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Garden-Variety Formalist

Colin Lang

IN THE WORLD OF ART (the one I know best), postmodernism was marked by what the art historian Craig Owens called a turn toward »the discourse of others.« What does that mean? The great heritage of postmodernism is thus one of inclusion, where difference was honored on a human level, signaled by a greater representation in the arts by practitioners of color, women, and those who did not fit into the prior paradigm of the white male heteronormative artist subject (ideally, anyway). All of this sounds good; at the very least, progressive. So, what does this have to do with truth becoming an ever more embattled region of public discourse, if the idea of »public« still holds?

Included in the larger description of postmodernism—a term that many rejected or refused to adopt—were the seeds of a more radical relativism, one which threatened to do away with certainty and truth altogether; or, better said, the certainty of truth. This was nothing, new, though. Nietzsche heralded a similar crisis of truth more than a century before the pomo kids arrived on the scene to wave the flag of indeterminacy: »These are by no means *free* spirits, *for they still believe in truth.*« And after Nietzsche, Mikhail Bakhtin's celebration of the carnivalesque did just as much to take the air out of the truth balloon. For Bakhtin, »carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.« Are »fake news« and »alternative facts« the new carnival and Trump its dog and pony show?

The idea of »fake news« and »alternative facts« as a carnival would at least help us to see the constructedness of the media spectacle, just as long as we remember that the carnival is most important for Bakhtin as a cultural medium in which it becomes very hard to distinguish between the event and ourselves. Even with the help of the metaphor provided by Bakhtin, we're still a long way from figuring out how alternative facts appeared in the marquee. For in the putative falsehood of alternative facts there is the correlate, truth, which, despite the many things that one could accuse the pomo torch bearers of, proposing a fatuous notion of truth is certainly not one of them. And for that matter, let's just assume that radical relativism is ultimately a red herring in this saga, which started only a short while ago.

Trump is surely playing a particular role in this carnival (clown or otherwise), and that role is not one that any of us would describe as presidential (that much

seems beyond debate). So, how would we characterize the performance? Many in the popular press have assumed it is just what it looks like, an infantilized narcissist, a parody of some Regan-era New York real estate tycoon straight out of a Bret Easton Ellis novel whose most triumphant »deal« resulted in winning a seat in the oval office. These characterizations are no doubt verifiable, and so few have worked hard to argue against them, or for an alternative, because, how can you ignore the obvious? The problem is that it is all too obvious, and misses something fundamental about alternative facts, and the part that Trump is playing in this theater of the absurd. The attempts to draw parallels to populist regimes, both historical and present, negate contextual specificity, leveling complexity through simple comparison. This, above all, must be resisted. A central assumption is, then, that the creation of alternative facts is one symptom of a more structural, paradigmatic shift in the persona of a president, one which has few correlates in the annals of political history. I realize it is a rather perverse provocation, but the closest analogy for this kind of performance is actually hinted at in the title of Trump's greatest literary achievement, *The Art of the Deal*. Yes, Trump is playing the part of an artist, and a very specific one, at that.

If Trump is playing the part of an artist (and that's somewhat different than »being« an artist), it is because he's pilfering from the tactics of the avant-garde and putting them to very different ends (the critic Hal Foster recently developed this thesis). It's not so much the nightmare of relativized truth turned into alternative facts, as it is a metamorphosis of responsibility. Think of philosopher Stanley Cavell's momentous collection of essays on modernism, *Must We Mean What We Say?* Well, I guess that depends on whom you're talking about, doesn't it? Of course, that matters, but the response is one that, up until this point, has left little to the imagination. In the immediate aftermath of the swarm of bald face lies, the chorus of criticism becomes one of defending the »truth,« but that means that the positions in the debate have already been defined. Alternative facts are so effective because it creates a dichotomy of fact and fiction as the a priori conditions of any meaningful debate, and we turn to truth as a savior, when truth is not even in the equation. Did we manage to repress Hobbes' formulation of the logic of modern rule? *Auctoritas non veritas facit legem*. Veritas has been old hat for centuries now.

If the notion of alternative facts is indeed the bastard child of postmodernism, the zombified enfant terrible of indeterminacy and relativized truth, we might try to trace our steps (culturally speaking) back to the onset of the movement that told us »everything is text.« Axiomatic or not, the promise of textuality was synonymous with a freedom from the tyranny of content: literary students waxing endlessly about characters, actions, and unexpected plot twists. It depends on whose postmodernism were talking about here, but if the progenitors (Derrida, De Man,

and others) are somehow to blame, then we managed to repress the lessons of those original moves. Or did we? Maybe the heritage of deconstruction in its alternative facts proclamations is also essentially a readerly project. »Just read what I say and you'll know the real story.« Alternative facts depend on us forgetting the formal structures of language (tweets, mostly, but others, too) in order to focus on the verifiable, producing as much content as we find. The problem is that we cannot ever really know or trust what is provided, so repeating this claim is stating the very obvious, to say the least. It also pulls us out of the discourse systems responsible for producing those mendacious streams of information.

