

# On Making Art in the Present Tense

by Alena Alexandrova

## Repositioning

I am sitting in the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam and the main hall is full. What I am about to see, however, is not exactly a dance or theatre performance. Instead, I will hear a lecture on making art from the very stage that usually hosts it. At the heart of the lecture series is the notion of the “new”, in several variations: new idealism, new beauty, new virtuosity, new knowledge, new subversion, new centre and the meaning of new. These issues are framed by the title of the lecture series – The Old Brand New – which indicates that the new is actually an old concept. In fact, too old, or too exhausted, a concept that is already in the past. The situation is doubly strange, or doubly new, and amounts to a careful positioning of the debate on art both in terms of context (the physical location of the theatre being part of this) and in terms of time (with regard to old issues, tradition and history). Reflection on the making of art is placed outside academia and the research centres, and the lectures will be given by both theorists and practising artists (with the latter being in the majority). It is the makers who will reflect on art as a way of making things, on art as praxis. The temporal fold indicated in the title of the lecture series suggests a desire to look for new ways to pose, and perhaps to make relevant, a set of issues that has been over-explored, and concepts that form an integral part of the very infrastructure of the regime of identification of art – but in a new way. This is a desire to see the possible future of art, but without making the old gesture of breaking with the tradition in order to be absolutely new. In other words, the lecture series will be about making art in the present, or as I would phrase it, making art in the present tense. My own question at the beginning of the series was: would speaking from such a complex place of awareness of positioning be possible?

Organized by a group of curators and art professionals (two curators, a choreographer, the director of a master of fine art programme and a lecturer in an art theory programme), The Old Brand New did not reproduce the format of an academic lecture, which normally presents current research done by a specialist in a particular field. The physical location – the Stadsschouwburg, seen by some as an overpowering setting – worked quite well for me, because it highlighted the fact that each of these talks is in a sense a performance. It also made more visible the positioning of the separate lectures with regard to a set of concepts. Some of these concepts already have a well-established status within a more traditional field of aesthetics (beauty, virtuosity), and others have a more recent history, but are beginning to function in a normative way. Paradoxically, criticality and even subversion have become concepts with a quasi-normative status. The invitation of the organizers was, in fact, an invitation to the art practitioners to re-appropriate this vocabulary used to frame and analyse art, and to employ it on their own terms.

The invited speakers were a mix of artists from various fields (including a choreographer, a painter, a dramaturge, a curator and a writer) and theorists who in many cases had

collaborated with artists (such as Marina Gržinić, Clémentine Deliss and others). In other words, professionals who are developing their practice and projects at the present moment. I imagine that what the organizers wanted was to represent – and in a sense, to put on stage – the current debate *within* artistic practice, while suspending the distanced and more dispassionate, objective view *on* art when it happens in a more academic setting (symptomatic in this respect was the absence of an art historian). In addition to this, I imagine they wanted to give an overview of what work is being produced at the present moment, what sets of issues are considered to be crucial, and to share and discuss their sense of urgency – while at the same time not separating this debate from the recent or slightly more distant past by proposing to revisit concepts that already have a history, have been valorized and are functioning in a normative way, or are being criticized and revolted against.

For me these were occasions to hear artists and theorists discuss their own work outside the academic framework (which is sometimes too regulated), and more importantly, to hear a very current re-evaluation of a set of concepts by the artists themselves. I must admit to a healthy dose of scepticism when it comes to talks by artists, which tend to be unstructured, and to talks by theorists, which tend to spill over the subject and become too hermetic for a wider audience. This was not the case, or happened only rarely, as each of the evenings featured both a theorist and an artist, which made for a good balance as well as a good “aftertalk”. In retrospect, I realize that for me the best talks were the ones given by practising artists. I was impressed by the way some of them articulated the current urgent issues, such as the need for slowing down the pace of the flow of images, for re-evaluating their status, for redefining the materiality of objects and gestures, and for looking at the past (of art, images and strategies, as well as rereading history).

The separate lectures were very well attended, especially if one keeps in mind that it is challenging to fill a space as big as the Stadsschouwburg. The audience was quite mixed: art students, artists and art professionals, as well as those who were there out of a more general interest. Academics were not as well represented as they were, for instance, at the lecture series *Now is the Time* organized by the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and SMBA (Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam); the lecture series at the UvA was, however, very well attended by artists and art students. Why there is such interest in attending lectures by artists and curators and why the academic audience is more difficult to attract to events that happen outside the university context remain open questions. There were many students in The Old Brand New audience, especially students from art academies. In this respect, the organizers successfully addressed a significant need for lectures and theoretical reflection on art (especially current art), which is to some extent lacking in art education curricula. The discussions during the aftertalks demonstrated the audience’s interest and the relevance of the subjects explored, although I wish the audience had been given more time to ask their questions.

