

Irit Rogoff

'Smuggling' – An Embodied Criticality.

[08_2006]

This is a collaborative project between British theorist Simon Harvey who has developed its theoretical framework¹, Turkish video artist Ergin Cavusoglu who has been working as an artistic researcher into the practices of smuggling² and myself, who am operating both academically and curatorially. It is our effort, which we share with so many others at this moment, to understand our work as vehicles for the production of new subjects in the world. A recognition, again shared, that the subjects and the forms we have inherited neither accommodate the complex realities we are trying to live out, nor the ever more attenuated ways we have of thinking about them.

The term 'smuggling' here extends far beyond a series of adventurous gambits. It reflects the search for a practice that goes beyond conjunctives such as those that bring together 'art *and* politics' or 'theory *and* practice' or 'analysis *and* action'. In such a practice we aspire to experience the relations between the two as a form of embodiment which cannot be separated into their independent components. The notion of an 'embodied criticality' has much to do with my understanding of our shift away from critique and towards criticality, a shift that I would argue is essential for the actualisation of contemporary cultural practices.

Briefly, this is a shift away from a model that says that the manifest of culture must yield up some latent values and intentions through endless processes of investigation and uncovering.

Using literary and other texts, images and other forms of artistic practice, Critical Analysis attempts to turn the latent of hidden conditions and unacknowledged desires and power relations into a cultural manifest. Using the vast range of structuralist, post and post post-structuralist tools and models of analysis we have at our disposal, we have been able to unveil, unravel, expose and lay bare the hidden meanings of cultural circulation and the overt and covert interests that these serve. But there is a serious problem here, as there is an assumption that meaning is immanent, that it is always already there and precedes its uncovering.

Criticality

But as we have moved to engage increasingly with the performative nature of culture, with meaning that *takes place* as events unfold, we need to also move away from notions of immanent meanings that can be investigated, exposed and made obvious. For some time we thought that a teaching practice that exposes what lies beneath the manifest and a learning practice that entails a guided 'seeing through' things, was what was required. That it will somehow counter any inherent naiveté by helping students work against naturalised assumptions by being, what we conventionally termed in education, 'being critical'. While being able to exercise critical judgement is clearly important, it operates by providing a series of sign posts and warnings but does not actualise people's inherent and often intuitive notions of how to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem rather than by analysing it. This is true across education whether theoretical or practice oriented. It is equally true of experiencing art and other aspects of manifest culture. Within this shift we have had to be aware not only of the extreme limitations of putting work in 'context', or of the false isolation brought about by fields or disciplines, but we have also had to take on board the following;

- The fact that meaning is never produced in isolation or through isolating processes but rather through intricate webs of connectedness.
- The fact that participants, be they audiences, students or researchers, produce meaning not simply

¹ Simon Harvey "Smuggling – In Theory and In Practice", PH.D dissertation, London University 2004.

² Ergin Cavasuglo, XXXXX, Film and Video Umbrella, 2006

through the subjectivities they project on works whose circuits of meanings they complete, but that they produce meaning through relations with one another and through the temporality of the event of the exhibition, or the class, or the demonstration or the display.

- The fact that college courses, art works, thematic exhibitions, political publications and others forums dedicated to making culture manifest, or work to re-produce them into view, do not have immanent meanings but function as fields of possibilities for different audiences in different cultural circumstances and wildly divergent moods, to produce significances.

- And ultimately on the fact that in a reflective shift, from the analytical to the performative function of observation and of participation, we can agree that meaning is not excavated for, but rather, that it *takes place* in the present.

The latter exemplifies not just the dynamics of learning from, of looking at and of interacting with, works of art in exhibitions and in public spaces, but echoes also the modes by which we have inhabited the critical and the theoretical over the recent past . It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique, and to what I am calling at present criticality. That is that we have moved from criticism which is a form of finding fault and of exercising judgement according to a consensus of values, to critique which is examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to criticality which is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness. By this I mean that criticality while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames.

