

The Dilemma of Instrumentalization
(or: From which Position is one talking?)

Markus Miessen in conversation with Taryn Simon and Liam Gillick

MARCUS MIESEN: Power has many meanings associated with it. Power is often confused with force. It can be understood as motive power, which moves something forward, statistical power, which describes the probability that a test will reject a false null hypothesis, power as the ability to make choices and influence outcomes, power held by a person or group in a country's political system, the ability of nation states to influence or control other states; it can be understood as purchasing power in the sense of the amount of goods and services a given amount of money can buy, or the ability to set the price of a sold good – in the case of monopoly power. The conference *Evasions of Power* explored the relations between architecture, literature and geo-politics, attempting to get a closer understanding about the consequences and implications of spatial practices today. Both of your particular modes of research and practice are arguably dealing with issues of power, enclaves, and extra-territorial sites throughout the world. Generally speaking, is it possible to evade power?

TARYN SIMON: Evasion is reactive and implies some form of power. It is impossible to evade the examples you have listed and participate in a modern complex society. Buddhist monks approach it.

LIAM GILLICK: Contemporary structures with an interest in growth and development work hard to disguise their power with elaborate veils. These veils themselves become the phantoms and shadows of power-structures, revealed to us in a series of codes and behaviours. Not being a pacifist, I am not necessarily against the notion of manipulating power towards positive ends. I think that it is sometimes necessary to harness power in order to change things. It is impossible to evade power. One can be a victim of it or take a series of critical positions in relation to it. An evasion of the implications and structural applications of power merely allows repressive forms to take control. This does not mean, however, that one has to mimic known power structures in order to critique them.

MM: Are there forms of institutionality that allow for a practice that does not only superimpose power but also shares it?

TS: I don't think so. Perhaps in the algorithm of a Google search.

LG: There are no forms of institutionality that allow for this. If there were, they would not be institutional in form or manner. There are various flows within the culture that attempt to formulate new ways to negotiate power structures. These can be improvised or take a horizontal form for a while, but in a Lacanian sense there is often a self-institutionalising that takes place after a while, especially within alternative forms of practice that attempt to institutionalize open exchange.

MM: It seems to me that one of the crucial issues that are at stake in a conversation like this is the question of the position from which one is talking. There seems to be, in my mind at least, a recent romanticisation about bottom up processes. What happens if the one 'in power' provides models for change?

TS: I think it amounts to nothing more than a system change. But when the one in power provides a model for extreme change, it creates a chaotic state for those on the same level as the powerful and those that the power is communicated to and assimilated by. The creation of the Kadima party in Israel is a contemporary example of this.

LG: I agree. There are many revolutionary models that give us a perfect image of the idea of a small group or individual offering a new model of society. The notion of becoming organised or nominating someone or some group to speak for others is a perfectly reasonable procedure towards imagining a better situation. In fact it is arguable that merely waiting for a spontaneous shift among a large group will never lead to anything. The problem is, that this set of truisms works the same way whether one is thinking about the left or the right in political terms. It is true that the left is more committed to open democratic procedures but this fact does not render the left more impotent nor does it mean that bottom up processes are merely a romantic fantasy. The point is to create real exchanges of ideas and create a situation where it is possible to formulate structures that offer alternatives and participatory potential for the multiple publics that operate within developed societies.

MM: Is democracy always desirable?

TS: In many instances a strong central power structure can lead a country from a very low economic level upward, but with that process should come an evolution from centralized power toward democracy. But democracy is only a means, not an end. It can also lead to authoritarian results.

LG: Yes, yet with the proviso that it will tend to create the problems described by Chantal Mouffe. The tension between liberalism and democracy has been eloquently expressed and agonised over within her writing. The European project is torn between liberalism and democracy. Democracy as an abstraction is dysfunctional without broader debates about how it is applied, gauged and critiqued.

MM: Can language become a mode of evading power?

TS: Language transmits power.

