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## Living in Literalness: The Biology of Vadim Fishkin

01

Rarely does an artist give viewers what they want to the extent that Vadim Fishkin does. When, for instance, they want to know, “what’s going on inside the artist’s head,” then Fishkin (henceforth, VF) shows them drawings of anatomical cross-sections through his head (*Investigation of the Head*, 1989). For those who implore the artist “to give his heart and soul,” VF answers by displaying his pulse in a light installation right in the crown of the Vienna Secession building (*Lighthouse*, 1996). Of course, it is also often said that an artist should be “at the heartbeat of his era.” In the same installation, VF solves this problem by, inversely, bringing his era to his heartbeat, even to the point where the Secession building’s neighbors complained that their cats couldn’t sleep.

Apart from this wish-fulfilling dimension, these works clearly also stage certain narcissistic fantasies of greatness, even omnipotence. The heartbeat installation not only lives a life parallel to that of the artist (following him in his times of excitement or boredom, his love affairs, his sports exercises, and sleep rhythms); it would also die with the artist. This is, of course, one of two possible strategies for impressing your successors: either you leave something great behind, or you take everything with you. The Egyptian pharaohs used both strategies. On the one hand, they left messages for the centuries that followed by building the pyramids (a gesture that VF repeats in *Self-Portrait* by encouraging children to leave a message for the future by building their little bed museums); on the other hand, when dying, the pharaohs are said to have taken their beloved, their slaves, and their cats with them into their impressive graves. The idea that even plants should show the artist’s image, realized in VF’s work *Self-Portrait* (1997) through photosynthesis, is not without a notion of greatness either. What plants embodied in ancient times were not ordinary people at all, but, as Heinrich Heine remarks, goddesses and gods.

Yet it is not only the artist’s own fantasies of greatness that are staged in VF’s works, but also those of the viewers. In the pieces *...Dedicated...* (1998) and *Snow\_Show* (2000), the viewers are again most generously given what they want: in the first, they get a personal

dedication by the artist, and in the second, they are even celebrated as the center of the show, right in the middle of the snow installation. They are made into stars, so much so that even the planets themselves (as VF demonstrates in *Am I a Star?*, 2004) grow skeptical about their own stardom. In *Choose Your Day* (2005), viewers are not only given the weather they want; they are also given the status of omnipotent little weather-gods. Such wish-fulfilling artworks here fulfill the viewers' aspirations to greatness; what they satisfy is the viewers' narcissism.

02

On the other hand, it is quite obvious that VF's works do not fulfill the wishes of their viewers at all. When they want the artist to reveal some hidden, personal clues, he just gives them some completely impersonal basic facts instead. In VF's works, *biology* answers when *biography* calls. A cheap naked truth is presented where one hoped to be introduced into some precious secret. Where a certain desire opts for just "a little bit," the artist, again very generously, gives all – proving at the same time that even all is in fact nothing. The desire is disappointed precisely by complete fulfillment. This gesture repeats the fundamental materialist position, stated by Wittgenstein, that there is no problem with truth: Everything that can be said, can be said clearly (see Wittgenstein 1979: 42). Yet we may still remain disappointed by all this clarity – proof of the fact that what excites and disturbs us is not so much truth itself but our expectation of it.

03

By giving extremely material answers to highly spiritual questions, VF transforms imaginary cultural *desires* into basic biological *needs*: "Here you have it. This is what you asked for." Yet this materialist reduction relies on a symbolic mechanism – literalness. VF takes viewers at their own words. Materialism thus reveals itself as structuralism, and it turns out that biology has to do with a life based on signifiers. The imaginary *meaning* of metaphysical questions is transformed into pure symbolic *signification* by their physical answers. Proceeding just like Wittgenstein, VF "shows the flies their way out of the fly glass" (see Wittgenstein 1980: 162): the exciting dream of something we cannot have is abolished by the gift of a real object that we very well can have but no longer dream of having. "What is it that you want? You wanna fly?" -

The verb is taken as the noun, and thus the dream of floating through the air is answered literally, with an insect (*Fly*, 1991). This may remind us of the paradoxical outcome of an experiment in which linguists tested a computer translation program. When they inserted the English saying, “Time flies like an arrow,” the program rendered it in French as: “*Les mouches du temps aiment une flèche.*”

04

VF’s works fulfill a classic cultural desire, and precisely in its fulfillment, this desire is transformed into its own parody. VF’s works appear to mock the very wishes they satisfy. The narcissistic human desire for *greatness* is made fun of, and the same goes for art viewers’ demands for *interactivity*. Even more than human greatness, it seems likely that interactivity in art is at its best precisely when it is being mocked. The best and wittiest interactive art installations are those that not only materialize the idea of interactivity, but in fact make a mockery of this idea. Interactivity, then, is for the arts what the philosopher Pascal said philosophy is for itself: “To truly philosophize is to mock oneself about philosophy” (“Se moquer de la philosophie, c’est vraiment philosopher”) (Pascal 2004: 1201).

VF’s interactive installations ...*Dedicated*... and *Snow\_Show* may represent the sharpest commentary on the notion of interactivity that has yet been offered. They reduce the mentality behind interactivity to its simple truth: the wish, preeminent in today’s culture, to share some of the artist’s presumed glory, and the narcissistic inability to tolerate anything that does not relate to oneself (something that has been well analyzed by Richard Sennett).

Whereas the “official” narratives about interactivity tell us that human creativity is something widespread among viewers and should therefore be recognized and admitted by the artwork, VF’s installations make it clear that viewers will gladly renounce their creativity so long as they can be at the center of the show. There is something ultra-biological in narcissism: as La Rochefoucauld remarked, we would gladly sacrifice our lives if we could be sure that somebody would talk about it. Narcissistic celebrity is about being, not doing or creating (or living).

