

Ranslate Looking Up

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I would like to begin with a work *Looking Up, Reading the Words* by the Soviet-born artist Ilya Kabokov. At first it is jarring to see what appears to be a radio antenna in such a pastoral setting. But upon further inspection hand written words can be made out between the aerials:

My Dear One! When you are lying in the grass, with your head thrown back, there is no one around you, and only the sound of the wind can be heard and you look up into the open sky—there, up above, is the blue sky and the clouds floating by, perhaps this is the very best thing that you have ever done or seen in your life.

The work provides a space for the viewer to simply lie down, look up, and wonder. It may be open ended in its specific meaning. But it is very specific in terms of how it calls up our relationship to the earth, technology, community, and the question of freedom without leading to universal conclusions.

There is unprecedented interest in art today. Art academies, art museums, art biennales, and art markets continue to grow despite the precarious global economic picture. Contemporary art development in places such as China has been nothing less than phenomenal. Mirroring the rapid economic development in China, the newness of contemporary art offers one of the few vital outlets for truly critical and imaginative expression. So too in much of the rest of the world is contemporary art seen as a symbol of discursive freedom and a sign of a nation's openness to reinvention. How is it that art has reached such a point of importance today when there are so many contradictory and debilitating factors at play for art? After all, the freedom of art to be art seems increasingly compromised by its capture by commercial markets and national interests.

A useful pathway to take to understand the situation of contemporary art today is to look back at the avant-garde art movements of the 1960s and how they challenged a

modernist understanding of art that privileged the ideas of individuality, subjectivity, autonomy, and universality. But before doing so, it is important to reiterate the point that modern art is a largely Western invention that grew out of a long history of visual art in Europe greatly influenced by cultures of outside of Europe, such as China. These influences have always been greatly under regarded or repressed within European visual art history. The decade of the 1960s at its bracketing by Pop, Minimal, and Conceptual Art was a tumultuous one with the transcendent nature of the art object and the sanctity of the exhibition space called into question. Today the term autonomy has been largely displaced by the term contingency. The negotiation of the present as well as the unpredictability of the future is at the heart of such a term.

Whereas modernist art required viewers to work at understanding the painted or sculpted surface before them so as to enter its depth, Pop Art destabilized the self-absorbed character of modernist art through its embrace of mass cultural imagery. Pop Art framed the art object as a text within a semantic field of culture and deemphasized the artist's "hand." In Andy Warhol's *Woman Suicide* from 1963 the repeated screen-printed image of an apartment building façade appears as a much larger building with many women jumping to their deaths. The degradation of the image from the screen-printing process results in the rendering of the subject with a cruel indifference, calling into question the authority posed by authorship. Yet the viewer is compelled to think about other people and the many tragedies that surround us every day. The filmic quality of what appears to be stills in *Woman Suicide* places the falling subject in a state of physical and temporal suspension. In effect, she never dies and is always about to die. This lends to the work a kind of horror in that the viewer is also left in a state of suspension. This would never be the case with a modernist artwork where the viewer would be carried into a transcendent state far from the mundane.

Pop Art was image and graphics oriented, while Minimalism was fundamentally sculptural and architecturally oriented. Like Pop Art, strategies of seriality and repetition were incorporated, tailoring the Minimalist work to the physical measurements of the exhibition space. Minimalist objects looked very much at home in the abstract starkness of the modern gallery space. Their forms mirrored the condition of spatial emptiness of non-referentiality.

Untitled (L-Beams) of 1965 by Robert Morris is comprised of three L shaped forms identical in every way but their placements in space. As the viewer moves about them, he or she has a different perceptual and experiential relationship to them. Their appearances vary according to the position of the viewing body and in relationship to one another. Only their L-shaped forms are emphasized as any clue relating to the materials and processes used in making them are suppressed. Another key is the uniqueness of the viewer's experience of the work as the arrangement of the L units is never the same for each new installation. Important to highlight is that the viewer is interpolated to perform his or her viewership in time and space. Such ideas of embodiment and corporeality are widely important for the understanding of contemporary art today.

The artist-critic Dan Graham recognized the affinity of Minimal Art to the built modern landscape of the post second world war American city and suburbs. His *Homes for America* was an expose of suburban tract housing in the United States. His photographs premiered in the form of a slide show in 1966. Like Minimal Art, this photograph of a row of houses highlights a relentless conformity. The featureless sky in the photograph looks like the gallery space and the houses all in a row look like a formation of Minimalism. The permutational variation of the homes cannot hide the compressed sense of regularity and regimentation to daily life. Minimal Art was, in many respects, a highly distilled representation of this realm of spatial and temporal limits.

