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Beyond the Critical Economy: Kathryn Bigelow from Art & Language to *Point Break*

*The administrators, dealers, critics, pundits etc. who
once seemed the neutral servants of art are now,
especially in New York, becoming its masters.*

....

*The bureaucracy will subsume even the most
persistent iconoclasm unless we begin to act on the
realization that its real source of control lies in our
very concept of our own 'private' individual selves.*

—Mel Ramsden 1975¹

The above observations bracket Mel Ramsden's essay "On Practice," published in 1975 in the first edition of *The Fox* by the New York contingent of Art & Language, an art collective originally founded in the UK. The essay laid down a central preoccupation for the group and a reason for its persistent reflections on the idea of "bureaucracy:" the inexorable rise of this "hydra-headed" "middle-ground of assessors and entrepreneurs."

More than simply a project to resist the commodification of the art object, Art & Language was a project to negate the division of labor within the art industry, which the focus on the commodity object only served to conceal. This division of labor had by that time congealed into an observable administrative apparatus, an ad hoc managerial class. While the problem of the commodification of the art object was indeed important, this was primarily because it ended in the commodification of the artist as a professionalized bureaucrat-entrepreneur, readily internalizing theoretical templates and valuations as yet another form of competency within a bureaucracy-marketplace. Rather than artists responding directly to the world and the work of other artists by producing their own artworks and using their own idiomatic language, the entire process was mediated. This mediation occurred between the market and spectacle on the one hand, and a kind of academic apparatus of valuation-through-critical-interpretation on the other—even or especially a valuation that hinged upon the rhetoric of liberation. Crucially, as Art & Language observed, these two poles were in fact the interlinked functions of a single rationalizing system.

¹ Mel Ramsden, "On Practice," *The Fox*, vol. 1 (1975), 66, 83.

The primary vector for this financial and theoretical rationalization of the artist's activities was the discourse of criticism as it was practiced in its professional capacity. The problem was largely a function of the inherently "objectivist" authority to interpret which was inextricably linked with the rationalizing valuation functions of the market. The act of critical interpretation was the very procedure by which art practice was rationalized into its critical-market value. The answer for Art & Language was to produce an art that *was* criticism and a theory that *was* practice by forming a body that could develop its own idiomatic language-as-practice—one that need not be mediated through the rationalizing discourse of the valuation apparatus. This practice produced a space in which to analyze not only the power stratifications of the art world, but also to consider the question of art's relevance within the broader repressive society from which these structures arose. Central to this project was the possibility to repurpose the functional embodiments of administration, and especially its depersonalized voice of authority as a medium. However, this necessitated that the members of Art & Language become their own administrative apparatus, an effort that they embarked upon with no shortage of ironic joy and all-too-real bureaucratic factionalism.

To the extent that Art & Language had at least theoretically merged art production and criticism, they were beset by a complex tension between theory and practice within their discourse. Indeed, the dichotomy itself seems to break down when applied to any of Art & Language's concrete activities. As a theory about "theory," was their criticism of the critical-market apparatus a "practice?" Is an attempt at a broader social engagement a form of practice that cuts through theoretical obfuscation, or merely the externalization of an internalized theory as to the "critical value" of such a practice? Is it even possible to discuss such topics without resorting to quasi-idealist abstractions? Questions such as these permeated their publications and published group discussions. Much of their practice-as-theory-as-practice consisted precisely in unraveling these complex configurations, which often broke down along transatlantic lines: while the New York contingent often pushed for a broader social engagement, the UK group insisted that social change was unlikely to result from any efforts within the art world.

Art & Language's critique was arguably responding to the continuing rise in the postwar years of what philosopher Herbert Marcuse had called "technological rationality:" an instrumentalizing mindset that accompanies a totalizing system of "rational" administration and production. In Marcuse's eyes, this mindset spurs the individual towards an unremitting standard of "productive performance" that is necessitated by the artificial scarcity ("surplus repression") of the market economy. In contrast to a highly rationalized and often repressive "civilization" that Freud had

described as a necessary evil to contain “man’s” destructive impulses and protect him from nature, and as opposed to the telos of rational progress through renunciation and therefore domination, Marcuse proposed the possibility of a non-repressive society, referring to Friedrich Schiller’s notion of the “aesthetic state:” “[Man] is free when the ‘reality loses its seriousness’ and when its necessity ‘becomes light’ [leicht]. ... In a genuinely humane civilization, the human existence will be play rather than toil and man will live in display rather than need. ... Such formulations would be irresponsible ‘aestheticism’ if the realm of play were one of ornament, luxury, holiday, in an otherwise repressive world. But here the aesthetic function is conceived as a principle governing the entire human existence, and it can only do so if it becomes ‘universal’.”² This new order would operate mainly through the play impulse to deprive the “laws of reason of their moral compulsion” and “reconcile them with the interest of the senses.”³ Western society had relegated this potential “freedom” of the aesthetic capacity to the sphere of art, and rather than allowing it to become a law unto itself, had separated it from the *rational* basis of the existing order. For Marcuse, this was the crucial division that supported the repressive character of the social structure.

