

KEEP IT
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AN APPROACH
TO UNDERGROUND
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)
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Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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10.2 The expression of diversity through art

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A b s t r a c t

This paper will examine Marcia Tucker's first three exhibitions which were held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York during the 80's. These exhibitions dealt with the themes of AIDS and gender in art in a way which was both organic and in-depth. Tucker was the first to present then-current social issues through art. These three exhibitions were: - 1982 "*Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art*", which was the first exhibition to consider the aesthetics of artists identifying themselves as Gay or Lesbian. 1984 "*Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*", which focused on the subjective construction of language and the chauvinistic stereotyping which was at times resorted to by the Media when portraying sexuality. 1987 "*Let the Record Show*", which concentrated on the highly sensitive issue of AIDS in a bid to sensitize the public to its spread. The second part of this analysis, closely-linked to the first, is the format which Marcia Tucker employed for her exhibitions: 1) The exhibition itself; 2) Topic-specific lectures; 3) Films, live shows and musical performances inherent to a specific theme.

Keywords: *Exhibition, gender, Marcia Tucker.*



1. Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual presence in contemporary art

This exhibition was organized by guest curator Daniel J. Cameron in 1982. As every year, Marcia Tucker wished to present an exhibition arranged by an individual from outside the museum establishment. Cameron was selected as the project which he submitted sparked lively debate among Tucker's staff due to the theme the curator decided upon. As Tucker observed:

It is the first museum exhibition in the United States to address an important question: in what way and to what extent has some of the most interesting contemporary art addressed and reflected the concerns of the homosexual community, which has substantially increased its visibility in the past few years.

(Marcia Tucker, 1986, IV)

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Cameron laid down his personal vision and three differing forms of "Homosexual Content": 1) Homosexual Subject Matter; 2) Ghetto Content; 3) Sensibility Content.

1.1. Homosexual Subject Matter

According to Cameron, in the early 1980's, the creators of mass-produced goods targeted specifically the heterosexual consumer while at the same time attempting to endow their products with features which would appeal to other typologies of consumer. For what concerned the Art World, the gender of art exhibition visitors and those who bought artworks bore no relevance. Given that the sexual identity of those who visited art exhibitions and those who purchased artworks was of no relevance to the artist, Cameron deduced that mass producers should not consider the gender of their consumers.

1.2. Ghetto content

Cameron believed that the fulcrum of this categorization was once again the consumer but with the difference that both the producer/artist and the consumer/public were homosexual. "Ghetto Content" implies mass produced goods and fine art works targeted at social minorities. Ghetto Content can be seen in art, the Media and in goods produced by homosexuals for Gay and Lesbian consumers and Gay and Lesbian members of the art public.

Ghetto Content was produced and marketed by homosexuals for homosexuals and products were recognizably homosexual. According to Cameron, the Gay and Lesbian community in that period did not accept that goods of this nature were sold to make profit.

Even though Ghetto Content often failed commercially, a lot of artistic production, in particular published material which was not marketed with the aim of making a profit, did enjoy great success.

1.3. Sensibility content

The third category, "Sensibility Content", was conceived as the sum of the previous two approaches. The concept of "Sensibility" was characterized by its not having a specific public and by its being born from personal sensibility and academic study, from the experiences of an artist inherent to the idea of

homosexuality seen as a concept. Knowledge of the concept did not imply sexual orientation; without being explicit, artists manipulated images and material to create a concrete representation of the concept of gender using homosexual overtones.

Cameron believed that the importance of this theoretical passage towards “Sensibility Content” represented a key turning point in the introduction of thematics linked to the Gay and Lesbian world; this was due to the fact that artistic works, often produced by heterosexual artists, did not make direct reference to the homosexual community yet suggested a representation of sensibility regarding the theme of gender. Within this category one may include the female portraits by Romaine Brooks (1874-1970) and the photographs of George Platt (1907-1955).

2. *Difference: On representation and sexuality*

This exhibition was handled by the guest curator Kate Linker and by two co-curators who dealt with the choice of film projections shown at the film forum set up alongside the exhibition.

Speaking about the “*Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*”, Marcia Tucker said:

The point of view of this exhibition is specific, since gender itself is not the subject of the show; it is instead an intellectual as well as visual exploration of how gender distorts ‘reality’, as seen through the work of thirty-one artists, both male and female (Marcia Tucker, 1984, p. 4).

