

Shifting between Rigid Analysis and a Residual Utopianism

Jan Verwoert

Review – November 1, 2006

Sven Lütticken, *Secret Publicity. Essays on Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam / Amsterdam, NAI Publishers / Fonds BKVB, ISBN 9056624679

Art criticism becomes productive when it goes beyond the declaration of judgements and instead develops its own questions and criteria. Sven Lütticken's writing has this quality. *Secret Public*, a comprehensive collection of his essays (published between 1999 to 2005), is enjoyable to read because it allows you to follow the process in which Lütticken continuously builds up and expands his apparatus of criteria from text to text. The question that emerges as a key motive behind his studies and investigations concerns the methodology of a critical practice: How can art challenge the culture of capitalism? Is it through a foundational analysis that leads up to a radical rejection of this culture? Or is it through the constitution of a counterculture that competes with the mythical images consumer culture perpetuates by inventing its very own alternative mythology? For Lütticken, the project of a contemporary left-wing criticism in general and critical art practice in particular is therefore defined by the task to choose or negotiate between two perspectives opened up by the history of modernism: rational analysis and radical negation on the one hand – and the creation of a new myth for a counterculture or 'secret public', as he calls it, on the other. The two figures who embody these perspectives in Lütticken's discourse are Guy Debord (analysis) and Georges Bataille (myth). In his writing Lütticken talks as much to as *through* their voices, without however, ever entirely siding with one of them. At times he plays one against the other, at times he makes their voices complement each other. While the analytical approach is used to target the romantic delusions of countercultural mythologies, the utopian drive of the desire to create a different art and public is acknowledged to be the force that keeps the whole project of criticism alive and going at the end of the day. So if there is an answer to the question of the proper method of critical practice, Lütticken gives it performatively, between the lines, by developing a method of constant shifting between rigid analysis and a residual utopianism in his writing.

As Lütticken's arguments unfold, Debord comes to figure increasingly less as a particular person and more as a principle. It is the principle of a categorical critique of the culture of capital that, without mercy, denounces the commodification and co-option of any cultural artefact or practice by the logic of capital and only accepts practices and positions as legitimate that stay away from and refuse to be made compatible with the logic of capital. Lütticken therefore invokes the Debord principle when he seeks to draw a line between legitimate (that is critical) and illegitimate (that is co-opted and commodified) art. The righteousness and Stalinist rigour of this terminology subsequently is always present in Lütticken's writing. At times it comes to dominate the tone of a text. Mostly, however, the Debord principle comes into play as a criterion around which a discursive space is opened up for the negotiation of the ambivalences of certain artistic practices and positions.

In the essay *The Art of Revolution* Lütticken, for instance, remarks about a museum

retrospective of the Situationist International (at the Centre Pompidou in 1989, after that in London and Boston,) that the show co-opts and commodifies the elusive work of the SI by turning it into just another set of museum exhibits.¹ At the same time he concedes that it is only by putting the SI in the museum that it can today be made accessible to a broader audience. While this dialectical reversal makes it almost seem possible that an idea might survive its absorption by an institution, Lütticken's overall position tends to be that the final commodification of art can rarely be avoided in the long run. In this sense he argues in *Appropriation Mythology* that Appropriation Art may have served as an effective approach for analysing and subverting the logic of capitalist culture.² Since it has, however, today been categorized as the textbook example for 'critical art' its critical edge has been co-opted and the criticality associated with it become a mere myth. Pop Art, Lütticken claims in *The Utility of Expenditure*, suffered a similar fate.³ Its exuberant over-affirmation of consumption made it a subversive force in its early days. It could have provoked the excess of overspending which, Bataille believes, can push economies to a point of breakdown. Pop Art in the days of Jeff Koons, however, has become a form of excess that the system can easily cope with and co-opt.

