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.

In summer 2019, Julian-Jakob and Laurie began collecting images, quotes and texts exploring the subject of taboo and morality in contemporary art and the discourse around it. They developed a pastiche-technique of communicating that spanned across emails, text messages, and personal conversations.

"Catch a lover's cry between your teeth. Bite down."
The New is the Old in Distress

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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 address something that concerns us both: at present a kind of limitation is being imposed on art, especially when it regards to so-called problematic artworks. I think talking about Dara Bajagić’s work is a good place to start. So 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 Greenpeace 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 propaganda or actual personal politics is not clear to me). The show got much buzz but was installed and shown poorly. Dara Bajagić, who studied painting abroad and is a stranger to controversy, was criticized because she was working with an artist that has claimed to support fascist politics. What interested me about Bajagić’s work was the conservative response it usually evaded. But what’s weird about the Greenpeace case, is that the individual artist was Boyd Rice, whose works were just black and white abstract paintings and in themselves do not have readable fascist ideology. It was his personal politics that caused the stir.

Julian-Jakob:
Can we talk about good art if it comes from asshole?

Laurie:
Assholes make the best art.

Julian-Jakob:
Can art be experienced without considering a person’s biography or politics? I mean, we just talk about the aesthetics, even a swastika, and wonder 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 it a trope, whether racist, murderer, pedophile, or cetera, a bad artist?

Laurie:
Martin Jay, longer 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 ‘Mark of Authenticity’? Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author,” on the other hand, is an attack on traditional literary criticism that focuses too much on trying to recreate the author’s intentions and original meaning in mind. Instead, Barthes takes us to adopt a more text-oriented approach that focuses on the interaction of the reader, not the writer, with the work.

Julian-Jakob:
Right because the issue of experience of the subjective experience of an artwork, has kind of been eclipsed. Sorry, but I don’t think artists are always the best representatives of their own 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 we already read artworks, literature, or even R. Kelly’s Ignition, as indistinguishable from their makers, or we notice, to judge works on the basis of the makers’ deeds, personality, or opinions, to liquidate art.

Laurie:
I think because of the tension between the two that is so fascinating. Some artists/activists that work with taboo are lauded, they are taken seriously, like the Pink Panther. But the swastika, or shapes that are taboo, or represent ancient values of the swastika—and these large collages from the Greenspoon show, also include some quite innocent stuff, like the Pink Panther, but it 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 it is 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 grant. 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:
Taboos is neither spoiled nor undeclared. 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 Žiga Zvonků famously discussed/explained their work as being subversive through overidentification: “What if… distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformity, since the normal function of the system requires cylical 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 the intended inversion, but overidentification with it—by bringing to light the overcome surreptitious underdece of the system, overidentification suspends its efficiency.”

Laurie:
Some artists are out there

Julian-Jakob:
Laibach’s stuff is funny and it’s not just because it’s ironic. I guess Žiga Zvonků, at a point, that Laibach has the potential to render that which overidentiﬁes with. But notice that Žiga says “suspends its efficiency” it’s a temporary reprieve, not a real, permanent, and most of 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 always find the work intriguing. I think because of the tension between something that is recognizable, so no so much that ‘‘something feels new to me’’ but ‘‘it has to make sense of itself. It sits in a really amplify place of ‘take me seriously, I don’t care what I am doing’.’’

You have this page watching

Honesty no one knows

What do you think will happen after

You have this page watching
Julian-Jakob

Actually, their work can be understood as very political. They co-founded a state called the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) in 1982, including their own currency, passports, and even embassies throughout Europe and online. Laibach also has their own political party called Specter.

Laurie

Do they affect politics directly? Are these parties running for elections, is the state in any way changing with other states? Politics would be about direct intervention in the world, in my view, but then most ‘political art’ doesn’t think that either. The thing is that there are many examples of artists playing their own state, but the aesthetics in Laibach are particular. Anyway, 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. RenaissanceAFoK is Neue Slowenische Kunst’s self-asserted 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 covers, songs, sometimes slightly altered. They refuse the term ‘covers’ and rather call them new originals. 

If you look at it 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 elegantly. He said: “Do I hate women? No, but I definitely have hated a specific man 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 airplane. But what I had done was harmless and pointed inwards. Have I ever dreamed of sleeping with my sister? Yes. But do I want this in reality? No, I don’t. I want this in reality? No, but it being something is a way to decide it something is right or wrong.”

He is thinking 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

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 Beuys called the ‘progressive characteristic of fascism’? Taboos 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. America is Elagabal or Laibach, I could with us, being us, through.

They think they know better but they don’t

Garrett Nelson

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We were having coffee, the whole group, when Eileen Myles and I started talking and asked, ‘Were you really a bush?’ I said, ‘Yeah’ playing it cool. ‘I actually was a bush while just now spreading out close to the ground – I am a blossoming with blossoms – defending with thorns, you know.’

I was,I was,at least a little, not so unfriendly, 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 undefined object. You need to make the space between you and the infection transferred to collective experience. That’s what turn the witchstone of poetry, it’s that space of making the personal into the collective so that it collides with experiences beyond yourself that we wanted to say it in plain terms. We would end every piece with the rhetorical: ‘Do you know what feeling that is?’