This reality is the fruit of artistic thinking and so it is a subjective way to look upon a determined reality. The aim of this exhibition is to highlight how every artist interprets reality through bias, that which Marcia Tucker in her introduction in the exhibition catalogue defines as “a visual exploration of how gender distorts reality”. Tucker believed that what an artist experienced moulded his sensibility towards certain thematic, opinions and points of view and these biases or cognitive distortions were to form the basis of this exhibition.

Making reference to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the modalities employed in the analysis of these biases were principally psychoanalytical.

2.1. *Sexuality: culture vs biological ‘truth’*

In the exhibition catalogue, the curator Kate Linker wrote:

Over the past ten years, a significant body of work has explored a complex terrain triangulated by the terms sexuality, meaning, and language. In literature, the visual arts, criticism, and ideological analysis, attention has focused on sexuality as a cultural construction, opposing a perspective based on a natural or biological ‘truth’. This exhibition charts this territory in the visual arts. Its thesis; the continuous production of sexual difference offers possibilities for change, for it suggests that this need not entail reproduction, but rather revision of our conventional categories of opposition (Kate Linker, 1984, p. 5).

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was pivotal in the formation of this. Lacan sustained that an individual is never an isolated being but is one who relates to

the social context which surrounds him in particular to cultural formations of patriarchy. In Lacan's vision, awareness of how gender incorporates a series of social rules in a child is implicit. (Lacan, 1977)

Craig Owens, who handled the section of the exhibition catalogue entitled "Posing", put forward this idea:

In contemporary art and contemporary theory are rich in parody (...), dissimulation (...) that is, in strategies of mimetic rivalry. The mimic appropriates official discourse-the discourse of the Other-but in such a way that its authority, its power to function as a model, is cast into doubt. Perhaps because of our culture's long-standing identification of femininity with masquerade-as Barbara Kruger proposes in an often-quoted statement, 'We loiter outside of trade and speech and are obliged to steal language. We are very good mimics. We replicate certain words and pictures and watch them stray from or coincide with your notions of fact and fiction' (Craig Owens, 1984, p. 7).

Taking as an example the works of artists such as Barbara Kruger, Victor Burgin and Mary Kelly, sexuality is considered as *a pose*. The term "pose" is used not with its most common meaning of "posture", but is used to indicate "imposture". According to the aforementioned artists, posing in art is an imposition; it reflects a sexuality imposed upon an individual by social norms. The artists present at the exhibition committed themselves to "codifying, decodifying, recodifying" images inherent to the concept of sexual representation. For instance, the works of Barbara Kruger tackle the transformation of action into gesture; works which deconstruct "pose" through images which recall well-known and shared meanings (codifying) and the texts which appeared in her work. By decodifying both the iconic and written messages, the person observing the work perceives the artist's message which is a deconstruction of the original iconic message by means of the text which she added.

2.2. The two theoretical approaches to posture: social and psychoanalytical

- With regards to concept of *posing*, critics of the early 1980's were of two differing points of view:
- *The Social Approach*: this can be defined as a tendency to see "posing" as the result of surveillance by Government Agencies. Homi Bhabha said: "The process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed" (Homi Bhabha, 1984). This approach considers *posing* as a defensive manoeuvre against the increasing penetration of *the public* into the private sphere.

The Psychoanalytical Approach: this approach aims to tackle the question of "posing" from the psychoanalytical angle, that is, considering "wish" which was neglected by the social approach.

2.3. Victor Burgin 'Zoo 78'

In Victor Burgin's work, "Zoo 78", a work made up of 16 images, the social and psychoanalytical overlap. In one of the "Zoo 78" images Burgin juxtaposes a photograph of a naked model posing during a peep show and a passage from "Discipline and Punishment" by Michel Foucault. The text describes an architectonic plan of the Panopticon by Jeremy Bentham. In the 1700's, the Panopticon was considered as the architectural epitome of a prison and later, as a metaphor to express the concept of surveillance in contemporary society:

The plan is circular: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower (...). By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible (Michel Foucault, 1995, p. 200).

