

What Our Present Is: Presence of mind in cultural production¹

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The present, currently the 4th of August, 2012. The present is being. The present is time. Each letter forms a word, each sentence forms a statement. Every choice and every action moves from moment to moment until it becomes the past or it becomes the future. In contemporary Buddhist thinking, awareness of the present can be elevated when a person breaks away from their comfort zone and enters into foreign situations. By breaking away from a daily routine, an activity that subsumes time, a person can begin to fully observe their experience of life, rather than it merely functioning as a construct: time. This has been my personal experience with the present, living in Berlin for three months of summer, disassociated from my familiar place, culture, and language. Yet it has been interrupted by other types of presence, that of things beyond my control, death and near-misses, events that mark moments in life. Flying between Berlin, Los Angeles, and Miami, the present is more present than ever. If not merely by proximity to mortality and the suspended reality of international flights, the value of life and artistic engagement with the society has come into unobstructed purview.

Our human presence at the current moment is full of conflict and tumult, but this is not an unfamiliar state of humanity. Each decade bears its weight in political and social economy by way of the impact felt on its people. It does not seem premature to categorize 2012 as a year in a decade of perilous swings above the economic and political abyss. It is significant to mention the unrest and subsequent movements that are slowly stimulating change across the globe and these

are significant for the reason that they are led by the populous; humans with an awareness of their right to exist and participate in their reality. This desire to participate in social exchange, dare I call it activism, is certainly gaining momentum in other areas. The mobilization of voices and awareness of our present has not felt so active, at least not in my lifetime.

In the field of artistic and cultural production there is a reawakening to the critique of art's complex institutional and commercial structures.² Cultural producers—historians, critics, artists, and writers, are embracing a more critical mind, taking the position to address the systematic silencing of voices that is perpetuated by capitalism. In an interview recorded late in his life, philosopher Michel Foucault described this very strategy in relation to his navigation of diverse issues within his work. Highlighting the methodology of human relations with proximity to history, Foucault lays out an exacting prompt:

The game is to try to detect those things which have not yet been talked about, those things that, at the present time, introduce, show, give some more or less vague indications of the fragility of our system of thought, in our way of reflecting, in our practices.³

What Foucault suggests is that we reflect on our present in relation to history in order to redefine and reinterpret the fundamental structures that bind us. He locates discourse in a type of social awareness that stimulates progress from within, be it across disciplinary contexts or situated within and between subjects. In other words, to define our present is to unpack its contents and expose the structures that bind us unknowingly. One must find the concrete means to address the concerns of the present for an emancipation of knowledge to occur.

Artists are in a unique position in that they can respond to and perform this idea in the social realm with an immediacy that few other fields allow. The role that art plays in society is determined by its ability to activate the present, to develop critical artistic practices that engage

with the social and political contexts of our world. Art historian Alexander Alberro recently iterated a similar sentiment in considering art's role in society, stating that critical artistic practice should trouble the habits of understanding that are patently acceptable in cultural terms.⁴ The work of artists is to comment on and enlighten our present through multifaceted and hybrid artistic strategies. As noted by Alberro, "artworks are meaningful only when seen in relationship to a wider network of beliefs and practices, economies and exchanges."⁵ Whether it is by touch, through language, performative actions, or by revealing the fragility of forms, artists can manifest the awareness of their individual presence in relation to the discourse of social culture.

I will close with another example of the sentiment of critical methodology from a speech by the author Haruki Murikami given in the aftermath of the Fukushima power plant disaster in Japan:

We, professional writers, who are versed in the use of words, also have a positive contribution to make toward this large-scale collective mission. We must connect new ethics and values to new words, thereby creating and building new, vibrant stories. We will then be able to share these stories. They will have a rhythm that can encourage people, just like the songs which villagers sing while planting their seeds. We rebuilt Japan, which had been completely destroyed by World War II. We must now return to this same starting point once again.⁶

To bring forth an awareness of the present, we must be willing to break down habitual or preconceived notions of our history and of our world. In the end, the purpose is to look, to listen, to pick up the pen, the brush, or whatever your tool of preference and participate in this moment, to engage with all its conflicts and contradictions, because the present is fleeting, just like our existence.

¹ The title “What our present is” is borrowed from a collection of interviews with Michel Foucault originally published by Semiotext(e). Michel Foucault, “What our present is?” *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston, New York: Semiotext(e), 1989 and 1996: 407–415.

² One notable critical text written this year was a contribution to the Whitney Biennial 2012 by artist Andrea Fraser. See Andrea Fraser, “No Place Like Home,” in Sussman, Elizabeth and Jay Sanders, *Whitney Biennial 2012*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, Cambridge: Yale University Press, 2012: 29–33.

³ Foucault, “What our present is?,” 411.

⁴ Alexander Alberro. “Life Models.” *Frieze* 148 (June July August 2012): 154–159.

⁵ Alberro, “Life Models,” 159.

⁶ Haruki Murakami. “As an Unrealistic Dreamer.” Cataluñya International Prize Speech, 10 June 2011. <http://www.senrinomichi.com/?p=2541>, Accessed 3 August 2012.