TEN

The Artist as Ethnographer?

Hal Foster

My title is meant to evoke "The Author as Producer," the text of which Walter Benjamin first presented at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris in April 1934. There, under the influence of Berthold Brecht and Russian revolutionary culture, Benjamin (1978) called on the artist on the left "to side with the proletariat."[1] In vanguard Paris in April 1934 this call was not radical; the approach, however, was. For Benjamin urged the "advanced" artist to intervene, like the revolutionary worker, in the means of artistic production—to change the "techniques" of traditional media, to transform the "apparatus" of bourgeois culture. A correct "tendency" was not enough; that was to assume a place "beside the proletariat." And "what kind of place is that?" Benjamin asked, in lines that still scathe. "That of a benefactor, of an ideological patron—an impossible place."

Today there is a related paradigm in advanced art on the left: the artist as ethnographer. The object of contestation remains, at least in part, the bourgeois institution of autonomous art, its exclusionary definitions of art, audience, identity. But the subject of association has changed: it is now the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the artist often struggles. And yet, despite this shift, basic assumptions with the old productivist model persist in the new quasi-anthropological paradigm. First, there is the assumption that the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation, and, more, that this site is always located *elsewhere,* in the field of the other: in the productivist model, with the social other, the exploited proletariat; in the quasi-anthropological model, with the cultural other, the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural. Second, there is the assumption that this other is always *outside,* and, more, that this alterity is the primary point of subversion of dominant culture. Third, there is the assumption that if the invoked artist is *not* perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but *limited* access to this transformative alterity, and, more, that if he or she *is* perceived as other, he or she has *automatic* access to it. Taken together, these three

assumptions lead to another point of connection with the Benjamin account of the author as producer: the danger, for the artist as ethnographer, of "ideological patronage."[2]

A strict Marxist might question this quasi-anthropological paradigm in art because it tends to displace the problematic of class and capitalist exploitation with that of race and colonialist oppression. A strict poststructuralist would question it for the opposite reason: because it does *not* displace this productivist problematic enough, that is, because it tends to preserve its structure of the political—to retain the notion of a *subject* of history, to define this position in terms of *truth,* and to locate this truth in terms of *alterity*. From this perspective the quasi-anthropological paradigm, like the productivist one, fails to reflect on its *realist assumption:* that the other, here postcolonial, there proletarian, is in the real, not in the ideological, because he or she is socially oppressed, politically transformative, and/or materially productive.[3] Often this realist assumption is compounded by a *primitivist fantasy:* that the other has access to primal psychic and social processes from which the white (petit) bourgeois subject is blocked.[4] Now, I do not dispute that, in certain conjunctures the realist assumption is proper and the primitivist fantasy is subversive. But I do dispute the automatic coding of apparent difference as manifest identity and of otherness as outsideness. This coding has long enabled a cultural politics of *marginality*. Today, however, it may disable a cultural politics of *immanence,* and this politics may well be more pertinent to a postcolonial situation of multinational capitalism in which geopolitical models of center and periphery no longer hold.[5]

The primitivist fantasy was active in two precedents of the quasi-anthropological paradigm in contemporary art: the dissident Surrealism associated with Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris in the late 1920s and early '30s, and the *négritude* movement associated with Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the late 1940s and early '50s. In different ways both movements connected the transgressive potentiality of the unconscious with the radical alterity of the cultural other. And yet, both movements came to be limited by this very primitivist association. Just as dissident surrealism explored cultural otherness only in part to indulge in a ritual of self-othering, so the *négritude* movement naturalized cultural otherness only in part to be constrained by this second nature. In quasi-anthropological art today this primitivist fantasy is only residual. However, the realist assumption—that the other is *dans le vrai*—remains strong, and often its effect, now as then, is to *detour* the artist. What I mean is simpler than it sounds. Just as the productivist sought to stand in the reality of the proletariat only in part to sit in the place of the patron, so the quasi-anthropological artist today may seek to work with sited communities with the best motives of political engagement and institutional transgression, only in part to have this work recoded by its sponsors as social outreach, economic development, public relations . . . or art.

