

WHOSE DOOR? WHOSE ALIEN?

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This session comes under the intriguing, but rather enigmatic, heading of “Knocking on an alien’s door”. Enigmatic, because it is not specified whose door it is, nor who is doing the knocking. No one is an alien to themselves; one is always someone else’s alien. So are we to understand that it is Africa which is knocking on Europe’s door, in the hope of being let in? Or is it Europe which, forswearing at least symbolically its tradition of knocking *down* Africa’s doors, has begun to knock *on* them, in the hope of finding someone inside, who is able to help it renew its flagging creative energies? In Bob Dylan’s song, it was Heaven’s door – that is, God’s door – that was being knocked on, and it was Bob who was doing the knocking. On the basis of those power relations, it is not difficult to decide who is the owner of the door, and who is standing before it, knocking.

Regardless of whom the door belongs to, it remains a door; that is, an unambiguously explicit symbol of separation, particularly when one has to knock on it – because that implies that the door is, for now anyway, closed. A closed door produces envy as well as suspicion, because of the interests which it both conceals and protects. I’d like to say a few words, first about closed doors and secondly about the effects that they engender. Let me reframe the door, so to speak, in slightly different terms – in terms closer to the geopolitical reality, of interest to us here.

We live in partitioned times. The sundering of common territories and histories, in the name of imaginary ethnic imperatives – and nothing is more real than the effects of the imaginary – has been one of the most traumatic and yet paradigmatic experiences of the past century; so widespread, indeed, that our age seems better served, as the Indian philosopher Ranabir Samaddar has argued, by the phrase “partitioned times” than the more prevalent “post-colonial times”. From India to Korea to Ireland, to Palestine – not to mention here, in Ethiopia-Eritrea – the vivisected regions that colour the world map have been shaped in a substantive way by great-power strategies of partition, exerted as the institutionalised form of the universally dominant geopolitical will. Partitioning, however, is by no means confined to geopolitics; rather, it spans virtually every field and discipline of contemporary human activity. Art, in particular, lives partitioned from other forms of intellectual creativity and symbolic production. Which is why many well-meaning artists, in seeking to draw attention to the tragedy, the inanity, of partition of some description have inadvertently ended up reproducing partition’s deadening logic, producing images of partition, without adequately attending to how our partitioned times encompass all walks of contemporary human endeavour, including artistic representation. Art, of course, cannot simply wish partitioning away: its symbolic privileges and market value are upheld by an economy of scarcity, which admittedly ensures that art remains the object of particularly attentive scrutiny. Yet such artificially sustained scarcity, by protecting the highly valuable, commodified art object from the realm of mass-production and distribution (thus ensuring its exchange value), also deprives it of its use-value – that is, of its capacity to do much damage to the dominant order of signs. All which allows partitioning to pursue its work, unhindered.

Personally, I am interested in art practices which take the “tautological imperative” inherent to conceptual art, and wrest it from the logic of scarcity, infiltrating the economy of the real. But our concern here, above all, has been with representation – and our common desire and demand for a more equitable representation of what for now remains ‘peripheral’ art practices. Giving visibility to what remains invisible; give a share to those without a share. This is a political question, but it is not the only way – and perhaps not the most imaginative way – of composing our desire, envisaging the future. Is the goal to get to the other side of the partition line? By definition, partition lines only keep us out, when we want to be in. In yesterday’s session, we considered Venice and Kassel as possibly

universal goals. *Goals?* They are certainly not my goals; nor is it my objective somehow to reform them, by focusing on making them more inclusive. If numerically perfect, equitable representation in major exhibitions were achieved, would that make them better? It could not make them worse, but fundamentally, from my perspective, such reform would merely reinforce the system of exclusion, by making it more insidious. The problem is at that level.

