

The Hollowing of Anarchy: Exhibition Value

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“... just as early industrial capitalism moved the focus of existence from being to having, post-industrial culture has moved that focus from having to appearing.” – Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Walter Benjamin developed the concept “Exhibition Value” in his 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” To say something has Exhibition Value means that there is a perceived value or benefit resulting from exhibiting it. The more people that see it, the better. The opposite of Exhibition Value is Cult Value. Byung-Chul Han contrasts the two in his book, *The Transparency Society*:

...they must be displayed in order to be; cult value disappears in favor of exhibition value...

“Cult value” depends on existence, not on exhibition. The practice of locking sacred items in an inaccessible room, and thereby withdrawing them from visibility, heightens their cult value...

Bare existence has no meaning as far as exhibition value is concerned. Whatever rests in itself – that is, remains what it is...possesses no value. Value accrues only insofar as objects are seen. (Han, Byung-Chul. *The Transparency Society*, Pg. 9)

When Exhibition Value is present, it threatens to take over an object’s existence. Properties seen as threats to increasing Appearance are cast off, and properties seen as promising more Appearance are put in their place.

The contemporary era is marked by Exhibition Value. Appearances proliferate everywhere, while Being is irrelevant. This mentality has affected the anarchist milieu, particularly where the internet most strongly mediates daily life, like in the United States.

Why Appearance?

When we say something has character, we are often referring to the extent that Being, or the various tensions and histories of an object, are hinted at in its Appearance. We aren’t sure exactly what it is, but we can see that there’s some sublime depth to the object. Exhibition Value, on the other hand, obliterates character and depth, because they uncontrollably interfere with Appearance.

On the subject, Han quotes Giorgio Agamben:

It is a common experience that the face of a woman who feels she is being looked at becomes inexpressive. That is, the awareness of being exposed to the gaze creates a vacuum in consciousness and powerfully disrupts the expressive processes that usually animates the face. (ibid, 23)

When we know we are being watched or observed, we act differently. We do things for the sake of the observer, if not to please them, to get them to stop staring. Either way, we become highly aware of our bodies, how we’re walking, where our hands are; and we think about whether they’re still watching. From this light, we can say that being in the state of Exhibition hollows an object. Appearance immediately takes center stage and begins to call the shots.

Exhibition Value leads to objects primarily concerned with Appearance. In order to get attention, they rely on either populism or edginess: modes where the emphasis is on how the object will appear. Two domains where Exhibition Values flourishes are social media and gentrification.

Social Media and Appearance

Having and Being make no sense on social media. Everything exists to be seen. You do not perform actions on social media, you adorn yourself with them. Pictures are posted to Instagram for the sake of being displayed, liked, shared, and commented on. Posting a picture with different motives is inconceivable. Exhibition Value is so strong here that objects are created solely for the purpose of being exhibited.

Why does Appearance crowd everything else out? Sometimes Being and Appearance clash, to the detriment of the latter. For example, humans are emotional beings, we can't always keep it together. Caught in such states, Facebook users sometimes confess vulnerable things through status updates, revealing their inner distress. This phenomenon – crying into Facebook – consists of the inner-tensions and turmoil of Being erupting despite carefully composed Appearance. It's embarrassing, and usually regretted afterwards. The lesson learned is that, where Appearance dominates, Being must be eliminated as much as possible.

Text is often meant to be seen. It therefore has some Exhibition Value. But it also has other types of value. It can facilitate communication between people, represent concepts, tell stories, etc. Artists and writers struggle with Exhibition Value. The knowledge that they will publicly display their work always threatens to intervene in the creative process. Artists whose work is clearly meant only to appeal to potential customers are called hacks. Astute readers can tell when writing is swimming in Exhibition Value. Advertisements fall under this category.

On the populist side of Exhibition Value, the more an object is created to be exhibited, the less transgressive it becomes. Objects created in an environment where Exhibition Value reigns will be crafted to appeal to popular sentiments. The best way to do so is to look for lowest common denominator values and style. In this mode of Exhibition Value, a culture's (or subculture's) dominant aesthetics and ideas are replicated.

Transgression – pushing against a culture's boundaries – threatens to close off Appearance because it might prompt disgust and thus turn people away. That which might offend is self-censored before it is born. In this way, Exhibition Value calibrates us, and leads to conformity of thought. Groupthink is what you get when morality and Exhibition Value meet.

