

Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing

Alfredo Cramerotti

Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2009

Reviewed by Matt Packer

In September 2002, *Artforum* published a number of critical responses to “Documenta 11”—perhaps the most significant event that took place in the art calendar that year: Linda Nochlin began by asserting “the predominance of the documentary mode, for want of a better word.” In the same feature, James Meyer spoke of how “Much of the work has a documentary format. New Media Social Realism, you could call it.”

Included in the exhibition was Zarina Bhimji’s film *Out of Blue*—a portrait of the Ugandan landscape that the artist’s family had been expelled from during the times of Idi Amin in the early 1970s; a landscape haunted by infrastructural abandonment that lay testament to a brutal past. Also included was the multimedia work *Solid Sea* by the Italian group Multiplicity: a series of videos that presented an intermixture of interviews, maps, and newsreels extrapolating the story of 283 asylum-seekers who drowned when the “ghost ship” carrying them to Europe sank off the coast of Sicily in 1996.

Together with others from Documenta 11’s long list of participants, the examples from Bhimji and Multiplicity could substantiate the claim that documentary has become a familiar mode within the traditional sanctuaries of culture. This recognition is not so much a question of conceptual definitions that lurk between the realms of art and media communications, but rather a question of certain characteristics, aesthetic and narrative, that more ambitious artists have co-opted into their practices. Interviews, presentations of statistical data, demonstrable embeddedness in scenes of action: are we witnessing a narrowing set of codes that distinguish certain kinds of art practice from the mainstream media? Or, do these similarities signify a progression on the part of art practice: a willingness to take on the responsibilities of information provision in the public sphere?

A more appropriate way to describe the documentary mode Nochlin witnessed in Documenta 11 is put forward by Alfredo Cramerotti in his book *Aesthetic Journalism*. As he says: "What I call aesthetic journalism involves artistic practices in the form of investigation of social, cultural or political circumstances. Its research outcomes take shape in the art context, rather than through media channels." As Cramerotti admits in his introductory chapter, the title serves as "one method of talking about something, one of many possible." Yet, the term "Aesthetic Journalism" is alternately deployed throughout the book, in a way not dissimilar to the way that "Relational Aesthetics" functioned for Nicholas Bourriaud. On one hand, elaborating upon recent tendencies in art practice, and on the other, proposing a radical interaction yet unfulfilled.

Cramerotti argues for a cross-fertilization between the practices of art and journalism; a way of reordering the aesthetic codes of information that currently exist more dependently than codependently. From a situation whereby "a significant number of artists, who work with journalistic methods, merely reproduce the same mechanisms of information adopted by mass media, without questioning their means of production," through to the possibilities of art's reciprocal effect upon journalism: "Can the coded practice of journalism shift its supposed objectivity to a transparent subjectivity by means of the artistic 'experience'?"

Such a proposition is premised on the idea that journalism is not only in crisis (typically, a slave to the corporate clock and commercial ad requirements), but also lacking reflexivity upon its own methods and truth claims. That crisis is also exacerbated by technological shifts: the increase of user-generated content (blogs and comment boxes allied to each published feature and article), but also shifts in image technologies. We might consider the plight of the newspaper staff photographer, for example; firstly misemployed by

freelancers and photo agencies, and most recently thwarted by the rise of citizens on the scene with mobile-phone cameras and Internet access. Quoting from a report by Italian newspaper *la Repubblica* that suggests that nonprofessional citizen reporters produce 70 percent of media images of natural disasters and terror attacks, Cramerotti argues that this phenomenon is the "result of a geographical and social fragmentation of production" that is surely set to continue. As these technologies replace certain production processes, which were once entrusted to a lonely professional, there is a bypass of the old ethical bulwark: the autonomy and responsibility of the journalist. While the media rhetoric sings of multiplicity and shared opinion, what are the risks of it becoming divested of all content and context? Simply a network of headless antennae and nothing more?

Those same insufficiencies of mainstream media might provide art with an opportunity. As the artist Liam Gillick put it in 2004: "The failure of mainstream media ... has left a vast territory of simple reporting to be done that is being achieved by artists now in lieu of any precise critical voice from within the establishment or the critical community." Less bound by corporate and commercial infrastructures, and tendentially more critical of its representational codes, art has the possibility of exposing the aesthetics of information via the process of transforming or transposing it. Or as Cramerotti puts it: "What art can do better ... is to construct a self-reflective medium, which 'coaches' its viewers to ask relevant questions by themselves, instead of accepting (or refusing *tout court*) representations as they are proposed."

A project such as Laura Horelli's *Helsinki Shipyard/ Port San Juan* (2002–2003) exemplifies these dialectical possibilities. The work consists of a pair of video works that counter-pose the construction of a cruise ship in Helsinki with the holidaying ship in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Horelli interviewed over sixty workers, from all echelons

of the cruise ship industry. From engineers through to the management, through to the onboard beauty therapist, Horelli gives voice to all stages of the ship's fabrication (both material and illusory), and intersperses her interviews with sequences that present the various "landscapes" of this labor, from the construction yard to the gaudy interior of an empty onboard restaurant. Yet, what this amounts to in *Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan* is a tension of contradictions in representation. Not only in the predictable jarring of labor relations and touristic dream, but more subtly in the way that each confidant chooses to describe their work and takes the opportunity of talking to the camera. In this sense, Horelli's work enlivens the promise of a mode of journalistic art practice that is committed to shedding light on circumstances that are hidden from public view, while also making conscious its own methods of engagement and delivery.

Horelli's project is one of several case studies that are given a dedicated chapter in *Aesthetic Journalism* under the chapter title, *Who Produces Aesthetic Criticism Today? From Which Position?* Others include Lukas Einsele's *One Step Beyond* (2001–2004) project that exists as a part-global survey of landmines and their afflicted survivors; Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group's Hostage: The Bacher Tapes* (1999–2001), as part of his ongoing counter-archive of the Lebanon war; and Renzo Martens's *Episode 1* (2001–2003), a reflexive-narcissistic romp through war-torn Chechnya. While these case studies are exemplary of different kinds of interaction between art and journalism, they do not represent a survey of journalistic art practice; nor do they try to, as Cramerotti himself admits. What is certain,

however, is that these case studies apply the terms of *Aesthetic Journalism* at the level of art practice, as opposed to a broader catchment to include curatorial and institutional practices. Considering that exhibitions such as Documenta 11 give rise and recognition to the tendencies that befit *Aesthetic Journalism*, but also seek to renew a horizon for art's social and political ambitions, the lack of focus on curatorial practice seems like a missed opportunity.

Drawing together references and critical models from philosophy, sociology, media theory, as well as art history, Cramerotti's arguments for *Aesthetic Journalism* are persuasive from a number of disciplinary perspectives. It is not a book that claims academic territory in the strictest sense, and it stays clear of questions of definition that could have easily waylaid its urgency. Rather, *Aesthetic Journalism* is more about recognizing, developing, and inciting a set of relationships that could radically alter the conduct of information in the public sphere.

All this might depend on the institutions of art and the channels of journalism sustainably forgoing their traditional stewardships, which remains to be seen. At a time when fundamental notions of publicness are being contested and fractured, the suggestion of a co-extensive and developmental approach to the provision of public information seems unlikely. Perhaps between the cracks in the ground, we might hope for other formats to emerge and do better.

Note

Matt Packer is Curator of Exhibitions and Projects at the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork.