Down By Numbers

16Beaver

Column – January 1, 2007

By the time you have finished reading this, it will have been 750 or more words, the space allotted to us by the editors with a going rate of 0.45 euro a word. We have been asked to write a short and polemic column-like text in which we formulate 16beaver's vision on the public mission of art and its institutions.

Of course we are scripted into schedules and deadlines which need numbers. Yes, numbers were calculated to consider the space available in this publication, the budget for printing, the fees, the salaries, and so forth. Numbers… what started as zeros and ones will soon enough lead to a more complex and flexible equation, bearing with it millions of combinatory numbers, a set for each person on earth… mirroring and tracking us inside and along the peripheries of the camp. We are assigned numbers on boarding, with each seat we take, each meal we charge, we are statistics, analysed, located, identified, placed into groups, numbers, we are pedestrian number x, customer x times, we are worth x, we are weighed, measured, ranked, even speculated upon, hell, we speculate upon ourselves. We are a credit rating. We are supply, we are demand? And yet, we are weightless and measureless. So we take a minute to measure just exactly how much we are worth and in this same logic, we argue, we demand more.

250 or so words in, we are seemingly no closer to addressing our subject of the public mission of art and its institutions. And the task is getting more difficult. We will ask the editors to improve our pay from this point forward. They agree, and raise the price to 0.47 euro per word.

We think about proposing that art's role today and the role of the institutions (which take on the mandate to protect, house, teach, care for, consider and nurture art) is to wage a war against these numbers. Art, which once took the poetic device – through language, images, diverse forms and behaviours, the task of thinking, elaborating and outlining humankind's place on earth – has reached an impasse. It has ridden on this impasse for the last century. A century in which the product entered into art as the readymade and art (later the artist) entered into the market as a product. Even if artists long ago left behind these legacies, we nonetheless remain in the vicinity of this intersection today. [1]

Moreover, a growing *number* of the existing institutions today, whether universities, museums, or even smaller non-profit spaces, are governed and often directed by the bureaucrats, the accountants, the crunchers of numbers, the trustees, the corporations (the sponsors), the investors, the speculators, the head counters, the grant givers, the generous donors, the infinite ways and means available to distribute and hold us all captive in / to the world of numbers.

Numbers which may aid us in understanding, for instance, the infinite complexity of genetic information residing in our bodies, or to investigate the wondrous textures of our cosmos, and estimate the number of years humans will need to destroy themselves, or how to increase the number of years we live. But they do not go very far in determining how one could live or organize society differently, for instance without creating false scarcity, without engineering and fostering fear, without rampant dispossession, without so much inequity or war. How to rethink our relation to the earth and all the other living and non-

living matter? Growing our bank accounts will not address these necessary and quite pragmatic questions.

Some of us, meanwhile, naively await a cry or a whimper, as the marches to various disasters proceed on schedule . . . cries to break banks open, to free the detainees, to end all occupations, to end the wars, but instead we hear the roar of bulls, the hurried thunder of a euphoric albeit confused stampede, running to cash the checks, counting the number of heads, speculating on the next big product launch, noting all the while that bills and salaries have to be paid, in fact, first of the month and a small pssst, 'you know, since these budget cuts'... You get the picture?!

Liquidity analysts, asset managers, resource administrators, endowment officers, treasury chiefs, grant clerks, donor strategists, corporate liaisons – these are key figures in our coming art institutions.

But this is not about a shortage; on the contrary, art may be entering the greatest period of financialization it has ever known as it gains further and further traction as an investment tool, a marker of status for the newly minted wealthy elite (the few beneficiaries of globalization) and gets increasingly mobilized as a powerful agent for tourism, for redevelopment, regeneration and city re-branding schemes.

47 words past our limit, and we are just scratching at the surface of an idea. What could this call against *the becoming-numbers of the world* have to do with the possible public role of art and its institutions? To continue we could distinguish (for instance) and disentangle the word *public* from *audience* (a word not implicitly negative but too often linked to passivity, numbers, market research and spectacle)? [2] To insist that art is not after a marked and predicted audience (much to the dismay of the marketing and publicity departments of many museums), but instead is seeking a public, to call forth a public which has yet to exist. Here calling forth this public would be part of a process called democracy: since we would reject the reduction of democracy to a mode of governance based upon counting votes, tallying numbers, etcetera... [3] This process of constructing or calling forth or creating a public would also require some struggle, some disagreement... [4] It would require fighting for ground lost and ground which has yet to be imagined. On another front, it would require some effort to link this discourse on numbers to the neoliberal values being taken on increasingly throughout the world – an irrational drive which hides under the seeming rationality of numbers – resting on the world's greatest selling fiction (money), yet referring to itself as realistic or pragmatic. Furthermore, it would require understanding the constructivist project of neoliberalism: its harsh process of imbuing its logic and values within existing and emergent institutions of government, education, social economic policy and culture. [5]

And it would come back to art and ask how it might be possible to question and argue against the becoming-numbers of the world, and then to argue for the measureless, infinite, incalculable, uncountable, unheard and unseen futures, which would require an explicit struggle and fight. And if the existing artists and institutions do not exist to wage this fight, then we would have to speculate upon how to shape the space and way for them to exist. The stakes are immeasurable. [6]

16Beaver is the address of a space in NYC initiated / run by artists since 1999. Since that time, it has served as place where those involved in art, politics, education, as well as a multiplicity of other contexts and fields of activity could discover and develop a common place to share research, questions, understandings, concerns, and struggles. Thus, it has been an open place to share, present, produce, and discuss a variety of artistic / cultural / economic / political projects. It has also been a site where discussions can lead to actions and action can be discussed and rethought. See further: www.16beavergroup.org.

Footnotes

1. Please see Giorgio Agamben's *Man Without Contents* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
2. We are using ***becoming*** in the ordinary sense of the word, not in the philosophical sense espoused by Deleuze-Guattari.
3. See Jacques Ranci¯re's writings on democracy.
4. See the writings of Chantal Mouffe and Rosalyn Deutsche.
5. See recent texts by Brian Holmes and David Harvey.
6. 'Are we claiming that no value, no justice, and indeed no virtue can exist? No, in contrast to those who have long claimed that value can be affirmed only in the figure of measure and order, we argue that value and justice can live in and be nourished by an immeasurable world.' From: Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, ***Empire*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000)

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