But what comes after the critical analysis of culture? What goes beyond the endless cataloguing of the hidden structures, the invisible powers and the numerous offences we have been preoccupied with for so long? Beyond the processes of marking and making visible those who have been included and those who have been excluded? Beyond being able to point our finger at the master narratives and at the dominant cartographies of the inherited cultural order? Beyond the celebration of emergent minority group identities, or the emphatic acknowledgement of someone else's suffering, as an achievement in and of itself?

What interests me in 'criticality' (and I am aware that this is a contingent and not entirely satisfactory term, not least because it is already occupied with various meanings I am not much interested in - but at the moment it is the best that I have at my disposal) is that it brings together that being studied and those doing the studying, in an indelible unity. Within what I am calling 'criticality' it is not possible to stand outside of the problematic and objectify it as a disinterested mode of learning. Criticality is then a recognition that we may be fully armed with theoretical knowledge, we may be capable of the most sophisticated modes of analysis but we nevertheless are also living out the very conditions we are trying to analyse and come to terms with. Therefore, criticality, is a state of duality in which one is at one and the same time, both empowered and disempowered, knowing and unknowing, thus giving a slightly different meaning to Hannah Arendt's notion of 'we, fellow sufferers'. So it would seem that criticality is in itself a mode of embodiment, a state from which one cannot exit or gain a critical distance but which rather marries our knowledge and our experience in ways that are not complimentary. Unlike 'wisdom' in which we supposedly learn from our experience, criticality is a state of profound frustration in which the knowledge and insights we have amassed do very little to alleviate the conditions we live through. So, you might well ask, what is the point then? Well , I would answer, the point of any form of critical, theoretical activity was never resolution but rather heightened awareness and the point of criticality is not to find an answer but rather to access a different mode of inhabitation. Philosophically we might say that it is a form of ontology that is being advocated, a 'living things out' which has a hugely transformative power as opposed to pronouncing on them. In the duration of this activity, in the actual inhabitation, a shift might occur that we generate through the modalities of that occupation rather than through a judgement upon it. That is what I am trying to intimate by 'embodied criticality'.

But there is an actual project to hand, an actual engagement with the practice of curating, an attempt to produce it as an embodied criticality. So first then, why invoke the notion of smuggling in relation to the curatorial?

Put simply, I would say that it tallies with several of our major concerns at present. Obviously, within a European context, the preoccupation with migration, with the sanctioned and unsanctioned movements of people and the huge political implications that this movement is producing in terms of reactions, hostilities, fears, policies, false economies etc. is so obvious that it does not really require much elucidating. Thinking of events in London and Paris over the past year and the frenzy of soul searching, denial, social policy and legal responses these elicited—thinking of these, we have to agree that this movement of people has resulted in far greater shifts than obvious demographics and that it is producing a necessary though thoroughly uninvited re-conceptualisation (albeit sometimes through negation) of notions of rights, citizenship and belonging. In which case I would argue that ‘Smuggling’ is an extremely potent model through which to track the flights of knowledge, of materials, of visibility and of partiality all of whose dynamic movements are essential for the conceptualisation of new cultural practices. In addition and equally important, I want to see if ‘smuggling’ with all of its necessary ‘shadow play’ can be an active, political mode of ‘being in the world’ to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty. If it can be the mode of artists, curators and of criticality?

At the heart of ‘smuggling’ is obviously contraband, its materiality and its facticity. And one of the questions that we need to ask is how do critical subjectivities intersect with contraband and what new forms of critical empowerment come out of this? In addition we would want to ask whether smuggling enables communication and if we can conceive and materialise a new theory of mobility out of it, one that links it more closely to the notions of ‘field work’, i.e. the work *of fields* rather than that which is located *in fields*, a term we are privileging at present as an understanding of our practice.

For some time now we have been differentiating between ‘curating’, the practice of putting on exhibitions and the various professional expertises it involves and ‘the curatorial’, the possibility of framing those activities through series of principles and possibilities. In the realm of ‘the curatorial’ we see various principles that might not be associated with displaying works of art; principles of the production of knowledge, of activism, of cultural circulations and translations that begin to shape and determine other forms by which arts can engage. In a sense ‘the curatorial’ is thought and critical thought at that, that does not rush to embody itself, does not rush to concretise itself, but allows us to stay with the questions until they point us in some direction we might have not been able to predict.

