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Postmodernity Doesn't Exist: An interview with Boris Groys

Catarina Pombo Nabais

CPN: I would like to start our interview by reformulating Spinoza's celebrated question: What can art do? What can a work of art do? Especially today, when the world has become global through the big 'machine of surveillance' that is the internet as you analyzed in your *Art workers: between utopia and the archive*?[1]

BG: Well, I think art can give an artist the possibility, for example, of not working eight hours a day (laughs), of not being a regular worker but to survive in society in a more individualistic way. I think that art is interesting, in the first place, for the artist, as a possibility to transform life in a more, I wouldn't say alternative way, but in a not so standardized way.

[1] "The efficiency of the internet is based precisely on its finiteness and, therefore, on its observability. Search engines such as Google demonstrate this. Nowadays, one hears a lot about the growing degree of surveillance, especially through the internet. But surveillance is not something external to the internet, or some specific technical use of the internet. The internet is by its essence a machine of surveillance. It divides the flow of data into small, traceable, and reversible operations, thus exposing every user to surveillance—real or possible. The internet creates a field of total visibility, accessibility, and transparency." Boris Groys, "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive" in *e-flux* vol. 45 (2013).

CPN: Following a Nietzschean reading of art as symptomology, Deleuze and Guattari define the artist as the "doctor of civilization". Do you agree with this affirmation? What task do you think artists have today? Is there any function or efficiency of art?

BG: To a certain degree, of course, I think that what artists are doing manifests the general conditions of the society we are living under. But the fate of the artists and their practice are different from the case of Nietzsche's dictum. There is a clear explanation for that. Art is always made in a kind of tradition. Art is a very traditional thing to do. We have museums, art history, the long history of artistic practices, and so every artist somehow always position himself/herself in this long history. And this is something that not everybody does. We actually live here and now. We don't think about positioning our activity and our practice in some kind of historic lineage. And that is what artists have to do and what they actually do.

CPN: So, do you agree with Rancière when he states that art is politics because it is an act of emancipation and of reconfiguration of the world and of the sensible?

BG: Again, I am not sure if I agree with Rancière. I don't really understand what he means when he speaks about emancipation of the spectator. It seems to me that today everybody is spectator, and everybody is active. On the internet, everybody puts his or her images, some videos, some texts. We are all producers and we are all consumers and there is no clear distinction between artist and audience, artist and spectator. That was before. Not today. I also don't believe that art can create communities because artists don't have this ability and this social function. Communities generally are religious. Community is a Christian notion based on the belonging to, and the veneration of, certain divinities. Hegel once said that, in this sense, art is over. Christianity already partially killed art because it is forbidden to venerate artistic production. The idea that art can create community or can control people in one way or another is a magical and

mystical idea, a kind of totemistic, magical understanding of art. In fact, it is impossible. We went through secularization. As Hegel said, this veneration of art and art's ability to create communities, as it happened for example in ancient Greek art, is not possible anymore. It seems to me that Rancière's idea is based on the first period of German Romanticism. Schelling believed that art can substitute religion and can create community instead of religion. Rancière didn't take into consideration Hegel's criticism about that idea of art.

CPN: But still, I think there is some kind of a meeting point between you and Rancière. In *Politics of Installation*, you say that "The installation space is where we are immediately confronted with the ambiguous character of the contemporary notion of freedom that functions in our democracies as a tension between sovereign and institutional freedom. The artistic installation is thus a space of unconcealment (in the Heideggerian sense) of the heterotopic, sovereign power that is concealed behind the obscure transparency of the democratic order"[2]. Now, Rancière says that "the logic of emancipation is a heterology"[3]. So, do you believe that it is possible to conjugate Rancière's thesis on the emancipated spectator with your point of view on the installation and, from this conjugation, to affirm that the installation is the place par excellence of the emancipation of the spectator?
BG: Installation and exhibition are not a place of emancipation but of oppression and terror over the spectator and the visitor. When you go to a museum, you cannot touch anything. You can only look at things. You have to be very quiet. The museum is more like a prison, speaking like Foucault. It is a place of extreme oppression. Children don't like to go to museums because they can't move, they can't roll… And, the same if you look to installation. For example, I have a problem with my back, so I cannot visit like 60% of contemporary exhibitions, because you have to roll, or take uncomfortable positions and my body cannot take them. So, I wouldn't say that museums and installations are a place of emancipation of the spectator. On the contrary, I would say they are a place of additional oppression and

[2] Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin/New York: Stenberg Press, 2010) p. 69.
[3] Jacques Rancière, *Aux Bords du Politique* (Paris : Gallimard, 2004) p. 85.

repression of visitors because they put the visitor in a more complicated and more restrictive space.

