

34th AICA Congress, London September 2000

outline of a paper by Mika Hannula - language must be checked -

presented in the parallel session for Triangular Mutterings, Saturday 16.9. at 14.30-17.45

### **Misunderstanding as an Ethical Principle**

In this outline of my paper, I will present a very short version of my argument. My starting point is a very general one: de facto plurality of cultures, content of concepts and versions of worlds. My main interest lies in the questions of how do we deal with this situation of complexity and multiple choices, problems and possibilities, which does not mean relativism. For me, it all tumbles down to the question of being-with. (For a longer version of the story, see Hannula 2000) I will present here the aim and presuppositions of my position, and in the end offering a certain chance of a path for this very demanding relationship. It is a chance which is opened up by a careful and caressing attitude, albeit also a surprising collision and meeting of ethical questions and contemporary art. However, I will begin with an anecdote, which ought to be relevant for the theme and context of discussion in the realm of contemporary visual art and culture.

This anecdote, which is personally felt and experienced one, refers to an international seminar called Changing the System? held in Rotterdam in April 1999, organized together by Nifca, Malmö Art Academy, Witte de With and Rijksakademie. This three day event brought together for discussions over 40 persons, mainly artists but also curators. It ended with a podium discussion to which participated, not only all the people invited, all of them gathered there in front, but also the audience. Among hundreds of themes and opinions brought up in the very loosely kept up discussion of that long afternoon, one exchange of opinions focused on the importance of the late Jackson Pollock, realized through comments on the last retrospective of his works. Some of the participants were happy to join into the praise of Pollock, saying little this and little that about Mr. Pollock, hardly at all making it clear what each of the commentators exactly meant with their reference. Pollock was great, magnificent. That was it.

During this perhaps nice but meaningless small talk, I could not any longer keep myself out of it. Asking for the microphone, I stated a very simple point. A content of any concept is not given, neutral or natural, but is always made, shaped and maintained. The content of

a concept is constructed and contested, being always both an ethical and political activity. What Pollock means is not the same in each and every situation or context. In other words, how Pollock is perceived, what kind of an interpretation and place he is given, differentiates in great variety of nuances, depending from where you look and who does the cooking.

This utterance became a solid bond symbol of triangular mutterings in a small book that was published of the seminar. The person who did the transcription of the text unfortunately did not attend the seminar. And I suppose because of my not so brilliant pronunciation, the point of reference to Jackson Pollock which I made turned into a rather different one. Thus, the text says, and I now quote from the book, a false but brilliant sentence put to my mouth. "Coming from Finland and living in Berlin, *bullock* means something completely different here than for someone coming from Indiana or whatever. The point is that we don't really understand one another. Dialogue needs a basis, something that is shared, and that is very, very difficult." (p.51)

To be sure, I have absolutely nothing against the organizers of the Rotterdam event, or the mistake in the book in which Pollock turns into bullock. I have presented it as anecdote, because I think it is absolutely necessary to speak from a certain position and to take responsibility of the values, interests, aims and fears incorporated into ones views. Instead of being politely general, universal and consensus-driven, we need to try to be as much as possible contextual, particular and personal. It is about situating oneself, speaking with, not about or from. It is the only way art speak has a chance of not mutating into a triviality of a version of ad speak. And in order to achieve this, my hunch is that we need to try - from time to time - to stop the process, to halt that sickeningly sweet and tempting caravan of hubris - the ultimately wrong assumption that I understand what you mean with words such as love, hate and democracy. (see Hannula 1998)

### **Aim and Presuppositions**

Now, moving away from the anecdote, I will state the aim of my paper. It is a very heavy-duty one, perhaps deserving the title as one of the most difficult ones in human relationships. The aim is: mutual respect and reciprocal relationship. It is about being with

in relationship in-between people. Or altering slightly the focus from ethics to contemporary art, in-between a viewer and a work of art. There is no need to equate the different aspects of the relationships, but nevertheless, a comparison of various aspects is fruitful.

Being with is about being in a relationship, which, if one is to take seriously the above stated aim, must be a relationship of two active partners in crime. It is, so to say, always a two-way street in which both participants affect one another. In this relationship, my claim is that it must be based on the ethical principle of misunderstanding. This basic principle is followed by two guide-lines and restrictions: principle of love (as, for example, found in New Testament, or the maxim of trying to treat the others the way you wish them to treat you) and principle of non-violence.

