

Unlearning journalism, misapprehending art.

By Alfredo Cramerotti, December 2008.

Abstract

In the last few decades, our ability to reality check has increasingly shifted away from the domain of the news to become a central preoccupation for art. In this process, an emergent way of researching, producing, and distributing “knowledge” about people, “histories”, and situations has addressed us through artistic practices: an aesthetic journalism has taken form, a mode of investigation on different issues carried out through the circuits of art. Aesthetics is about what our senses experience; in this sense, it is important to query not the way art and journalism supposedly transform the world but the way they—working together—can transform the meaning of the world. Aesthetic journalism (different from “journalistic art”) becomes central for questioning both the selection of the material delivered to us and the specific reasons for why things are selected, leaving to the final user of that information the space to “digest” what is experienced.

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I would like to invite the reader to take a brief journey into the world of information processes such as news-making, investigative journalism, and reporting, and, in addition, into the world of art practices dealing with this. What I am interested in disclosing (a little) is the complex relationship between the information produced and distributed by journalism and the information generated by art.

My idea is that the notion of truth has undergone a shift in the last decades: once clearly a domain of the journalistic method (what happened in the world, why it happened, and what the foreseeable consequences were) is increasingly becoming a preoccupation for artistic activity (why things are presented in certain ways, whom they benefit, and in what conditions).

An emergent way of researching, producing, and distributing information about people, “histories”, and situations today no longer passes through broadcast or media journalism, yet it reaches a (specialized) worldwide audience: the public of the “globalized” circuits of art exhibitions, biennials, film festivals, and so forth. However small this public may be in terms of time (the last few decades from the 1960s onwards) and space (146 biennials worldwide to date, for instance), this reception and redistribution of “knowledge” has affected, and still does affect, our idea of the way we know things about the world and about ourselves. This

“interaction” between art and journalism is something more than a trend, and it is different from socially responsible art. It has developed to the point of forming a new mode of journalism, an “aesthetic journalism,” varying in intensity according to the degree of journalistic method applied by the artist. Aesthetic journalism is that mode of investigation on social, political, geographical, economical, or cultural issues carried out through the circuits of art. It is now a phenomenon that lends itself to an examination of the information produced, and the approach adopted.

Reality and fiction

Just for a moment, imagine journalism and art as a multilayered single activity, rather than as clear-cut separated fields. Journalism works providing a view on things, art a view on the view (feeding back on the first). Even if one is a coded system that speaks for the truth (or so it claims), and the other a set of activities that questions itself and its means at every step (or so it claims), in the end both are methods of representation and mediation for the human condition. Humans act and think (and represent what they think) in a perpetual ballooning between reality and fiction. When a journalist undertakes an investigation about this or that history, problem, or situation, s/he selects a number of images and words out of a continuum of life. In this case, there is a subtraction from a huge and complex number of relations and processes (what we call reality). If an artist makes an artwork on the same subject (a film or an installation, for instance), s/he creates a narrative where there was none, or a different one. In this case, there is an addition to reality. The flux between adding and subtracting creates the environment in which we live. In terms of representation, there is very little change if a story is “factual” or “fictional”—an account and a depiction is produced. What changes dramatically, however, is how this story is told and distributed, and the consequences that will affect our behaviour.

The profession of journalism would imply almost an ethical stance: to serve the highest number of people possible and to be a witness of history, not its maker. In this process, the journalist may or may not pronounce her or his biased view and fallibility in the pursuit of truth. This has consequences on the public actions, unlike the work of the artist (as it has been conceived so far). Since the age of Enlightenment, when to address public interest was of primary concern for the bourgeoisie, the profession of the journalist has become an object of negotiation. It

is now a constant process of conciliation between the sources of information, the employer's interests, the power exerted over the subject of the reporting, and over the audience, but also the expectations of the very public it serves. This negotiation between multiple terms is the reason why today journalism is conducted in the pressroom, and not in the field. As something (we are told) is happening somewhere, we get instant access to broadcast footage in real time, mediated by experts that comment on the live feed of the images and by digital editors that mix, overlap, crop, and insert graphics and running texts. What we get in omniscience, we lose in context and sense. We no longer know in which situation something takes place, since the context is very much constructed, mediated, and delivered to the viewer for consumption. More news any time, more journalism universally coded, more events thanks to the multiplication of newsworthiness. We have reached the point that we need to have "meta-media," the explanatory industry. We consider everything as either reliable or manipulated, rely for judgement on media watchers and critics, commentary programmes, articles on the interpretation of other articles, and so on. In this context, to explain means also to influence.