CPN: Do you think that the museum can affirm itself as a heterotopy, a *place autre* for collaborative and participative communities? What do you think of those cases where the public is invited to choose the next exhibition to be produced by the museum, as if taking the role of curator? Do you think we are witnessing a museum's participatory tendency? And, in general, what do you think about participatory movements?

BG: I don't think that there is today a participatory tendency. I think that what actually happens is the same domination of consumption over production. It is the capitalist consumeristic practice that makes a consumer out of the visitor. The consumer dictates what he wants to buy and what he wants to see. That transforms museums into supermarkets where the consumer is a hero and a king. What we face today is a totally neoliberal consumerist attitude towards art which has nothing to do with participatory art. Participatory art is based on a group of people who want to create some kind of different and communal lifestyle.

CPN: You have stressed a contradictory effect of participation: on the one hand, science and technology keep their inner value independently from the public's opinion; on the other hand, art becomes valueless according to public's taste and aesthetic judgment. So, paradoxically, we see art losing its autonomy while science and technology become the true autonomous world (protected by power structures, of course). Do you see other perverted effects of participation in art, science, and technology?

BG: First of all, I don't believe that art is dependent on public taste. Art has its own history and is always positioning itself in relationship to this historical perspective. Of course, a lot of art is dumb today. But when we speak about contemporary art, we only speak about art that is historically new, historically different.

That is what is specifically contemporary. If someone is painting a

landscape in an eighteenth-century style, we wouldn't say it is contemporary art. So, the concept of contemporary art is already an historical one. And that means that public taste doesn't play an important role in art.

Now, a museum's collection, or a collection in general, choose what is specific for certain periods of time. That is why *avant-garde* had such a success. I think that one of the problems of Rancière is that *avant-garde* was never successful in France. Now, *avant-garde* artistic practice is always against taste, against the public taste and against the taste in general. Duchamp said that artists should make art against taste. So, participation is not consumption. Participation is substitution of the individual artist by a group. Participation does not involve public. Participation happens inside the artistic milieu itself. If you look at a radical *avant-garde* movement like Bauhaus, it is a participatory movement in the sense that the project and the production are collective, not individual. That is participation: not consumption.

CPN: And what about participation in science and technology?

BG: If we look at the contemporary situation of science, fundamental sciences do not actually get any funding. And also, if we look at the applied sciences, they get funding related to some possible commercial effect. So, if they are developing some scientific programs that do not promise commercial effect they are not funded. Science has no power, it is a function of funding, because science needs money. Economic dependence is, again, commercialized, and science works with the expectation of the commercial effect of some scientific developments. So, the power position of science is a total illusion. It never took place in the past and especially today it never takes place. Science is now totally commercialized and integrated into commercial practices. Science is only functioning insofar as it brings something that can be sold.

CPN: I would like now to shift the focus of our talk and concentrate on a specific question: the process of de-subjectivation. What are the conditions

of possibility for de-subjectivity's creation today? How can we become a-subjects inside a control society? Is it by a radical refusal of the internet and by the exclusive use of darkweb systems or, on the contrary, by an intensive use of those systems as a medium of experimentation, of becoming-anybody? In other words, how to escape surveillance and control?

BG: I don't know: not using the internet at all, for example. But if you don't use internet at all, you are still integrated in other systems. However, I must say that I don't think I am interested in de-subjectivation. I never believed it was interesting. It seems to me a kind of reactionary, archaic idea. I think more interesting to be on the level of the time we are living in, *absolument moderne* as Baudelaire said, and to operate on the level of the technological consciousness that is specific of your time. That is, to be contemporaneous. I don't believe it is a good idea to reject something, to escape something, because it is always aggressive and reactionary. It is better to operate on the level of contemporaneity.

CPN: If (as you wrote) "hermeneutics is the hacker"[4], can we say that the hacker who constructs darkweb structures is the new God? Are these darkweb systems the new religion where we can construct our opacity towards the system?

BG: No, I don't think so, because every hacker can be also hacked and so on, and so on. To become a hacker, you have to be trained, you have to be inside the system, you have to be technologically very qualified. You must

[4] "The internet is the place where the subject is originally constituted as a transparent, observable subject—and only afterwards begins to be technically protected in order to conceal the originally revealed secret. However, every technical protection can be broken. Today, the *hermeneutiker* has become a hacker. The contemporary internet is a place of cyber wars in which the prize is the secret. And to know the secret is to control the subject constituted by this secret—and the cyber wars are the wars of this subjectivation and desubjectivation. But these wars can take place only because the internet is originally the place of transparency." Boris Groys, "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive" in *e-flux* vol. 45 (2013).

be already in the system, maybe more in the system than anyone else. To be a hacker is not a precondition for anything at all (pause). I am a bit out-dated, archaic. I don't have a driver's license and I am not registered in the social system.

CPN: Really? And do you have a smartphone?

