Lying Freely to the Public
And Other, Maybe Better, Ways to Survive

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More and more often, artists, critics and intermediaries are expected to know whom they are addressing. Critic Jan Verwoert holds an ardent plea for a practice in which the public is anonymous. Only if we don't know who our audience is do we become curious, can meaningful encounters take place and communities be formed.

People expect a lot from artists, curators, educators and intellectuals. We are expected to always have something to offer, something exciting, beautiful or true. Increasingly, we are also expected to know *to whom* exactly we offer what we provide. Which audience are we addressing? What are the needs of the community that we respond to? What is the composition of the constituency we are representing? How can we identify that community and constituency? It seems natural that we ask ourselves these questions. Who wouldn't want to know whom they are talking to when they speak? Of course we get curious about who consumes the culture that we produce. Still, there is something dubious about the demand to identify your public. The inquiry into the composition of our audience has a peculiar aftertaste. It smacks of the ill logic of authoritative demands for the economic legitimation of culture. So, what is all this talk of serving your community about if not strategic product placement through target group marketing? It seems that the instrumental logic of strategic marketing has invaded the discourse on the legitimation of culture, disguised as a conscientious concern with social justice. Communities and constituencies, these words seem to come out of the mouth of a true Social Democrat, when the speaker, in fact, may be a hard-nosed cultural bureaucrat or marketing executive. We should ask ourselves to which degree our conscientious concerns about serving the public are in fact symptoms of us internalizing the petty power play of imposed justification rituals.

What do you reply then, when you are asked why what you do should be in the interest of the public? We all know that what we do and desire lacks ulterior justifications and that all the arguments that have been put forth over the centuries to corroborate why art is a common good and why it should be in the interest of the public to support it, were lies. In the end, what is the enlightenment but a success story of artists, educators and intellectuals tricking the public into buying the biggest lie of all: that art and thinking are good for you because they make you a better human being. It's ridiculous and we know it. Still, it's the smokescreen that, until now, has guaranteed our economic survival over the centuries. The irony is, it still works, and it works best with conservative politicians of the old school, not because they believe it, but because they are used to lying so they expect nothing else. It is rather the politicians of the left, most prominently the Social Democrats, who are naive enough to expect to hear the truth. So traditionally, they have been the most unyielding in their demands to know what *exactly* art is good for. If they have a clear understanding of the common good, however, we're in trouble, as this will likely be defined in terms of greater financial support for healthcare, childcare, education and sports. And who would want to deny that they are sensible people?

The Fallacy of Believing in Standards of Legitimation

To respect our audience and understand our own practice as embedded in a particular social environment is, no doubt, a necessity if we want to develop an even halfway emancipated approach to what we do. At the same time, however, it seems that within the institutional apparatus of cultural administration – as well as in the minds of all who believe that culture must be justified in the sight of society's demands – our readiness to question the basics of our practice is turned against us. The modernist desire to critically probe the foundations of cultural production then prepares the grounds for those who secure their power by exploiting the notorious anxiety of the modern artist and intellectual to lack palpable reasons for what they do and want. Especially in the institutionalist community of righteous critics, despite years of education in social theory, people fail to see the obvious: that by exposing the illegitimacy of art to the light of the demands of society, morally zealous critics enforce the pressure that the dominant social order puts on art anyway. Taking the position of the public prosecutor is easy and convenient; ironically, it is precisely those who never tire of denouncing the collusion of art (with the market, for instance) who in fact most forcefully collude with the powers that be.

Power structures need public prosecutors because they invest belief into the reality of these structures. Whether the prosecutors defend or criticize the structures makes no difference in this regard. On the contrary, it is precisely the critic of institutional power structures, for instance, who does these structures the invaluable service of making the public *believe* that the institutional apparatus is the most, if not only, important force that determines the production of art. Converting to this belief, however, means to renounce your faith in the idea that art practice could actually make a difference. One prominent fallacy of political art criticism has therefore always been to ground their critique in a serious belief in the exclusive power of power structures. A criticism that sought to empower resistance, however, would have to analyse the structures, but deny them the service of believing, and instead invest the power of belief into the possibility of change through (art) practice.

A second major fallacy of modern criticism is equally tied to the investment of belief: while the right to call the legitimacy of anything and anyone into question is the *conditio sine qua non* of all criticism, the *belief* that positive standards of legitimacy actually existed is the death of criticism and the prime source of ideology. In the face of the public, criticism therefore exists in the same state of limbo that art finds itself in. It is free to question anything and anyone, but no mandate and no law ensures the legitimacy of that freedom. The challenge then is to perform criticism publicly without a mandate, exposed to the question of legitimacy and resistant to the urge of aligning oneself with the ideological standards of righteousness supported by particular communities.

