

**ily cere-
cahier**

**the artist as producer
in times of crisis
okwui enwezor**

The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis

Okwui Enwezor

Lecture at ECF conference on engaged art, 2004.

From 11 to 14 March, the European cultural Foundation (ECF) organised the conference Almost Real in Utrecht. Some one hundred and fifty visitors from Europe and the rest of the world participated in workshops and debates about art and social changes. The high point of the conference was a presentation by Okwui Enwezor titled The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis.

Okwui Enwezor is a Nigerian art critic with an impressive career history. He founded Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, and has held positions including curator of the second Biennial in Johannesburg and Documenta 11 in Kassel. During his reading at the ECF conference Almost Real he advocated engaged artists collectives.

On April 27, 1934 Walter Benjamin delivered a lecture at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris. In the lecture, "The Author as Producer", Benjamin addressed an important question that, since, has not ceased to pose itself, namely to what degree does political awareness in a work of art becomes a tool for the deracination of the autonomy of the work and that of the author?

Benjamin's second point was to locate what a radical critical spirit in art could be in a time of such momentous, yet undecided direction in the political consciousness of Europe: between the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the productivist model of artistic practice it instantiated and the storms of repression unleashed by fascism and Nazism in Western Europe. In a sense, Benjamin's lecture addressed the question of the artist's or writer's commitment under certain social conditions. This would lead him to ask "What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?" Georg Lukács posed a similar question in his 1932 essay "Tendency or Partisanship?".

The conditions of production of the time was the struggle between capitalism and socialism as the driving force behind modern subjectivity. It is my intention in this lecture to extend the questions raised by these two thinkers and apply them to the critical context of contemporary culture today. Ever more so, Benjamin and Lukács are not only relevant, but crucial to understanding a visible turn that has become increasingly evident in the field of culture at large, that is the extent to which a certain critical activism in contemporary art has become a way to pose the questions raised seventy years ago anew through collective practices. My focus is not on activism per se, but on work driven by the spirit of activism that bear direct relationship to Benjamin's and Lukács's essays.

To that end, recent confrontations within the field of contemporary art have precipitated an awareness that there have emerged in increasing numbers, within the last decade, new critical, artistic formations that foreground and privilege the mode of collective and collaborative production. Is this return an acknowledgment of the repressed memory of a social unconscious? Is the collectivization of artistic production not a critique of the poverty of the language of contemporary art in the face of large scale commodifications of culture which have merged the identity of the artist with the corporate logo of global capitalism?

These questions shadow the return of collectivity in contemporary artistic practice and in so insistent a manner, across a broad geographic area that to

ignore the consequences is to miss the vital power of dissonance that is part of its appeal to the contemporary thinkers and artists who propose collectivity as a course artistic work. Of course, we need not to be reminded that there is nothing novel about collectivity in art as such. It's been a crucial strategy of the avant-garde throughout the 20th century. Therefore, a proper understanding of collectivity today would have to be traced through its affinities with past examples. This story belongs to the history of modernism proper. The position of the artist working within collective and collaborative processes subtend earlier manifestations of this type of activity throughout the 20th century.

Collectivity performs an operation of irruption and transformation on traditional mechanisms and activities of artistic production which locates the sole figure of the individual artist at the center of authorship. Under the historical conditions of modernist reification, collective or collaborative practices (that is the making of an artwork by multiple authors across porous disciplinary lines) generate a radical critique of artistic ontology qua the artist and as such also questions the enduring legacy of the artist as an autonomous, individual within modernist art. This concerns the question of the authenticity of the work of art and its link to a specific author. However, there is a level at which the immanence of this discourse is also evidenced in the critique of the author in postmodernism.

On both levels, I would argue that the anxieties that circumscribe questions concerning the authenticity of either the work of art or the supremacy of the artist as author are symptomatic of a cyclical crisis in modernity about the status of art to its social context and the artist as more than an actor within the economic sphere. This crisis has been exceptionally visible since the last decade of the twentieth century. The political climate of the current global imperium adumbrates it further. If we look back historically collectives tend to emerge during periods of crisis; in moments of social upheaval and political uncertainty within society. Such crisis often forces reappraisals of conditions of production, reevaluation of the nature of artistic work, and reconfiguration of the position of the artist in relation to economic, social, and political institutions.

There are two types of collective formations and collaborative practices, that are important for this discussion. The first type can be summarized as possessing a structured *modus vivendi* based on permanent, fixed groupings of practitioners working over a sustained period. In such collectives, authorship

represents the expression of the group rather than that of the individual artist. The second type of collectives tend to emphasize a flexible, non-permanent course of affiliation, privileging collaboration on project basis than on a permanent alliance. This type of collective formation can be designated as networked collectives. Such networks are far more prevalent today due to radical advances in communication technologies and globalization. However, we shall trace the emergence of the artist as producer in times of crisis by first linking up with modernism.

In collective work we witness how such work complicates modernism's idealization of the artwork as the unique object of individual creativity. In collective work we also witness the simultaneous aporia of artwork and artist. This tends to lend collective work a social rather than artistic character. Consequently, the collective imaginary has often been understood as essentially political in orientation with minimal artistic instrumentality. In other instances shared labor; collaborative practice; the collective conceptualization of artistic work have been understood as the critique of the reification of art and the commodification of the artist. Though collaborative or collective work has long been accepted as normal in the kind of artistic production that requires ensemble work such as in music, in the context of visual art under which the individual artistic talent reigns such loss of singularity of the artist is much less the norm, particularly under the operative conditions of capitalism.

notes:

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

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