On the flip side, transgression also dies in edgelord contrarianism. To be an edgelord is to give the appearance of transgressing. To do so on the public stage. When in front of an audience, it's nearly impossible to ignore them and act without their presence in mind. In such a situation, pushing against society's boundaries becomes trying to show that one is pushing against society's boundaries. Transgression degenerates into edginess or performative trolling. Nobody takes edgelords seriously precisely because of the Exhibition Value apparent in their public stunts. How then, to transgress when the whole world has become a stage?

With the internet as proof, Exhibition Value leads to populist head nodding or affective warfare. In the former, sentiments are unchallenging to the dominant norms, and are spoken for the sake of appearing on the correct side. In the latter, pre-conscious emotional reactions – anger, fear, outrage – are sought because doing so attracts attention in a competition against endless streams

of other mediocre content. In both modes, Being is trumped by Appearing. The goal is to Appear, and to do so to more people.

Gentrification as Synonym for Exhibition Value

In gentrification, the untidy is removed, and inoffensive Appearance is put in its place. Pre-gentrification urbanity was marked by Being. Every city, neighborhood, block, and street corner had history marking its walls. Histories of capital investment & flight, riots, crime, and people living the best they can. In the abstract, we can say that pre-gentrification urbanity had interiority, a result of its existence in a turbulent and chaotic world. This interiority, per Figure 1, breaks through to the surface and affects Appearance.

With gentrification, the goal is to bring capital back into the city, both business investments and people with money. Both as cause and effect, Appearance becomes a priority. People with money are afraid or disgusted by poverty, so the signs of poverty must be removed from public eye. Exhibition Value begins its creep.

Among other things, gentrification is the replacement of Being with Appearing applied to geography, population management, and architecture. The petite-bourgeois, the class that gentrification appeals to, defines itself by its ability to keep separate Being and Appearing. They are polite, they don't become too emotional in public. They hide the turbulence of their toxic relationships within private residences. They keep their Being at bay through emotional repression. There is no graver sin to them than breaking into heated argument in public. The threat of embarrassment, of Being slipping through the mask of Appearing, always looms over their neurotic heads. This highly contrasts with pre-gentrification residents of cities. The homeless have their disputes in public, they have no private sphere to retreat to. The working class is usually perceived as being crass and crude.

The reinvestment of capital in the cities rode in on Exhibition Value's ambition. The sense that the Appearance of the petite-bourgeois suburbs is hollow brought young petite-bourgeois to the cities, to the location of exotic Being. Yet they were so stuck in Exhibition Value that they could only adorn themselves in Being. That, or their Being was not rife with inner turmoil enough to spill out into Appearance. So, the older petite-bourgeois saw them walking the urban streets and waiting their tables, and was not threatened. With the unpredictable messiness of Being largely absent, they began trickling back into the cities.

Exhibition Value's Left-Wing

Cult and Exhibition Value emanate their own auras. The former gives off the impression of being special and sacred. The latter, cheap and fake. The way the object is treated is apparent in how it's perceived. As the world of Appearances becomes culturally known by wider segments of the population, there will arise a backlash against it. Frustration at a world of Appearances, as well as the work necessary for maintaining those Appearances, will mount.

Notably, Exhibition Value has built-in safety valves for this. Rather than be against a society drenched in Exhibition Value, the reformist response will be against Appearances that obscure the Being inside. Wearing our hearts on our sleeve will be seen as the authentic liberatory gesture. It will contrast itself with the phony, "non-authentic" Appearance deliberately crafted to appeal to

those around us. It will set up the dichotomy as Transparency and Intimacy versus Performativity. In both the Right and Left wings of Exhibition Value, the focus is on the form that Appearing takes. Withdrawing from Appearances is, and will remain, totally invisible, and therefore pointless. If anything, withdrawing from Appearance will be seen as an attack on Intimacy/Transparency, and therefore saddled in with the Right. The Left-Wing of Exhibition Value will help systems of power by prodding us to reveal even more of our selves to the data-gathering machines of the Internet.

