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Art and Repugnance

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Art is an élite affair. The ability to decipher the relevant codes and to understand the tacit agreements underlying art needs a good deal of learning. Those who are late trying to acquire this knowledge will remain perplexed fools all their lives when confronted with art. Buying works of art requires considerable resources. The usual hefty sums are spent by people wishing to display their elevated status over the less privileged social classes. What they get is known as distinction gains. A kind of "mega version" is the case of an insurance company sponsoring an art foundation in order to camouflage its actual, rather mundane, activities via its corporate design. The increment in symbolic capital is used to "culturalise" the company's normal field of action, which has little to do with cultural endeavours in the traditional sense. With this going on, all the talk about artistic freedom amounts to nothing but profound contempt for both creative artists and their public, considering that the social justification of art mainly rests on the emergence of flourishing markets and that the role of artistic genius is just some ideological wrapping around the product called art.

Mainly the exponents of "art without works" are painfully aware of this situation. Many generations of them have suffered from it.

They share their knowledge about the crux in art with other critical artists who - it is claimed - are incorruptible by society and institutionalised art. The drop-out rate among them is very high, though; only few become famous and even fewer get rich. However, if they keep going long enough, they may indeed acquire some renown beyond their small circle of personal fans while still alive. If an artist becomes a historical figure, there is a possibility of rediscovery, reappraisal, etc., also many years after he or she has passed away.

1.

Contradictions are not reserved to art. As soon as the various protagonists in production, interpretation and marketing grasp that precisely the contradiction between autonomy (self-determination) and heteronomy (being determined by others) has made modern art so successful, they can live with this without qualms. It had transpired long ago that it was not consensus but the clash between redundancy and differentiation that was propelling communication processes. The attitude expressed by the followers of "art without works" is part of a long artistic tradition going back to the period after the second world war, when classical avant-garde concepts and semantics diversified into branches like the "fluxus movement", actionism and material art, concept art, and various other expressions of institutional critique. Several generations of artists have made productive use of their occasional disgust or guilty conscience about the social conditions of art production by employing precisely the logic and methods of art to analyse and depict this situation.

Marcel Duchamp is something like the ABC in this kind of art production. With his "absolute thing", the *bottle dryer* of 1914, he introduced deconstruction of the art object through "historical transgression" to artistic discourse. The thing called *bottle dryer* is, in fact, a bottle dryer that simply has been moved from its traditional to an artistic context. The thing stays completely outside the historic art context, and outside the normal conception of this context; it is therefore a "historic transgression". The shock of perceiving this thing, ie the simultaneous experience of difference, ideally triggers learning and thought processes, such as wondering what it is that transforms a given thing into art. By the late 1970s, Duchamp's "ready-mades", as he called those objects, had of course deteriorated into avant-garde clichés.

Duchamp had considerable influence on the generations of artists after 1945. *Décollages*, ie pictures which so-called "decollagists" like Raymond Hains and Mimmo Rotella made out of paper snippets usually torn off billboards, represent fragments of reality similar to Duchamp's "ready-mades". His way of incorporating the trivial in everyday reality lived on in the manifestations of pop art produced by people like Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg or Richard Hamilton. Duchamp contributed to the development of kinetic art by experimenting with the phenomenology of perception in works like his rotating glass discs of 1920/1925 or the Rotoreliefs of 1935, and he also paved the way for what later became known as op art. From 1945, he had duplicates made of his works, so that by 1967 there were more reproductions than extant originals. In the evolution of ideas within art, this duplication amounted to an attack on the fetish of the original. Because of his strategy of removing the aura from the art object, Duchamp also became a forerunner of the multiple-print and silk-screen print hypes that began to appear in the 1960s. This demonstrates that the demands

and postulates of the 20th-century artistic avant-garde have been fulfilled completely - but in a way compatible with capitalism.

2.

Marcel Duchamp, who challenged painting in 1913, fell into oblivion for a long time. When he was 40, ie in 1927, he stopped artistic production altogether for 20 years. Or so the myth has it. In 1959, when he was 72 already, a first big monograph appeared on him. In 1966, the Tate Gallery organised a retrospective that brought him international recognition. At the same time, the institutional acknowledgement of his works sparked off productive controversies among another generation of young artists.

In the 1960s, Duchamp's successors behaved like struggling adolescents. One the one hand, they eagerly continued the ideas of their overwhelming father figure, on the other hand they condemned Duchamp as bourgeois. Quite apart from any psychoanalytical aspects, it is indispensable to distinguish oneself from the previous generation when constructing one's own position, and to assert it over other positions held by contemporaries. Uniqueness also weighs heavily in competition. Duchamp's life is an example. His rise did not start in his native France, nor elsewhere in Europe, but in the USA, in New York, at the legendary Armory Show of 1913. This date also marked the beginnings of so-called "non-retinal art". The term did not mean there wasn't anything to see any more. The distinguishing feature of "non-retinal art" over "retinal art", ie art as traditionally conceived, is that "non-retinal art" is not understood to be part of some linear development of forms. Its essence is thinking about art

and about the implications of art; thus it appeals more to the cognitive abilities of the recipients.