This is not the facile complaint of personal co-option or institutional recuperation: that the artist is only tactical in a careerist sense, or that the museum and the

media absorb everything in pure malevolence (indeed we know they cannot). Rather my concern is with the *structural effects* of the realist assumption in political, here quasi-anthropological, art, in particular with its siting of political truth in a projected alterity. I mentioned the problem of automatic coding of artists vis-à-vis alterity, but there are additional problems here as well: first, that this projection of politics as other and outside may detract from a politics of here and now. And second, since it is in part a projection, this outside is not other in any simple sense.

Let me take these two problems one at a time. First, the assumption of outsideness. If it is true that we live today in a near-global economy, then a pure outside can no longer be presupposed. This recognition does not totalize the world system; instead, it specifies resistance to it as an immanent relation rather than a transcendental one. And, again, a strategic sense of complex imbrication is more pertinent to our postcolonial situation than a romantic proposal of simple opposition.[6] Second, the projection of alterity. As this alterity becomes always imbricated with our own unconscious, its effect may be to "other" the self more than to "selve" the other. Now it may be, as many critics claim today, that this self-othering is crucial to a revised understanding of anthropology and politics alike; or, more circumspectly, that in conjunctures such as the surrealist one the troping of anthropology as auto-analysis (as in Leiris) or social critique (as in Bataille) is culturally transgressive, even politically significant. But there are obvious dangers here as well. Then as now such self-othering easily passes into self-absorption, in which the project of "ethnographic self-fashioning" becomes the practice of philosophical narcissism.[7] To be sure, such reflexivity has done much to disturb reflex assumptions about subject positions, but it has also done much to promote a masquerade of the same: a vogue for confessional testimony in theory that is sometimes sensibility criticism come again, and a vogue for pseudoethnographic reports in art that are sometimes disguised travelogues from the world art market. Who in the academy or the art world has not witnessed these new forms of *flânerie?*

What has happened here? What misrecognitions have passed between anthropology and art and other discourses? One can point to a whole circuit of projections and reflections over the last decade at least. First, some critics of anthropology developed a kind of artist-envy (the enthusiasm of James Clifford for the juxtapositions of "ethnographic surrealism" is an influential instance).[8] In this envy the artist becomes a paragon of formal reflexivity, sensitive to difference and open to chance, a self-aware reader of culture understood as text. But is the artist the exemplar here, or is this figure not a projection of a particular ideal ego—of the anthropologist as collagist, semiologist, avant-gardist?[9] In other words, might this artist-envy be a self-idealization? Rarely does this projection stop there, in anthropology and art, or, for that matter, in cultural studies or new historicism. Often it extends to the *object* of these investigations, the cultural other, who also reflects an ideal image of the anthropologist, artist, critic, or historian. To be sure, this pro-

jection is not new to anthropology: some classics of the discipline (e.g., *Patterns of Culture* by Ruth Benedict) presented whole cultures as collective artists or read them as aesthetic "patterns" of symbolic practices. But they did so openly; current critics of anthropology persist in this projection, only they call it demystification.[10]

Today this envy has begun to run the other way too: a kind of ethnographer-envy consumes artists. Here as well they share this envy with critics, especially in cultural studies and new historicism, who assume the role of ethnographer, usually in disguised form—the cultural-studies ethnographer dressed *down* as a fellow fan (for reasons of political solidarity—but with what social anxieties!); the new-historicist ethnographer dressed *up* as a master archivist (for reasons of scholarly respectability—to outhistorian the historians).[11] But why the particular prestige of anthropology in contemporary art? Again, there are precedents of this engagement: in Surrealism, where the other was figured as the unconscious; in *art brut,* where the other represented the anticivilizational; in Abstract Expressionism, where the other stood for the primal artist; and variously in the art of the 1960s and '70s (the Primitivism of earthworks, the art world as anthropological site, and so on). But what is particular about the present turn? First, anthropology is prized as the science of *alterity;* in this regard it is second only to psychoanalysis as a lingua franca in artistic practice and critical discourse alike.[12] Second, it is the discipline that takes *culture* as its object, and it is this expanded field of reference that postmodernist art and criticism have long sought to make their own. Third, ethnography is considered *contextual,* the rote demand for which contemporary artists share with many other practitioners today, some of whom aspire to fieldwork in the everyday. Fourth, anthropology is thought to arbitrate the *interdisciplinary,* another rote value in contemporary art and theory.[13] Finally, fifth, it is the *self-critique* of anthropology that renders it so attractive, for this critical ethnography invites a reflexivity at the center even as it preserves a romanticism of the margins. For all these reasons rogue investigations of anthropology, like queer critiques of psychoanalysis, possess vanguard status today: it is along these lines that the critical edge is felt to cut most incisively.

