

# **Forget Fear, reflecting about art and fear (using as an excuse the 7th Berlin Biennial)**

## 1) The Attraction

Forget Fear.

The title of the Berlin Biennial is so intense that it is difficult to pass beyond the speculations that its sonority produces.

It would have been easier to digest if the organizers had included a subtitle constraining the meaning of the title. Depending on the message the biennial wants to send would have been of a different kind:

Forget Fear. All power to the soviets.

Forget Fear. How to Turn Rejection into Success

Forget Fear. The Mercedes new A-Class

Forget Fear. The Fatherland needs you.

Forget Fear. Nuclear power is not that dangerous.

Forget Fear and let's dance.

Letting the meaning of the title open to speculation is better strategically, as it can then attract the attention of a wider audience. People with different agendas are looking forward, for them and for others, to forget fear, and this one title fits them all. Besides, it catches the attention of others like me, who keep wondering about what it refers to.

As a title, Forget Fear has other advantages: it is also a well coined powerful sounding phrase. This is of course due to alliteration. As Alan Partridge would put it,

it is difficult to think of anything with matching initials that we don't like: Green Goddess, Bum Bags, Krispy Kreme, Dirty Dozen, Est Est Est, World Wide Web, Clear Cache...(Alan says) Train Time, Penne Porcini, Tokyo Tower, ... (me). Well, perhaps "Heil Hitler", we do not like that much.

But, being made also of matching initials, I think that if I were in the situation of the curators I would have favoured, as I will explain bellow, "Fear Forgetfulness". For purposes of public relations and branding, it sounds a bit menacing though.

## 2) Diving Deeper into Forgetfulness

The book published on the occasion of the biennial might give a clue about what fear is encouraged by the organizers to be forgotten.

The introduction written by the director of the biennial, Artur Zmijewski, makes us think that, by forgetting fear, the artists of the world will be prompted out of the commercial, capitalist, neo-liberal elite entertainment, object-driven art system they have fell in. At the moment they fear interacting with society, they are afraid of abandoning the false immunity art status is giving to them. This is something grasped between the lines, but that only fully takes shape when one arrives to the revealing rhetoric closing sentence of the text, which reads: "I am also afraid, but I am trying to forget fear"

Two issues come to my mind:

First, it is quite generous to talk about the art market system as the place of art. In the text, these "nominal artists" looking exclusively for new spaces to show their objects, trying to meet more curators to expand their network, these artists only concerned with their own benefit, are still considered "artists". They do not serve the largest purpose of art (changing society, in this context) so it is not clear why the author is that magnanimous. And then we see that this honour is only given to be withdrawn, to show how little they deserve it.

Secondly, it is difficult to picture these people afraid. One imagine them (as imaginary beings they might be) indulging in cocktail parties around a golden calf (formaldehyde version). They do not have the *fear* of God before their eyes (Much less is the love of God in their heart). There is no regard or reverence for honour of Art as to restrain them from creating expensive slick objects.

I would rather do not consider "artists" people who are so far of what seems to be the understanding of what is art for this curatorial team. And I would say that

it is precisely not-remembering fear what might be preventing them to become deserving artists.

But then, it is strategically good to condemn attitudes which are condemnable, instead of aiming for more controverted ones. And probably the curators of the Biennial want to get away of these attitudes just because *they fear*.

"I also used to be fearless, but now I am regaining fear".

### 3) Ironic processing.

Something that troubles me, because it makes me fear that I might be making a fool of myself, is the possibility of the title intending an ironic effect, while I am taking it literal. It could be expected, because as we know the Biennial uses other figures of speech, and people who genuinely want us to forget do not mention "fear" at all.

If indeed irony is meant, the title would imply that, by encouraging people to forget fear, the curatorial team what actually wants is to make them remember. The title of the biennial would be then an example of what is called "ironic processing". This is the psychological process whereby an individual's deliberate attempts to suppress or avoid certain thoughts (thought suppression) render those thoughts more persistent. It is often explained by quoting Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who challenged his brother not to think of a white bear.

- Forget Fear!
- Forget what? Fear? Is it there something I should be afraid of? NOW, I am afraid.

One advantage of the imperative form the title uses is that it is a good base for a more brute force approach to ironic processing, when subtleties fail.

- Forget Fear, you piece of shit!  
(whipping is optional)

Anyway, as soon as one tries do not think on something, that thing gets control of one's mind. Besides the curious entertaining effect, this can be used effectively for coercion. The key of much art and politic debates is found in the imposition of certain frames in which the discussions take place. So is to say that, whoever sets the frame of discussion, the context in which every statement of the contenders is going to be read, has the sure chance of making his or her opinion to

prevail.

That might be the problem the Biennial's curator team mean to denounce, that the old art system has its frame well forged and it is forcing artists to think within that frame: artists must leave the frame to think freely. Forget Frame!

