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ART IN THE AGE OF VISUAL CULTURE
AND THE IMAGE

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8.

Dan Karlholm

Reality Art: the Case of Oda Projesi

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«What does it mean to speak of art today?»¹. This question addresses the need to connect or negotiate the reflective discourses on art with some (con)temporary platform of utterances. Just what is it, then, about today's art that is so different, so urgent to discuss? This paper deals with one instance within the present field of art, which, despite its flaws, poses a challenge to many of the ingrained notions and habits of mind that structure the dominant discourses of art history, aesthetics and visual culture.

To begin with, I would suggest that art is not the problem 'in speaking of art today'. From the high to the low, from the east to the west, from experimental to established, from the most subversive tactics to the top reactionary celebrations of the status quo – art is thriving. The concept of art is affirmed or reclaimed so frequently that no functional death can be diagnosed, whatever the theory says. But is not the theory, so to speak, from Hegel to Danto, Belting et al., itself «a thing of the past?»². It presupposed, also while questioning, a certain narrative development of art and a faith regarding art and history that is neither valid nor even informative anymore. It no longer makes

¹ The quotation is from Andrea Pinotti's Call for papers to the workshop at Gargnano del Garda, Italy, funded by the European Science Foundation entitled *Art in the Age of Visual Culture and the Image*. The title of my paper as delivered (April 7, 2005) was *Art, Visual Culture, and the Image – or Stagings of Reality*.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford 1988, vol. 1, p. 11. Danto's theory is best summarized in his 1997 book (note 4 below), but has been rehearsed and refined in numerous books and articles since the 1980s. Belting's views, in English translation, are to be found in *The End of the History of Art?*, Chicago 1987, and *Art History After Modernism*, Chicago 2003.

much sense, I would say, to speak of «postart»³, or to ponder our situation as being «after the end of art»⁴ since these phrasings preserve and confirm a teleological concept of art that we have largely left behind or lost. Are we not approaching a situation today where art is everywhere and around the clock, where art is almost anything we want it to be? Without beginning or end, without a mission, purpose or logic necessarily, and without a history powerful enough to determine its future configurations? Even if we equip the concept of art with permanent quotation marks, it cannot disguise the fact that a working definition of art is what binds the activities of the art world together. And what is the art world? Well: everything that has to do with art that is not art.

Furthermore, is not «the Age of Visual Culture and the Image» itself the locus of a problem⁵? Is this not, already, a dated formula? To determine our age – and who are we? – by a singular attribute is, of course, always problematic. Foregrounding the visual, moreover, appears increasingly excluding and limiting to me. And if an attribute may still be justified, would it not be more accurate to speak of hybridity, mixed media, *bricolage* and crossover or something multi-sensational than appeal to just one of our senses⁶?

What is at stake in speaking of art today, whether historical or contemporary, is not art, arguably, but the legitimacy of the received ways of speaking about it: Art History, Visual Culture/Visual Studies, *Bildwissenschaft*. We could add *Bildanthropologie*⁷, Visual Analysis, Visual Communication, Picture Theory, certain sections of Aesthetics, and more. All of them speak, in different ways, about art as well as non-art, thus forging different conceptions of art. None of them, however, is competent or sufficient to speak of a considerable amount of what goes by the name of art today. I will turn now to my example, before returning to my claim.

³ Reclaiming Allan Kaprow's term, Donald Kuspit argues that art «has been replaced by 'postart'» (*The End of Art*, Cambridge 2004, cover and abstract).

⁴ I am paraphrasing the title (and contention) of A.C. Danto, *Art after the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton 1997.

⁵ See note 1 above.

⁶ The postmodernist favorite 'hybridity' is perhaps better dropped, actually, since it presupposes some problematic blend of purities. By 'mixed media', I refer to W.J.T. Mitchell's remark in *Picture Theory*, Chicago 1994, that indeed 'all media are mixed media'. *Bricolage* has been used and abused by many, since invented by Claude Levi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* of 1962. The term 'crossover' is deliberately low, with its connotations to cocking and consumption. I am aware, finally, of the frequent precautions made, among those writing on visual culture, not to delimit this field exclusively to the visual or visible.

⁷ See H. Belting, *Bild-Antropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, Munich 2001.