This turn to the ethnographic, it is important to see, is not only an external seduction; it is also driven by forces immanent to advanced art, at least in Anglo-American metropoles, forces I can only sketch here. Pluralists notwithstanding, this art has a trajectory over the last thirty-five years, which consists of a sequence of investigations: from the objective constituents of the art work first to its spatial conditions of perception, then to the corporeal bases of this perception—shifts remarked in minimalist work in the early 1960s through conceptual art, performance, body art, and site-specific work in the early '70s. Along the way the institution of art could no longer be described simply in terms of physical space (studio, gallery, museum, and so on): it was also a discursive network of other practices and institutions, other subjectivities and communities. Nor could the observer of art be delimited only phenomenologically: he or she was also a social subject defined in various languages and marked by multiple differences (sexual, ethnic,

and so on). Of course these recognitions were not strictly internal to art. Also crucial were different social movements (feminism above all) as well as diverse theoretical developments (the convergence of feminism, psychoanalysis, and film; the recovery of Gramsci; the application of Althusser; the influence of Foucault; and so on). The important point is that art thus passed into the expanded field of culture that anthropology is thought to survey.

And what are the results? One is that the ethnographic mapping of a given institution or a related community is a primary form that site-specific art now assumes. This is all to the good, but it is important to remember that these pseudoethnographic critiques are very often commissioned, indeed franchised. Just as appropriation art became an aesthetic genre, new site-specific work threatens to become a museum category, one in which the institution *imports* critique for purposes of inoculation (against an immanent critique, one undertaken by the institution, within the institution). This is an irony *inside* the institution; other ironies arise as site-specific work is sponsored *outside* the institution, often in collaboration with local groups. Here, values like authenticity, originality, and singularity, banished under critical taboo from postmodernist art, return as properties of the site, neighborhood, or community engaged by the artist. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this displacement, but here too it is important to remember that the sponsor may regard these "properties" as just that—as sited values to develop.[14] Of course the institution may also exploit such site-specific work in order to expand its operations for reasons noted above (social outreach, public relations, economic development, and art tourism).[15] In this case, the institution may displace the work that it otherwise advances: the show becomes the spectacle where cultural capital collects.

I am not entirely cynical about these developments. Some artists have used these opportunities to collaborate with communities innovatively: for instance, to recover suppressed histories that are sited in particular ways, that are accessed by some more effectively than others. But I am skeptical about the effects of the pseudoethnographic role set up for the artist or assumed by him or her. For this setup can promote a presumption of ethnographic authority as much as a questioning of it, an evasion of institutional critique as often as an elaboration of it.

Consider this scenario, a caricature, I admit. An artist is contacted by a curator about a site-specific work. He or she is flown into town in order to engage the community targeted for collaboration by the institution. However, there is little time or money for much interaction with the community (which tends to be constructed as readymade for representation). Nevertheless, a project is designed, and an installation in the museum and/or a work in the community follows. Few of the principles of the ethnographic participant-observer are observed, let alone critiqued. And despite the best intentions of the artist, only limited engagement of the sited other is effected. Almost naturally the focus wanders from collaborative investigation to "ethnographic self-fashioning," in which the artist is not decentered so much as the other is fashioned in artistic guise.[16]

Again, this projection is at work in other practices that often assume, covertly or

otherwise, an ethnographic model. The other is admired as one who plays with representation, subverts gender, and so on. In all these ways the artist, critic, or historian projects his or her practice onto the field of the other, where it is read not only as authentically indigenous but as innovatively political! Of course, this is an exaggeration, and the application of these methods has illuminated much. But it has also obliterated much in the field of the other, and in its very name. This is the opposite of a critique of ethnographic authority, indeed the opposite of ethnographic method, at least as I understand them. And this "impossible place" has become a common occupation of artists, critics, and historians alike.

