Democracy is a good idea
On politics, art and activism, idealism and pragmatism
By Morten Goll & Jesper Goll

Pragmatik -ken [pray-] (From Greek Pragmatikos skilled, experienced, active, political, from pragma - that which has been done, active, of state affairs) expertise; in semiology a discipline that studies communicative media, the sign systems and their relation to man, and which regards the linguistic act in its concrete context in the widest definition (The concrete situation, the particular circumstances of the speakers, their intentions, their social origin, their mutual relations etc.); in political relations: factually grounded, practical and realistic politics.

How do we know what contemporary art looks like? We don’t. We know that it can be defined as cultural critique, that it seeks to eliminate its own inherent confinement as well as the limits produced by the current explanatory model. Which is to say the philosophical discourse and the identity models we deploy to describe the world and ourselves, both globally and on the local political plane as well as at the individual level.

For want of something better, we rely on our experience when we have to determine whether something is art, critique or skilled craftwork. In other words, we judge the artwork with reference to historical models that relate to how art used to look. But what qualified as art fifty years ago is not necessarily art today since its form and content no longer propose a critical alternative to the prevailing explanatory model.

Stripped of its critical dimension, art reduces to skilled craftwork.

How do we know what critique looks like? We don’t. Logic allows us to deduce that the form and burden of a critique should be a function of the object of critique. At best, the critique takes a form that constitutes a constructive demonstration of an alternative to the object of criticism. But more often than not, the form amounts to a recycling of approaches that have proved successful in the past, but may not be successful in the present.
Political activists and progressive artists inhabit parallel universes. When the activist decides to protest against an undemocratic, compliant and anti-social government, she does precisely what the artist does in seeking to create an artwork: she takes a retrospective look at the protests of earlier times and repeats the pattern. But how do we know what resistance looks like today? How do we know how a demonstrator behaves?

What we are looking for in the past is an identity model. A model that defines a pattern of agency, which is a function of the world-view we share. Modernism was one such world-view. The modernist utopia was a fantastic vision of an ideal world.

The modern ideal: that man, aided by science, is able to establish an objective viewpoint from which the world can be over-looked at safe distance. In this modern gaze, the beholder is removed from the object of the gaze, and thus exerts no influence on what is seen. This dualist partitioning of the world is all pervasive in the West. It freezes personal identity into an I and a you, and group identity into a them and an us.

Dualism likewise informs the Western idealist faith in progress, which — orchestrated through technological and political revolutions — will bring us ever closer to the modern utopia. Western scientists, along with the revolutionary avant-garde, lead the way. Both are, by virtue of their positions — in the laboratory or as part of the political elite — immune to pressures from “the natives” they control. The myth of the artist-genius is also part of the legacy of the modernist identity model. The male artist-ego sequestered in his studio, extracting from the uniqueness of his inner being the truth about the world.

The modern idealist’s worst nightmare is political pragmatists.

The pragmatist’s worldview is based on a quest for consensus. Rather than cultivating the cleavage between “them” and “us”, utopia and reality, pragmatists seek to bridge differences, with the aim of reaching practical political solutions. Pragmatic power politics have produced some of the most absurd states of affairs seen in recent world history. An example is USA’s ever-changing relations to Osama Bin Laden.

Yet,modernism’s political idealism — anarchism, socialism and communism, once seen as alternatives to capitalism — have suffered one abysmal defeat after the other over the past 20 years. As a philosophical discourse/an explanatory model for artists, modernism has proved similarly inadequate.

Artists have talked a lot about “postmodernism” as a new explanatory model but few have managed to set up identity models that do not hark
back to the history of modernism. At this point, one can conclude that the only novelty ushered in by postmodernism was the loss of the modernist utopia. Thus bereft of ideal and purpose we carry on in the manner of headless chickens plunging forward in the same direction as before. In a similar manner, demonstrators dress up to look like demonstrators, lining up in front of the police in conformity with the designated extra-parliamentary role accorded them by the powers that be.

However, if art is still a form of cultural criticism, and if political activism aspires to the same goal, it becomes a crucial point to answer the question of where the potential for criticism can be found today. One way of seeking an answer to this question is to try to define more closely and concretely how modernism has outplayed itself. For in the anatomy of the breakdown of modernism lies firstly an understanding of what has broken down, and why, secondly the point of departure from which it might be possible to move on.

Modernist thinking is critical thinking and cultural criticism par excellence, but as critical thinking it has a characteristic trait that seems closely related to its present downfall: The modernist critique is often founded in an abstract negativity, and with the progress of the 20th century this trait seems to become ever more dominant. The focus of the critical activity changes over time from an interest in the specific subject of concrete critique – an interest in what is being criticized, and what this concrete critique has to say about its subject – to an interest in the fact that critique is being exercised. The point of interest becomes the process of negation as such instead of its cognitive potential.

The purpose that modernism seeks to achieve with this negative move is to criticize any form of fundamentalism. Like Derrida, modernism seeks to disown all “privileged concepts” – except the critical position as such – and the means it employs in this general crusade against privileges is a critique of all attempts to establish something that can be construed as a fixed position. But since every positive statement is by its nature (i.e., by the nature of language) similar to a fixed position, modernism in the end looses its ability to say anything at all except “no”.

