Goodness Me: On Contemporary Art as Critique or Exemplification of a Goodness Regime

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I Writing, Showing, Doing

In his 2012 text “Writing and Indifference,” critic and curator Dieter Roelstraete suggests the emergence of a new trend in art writing that comes with “one clause only”:

Please feel free to write anything you want, as long you refrain from writing “about” the work. Indeed, the author is expressly asked, sometimes almost implored, to write “beside the point”: often a mere literary Spielerei will do ..., sometimes a dialogue or play may be considered fit, sometimes a broadly art-historical framing. Anything but a piece that seeks to engage, in varying degrees of directness—this in particular being the great new taboo—the work or the practice itself.

It’s hard for me to argue with Roelstraete’s delightfully angry prose. Especially since I myself have often engaged in such Spielereien. As a matter of fact, when Jumana Manna and Sille Storihle commissioned me to write this very piece, I responded with a fictional diary of my own. This essay is my second contribution, which came of the late realization that, sadly, the aesthetics of goodness is indeed tied to the politics of declared intentions. After all, the problem with any clear act of “being about” something or other is that it also “brings about” something else, in one fell swoop. Just as any clear act of “showing” is also an act of “doing,” and speaking “about” always already amounts to a speaking “for.”

The one footnote I’d add to Roelstraete’s tirade is that the trend he’s lamenting transcends the acceptability of fiction-as-art-writing or poetry-as-criticism. Even if you stick to plain old prose, open-ended innuendo seems to be the default solution for latter-day art writers. In other words, the rarity of direct engagement, the elusiveness of the “about,” and the reticence to conclusively articulate meaning all point to a broader crisis here.

To be clear, if you’re the historico-scholarly type who pursues empirical accounts of artworks in your texts, then you’re probably grappling with a different type of crisis altogether (a rather more traditional, familiar one: the crisis of boring insignificance). Otherwise, the current crisis of criticism will feel a bit deeper and gnarlier than the many crises that preceded it. Not least because the artists themselves, not to mention their curators, are just as happy to avoid the responsibility of the “about.” Their work “plays upon” and “raises questions.” It points to problems, problematics, bad objects, and good regimes. But it offers no answers. Lest it question the logic that makes it contemporary art in its very essence.

At the end of the day, the issue is one of disidentifying with power, whether of the good or bad variety. The power to assign meaning to art and/or the power of art to shape the world around it. We bestow meaning on art all the time, just as art proactively shapes the world around it, willy-nilly. Cash flows, boycotts, university curricula, working conditions, trends in cinema and advertising, fashion and design, even the very spirit of capitalism as we know it: all these are marked by contemporary art, sometimes deeply, sometimes less so. But rarely is art’s status of indeterminate innocence challenged fundamentally. So art becomes a discourse that interferes without being called to account. In other words, when it comes to transparency, I’ll take a Norwegian over an artist any day.

II Anecdote

It’s March 2005, and I’m a hungry, overconfident man-child recently appointed associate curator of the 7th Sharjah Biennial. Perhaps the most challenging work to get ready on time is Santiago Sierra’s 120 Hours of Continuous Reading of a Telephone Book (2004). The piece
consists chiefly of pages from Israeli phone books that are reserved for Palestinians. When the piece was originally commissioned, every name was read aloud, and the recording served as the soundtrack to our installation in Sharjah.

Page after page of flimsy phone-book paper is carefully removed, framed, and hung across the high walls, with a grid of glassy rectangular units slowly covering the room. We get this done only hours before the opening. And it’s at this heady moment that Sierra finally shows up. Sunglasses, cowboy boots, and a camera team in tow. He curtly approves of the installation, and immediately suggests we discuss something entirely different.

Which turns out to be a brand new piece for the biennial, about the exploitation of laborers in the UAE. It so happens that the working conditions of guest workers has attracted the attention of another biennial participant, Peter Stoffel. Unfortunately, Stoffel’s work fell prey to subtle delay tactics of the host institution, and the best I could offer as his curator was a painful compromise: a poster dryly featuring a timeline of those very delay tactics. Sierra’s proposal, by contrast, comes only hours before the opening. No research involved. Which is why, anxious about the kind of poor-nography that leaves workers doubly exploited, I decline. And thus, my international career begins with a twin act of censorship: one of them bitter and complicated, the other simple and smug, before the rolling cameras of the BBC.