Art for Marcuse thus possesses an iconoclastic potential through its appeal to the taboo “logic of gratification” against the dominant “logic of performance.” And herein lies the tenuous and paradoxical position of the “art world” as it has come to exist subsequent to Marcuse’s analysis: by the time of *Art & Language*’s observations on the emergence of a bureaucratic professional class within the art system, any attempt to expand art’s relevance from within the art world—to make it “universal”—in effect recolonizes and rationalizes social engagement back into the administrative system of valuation upon which the art world operates. This in turn reinforces the overall rational order, which is precisely the system that has placed art and aesthetics within a rarefied, “unreal” realm—the system that enforces this original separation and turns the art world itself into an apparatus. Rather than creating a rupture to the rationalizing framework of society, a “radical” artistic act in this context creates enhanced “critical value,” and by extension an increased valuation of its author’s competency and thus marketability as determined by the art system’s bureaucracy-marketplace.⁴ An act of exodus becomes the only plausible response to the endless reproduction of the performance principle and the logic of valuation within the aesthetic sphere.

² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 187–188.

³ *ibid.*, 182.

⁴ This bureaucracy-marketplace itself can arguably be viewed as a systematic and “rationally administered” variant of what Clement Greenberg had earlier referred to as the “umbilical cord of gold”—but one that in *Art & Language*’s analysis expressly included the role of the critic, historian, academic or administrator as a functional component, and indirect beneficiary, of its market dynamic.

Shortly before its acrimonious dissolution in 1976, the New York contingent of Art & Language produced one last publication, *Art–Language Vol. 3 No. 4*, subsuming the original title *The Fox* back under the broader moniker as the sign of the New York group’s reincorporation/dissolution. The issue was collectively authored by Michael Baldwin, Kathryn Bigelow (who had joined following the ouster of Joseph Kosuth earlier that year), Philip Pilkington, Mel Ramsden, and Mayo Thompson. Bigelow also acted as distributor for the publication, and as Art & Language’s last remaining New York contact during the New York group’s dispersal. This last publication began with a characteristic problematizing recap of recent events and discussions, with most of the remainder dedicated to a vitriolic polemic against “University Art,” the *October* journal, and semiologists as the embodiment par excellence of the managerial interpretation-bureaucrat. The issue ended with “Above Us the Waves (A Fascist Index),” a nine-page polemic combining an index of quotes and *détourned* photographs of military campaigns from the Second World War, and whose introduction read: “Fascist interpretation and the use of piping production in its fiefdom must only enjoy neighborly relations with the self-interpretations of the ‘producers’.” Quotes from Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Beuys among others were indexed to contemporary art periodicals including *The Fox* itself. Images included a Tommy Gunner standing guard in front of a sign that reads “Art and Social Purpose,” suggesting a captured installation. Other images made further reference to semiologists or depicted bombs labeled with ironic phrases such as “radical perspectives in the arts.” The index bore the disclaimer: “It works because most people can think of a better contemporary art bibliography.”⁵

As an ad hoc bureaucracy that pontificated on the problems of total administration via the internalization of critical discourse, Art & Language can now be recognized as one of the vanguards of that internalization. Despite or because of their trenchant position against the empty machinations of the critical complex, they are most widely acknowledged and critiqued within that very establishment for their own distinctively impenetrable and often theory-laden prose. These and other ironies of their situation were not lost on them: “This ironization was in part the ‘work’ of Art & Language” as core member Charles Harrison recalled in 2003.⁶ If any aspect of Art & Language can be taken as central, it would seem to be their obdurate insistence on the insurmountable, irreducible complexity of any situation, an insistence on the idea of *practice* in all of its vicissitudes.⁷ Irony or not, it is somehow fitting that, following their final publication, Bigelow would enroll in one such semiotics-laden

⁵ “Above Us the Waves (A Fascist Index),” *Art – Language*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1976).

⁶ Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 124.

⁷ This idea of practice would of course include the “practice” of “theory.”

“University Art” program, Columbia’s film school, not to produce artwork that is grounded in the science of signs but rather to begin her practice as a filmmaker.