After the breakdown of this critical project, two alternatives seem to remain open. The first alternative is to turn the edge of abstract-negative criticism against modernism itself. Which leads to either the nihilism of postmodernism – where finally the critical position itself is negated and all positions become equally valid or invalid – or to a “yes” that is as abstract as the “no” of modernism, that is to a relapse into a fundamentalism that until recently seemed to belong in the past. These
two positions, fundamentalism and postmodernism, are in fact each other’s reflections.

The second alternative consists in making the critique concrete (a classical move borrowed from Hegel’s toolbox) by seeing the history of modernism as a point of departure, as experience gained that needs to be worked through, assimilated and used – rather than as a platform for renewed exercises in abstract negationism. The experience embodied in modernism is hastening towards self-destruction – culturally into nihilism, politically into fundamentalism – and the necessary countermove is an anticritique that criticizes the failing ability of critique to comprehend pluralistic values and contexts, its forever escalating levels of abstraction and its generally hostile relation to the subject of critique.

Where modernist critique works by constantly “undermining” something – a strategy that in the end reduces the very concept of critique to a ritual – anticritique remains critical in the original sense of the word by entering a territory and opening it, by asking new questions and investigating unseen connections. In its origins modernist critique was (also) like that, but a century of ritualization has rendered its form unusable at present.

Anticritique turns this state of affairs around by maintaining the initial right of any viewpoint to be heard, thus laying claim to consensus, compromise, and dialogue. This is a necessary consequence of its concrete starting point: If the task at hand is to understand, elaborate and develop that which is criticized, it is necessary to run the risk of learning something from it. One’s own position must be brought in a danger that is equal to the danger brought to the opponent’s position. Thus, anticritique represents an abrupt fall from the thin, refined air of modernism down to the messier but also, one may hope, more fertile morass of opposed interests and viewpoints.

By virtue of the extreme situation in which modernism has left us, such “kindness” is in itself a critical move that will reopen a number of worn concepts – democracy, dialogue, compromise – to thinking. To Heidegger, for one, this is the very purpose of art: To preserve the instruments of thinking in language by renewing and deepening their meanings. He saw poetry as a paradigm for this type of move: The German name for poetry is Dichtung, which to Heidegger also signified Verdichtung, “condensation”.

However, the very relationship between critique and anticritique also cannot be contained in an unambiguous preference of one over the other. On the contrary, both of these concepts of criticism will loose their content (as in modernism) if they are not thought together. A critique of culture and society that deserves to be called radical must oppose any ritualization of thought. This includes the abstract negativity
of modernism, but also the ritualization that attempts to elevate compromise and consensus as the new established ritual. A critique that is radical in this sense must avoid manifestos and policy statements like the plague, and at the same time it must continue to produce them. It is pragmatic, paradoxical, unruly, of a Buddhist nature.

Modernism's ritualistic insistence on critique as pure abstract negativity has completed a long, tough haul in the cultural history of the West. Because this haul is now complete, it is time for new poetry, for a new condensation – and because all the old idols have been toppled (also for this reason!) we now necessarily find ourselves on the ground of pragmatism. Our task is to formulate a trap, an ambush that can open the mind to the possibility of pragmatism – for the only alternative available today seems to be a relapse either into a post-modern form of nihilism, or into a medieval fundamentalism akin to the simplified, semi-religious world views that are presently being promoted by powerful militant leaders both in the East and in the West.

It is time to develop a new identity model that can invest both art and activism with new meaning and better resonance. Modernism's dualism, which makes possible the entrenched ego, is closer to fascism than to democracy in social contexts. It supports colonialist domination: to talk, to refuse to listen, to dominate.

The task for this new identity model is nothing less than a defense of one of the late modernism's most impossible ideals, namely democracy. It is the responsibility of art and political activism to create an identity model that both in terms of method and message articulates a democratic alternative.

Democracy is a fragile vision that has been in hibernation for 2500 years. The democratic ideal is constantly threatened by economic, political and military powers. Democracy is impossible in a capitalist economy that places economic freedom above personal freedom. Democracy is impossible where pragmatic power politics sacrifices human rights in favor of cheap oil. Democracy is impossible without democratic mass media. Democracy has never existed. Yet, it is a good idea.

Democracy's method is social interaction, communication, debate, respect for those who think differently; consensus, pragmatics. The struggle for democracy should be conducted by the same means. This does not mean that we should adopt current definitions of the concept of "pragmatism". Rather, we should explore and develop the potential of pragmatics as an ethically accountable artistic and political method. We
need to explore the dynamic intersection where critique and anti-critique meet.

A pragmatic model of identity must be based on concepts such as collaboration, conversation, mutable identities, and above all focus on encounters in social space where the democratic processes are conducted. All communication requires a sender, a receiver and a medium to convey information. Meaningful communication requires that the participants exchange not simply information but also identities -- to be a listener as well as a speaker. A pragmatic cultural critique must focus on the art of disseminating information, on the role of the mass media, on the reclaiming and upgrading of the name of democracy. We need to find ways to demonstrate that democracy is a good idea, and methods that reveal how its name is being abused.

Being a fellow-citizen is not a profession. It is a responsibility that falls to amateurs.

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