Looking back, with more experience jostling with host institutions and last-minute artists, I should have encouraged Sierra to join forces with Stoffel. We’d have had a perfect storm on our hands. Then again, within the context of this essay, and the conversation it hopes to spark, there’s something to be said for unapologetically marking the prerogatives of a curator. Although Sierra’s installation was “about” Israeli apartheid, this only partially defined the politics the piece embodied, given that Sierra’s take on Zionist politics of visibility was facilitated by means of selective modes of visibility on behalf of the work itself.

It bears mentioning that Sierra’s was the only contribution, as far as I remember, that was eagerly discussed by museum staff members, whether local or foreign. Its lucky placement within the overall chronology of the exhibition—a bizarrely spacious, conspicuous corner, within an otherwise monotonous corridor trajectory—allowed it to architecturally hold its own. Aesthetically and formally speaking, meanwhile, it was the minimal brunt of the black-and-white phone-book pages, framed and stacked like modernist wallpaper, that set it apart from the colorful attention economy of the rest of the setting.

On the other hand, in order to get the job done, the biennial resorted to a routine mix of staff and volunteers who slaved away day and night under questionable conditions. The fact that Sierra’s work is largely about the labor masked by glossy art commodities bears an irony that wasn’t lost on us. But bewailing the interns is no match for the “critical virtue of art” (Suhail Malik), which allows us to flatter ourselves for our ideological credentials and allows for a bad object (“Zionism”) to be placed safely beyond the confines of the show. Thereby reassuring the audience they are not complicit, let alone responsible.

### III About The Goodness Regime

Manna and Storihle’s *The Goodness Regime* (2013) is about this kind of dynamic precisely. About the dialectics of telling silences and self-important declarations. About fables of innocence. Not to forget the poetics of human rights and the semi-debacle that was the Oslo Accords, as well as the disidentification with power that allows key players of this semi-debacle to get away with blue murder. Like any other artwork, the project is, moreover, a tacit statement on contemporary art at large.

But it’s also about the folding of a complicated and painful history into an unpretentious visual sequence. Formally speaking, *The Goodness Regime-as-video* is a confident example of visual sophistication. A confidence that, in combination with the polemical framing of the topic, sits oddly with the rather gentle, underhanded way in which this topic materializes within the film. Most of the takes are hushed in volume, elegiac in tone, panoramic in content. The lush interiors and outdoor landscapes, some majestic, some rugged, convey a subtle sense of disparate locations tightly intertwined. It’s the emptiness of the scenes—or rather, the seductive, evocative beauty of the empty scenes—that forges common denominators here.

This serenity is striking when compared to movies and newsreels of “the conflict,”
where scenes are chock-full of people—“It’s a scramble for the land!” But the fact that it’s an artwork makes it less of a novelty in this regard. In some other essay, drafted by someone more informed than myself, it would be well worth pursuing why artistic representations of Palestine tend to be less claustrophobic by and large (see Emily Jacir, Yazan Khalili, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, et al.). Here, it’s chiefly an uncanny sense of anticipation that dominates.

And then you have the kids. Who are no less serene than the panoramas. Handsome boys and girls, blond and brown, who embody the narrative in a manner that is restrained and pensive, and perhaps a bit glum. It takes a particular effort to make a bunch of brats look as diffident as these little cherubs. But the filmmakers do their job extremely well, to the point where a sense of quiet inevitability permeates the scene. The kids seem not flattered or excited but downright resigned to be the actors here. Actors on set and on the stage of history alike. They move with a childlike befuddlement, which, in a pinch, can result in an overarching sense of helplessness at the hands of world events. After all, if the kids are stand-ins for the historical unfolding of Good Norway, and if the audience watching them identifies—and we must remember that identification is something an audience loves, loves, loves more than anything—then a community of innocents emerges by default. In other words, making the most of Manna and Storihle’s astonishing work hinges upon avoiding “democratic” deferrals to the will of that audience precisely.