I must now be more precise what I want to refer to with the concept of misunderstanding. First of all, I do not view misunderstanding as an opposite of understanding. Instead, it refers to the unnecessary and danger of understanding in the process of being with. The main danger being that understanding controls and closes too strongly doors that must stay open and openable. By using the word misunderstanding, the aim is not non-understanding, and it is not to understand in a false and unintended way. Slavoj Žižek (1999) has touched the theme from a different angle, commenting on the ideology of multiculturalism and its relationship with global capitalism. I want to distance myself strongly from his plea of intolerance. I stand for critical tolerance, claiming that the repoliticalization of economy and societies, which Žižek demands for, can indeed be achieved through the chances which the attitude of misunderstanding makes happen. The principle of misunderstanding, as I want to see it, is political as in questioning, and as in eventualization. (See Foucault 1980)

What misunderstanding is after is the acceptance of the attitude that we do not need to understand. Instead of it, the task is to find out - through endless compromises and negotiations - the terms and ways in which to be with and to relate with others - persons and works of art. It is not, and cannot fall into the traps of relativism, but must be grounded on the responsibility of speaking from a position. You know the line: if you do not stand for something, you will fall for anything.

The philosophical attitude for this choice bounces heavily back to the attitude of both-and, which is brilliantly presented by Gianni Vattimo(1988), mostly in terms of his relationship towards religion, and to the process of secularization. Here, it is reflected in connection to our relationship towards the past. And that is past as in personal experiences, and as in versions of traditions and as in the genealogy of the content of concepts. Thus, using the prefix mis, I want to stress the need not to loose the ground control and to dream of a situation in which redescription of the content of concepts can happen ahistorically and without a past. It does not. The past is always present. We will always struggle with the wish to understand, to control and to categorize.

Thus, coming back to misunderstanding, and stopping for the concept of understanding, my main claim is that understanding as an aim and as a need is a very major hindrance for the endlessly difficult process of mutual respect and reciprocal recognition. You do not have to understand the other. You even can not understand the other- the other being both inside and outside yourself. There is no necessity of agreeing on a bases of consensus. In order to have the plurality of views and opinions, the relationship of being with must be grounded on the attitudes of a loving conflict, and of the attitude of seeing conversation, not as leading to consensus, but as an open conflict of opinions. To use the old cliché: it is not about arriving, but the importance of how you travel - how you discuss and try to relate to and to be with.

### **The Third Space**

To close up, I will provide a possible connection point in-between the more theoretical and ethical thoughts presented here and the practice of contemporary art. What I have in mind with the connection is a certain meeting. A meeting which in best of cases leads into a forming of a relationship, a dialogue between the viewer and the work of art. Not just talk talk, but give and take interaction. In this process, understanding and the aim of it, have very little room or role to play. Instead, the journey of the participants starts of with the wish and often the necessity to meet the other, to form a relationship with one another. At the beginning of the journey, both must realize that in order it to succeed, they have to move away from their secure and safe positions. They must be willing and able to confront the other, and to be able to put into a question their own previous views, beliefs, wants and fears.

This journey has the chance of going somewhere where neither of the participants have before been. It is a place which is created only in the process of their interaction of being with. And this process is very hard and time consuming. It is not about allowing and accepting everything, but about negotiating and forming of compromises. It is to move into an unknown territory. Meanwhile, they both have arrived at a new place, something that belongs not to either of them, but to them together - for that passing by moment. (And the choir sings: shala la laa...)

I would be happy to call that situation a third space. Like in an act of perception. When you watch a glass on the table, it watches you back. You affect it, and it affects you. Slowly but surely - if you pay attention. It is not a major earthquake, but something is going on. It is an invitation. It is called being with, which is only possible if the meeting is not hindered by the predetermined need to understand. It is a space, a gray ambiguous area which with all its challenge and demands, risks and openings, we must face and confront.

**Mika Hannula**

literature

Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge; Selected Interviews and Other Writings. ed. Colin Gordon, New York Pantheon Books 1980

Mika Hannula: Why Do I Like Rock Music? A Theoretical Discourse of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art in the 1990's - A Defense of Postmodern Pluralism. NKNU University of Trondheim 2000

Mika Hannula (ed): Stopping the Process? Contemporary views on art and exhibitions. Nifca 1998

Slavoj Zizek: A Plea for Intolerance. 1999

Gianni Vattimo: The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture. Polity Press 1988

Changing the System? Artists talk about their practice. Nifca 1999