

# Not Utopia, just its possibility.

“Whoever seizes the greatest unreality will shape the greatest reality”<sup>1</sup>

There is no art in Utopia. In the perfect society, everything and everyone are as they should be, in their appointed place: art and life have fused into one organic whole and there is no longer need for art as a separate activity – from Plato to Moore, utopists have generally been weary of art, as are totalitarian systems. In 1548 Titian painted a seated portrait of Charles V – the emperor on whose domains it was said, the sun never sets. His feet are resting on a bright red rug, an almost pure patch of red paint in an overall picture of subdued tones, drawing the eye like a magnet. All official painter that he might have been, what Titian really cared about is paint and his painting not so much reifies the ruling emperor than opens up the possibility of a world where red rugs – or red paint – are more important.

If on nothing else, all the views on art criticism seem to agree that “the nature of criticism is as divergent as flora and fauna, or as chaotic as a field of weeds”<sup>2</sup> as Sally O’Reilly puts it; that there are about as many ways to write about art as there are writers or, put slightly differently, as there are views on what art is/do, or is supposed to be/do. My personal favorite is that art makes us free. Something along Kant’s line that the indeterminacy of the aesthetic experience frees us from necessity or, phrased by Rancière:

*From the very beginning, the autonomy of aesthetic experience was taken as the principle of a new form of collective life, precisely because it was a place where the usual hierarchies which framed everyday life were withdrawn.*<sup>3</sup>

Now art criticism or art writing, while it partakes of its object’s projected aim, does so with its own means, in parallel. In *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben drew attention to the first use of the term criticism: “when the term “criticism” appears in the vocabulary of Western philosophy, it signifies rather inquiry at the limit of knowledge about precisely that which can be neither posed nor grasped.”<sup>4</sup>

*Like all authentic quests, the quest of criticism consists not in discovering its object but in assuring the conditions of its inaccessibility.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus echoing the ever elusive articulation between the art object and the written word: the ‘making visible’ in Declan Long’s text, to ‘induce’ to ‘cajole the art object to speak’ as Maria Fusco has it, the failure and inadequacy of words in Imelda Barnard’s text. But this inadequacy is also acknowledged as the richest potential of art writing when it abandons its claim of being an academic discipline as Pablo Lafuente in *Notes on Art Criticism as a Practice*, quoted in Barnard’s, pointed out. As practice, art writing reclaim its creative power and its capacity to unleash imagination as was developed by Bernardo Ortiz Campo in *Criticism and Experience*:

*Understood as an exercise that reclaims the role of imagination in the act of knowing, criticism is a creative process in itself. Its medium is language, as well as all the mediations that occur*

*within it, the variety of media through which language flows. One could say, therefore, that criticism is a productive act. In other words, a transformation of reality.*<sup>6</sup>

It is in the understanding of this act of transformation that there is no such thing as a straightforward description, which could be separated from interpretation or argumentation. All writings on art are, at some level, a transformation, a production of the art object – of reality – the most apparently neutral all the more so as they are ideology presented as fact – any parallel with the current ‘necessary’ budget’s adjustments is not coincidental. Art criticism just as much as art has to keep high its claim to imagination and potential to effect changes. Even if it cannot ever know its object, it must keep trying, neither philosophy nor poetry:

*Yet. If criticism, insofar as it traces the limits of truth, offers a glance of “truth’s homeland” like “an island nature has enclosed within immutable boundaries,” it must also remain open to the fascination of the “wide and storm-tossed sea” that draws “the sailor incessantly toward adventures he knows not how to refuse yet may never bring to an end.”*<sup>7</sup>

That such adventures are still being embarked upon is all the more important when supposedly inevitable ‘economic facts’ are determining our collective fate and alternatives seem at an all time low. So that it may still be possible that red rugs – or is it red paint? – are more important than ruling emperors.

Michaële Cutaya 2011

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Musil quoted by Giorgio Agamben in *Stanzas, Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R.L. Martinez, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. XIX

<sup>2</sup> Sally O’Reilly, *On Criticism*, *Art Monthly* 296, May 2006, p.8

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *From Politics to Aesthetics*, *Paragraph*, Vol 28, March 2005, p.21

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas, Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R.L. Martinez, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.XV.

<sup>5</sup> id. P.XVI.

<sup>6</sup> Bernardo Ortiz Campo, *Criticism and Experience*, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/115>

<sup>7</sup> the Jena group quoted in Agamben op.cit, p. XV.