matters. Groys, a charming egomaniac, discussed how much the deceased Heiner Müller had liked his book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1983) and recalled the experience of staying in Elena Ceaușescu's bedroom three weeks after she was murdered by a vengeful mob. Meanwhile Wallenstein, under pressure from Engqvist, told Žižek stories. 'He told me once over dinner,' the Swede noted, 'that his single greatest ambition was to write more books than Derrida. He will fail, of course. Derrida wrote, what, 80 books?' Reflecting on how his own reading habits were changing with age, the philosopher mused that the day was approaching where he would start reading biographies of dead Roman Emperors.

Daniel Miller

Daniel Miller is a writer in Berlin.