LG: Absolutely. A sophisticated intellectual discourse should have a problematization of the dominant language at the heart of its analysis. Language carries traces of power at all times. Critical language contains traces of critique at all times. We have seen that even the most repressive forces in the culture have become elegant semioticians. This means that the implication of the question is not merely applicable to whoever we might be imagining to be the “correct thinking” people, but is used by repressive forces to create endless synonyms for control and non-control.

MM: Is there power in dilettantism, in the role of the one waiting to be instructed?

TS: There is only if the “one waiting to be instructed” is not waiting simply for direction, but for an instruction that meets with his taste. In any other scenario the “dilettante” only becomes an instrument for the powerful.

LG: If one accepts that such strategies are only productive in the extremely short term and extremely long term. In the short term, as we have learnt from queer theory, feminism and other forms of social reassessment, rejecting the terms of engagement that underscore the dominant culture can produce levels of refusal to acknowledge the power structures that effect us all. Contrary and dismissive languages create discourses that cannot be assessed or controlled. However, these strategies work in a direct and engaged way with the present for the most part. Yet such strategies also have a long term effect in relation to style, social behaviour and boundary pushing, which tend to become mainstream over time. It is the space between the immediate sense of refusal and the long-term effects of social shift that I am generally interested in and is the area dominated by government, bureaucracy and straight white men.

MM: If one is looking at the slightly contested forms and understanding of participation today, one immediately gets frustrated about the romantic conception and nostalgic implications of the term. What are the modes of participation that are still operational rather than a mode of outsourcing responsibility?

TS: The romanticism you ascribe to these ideas of participation exists for a reason. They were systems that succeeded or failed at a specific historic moment. They may seem large as hallmarks but these groups were essentially systems operating in group-consciousness in a micro-sphere. Any operational contemporary system of participation is, for the most part, bolted to the foundations of outmoded or failed systems. The footprint of these romanticized participatory movements, at the end of the day, was more profound pop culturally than culturally or politically.

LG: One danger here is connected to the problem of instrumentalization. Most dominant power structures today claim to be committed to participation and transparency, certainly within an Anglo-Saxon context. As a result, any sense of participation – or attempt to create it – have to be super-self-conscious about being co-opted by more insidious structures. Yet, it is still reasonable to argue strongly in favour of

participation, assuming that it is combined with a series of critical reflections.

MM: The role of the uninvited outsider seems to be very interesting. One could argue that actually it is no longer the one who participates in a given structure or system that has been set up by others, but the practitioner that breaks into alien – and possibly not-yet-known or established – fields of knowledge. Not in a romantic way – not in the sense of a participatory democracy that postulates an idea of inclusion and invitation of the entire social body – but in terms of production. Taryn, your work in that respect is super-interesting. Can you please elaborate on your practice of “entering”?

TS: There are no insiders. And the outsider can never reach a core. He or she can only find another perch from which to observe. In my work, “entering” was testing physical and intellectual boundaries; confronting the divide between public and expert access and knowledge.

MM: I am wondering whether naivety, in its most positive terms – as “not-knowing”, as one driven by relentless curiosity – produces a productive, opportunistic means of rupture in often very static systems?

TS: There is no version of a positive “not knowing”. Lack of knowing itself is a gap easily and readily filled with obfuscation to maintain and expand an unknowing state by the powerful.

LG: This is not something I can comment on. It is a kind of Wittgensteinian dilemma. If one knew how to not-know one would know what could be known and therefore know what cannot be known. Actually, worse it is a kind of Donald Rumsfeld-ism. The known knowns and the known unknowns ...

MM: Is there a quality or an advantage to “not knowing”?

TS: Only to have a fantasy to escape to.

LG: It is a permanent state and a dysfunctional paradox. Not knowing is fetishised by those who claim to “believe” in some higher power. Faith is an extreme form of not knowing. Therefore arguing in favour of not knowing falls into the trap of a quasi-religious thinking.

MM: Within the constraints of your practice, do you understand yourself as outsiders or as someone who directly operates from within a given system?

TS: I operate from within a given system. But the system is not stagnant and not all-confining. It is a system that provides tools to alter its dimensions.

LG: Operating from within a system, but not one that is given, but rather one that requires analysis and critical self-consciousness.