If we had all retained a baroque sense of grandness, genius and divine vocation, to deal with the public would, of course, be much easier. A mere glance of indignation would suffice to silence the *ignoranti* and make them fell wretched about their prosaic intentions to talk about what the people want. "If they have no bread why they eat cake?" as Marie Antoinette would have graciously retorted. Naturally, this position is impossible to take for any true modernist. It's a farce (as we don't have any cake to offer and are dying to have some ourselves). But it should be added that in political negotiations of the legitimation and funding of art, this farce continues to be a success story. Just look at how everybody in the city of Düsseldorf respects a character like Markus Lüppertz and willingly funds his academy because he gives the people what they want: the perfect impersonation of a grandiose court painter from a different century. It's unreal, but it fulfils the people's expectation that great art can and should not be understood – and his audience is willing to pay more for it.

The trouble is that this role traditionally only works for those who happen to be white, male and charismatic. It also presupposes a love for spectacle and the intuitive capacity to freely deal with double standards. If you are not white, male and charismatic, you have to find other ways to make people believe in you. Hard work, high standards and moral righteousness seem to function well as an alternative, but, in the wrong context, they may also raise suspicions of philistinism. If you indeed happen to be – or at least manage to pass as – white, male and charismatic, the question is still how you want to handle that privilege. If you see the conditions of how the public works clear enough to loathe them, to engage with the public under these conditions will inevitably make you loose all self-respect and in the long run turn you into just another sad cynic. Success and alienation are then bound to increase in direct proportion to each other. Just remember the iconic moment in recent pop history when, at the apex of their success and verge of breakdown, Johnny Rotten faces the audience at the end of what was to become the Sex Pistols' final gig with the words: "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" 'You' is him. But 'you' is also the public. It's always both.

Ethics

So even if it should turn out that ***morals*** are neither helpful nor required, really, when it comes to dealing with the public, ***ethics*** remain indispensable. Ethics are about the practical knowledge of how to live a good life, yourself and with others. If you end up living the life of an over-worked philistine or a charming cynic cheat with an alcohol problem in order to survive in the public realm, that can't possibly qualify as a good life. So, from the point of view of an existential ethics, or an emancipated, syndicalist hedonism, if you will, the most far-reaching question is a deeply pragmatic one: how do we want to live and survive in the public realm as public persona when the public wants what we don't have to offer – spectacular revelations of truth and beauty – but tacitly expects to get what we are not willing to give – lies, myths and ideologies?

If, from the point of view of an emancipated hedonism, we agree that we want to live a good life, in public, as public persona, we need to find out where things start to go wrong. Maybe, this is when we start lying to ourselves about why we do and want what we do and want. Of course, the desire to be honest with yourself is a bit of a romantic disease in itself and, from a pragmatic perspective, the source of many misunderstandings. But, then you don't have to be romantic about honesty. To be hedonist about honesty makes much more sense. True hedonists have learned through experience that, in the long run, it simply makes life better for everyone because it takes the venom out of human relations that sooner or later poison your life as much as that of others when you spread it. The poison of the public sphere is intrigue and gossip. Art people know that because, as public persona, they are exceptionally vulnerable to it. So, from a hedonist point of view, there is a simple answer to intrigue and gossip: If you want to have a better life for yourself and others, don't practice it, don't spread it; have some courtesy, have some taste.

Gossip means making lies and half-truths about others circulate. But the lying starts, first of all, when we talk to ourselves in voices that are not our own. Again, of course, the desire to eliminate the voices in your head that are not your own, an unfortunate fallacy, because whose voices would you find in your mind if not those of others, people you have been exposed to, listened to, read and loved? The point of departure for any kind of ideology critique, or 'emancipation' if you are so inclined, however, has always been to single out those voices that tell the lies that make you accept the legitimacy of power structures as they are – and exorcise them. So, we are back to the beginning, back to the question: Who speaks when we ask ourselves tacitly, routinely or in anger and desperation: 'For whom am I doing what I do? For whom do I want to do what I want to do?' We should be wary of the voice that asks for legitimation. It may simply be the internalized voice of the dominant social order; a sardonic paternal voice, unrelenting in its requests for a justification that

cannot be given because it is known to be lacking, and merciless in its assertion of a guilt that cannot be overcome because, for want of plausible legitimations for what we do and want, our innocence has been irretrievably lost anyway. So, when we mull over the question of our legitimate public, are we not unwittingly ventriloquizing the discourse of the dominant social order?

