GETTING LOST

BY BEN EASTHAM

The question of who has the right to speak on behalf of whom, and how or whether artists should lend their support to causes that are not their own, has been a feature of recent protests against the exploitation by white artists of black suffering and the abuse of power by men in the art world. These controversies have made abundantly clear—it should already have been clear—that specific forms of oppression cannot adequately be articulated by those excluded from them.

This idea of "belonging" derives from Aimé Césaire's rejection of Jean-Paul Sartre's attempts, in his 1948 essay "Black Orpheus,"[1] to figure black resistance as one expression of a universal class struggle. Césaire argued that this neglected and thereby diminished the specifics of that struggle, pointing out that black subjectivity is shaped by "a situation in the world that can't be confused with any other… problems that cannot be reduced to any other problems… a history constructed out of terrible misadventures that belong to no other."[2] The implication is that, by translating those experiences into his own language (or, perhaps more accurately, what Ferdinand de Saussure would have called his *langue*) in order to fit his own ideological agenda, Sartre is guilty of silencing them.

However reassuring it might be to think that all forms of oppression are symptoms of the same root problems, and that the experience of one entitles you to speak with authority about the other, doing so risks effacing the differences that qualify another's suffering. The endorsement of a movement from a position of power—even to the extent of articulating solidarity—resembles assimilation. And so even well-meaning attempts to express solidarity and find common cause can read like attempts to "own" or "universalise" them.

The experience of racism, to take the clearest example, is nontransferable. This remains the case no matter how capacious an artist believes their capacity for empathy to be, nor how firm their faith in the potential of art to inspire fellow feeling. Having accepted that presuming to represent the suffering of others is misguided, the next question might be how it is possible even to assert solidarity with that suffering. Does any gesture—however well-intentioned—across a power differential risk downplaying the conditions that underwrite that inequality? We might take for a topical example the hasty assertions by men on social media that they "are feminists" and "stand with" the #MeToo movement. These seem not only to take for granted that this is an insurgency in which they are invited to participate, but also that a public statement of support pre-empts criticism and precludes any serious self-examination. The dilemma is that while they (I should say we) might be better advised to keep their counsel and simply listen, to do so risks being interpreted as quietism or even a tacit acknowledgment of complicity. Which might also apply to the recent proliferation of works of art that more closely resemble sloganeering statements of political affiliation or resistance.

In what risks becoming a lapel-pin culture of performed solidarity, there is legitimate suspicion of the hollow indignation expressed by artists hitching their wagons to the latest movement. When I read that anti-Trump works were selling well at Art Basel Miami Beach, my first reaction was that a marketable "aesthetics of protest" risked overshadowing those artists (and there are lots of them) whose work exposes systemic injustices rather than simply decrying their most egregious symptoms. Furthermore, that there was something narcissistic about artists in positions of relative privilege electing themselves to defend communities whose particular grievances they were not, in certain cases, willing to entertain. When artists declare affiliation with a demographic to which they do not "belong"—suffering in which they do not participate—in order to accrue capital, whether cultural or financial, they undermine rather than advance the cause.

Yet it is difficult to escape the feeling that the particularism this entails is, when the global circumstances demand the formation of the broadest possible coalitions, untimely and even defeatist. That an individual should refrain from aligning themselves with resistance to injustices that, to return to Césaire's phrase, do not "belong" to them seems to disallow any kind of solidarity. The extension of this dispiriting logic suggests that we are committed to an ever more fragmented culture, in which even gathering points like #MeToo are suspicious because they conflate different types of harassment.

I don't pretend to have answers to these questions. But a forty-year-old photograph might offer one means of thinking around what it means to express solidarity in the field of contemporary art, and even offer a potential model for exchange and community building. The image captures an encounter between two artists, one of whom is effectively protesting against the other. The specific issue at stake might strike some as trivial but, while I'm disinclined anyway to assign degrees of importance, the purpose is not to imply any equivalence between this and other issues. The example is useful—if it is useful—at least in part because it is to some degree removed from current sensitivities.

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