### **The Old New – Revisited**

Alongside the spatial positioning of the lecture series (which is related to the positioning in a professional context), through a semantic paradox, the title *The Old Brand New* indicates the temporal dimension of the positioning of the lectures. For me, the two keywords “old” and “new” invoke two lines of thinking. One is associated with the vocabulary of temporality: old, new, past, present, future, anachronism, simultaneity, co-presence. The other is associated with concepts such as novelty, originality, progress and absolute creation as well as origin, past, history and authenticity. On the side of the organizers, there was an awareness that using the old concept of the new – a distinctly modernist concept with specific connotations – means a re-examining, a coming back to the new. A repetition, in other words, and repetition as such goes against the grain of novelty.

Generally speaking, making art has always been viewed as a generative practice, producing new “things” and ideas. As Rosalind Krauss remarked, within art as a practice, any figure considered to be a means of achieving the entirely new – claims such as a radical break with tradition, or the grid as a zero point in painting – can only be repeated. In other words, the new is a concept with a paradoxical condition, or as she put it, a “myth”. The counterpart to this concept of myth is the old as signifying tradition, canon and value, concepts that are the target of much criticism. But the old also signifies “past”. This past, I would add, is equally an object of invention, an imagined past that is constantly revisited, an entirely new past. As Jacques Rancière put it, the current, aesthetic regime of art “incessantly restages the past”. I would say that the new is the production of the myth of the past, its mythification.

We should make a distinction between the new as the other side of a tradition, and the new as another reading of a tradition. The very title *The Old Brand New* makes a statement about the paradoxical condition of using the word new both as a noun and as an adjective. Such a formulation also questions the logic of the “post-” in the sense that its identify is not based on the closure of a previous regime, but instead tries to find the newness, to revisit the old concept of the new: an ambitious enterprise of revisiting concepts with history, revisiting myths. As interested as I was in the outcome, I was asking myself whether it is possible to articulate an answer at all. For we all feel our own situation is characterized by a mixture of continual paralysis and a feeling of tremendous potential and opportunities for producing images, gestures, performances and texts.

An intriguing combination of central themes was selected for the lectures: virtuosity, idealism, centre, beauty, knowledge and subversion. Included are concepts key to a romanticist-modernist constellation, and a later moment associated with post-modern engagement with and a critique of the tradition. This gave the lecture series a broad focus, and demonstrated a clear interest in revisiting both old and new concepts. Perhaps the implicit rhetoric of this selection was the desire to find relevance in concepts and issues that are rejected, and likewise to examine the very gesture of criticism and its current precision and relevance.

The invited speakers addressed the question of the new in a variety of ways. It is possible, however, to discern a tendency, and several points common to the various lectures. Most speakers articulated the need for alternatives to the current practices and institutional contexts, but also problematized the very issue of the necessity of alternatives. There was a shared awareness of a need for repositioning with regard to the past (including the recent past), and that this manoeuvre has a complex topology. There are entities – the past, the tradition, the centre, the previous new, and so forth – which evidently exhaust themselves, but are also part of our condition. Although we want to differentiate ourselves from them, we are aware that absolute separation is impossible, or is in fact repetition of the very gesture of differentiation. Then, thinking in terms of the old new, the new centre and the new idealism is in fact an act of self-rereading. Nearly every speaker remarked on the need to relate to the past in a new way, and on the need to use a vocabulary different from the one of self-constitution, or self-creation of the modernist myth. In many cases they focused on concepts that invert, or indeed subvert, their traditional counterpart: prelusive knowledge (Deliss), beauty in the monstrous (Foerster and Warner), the post-apocalyptic old new (Hebdige), an image that says “beware of the image” (The Otolith Group). In other words, the speakers articulated a vocabulary that obstinately resists that of origin, centre, originality, genius and so on – not as a negation that paralyzes, but as an opening for future possibilities. Another issue that emerged in almost all of the talks was the need for art to be a critical medium in terms of problematizing its own condition. If it is to be invested with hope for change, or considered to have political potential, it has to be more precise, slow down the frenzied flow of images (in contrast with the modernist emphasis on speed and progress), and think about possible futures and the implications of our activities now.