Like Kabokov's *Looking Up, Reading the Words*, Minimal Art, despite its announced intentions, imparted something real about the everyday condition of life for so many. In doing so, a moment akin to lying in the grass and looking up arrives.

An early furniture work of mine titled *Sculpture for Living Room/Public Lounge* from 1978. I was new to art at the time, arriving as I did from the world of science, and excited about the potential of art to question through an aesthetic lens the world that one knew. With this particular work I tried to tackle the subject of the negated social content of Minimalism. I used modular furniture and arranged them in a configuration that followed the logic of Minimalist display. Parallels were drawn between the relationship of a viewer with Minimal Art and that of a private citizen at

home in his or her sofa. The parallels were not to be understood simply in formal terms but also psychological ones. The art historian and critic Michael Fried famously criticized Minimalism's claims to pure form and pure engagement as nothing more than theatrical contrivances. With my furniture sculptures, I tried to place this theatricality into quotations. I tried to say something about the logic of private space construction and by extension the rules by which we organize our lives across the divide from public to private space.

Certainly more so today than during the time of Minimalism, the demarcations between public and private realms have become blurred. The question of what is truly public space is difficult to answer. Another important question to consider is whether public space can meaningfully exist within a social economy built on the ideals of privacy and property rights. As such, many contemporary artists have deployed strategies of publicly activating spaces through performances or installations that are often residual in appearance and temporal in nature. Here one can think of the work of Gabriel Orozco and his improvised interventions as he walked through Mexico City or the melting snowballs of David Hammons in his *Blizzard Ball Sale* of 1983.

The deepening division between wealthy and poor has also exacerbated the non-identity of one human to another, such that the problem of alienation that was a central concern of much 1960s art is more naturalized. Social media is very important today in bridging human separateness by channeling users to one another through private on-line sites such as Facebook. But contact made through these sites is highly disembodied.

Whereas Pop Art and Minimalism expressed a harsh coolness that was either ironic or ambivalent to the question of genuine engagement with the social and political realms, Conceptual Art provided the most useful lessons for contemporary artists in respect to a template language for artistic thinking and procedures as it radically democratized art in terms of its possible practitioners by emphasizing concept over making. A binary that preoccupied Conceptual Art was that of the difference between art and non-art. Another binary concerned the distinction between art in the art world and art in the world. Conceptual art referenced administrative and informational systems (including systems of presentation that are salient to the

world of non-art goods and service exchange). It provided a critique in the negative of the containment of art by the art system (including the art market). And it employed strategies that called attention to this containment by emphasizing the formal disappearance or dematerialization of the work of art.

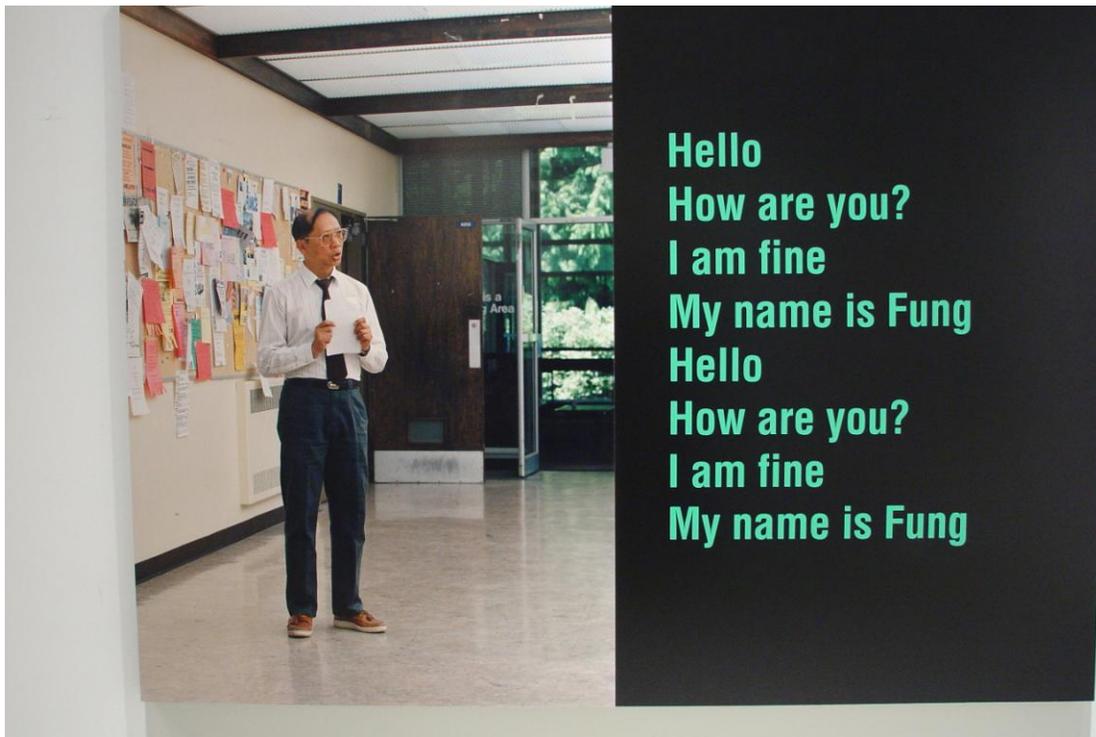
To wit this work by Robert Barry titled *Some things to which we can come, and for a while, "be free to think about what we are going to do. (Marcuse)"* very much echoes in spirit Kabokov's work *Looking Up, Reading the Words*. Or, consider Barry's *All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking-1:36 pm; June 15, 1969* in which the state of a brief moment of unthinking or not thinking is highlighted. The demand for decentered definitions of art extended to newly emerged art practices in the form of Performance, Video, and Site-Specific Art prescient of the global contemporaneity that is a condition of all art today.