2.4. Mary Kelly's 'Post-Partum' (1972-1979)

Mary Kelly was one of the most representative artists of the feminist movement and feminist thinking of the times. Through her work "Post-Partum", Kelly succeeded in gathering together many themes held dear by other female artists present at exhibition:

The Post-Partum Document is located within the theoretical and political practice of the women's movement, a practice which foregrounds the issues of subjectivity and ideological oppression. More specifically, the Document is identified with the tendency that bases the notion of ideological oppression on a psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity, that is, the unconscious. The ideological refers not only to systems of representation but also to a non unitary complex of social practices which have political consequences. Moreover, these consequences are not given as the direct effect of the means of signification employed in a practice. They depend on a political analysis of what is signified. (Kelly Linker, 1977, p. 11)

Developed between 1972 and 1979, "Post-Partum" takes inspiration from *daily life* and depicts various objects taken from the everyday life of her son:

clothes, his scribbles and nappies. For a long period, the work was reputed as an outstanding artistic work on the subject of motherhood. The attention paid by the artist to the psychoanalytical and documentative aspect allows one to discover the mutable nature of the mother-child relationship, varying between the objective and the subjective. Kelly's vision of the subdivision of society is expressed from a psychoanalytical standpoint:

In patriarchy, the phallus becomes the privileged signifier of this symbolic dimension. Although the subject is constituted in a relation of 'lack' at the moment of his/her entry into language, it is possible to speak specifically of the woman's 'negative place' in the general process of significations or social practices that reproduce patriarchal relations within a given social formation. (Kelly Linker, 1977, p. 12)

With *childbirth*, the artist sees the negative collocation of women; not having the male genital organ, they reproduce in their relationship with their child a compensation between what they lack physically and the figure of the child itself, the child assuming the position of the natural lack of a phallus. This imaginary substitution is lived, both at the level of ideology and social practice as a castration which relegates women, due to only their having the natural capacity to bear children, to childcare. This gives rise to the conception of the sexual subdivision of differing typologies of work carried out by women and men. Kelly makes reference to the reflection of Freud in "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," according to which women can symbolize their recognition of *lack* (castration). As Freud said: "in a sense she has the phallus. So the loss of the child is the loss of that symbolic plenitude more exactly, the ability to represent lack" (Kelly Linker, 1985, p. 9).

3. Let the record show

In 1987, within *The Window Series* exhibitions which the New Museum dedicated to installations dealing with social and political issues of the times, the external curator William Olander organized "Let the Record Show". Olander brought in activists from the Coalition to Unleash Power ACT UP to create an installation inherent to the issue of AIDS. During the 1980's, New York bore witness to the deaths of approximately 75,000 people owing to this disease, accounting for almost 20% of those Americans dying from AIDS (New York Times, 2001). The installation created by the ACT UP activists was entitled "SILENCE=DEATH".

3.1. 'SILENCE=DEATH'

Accompanying these words, sited on a black background, was a pink triangle-the symbol of homosexual persecution during the Nazi period and, since the 1960s, the emblem of gay liberation (...). Finally, the installation is more pointedly directed to those national figures who have used the AIDS epidemic to promote their own political or religious

agendas. It is intended to serve as a reminder that their actions or inactions will soon be a matter of historical record. In discussions about this project, inevitably the question, 'But is it art?' arises. Though my own response is, 'not that again, it's a question that can be put to positive effect. That is, throughout history, all periods of intense crisis have inspired works of art whose functions were often extra-artistic (William Olander, 1987, p. 1).

The title of the installation, "SILENCE=DEATH", was a provocation towards State and Federal Healthcare Institutions as well as other public figures who, according to ACT UP²⁴⁹, in an attempt to meet their own interests, were those responsible for the institutional silence and manipulation shown in the face of AIDS. The installation was exhibited in the main museum window located at street-level. This was done so that passers-by would interpret the work as a public demonstration.

The neon installation consisted a pink triangle with SILENCE=DEATH written below it. The installation backdrop of was a gigantic photograph taken during the Nuremberg War Trials along the bottom of which the photographs of the faces of six individuals²⁵⁰ who ACT UP reputed irresponsible in their treatment of AIDS were positioned.

4. Format employed by Marcia Tucker for her exhibitions

In 1977 Marcia Tucker founded the New Museum as she reputed:

Tucker focused her museum's mission on the promotion of lesser known artists and work being done outside the artistic mainstream, on the margins and edges of the art world. She wanted to explore interdisciplinary and community-based projects. She felt that involving artists in the way the museum functioned was a critical component of working with living artists on the cutting edge of contemporary art (Cyndy Coon, 2010, p. 42).