What I am trying to get at is a move away from intention, away from illustration, away from exemplification – a move that does not go in the direction of furnishing good, or not so good, ideas with a rich set of instances. Because the conventional work of curating that followed along these lines simply reproduced existing subjects in the world, be these ‘Conceptual Art 1966-1978’ or ‘The Fantasy of the Urban’, or ‘The Late Rembrandt’ or whatever other stylistic or social/historical subjects are in circulation, pre-packaged and ready for use. In addition there are some highly performative instances, instances that perform certain aspirations and inaugurate the subjects behind them into worlds they would like to inhabit; like those I have been seeing around Eastern Europe such as “Vilnius/ New York” or “Budapest/ New York” or elsewhere “Tokyo/ Paris” whose *raison d’être* has to do with a desire to enter and inhabit a particular world which they admire or to which they aspire. While seemingly very banal, I think these are actually more interesting than the pre-packaged ones, for they point to some unspeakable desire, and what people desire is always more interesting than what they consume, consume consciously and knowingly.

Moving to ‘the curatorial’ then, is an opportunity to ‘unbound’ the work from all of those categories and practices that limit its ability to explore that which we do not yet know or that which is not yet a subject in the world.

I have for some years been pre-occupied with geographies and territorialities, with boundaries and circulations always keeping in mind Jacques Derrida's belief that boundaries, whether they are narrow or expanded, do nothing more than establish the limits of the possible. Thus and perhaps most importantly for my purposes I have been trying to envisage what an 'unbounded', an unbounded space, an unbounded practice, an unbounded knowledge, might be. Trying to think these issues alongside the curatorial, I would like to introduce the notion of 'smuggling' as a model and subject for curatorial thought and activity. On the one hand it will allow me to set up a series of dynamics between curating, critical thinking and the actualisation of both emergent issues and emergent operating modes around us. On the other hand it is an actual project which a group of us are developing at the moment; theorist Simon Harvey, artist Ergin Caucuvuglu, myself and members of a new program at Goldsmiths called "Research Architecture", and it is one which we hope will become an actual exhibited project. In this instance we are talking about 'smuggling' as both our subject matter and also as our operating methodology. We are not trying to illustrate 'smuggling' through various works of art but to produce it as an operational device which allows us to bring our speculations concerning global circulations, cultural difference, translations, legitimacies, secure inhabitation, visibility and the queering of identity into play as they circle and hopefully produce 'smuggling' as a new subject in the world.

So what are the principles by which this notion of 'smuggling' operates?

Firstly it is a form of surreptitious transfer, of clandestine transfer from one realm into another. The passage of contraband from here to there is not sanctioned and does not have visible and available protocols to follow. Its workings embody a state of precariousness which is characteristic of many facets of our current lives.

Smuggling operates as a principle of movement, of fluidity and of dissemination that disregards boundaries. Within this movement the identity of the objects themselves are obscured, they are not visible, identifiable. They function very much like concepts and ideas that inhabit space in a quasi legitimate way. Ideas that are not really at home within a given structure of knowledge and thrive in the movement between things and do not settle into a legitimating frame or environment. The line of smuggling does not work to retrace the old lines of existing divisions – but glides along them. A performative disruption that does not produce itself as conflict. In Ergin Cavasuglo's video installation "Downward Straights" (2003) a large dark vessel glides along the waters of the Bosphorus in the middle of the night, the brilliant lights of Istanbul in the background emphasising its own blank darkness. The ship is a smuggler's vehicle, one of the many that wait for its chance in the night when the pilot boats that guide the bona fide vessels through the channel that connects the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara are not operating. Instead of the guidance of the experienced pilots, these ships navigate with a shared Citizen's Band radio channel in which they warn each other of the many obstacles that await in the dark. It is surprising to have smuggling presented to us as a collaborative enterprise, since it is most normally shown as the domain of unruly individuals. But what has really interested me in this evocation of a smuggling practice is how it does not breach a line, does not turn it into a 'border' in the classic sense, but traces a parallel economy, going over its lines again and again and in the process making them an inhabitation, expanding the line of division into an inhabited spatiality that someone else might also occupy, slip along until the opportune moments comes along to slip over.