BG: Yes, I have a smartphone, but one of the second generation. Further, I have a smartphone, but actually it doesn't function, or it only functions in a very rudimentary way. There is of course a kind of contradiction. At the same time, I don't believe there is a contradiction because I think that contemporaneity is not equal to technicality. I think contemporaneity means a way of existing in a contemporary civilization: not at a professional level but at a life practice level, a lifestyle.

CPN: Are you worried about how to escape google, street cameras, i.e., digital tracing?

BG: I think control is not so bad. I don't think it is such a terrible thing to be controlled. I think that it is more unpleasant to know that we are going to die. I think we are subjected to so many ontological, biological, anthropological unpleasant things, like hunger, that comparatively surveillance is not such a bad problem (laughs). After all, it is even nice that somebody is interested in you and in what you're doing, because most of the time people are not interested.

CPN: I imagine you google sometimes. Are you a regular consumer of the internet?

BG: Yes, I google sometimes. I must say that in many cases - I think, in the majority of the cases - I hate that practice. For example, I google mostly when I am in New York. I don't know the city. So, if I want to find something, I google. I google pharmacy, mail offices, etc. But, I never found any information about any institution that is true (laughs). I have lived in New York for ten years. And during this time, all the information I

found on the internet about all institutions was false. And I also think that all the information I found about scientific issues was false. However, I think the internet is interesting because it is an effect of the abolition of Plato's difference between opinion and truth. Internet is a place of opinions. It substitutes truth by an overview of opinions. These opinions can be more or less close to reality (mostly they are not). It is like statistical analysis, something probably similar to what Rancière means about emancipation – the emancipation of a private opinion from truth. Whatever Rancière says about emancipation is true for Google… That is fascinating and that fascinates me too. Is that the end of Philosophy? If Philosophy is understood in the Platonic way, it is quite obvious.

At the same time, I think it is an interesting challenge to navigate a space in which truth becomes structurally impossible, where there is no specific place for it, because there are only opinions. Also, you have all the statistical research about what people think about this and that. I wouldn't say that I find it in general very sexy. But, when you remove this difference between right or wrong, you get a combination of statistical research, sociology and internet. And that is interesting. That is the only thing really interesting.

CPN: And what about fiction?

BG: Fiction became impossible.

CPN: Or it becomes the new truth? The new archive?

BG: No, no. To archive the internet would be impossible. You can't stabilize information there… Information is stable for a while and then it disappears. Because truth is impossible, fiction is also impossible, because every fiction on the internet relates to a fact, which is an objective and empirical fact. You can't find fiction on the internet, for example, as on a novel. You can find the information that this or that guy wrote a novel and that his novel was published by this or that publisher. And that is a fact. It is a fact that excludes the possibility of fiction. The possibility of fiction is

based on a kind of institution like a museum or a library. Everything the internet speaks about is about facts. So you have opinions and facts. Facts are mostly fake and opinions are mostly wrong. Opinions and facts build an unphilosophical field of thinking. The last philosopher was Derrida because he said, basically, that desire for truth is an unrealizable desire but this desire exists. I told him once that this kind of desire doesn't exist (laughs). But I agree that if the desire for truth existed then it couldn't be realized. Now, the situation has changed: people just reject the truth and the desire for truth. So, they go from deconstruction to consumption of opinions. Nobody has the opinion that one must destroy museums. That would be the only interesting opinion I can imagine (laughs). But such an opinion is not in the system. A lot of people have consumerist opinions and opinions about the best way to consume. Our civilization is based on that, which is fascinating. Our time is an interesting, fascinating time. And it is always interesting to live in an interesting time.

CPN: Now I understand why you put Deleuze in the group of anti-philosophers!

BG: Yes, you are right. Deleuze is all about desire – but not the desire for truth. You know, after Derridean deconstruction the only thing that remains is desire as such. And what is desire? It is consumption. Even if Deleuze wants infinite desire, the infinite consumerist desire, the whole supermarket (laughs). All desires are actually consumptionist desires. So, French philosophy, as Lyotard said, is about desire and money flowing together. French philosophy is a celebration of neoliberal economy. Something which is a bit too late because in society two powers operate: economy, so consumption (where Deleuze, Lyotard, Rancière, Badiou are based on) and military power. Military power is also not a power of truth. It is a power of killing people, physically. Now, it seems to me that actually we are approaching a form of military dominance. We are at a stage of preparation of the new war. Militarization is the only efficient process today… European, Russian, Chinese. What we witness in the present is the subjugation of the economic desire to the military power. So, the

celebration of desire is ok but a bit too late. It was good for the 80's because it was a period of consumption. But nowadays we are in a different time.

