

Silvia Kolbowski interviewed by Hannah Entwisle and Merouan Ammor

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CCC: In our conversations with visiting artists over the past months, individuals have expressed diverse viewpoints on the role art plays in social change. In particular, some have made a distinction between art and activism. What are your thoughts on the idea that art is separate from activism, and how does this impact your artistic practice?

SK: Actually, I think that's a specious distinction. What is activism? Many people define it mainly as signing petitions, or calling a lot of politicians, or going on physical marches against injustice, or organizing communities to defend or expand their rights in the name of democracy. I have no objection to such actions, and often participate in them myself. But I would define activism more broadly as the activity of being a political subject in the world, and rising to the challenges of taking public stances on politics and ethics. But what is a public stance? A public stance in art can take many different forms. It is puritanical, in my view, to define activism as only something that can have quantifiable results. Change can be precipitated in many, often unexpected, ways, and involves shifts in thinking and perceiving. Artists work with representational methods that are not quantifiable in terms of end results. But, truly, I've begun to think that the puritanical overvaluation of the quantifiable is going to be the downfall of the human species. I mean, of course when it comes to such things as the ongoing oil explosion disaster in the Gulf, we need scientific facts. But it's clear that those facts can often hit walls of psychological denial and political expediency. So facts alone are not going to be our salvation.

The distinction I make is more in the nature of expecting that aesthetic activism (a terrible term because in a sense all meaningful and valuable art is activist) develop a language that is not shared by discourses that are dependent on pragmatism. That alone does not make work activist, but in my mind it's a precondition for aesthetic practices.

CCC: During your meetings with students this year, you spoke about how psychoanalysis plays an important role in your work. There is often a suspicion in the general public or in the scientific community about the seriousness of psychoanalysis, suspicion that dates back to its origin. Do you consider psychoanalysis to be a science, even if its results are not reproducible or falsifiable? If not, how would you classify it?

SK: To be honest, I'm not interested in answering the question of whether psychoanalysis can be legitimated scientifically unless we're also going to inquire into how our notions of Science with a capital "S" have developed. Why are we using Science as a benchmark? That question also betrays a profoundly Western prejudice. Let me use the analogy of centuries of Eastern medicine as opposed to a much younger Western, "scientific," medicine. I've always been amused by a cartoon I came across decades ago in which a Western medical doctor, framed degree on the wall, says to a puzzled patient, "Madam, we don't cure people here. For that you'll have to go to a quack." Again we come back to the question of the Western love affair with the quantifiable and the scientific. Can we not also attribute that historical and modern suspicion of psychoanalysis to a fear of the complexities of the psyche that psychoanalysis outlines, the complexities of the sexual drive and pleasure, of child sexuality, etc.?

CCC: In your opinion, what were the main mistakes made by activists/artists before taking psychoanalysis into account? Perhaps more specifically, how can one concretely incorporate psychoanalysis within an artistic intervention? How can this tool be powerful? How do you personally use psychoanalysis in your work?

SK: “concretely,” “tool,” “artists, *slash*, activists” – can I point out again the emphasis on the pragmatic, and the dualistic? In a contemporary period in which even our always-flawed western democracies are being eroded into non-existence through various forms of political and social instrumentalization, can we refrain from such vocabulary in talking about art?

My knowledge of psychoanalysis is always imbricated in my address to and creation of a spectator. Knowing that the human psyche is not rational, and knowing that it creates perception through projection, displacement, condensation, denial, desire, conflicting drives, etc., means that one thing I will never do in my work is try to enlighten my spectator through the presentation of what I might think are self-evident truths that will lead to the improvement of the social condition.

Remember the analogy I made during one of my teaching sessions this year? The observation by animal behaviorists that the only species that will follow an unstable leader is the human (i.e. not any of the animal species)? I’m both fascinated and horrified by the knowledge that humans are often in thrall to irrational and destructive power. According to Freud, the human death drive and the libidinal drive could enter into a delicate balancing act. But throw into this delicate balance Capitalism’s end game of technological destruction (“progress”) as it dovetails with sadistic and masochistic human drives, and we will have to be very ingenious as artists to be able to understand the human motivations behind what seems like a headlong drive toward extinction at this particular moment in history. But browbeating or even trying to seduce spectators with rational arguments is not going to do the trick.