Questioning and delivering

Aesthetic journalism works on the borders of reality and fiction, using documentary techniques and journalistic methods, but self-reflexively examining its own means; ultimately, it is not about delivering information but about questioning it. What I consider worth examining is a cultural practice that meshes the criteria of journalism and art, questioning and possibly reversing the tradition of both fields: an activity—produced either by artists or journalists—that queries the realm of fiction as the site of imagination, and that of journalism as a site for reality. We start to get closer to the core of reality itself when we make *our* reality not a given, irreversible fact but a possibility among many others.

Since its origins, journalism has constantly struggled between its "mission" and its power position. Art, on the other hand, is no less implicated in a dualism: artists are keen to appeal to a particular audience (the art audience of the globalized circuits as described earlier), pursuing at the same time something beyond the artistic field, as if "more real than reality." Often non-fiction work by artists is uncritically taken for reliable information, as a valid counter-account to media journalism. However, since an act of interpretation is never neutral, art and journalism find themselves on the same level regarding the narratives they propose;

this bring us back to my earlier invitation to imagine a notion of information which includes the artistic treatment of reality.

The problem occurs when an artist feels obliged to strip down his investigative work to bare facts. It is more important, in my view, to vary one's vocabulary according to different contexts than to continue to propose the dichotomy facts/fiction. They are no longer two distinct ways of dealing with the world around us—one objective and the other fictionalized—but more types of the single activity of production and distribution of information. We could think to adopt the label “media worker” not only for journalists, TV, or Internet editors but also for artists, performers, musicians, storytellers, and poets. Producers who include the use of imagination, open-ended meanings, and individual interpretation of documents could fruitfully expand the journalistic (and artistic) attitude. The hybridisation of journalism with art adopts imagination, narrative, and abstraction to implement the research and delivery of information; it does not attempt to be objective at all costs, nor discard creativity in favour of neutrality.

Audience and public

I will admit that I am the first to rarely take the extra mile; I am often satisfied with an overview about a problem, quite content to not join a critical, specific analysis. This, probably, is not enough. Should we—as audience—not be called into question for accepting things “as they are?” A public becomes an audience when it takes the liberty to add something to the narrative offered by the work of art, the documentary film, or the journalistic reportage. As an audience member, I should be able to analyse the relation between “what happened” and its representation, be it a video projection in a gallery or an article in the morning paper. In this sense, seeing and frequenting “journalistic art” is no more relevant than watching CNN; reading, making, or critically engaging with art does not happen without putting one's agenda and interests at play. What I consider real or as truth—as well as what I think is purely imagination and construction—is very much shaped by the way that information relates to my world. I would call “aesthetics” precisely that experience of relating information, signs, and symbols to my background and life.

There is an inevitable division between the individual experience of something and its representation, and we cannot escape it. Our personal

experiences cannot be true for someone else; its “knowledgeable” representation, on the other hand, goes beyond her or his own individual experience. This gap between the actual incident and its “model” is no more no less than the difference between the coded journalistic representation and its artistic counterpart. This is the value of journalism “being” aesthetic, rather than journalism using aesthetic means (which it does very well and has always done.) Since journalism adopts the knowledgeable mode (providing a representation as a substitution for the accident reported), it has become the modus operandi for dealing with that, which cannot be experienced first-hand. Journalism is necessary for us to help deal with an increasingly complex civilization, separations of roles, and procedures in administration, science, culture, and technology. The specialized activity of the journalist mediates these fields to those who have no direct experience of all the multifaceted aspects of society and its occurrences. Since the journalistic attitude is so successful in proposing the model as the event, it has spread into many other areas outside the journalistic field, constructing the boundaries of normalcy for both representation and reality. In this sense, the journalist is an artisan, someone who carefully designs information (declaring, or not, its distortion) in order to present an understandable picture of the world “out there.” My invitation to the reader to consider art and journalism as two sides of a unique activity generates the main question: is it possible to work with aesthetics, allowing the viewer’s interpretation, and still be informative, precise, and relevant? If truth telling is shifting from the news to art, how can we negotiate the confinement of art within the boundaries of institutions, biennials, and a few public projects?