Admittedly, knocking on such doors is politically important. For, like all partition lines, the border between visibility and invisibility is subject to what I yesterday referred to as “police” controls. Here, too, art must consider its own paradoxical regime of visibility: for if it is highly visible, as art, it will be scarcely visible – that is, only within a certain circuit of visibility. However, in sacrificing its visibility, art eludes control, prescription and regulation – in short, it eludes the “police”. As Jacques Rancière put it in his now classic definition,

“... the police is thus above all a bodily order that defines the partition between means of doing, means of being and means of saying, which entails that certain bodies are assigned, by their very name, to such and such a place, such and such a task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable, which determines that some activities are visible and that some are not; that some speech is heard as discourse while other speech is heard as mere noise.”¹

Seen in this way, partitioning is not merely a profoundly political issue; challenging it is the very essence of democratic political struggle, both in the realm of geopolitics and the realm of art.

I sense that what the logic of partitioning has produced that is most perfidious, is a generalised regime of what I shall call *exhibition envy*. Why are we envious – and ever more envious – of these keynote exhibitions, as if there were somehow not enough to go around?

Envy is on the rise. It seems strange to say that about something as timeless – or at least as biblical – as envy, but, historically speaking, phenomena like envy tend to wax and wane, in keeping with broader economic trends. To acknowledge that is to recognise that envy is not so much a psychological category as an economic one; more precisely, it is the psychological reaction to a regime of scarcity.

I recently came upon a book by McKenzie Wark called *A Hacker Manifesto*.² A hacker, in Wark’s lexicon, is very different from the image of the super-specialised anarcho-programmer, which the term still conjures up for most people; indeed it was only in reading the book that I came to realise I too was a sort of hacker. Art critics, curators – and particularly those in so-called marginal contexts – are hackers. For a hacker, he claims, is someone who hacks into knowledge production networks of any kind, and liberates that knowledge from an economy of scarcity. In a world based on private property relations, scarcity is always being presented as if it were natural; but in the contemporary context, where intellectual property is the dominant property form, scarcity is artificial, counter-productive – and the bane of all hackers – for the simple reason that appropriating knowledge and information by no means deprives anyone else of it. This is a key issue in art-related practice – indeed, Wark discusses hacking as if it *were* an art practice – for the system of value-production in the mainstream artworld is also premised on an envy-fomenting regime of scarcity, underpinned by the author’s signature.

Wark hacks his rather unorthodox theory out of Marxism: like Marx, Wark believes human history can be conceptualised in terms of class relations and conflict. Today, he argues, this conflict is most acute between what he calls the “vectoralist” class (which has come to supplant the hegemony of the capitalist class) and the new productive class, that Wark describes as hackers. He derives this name for the new dominant class from its ownership of the “vectors” of our society. A vector is the means by which anything moves: vectors of transport move objects and subjects; vectors of communication move information. Hackers, on the other hand, are the abstract producers of all that flows through the vectors. For now, Wark admits, hackers, like artists, continue to regard one another enviously as rivals, rather than as fellow members of a class with shared interests – a problem that he elegantly side-steps by arguing that “*the hacker class does not need unity in identity*

¹ Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente*, Paris, Galilée, 1995, p. 51 (Author’s translation).

² McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004.

but seeks multiplicity in difference".³ In Wark's mind, it seems, hackers of the world need not so much unite as continue to untie, freeing knowledge from illusions of scarcity. For those who might find Wark's picture overly rosy, the book is full of accounts of actually existing zones of hacker liberty, including this gem from free software advocate and producer, Richard Stallman: "*It was a bit like the garden of Eden. It hadn't occurred to us not to co-operate.*"⁴

