



Catch a lover's cry between your teeth.
Bite down.

SCENE I

THE NEW IS THE OLD IN DISTRESS

Laurie Rojas & Julian-Jakob Kneer

LAURIE ROJAS is an art critic and senior editor of *Spike* whose writings have appeared in various publications. She is committed to critical thinking, exploring ambivalence in artworks, art criticism after its eclipse, and the politics of social emancipation.

JULIAN-JAKOB KNEER is a Berlin-based artist who runs *Gruppe Expo*. His work often deals with culturally enforced symbols and allocation-systems: the exploration of the contingency and specificity of the lines demarking social territories of good and bad taste, beauty and ugliness, normalcy and pathology, object and abject, negation and affirmation.

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Laurie

We've tasked ourselves to have a conversation about taboos and morality in art. I think this is the most direct way to explore something that concerns us both: at present a kind of limitation is being imposed on art, especially with regards to so-called problematic artworks. I think talking about Darja Bajagić's work is a good place to start. She is an artist we have both discovered recently and she epitomizes a 'problematic' position in contemporary art. The work is morally complex and captivating, it has an element of ambivalence, a kind of disturbing attraction that draws you in with taboo subjects.

I first learned about Bajagić because of the big controversy last fall in New York when Greenspon Gallery organized a two-person show with Bajagić and Boyd Rice, who is a noise musician, one of the founders of the UNPOP Art Movement, and known for his neo-nazi sympathies (whether this is nihilistic provocation or actual personal politics is not clear to me). The show got 'cancelled' but was installed and shown privately. Bajagić, who studied painting at Yale and is no stranger to controversy, was criticized because she was willing to show with an artist that has claimed to support fascist politics. What interested me about Bajagić's work was the conservative response it usually engenders. But what's weird about the Greenspon case, is that the incendiary artist was Boyd Rice, whose works were just black and white abstract paintings and in themselves do not hold any readable fascist ideology. It was his personal politics that caused the stir.

Julian-Jakob

Can we not enjoy good art if it comes from an asshole?

Laurie

Assholes make the best art.

Julian-Jakob

Can art be experienced without considering a person's biography or politics? Can we not just talk about the aesthetics, even a swastika, and acknowledge how it is objectively beautiful in the sense of classic aesthetic theory because it is made of simple geometric forms and it is symmetrical? Is an asshole, whether racist, murderer, pedophile et cetera, a bad artist?

Martin Heidegger concludes in his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1950) that the artwork originates from the artist and vice versa. But does that mean that the artist always sympathizes with the content of their own artwork? Do we still have to speak of the *Motiv* (motive)? Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author*, on the other hand, is an attack on traditional literary criticism that focuses too much on trying to retrace the author's intentions and original meaning in mind. Instead, Barthes asks us to adopt a more text-oriented approach that focuses on the interaction of the reader, not the writer, with the work.

Laurie

Right, because the issue of experience, of the subjective experience of an artwork, has kind of been eclipsed. Sorrysorry to say, but I don't think artists are always the best representatives of their works, and they certainly don't have the last word: that kind of thinking—evangelized by conceptual art practices like *Art & Language*—have pretty much decimated art criticism. But to then only read artworks, literature, or even R. Kelly's *Ignition*, as indistinguishable from their makers, or even worse, to judge works on the basis of their makers' deeds, personality, or opinions, is to liquidate art.

Julian-Jakob

Art and artists nowadays get so politicized. The capital *Other* in Lacan's psychoanalysis materializes the anonymous field of society, it is an implicit referential point in our thinking, reasoning, and acting. The capital Other represents the symbolic order, it represents the perspective out of which we gaze upon our own lives. In contemporary art the capital Other is more present than ever, art is not addressed to anonymous anymore, art is not *pour l'art*, it is *pour* the capital Other or even *pour* concrete politics, opinionated, and directed at something.

Laurie

I have to disagree a bit here. The 'Other' is not that important with reference to how I understand the individual's relationship to society. Maybe it serves as the object of pathological projection when we cannot make sense of the anxieties and antagonisms our society creates. But, it does point to the theme of dissociation. The Other has become postmodernism's theoretical

What do you think will happen after this is all over

explanation of alienation from ourselves, from the products of our labor (including art), each other, and society. But I do agree that since 2016 most art has not been for its own sake: it has been demanded that art be political in order to be art, and this has produced boringly didactic propaganda for social justice warriors. But, the thing about the whole art pour l'art is that art is in a double bind, art is never truly and fully autonomous, it is always social, even the most abstract or taboo work cannot claim full autonomy.

