

The greek equivalent of 'multus' is 'polus', 'many'. The notion that human symbolic languages are polysemous has had

Multi, polysemy and the beer mat rows

take on all things cultural and the brash economic mood it accompanied seemed to
critical debate about traditions and values, the post- arena being largely occupied by a
side relativism. Peter Suchin reviewing Hal Foster's The Return of the Real in 1996:

'...the status and effectivity of critical practice is perhaps the kind of question that can't
answered, and certainly not in any direct sense. [...] The Return of the Real virtually begins
acknowledgment of this intractable situation with Foster launching straight into a fistful
questions concerning criticism itself: "what is the place of criticism in a visual culture that is evermore
an artworld dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-
entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever?" (1)

I will return to this review below.

As a background to the aims of Multi I would like to think around the possibility of critical practice in our slippery
communication environment where, as I have put it elsewhere, there are no hermetic seals to a highly ill-defined soup of
tone and reference. (2)

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In her recent tribute to Robert
Freud- working on the side
of Pop.' She takes up Leo
works including bulletin
may be received, printed,
the reception of data or
(3)

Rauschenberg Rosalind Krauss wrote, 'Robert Rauschenberg was a contemporary
of the depth of subjectivity against the steamrolling it had undergone at the hands
Steinberg's 1972 essay on the Combines where he looks for analogies for these
boards, "any receptor surface on which data is entered, on which information
impressed- whether coherently or in confusion.'" She continues, 'To speak of
information is to liken these concatenated surfaces to a matrix of consciousness.'

One of the things that make this tribute so
this case, Steinberg that a symbolic image
students that responding to much art in
What does it mean? but one can ask
work is not offering the expected or

positive for me is the embracing conviction she takes from, in
may offer a coherence or may defer or withhold it. I often say to
Modernism and good art after it, one can't ask the question
the question What is it likely to mean? This is because the
normative relay from its signifying elements to a signified.

Withholding resolution in art and poetry
to Gerhard Richter and into critical and
most would agree that the period of Pop realised it had a new challenge to Modernism's subversive strategies in the
everyday address of commercial culture, which was becoming more sophisticated in engaging our symbolic and imaginative
worlds. For some the sparring exchanges were fun, and photo-silkscreen became a process of choice for those wanting to
explore the crossovers, celebratory or critical.

Since that time at least three significant phenomena have changed the commercial and popular communication environment.
First, TV in particular had by the 1970's in Britain become
from solipsistic given the viewing figures for, say, the
TV had secured its place, rather like initially marginal
instruction, opinion and evaluation. Second is
instrument of distribution. Third and related is
or not of actual and potential consumers. The two
in the way that industrialisation and urbanisation did
implications still uncertain as a contemporary 'matrix
self-reflexive, aware of its own history. But this was far
Morecambe and Wise Show. To put this another way,
cultural phenomena, in the wider tradition of
the rise of the internet as an environment and
globalisation, driven by capital with the collusion
latter, while mass phenomena, are not massifying
in the 19th. century. They are more dispersive, their
of consciousness.'

One of the first theorists to look at mass entertainment and its epiphenomena was Adorno and he did not see it as a black
and white problem:

'What the culture industry presents people with in their free time [...] is indeed consumed and accepted, but with a kind of reservation [...] perhaps we can go even further and say that it is not quite believed.' (Adorno, 2001)

And Victor Burgin on the semiotic activity of some advertising:

'...commercial publicity is often made as if the lessons of the [russian] Formalists were being assiduously applied [...]; in this, publicity occasionally exhibits a high degree of what information theory calls "originality" in regard to the codes.' (Burgin, 1986)

Or architect Amanda Levete of Future Systems interviewed in 2002:

'Designing the new Selfridges, I've had to question the boundaries between fashion, art and the department store, which are continuously merging to form an intoxicating blur of public entertainment...' (Levete, 2002)

Others have been less forgiving about the consumer mirage:

'This Star Trek notion of infinite diversity in infinite combination which is perfect for Benetton ads and Coca Cola's "small world" capitalism.' - Kaucyila Brooke, 'Are you politically correct?', part of a multiple photo-piece at the Photographers' Gallery, London July 1994.

Wherever one stands in this spectrum of optimism, scepticism or pessimism, the presence in our imaginative life of the 'infotainment' industries (Hubert Schiller), now including the internet, can't be denied. They are a seductive option for another generation to sift the tradition.

For me, to take into account their level of semiotic activity is part of work to be done towards enabling a place and places for critical practice as these take shape and direction differentially against normative tendencies. This 'differentially' may be assembled by thinking, invention, re-appropriation and some good luck, also, importantly, through collaboration. Whether such a critical process is inherently more complicated, even approaching another epistemological order, than earlier modern moments of contestation is an interesting question. It depends how new technological mediation proves to be decisive and determinant in our knowledge-relation to reality. Even so, one might be cautioned by re-reading Arnold Hauser's meditations on explanatory frameworks in relation to change and response in art of any period. This would include an over-reductive marxist dialectical one: conditions + artist = look of next piece of work. (Hauser, 1959)

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I want now to pursue the modernism/postmodernism debate beginning with two proposals which still underpin for me a nexus of meaning, agency and transformation. From the 1920's, V.N. Volochinov:

'Several classes will use one and the same langue. Hence: inflections going in different directions which cross in every ideological sign. The sign becomes a field of action for the class struggle.