Wark's book, it seems to me, has everything to do with art, and can help us partially to refocus our discussion regarding the skewed relations between overdeveloped and underdeveloped artworlds. Of course the mainstream artworld is rife with envy from top to bottom, North to South; still, it would be rash simply to present artworlders as a bunch of jealousy-smitten strategists, intent on one-upmanship, like everyone else, if only because that would miss the key to the story, which is how the symbolic economies of the artworld mirror those of the world at large. The artworld is so good at the strategic exploitation of inequalities in symbolic capital (which it persists in referring to as 'talent', so as to sweeten the pill and give culture the airs of a natural science), and having artists and writers not merely accept, but actually *insist upon*, non-monetary remuneration and interpersonal competition – which is a fancy way of describing envy – that it has become a model that is studied in MBA-level management courses. But art also has an heuristic approach to the problem. Take one example: one of the vectors of access to the prestige economy of the international artworld is the English language. This point was underscored with corrosive and insolent matter-of-factness in 1992 by Zagreb conceptualist Mladen Stilinovi's embroidered work entitled *An Artist Who Speaks No English Is No Artist*. Whereas that sort of quip had critical overtones some fifteen years ago, it has today become a statement of mere fact. And this is the sense of Pristina-based artist Jakup Ferri's recent video piece of the same title: the artist, in a close-cropped head shot, addresses the viewer, apparently in English. The words, at any rate, are English and in profusion, but they appear strung together by some random alien logic, intent on pulling the language apart. The result is utter gibberish and the effect is dizzying to the point of nausea – like trying to walk a straight line while drunk. Indeed, one cannot but wonder if one is not slightly drunk, and seeks to concentrate more closely – to no avail. In this film, Ferri breaks with omnipresent "English envy", displacing scarcity with a deluge of surplus.

My plea, that we shake ourselves free of the economy of envy and start opening different doors without knocking, can easily be discounted as stemming from position of privilege. Because, of course, the experience of envy is as widespread as it is oppressive. It is so, because the experience of scarcity in the world is all too real. "*As more and more of nature becomes a quantifiable resource for commodity production, so the producing classes in the overdeveloped and underdeveloped world alike come to perceive the power the vectoral class has brought in the world: the power to steer development here or there at will, creating sudden bursts of productive wealth and, just as suddenly, famine, poverty, unemployment, and scarcity*".⁵ On a more positive note, however, Wark senses "*a detectable air of desperation in the work of the vectoral class, a constant anxiety about the durability of a commodified regime of desire built on a scarcity that has no necessary basis in the material world*".⁶ Scarcity, in other words, is the product of class rule, and not an objective fact of nature. That is an admittedly counterintuitive point of view. But until we can grasp that, envy, too, will appear an objective fact of interpersonal psychology. Perhaps in a pastoral society there is an objectively limited amount of arable land – though it is vastly greater than what is required to sustain human needs, and historically was transformed into a scarcity only through forced displacement and enclosures, as Olivier Razac has demonstrated in his devastating study on "the political history of barbed wire".⁷ Under industrial capitalism, scarcity was maintained by the cunning ploy of paying workers slightly higher wages, enabling them to buy back at the end of the day a portion of the goods they had just

³ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵ Ibid., p. 304.

⁶ Ibid., p. 299.

⁷ Olivier Razac, *Barbed Wire: A Political History*, (trans. from the French by Jonathan Kneight), New York, New Press, 2002.

finished producing. But under vectoral capitalism, scarcity has become hard to sell. *“The vectoral class commodifies information as if it were an object of desire, under the sign of scarcity. The producing classes rightly take all commodified information to be their own collective production. We, the producers, are the source of all the images, the stories, the wild profusions of all that culture becomes”*.⁸

And it is just that wild profusion which may well make scarcity itself a scarcity! This is truly the irony of ironies, because it is precisely that profusion which the vectoralist class relies on, to produce a surplus of desire (to consume), along with the scarcity of the desired object. There can be no fundamental limiting of the free productivity of the hacker class – whose role it is to fuel the free productivity of desire with images and stories, new vectors in which to channel them, new means of perceiving them – and so the system induces the very productivity that exceeds the commodity itself. Scarcity is destined to be outstripped by surplus, and it is worthwhile imagining the difference between an abstract theory of the productive development of human society, framed in terms of scarcity, and one premised on surplus. The first instance leads to legitimising a ruling class taking charge of scarce resources; the second insists on how the productive classes produce more than their immediate needs and are deprived of this surplus – and want it back. In this respect, the liberal economic theory of the scarcity of objects and the psychoanalytical theory of desire, as subjective lack – rather than as overbrimming, overflowing surplus – are one and the same theory ... and both reinforce the same door.

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⁸ See note above, p. 308.