It could be also the problem of the political systems upon which, the biennial affirms, artists should act: there is no way to do valid politics out of the frame the system imposes (in politics if ironic processing is not enough, the frame is backed up by police forces).

There is a frame within which the Biennial wants us to consider the relationship between art and reality, art and society, art and action. I am bound to think that this frame has also been imposed to the curatorial team, which was keen on accepting and promoting it because they were forgetting too much.

#### 4) The scientific approach

To know how effective the formulation of the title is, either on direct or reverse mode, it could be most advised to measure the variations on the levels of fear on the visitors to the Biennial. This kind of task is usually trusted to the scientific method.

As far as I know there is not a way of measuring fear. Perhaps a scientist can help here. There might be some changes in brain waves or blood components that appear with fear, and do not happen with any other extreme emotions.

In the meanwhile and due to the lack of reliable data, I would propose a system of estimation based in witnesses' testimonies and behavioural approaches. The unit of fear would be the "Phobo". It could be abbreviated as Ph, or use, as a fear symbol, the cryptosvastikal logo of the biennial (if copyright holders consent).

As a reference point: one Phobo is the amount of fear an adult, in full physical and mental conditions, experiences when is in the death row about to be executed. One phobo is what would score people affected by "death panic". This was a term SS officers used in Treblinka to refer to the fear of imminent death, which caused their victims to "empty" involuntarily.

The value of fractions of a Phobo is defined as follows: A miliphobo is the amount of fear that an adult, in full physical and mental conditions, full time employed, suffers when cannot find the credit card, he is almost sure has put on his walled when leaving home.

To wake up in the middle of the night, covered of sweat and perceiving life too short could score between 150 and 300 miliphobos. A visit to the doctor involving cancer diagnose might peak up to the 900 mPh.

I believe that, if these kind of measurements could be done, members of the

occupy movement, present in the biennial and praised in the introductory text for their weakness, would score much higher now than few years ago, when most people in this side of the world was looking at offers on mortgages and loans. I suspect also that the marks of the artists in the Biennial would be higher than these of those artists, object-makers, in their "panic rooms".

As a general effect however, the use of this methodology would produce an overall lowering of the fear rates. For instance, a person just newly heard about his invasive cancer might experience a little reduction in his levels of fear if advised that, in such circumstances, it is "completely normal" to score 900 mPh. This is a diverting quality of science that can be using for deflecting fear in a wide range of situations.



## 5) Is fear that bad?

There is a proverb that passes as traditional Chinese wisdom and says: when the finger points to the moon, the idiot looks at the finger.

While many are enjoying the beautiful ornamental qualities of the moon (or engineering how to get there) there is always an artist looking at the finger. Who is pointing and why, is more relevant to artists' interests than the aesthetic experience one can draw from moon contemplation, or the practical approach to conquest it. To look at the moon is very pleasant, and it is nicely reassuring to delegate the decision about what is worthwhile to look at in somebody assumed to know it well. Shame on artists.

Considering how it supports power and it removes anxieties, this proverb must have been written by somebody in the Forbidden City advertising agency. If there is a domain in which uncertainty and fear are doomed to be forgotten, is that of advertising. Same to sell products, national identity, ideology or legitimacy, fear is better to be left off. The very idea of advertising seems to send this only message: there is nothing to fear of. Once this is established customers can relinquish control, in the group or in indulgence, no pretext to worry or to keep your money safe. I guess that is the reason why commercials of insurance companies have such bad time accommodating the inspirational thrust to buy their products within nonthreatening narratives, with astonishing high rates of childishly stupid results.

Fear must be bad because everyone and everything is trying to make people forget it. Of course is the industry of entertainment and advertising, but also most of other activities, disciplines, daily life routines, cultural devices, ideologies, armed forces, media corporations and security services are busy all the time making us relegate fear to oblivion or trying to persuade us of that. All these are instruments of power, which functions more effectively on fearless individuals.

The idea that power acts currently by mechanisms of repression and ideology was made clearly obsolete by Foucault, when he said that these are not but extreme strategies of maintaining power. When power is able to produce reality doesn't need to scare people off anymore (not at daily bases at least). Power is exerted not by acting directly into individuals but by producing a technical transformation in them, a normalization, a process that has become the modern form of slavery.

Our societies are built into this structural fear, the technical environment in which we move and that permeates all our existence. It would not appear in the scale of phobos but like a constant tone, like this background noise that is always registered in the recordings however good is your microphone. It doesn't feel like fear.