Julian-Jakob

All art is political, especially 'unpolitical' art.

Laurie

Yes, just like anti-authoritarianism is the oldest form of authoritarianism. But it is the impulse towards freedom, to unchain art, that matters, because it is what keeps culture moving. This is why art that is for itself is both necessary but impossible. While, the demand to make politically or committed art now, or in the past, is nothing but the demand to aestheticize politics (a hallmark of fascism as Benjamin famously wrote in the *Work of Art* essay), and it runs the risk of liquidating art, and re-constituting the neoliberal status quo.

Julian-Jakob

Darja Bajagić to me is a good example to counteract these tendencies I was discussing. Her works incorporate such a large amount of symbols, which when experienced simultaneously, become incomprehensible. Each work becomes oversaturated with associations. The codes seem to eliminate each other, taboos collide with other taboos. This seems to me like a good strategy in order to empty the work of moralization, to ignore or maybe even provoke the capital Other. Finally, we can look at her work and actually talk about what we see, what it makes us feel, not just how we read into it—or the most boring thing—to argue over how it should be read.

Laurie

Yeah, it was her work and not Boyd Rice's politics that should have been discussed and reflected upon. Because her works explicitly appropriated taboo aesthetics—like the swastika, or shapes that allude to or represent ancient varieties of the swastika—and these

large collages from the Greenspon show, also include some quite innocent stuff, like the Pink Panther, but it too has become taboo because of its use by the NSU. I see how her work can be misread as sympathetic to right-wing ideology, but come on, experiencing her art is not going to make anyone a neo-nazi. What all the works share is a kind of looking glass into a dark side of humanity that provokes suspicion rather than reflection, because we often rather repress or not be confronted with this dark side—hence taboo, the unspeakable. The taboo is that which we do not want to understand. And she forces the viewer to confront that taboo, to become a voyeur, a kind of non-consensual voyeurism, which in the age of #MeToo, is absolutely unacceptable. Kind of like Vito Acconci masturbating in a gallery.

Julian-Jakob

Taboo is neither spoiled nor undefiled. No one touches taboo, it is pure. It can be argued that taboo is beautiful. I would like to bring up Laibach, the Slovenian art collective known for their music, and how Žižek famously dissected/explained their work as being subversive through overidentification: "What if [...] distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense the strategy of Laibach appears in a new light: it frustrates the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but overidentification with it—by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, overidentification suspends its efficiency."

Some of us are out there

Laurie

Laibach's stuff is funny and it's not just because it's ironic. I guess Žižek has a point, that Laibach has the potential to undermine that which it overidentifies with. But notice that Žižek says 'suspends its efficiency'; it's a temporary reprieve, not a real, permanent, solution. So the point of Laibach is not a political one so much as an aesthetic one. Even if I am not sure what it means, I admit that I find the work enigmatic. I think because of the tension between something that is recognizable, not so new, but somehow feels new too, and hard to make sense of. It sits in a really ambiguous place of 'take me seriously, but don't take me that seriously'.

You have leverage watching

Honestly no one knows

Some of us are in

Julian-Jakob

Actually, their work can be understood as very political. They co-founded a state called the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) in 1992, including their own currency, passports, and even embassies throughout Europe and online. Laibach also has their own political party called Spector.

It's convenient too

Laurie

Do they affect politics directly? Are these parties running for elections, is the state in any way exchanging with other states? Politics would be about direct intervention in the world, in my view, but then most 'political art' doesn't fulfill that either. The thing is that there are many examples of artists starting their own state, but the aesthetics in Laibach are particular. Anyways, unresolved problems, either aesthetic or social, return often in new form if they were merely repressed, made taboo. But maybe it's the way that aesthetics and politics intermingle in Laibach that makes them enigmatic for me but morally dubious for others.

Julian-Jakob

Faux identification with familiar forms. *Retroavantgarde* is Neue Slowenische Kunst's self-ascribed fundamental artistic approach. They describe it to be based on the premise that traumas of the past that affect the present and the future can only be cured by a return to the original, provoking conflicts. Laibach for example, follow this principle in a playful way of doing lots of coversongs, sometimes slightly altered. They refuse the term 'covers' and rather call them 'new originals'.