MM: When you produce, is there a particular audience that you have in mind or are you attempting to produce new audiences in the sense of alternative formation of receivers that – without your work – would not exist?

TS: I consider the material forms that the work will live in; as a book, as an exhibition, in print. These forms desire an audience. I consider the multiple contexts it will enter into and work very hard to establish a fixed context within the work that can survive all these mutations intact. I am admittedly invested in seducing a broad audience and strategically use tools that have been proven to do so. My technical approach gives a stage typically reserved for heavily funded and distributed visual forms to subjects that would not receive such a stage.

LG: There are many publics. I don't think about audience, as that implies a performative aspect. I acknowledge the multiple publics for cultural practice and I think this problem or question is also a crucial one for the curators and others that I work with. Consequently, this discussion never happens alone.

MM: How do you communicate your work other than through conventional channels such as galleries, shows and publications?

TS: Through conversation.

LG: In dialogue. In lecture form. In argument. Via teaching. In bars. In silence. By thinking.

MM: What role does emotion play in your practice?

TS: It is a catalyst that is at best absent in the end result.

LG: It is sublimated.

MM: Would you call yourself romantic?

TS: Never. But I am.

LG: Never.

MM: The autonomy of the art world, by definition, means that things always happen in a very privileged and introverted, often apolitical, environment. This autonomy, on the other hand, is its potential: a "test-ground" without direct consequences.

TS: Everything has a consequence.

LG: I do not agree with any of the statement in your question.

MM: I am wondering whether you think that rather than being a test-ground of sorts, it is an environment that produces direct results?

LG: It really depends what a direct result might be and how we might measure it. I am sure that art has potential. I am not sure that we should only talk about it in terms of the "laboratory" or "test ground" but actually attempt to imagine that it is doing something precise and contingent simultaneously.

MM: Do you understand your practice as one that has or might produce global repercussions?

TS: I wish.

LG: Yes, but only in the sense that any act has a potential repercussion.

MM: As to the notion of opposition, there is always the question as to what degree one should go "with it" or "against it". Do you ever feel like there is a certain expectation directed towards yourself as to what to produce?

TS: I am always producing work from within very defined margins. The subjects I document force me to navigate through agendas. As a result, I remain hyper aware of my inability to be clean and consequently avoid absolutes. Images have multiple truths. In their accompanying texts, I present un-authored facts and formulas, never answers. At best, they attempt to lead to disorientation, but never to distortion.

LG: People often ask me directly for a specific action, thing or text. I am not necessarily against this. The idea of a unique context-free semi-autonomous producer does not appeal to me.

MM: Has critique ever turned against you in terms of direct censorship?

TS: In production, I have been denied access to sites for seemingly political reasons. In writing, I have been told to not record certain facts and have been denied information. In distribution, I have been told certain images cannot be presented for political reasons.

LG: Yes.

MM: Of what kind?

LG: The suppression of information that is necessary to understand an art work. This has happened at least twice in specific situation where the overtly political basis of a work is omitted from the published material distributed by an institution and substituted with generalised statements about the form of the work.

MM: Is there still potential for opposition or is it a nostalgic mode of operation that has been superseded by more productive means of involvement? Often, opposition to something produces the exact opposite of what the core of opposition intended.

TS: Opposition often turns what it opposes into the opposition. Catch-22.

LG: I agree with the general aspect of this question/statement. However I think that there are moments where precise direct action are necessary.

MM: Can conflict become somewhat operational?

TS: Yes.

LG: My Irish ancestry proves it.

MM: Do you consider Gramsci's slow march through the institutions as a still valid thesis?

LG: No.

TS: The Infinite Monkey Protocol Suite (IMPS) describes a protocol suite which supports an infinite number of monkeys that sit at an infinite number of typewriters in order to determine when they have either produced the entire works of William Shakespeare or a good television show. The suite includes communications and

control protocols for monkeys and the organizations that interact with them. If you have an infinite number of monkeys typing on an infinite number of typewriters, eventually they will type the correct answer to this question.

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