

ART AS A TRAP

This work is a trick. Phineas Taylor Barnum, the multifaceted, 19th-century businessman of the circus and freak shows, understood the concept well. It is the process of making something look like something it's not. One of the Barnum's better-known works that has survived is his book-manual: *The Art of Money Getting or Golden Rules for Making Money* (1880). It was the first best seller of a large, truly American literary genre of self-help literature, a sort of guide for the pursuit of success which found wide acceptance at the peak of the Industrial Age in the United States. Twenty sentences head chapters that set out a series of norms, which all who aspires to economic success should follow. Since then, this literature has become a global phenomenon that aims to motivate average citizens to social and economic prosperity. This is the well-known idea of the American Dream. Barnum writes: "That we are born 'free and equal' is a glorious truth in one sense, yet we are not all born equally rich, and we never shall be."¹ Indeed the current global crisis has pointed out that the basis of this ideology of progress –equality and personal freedom- has slowed. On the one hand, citizen movements around the world have awakened consciences as they have called upon basic human dignities, the right to employment, housing, and personal growing perspectives. On the other, several studies have pointed out the detrimental changes in the organization of economic policies which, since the 1980's, have lead the developed world to one of the greatest periods of social inequality since the Great Depression.² Currently, it is difficult for conservative governments and media to hide that the gap between the very rich, the so-called 1%, and the remainder, has not only increased but is also unfair.

The trick of the language is also the trap of the message. Barnum's book generates sentences as ambiguous as they are obvious: don't mistake your vocation, select the right location, avoid debt, persevere, use the best tools, be systematic, etc. To read Barnum in today's economic and social stagnation produces a certain estrangement. Some ideas do not ring true as they may have earlier. Barnum's ingenuity does not take into account that economics and society, acting as transparent screens, can determine the distribution of wealth more so than good behavior, perseverance, and personal effort. For example, consider the direct impact differences of race, physical appearance, gender, and sexual orientation, have on the incomes and economic productivity of millions of citizens in developed countries.

The so-called "Barnum effect" lies in the imperative power of the text, the credibility given to its author, and the identification process that facilitates the transformation of generic information into a personal one. Also considered a subjective

validation, the Barnum effect is a process that can affect the construction of an opinion, the formation of ideology, and, ultimately, a way of thinking about subjectivity according to a preexistent model. The psychological experiments that corroborated the Barnum effect were done through generic descriptions used in personality tests, but I would like to think that something related to the Barnum effect also operates in the most basic strategies of advertisement and propaganda. It has complex precedents in literary and visual art works designed to exalt, arouse feelings of remorse, and direct the conduct of the reader/spectator through the narration or presentation of the biography or autobiography of the other.

Why Barnum in art? Is art a trap? Art can be a language or a reflexion about language and I believe Anna Moreno's crucial strategy in "The Barnum Effect" is to experiment with what happens when someone takes Barnum's teachings at face value. Moreno reads fragments of Barnum's book in public actions; she proves it through her work as an artist or quotes sentences in pieces where Barnum's words become an object. The text enters circulation with many stages of legibility and the public has to test their predisposition in front of what it is presented as a performance or installation. At her presentations, one never truly knows if they are witnessing a serious motivational speaker or a charlatan. Moreover, she presents a banner in a demonstration that you cannot identify at first glance whether it is real or fake. What seems clear in the works shown here is that the systematic translation of Barnum moved Anna Moreno to error: she fell from the roof of a museum while she was installing her piece *Don't Get Above your Business*.

¹ P.T. Barnum, "The art of money-getting," in *For Richer or Poorer*, New York, Arno Press, 1976, p. 12.

² Without an exhaustive aim, see for the American case Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the Gilded Age*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008; Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, "Winner-Take-All Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States," *Politics & Society*, 2010, vol. 38, no. 2, p. 152-204.

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