

## **Aesthetic, yes. Journalistic, too.**

by Alfredo Cramerotti

► **MOLE**print Nr. 1, September 2009

An exclusive excerpt of the text from the upcoming book “Private Investigations” (2010) published by Büchs’n’Books and edited by Andrei Siclodi.

### **Reality and fiction**

An emergent way of researching, producing, and distributing “knowledge” about people, histories, and situations today no longer passes through broadcast or media journalism but reaches a (specialized) worldwide audience through the public of the “globalized” circuits of art exhibitions, biennials, film festivals, cultural celebrations, and so forth. However small this public may be – and it is not – this reception and redistribution of information affects our idea of the way we learn about things of the world and about ourselves. This “interaction” between art and journalism is something more than a trend. It developed to the point of forming a new mode of journalism, “aesthetic journalism,” varying in intensity according to the degree of the journalistic method applied by the artist. Aesthetic journalism is a mode of investigation into social, political, geographical, economic, or cultural issues that works through the circuits of art.

Just for a moment imagine journalism and art as a multilayered single activity rather than clear-cut separate fields. Journalism provides a view on things, art a view on the view (feeding back on the first). Even if the one is a coded system that speaks for the truth (or so it claims), and the other a set of activities that questions itself at every step (or so it claims), both are methods of representation and mediation of our human condition. When a journalist undertakes an investigation, s/he selects a number of images and words out of a continuum of life (a subtraction from a huge and complex number of relations and processes – what we call reality). When an artist creates a work of art, s/he creates a narrative where there was none (an addition to reality). The flux between adding and subtracting creates the environment in which we live. In terms of representation, very

little changes, whether a story is “factual” or “fictional” – an account and a depiction are produced. What changes dramatically, however, is how this story is told and distributed and what the consequences are that will affect our behavior.

### **Questioning and delivering**

The profession of journalist involves an almost ethical stance: to serve the highest number of people possible and to be a witness of history, not its maker. In this process, the journalist may or may not denounce her or his biased view and the fallibility of pursuing truth. Since the Age of Enlightenment – when to address public interest was of primary concern for the bourgeoisie – the profession of the journalist has become an object of negotiation. It is now a constant reconciliation between the sources of information, the employer’s interests, the power exerted on the subject of the reporting and on the audience, but also the expectations of the very public it serves. This negotiation between multiple terms is the reason why journalism today is conducted in the pressroom and not in the field. When something (we are told) happens somewhere, we get instant access to broadcasted footage in real time, mediated by experts that comment on the live feeding of the images and by digital editors that mix, overlap, crop, and insert graphics and running texts. What we get in omniscience, we lost in context and sense. We no longer know the situation in which something takes place, since the context is very much constructed, mediated, and delivered to the viewer for consumption. More news, at any time; more journalism, universally coded; more events, thanks to the multiplication of newsworthiness. We have reached the point where we need to have “metamedia,” the explanatory industry. We consider everything either reliable or manipulated, rely for judgement on media watchers and critics, commentary programmes, articles on the interpretation of other articles, and so on. In this context, to explain also means to influence.

If journalism has constantly struggled between its “mission” and its power position, art, on the other hand, is no less implicated in a dualism: artists are keen to appeal to a particular audience (the art audience of the globalized circuits as described earlier), pursuing at the same time something beyond the artistic field as if it were “more real than

reality.” Often non-fiction work by artists is uncritically taken for reliable information, as a valid counter-account to media journalism. However, since an act of interpretation is never neutral, art and journalism find themselves on the same level regarding the narratives they propose; this brings us back to my earlier invitation to imagine a concept of information which includes the artistic treatment of reality.

### **Aesthetic journalism**

Here lies the value of a journalism “being” aesthetic rather than a journalism using aesthetic means (which it does very well and has always done). Journalism is necessary to help us deal with a growing complex civilization, separations of roles, and procedures in administration, science, culture, and technology; it has become the *modus operandi* for dealing with that which cannot be experienced first-hand. Since the journalistic attitude is so successful in proposing the model as the event, it has spread to many other areas outside the journalistic field, constructing the boundaries of normalcy for both representation and reality. In this sense, the journalist is an artisan, someone who carefully designs information (declaring, or not, its distortion) in order to present an understandable picture of the world “out there.”

Art and journalism are therefore two sides of a unique activity, which generates a main question: is it possible to work with aesthetics, allowing meaning based on the viewer’s interpretation, and still be informative, precise, and relevant? If truth telling shifts from news to art, how can we negotiate the confinement of art within the boundaries of institutions, biennials, and a few public projects? Aesthetic journalism works on the borders of reality and fiction, using documentary techniques and journalistic methods but self-reflecting on those means; ultimately, it is not about delivering information but questioning it, reversing the tradition of both fields (art and journalism). An activity – produced by either artists or journalists – that queries the realm of fiction as a site for the imagination and that of journalism as a site for reality. Here, we get closer to the core of reality itself when we make *our* reality not a given, irreversible fact but a possibility among many others.

The problem arises when an artist feels obliged to strip down his or her investigative work to bare facts. It is more important, in my view, to vary one's vocabulary according to different contexts than to continue to propose the dichotomy fact-fiction. There are no longer two distinct ways of dealing with the world around us, one objective and the other fictionalized, but more types of the singular activity of production and distribution of information. The hybridization of journalism with art adapts imagination, narrative, and abstraction to implement the research and delivery of information; it does not attempt to be objective at all costs, nor discard creativity in favour of neutrality.

### **Instruction and intuition**

Aesthetics is about what our senses experience; artistic investigation becomes a tool to question both the selection of the material delivered to us and the specific reasons for why things are selected. Cultural production in general and art in particular are increasingly at the forefront for understanding the world we live in. If, in the 1950s or 1960s, the economic mechanisms were the main referents for our experience as members of a given society (either in terms of conformity or antagonism), it is now no longer the case. Cultural dynamics play an increasingly important role, and the criteria of economic achievement are no longer sufficient for a proper comprehension of phenomena like, to name one of the most abused terms, the "clash of civilizations." It seems we have to rethink society bottom-up and re-address many of our referents in cultural, even aesthetic terms. Not surprisingly, multinationals and corporations made huge efforts to re-invest their profits in cultural and artistic projects in order to create a "culture" that can travel beyond national schemes and monetary values.

The past few generations of artists feel they cannot leave research and a commitment to social and political meaning out of their practice and so engage with production and distribution outside the specific constraints of art. This trait could shape the future view of the world through a re-adaptation in artistic terms of journalism and the news industry. But rather than abandon the aesthetic approach in search of a journalistic neutrality, the real challenge is to "contaminate" one with the other, making it impossible to distinguish the two approaches, thus "alerting" the viewer to the mechanisms at play in

representation and reporting. In fact, to think about something in a “secure” way by means of structured information (like professional journalism) is to reduce the unknown to the expected and therefore take away the possibility to learn. In addition, to be able to learn something, we first have to unlearn what we take for granted.

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