My case in point of a significant trend in the contemporary art world is an exhibition of the Turkish group of artists Oda Projesi at the *Swedish Tensta art gallery* or *Kunsthalle* in the fall of 2004⁸. Oda Projesi, which literally means 'Room Project', consists of three women artists from Istanbul: Özge Acikkol, Günes Savas and Secil Yersel. Having worked together for a few years, they rented an apartment in the Galata district of Istanbul in 2000, from where they involved neighbors and invited artists to actively participate in various projects. While most of these projects were based in their own environment, with people they got to know over a longer period of time and with whom they share the language and many cultural codes, they have also exhibited elsewhere, including the Munich *Kunstverein* and some major biennales: Havana, Istanbul, Gwangju and Venice.

In Tensta on the outskirts of Stockholm, Oda Projesi used the exhibition space allotted to them for two months as a base camp of sorts for initiating a dialogue with the locals. During this period of time, the group was living in Tensta, a rather isolated, ethnically diverse suburban neighborhood. Roughly the first month was spent getting to know the place, and meet people, and slowly forming a tactic of operation. A month later, the exhibition formally opened to the public, i.e. to local people who wanted to participate in one way or another, and to people like myself, over-educated residents from the center of Stockholm, who occasionally spend an hour on the metro to encounter some new art in the so-called periphery.

What, then, was offered to the public(s) to experience? Having missed the opening, I was unable to try the meatballs, which were the result of a cooking contest between women not born in Sweden, and thus presumably relatively unfamiliar with this rather crude national dish. A professional food connoisseur eventually selected the winner. Why this was not entrusted to the locals, or to an art critic, I do not know. The serving of food is perhaps the defining paradigm, or ultimate cliché, of this kind of relational art, ever since Rirkrit Tiravanija's Thai dishes lured people in various parts of the world to enter his exhibitions⁹.

⁸ See the exhibition catalogue *Oda Projesi, Tensta konsthall, 17/8-24/10 2004*, with an interview as well as essays by Nina Möntman and Erden Kosova. For further information see their own website (www.odaprojesi.com) and perhaps the best article so far, M. Lind, *Actualisation of Space: The Case of Oda Projesi*, in C. Doherty (ed.), *Contemporary Art, from Studio to Situation*, London, 2004, pp. 109-121.

⁹ At the 1993 Venice Biennale Tiravanija arranged for people to make and consume powdersoup as part of his installation. Some years later artists offered massage to the pub-

The exhibition space, which pretty much consists of one big room, contained a number of stations where various everyday activities were taking place, or had taken place. The exhibits included, for example, well-thumbed catalogues from previous projects of the group. Normally such documentation would be available *apart* from the exhibition, but here it was inserted as *a part* of it. The word ‘exhibition’ is a misnomer, by the way, since everything of importance in this space has to do with the activities that have taken place, that are taking place and that will take place. Oda Projesi is careful not to attest any artistic value to the material displayed in a place like this: «It is the process itself [they] call art»¹⁰.

Parts of that process were scribbled suggestions by visitors/agents on the wall responding to the question ‘What would you do with this space if you were free to choose?’. The answers ranged from an expressed desire for affordable apartments to some ordinary art. Asking questions is another, by no means innocuous, strategy of relational art. My association goes to the artist asking the homeless guy where he would like to dine if he were to pick a place. A swing were placed next to two work stations, one where the visitor could be helped to stitch together a bag, and the other a table where young people had made bright-colored clay figurines out of play dough. These would later be exhibited in a well-known craft gallery in the center of Stockholm – why? To have some art world legitimacy conferred upon these playful non-art products? To have the youngsters believe they had created real art? To initiate a dialogue between inside and outside, upstairs and downstairs? The motivation escapes me.

A heap of books on the floor was in part a reference to a more ambitious project, in Riem outside Munich, where Oda Projesi were invited in 2003 to do something. In addition to ‘business as usual’, that is, socializing with people of various nationalities, they intended to leave something (good) behind for once: a library (as if that was an unheard of concept in this vicinity). The library was to be based on voluntary donations and, eventually, on a strict policy of exchange: pick one book – leave another in return. The project failed, however, due, possibly, to the atypical ambition of Oda Projesi to

lic. See N. Bourriaud, *Berlin Letter about Relational Aesthetics*, in C. Doherty (ed.), *Contemporary Art*, *loc. cit.*, 2004, pp. 42-49. The exploration of further bodily relaxation (as art) is yet to come, I presume.