Lying to the Right People

Now, even if it should turn out that we have to lie to the public and the representatives of the cultural administration to receive the support that we need to survive, there is no reason for us to lie to ourselves! We should beware of *believing* in the things that we say when we lie to the public. A sure sign of this happening is when the promotional rhetoric used in advertising and funding applications spills over into art professionals' critical writing. As a reader I can't help feeling treated like a fool. Only a while ago the pitch for justifying why it should be in the interest of the public to support art usually was that art helps to 'promote cultural diversity' (and not just to entertain the educated middle classes). The latest spin seems to be that it is because art is 'a form of knowledge production' (as if we really ever knew what we were doing and desiring). I don't mind that people write such things to lure sponsors, government funding bodies or university deans into giving them money. But it upsets me when critical essays and academic publications are produced in a desperate attempt to breathe meaning into the empty shells of such phrases. Whom are such publications addressing? As a reader I feel it can't be me because the language they employ is the language for addressing funding bodies or sponsors. They should reserve the space of their writing for reflecting on what would really be worth talking about.

But which language could we use to talk frankly? Maybe we should re-invent the genre of the *manual*. Manuals have always been a good medium for formulating practical ethics. They represent a form of writing dedicated to the sharing of advice and experience concerning the pursuit of happiness and how to approach politics and act in the public realm. From Epicurus via Machiavelli to Crowley there is a long tradition of manuals on the practical principles, social techniques and magic tricks that may be useful to consider when you want to have a free and happy life together with those who are your friends. So, instead of wasting intellectual energy on fleshing out the latest spin and ideologeme, we'd do better to use that time and media space to write about how we want to survive when we decide to commit ourselves to art, education and thinking.

No doubt, you could hold against the resolution to lie to the sponsors and authorities and reserve the truth for your friends that you may be preaching to the converted and, on top of that, effectively giving up on the claim to have anything to say to a wider public – and especially those in the wider public who may become your friends (or your enemies) once they have read what you might have to say to them. So, in a sense, we are back to square one, to the nagging question: How can you know what public it is that you are addressing and what mode of address (lying or being truthful) would therefore be adequate? Obviously there are occasions when you know the people you negotiate with over funds would appreciate it if you lied to them and gave them a pitch that they could file your request under and thereby make it easier for them to process it. And of course, there are other occasions when lying is clearly not required since the people you are talking or writing to are in the same position as you are. But there are still numerous situations in which it will remain difficult if not impossible to say what would be the right thing to do, quite simply because you cannot, or at least not really and fully, determine whom you are addressing and what the right mode of address would be. As readers, would you want me lie to you now?

Anonymity as a Utopian Condition

Yet, maybe it is also precisely by acknowledging that on numerous occasions when we address the public we cannot really or fully tell whom we are talking to, that we actually arrive at one of the strongest objections against the demand to know your audience and identify the community or constituency you are supposed to legitimately serve: this objection is grounded in the simple realization that, despite all the demographical study and customer research that is being conducted, it is the nature of the modern urban public that it remains largely anonymous. Anonymity is in fact a key condition for the modern urban public as such. If you participate in culture and want to associate with other people and see what they have to say or show you, suspending your prior assumptions about people is a prerequisite; not to be moralist but quite simply to be able to listen and see what they have to say and show. If we really knew each other, we wouldn't be curious to encounter anyone or anything new, or be willing to allow people to reinvent themselves and be what they would like to be rather than what the social institutions that govern them (their families or communities, for instance) tell them to be. For sure, the anonymity of modern culture is also the condition for isolation, alienation and exclusion and therefore the very thing that we seek to overcome when we create and participate in culture. Yet, paradoxically, the very same thing that we try hard to dissolve through cultural communication, anonymity, is the very condition of the possibility of our attempts to create something worth sharing.

The anonymity of modern social life is in a sense therefore the condition both for the impossibility and the possibility of meaningful encounters between people in the sphere of culture. The point is not to glorify this anonymity but, maybe, to beat the spin doctors, target group researchers and cultural bureaucrats to the punch by demonstrating that, while yes, we want to create possibilities for meaningful encounters to happen and communities to form, what we do and want is only possible when we presuppose that the insurmountable precondition for attracting and initiating the public is the anonymity of the modern public sphere. In the end, what we say only makes sense because we don't know whom we are talking to, even though what we do is deeply motivated by the desire to get to know (or be) someone else, someone other. Does this sound true? I believe it does. But, then again, I might be lying to you, to end on a high and justify the time you have spent reading this pamphlet by arriving at an uplifting conclusion that makes what we do and want seem a bit more justified and justifiable. As if there were any justifications for what we do and want except for the fact that we do and want it! Or not?

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Art Discourse

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