I entered into art at the tail end of Conceptual Art. As a Canadian artist of Chinese heritage, I felt receptive to an art world that may not have been so welcoming to me only a few years earlier. It seemed that every day art was extending into new categories of practice at the same instant that normative metrics for art were constantly being challenged. I learned that many artists believed in the collapse of art into politics while others took a stand of indifference for the aesthetic dimension as their work quoted or inhabited the logic of documentary and information systems. Much of the art of the time was guided by a negative critique of artistic representation. Indeed, the radicalism of much of the art of the time was premised on an assumption of a non-art posture. There was a strong sense that a certain idea of art and the art world had reached an end point. There was a view that the engaged artist makes art that would either be dematerialized or more approximate to the status of non-art in everyday life. The goal of imparting what is real and authentic in life reached a zenith with Documentas 10 and 11 of 1997 and 2002 respectively. These were two groundbreaking exhibitions where art co-mingled fluidly with documentary forms.

During Conceptualism, text came of common usage because it was believed that the presence of text underwrote criticality in denying representation systems of its insistence on pictorial autonomy. There was also a prevailing view by many that text in art was a less aesthetically pleasurable activity for engaging in art compared to

the immersive experience of taking in a picture. Text was seen as a cerebral activity compared to an image or picture, which could break down the illusionary absorptive capacity of pictures regarding viewership.

In such a context of stringent rules of what text and the image can and cannot do or even should and should not do, all pictorial systems, including photography, were seen as highly contested fields.



Ken Lum, *My Name is Fung*, 1993

Today, it is next to impossible to make work that does not pass through these debates about the Document and the Archive. My own image text works owe much to these debates. In *My Name is Fung* of 1993 text is not employed in place of an image. The presence of both image and text in conjoined form produces an oscillation of meanings. The presence of text both supplements and destabilizes the image. The reverse is likewise the case. Of interest to me is how an image can produce textual readings and a text can produce pictorial readings. In my image-text works, the production of multiple readings is inherent to the problem of individual identity.

Indeed, a key problem preoccupying contemporary artists today is how to negotiate through art the many different identities that comprise the world without relying on universal truths. Given the different histories and cultural values that have engendered different artistic responses according to different experiences of geography, history, and identity, can there even be a comprehensive strategy for defining what contemporary art is? The particular terms and conditions of contemporaneity may differ from one locale to another but all the points converge in terms of a shared sense of limits (we share the same planet) and temporality within which certain urgencies appear to which art is well suited to respond. Contemporary art may be elusive to define but it is precisely this quality of elusiveness that allows art to express politics through aesthetics. The social critic Irit Rogoff has employed the term "Urgencies" to refer to those things that issue out of the human conditions produced by a globalized contemporaneity that need to be addressed. Often such urgencies are difficult to articulate as they encompass the terrain of desire and repressed feelings, a terrain contemporary art is well suited to negotiate. The urgencies of representing difference, of opening up public space, of initiating dialogue, and of advancing notions of democracy for everyone is responded to by contemporary artist through a heterogeneity of production that is often independent of formal unity. I began this presentation with a discussion of a work that illustrates some key features that define contemporary art today. *Looking Up, Reading the Words* calls up our relationship to the earth, technology, community, and the question of freedom but does so while also maintaining a space for pause, difference, and wonder.