¹⁰ *Om ett oavvänt rum: samtal med den turkiska konstnärgruppen Oda Projesi*, in «Hjärnstorm» 82 (2004), pp. 44-45. My translation.

achieve something tangible, as well as to create no less than a 'collective memory' for this multicultural district¹¹. The same participatory invitation, pick a book – leave another, applied in Tensta. But it could not fail here, since without the aim to achieve something tangible, and without explicit motivations other than that of establishing relations between people, success and failure cancel each other out.

There were also some ordinary art on one wall, mostly framed lithographs, presumably bought from a nearby flea market. These pictures could be borrowed by anyone (if their taste differed enough from these artists, who would never, I am sure, have art like this on their walls). I will conclude my selective survey with mentioning the stand of postcards, produced by young people from the neighborhood, which was placed near the entrance to the room. These cards were free to take, and were possibly a source of significant pride to these amateur photographers themselves, and to their friends and family. Distributed authorship is perhaps the proper technical euphemism for this gesture.

Moving on to the group's self-presentation on their web site, Oda Projesi is presented as a «project», which initiates «projects». In their own words:

The main aim of the project is to multiply the possibilities of making art by drawing attention to ordinary ways of living. The Oda Projesi lives on the potential of everyday life practices. It draws on the plural, complex ways of making in everyday life. It reclaims everyday life as a way of making art. It is a social sculpture in process, an unfinished everyday life performance being shaped by the relationships between people and spaces. Its inspiration comes from the rhetoric of everyday life shared by all.¹²

I would like to make four comments on this program, concerning:

1. the implied meta art tendency;
2. the mantra of the ordinary and the everyday;
3. the role of the references to established art history;
4. the implication of the words 'relationship' and 'space'.

First, a meta art ambition is evident from their very first sentence. Oda Projesi does not just want to do the kind of art they do, which is about ordinary ways of living. Their main objective is puzzlingly quantitative: to extend

¹¹ For example, A.P. Cohen, *Dispositiv Workshop – Part 1: Oda Projesi, 5 June – 31 August*, in «Kunstvereinmünchen» (Spring 2003), pp. 24-25.

¹² www.odaprojesi.com/.

the ways of doing this. Not only is their main objective devoid of a purpose, it lacks a formulation of content altogether. They are interested in procedure, in method – in making art. How could we explain this rather academic emphasis, followed by all the invocations of the ordinary and the everyday? Well, without foregrounding the art context, this form of context art runs the risk of evaporating into pure context, and to be indistinguishable from precisely the ordinary and the everyday.

This overlaps with my second comment. I am intrigued by this curious interest in the non-curious, this preoccupation with the ordinary, repetitious, mundane, everyday *for everyone*, even. The typical references, and this goes for many types of relational art, are to sleeping, walking, eating, talking, and the like – never to such interhuman relations as arguing or making love¹³. This is coy art, decent art – an art for children. To me, the recurring swing utilized by Oda Projesi appears to be the perfect metaphor for this artistic project as a whole: playful (vaguely auto-erotic?) and plain¹⁴. Aesthetically speaking, the importance of such attributes is signaled, too, by a preference for cheap or found materials, unpainted wood constructions, and a carefully choreographed ‘casual’ chaos.

Art like this is often interpreted, by the way, as more or less utopian, but is not the opposite more applicable? As if the world had been drained of even the most basic social values, and needed help to regain something of its former self – is this post-apocalyptic social service art? Art like this is often, too, ascribed an aura of democracy, which has to do with its rather presumptuous approximation of everyone’s way of living. As if that would prevent it from being elitist, theory-burdened or aloof, like so much contemporary art, allegedly? The condition of possibility for this art is the institutional theory of art, according to which the initiated are always free to ignore more public appeals. We do not vote to include members in the art club. This brings up the issue of politics, as well as my third comment, on established art practices.

Let me quote again from their website: «[O.P.] is a social sculpture in process, an unfinished everyday life performance». The «social sculpture» is a

¹³ An excellent article on relational art, based on this kind of self-censored attitude of prohibition against violence and direct physical confrontation is C. Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, in «October» 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 51-79.

