

THE FORM AND THE CONTENT

Luis Camnitzer

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(edited)

I believe that I was seventeen years old, in my second year in art school, when I asked my sculpture professor, what was more important, the form or the content. Without any hesitation, he answered, "The form, of course." The irony of the situation was that the conversation took place while I was attempting to render in clay a realistic version of the head of a life model, and while he—a follower of the French sculptor Despiau—criticized my work in terms of resemblance, something that I was systematically eluding.

What was interesting about the conversation was that we both took for granted that form and content are separate, and act as opposing terms. There was something surprising about my professor's response, and, also, the absence of my challenge. If Despiau's work had any merit, it lay precisely in the integration of form and content. Though the work of both artists was bland, form and content were complementary.

A decade later, I arrived to the conclusion that at the moment an artist holds a paintbrush—particularly an artist in my condition, that is, a member of the periphery—, he or she is fated to produce colonial art. Without realizing, I had eliminated the form/content dichotomy by declaring that everything would be about content. In certain ways, this was a superficial conclusion, since I hadn't even considered syncretism as a form of resistance. The role of attributed and implied meanings to forms imported from elsewhere is a process typical for colonized cultures, utilized to maintain collective mental well-being. By becoming aware of this process, I once again separated form from content. And this took me back to the beginning, but this time, a third element was introduced to the quandary: purpose. In a simplistic way, one could say that politicized artists use indignation and utopia purposefully. Formalist artists, however, leave these issues aside.

The complexity of this form/content interaction was revealed to me recently, and quite memorably, in an act of George W. Bush. This revelation happens nearly half a century after the conversation with my professor, and, of course, in this case, on a political rather than an artistic setting. But this latter point doesn't really matter, as my generation doesn't find much difference between the political and the artistic. And so, here were the elements to pursue my analysis.

Some months ago, Bush made a presentation to journalists where he tried to express his indignation in regards to the deaths caused by Palestinian militant suicide attacks. The purpose and content of his performance—indignation—was clear, correct and to be agreed with, as is any case that involves the death of any innocent beings. But the act became somewhat messy due to the form employed. Bush chose a golf game to make his remarks. He responded to the questions posed by journalists, who were following him on the turf and, after expressing his anger he invited them to observe his stroke. In itself, the backdrop or situation that Bush chose for his address was quite harmless. It is said that golf is good for one's health and therefore it showed the human side of the President of the U.S.A.; that he is accessible; and that he doesn't mind sharing a private activity with the

public. But it was the combination of things that didn't quite work. For example, the indignation expressed while he was eying the golf ball on the grass could lead to two possible, not very positive, conclusions: One is that Bush is not a serious golf player, as indignation would have distracted him and ruin his game. The other is that his indignation is but a superficial gesture, for such a feeling would have otherwise interfered with his play. Either of these conclusions would hamper any kind of empathy by the public. By combining two incompatible activities, namely, that of mourning and amusement, Bush's address in the golf course was of bad taste and tactlessness.

My second reaction was to feel the extraordinarily insensitivity of the President. He seemed incapable to perceive the significance and weight of the deaths of innocent victims. The golf course had become a formal wrapper of sorts, an aesthetic bearer of the message. And, finally, I thought about profanation.

I realized that by tradition and education, we tend to simplify messages produced outside of the art field and limit their analysis to content. The "propriety" of the presentation, its good manners, recede to a second plane. In that simplified communication we lose, among other things, sensitivity toward something like the profane—a concept we tend to confine to the areas concerning religion.

The profane may also occur when content is presented with an inaccurate formal design, when its form of packaging is inappropriate. For those who use the term "victim's art," this is what ultimately leads them to dismiss art that is engaged with political cause. They feel that introducing political or ethical issues constitutes the profaning of art. I am no specialist in religious affairs, but I would presume that within religion a profaning takes place as much with sexual acts executed in a church (it recently happened in St. Patrick's Cathedral under the sponsorship of a commercial radio station)¹ as it does with a mass celebrated in an active whorehouse. Profanation is not integral to place or content. It is a concept that emerges from a failed relation between form and content.