The plural inflection of the sign is crucial. A sign which has been withdrawn from the tensions of the class struggle...inevitably loses its force, degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of a social understanding which is alive, but that of philological attention.' (quoted by Houdebine, 1977)

From the early 1970's, Julia Kristeva:

'...on that terrain where the problem is posed, in all its radicality, of the infinite outside and the infinite sign-language that sign-ifies it. It is there in the juncture of the sign, and not in the zone of being or non-being, that is located a thinking intent on reformulating the kernel elements of our culture.' (Kristeva, 1973)

With these in mind I want to consider two essays from 1996 looking at the then establishing young British art and the publication of Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*. First Mark Harris's *Putting on the Style*, on avant-garde style in recent British art and advertising. He is scathing on the use of avant-gardism as a 'trope' to give meaning to some recent art and advertising. The parallel with Volochinov's 'philological attention' comes to mind as he argues,

'As an atavistic avant-gardism it can be understood as a stylistic device, a vestigial offensiveness that designates participation in a broader submission to abrasive imagery and language, especially in current advertising where, in

order to promote commodities, these devices are developed most effectively.'

He has praise for the way that Mark Wallinger's video work *Royal Ascot* uses its 'surfacedness' to permit 'oblique and unexpected penetration into a density of cultural references'. But surfacedness at its worst prompts from him,

'Confining meaning to the utterable or legible has the virtue of it needing no translation as it crosses mediating structures, from artwork, to gallery, to newspaper, to television, to collector, to museum. Its significance, fixed at the start as essence, remains intact along the journey, reiterated by each agency promoting and in turn deriving purpose from the work.'

As for the content in much of this work he comments,

'Other than glancingly, the following issues, randomly chosen but critical to the period marking the emergence of these artists, are just not in evidence. Aids. Racism. Gay and Lesbian activism. The consequences of the Gulf War. The intentional creation at government level of a new economic underclass. Economic colonialism. The evisceration of organised labour. The evisceration of the welfare state.' (Harris, 1996)

Second, back to Peter Suchin's review of Foster's *The Return of the Real* - and its subtitle needs to be here now - *The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, again with the proposals of Volochinov and Kristeva in mind:

'Foster's contention is that the radical issues raised in the 1960s and 1970s were themselves in part a return to an even earlier moment of radical questioning, that of Dada and Surrealism (and these via another "level" of return, that occupied by New York Dada, particularly that of Rauschenberg and Kaprow). One begins to get a picture [...] of an extremely clever intermeshing of events and questions, relationships between "key" moments of twentieth-century art practice and theory being drawn out [...] Thus contemporary art has, in its important manifestations, returned to what one might call "limit points" of previous practice. This "real" is not the ideological real of academic, naturalised practice but a reality that is that of the embodied human subject.'

And in the concluding paragraph:

'There is an understanding of fashion and its fluctuations buried within Foster's analysis, one informed by a politics which, quite unfashionably, is not afraid to call itself by that name. If Foster retains a belief in the future emergence of a transformatory critical practice it is because he grasps the unfinished form of culture which, even in this time of "evermore administered" multinational capitalist expansion, is not open to reliable prediction. That's one more way of considering the "real" of the book's title: a real that has to be made in practice, in actuality, that isn't already part of the foreseeable future.'

The actuality insisted on by Volochinov is updated. Its part in a possibility of critical practice and thinking is a key theme in Dave Beech's recent and timely essay *Recovering radicalism*. Here he summarises Frederic Jameson's understanding of the postmodern environment, then quotes his response for art:

'The shift from a rationalised productivist Fordism to a consumerist post-Fordist service economy is the true measure of Postmodernism's eclecticism, pastiche and love of difference, of its free-play of the signifier and loss of meaning. [...] Jameson ends his essay by proposing that the question of a critical art has to be left open: "The new political art - if it is indeed possible at all - will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object - the world space of multinational capital - at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last [...]" (Beech, 2009)

This thought again leaves to be discovered the criticality that art assembles embedded in and for the furtherance of a reality. A thread in these latter quotes reminds me of an insight by the late french film critic Serge Daney discussing, in relation to TV and film, the challenge of putting truer images in front of us. In this, for him, Fellini was a great realist:

'Without him we might definitively forget what it looks like, Rome and its traffic jams...a hotel stuck up anywhere...' (Daney, 1991)

For agency and transformation to take place we need the best possible chance to see reality in the first place. In a period of unprecedented visuality (and its commentaries) it is important and inevitable that one place the claims of this visuality, its semiotic mechanisms, come under scrutiny is through those of art.

Robert Galeta