¹⁴ Apart from the Tensta installation, a swing was also one of the first ‘projects’ in the Galata apartment. See www.odaprojesi.com/projects.

tacit reference to Joseph Beuys, whose messianic persona, however, is radically alien to this trio. The same could be said for Beuys' political activism and his performances, which were all, at least, defined by a beginning and an end. The performance-like projects of Oda Projesi flirt with the death-denying prospect of the limitless and the infinite, which appears Romantic and perhaps utopian, but not in any practical sense political. The word «process», of course, recalls process art of the sixties and seventies, but no more than that. Whereas process art regarded the process of making a particular work a vital part of that work, Oda Projesi relies on the capacity of conceptualizing everyday activities, for an indefinite period of time, as art.

Many links can be made with previous art practices, from Duchamp and the surrealists' chance encounters between ordinary objects, via various performance traditions, such as Fluxus, Cobra, the Situationists, or, more loosely, with actions, events, happenings, etc., up to the installation art of our most recent past. The decisive difference, I think, is that all of these artistic manifestations held on to the material *and/or conceptual* design or formation of a work, and to the notion of content, however impenetrable, indeterminable, immaterial, open or abstract. For Oda Projesi form and content have become equally obsolete (which is not true when it comes to documenting their own work, to which I will return). Oda Projesi conducts experiments for the sake of experiments, processes as art for the sake of processes as art. At the center of all this is a void, an emptiness. And an empty Istanbul apartment filled with – possibilities?

Heading towards my forth comment, we may recall that Oda Projesi aims to create «relationships between people and spaces», which seems to refer to «relational aesthetics», launched by art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud¹⁵, and on a conception of space derived, possibly, from Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In this classic text, he talks, for instance, about space as «a practiced place», including «vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables». Thus, the dimension of space is not in contrast to time. Space, in this fertile sense, is «actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it»¹⁶. It is customary to compare this concept of space to the saussurian *parole* and to speech acts. Space is hereby distinguished from the more static concept of place. It is thus actually tautological to speak of «relationships between people and spaces», since a «space», following De Certeau,

¹⁵ N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), Paris 2002.

¹⁶ M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Berkeley, London 1988, p. 117.

is already peopled, or the product of a certain amount of action, practice or human interference.

A 'space' is arguably the precondition for observing a relationship or connection at all between people. A 'space', however unstable and transitory, seems to be needed in order to bridge the gap, as it is sometimes put, between art and the world, art and real life, artists and ordinary people. Whether or not bridging the gap is a good or interesting thing, or something that threatens to deprive art of its criticality and *raison d'être* is another matter. It could well be argued that the very constituting of a space or a 'room' for a 'project' precisely *precludes* a bridging of the gap between art and life or the ordinary. It might serve, instead, to preserve the gap as the final precondition for art.

The dichotomy between art and real life is in any case just as essential to Oda Projesi as it is, or was, to Bourriaud, according to his *Relational Aesthetics*¹⁷. Influential though it is, I will not discuss this text here, since art projects like Oda Projesi have moved beyond (behind or below?) Bourriaud's position, not least regarding the weight he still ascribed to representation¹⁸. Oda Projesi are not interested in representing, signifying or interpreting relations, but in – and this will recall Marx's famous sentence – effecting some kind of change in the world, however microscopic. The notion of change appears vital to these artists, and to the critics that embrace them, but since it is not qualified, it is of course as empty and unbinding as it sounds. Change is what is inevitable.

Approaching my conclusion, I will return to my claim, namely, that art practices like these leave us pretty empty-handed, since our habitual tools and paradigms, from art history to visual studies, from formalism to iconography, from hermeneutics and semiotics to psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, will get us nowhere here. The models of avant-garde, neo-avant-garde and reaction, of modernism and postmodernism or no modernism are equally drained of explanatory power¹⁹. In part because there is nothing to interpret here, no

¹⁷ N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, *loc. cit.*, p. 107 (Glossary): «Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects».

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 112 (Glossary): «Relational (aesthetics) [=] Aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt».