It would be simple to reduce profanation to a mere form/content discrepancy. But the power of religious indignation in terms of profanation does not rest on the clarity of a schematic relation, but on its imprecision. The church or whorehouse—or in our case, the golf course—are not just a wrapper for the events, they have (and are) their own content. There really is no form without content (or content without form), there is always a sub-text or an ideological intent that takes away neutrality from form and thus makes it part of a con-text. The content of Bush's utterances referred to an act of faith: a respect for human life. The golf course, however, contextualized the act with triviality. And in that context, the game itself could be interpreted as profaning the memory of the victims of terrorism. In a situation other, one that would exclude quasi-religious elements or moral principles, one would speak of this matter in terms of impertinence—the secular version of profanity.

Those were my first thoughts; my initial reaction.

¹ Lynette Holloway, "A Contrite and Gentler Brand of Shock Radio, for Now," *The New York Times*, p. C7, 9.16.2002

In giving more thought to all of this, I realized that my understanding was bound by the traditional dichotomy of form/content. If I were to include the possibility of purpose, the same spectacle could be seen—unexpectedly—as a politically extraordinary and brilliant gambit. That is, by interposing the golf course with his heartfelt words, Bush positioned violence in such a distance that it made it foreign and alien.

His situation was manifestly “exploiting the alienating circumstances of others” (as somebody criticized political art in a recent issue of *Artforum*), not because of ineptness or lack of sensitivity, but as an example of political refinement. As proof of my interpretation I would say that Bush would have never afforded the same luxury to express his indignation about the demolition of the Twin Towers, or to express condolences to the relatives of its victims. These were cases that, because of their local breadth, carry with them a much bigger religious dimension and thus require the conveyance of total immediacy in order to maintain Bush’s political survival.

But Bush’s gambit went further. It also served to (perhaps) project his enormous intellectual capacity and his efficiency in holding the reign of the country. According to this line of thinking, Bush is presented as a leader able to handle enormously complex international affairs practically without paying attention—he has more than sufficient mental time and space to ogle the golf ball. Thus, by proposing both a distance of violence and a quality of leadership, the content of the operation—indignation—was in fact used as a form that communicated deeper contents.

Bush’s risk with this telescopic and ambiguous structure is that the possible intelligence of the setup only becomes apparent in case of success; that is, with the purpose achieved. The definition of success here is based on public acceptance. If the public would react with indignation confronted with something that could be understood as a lack of respect toward the life of foreigners, the conversation on the golf course would be seen as stupid and tasteless. In this particular case there seems to have been intelligence, since the public accepted it. One then talks of “presidential style” instead of stupidity, and the popularity ratings remain or even increase.

It is precisely at this point—the precision in touching the public—where the success of the work is defined; where it is determined if profanation took place; the merits and demerits of the operation. But the dual reading of Bush’s presentation also made me realize something else. In his setup there were cohabitating two contradictory notions. One could say that in his exchange with the press, the form—that physical context—and the content appear as clearly separate; treated distinctly and independently, but where the content has absolute primacy and its own reading.

Superficially, **what** Bush was saying mattered more than **how** or **where** he was saying it. By focusing on a telescopic construction of the fluid interrelation of form and content, one could also draw the conclusion that these are unified, that is impossible to define them autonomously, that there is no borderline between them.

It should be noted, however, that there is a contradiction, and it is not due to Bush’s manner of presentation—if we were discussing the scene as a work of art—but a consequence of how we observe it. The same piece (or scene) is simultaneously viewed

from the points of view of an artist and of a consumer. There is neither effort nor intention to differentiate these positions.

