



A Lost Center?

Shirin Neshat: *Roja*, 2016
Single-channel video/audio
installation, 15'20"

Who subverted the “public sphere” in art? Who was it that injected their own dreams and even hallucinations into many of their images? According to Hans Sedlmayr, in his famous and infamous 1948 book “Art in Crisis: The Lost Center,” it was Francisco Goya, also Caspar David Friedrich, Honoré Daumier, or Paul Cézanne. In short, it was some of the most famous among those we hold in the highest esteem today who, according to Sedlmayr, depicted and thereby promoted the symptoms of a “morbid” development in modern society. Nowadays, unimpressed by Sedlmayr, we think differently, and not just by way of experiment. But doesn’t our current cultural crisis, which seems even more difficult to diagnose than it was seventy years ago, present us with a challenge that is even more daunting? **On one hand, the idea of the canonically “beautiful,” “true,” and “good” has receded from our horizons, not least because Europe sees itself almost ground down between the two global powers, China and the USA.** Those values still call to us from afar, but do we want to and can we respond to their appeal, now that the religions, the dogmas, the regulated functioning of public life in almost every Western society have palpably declined? “Diversity” alone, one of our most popular slogans, will not be able to solve and satisfy everything. **On the other hand, in a book published in 1977 that is still worth reading, Richard Sennett spoke of one consequence of declining public life, which he termed “the tyranny of intimacy.”** When we seek to widen the scope of “education,” egocentric disputes as to which kinds of content should be imparted take up almost as much space as the syllabus itself. In our consumption of media, we are primarily dealing with stars and fringe groups and no longer with a mainstream, but rather—especially in social media—with a selfie culture. We like to be tolerant, but also, faced with increasingly particular demands for consideration, intolerant. A few days ago, Holland Cotter wrote in *The New York Times*: “Politically, 2020 has been, so far, a gonzo variety show of executive howlers and hissy fits, prayer breakfasts and Iowa pratfalls, split ‘victories’ and revenge firings.” Cotter’s subject was a painter who has depicted and bawdily lampooned undesirable developments, mainly in American society. He is currently considered especially “politically correct.” The artist in question, and this is not a recommendation, is Peter Saul, born in 1934, of whom Donald Judd wrote already in 1963, “Saul is O.K. and no more.”

On the Chinese side, there is the phenomenon of Ai Weiwei. Ai began by pillorying the Chinese government and its censorship, hugely applauded by critics in the West, and has now, after receiving a grand welcome from the city of Berlin, proceeded to condemn Germany as a bigoted and intolerant society. Because the Berlin Film Biennial is not showing his films, he is now again denouncing “censorship.” According to his credo, his art is legitimized solely by its political message and educational contribution. **Both artistic approaches, the colorful cartoon and the stern political warning, remind us of war profiteering, for misery, in the form of a particular abuse or grievance, is the work’s entire basis.** Society is supposed to thank artists for this, which brings us back to Goya, Friedrich, Daumier or Cézanne. But wherein lies the difference, given the way societies and the art market itself are currently drifting apart, when the prices even of mediocre artworks reach absurd heights? It is the self-centeredness behind it, the intellectual solipsism intent on building a citadel for itself in an “open society” to the point where the corresponding art appears as the hallmark of a social group steeped through and through in its own separate culture, its own singularity: people used to call this kind of thing a sect. **The crisis of orientation that is currently leading to stagnation in the art market will gradually manifest excessively egocentric works as dust-gathering trophies of an out-sized ego in virtual divorcement from the rest of the world.**

This brings us to today’s “center” and its impending “loss.” Evidently we—unfortunately we—have been standing in the center for too long. My ego, I myself, was the center. It was perhaps the masculine ego: consider Pablo Picasso’s hypertrophied fame, so prone to overestimating itself. Among women, too, one could observe a peculiar solipsism—no bull’s blood but instead a stroking of one’s own self. **It was always our own world we were taking in.** We danced through a self-defined field of action that was supposed to be our arena, a limitless one if at all possible. As soon as my ego struck against a ceiling or felt constricted or rejected, it considered itself a victim and regarded limits as something malignant. In the art history of the late 20th and early 21st Century, long after Picasso, it is playful works above all that speak for this ego-dominance. Consider Jeff Koons’s “Made in Heaven,” or the sculptures of Erwin Wurm, who inflates things and willfully presents them in a lopsided or softened form. Or Silvie Fleury, who places her own shoes and handbags in art galleries, rebranding and revaluating them by that supposedly feminist act. Pipilotti Rist, with her “Pimple Porn” or her miniature video in a parquet floor, “Selfless in the Bath of Lava,” exuded our, not just her, egocentricity like an endless bubble bath with expertly lascivious, prototypical aplomb. Over the years, thousands of museum visitors have lain stretched out on cushions to enjoy her videos. **We are, or were, intent on experiencing ourselves for a little too long, living in a kind of perpetual singularity, and would have liked to beam ourselves up into a colorful soap bubble.** But soap bubbles burst. What follows after the infinitesimal advances in the logic of self-aggrandizement? Where does the subjective absolutism and solipsism that projected art forward like a wide shadow, especially after 1968, ultimately arrive? Now, in the year 2020, the ego seems exhausted.

Self-realization has come to an end; it gives an almost grotesque impression. No one feels himself genuinely met by such a vis-à-vis. No one, according to the old, now faded, cultural logic, finds the so-called real world on the far side of personal power and narcissism. **The secret for which we must now seek for years to come, in art as well as in investment, is empathy.** Empathy calling for redress of grievances, for example, or stirred by the fate of others, or even by an injustice. Empathy for the sake of the love of others. Empathy as distinct from mere curiosity. Empathy with an esthetically high goal, instead of an aim set by cheap proclamation. For the goal of empathy, catapulted out of the too long-indulged sphere of self-realized ego, is nothing less than the experience of dignity. The dignity of others, of otherness itself. In 2015, an analyst of our era, Richard Prince, reproduced on white-primed canvas the self-presentations, in photos and texts, of nearly one hundred personalities who had showcased themselves on *Instagram*: a memorial to our still living trash culture. Shirin Neshat, who just recently presented a great exhibition at the *Broad Museum* in Los Angeles with a new work titled “Land of Dreams,” is a true ambassador of the new dignity. It is a dignity drawn, in part, from fear of the artist’s own ego. Here lies a new path for art.

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