As an exhibition practice this form of smuggling which traces and retraces the lines of its supposed boundaries of exclusion, allows the curatorial to become a cross-disciplinary field without any relation to a master discipline (art exhibitions enriched by contextual or other materials), to put entities in a relation of movement to one another.

In the latest Sarai reader *Sarai 05* there is a quite remarkable piece by Lawrence Liang entitled "Porous Legalities and Avenues of Participation"³. In it he produces a long quote from Raqs Media Collective who are part of Sarai concerning the role of networks and seepages which are performed by migrants, hackers, pirates, aliens and squatters. These people, says Raqs, travel with the histories

³ Lawrence Liang, "Porous Legalities and Avenues of Participation". Sarai Reader 2005, "Bare Acts".

of the networks they were part of and are equally able to perform the insistent, ubiquitous insider knowledge of today's world. "How does this network act and how does it make itself known in our consciousness? We like to think of this in terms of seepage. By seepage, we mean the action of many currents of fluid material leaching on to a stable structure, entering and spreading through it by way of pores. Until it becomes a part of the structure, both in terms of its surface and at the same time continues to act on its core, to gradually disaggregate its solidity. To crumble it over time with moisture. In a wider sense, seepage can be conceived as those acts that ooze through the pores of outer surfaces of structures into available pores within the structure, and result in a weakening of the structure itself. Initially the process is invisible, and then it slowly starts causing mould and settles into disfiguration – and this produces an anxiety about the strength and durability of the structure."

One of the most interesting things that 'smuggling' as a model allows us to do is rethink the relations between that which is in plain sight, that which is in partial sight and that which is invisible. Here we might think of the logic of street markets, of the jumble of things that are piled in them, in part legally obtained and in part less legally obtained. Objects whose journeys to their present location cannot be told in an overt and straight forward way – in England one euphemistically says that they might have 'fallen off the back of a Lorrie' to elegantly characterise their quasi legality. But where did they fall off, who pushed them off and who picked them up? What is so rich about the notion of 'smuggling' is that the entire relation to an origin is eroded and the notion of journey does not follow the logic of crossing barriers, borders, bodies of water but rather of sidling along with them seeking the opportune moment, the opportune breach in which to move to the other side. In that street market all these objects, their origins obscured, lie entangled in each other side by side, their journeys only partially visible, and they produce a new relation between themselves. What came in the back of a Lorrie from Afghanistan and at the bottom of a suitcase from Bangladesh and in the intestines of a human mule from Colombia, the pirated tapes and disks of western entertainment industries, all begin to develop another relationality to one another that could never be accommodated through nationally located cultures or conventional commodity circulations.

Recently being introduced to the dissemination patterns of the activist publication "Make World" I understood that their global movement in the suitcases and rucksacks of those who shared their values and aspirations, owed its logic and its exceptional effectiveness, to smuggling. Here, in the same way that smuggled contraband undermines inherited systems of value, it also demands an engagement with the law; to asking how is contraband implicated in systems of law, can these be put to flight, in fact in a broader sense it demands that we ask whether law is, by definition, bound to contrabanding?