The outlook for a critical practice is less bleak when Bataille figures as the *spiritus rector* of an essay like *Secret Publicity*.⁴ With a great love for detail, for instance, Lütticken recounts how Bataille assembled a clandestine circle of intellectuals around his journal *Acephale* in the hope of creating a new myth for the left in this secret society. Yet this text is also marked by the melancholy admittance that Bataille's utopian project was untimely, quixotic and bound to fail. A similar love for the quixotic shows when Lütticken explores the contemporary significance of conspiracy theories in *The Conspiracy of Publicness*.⁵ On the basis that any political theory must make sometimes unwarranted connections to get the bigger picture, he proposes to redeem some of the speculative elements of such theories for an unruly form of political thinking in the spirit of William Burroughs. In *Bik Van der Pol's Repetitions* he embraces a return of the Situationist spirit in the improvised scenarios Liesbeth Bik and Jost Van der Pol create for the temporary gathering of transient communities.⁶ Despite these momentary glimpses of hope, the overall tone of the collected essays remains largely apocalyptic. Lütticken most of the time portrays the situation of contemporary art practice as an endgame scenario in which critical practitioners fight a desperate fight against the overly powerful opponent of the market. Throughout the entire book I in fact kept choking on the lines I read on the very first page of the *Introduction*:⁷ 'For the contemporary art world, however, self-criticism and complexity have become unique selling points that have turned art into a successful up-market branch of the culture industry at large, and therefore part of the present society of the spectacle. In this situation, art criticism serves as a discursive dressing for the choices of the real decision makers – the collectors, curators and gallery owners.' Why would you open up a critical discourse with words that deny its very possibility and potential relevance? I cannot help but hear the voice of a prophet of doom here who begins to speak by announcing that the end has come.

Why take such a position today? If anything, the current opening up of the art discourse towards Eastern Europe, for instance, has shown that the model of monolithic market domination may apply to the USA, but not to the chaotic new European art topography in which the West European patchwork of commercial and public institutions now begins to interlace with art contexts in which markets practically do not exist. I believe these developments force us to abandon moncausal types of structural analysis in favour of the more complex models of understanding the multiple relations between sub-contexts that post-structuralism provides. And why honour the market by investing belief in its symbolic power? Being a bit of a residual modernist myself, I also strongly believe in Adorno's insistence that critical theory should not give power to power by allowing the thought of its dominance to govern its discourse. I respect the analytical rigour with which Lütticken works through his arguments and voices his unconditional scepticism. At the same time, I

would maintain that it is one of the most eminent tasks of criticism today to work against the closure of discourse (even and also when it is effected by the totalizing account of a monocausal sociological analysis) and towards the invention of ideas and concepts that could empower difference. I realize that I sound like one of the 'freestyle Deleuzians' here that Lütticken continues to mock in his writing. Maybe rightfully so. Still I feel that his writing provokes me to take that position. Which is a way of saying that in the end I find the book enjoyable because it provokes you to take positions. And very little criticism manages to do this.

Jan Verwoert is a critic and writer on contemporary art and cultural theory. He is a contributing editor of *Frieze* and his writing has appeared in different journals, anthologies and monographs. He is the author of the essay collection *Cookie!* (Sternberg Press / Piet Zwart Institute, 2014), *Animal Spirits -Fables in the Parlance of Our Time* (together with Michael Stevenson) (Christoph Keller Editions, JRP-Ringier, 2013), the essay collection *Tell Me What You Want What You Really Really Want* (Sternberg Press / Piet Zwart Institute, 2010) and *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous* (MIT Press / Afterall Books, 2006). He teaches at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, the Piet Zwart Institute and the de Appel Curatorial Programme.

Footnotes

1. Sven Lütticken, *Secret Publicity – Essays on Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam / Amsterdam: NAI Publishers / Fonds BKVB, 2005), 43–54. First published in *De Witte Raaf* no. 109, 2004.
2. Ibid., 83–104. First published in *New Left Review* no. 36, 2005.
3. Ibid., 139–154. First published in *De Witte Raaf* no. 82, 1999.
4. Ibid., 21–42. First published in *New Left Review* no. 17, 2002.
5. Ibid., 191–204. First published in *Open* no. 7, 2004.
6. Ibid., 155–164. First published in *BikVan der Pol – With Love From the Kitchen* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005).
7. Ibid., 7–20.

Tags

Art Discourse, Capitalism, Public Space

This text was downloaded on February 17, 2026 from

Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain

www.onlineopen.org/shifting-between-rigid-analysis-and-a-nnbsp-residual-utopianism