## 6) Vividly Recall Fear

There is a certain amount of fear contained in the action of adjusting your seat belt. As far as it is an automated gesture, as far as it is understood as the fear of being caught without wearing it, as far as the belt is of the latest model, much safer, that fear doesn't grow conscious. There is as well certain amount of fear in the way an iPod or a vacuum cleaner are operated. Structural fear is made of a fabric of mini-fears, surrogate fears administered in homoeopathic doses, more often concealed (forgotten).

You HAVE to be some kind of rocket scientist (to be absorbed by abstract speculations about science and technology, how to get to the moon) to do not easily realize that the one and only fear is that of dying. Only one fear to forget, one fear to remember.

Even if evident, this all-time-true fear is quite difficult to comprehend. It only holds in the body for a little while and then moves a bit further. The ability of bringing this fear back is what primarily constitutes art specificity, it is what makes possible triggering the chain of processes art experiences involves, to which artists are so addicted. Art helps to reconnect the life we live with the death that operates in it in a stealthy manner. There are many proxy fears that keep up deflecting attention from the real one, and which are growing exponentially to block any possible fissure. Art techniques have to be developed, in exponential fashion as well, in order to overcome mini-fear's narcotic effect and to procure the break through artists are looking for. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter (This is Adorno about how to recall horror). Art recalls fear vividly (from *vivere*).

To keep a continuous flow of fear art has, as well, to resist succumbing at it, but this is something that many other approaches to life have in common, and which specificity is, perhaps, the very fact of confronting fear.

There are many places and situations where the ability to bring back fear is worthless and in which perhaps art would have to act differently, or simply art cannot be possible (experiences of intellectuals in Auschwitz might put that clear). But in the critical realm and in the debate forums of this globalized world, fear is conspicuous only by its absence. Forget Proxy Fear.

## 7) Pragmatic Art

Artists performing within this tension of regaining but resisting fear need to keep every single aspect of art uncertain. This applies particularly to its function: which results are intended and which benefits to bear. The outcome of art endeavours is not only to be unexpected, but even (for the sake of uncertainty) irrelevant.

Finally here the title might become consistent with the proposal of the show: the biennial exhibits "art that actually works, that makes its mark on reality and opens a space where politics can be performed", the director speaks of art as "a tool" and the publication is reporting in "artistic pragmatism". Indeed pragmatism is a tool to forget fear.

Assigning a practical value to art and trying to make it exact and useful, this is, stripping uncertainty out of it, pushes art to oblivion. The procedure reminds to that of the farmer committed to teach his donkey not eating, and how disappointed he got because, when he was just about to succeed, the donkey died. By calling for a fearless pragmatic art we lost the fear and then the art.

If "politics is the art of the possible" art cannot be but the politics of the impossible. The political value that can be drawn from art is contained in the fact that makes every situation uncertain, and therefore nothing is perceived as fixed. Things that were impossible are not anymore experimented as such. The most established ideas, self-evident and seamlessly embedded in the fabric of reality, are to be re-evaluated. No unmovable truth, no legitimation for a government or a state of things can hold on uncertainty. But even so, if art changes society, that's only as a by-product, something the artist does not intend at all.

I think I will agree with "Forget Forget" but still not sure about "Fear Fear".

## 8) Contradictions

The capability of causing reality to tremble would render art "the continuation of the politics by other means." And some can argue that this assimilates art to war.

When the text of the biennial defines art as a "mechanism which works by combining the powers of the intellect and the intuition, with a desire of dissent" is suggesting that art aims are set by the establishment art is longing to dissent from.

- "We will fight the moon, if somebody points at it convincingly enough".

An antagonist has to be selected. If the target audience can identify it as their own, it might be operatively useful enough to set up a steady frame one can hold to for art and politics. Then it can fulfil one's psychological needs and transcendence. Nationalist politicians have use the *enemy card* persistently, and almost can be said that this is the material nationalism is forged on.

- Nationalist strategies are always addressed to show how good we are in comparison with others.

- Political idealistic discourses are traditionally addressed to show how evil others are and the wrong they do.

- Scientific discourses having been historically imagining a future world in which all these problems will be solved and devising methods to reach it.

Political art shall be researching about what art does wrong. About what is wrong with art, with us, and what evil we do. In other words, art is first and foremost an internal process of recognition and enlightenment.

What it feels wrong with the message of the biennial is that it is projected by public relation techniques, that it praises seduction as a tool art should master. It

means to affirm that the problem with seduction, with power, with effectivity, can be reduced to the question of their correct use. But propaganda has its own agenda and if it is used for well-meaning political purposes always backfires. It has already invalidated traditional politics which are incapable of addressing social problems anymore (and thus the need for different approaches). The type of power the biennial affirms to be against has set its first line of defence at the very title of the show.

Even if many books have been already printed, interviews and reviews published, even if there are for sure good reasons for it, and it has everything been prepared with the best of the intentions, I would encourage the curators to choose a different title.

Manuel Saiz, May 2012