CPN: In your book *Antiphilosophy* you present the vulgarization of philosophy as a scepticism towards traditional philosophy, leading either to cultural relativism (no one escapes cultural identity), or to antiphilosophy (ready-made philosophy for everyday life). So, what is left to philosophy? What can philosophy still do today? What has philosophy yet to say?

BG: I don't think that the role of philosophy, the role of art, is to do or to say something. I think that philosophy and art open the possibility for an individual to practice something. They create a certain kind of vacancy, a social vacancy. The possibility that something can be put in practice. So, you want to do it. And you do it. People ask why did this guy became a serial killer, a terrorist? The answer is quite clear: because there was an opportunity to do so. You know what a serial killer has to do and how, because there are a lot of movies about it and an entire tradition. So, it is an opportunity you can embrace to become a serial killer (laughs). You can become an IT specialist or a terrorist. Similarly, there is a possibility to be a philosopher, to embrace a certain kind of lifestyle. This lifestyle is peaceful in practice and aggressive in discourse. The same with art. Art and philosophy do not exist without aggression. This is why philosophy and art are closer to military power rather than to economy. Art and philosophy are always an aggression against culture, against the audience, against other people…. It is always an attempt through aggression to find a place for yourself. When you are born, you have no place. You get a birth certificate and you are waiting for a death certificate. Your life is time-between birth certificate and death certificate and that's it. You look at the internet and you see all possible things but you don't see your own name and that is insulting. So, if you want to see your name in the internet you begin to think about how to add it. And then you become a serial killer, or a politician, or a philosopher, or an artist. And after a while, when you google your name, your name is there. Then you can die happy.

CPN: You are against the democratization of philosophy. But, at the same time, you affirm that antiphilosophy is the only way for philosophy to survive… So, are you a critic of postmodernity (when you say that antiphilosophy is a call for action and a normative command for life) or are you in favour of postmodernism (when you see antiphilosophy as the only destiny of traditional philosophy)?

BG: I think that postmodernity doesn't exist. So, I have no position towards that. Postmodernity doesn't exist because people who thought that it exists also thought that it exists as a certain historical period – but this thinking remains modern. I think the point is, again, if you enter a society you have to embrace a certain tradition. And the tradition of philosophy is the tradition of revolting against philosophy. The tradition of art is the tradition of revolting against the tradition of art. So, continuation of art is a continuation of protest, of criticism, of revolution, of negation. As Trotsky said, the oldest practice of people is revolutionary practice. So, revolution is not new. People always had the tradition of revolution. So, what you do is always a continuation. But, in modernity, continuation of a certain profession is a protest against that profession. I think this is something that makes certain things obscure.

CPN: And in that continuation of the tradition, do you have any favourite philosophers? Who are your heroes in Philosophy? Which philosopher do you keep in your heart (as Deleuze says about Spinoza)?

BG: Indeed, there are some… (pause). When I try to explain what I want to say, one way to explain is to make some references to already existing philosophical contexts. And then, of course, some texts are more favourable to what I want to say. Others less. So, I use some of the philosophers. Some texts fit my purposes better than others. But if I use a text of a philosopher that doesn't mean that I admire him or her as a hero.

CPN: Finally, I would like to finish our conversation by asking you: How is your writing process? Is it a quick, spontaneous writing, a thinking-while-writing process, or do you prepare everything previously in your

head before you start writing?

BG: Well, first of all, I hate to write. I don't like it.

CPN: But you have written a lot!

BG: Well… not so much… you know. My friend Sloterdijk is writing all time, like Žižek. They like to write a lot. I don't. Physically, it is bad for my eyes, it is bad for my back. It is tiring. And in general, I don't like the process. I like to talk. I don't like to write. On the other hand, I know that, from time to time, I have to write something. Simply because certain ideas and certain figures cannot be developed in speaking. They should be developed in writing. My writing is always provoked by listening to the opinions I do not agree with. It is always actually polemical. I always get the impulse to write something against something. So, I always have a certain complex of ideas I am against. Even if the tone is neutral - and the tone in my texts is neutral - I always write against certain ideas.

CPN: But your writing is so fluid…Your texts are very clear...

BG: Yes, I always want to be clear because I want to explain what I don't agree with. I never mention it simply because I don't want to destroy my text by mentioning something I don't like. So, I hope that people who read my texts already have an archive of wrong opinions in their heads so that when then read, they may compare… I think this is the function of philosophy. The function of philosophy is not truth, because truth is over. It is not the emancipation of the reader, because the subjection of writing to others is a consumption. It is an attempt to demonstrate that you can write some good texts without taking into consideration all of the accepted ideas of your time and, at the same time, to be contemporary and to be part of this discourse.

CPN: I suppose that is what you mean when you state that 'a traditional philosopher is like a traditional artist: an artisan producing texts'. What a wonderful way of finishing this interview! Thank you so much, Boris, for your time.