In 1979, the New Museum inaugurated its *The Window Series*. Artists were invited to exhibit their installations in the museum's street-level windows. These artworks were linked to then-current social issues and given that they were positioned at pavement-level, they could be seen by large numbers of people as they walked past. This allowed for the amplification of reflection on the themes inspiring the works which at times were neglected and went unpublicized.

During the 1980's, the museum began a series of monographic exhibitions to show the works of up-and-coming artists handling social and political themes. Exhibitions of this genre led to the museum's achieving fame for cultural debate and post-modern criticism.

I would like to emphasize again that dealing with contemporary art requires a different kind of inquiry

²⁴⁹ "ACT UP is a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis." (<http://www.actupny.org>)

²⁵⁰ Jerry Falwell, televangelist— "AIDS is God's judgment of a society that does not live by His rules". William F. Buckley, columnist— "Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals". Jesse Helms, US Senator— "The logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected". Cory SerVaas, Presidential AIDS Commission— "It is patriotic to have the AIDS test and be negative." Anonymous surgeon— "We used to hate faggots on an emotional basis. Now we have a good reason". The sixth accused is President Ronald Reagan, and before him is placed a blank slab of concrete, referencing his notorious seven-year public silence on the epidemic" (Robert Sember, David Gere, 2006).

and practice than traditional art history does. Moreover, the criteria of uniqueness, authenticity, or originality were dismantled by postmodernist theory, and to continue applying them to works of art in general – contemporary or historical – no longer holds water. Thus an inquiry based on a multidisciplinary and nuanced set of critical ideas could provide access and understanding for very difficult works of art we dealt with in the Museum (Marcia Tucker, 2006, p. 116).

In the very same period, the New Museum published the first book in its series entitled *Documentary Sources In Contemporary Art*. In 1980, the museum undertook its High School Art Program (HSAP), which was an initiative to have problematic adolescents involved in formation programs at the museum. This program, which was one of the first programs of its type in the United States, was characterized by its interdisciplinary and intercultural methods which were employed so that youngsters would gain awareness of the socio-cultural questions surrounding them in their daily lives.

I tried to show the close relationship between contemporary artistic practices and popular culture. Besides works of fine art, the exhibition included music, television, cartoons and comic books, and the work of local school children. This was certainly not a unique curatorial experiment for me because many other shows I did at the New Museum also focused on removing the barriers between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture or ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ art, as well as the isolation of art from quotidian life (Marcia Tucker, 2006, p. 116).

As well as through the exhibitions themselves, these events involved the public by means of a series of debates built around the exhibitions' central themes. Debates, which sometimes included film projections, were conceived as open dialogues between academics or social representatives and the general public, all of whom had the opportunity to put questions and voice personal opinions.

5. Conclusions

During the 1980's, the Gay and Lesbian community underlined its request to be recognized not as a minority but as an integral part of civil society. Marcia Tucker's New Museum was the first to take on board what was then such a complex and controversial issue. This was not done by chance; Tucker had conceived her museum as an exhibition space for artists handling social and political themes of the times. The artists whose works were exhibited participated in public debates inherent to the theme of their works and publications, such as *Documentary Sources In Contemporary Art*, ensued. With time, the New Museum acquired both relevance and reputation; it was as a museum worthy of the trust of artists, feminists and other minority social groups.

Owing to this consensus, eminent main-players from the world of culture and civil society took part in museum debates in ever growing numbers. Very often, themes were dealt with either in a way which was psychoanalytical, making reference to authors such as Freud or Lacan, or in a way which was sociological, with reference to authors such as Foucault and Derrida. The *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* exhibition is a perfect example as besides there being the exhibition curator who was in charge of organizing debates, there were also two curators who were responsible for film projections which were held in a nearby theatre. The artists who participated in this exhibition made use of both psychoanalytical literature, as can be seen in Mary Kelly's "Post-Partum", and a sum of the socio-psychoanalytical vision, visible for example, in Victor Burgin's "Zoo 78". Marcia Tucker was able to unite both popular with intellectual demand and she was also able to establish one of the first educational projects for youngsters within a museum. Tucker's museum space redefined itself according to the type of public it attracted at any given time. Her museum space did not serve just one single purpose; it adapted itself to the demands of visitors who attributed it with varying valence according to their necessities. This was rendered possible thanks also to Tucker's belief that an exhibition visitor should not be present merely to obtain information, but should be active rather than passive.

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