We have in recent years spoken much and often of not wanting to set up conflictual and binary engagements, of not wanting to have a fight with the art academy in the name of a progressive or revolutionary practice, of not wanting to battle it out with the museum for greater accessibility (not least because this allows for 'populism' to gain an upper hand) or to waste time on battles between what is sanctioned 'inside' the art institution vs. what takes place more organically 'outside' within the public sphere. Instead we have opted for a 'looking away' or a 'looking aside' or a spatial appropriation, which lets us get on with what we need to do or to imagine without reiterating that which we oppose. In theoretical terms we have moved from Criticism, to critique to criticality, to the actual inhabitation of a condition in which we are deeply embedded as well as being critically conscious. 'Smuggling' exists in precisely such an illegitimate relation to a main event or a dominant economy without being in conflict with it and without producing a direct critical response to it. And it is through such a practice that less legitimate, less valued materials – materials such as tele-novelas and Bollywood movies shown far way from their original cultures and providing some identificatory text, some comfort for the global poor or the global displaced – are suddenly and unexpectedly allowed to address the big questions – questions of immigration, of the cross cultural, of how one culture infiltrates another. In some of Mike Nelson's installation works, in the prolonged passage between the room like spaces he sets up, we encounter small traces of the daily life of migrant communities within the great urban megalopolises. The wall calendar of some far off home country here, a prayer rug there, the occasional sign for travel, or money wiring or internet contact, the indications of a mini-cab office or some other occupation

which has the easy access to employment that so many migrants need. Here we begin to recognise that the traces are everywhere, that our daily urban environment is fully inhabited by them, that those who are not recent immigrants also inhabit the sign systems of displacement and can read them, are habituated to them, quite as well as they can, their familiar inherited ones. This is an act of smuggling, an embodied criticality acting outside structures of representation and objectification.

Here is Melek Ulugay, one of the heroines of Kutlug Ataman's "Women Who Wear Wigs"(1997) describing her time on the run from the police in Turkey, who thought she was a terrorist on the run , rather than a left wing sympathiser, courier, etc. which she actually was. Her journey, which lasted many years, and is described with a reflective self irony, included various disguises and pretences whose point it would seem, was never to mislead anyone.

I am quite convinced of looking like a peasant woman,
but I don't think I can fool the villagers. Because
Later, we went to Antep. We're hiding-out
in the house of a smuggler. He's smuggling
between Turkey and Syria. So we went to his house.
That first day there were about five of us
It was a house in the Armenian quarter of Antep
a house with a courtyard. It was actually the annex
to an old church and so, all the walls were covered with crosses.
Anyway, so we're there, having a cup of coffee each.
The smuggler asks, "How are you?" and
welcomes each one of us seperately,
as is the custom in this region.
Then, he looks at me, and says,
"Sister, you're in disguise, aren't you?"
I am shocked. I mean, as a smuggler,
he could not have better interpreted
and verbalized my appearance!
It was a very nice way of saying, "You're not a peasant!"
What I mean to say is, no matter how hard you try
to look like someone else, people always see, they always detect
the real person hiding behind".

What Melek Ulugay's hapless adventures smuggle into the public sphere is not goods, or subversive practices, or even ideological stances, as much as empathies and identifications and understandings of the immense political potential hidden within the small gestures of everyday politeness. Courteous smugglers, empathic prostitutes, beguiled students, knowing peasants populate her narrative as they come to inhabit 'the political' in a Turkey in turmoil without uttering a single political statement.

Spatially too 'smuggling' is rife with possibilities as it helps us to unthink those binaries of inside the museum and outside in public space, and as for all its purported secretiveness it embodies a state of 'unboundedness'. Working with 'Research Architecture' we envisage a project to design a containing space, one that echoes the containers in which things move around, and at the same time one that opens out to the world. Framing the exhibition in that duality of partial visibility which is the status of the smuggled; goods, people, ideas and concepts, - in its points of arrival.

In effect, smuggling produces subjects and objects and practices that exist in the realm of the 'untaxable'. And by this I mean a great deal more than that which escapes the regimes of levied tax. The 'untaxable' is a mode of eluding existing categories and being unable to operate with them and as such it is not a resistance but an embodied criticality. In its array of partial splits and internal incoherences, the 'untaxable' of smuggling provides the inhabitation of a category of refusal.

I hope that I've been able to point to some of the ways in which I think 'the curatorial' operates as hopefully, a mode of smuggling. Of how the subject matter and the operating modes dovetail one another, dance and swish their skirts around one another so that they never settle into illustration, never settle into containment and stasis. In smuggling we may have an actualised manifestation of a theory of 'partial knowledge' and of 'partial perception' we have long been looking for.