Anarchy and Exhibition Value

Exhibition Value fits in snugly with politics. Every politician's speech, including those given by wannabe leaders at demonstrations, is created to appeal to people. For those that want to bring people over to their side, to adopt their values, to agree to their platform, Exhibition Value is the default mode. It is the value-form of populism.

It's telling that, since the ascendancy of social media, anarchy hasn't made many gains, but fascism has. Fascism is nearly impossible to define because it has so little internal meaning, its existence is based on the images it displays, images of power and strength. Anarchy is the opposite: it means too much.

That's not always a bad thing. What's beautiful in anarchy is its potential for defying Exhibition Value and politics, for concerning itself primarily with Being: subverting daily life, grabbing hold of life's trajectory from imposed social roles, etc. But that potential is often crowded out by other potentials. In contexts like today, anarchy has become just another political position.

Anarchy with an anti-political orientation highlights living anarchist values and ideas. The union of means and ends is taken seriously, and applied to daily life. From this vantage point, the practice of dressing up nice to appeal to normative society is seen as a manipulative political strategy.

Of course, to reject politics need not mean rejecting social struggle or revolt. Rather than spending time and energy trying to will mass struggles into existence, anti-political anarchists often embrace criminality and withdrawing from work in their daily lives. And not just to make more room for activist political projects.

Insurrectionary anarchy is notable for being a tendency both of anti-political and political anarchy. Sometimes, it values attack for its own sake, for the dignity and confidence it brings those who partake in it. In these ways, it embodies Being. However, it also contains Exhibition Value, in that it extols attack for the sake of being seen. Attack under insurrectionary anarchy can be a public gesture meant to inspire further attack. Because it contained both tendencies, insurrectionary anarchism helped bridge anti-political anarchy to the political anarchism prevalent today. Again and again, Appearance crowds out Being.

The contemporary anarchist moment is defined by Appearing. The only things valued are those that will be exhibited, as well as the legwork necessary for said exhibition. The allure of Appearance is so high that anarchists exaggerate their actions on anarchist news sites. This all has been facilitated by the Internet, where various content competes for the glazed-over, half-attention of Internet users. Its measure is quantitative: how many views, followers, or shares something has.

Daily life is often not spectacular, it has no clickable allure. Outrage, fear, anger, and excitement are what get attention, not clever scams, graffiti, lazing about, or taking care of your friends. And, in order for anarchy to be easily shared and viewed, it must be quickly digestible. Thus, the more complex and transgressive ideas within it – those arising from the influence of the Situationists, Fredy Perlman, and post-left anarchy – have receded.

It's notable that withdrawing from the techno-nightmare would be totally invisible to the culture of Exhibition Value we live under today. Yet said withdrawal, including learning to deal with the trials and difficulties that accompany it, should be alluring to people who define their political identity as being against social control.

The right-wing backlash that marks the contemporary political period provides further incentive for anarchy's hollowing. With smackdowns between antifa and far-right street-fighters on the horizon, those partaking on the antifa side are not going to come out victorious in one-on-one combat. Anarchists do not build a cult around images of strength the way the far-right does, and we don't have the tepid support of the police.

So, if said smackdowns are to be engaged in, antifa needs numbers. Thus, there is pressure to transgress societal values less, and to appear to embrace those that, superficially, we share with liberals. Opposition to race, gender, nationalism, and identity lose their sharpened edge and become the culturally-hegemonic common sense of being against racism, sexism, and Nazis. We end up appearing as the defenders of this society and its values, in opposition to the anti-establishment Nazis.

The more our acts carry Exhibition Value, the more we can say they are political. The more our actions are not constructed for the stage of public opinion, but are entangled in our anarchist values, the more they are anti-political. In our very political moment, Being is less a priority than Appearing. Because contemporary anarchy is obsessed with Appearing, because it is just another leftist political position, it could very well lose its draw to dissatisfied, alienated people. Its transgression and dignified hostility to the qualitative poverty of this society were what made it special. New radicals are often content to generically call themselves "leftists." Why pick anarchy over the rest when it's barely different?

Sources

Han, Byung-Chul. *The Transparency Society*. 2015, Stanford University Press

Further reading

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin

"The Transparency Society" by Byung-Chul Han – Many ideas for this piece were taken or built from provocations in Han's book.

"The Society of the Spectacle" by Guy Debord

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