

“The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity. Having said this much, we have nevertheless still not addressed our question. Why should we be at all interested in perceiving the obscurity that emanates from the epoch? Is darkness not precisely an anonymous experience that is by definition impenetrable; something that is not directed at us and thus cannot concern us? On the contrary, the contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him. Darkness is something that—more than any light—turns directly and singularly toward him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time.”(1)

Political systems overwhelm and force into submission or into witnessing exploitation and global and local destruction. In the face of failure, of disillusionment, there is no more protest, only division and isolation. However, almost a year ago in France, the Saturday protests of the winter of 2019 created community. There were *gilets jaunes* at the roundabouts, but also in Parisian streets, with diverse unions, a support organization for Adama Traoré—victim of police violence—, marches for the climate...The struggles merged into one another, in the appearance of unity at least, and it is exactly in these entanglements that everything seemed possible. It is also in the crossroads of these struggles that evidence of a deeper sickness than the sum of these parts proved to be indisputable.

Simone Weil was a unionist and against the collective, revolutionary but against social dialogue, the anarchist one as well, all the while making order one of the first needs of the soul. Because her thinking was tied to the world and subject to its contradictions. The works of the artists of the exhibition *Bootleg* invoke realities, sometimes fragile, like a fleeting smile against the mass media stoking smoke and demoralization. In this state of transition, in view of reconsidering the structure of the art world itself, these artists grind up their reality, its contradictions, and put words to things, forms to be more precise. They expose in the two senses of the word, which would be at once to show and to risk. Political engagement contributes to making—or at least fantasizing—a world in which its members feel connected and have the capacity to influence what surrounds them.

“This is all to say, quite simply, that while we all must tell ourselves certain lies to justify participating in our industry, this massive and ongoing myth that art serves an inherent public good—which justifies the means to its end—has crumbled under its own weight. The scales, having been tipped overwhelmingly toward the symbolic in terms of where we do our politics, are in the process of being re-balanced. This is an opportunity not only to proceed with a stronger sense of ethics in practice but also to reevaluate what it is that we want from art, and what it can give us; to ask genuinely, for once: what are the conditions of art today? They aren’t what they used to be, and we need a language for what they are. Until then, it’s better to believe in nothing than to worship false gods.”(2)

Today questioning the forms of politically engaged art and their modalities

requires a repositioning of the debate. It requires letting go of beautiful formulations that still come from the mythification of the role of art and the artist in society, asking her to be to be a “bulwark against barbarism” or a “tool of emancipation.” It’s also a question of contradicting the notion that all art is political by nature. That is, it’s completely possible but inscribed in a particular ecology, in a fight or at least a collective reflection at the heart of which artistic activity is one element among others. What forms will come together in an apparatus of questioning the social role of art and where the struggles of artists lie? What would an exhibition that makes these struggles come together produce, the struggle of minorities, of gender, anti-colonial struggles, the migrant crisis, the melting of the planet?

Can we consider artworks whose production itself, or a part of it, has a political and social effectiveness, whereas this form possesses more artistic qualities than as a standard bearer or a witness to the effectiveness of art? In short, an art underpinned by a real political consciousness tied to engagement rather than the bounded field of this engagement? Bootleg collaborates with the collective Melting Point, a collective that brings together nightlife communities to change public opinion and collect donations to directly support immigrant rights. Although drawn to Melting Point for their love of high BPMs and fast temps: this collaboration was built around love of protest.

This political engagement starting from the field of art is perhaps just non-hegemonic momentum coming from somewhere unexpected. With testimonies, autobiographies, documents, and identity, the artists in the exhibition evoke the manifestations of coloniality, the alienation of ultra capitalism. They refuse the condition imposed on them, that of rusty politics as the status quo, seek to raise awareness through speculative fiction, borrowed tributes to historical figures, foundational myths or popular culture. They create tools to problematize so-called norms of the world in which we live. In analyzing cultural systems, they also call into question the art world in which they are evolving.

In the background, this good old bourgeois-white-heteropatriachal-western culture is much too sure of itself and so repressive that it doesn’t tolerate any points of view except its own. If simple displacements in the order of representations are met with such animosity, then art is surely an instrument of power. From which point on, artists have a real voice. Can contemporary art contribute to building a more free and just society? And if it not, shouldn’t we decry the insignificance of this playing field to no longer have to revolt against its dominant and deadly ideology? It’s another question to ask. For now, let’s assume it’s the case.

Marielle Chabal.

(1) What is the Contemporary?, Giorgio Agamben

(2) On Progress, or the speed at which a square wheel turns - Aria Dean.