What is important is that, although these cherubic faces are figures of depersonalization, that doesn’t mean they’re harmless or unknowing necessarily, let alone good. To depersonalize them merely makes them cogs in a larger apparatus, which is not the same as a community of innocents. A “structural” approach of that kind will point to an overarching machinery without redeeming any of its components. Its cogs and cogwheels, bolts and spark plugs. And goodness is not represented as a perversion of politics or history but as a shockingly productive method of governance. One that encompasses contemporary art as part of its very hardwiring. Within the catalogue or exhibition, and without. This is what allows for a more haunting artwork, a more realistic sense of agency, and a more effective instrument for teaching, producing, and exhibiting contemporary art, in Palestine and Norway alike.

As for the West Bank. This is where the sense of structural stakes, as opposed to individual intentions, is particularly decisive. To be a writer-curator working in Ramallah is to undergo a visceral lesson in the pointlessness of righteous motives. We of the wandering tribe that proffers bad Arabic and good intentions, we cover this place like a fungus. And yet, very few of us are cynical or lazy. Most of us, I would venture, are competent, committed, self-aware, and self-critical. The problem lies not in the individual cases but in a larger organism of self-serving philanthropy, one that is increasingly well documented across the disciplines. What makes this all the more significant is the fact that, urban progressives aside, from the United States Agency for International Development to the Islamic Republic of Iran to even (a particular brand of) settler, there’s no one who doesn’t evoke a rhetoric of human rights and best intentions in some capacity or other.

Still speaking from Ramallah, I’d also argue that the potentials of the film are contingent on how it addresses the prevalent skepticism regarding representation, or regarding testimony as visualization. The long history of rich and complex illustrations of the Palestinian plight has yielded limited results, which has given rise, in turn, to a pervasive sense of scopo-skepticism among artists and scholars, filmmakers and activists alike. It has equally given rise to an appetite for more sustained, layered, embodied proposals, beyond representation per se. For collective dynamics over ambassadorial mouthpieces.

The fact that The Goodness Regime is a partnership between two artists with visibly dissimilar practices already indicates an appetite beyond the standard operating procedures of contemporary art. Surely enough, the artists have decided to extend the collaboration beyond a film alone, into a publication project and perhaps further, which likewise multiplies the conceptual, material, spatial, and discursive options at hand. (The Goodness Regime as graduate seminar, pop-up think tank, political coloring book, kjøttkaker workshop? The sky’s the limit.) After all, what distinguishes a reading of art, as opposed to that of a website, publication, or film, is the possibility of transfiguring the material into three dimensions, to be viewed by bodies moving through space. This is in turn defined by the architectural setup, the thematic context, the curatorial language, the minutiae of the installation. Not to mention the atmosphere and political particularities—and local fungus and flora—of whatever town it’s hosted by.
IV Two or Three Risks

The fork in the road ahead, in sum, amounts to presenting goodness either as a problem pertaining only to the corridors of power (i.e., nothing to do with art) or as part of the apparatus that lends contemporary art the very traction it currently enjoys. The risk of the former is that of repeating the very stuff Manna and Storihle set out to critique. The risk of the latter, meanwhile, is to introduce a sense of fatalistic complacency.

After all, if we’re all cogs to the system, perhaps the best we can do is just helplessly revel in self-irony. Such is not an unlikely interpretation. But the very title of the piece is helpful here. *The Goodness Regime* is too crushing, in its caustic disdain, to allow for an easy sense of *tristesse royale*. Imagine an artist, of all people, introducing herself along these lines (“What kind of art do you do?” “Oh, it’s the art of goodness, mostly”). To cut through the muck of sticky sweet benevolence, you’ll need something a little sharper than that.

If given half a chance, the work is indeed as sharp as it needs to be. At the end of the day, Manna and Storihle forcefully represent the Oslo Accords as an exercise in ciphers and rhetoric, emblems and fantasies. As an aesthetic exercise, in other words, one that is equipped with prospective powers of frightful capacity. And if an exercise of the kind can have such impressive consequences, then surely contemporary art can and should, by the same token, be judged by the ciphers and rhetoric, emblems and fantasies of its own making.

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The complete publication is available at www.thegoodnessregime.com