NOTES

1. The fact that Stalin had condemned this culture by 1934 is only one of the ironies that twist any reading of "The Author as Producer" (Benjamin [1934] 1978) today (to say nothing of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [Benjamin 1968]). My title may also evoke "The Artist as Anthropologist" by Joseph Kosuth (1975), but our concerns are quite different.

2. This danger may deepen rather than diminish for the artist perceived to be other, for he or she may be asked to assume the role of native informant as well. Incidentally, the charge of "ideological patronage" should not be conflated with "the indignity of speaking for others." Pronounced by Gilles Deleuze in a 1972 conversation with Michel Foucault, this taboo circulated widely in American criticism of the left in the 1980s, where it produced a censorious silent guilt as much as it did an empowered alternative speech. See Foucault (1977:209).

3. This position is advanced in an early text by the figure who later epitomized the contrary position. In the conclusion of *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes writes:

> There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. ([1957] 1972:146)

4. This fantasy also operated in the productivist model to the extent that the proletariat was often seen as "primitive" in this sense too.

5. For a related discussion of these problems, see Foster (1993).

6. It is in this sense that critics like Homi Bhabha have developed such notions as "third spaces" and deferred times.

7. James Clifford develops the notion of "ethnographic self-fashioning" in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), in part from Stephen Greenblatt (1980). This source points to a commonality between the critique of ethnography in new anthropology and the critique of history in new historicism (on which more below).

8. Clifford also develops this notion in *The Predicament of Culture:* "Is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities?" (1988:147). Some have questioned how reciprocal art and anthropology were in

the surrealist milieu. See, for example, Jean Jamin (1986) and Denis Hollier (1992).

9. Is there not, in other words, a poststructuralist projection akin to the structuralist projection critiqued long ago by Pierre Bourdieu in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (1972)?

10. Incidentally, this artist-envy is not unique to new anthropology. It was at work, for example, in the rhetorical analysis of historical discourse initiated in the 1960s. "There have been no significant attempts," Hayden White wrote in "The Burden of History" (1966), "at surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century (except by novelists and poets themselves), for all of the vaunted 'artistry' of the historians of modern times" (White 1978:43).

11. Obviously there are other dimensions of these crossings-over, such as the curricular wars of the last decade. First some anthropologists adapted textual methods from literary criticism. Now some literary critics respond with pseudoethnographies of literary cultures. In the process some historians feel squeezed on both sides. This is not a petty skirmish at a time when university administrators study enrollments closely—and when some advocate a return to the old disciplines, while others seek to recoup interdisciplinary ventures as cost-effective moves.

12. In a sense, the *critique* of these two human sciences is as fundamental to postmodern discourse as the *elaboration* of them was to modern discourse.

13. Louis Althusser (1990:97) writes of interdisciplinarity as "the *common theoretical ideology* that silently inhabits the 'consciousness' of all these specialists . . . oscillating between a vague spiritualism and a technocratic positivism."

14. I am indebted in these remarks to my fellow participants in "Roundtable on Site-Specificity," *Documents* 4 (1994): Renee Green, Mitchell Kane, Miwon Kwon, John Lindell, and Helen Molesworth. There Kwon suggests that such neighborhood *place* is posed against urban *space* as difference against sameness. She also suggests that artists are associated with places in a way that connects identity politics and site-specific practices—the authenticity of the one being invoked to bolster the authenticity of the other.

15. Some recent examples of each: social outreach in "Culture in Action," a public art program of Sculpture Chicago in which selected artists collaborated with community groups; economic development in "42nd Street Art Project," a show that could not but improve the image of Times Square for its future redevelopment; and recent projects in several European cities (e.g., Antwerp) in which site-specific works were deployed in part for touristic interest and political promotion.

16. Consider, as an example, one project in "Project Unité," a show of site-specific works by some forty artists or artist groups within the Le Corbusier Unité d'Habitation in Firminy, France, in summer 1993. In this project, the neo-conceptual duo Glegg and Guttman asked the Unité inhabitants to contribute favorite cassettes toward the production of a discothèque. The tapes were then edited, compiled, and displayed according to apartment and floor. The sociological condescension in this facilitated self-representation is extraordinary.

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George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers

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