Regarding her earlier endeavors and decision to exit the art field, Bigelow has said that she had become “dissatisfied with the art world—the fact that it requires a certain amount of knowledge to appreciate abstract material.”⁸ Despite the numerous points of contention within the rhetoric of New York Art & Language, a certain logical consistency nevertheless arose. In addition to Ramsden’s “On Practice,” an essay by Karl Beveridge in *Vol. 3 no. 4*, “A Forum on Artforum,” had pointed out how the impossibility and ridiculousness of the art world’s claims for art’s broader, transformative social relevance is already embodied in the term “art world”—in the distinction and separation, the illusion of freedom that the term implies: “A ‘free’ community in an authoritarian world. Angels in hell, no wonder we have nothing to say!”⁹ It is worth considering the possibility that in her disavowal of the art world and her subsequent career in mass entertainment, Bigelow represented in fact a culmination of this logic as practice.

In Bigelow’s first film, *The Set-Up*, a twenty-minute short made while she was still at Columbia, the tension between theory and practice—between a theoretical “deconstruction” and the violent physical obliteration of any intellectual capacity from which the former might arise—reached a kind of crisis point, which her later work would resolve largely on the side of violence. Many of the themes that were present within, for example, “Above Us the Waves (A Fascist Index)” were reconfigured into a curious mix: on a split screen, two men are beating each other senseless in a downtown alley to the narration of Marshall Blonsky and Sylvère Lotringer. On each of the two distinct levels of “practice” and “theory”—the vulgar and the rarefied—two men compete against each other, blunt physical force battling against the symbolic violence of a theory that could contain, explain, and diagnose it. Bigelow recounted later: “The piece ends with Sylvère talking about the fact that in the 1960s you think of the enemy as outside yourself, in other words a police officer, the government, the system, but that’s not really the case at all, fascism is very insidious, we reproduce it all the time.”¹⁰

What is striking about Bigelow’s films since *The Set-Up* has been their persistent focus on the material and subjective embodiment of systems of power, most often in the form of the State and the violence that it both contains and deploys. They center around the concrete instances of embodiment of apparatus configurations,

⁸ Andrew Hultkrans, “Reality Bytes” (interview with Hollywood director Kathryn Bigelow), *Artforum International*, November 1995.

⁹ Karl Beveridge, “A Forum on Artforum,” *The Fox*, vol. 1 (1975), 139.

¹⁰ Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 29.

the collision points where structural positions are enacted in real space. To look back on her career is to see a vision of the world, or at least of America, in which the grand constructions of the State, the law, the economy, the military in all of their interrelated forms are invisibly distant as such. What appear instead are collections of small, semi-autonomous, almost entirely male groups competing and cooperating to varying degrees while they enforce or resist their respective orders: the army units, police squadrons, submarine crews, biker gangs, bank robbers or bureau departments. While the films' narratives focus precisely on the individual figures of the front-line agents—not the architects of policy or theory, but its enforcers, generally in the bottom half of the managerial division of labor—they do so as an allegory of the process by which the “insidious fascism” evoked by Bigelow becomes internalized.

One particularly symptomatic if fleeting instance of this internalization takes place in Bigelow's first Hollywood film (1989). A rookie cop (played by Jamie Lee Curtis) is pursued by a psychotic stockbroker (Ron Silver). Early in the film, a close-up shows men in a chaotic row screaming frenetically and hysterically. We quickly recognize this tableau as the workings of the trading floor, and we see the psychopath among other men, shouting and gesticulating, summoning or exorcising an unseen force. Blending in almost perfectly with his surroundings, he appears quintessentially within his element: the irrational, insatiable id of *homo oeconomicus*, channeling its desires into a sustaining ritual that in its turn directs all facets of society—the core of “civilization.” He is nothing but the outward manifestation of his position, which is so thoroughly internalized that it takes the form of his innermost “authentic” emotion spilling out into the external world; his unbridled schizoid machinations perfectly correspond with his position as a medium of the market. Here we might recognize, in a new context, the tension between theory and practice that was implicit in Art & Language's project: theory, whether it arises in the hierarchical administrative sphere of authority or within the “oppositional” cultural sphere of a rationalized society, participates in an interconnected system that, regardless of intentions, administers, constrains and directs the performance of bodies and subject desires.