¹⁹ This becomes disturbingly clear in the concluding roundtable (*The Predicament of Contemporary Art*) of the recent textbook collaboration of four «October»-based critics:

Gestalt or form, no message or meaning, no hidden psychic or social truth to reveal. There is a project, and a process and things going on, that may be meaningful or meaningless, interesting or boring, to 'us' or the ones involved, but that is all there is. Or is it? And who are 'we' and 'those involved' precisely?

A distinction must be made between at least two different publics²⁰. What I would term the *primary* public includes those who are actively involved in one way or another with what the artists are doing in/with a certain space or a certain project. This group of people, typically unfamiliar with the rituals of the art world, is always quite limited in number. This 'public' is actually most often transformed into something else than a public: participant, agent, actor or artist. The role of this group of people is of course absolutely essential: without them there would be no *processes* as art here. They are thus treated with respect, in that the artists listen to them, observe them carefully, bring them along to chat or express themselves, for as long as the project lasts. And they are treated with condescension, since, ultimately, these people serve the role of building blocks of a thoroughly abstract 'social sculpture' that will be beyond any individual's grasp and especially those unfamiliar with art. They become actor-puppets in a play with a script unknown to them. They become fetish objects of the desired real world. Integrating these people into a process that is defined as art highlights the considerable distance between the primary 'public', on the one hand, and the artists and the *secondary* public, on the other hand. The friendly socializing, low-tech environment, and air of 'democracy' serve, arguably, to conceal this radical difference in terms of power/knowledge.

The secondary – non-participating public – which by far outnumbers the primary public, comprises the artist peers, the critics, the professional as well as non-professional art lovers, that crop up at the biennales, or, at least, after the fact, or with a chosen distance towards the activities on grass root level. These people – stand ins for the art world – are probably, too, the implied readers of all the archival material (books, catalogues, recordings and websites) that is so prominently and pedantically brought to the fore by artists like Oda Projesi, and which is sometimes even interspersed among the

Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London 2004, p. 679.

²⁰ Claire Doherty makes such a distinction, without further elaboration, by referencing «first and second audiences» in her introduction *The New Situationists*, in C. Doherty (ed.), *Contemporary Art*, *loc. cit.*, p. 8.

‘exhibits’ or lost forms of the social sculpture. The secondary public contemplates the traces of all the trivia and everyday activities with a hard-read catalogue in hand. This public views real people who do real things on video recordings, not unlike consumers of so-called reality TV, which is the entertainment industry’s response to a similar lure of the real at play here.

The role of the secondary public is no less essential – I would say that it is more essential – than the primary public’s, to this form of art. Without the tacit consent and approval of the secondary public of more or less passive art world inhabitants, there would be no processes *as art*. But their role, as part of the everyday processes of the art world, is not acknowledged openly, which is hard not to interpret as unreflective, hypocritical or even cynical. The people who are explicitly (primarily) addressed by Oda Projesi are those who conform to a preconceived notion of an *other* – the category of ordinary people. (Perhaps projects like these share the fate of the arts of illusion and representation: the more they approximate ‘everyday life’, the further they are removed from it.) The secondary public is only implicitly, tacitly addressed, but their response, contrary to the primary public’s, cannot just go anywhere. It has to be, at some point, affirmative and incorporating, even in the format of repressive tolerance. At the end of the day, the secondary public *is* the primary public.

In conclusion, is this a condemnation of relational art, or a facile critique of one perhaps less strong instance of it? Am I saying that art has lost its meaning or function, or that we will have to look for something more substantial and tangible or visually arresting, to preserve the role of art in our contemporary societies? I am not. Do projects like Oda Projesi dilute the concept of art today? I think the opposite may be true: by their emphasis on the very preconditions of art, as a kind of social game, dependent upon its rules as well as its capacity for attracting players, relational art affirms and reinforces the ‘practiced place’ or space of art in our world. Relational art of this kind, indeed, poses a healthy critique, unwittingly or not, of what has passed for art for as long as can be remembered. But more importantly, it can be read as a preservation of the condition of art, vis-à-vis the (rest of) world, the dimension of art as an aspect of reality, no matter how, where and why. Despite the flimsy rhetoric of practice and action, what is actually cultivated here is potentiality pure and simple, which is, at the very least, promising. In any event, the established discourses of art history and visual culture will have to reorient their radar, or this increasingly disseminated and, for all important purposes, invisible thing called art will escape them completely.