05

Mocking narcissistic wishes is made possible in VF's works by literalness, and literalness is sometimes established through performativity. As Roland Barthes remarked about the "dedication" works of Cy Twombly, dedicating is a performative speech act: a practice that coincides with the act of its enunciation. To say "I dedicate" has no other meaning than the effective gesture by which one gives one's own work to somebody else (someone loved or admired). Yet this performative structure of dedication becomes redoubled in artworks that consist of nothing but the very act of dedication. Just as in Twombly's work, in Fishkin's ... *Dedicated*..... there is no artwork apart from the dedication of the artwork. As Barthes put it, nothing is given but the act of giving (Barthes 1983: 72). To present the artwork as a gift is to create the artwork itself.

Making things real through their representation is an old artistic dream (as in the Pygmalion myth). VF investigates this dream in his sound installation *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (2000–2005), where the naming of the places appears to make them exist. The tomographic drawings of the artist's head are similarly made in a type of architectural graphic language that, as VF says, "lets things look even truer than in reality."

06

Creating a reality by pronouncing its name or producing its representation is commonly regarded as the typical procedure of magic, and, as Sigmund Freud has stated, if there is one place where our former magical beliefs in such things have survived, it is art (Freud [1912–13] 1993: 378).

Magic itself is commonly regarded – especially by psychoanalytic theory – as pertaining to an infantile stage of development. In the stage of "primary narcissism," we tend to believe in the "omnipotence" of our thought, and therefore do not distinguish between our wishes and reality: a strong wish is perceived as strong evidence. Psychoanalysis, therefore, regards magic cultures as primitive and interprets magical acts by civilized adults as the effects of a "regression" to that infantile stage of naive narcissistic belief where we assumed our wishes were powerful and where we therefore had no problem getting what we wanted (see Freud [1912–13] 1993: 364–379; Grunberger and Dessuant 2000: 225–250).

Yet it is interesting to see that Freud's own examples point in exactly the opposite direction: *for in magic we do not get what we want*. The fairy answers the three wishes of the

couple by having the sausages appear, putting them on the wife's nose, and then having them disappear again. And the "Rat Man" is horrified when the old man actually drops dead, a wish he had jokingly pronounced (see Freud [1919] 1989: 262). Magic is something horrifying, not pleasant; it disappoints our wishes by taking them literally.

This is the clue to the role of literalness in VF's works: literalness is not there to "performatively" or "magically" satisfy our narcissistic wishes. On the contrary, by taking our wishes literally, VF's work brings us, as it were, to the other side of these wishes. Literalness traverses narcissistic fantasies.

07

Narcissism consists not so much of narcissistic wishes but of strategies for not bringing them to completion. The typical narcissistic "fixation" (libido-stasis) is achieved by entering but barely confronting the narcissistic aspirations. Contemporary cultural narcissism, too, consists of such strategies of timid avoidance. For example, since the early nineties there has been a massive movement going on in art, which, under the pretext of enlightenment and emancipatory objectives, avoids everything that has to do with charm, magic, obsession, spleen, glamour, heroism, or charisma. Regarding itself as a "politicization" of the arts, this is mostly an attempt to avoid any surplus of the signifier and, instead, to create clear, predictable meanings. The artist is no longer allowed to follow his or her individual passions, to indulge in attitudes of extravagance or to say anything more than he or she knows. A kind of "categorical modesty" has taken possession of the arts; nothing unexpected or fascinating is permitted.

At first sight, this can appear as a renunciation of the traditional narcissistic passions of artists. Yet, on closer examination, this apparent "demystification" reveals itself as something quite strange. In no way is this a *denial of the existence* of magic realities. Nor is it an *attempt to give a rational explanation* for them, such as a materialist approach would do (see, for example, Freud [1901] 1996; [1921] 1999). Rather, it is simply a prohibition. Charm and charisma are not impossible; it's just that you are no longer allowed to let them appear. Contemporary "enlightenment" in the politicized arts admits the existence of "magic" realities; it simply wants nothing to do with them and tries to keep "on the safe side" of things. Most of the collective, interactive, and participatory efforts in contemporary art must be seen under this aspect: they try to avoid the desire for the charisma of individual authorship rather than face the challenge it

presents. Such timid behavior, however, leaves its enemy untouched and so makes it appear even bigger than it is, all the while restricting itself to an ever-shrinking, ever less satisfactory home territory.

A materialist intervention, on the contrary, would engage the enemy as closely as possible. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, confronted by a client embarrassed by the idea of never having been appropriately honored in the circus, did not simply forbid this as a stupid idea. On the contrary, he took his client by his hand, brought him to the circus during the day when it was empty, and encouraged him to sit in the very seat of honor that he had so desired (see Alain 1982: 160).

VF's wish-fulfilling installations do the same with their viewers. They take viewers, literally, to the very end of their fantasies, and in so doing, they confront them not only with a solution to their problem, but also with an even more difficult problem. The problem is not, for instance, that you were never a celebrity; the true problem is rather that even after having been one, you still experience the "ordinary misery" of human life. What had appeared to be the initial "problem" was in fact a solution: it kept the viewer from facing what would have come after the glory so desperately desired.

The narcissistic fantasy thus loses its spell and no longer needs to be forbidden as something foreign to us. On the contrary, it can now be treated as something familiar, something that at the same time calls for love and laughter. The specific humor that characterizes VF's works appears to stem from the fact that they allow us to regard our fantasies from a viewpoint that makes them appear as once-beloved childhood toys. When, after a long time, we again come across such a toy, we may still regard it with a certain fascination – but not without a smile about who we once were.

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