Similarly, the inherently conflictual relationship between the freedom of movement of the body—and with it, desire—and the mechanisms of administration constituted the central drama of Bigelow's 1991 film *Point Break*. The film tracks a conflicted FBI agent's infiltration of a band of surfer bank robbers who wear the masks of ex-presidents of the United States. The opening sequence is a montage of free-flowing athletic virtuosity set to a triumphalist score: surfer bank robber “Bodhi” careening in slow motion across cresting waves, FBI cadet “Johnny Utah” perfectly disposing of a series of moving targets on a rain-drenched shooting range. These graceful first five minutes of the film suddenly give way to a staccato piling on of every sign of alienation inside the FBI office work unit. Upon maneuvering

through an overwrought series of double-paned glass reception cubicles, slamming double door security chambers, admonishing buzzers and nonplussed administrative attendants, Utah meets his supervisor: “Day one in LA, welcome... You may well have been in the top two percent at Quantico, but quite frankly son, out here you have exactly zero hours in the field. You know nothing, in fact you know less than nothing,” the supervisor rattles off as if reading from a memorized orientation script before briskly walking down the hall. He continues to inquire about Utah’s eating habits and caffeine consumption while leading him to an open-plan office with dense and hurried activity, office workers brushing past from all directions as the camera zooms and swerves to keep up:

[Boss] This is us, Bank Robbery, and you are now in the bank robbery capital of the world.

[Utah] One thousand three hundred and twenty-two last year in LA County, up twenty-six percent from the year before.

[Boss] That’s correct. And we nailed over one thousand of them... Do you know how we nail the bad guys Utah? Do you know how we nail them? By crunching *data*. Good crime scene work, good lab work, and most importantly, good data-based analysis.¹¹

The overarching role of total administration and objectivist theories of management in relation to the arrangement of bodies is apparent from the outset. Utah veers jarringly from a rewarding, sublimating notion of work, as embodied in his training regimen, to the Bureau’s alienated workplace that enforces technological rationality within its own organization at least as extensively as it does on the outside. From the architecture to the camera work to the mechanistic tempo, the scene conveys a visceral sense of progressive physical constraint, affective dislocation, and functional hostility that is in heavy contrast to the graceful free movement of the opening credits.

Yet as the film progresses, what was suggested at the inception becomes verified: the emancipatory alternative to a society of alienation proposed by the surfer bank robbers appears as the piling up of so many emptied Hollywood clichés—a condition that is echoed in their donning of the empty masks of former presidents. Not unlike Art & Language’s simultaneous investment and emptying of the forms of rationalized administration, Bigelow stacks up hollowed and spent cultural tropes as bricolage materials with which to construct her onscreen worlds. Bodhi’s gang speaks in bumper sticker countercultural slogans with an eye to the trailer sound bite: “We’ve been screwing you for years so a few more seconds shouldn’t matter!” (Reagan); “Just implementing our personal plan of deregulation!;” and, more simply, “Rock and Roll!” (Nixon). And of course *Point Break* itself can be seen as an amalgam of

¹¹ Bigelow, Kathryn, *Point Break*, DVD (CBS Fox, 2000).

many filmic antecedents, including *Endless Summer*, the 1966 surf documentary, and *The Wild Bunch*, a 1969 bank robbery Western.¹²

This condition of ideological collapse is further evidenced late in the film when Bodhi explains his worldview to the captured infiltrator Utah. Bodhi offers a brief, impassioned exegesis along the lines of the Ex-Presidents fighting “the system” to demonstrate the possibility of another world to the “empty shells” of people stalled in their cars in LA traffic. By then, the unflappably Zen Bodhi has become a truly caricatural figure, turned overtly authoritarian, manipulative and unhinged. His promises of liberation or revolution are haunted by the specters of strongman messianism and a reactionary longing for pre-civilized apocalyptic chaos—another recurring theme in Bigelow’s films and a common cliché of Hollywood discourse.

Set to a queasily triumphalist score, Bodhi’s exhortation also registers the obvious limitations of a mass-cultural medium’s capacity to raise the consciousness of a mass movie-going audience. Within the flattening template of the Hollywood apparatus, the revolutionary rhetoric appears as a prepackaged mishmash of so many customizable alternative lifestyles coexisting within an equalizing marketplace. The rhetoric of resistance to the rationalizing order has already been rationalized and encapsulated as merely another emptied and circulation-ready narrative. Curiously however, even in this one-dimensional form—perhaps because Bigelow’s palpable focus on violence and the grace of unrestricted, “improvised” physical movement can appear to break through the *mise en abyme* of repurposed stereotypes—the film’s dynamic contrast between the figures of bureaucratic repression and bodily freedom once again conjures to mind the work of Marcuse and the earlier polemics of Art & Language.