Art and journalism

To summarize, it is a matter of diversifying what has now become uniform. We could envision an activity of producing and distributing information in which fixed positions are undermined: journalism approached as an art form, art considered as a journalistic method. Below are a few aspects of this interaction, either from the point of view of the audience or the producer, less to provide directions to follow than to create a chance to discuss them.

Formats

The artist-as-journalist is able to research possibilities in many fields and circumstances; resourcefulness is one of the skills of art people. The first thing that pops to mind is to invite artists to produce investigative works not exclusively for

the artistic scene but for different communication channels: television, the Internet, radio, and magazines. It would be crucial to initiate a relation with media channels (from local TV networks to national newspapers, and radio projects) and propose works realized according to an aesthetic approach—not “about” art but *through* art—and use these possibilities. Artists have been dealing with media channels, one way or another, since the 1960s “Warholian” times (art as media industry, or vice versa). From Gerry Schum and his Television Gallery to Ian Breakwell using television and radio programmes to reach a broader audience, up to current days with cross-media ventures like GNN (Guerrilla News Network). This latter case is a news channel on television and the web whose aim is to build programmes about socio-political topics (War on Terror, environment, intelligence, and so forth) driven by a musical narrative. The idea behind it is that producers can either snub the populist approach to information, and give way to manipulation of facts and representations, or embrace the very realm of advertising, music videos, and pop formats in trying to build a meaningful commentary. The bottom line in all of this is that an artist, who wants to effectively work *with* an audience rather than *for* one, might be better off pursuing collaboration with other platforms (so to speak), such as journalism, rather than expecting this or that media opportunity. Bringing in expertise, time (something the media environment cannot afford), and attention (another element lacking, due to time pressure), demanding a funding and distribution structure in exchange. It has been done in the past and can be done now—even at the cost of subjugating to the rules of media production. It is nevertheless worth the attempt, since reciprocal influences are not foreseeable and will depend upon a significant reception by the audience.

Time

As mentioned, television, radio, and press production cannot afford to take a long-term view. Artists and art institutions, instead, can produce works over a span of months rather than minutes and can adapt their agenda (because they have time) to pursue unpredictable leads. A longer and “vertical” investigation, also in historical terms—rather than a “horizontal” one from theme to theme—allows one to connect with many other related issues and provides the chance to make more works, distribute widely, and possibly generate economic returns from different commissioners. This form of production of information is an option for both documenting and fabricating, since it depends not on the author or the subject but on the receiver. If we, as public, accept the opportunity to “develop” this or that topic in time, as part of our own story, we activate a sort of witness process, and

we become audience(s). It is a matter of adding knowledge, linking what we already know with what we do not know, and putting the new in sequence with the other knowledge. Two aspects are equally important here: for the author, not to be forced to adapt to the speed of the news industry; for the spectator, not to be required to accept (or refuse) the information on the spot. It is an opportunity that must be kept alive in artistic practice, eventually to expand into traditional journalism and other media formats.

Alienation, playfulness, transparency

Unlike the work of the artist, who focuses on representation but is relatively freed from the time-bound issue, the work of the journalist is one of estimation, an act of creation with one eye on the consumer and the other on the deadline. Journalism has to allow a range of readings of what it produces, and possibly re-focus the constant shift of attention and engage more “vertically.” A few elements could be employed to keep at bay the pretension of neutrality and objectivity, in particular alienation, playfulness, and transparency.

1. Alienation: Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel, for their theatre in the 1920s, wanted the audience to assume an attitude of critical distance and aimed at disturbing their connection to the play and breaking with viewers’ expectations. Such an approach, if applied to media production, does not completely reveal the authors’ agendas (as everything is part of a staging act) but can displace expectations. Moments of alienation allow the subject of the investigation to be framed at least in a different way than its picturesque image.

2. Playfulness: to play with representation means, for instance, to include the production crew or the mechanism of editing into the scene, that is, within the frame of the visible, and to make it transparent. This technique is well known in the world of art; just think of the work of Omer Fast: in his video works, he addresses the viewer through a complex and multilayered narrative, but makes of the untruthfulness of the mechanisms of narration the very point of his work. This approach, though, is normally avoided in both “journalistic art,” which tends to overlook it, and media journalism, where crew and set-ups remain hidden.