### **The Old New – Multiple Perspectives**

The first evening of lectures in the series – “New Subversion” – addressed the question of criticality, and the terms on which art can be critical today, now that various subversive strategies have been incorporated into the mainstream. This question is almost impossible to answer. Yet every particular historical moment and social circumstance articulates its own specific need for and possibility of subversive gestures. Marina Gržinić’s reflection on the way neoliberal capitalism penetrates into every realm of life (including that of art) and transforms it into capital provided a provocative invitation to reconsider everyone’s position, yours and mine, in a system that sustains itself precisely by incorporating its critique. Michael Uwemedimo’s lecture offered a more optimistic counterpoint. He pointed out that neoliberal capitalism fails to function according to its own terms, subverting itself, and that it is possible to articulate genuinely critical gestures from within the system. Joep van Lieshout presented the project “Slave City” – a dystopian vision of an ultimately self-sustainable structure, with no waste, a hyper-rationalized version of society that is claustrophobic and fascist in its mode of managing human life. Bitterly cynical, the project demonstrated that perhaps one possible

form of subversion would be to generate a shock effect by amplifying aspects of reality we already share.

Art has always been a field that provides knowledge of the world, yet in a manner quite different from that of science. The lectures included in “New Knowledge” provided two different perspectives. Bracha Ettinger combines at least three figures in one – psychoanalyst, theorist and artist. In a somewhat opaque way, her lecture generated a labyrinthine discourse that linked, but also blurred, the borders of the more traditional psychoanalytic questions with regard to the theory of culture and art. Art becomes a field of crystallizing knowledge generated through feeling, and psychoanalysis a field of articulating the aesthetic dream of a form of subjectivity that is poetic and ethical at the same time. Clémentine Deliss’s lecture was a statement for developing a new model of knowledge at the intersection of curatorial, research and collaborative practice (for me personally, a highlight in the lecture series). She articulated the urgency of reconsidering the study collection: something that is traditionally part of a university and which has been somewhat forgotten, but which preserves an enormous accumulation of knowledge. She called for returning there with an entirely different model of representation in order to uncover the enormous potential of these forgotten objects. The study collection, or the ethnographic museum, can become places of anarchic thinking, where the dislocation of the object from its context (the condition of ethnographic research and collecting in a broader sense) can be transformed into a generative device. She also called for redefining the institution of the museum and the position of the viewer, who should be offered the space to become a researcher in her own right during the very act of viewing.

The following evening’s programme included lectures on “New Virtuosity”. Virtuosity is not an easy issue to discuss following the valorization of the concept of deskilling in twentieth-century art. Yet, during one of the most interesting evenings in the series, a choreographer and a painter confronted and explored this issue in two separate lectures. In my view, Luc Tuymans demonstrated a virtuosic awareness of the question of the image at the present moment. It is rare to hear an artist speak about his practice like a theorist. His method of working with appropriated or existing images articulated an analysis of the very infrastructure of the medium of painting. One especially important point was the call for precision in our efforts to understand reality through the image in situations where images are becoming increasingly complex and confront us with increasing velocity. He demonstrated that an analytic and distanced approach to the image can allow its ambiguity and multiple layers to become visible. According to Tuymans, the new virtuosity means liberating the image from the hand and delegating it to the precise eye of the painter, analyst of images. Boris Charmatz presented – or rather performed – a reflection on the materiality of the gesture in dance. Like Tuymans, he located virtuosity in the precision of approaching the minimal conditions of the medium. In his practice, appropriation and reference to past moments in the history of dance proved to be the means of producing new works. He presented the idea of creating a museum of movement, which implies completely rethinking the status of public and

institutional dance spaces, as well as the very institution of the museum as a “container” of artefacts. “Museum” in this case would not be a fixed frame to validate, for collecting different pieces. Charmatz suggested that the space of the viewer’s body should become the museum. This idea is similar to Deliss’s proposal for rethinking the status of the ethnographic collection. Here as well, I see an emerging desire to define the viewer as a researcher, as a participant in the thing she is seeing, by taking the collection off its pedestal.