The first interpretation—separation of the **what**—takes place in Bush or the artist. There is a purpose, I choose the vehicle to express it, and the result is a testament to my power to do so. With typical arrogance: if the work is not understood, it's the public's fault. The second interpretation—the blurriness of the **how** and the **where**—happens during the consumption of the piece. If the purpose is clear and legible, it will invade the piece and determine its absorption as something coherent with that purpose. In other words, the public attempts to decode things to the extent possible. In terms of functionality, it is the second interpretation that becomes more important, which is the reason why the artist has to be clear to which public he or she is addressing.

The reason both interpretations can coexist is that we have been conditioned to accept an art piece as a terminal object. The responsibility of the artist ends with the production of the piece, and the responsibility of the public only starts at that point. If the public is the appropriate audience, there is a good chance that communication takes place and that the terminality of the piece is overlooked. The purpose then transcends the work.

By focusing on the purpose rather than on the relation between form and content, it becomes clear that, however limited, art is a way of exercising power. The artist is able to create something that didn't exist before; has the possibility of saying things that other people wouldn't; can move in a field where, in theory, there is practically no control and where there is absolute freedom. That is, the artist uses power to produce and present art. However, there is always the chance or danger of abuse in power. With the production of terminal objects, the artist feels relieved from any responsibility of the effects his or her work may have on the public. Thus, two processes evolve that do not necessarily link correctly. The potential power of the public is reduced to the interpretation and possession of the object. Beyond a boycott and refusal to buy, there is no possibility for dialogue. The process could be compared to a one-way corridor that opens from the artist toward the art object, without any access or freedom of circulation for anybody else.

Supposing that Bush's presentation was planned in a Machiavellian way, his piece only is completed once the public reads it in the expected way, thus fulfilling its purpose. In this case any profanation would be invisible or non-existent. Moreover, the idea of profanation would come from a scale of values alien to both the artist and the public. One could also say that by using Bush as an example it is me who introduces the concept of profanation, for it helps me discuss the issues of form and content in my own way. And this is true. I am doing this in bad faith, betting that my audience is sympathetic with my views and not with those of Bush and his public. Thus, as a work of art, Bush's piece doesn't work for my public, nor do mine for his.

In both cases, the corridor opens only in one direction. Both Bush and I talk, the public listens and, if we are lucky, we get approval. If we are not, we get booed. Either way, it is only approval or disapproval that can be expressed. Real power is not shared because we are both delivering terminal pieces. If we generalize this to a more complex and vast social interaction, we could say that the possibility of participatory democracy is totally ignored.

I believe that it is in how power is shared, if at all, that one finds the connection of art and ethics. Artists belonging to a democratic society demonstrate their free will creating, within a non-participatory process, objects that symbolize a concentration of power. At the expense of the possibility of liberation and empowerment, these objects remain as a testimony of the culture of liberal democracy. With an art defined by means of terminal objects we give priority to the inherent fetishist qualities of merchandise and to those benefited by it, while we diminish broader cultural dynamics. We let ourselves be trapped by the relation of form and content, without really being able to identify the purpose. We are vulnerable to manipulation.

While in traditional politics the intentions are always clear—power is there to be accumulated—in art matters things are more diffused. Maybe more than in the case of other disciplines, artistic merchandise affects culture at the same that it is cultural effect. Affecting culture changes attitudes and perceptions. Cultural effects can be analyzed, interpreted, and historicized. The division between both qualities allows for a choice in the stand the artist can take in regard to power. In the first case power is exercised and leaves a trail of documents. The cultural heritage is (at least) quantitatively augmented. In the second, power is shared; the ability to express is nurtured. Culture is energized.

To discuss these political issues in purely artistic terms, outside of a social context, only distracts us from any ethical work or an exploration of what may be ethical. It is therefore not anymore an issue of content vs. form, but one of content vs. content, only understood once the purpose is identified.² That is why just politicizing the narrative of content doesn't help. That is why art has to be conceived and used as a political instrument, not as political representation. Only then can we express our ethics instead of just illustrating them. The lesson was clear. Thank you President Bush.

² This point was made to me by Ana Tiscornia after reading a first draft.