The work and example of Art & Language tended to demonstrate how the art industry rationalizes knowledge, even and especially “critical” knowledge, as a competency and an extension of bodily performance. “Theory” or “critical discourse” as it functions within the art system is often bifurcated between offering an ineffectual narrative of liberation, on the one hand, and acting as the measure of the artist’s productive performance within a repressive valuation system, on the other. To the extent that it formed a micro-administrative apparatus that was framed by and functioned within the discourse of art, Art & Language was ambiguously both an apparatus and a representation of an apparatus, in a kind of facetious mirroring. Despite being linked

¹² Indeed the film almost appears to be self-consciously structured upon the telos of its own promotional trailer, bringing to mind Frederic Jameson’s observation that the film preview has superseded the feature-length film in a manner analogous to the latter’s historical encapsulation of its earlier, novelized cousin.

to the late 1960s conceptual art trend towards “dematerialization,” a term the group resisted as an oversimplification, Art & Language’s practice was in fact precisely focused on the materiality of the administrative apparatus. At times this focus verged on an ironic fetishism, as with their open infatuation with the hermeneutic functions of the arrangement of documents within a systematic archive, or their obsessive investigation of the structural and logical limits of discourse within its various—always material, historical—manifestations. Their project consistently produced and reframed a desubjectivized language of governance as the externalized material embodiment of the logic of the apparatus. Mel Ramsden had pointed to the “very concept of our own ‘private’ individual selves” as the crucial underpinning and obfuscation by which the “bureaucracy” functions, and Art & Language’s own project further challenged notions of the private individuality of the cultural producer and the illusions of freedom that they bolster.

Nevertheless, Art & Language’s project remained situated within the confines of the art world and intelligible only to those already inside this realm. The residual notion of the “private self”—albeit in the somewhat mutated form of collective authorship—continued to operate, since at its root it can be traced back to the very separation of the art world from mass culture and the broader social order. It is this apocryphal separation of the “art world” from the “public” that underlies the former’s peculiar critical-valuation economy, with all its attendant managerial divisions and legitimating structures. If the function of an apparatus, as once defined by Louis Althusser, is to reproduce an existing division of labor and a dominant array of power relations through that apparatus’ effects on, and indeed its constitution of, individual subjects, then Art & Language’s experiment with the bureaucratic apparatus as artistic medium had an ambiguous and limited status. While Art & Language were able to reflect upon and problematize the division of labor within the art system, they were unable to significantly change it from within its own frame. If one is to follow Marcuse, not only does this division of labor within the cultural sphere assure the continued reproduction of that sphere’s own particular power dynamic, but the reproduction of the structures of valuation and division within the “oppositional” cultural sphere perpetuates, at the same time that it relies upon, the separation and alienation of that sphere from the whole of society. This limits art’s potential to intervene in history, much less to become the basis for a radically different social order along the lines of the “aesthetic state.” The rationalization and separation of the oppositional sphere in the form of a critical/oppositional economy thus stands as the final and perverse victory of the order of technological rationality over this potential.

Seen from this perspective, the films of Kathryn Bigelow, even as ambiguously flattened templates, have extended the logic of Art & Language's project beyond its own structural limits into the field of mass culture. When Bigelow chose to exit the apparatus of the art world in favor of the Hollywood studio system—another administrative apparatus, to be sure, producing for its part vehicles of mass media interpellation—a thematic shift occurred: away from what in Art & Language had been a theoretical discourse and a focus on self-reflexive self-definition, and towards a focus on the physical, practical embodiments of systems of governance in the broader social realm. Bigelow the filmmaker has sustained the focus on materiality but shifted it further towards the embodiment and internalization of governing structures within individuals. This focus dovetails with the materiality of montage and the cinematic apparatus as it projects a narrative vision for the audience to internalize. As we have seen, Bigelow's narratives typically revolve around a conflicted subject caught between interpellating and enforcement on the one hand, and being interpellated and the subject of enforcement on the other—much like the position of the viewer, for whom this dream narrative becomes, via the cinematic experience, a reflection upon processes of identification and internalization at work in both the cinematic apparatus and the broader social field.

Perhaps an act of exodus must be a final act, measured by the level of indifference it is followed by and the absence of subsequent critical recapitalization. Yet we know that the valuation apparatus of the art world, not unlike that of the economy at large, functions through an ineluctable chain of associations that continually expands its own frame and its legitimacy through a metonymic game of inclusion. Even this essay functions to “valorize” Bigelow's endeavors from within the critical discourse of the art world, constructing a “narrative of exodus” based on her early and brief involvement with Art & Language. It might be then that the “value” of Bigelow's project lies not in successfully escaping such narratives, but in exacerbating the position of the cultural producer within a rationalized society—in complicating the question of agency almost to the point of negating it entirely.