If you look at it from out there

Laurie

Well that method seems terribly close to what used to be called immanent critique. Laibach is doing immanent critique of both the avantgarde and of (fascist) kitsch. Turning kitsch into avantgarde to show its progressive potential. What is more taboo than what Benjamin called the 'progressive character of fascism'? Taboo represents anxiety about aspects of ourselves in relation to society. Sex work, pornography, and fascism are some of the most taboo subjects. Simply because fascism was not done away with when the Red Army militarily defeated the Third Reich, or the US dropped several bombs on Japan, fascist tendencies are bound to re-emerge in new ways. Artists like Bajagić or Laibach, I could

with us, being us, through us

argue, have a way of exposing that as a taboo, to attempt to break, transform, or critique that taboo and render it harmless. The question is whether any work of art can render something like sexual taboos, or thought-taboos, harmless.

Julian-Jakob

With regards to taboos, deviances, or immorality: they are necessary in art simply because they exist, they are an option. I once read this interview with Jordan Wolfson where he describes this very easily. He said: "Do I hate women? No, but I definitely have hated a specific woman and I can imagine to be someone who hates women. Have I ever masturbated publicly? Yes. Have I ever masturbated on a plane? Yes I did, just last week. And I had the paranoid fantasy that there was a camera, making the scene viewable to the whole plane." He is speaking about the capital Other here. "This paranoid imagination gave me a bad conscious considering my actions. But what I had done was harmless and pointed inwards. Have I ever dreamt of sleeping with my sister? Yes. But do I want this in reality? No, but imagining something is a way to decide if something is right or wrong." He keeps going on with more examples on pedophilia, racism, murder. He says, it is okay to have these thoughts as long as you are not committing yourself to them but using them to understand yourself and the world. "Walking through possibilities is not wrong but necessary to train our understanding of reality. Everyone who denies having these thoughts is a liar." Do I have to add something here?

Laurie

Yes, it takes balls for an established white male artist to say something like that right now but does art need to be taboo or immoral? Not necessarily, but maybe it's desirable. Art is the ambassador of freedom, it carries with it the potential for change in an unfree world. Sometimes that means confronting unsavory and unfashionable truths.

Julian-Jakob

Nothing outdoes truth, it is the most powerful weapon. But to paraphrase Christoph Schlingensiefel, there might be more truth in the accumulation of evil, absurd nonsense than in the accumulation of truth.

you're only
a poet when you
have a fever. you
know you're a poet when
you can't get out of
bed and you're covered
in sweat, when there are
things to be done but
all of them seem less
important than a memo-
ry of something
else.

i dreamt that i
was at an AA meeting on
west 6th street and there was
a dyke with a dog. a real glori-
ous dyke, like i remember as a child,
the ones my mom knew, the ones that made
me want to be gay but not like that. back
when america still made dykes out of dense old
growth wood and leather boots, strong hands and
a thick humorous honesty. they stopped making
that model right about the time pick-up trucks
started getting multiple front doors. this was a
two door truck dyke. they stood up to introduce
themselves and said, Hi I'm a Kennedy ... and I'm
an alcoholic. I realised it was Eileen Myles and
they weren't a Kennedy but they are an alcoho-
lic, like me. They sat down again after their
introduction and winked at me noticing that
I had figured them out. figured them and
their entire body of work out in that
one line. The whole writer thing.
The whole show.

When it came
around to me the dog
raised its head expecting
something good. Nervous but not
showing it, I said, "Hi I'm a Bush ...
not the beer or the president, just a
Bush ... pause ... and I'm an alcoholic. Nobody
thought it was funny or even got it and the
dog laid its head back down between its out-
stretched forelegs and let out a sigh. I was
thinking about a biblical burning bush, or a
bush of pubic hair, or a shabby evergreen bush
in a strip mall parking lot or a neglected
front yard. I forgot all about being myself
in a meeting and just sort of became a bush,
several bushes, real bushes, bushes with
strong multi-faceted basel cores that
could be cut all the way down and
regrown like an ancient olive tree
cut to the soil that will shoot
up again from its thousand
year old base.

We were having
coffee, the whole group,
when Eileen came up to me and
asked, "Were you really a bush?".
I said, "Yeah" playing it cool, "I actu-
ally was a bush, for a while just now,
spreading out close to the ground ... luring
with blossoms ... defending with thorns, you
know how it goes." We looked at each other,
smiled, talked about things less real for a bit.
something like an infection of your existence,
you're only a kennedy when you have a fever but
you're only a bush when you let the fever take
over to become an urgency of synthesized recol-
lection transferred to collective experience.
that's what turns the whetstone of poetics.
it's that space of making the personal into
the collective so that it collides with
experiences beyond being yourself. If we
wanted to say it in plain terms, we
would end every poem with the rhe-
torical line, "Do you know
that feeling?".

Actually it isn't different

They think they know better but they don't