3. Transparency: current media programmes try to provide that feeling of “being in the place and moment,” which is supposed to help the appreciation of truth (i.e., the arrangement of the news studio as a pressroom). However, these strategies rarely make the reasons clear why a team, or reporter, has chosen that location and that subject, and not other sources and interview partners, and what

the specific interests behind those choices are. In short, it would be useful to know the principles behind *any* investigation.

Withdrawal

Representation activities like journalism and art are always developed and sustained within a prevailing cultural system, thus any claim of truthful perspective cannot exist; it can only be presented as such. The withdrawal concept is a measure to counter this claim based on two approaches: to show an image that does not reveal its content but refers to something else outside the picture; and to not show an image at all. Withholding visual evidence, or information in general is seen as a lack of professionalism in journalistic criteria; but what is lack in one field can be wealth in another. It is very important to open up the possibility of seeing something different in what is told, not claiming to tell, “what is all about,” but rather proposing a selection of reading possibilities. The 2003 video *Schwarz auf Weiss* (Black on White) by the art collective Klub Zwei (Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser), for instance, presents a succession of images of the Shoah that are withdrawn and substituted by a text referring to those images and a voiceover. This kind of narrative removes the pictures that are spoken of, instigating in the spectator’s mind a reflection about what is, which distinguishes an image as an historical document. Jalal Toufic is another interesting author regarding withdrawal: in his book *Forthcoming* (Atelos, 2000), he cites (or perhaps invents) a photographer who was sent to Bosnia to document the destruction of the war and returned “with thousands of largely blurred and haphazardly framed photographs of intact buildings with no shrapnel, with not even broken glass.” In seeing those pictures, one could perceive the war in Bosnia, precisely through the intactness of the streetscapes portrayed in the images.

Regardless of the truthfulness of what is reported (omitting? forgetting? inventing?) what counts is the activity of perennial re-working, researching, and reading of things by the audience; it requires us to suspend our notion of the “experienced” as something fixed and immutable. Withdrawal is treatment of the reality in a fictitious way; not fabricating or documenting, but rather reading the facts as though they *were* an artwork. This goes hand-in-hand with both the disappearance of art as a distinct (autonomous) and coded (with specific media and tools) practice, and with its contamination with other disciplines like journalism or science. It challenges our idea of representation as an artistic effort, and of engagement as a political one.

Instruction and intuition

Aesthetics is about what our senses experience; in this sense, it is important to query not the way art and journalism supposedly transform the world, but the way they can transform the meaning of the world. Artistic investigation becomes a tool to question both the selection of the material delivered to us, and the specific reasons for why things are selected. Cultural production in general, and art in particular, is increasingly at the forefront of how we understand the world we live in. If, in the 1950s or 1960s, the economic mechanisms were the main referent for our experience as members of a given society (either in terms of conformity or antagonism), now this is no longer the case. Today, cultural dynamics play an increasingly important role, and criteria for economic achievement and wellbeing are no longer sufficient for a proper comprehension of phenomena like, to name one of the most cited issues, the so-called “clash of civilisations.” It seems we have to rethink society from the bottom up, and re-address many of our referents in cultural, even aesthetic terms. Not surprisingly, multinationals and corporations put huge effort into re-investing their profits in cultural and artistic projects in order to create a “culture” that can travel beyond national schemes and monetary value. Aesthetic practices first developed a journalistic “trait” to expand art’s grasp on life, since the tools at its disposal, like the search for the sublime in the traditional aesthetic approach of painting and sculpture, were no longer relevant. The last few generations of artists feel they cannot leave research into and a commitment to social and political meaning outside their practice, and therefore engage with structures of production and distribution outside the specific constraints of art. This trait could shape the future view of the world, via a re-adaptation in artistic terms of journalism and the news industry. But rather than to abandon the aesthetic approach in search of journalistic neutrality, the real challenge is to “contaminate” one with the other, making it impossible to distinguish the two approaches, therefore “alerting” the viewer about the mechanisms at play in representation and reporting.

Only time can tell if this will be established as *the* essential feature for our understanding of the world. I see aesthetic journalism as an instrument for rendering sharper and more persistent our curiosity (essential for departing towards something we do not understand) and for making the contours of reality more visible. In fact, to think about something in a “secure” way by means of structured information (like professional journalism) is to reduce the unknown to the expected

and, therefore, to take away the possibility of learning. In addition, in order to be able to learn something, we first have to unlearn what we take for granted.