A subsequent evening in the series dealt with the “New Centre”. The process of globalization and the accumulation of critical knowledge call into question the current understanding of centre at geopolitical, cultural and economic levels. In another sense, problematizing the concept of centre implies a desire for becoming aware of where you are positioned, a desire for self-revisiting. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan argued for translating the centredness on the self (the self-reflexive mode) into transitivity and knowledge of the other; for developing a different epistemology of the new centre, which simultaneously renders visible the old framework of the not-so-distant past (colonialism, racism and sexism) and allows for a co-presence of the past and the present; and for a decentring futurity. André Lepecki’s lecture provided a further reflection on this possibility for a new encounter with the other in the field of dance. His main statement was that new centres are coming into being, in a sense behind our backs. They challenge us to look over our shoulders, thus defining a different mode of frontality. He traced a line of development within dance that decentres the discipline by reducing the movement of the dancer, and by replacing her presence on stage with objects. Such an idea challenges us to rethink terms like intersubjectivity, or indeed modes of spectatorship. Placing an object on stage redefines, and in fact inverts, the well-known notions of “objecthood” and “theatricality” as articulated by Michael Fried. Lepecki argued that such re-centring, which focuses on the object in performative practices, has political implications as well.

In “New Idealism”, the lectures posed a crucial question: is it possible to think of a new idealism, and if so in what terms, especially at the current, post-ideological, moment. Would it be possible to speak of decentred idealism, in the sense of being detached from one unifying ideology? Or of many idealisms? And what role would the artist play? Both Marianne van Kerkhoven and The Otolith Group were sceptical with regard to new notions of idealism. They emphasized the need for the artist to be a disillusioned figure who generates more questions than utopias. Van Kerkhoven pointed out that at the present moment even the forms of resistance are integrated into the system, and that in a sense it is impossible to step outside of this. There is a paradoxical feeling of pessimism in the developed countries, whose societies live in an open world without borders, with wealth and rapid means of communication. In a way similar to Tuymans, she pointed out that artists today try to counteract that speed, slow down the image, and make its ambiguity and the different layers of meaning co-present there more visible. In this sense, the new idealism would be a true commitment to art, to do it and to do it well, with precision and integrity. The lecture by The Otolith Group posed questions crucial to the ethical and political aspects of the image,

especially for the present day. They showed how over-mediation and visual overproduction in itself does not contribute to changing a situation, but transforms the trauma into a spectacle to which we gradually become desensitized. They presented the film *Nervus Rerum*, which focused on the reality of the ongoing trauma of the Palestinian population in the Jenin refugee camp. The precision of questioning the conditions of representation in the film has a greater relevance than the reality it dealt with. For The Otolith Group, idealism is not to be found in new ideologies, but in questioning the very infrastructure of the image and its articulation – in their words, “to question within the image what the expectations of an image are”.

The lectures of “New Beauty” addressed a concept with a long history, both valorized and contested, and considered to have lost its relevance. Marina Warner demonstrated that the beautiful is far from being a purely aesthetic concept, or an object of a disinterested judgment. It is a critical concept, and an ethical and political issue. The distinct interest in the monstrous and the formless, in metamorphosis and the organic shown by women artists belonging to several different generations is in fact a revolt against the culturally privileged, rigid version of this concept. The feminine poetics of metamorphosis is an insistence that beauty is a process of organic growth and change that eludes the fixity of the form. The issue of the beautiful approached from this perspective posed the question of the changing character of our definitions of the human, and of the limits of willed scientific mutations of the body. For Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, too, beauty is something unstable and fugitive that has nothing to do with perfection and eternity. Her vision of a possible dystopian future found beauty in the new ruin, and both she and Warner found hope in the organic and in the resistance of life.

The lecture series closed with its central question, perhaps the most difficult and most open one: “What is New?” Dick Hebdige’s answer, or rather performative confrontation with the concept of the new, focused on a subculture that articulated a complete disenchantment with the future, and whose incredible creativity is based on the appropriation and inversion of icons, clichés of mainstream culture and apocalyptic awareness: No Future! Punk and post-punk’s model of novelty is the (repetitive) explosion, the continuous end of it all. Hebdige articulated what I would call a post-apocalyptic new, a new after the end. Keith Sawyer demonstrated how novelty is the outcome of a group rather than an individual process, and always involves the reworking of existing structures and forms of stability. His lecture provided a concluding point that reiterated the central issue raised in the separate lectures: to create novelty is to revisit existing concepts, images and gestures.

Writing an overview of a lecture series is an experience of returning to thoughts and experiences I had in the past, not as a result of reading a text with the awareness that I could read it again, but from working with memories – changing entities that are always busy with their own revisiting. In both the individual lectures and the programme text, *The Old Brand New* indicated the necessity of self-rereading, and of reconsidering our own place within an ever-changing, flexible structure, which is what we call culture, or art.