I claimed that Trump was playing the part of a particular kind of artist (I didn't say he was doing a good job of it). The temptation would be to equate this performance with the figure of the artist as a rule-breaker, the kind who relishes in transgressive acts and moves freely between one rhetorical move and the next, never holding to a center, or core ethos. »We can't pin him down! He keeps changing his mind!« Such cries are the ones that have led so many to proclaim Trump as post-ideological, not committed to anything other than securing the best deal, at whatever cost, and for whichever gain. And yet, those same voices are the ones who keep beating back the twitter swarm with the truth stick, in the hopes that reason and good judgment will carry the day. The rule-breaking artist doesn't care about good judgment or reason. In fact, those criteria are the ones most directly thwarted in the service of an act that is designed to provoke. Even the best provocateurs can't tell us how to react, even if their transgressive behavior is only shocking against the backdrop of good taste.

Here we run up against an old notion of ideology, one which assumes a consistent, repeatable core of slogans and stances. In such a definition, clearly Trump is post-ideological. Seen differently, however, ideology names not just the *content* but the *form* of a system of symbolic production. Here, the fact of twitter as communicative medium is itself already the product of an ideology, one which behaves according to the anonymous execution of codes more than it does any flesh and blood agent or actor. There is ideology all right, it's just no longer tied to human brains. It is the ideology of self-reproducing machines and their sophisticated language of commands and tasks that are only connected to the body as an input device, a system of relay switches that operate like the peripheral nervous system of a networked brain. The failure to see this is a failure to mistake coding and language for content-driven systems and their attendant interpretations. Even your average coder knows the difference between the two. And we cannot forget the fact that in the language of code, content management systems are those interfaces designed specifically for the ineptest in the world of digital production, incapable of writing or reading sophisticated text. Lest we forget, that is the »archi-écriture« of twitter, as so much else.

Does this mean that Trump is able to understand those complex systems that too many of us end users are unable to comprehend? No. Certainly not. That is not what I'm suggesting. Trump as a writer would lead in a very different direction indeed. Twitter's code is not equal to its form, and Trump is exploiting that potential to incredible effect. Twitter, like so much in the world of writing, is essentially a medium of transmission, as the novelist Tom McCarthy has reminded us. Twitter provides a platform for transmission, a poiesis; one that is only marginally tied to language, even less so to a reliable content. Each Presidential Twitter communiqué engenders, legitimizes and confirms the act of transmission. If George W. Bush was the president of the image war, where so much ideology was compressed into the circulation of a single picture—Abu Ghraib, 9/11, Katrina, you name it—Trump seems to work from the other end. According to *Retort*, a group of intellectuals who wrote a book on the language of the image war post-9/11, there was nothing essentially visual about the language of the new image campaigns, nothing that could have elicited a complex response from its viewers. Instead, *Retort* tell us that language is lurking behind the picture, the most vulgar and banal speech, informing how images both spectacularize and hide what they show.

With Trump, the twitter campaign is producing images, too, stand-ins for the living body behind a microphone (something Trump has only dared to subject himself to a few times since his presidency began). Instead of the face we get a proliferation of small little white boxes, each identical, a serialized stream projected and re-projected on screens everywhere. This is the image of the president, everything else is a mirage. There is no ideology lurking behind each miniature missive because the ideology has already been enforced every time we tune in to read. Yes, the widely heralded televisual age has come full circle, where images are produced for us to read, without ever having the option of quarreling with *how* we read them. This is the image par excellence. We discover it readymade, presented to us in all its finishedness, without requiring anything from us other than to see and behold. Even that most private act of reading has gone viral.

Back to the question, then: What kind of artist is Trump if he is not the rule-breaker (America's answer to Martin Kippenberger)? What can be made of this perverse analogy other than to highlight the fact that we've managed to jump headfirst into a pool that none of us built? Let me return to W. (George W. Bush) for a moment, only to conclude my highly conjectural and unprovable thesis. If W. (in his role as painter) was fond of figuration, then Trump is more the abstract formalist. He sees the channels, that the art is in probing and constructing networks. Significance, meaning, is a product of those channels, not something we glean in spite of their existence. Who cares what we find there? Well, too many of us, I'm afraid. The idea of Trump as a formalist is almost as absurd as categorizing him as a performance artist, playing a part that many of us who operate be-

tween politics and history might recognize if given the chance. As with any argument, I propose this radical and racist brand of formalism as an operative condition so that we find a mode of resistance that does not accept the content management systems offered to us by the usual reactions. No one is to blame for having those reactions (they're often mine, too). While I cannot prescribe or predict how that mode of resistance will manifest itself, I do know this: one can only fight form with form (*Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse*). Beneath the surface of our Mediocene, there is a vibrating, concatenating crust of code, a language without recourse to meaning, metaphor, or reference. It's there that alternative facts become something more than a depraved notion. It's there that the battles are waged. If you don't believe me, check your twitter feed.