A particular problem for Duchamp's successors after 1945 was his relationship with society in general. In spite of having shaken the foundations of art, he stayed within the culture of the privileged classes, he produced art for snobs and dandies, his systemic criticism did not go beyond the boundaries of art. Thus the main accusations of his critics. For example, Duchamp undeniably allowed the wealthy collector Walter Arensberg to keep a studio for him in New York and he shared all the privileges of his patron. In the home of the Arensberg couple, at West 76th Street near Central Park, he had the opportunity of meeting intellectuals and leading personalities of the sciences and the arts, such as Francis Picabia, Albert Gleizes, Man Ray, Mina Loy, Edgar Varése, Arthus Davis and Beatice Wood. No doubt, it was an attractive alternative to slaving away with one's art if, for example, Baroness Elsa of Freytag-Loringhoven removed her clothes in order to act as a "ready made"; or if the poetess Mina Loy, accompanied by Duchamp, Beatrice Wood, Arlene Dressler and Charles Demuth took leave of an evening party in order to engage in group sex at Duchamp's next-door studio.

I owe the above information to Joan Richardson's article "Another Reality Club". Other passages in that text are even more pertinent to my theme. For example, Richardson describes the circle of friends around the Arensbergs to which Duchamp belonged as individuals who endeavoured "to change the images of themselves within the world that persons create". This, according to Richardson, also meant "creating connections through works of art, worlds within other worlds, to realise through works of art... what it means to live in a continually changing present, near the fringe of experience". (Richardson 1990:239). The circle of friends

around the Arensbergs not only discussed avant-garde positions in art, they were also interested in current scientific issues. They talked about Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity, Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity, about Max Planck's quantum theory, or about Robert Goddard's rocket experiments. In short: the persons who regularly met at the Arensbergs' home during 1914 to 1921 were determined to discard a world view that had arisen in the specific context of 17th-century Europe, to leave behind its Cartesian-Newtonian foundations. This world view began to crumble at the turn to the 20th century, mainly due to new developments in physics. In New York, by the way, Walter Arensberg was considered to be the founder of something later called DADA. This was before a group or artistically-minded people gathering at Café Voltaire in Zürich adopted that name. The DADA movement was the next step in the evolution of "art without works" reaching back to Romanticism, ie to the second half of the 19th century.

3.

The controversy among young artists about Duchamp's role in the 1960s had, in fact, been a major generator of discourse on modern art much earlier. Proof of this, after 1945, were the many references by the neo-avant-garde to positions taken by the classical avant-garde during the first three decades of the 20th century. This can be fully appreciated if one conceives conflicts from a systems-theory perspective as instrumentalised contradictions, ie contradictions that have turned into communication. "Being social systems, conflicts are autopoietic, self-reproducing units. Once they are formed, their continuation, not their end, is to be expected". (Luhmann 1987:537).

At this point I would like to emphasise that art can only be understood as one social system that is connected with other systems of society. When analysing developments in art it is therefore indispensable to consider, at the same time, socio-cultural changes in communication and in the communications media. The dynamic and complex processes involved in producing, distributing, circulating, consuming and reproducing culture must be taken into account. Art as a system reproduces itself auto-poietically within operative borderlines defined by the difference between this system and its embedding environment, so both self-organising closedness and energetic openness are possible. The circular inter-relationship between system and environment acts as a mutual source of perturbations (disturbances, turbulence). In the words of the founding father of constructivism, Heinz von Foerster, this follows the "order from noise principle". (Foerster 1960:31 ff)

Even if one conceives art as evolution of ideas, it will not further our understanding of its complex role if we simply celebrate the various heroic figures among artists and praise their "formal and historic transgressions". From a systems-theoretic point of view, the perturbations - ie the disturbances arising from interactions between system and environment - influence the reflexive processes of differentiation and recombination present in the mechanisms of diversification, selection and stabilisation. Interaction with a social system's environmental factors, eg the physical and psychological resources present in specific actors, leads to structural changes in the social system via recursive loops. In this connection, the term "structure" must encompass the necessity of self-reproduction, ie auto-poietic practice. Changes in the system's basic structure are semantically expressed as dissolution or recombination variants of art medium and art form - the two being loosely correlated with

each other - like seismic vibrations, as it were. This, of course, also applies to so-called innovations. As a consequence of this point of view, neither changes within society nor changes in the semantics of art can be analysed in terms of "the human being" as basic element. At the societal level, only the evolution of society as a whole is productive in the sociological sense. Social structures are both results and conditions, they form the framework for permanent social conflict which continuously re-shapes the different spheres of reality.

The question what social systems consist of has been answered as follows: "... they consist of communication acts and their attribution as actions. The one could not evolve without the other". (Luhmann 1987:240) "Communication is the elementary unit of self-constitution, action is the elementary unit of self-observation and self-description by social systems". (Luhmann 1987:241) The ultimate elements, ie the communication acts, are not phenomenological units of any kind whatsoever, and they do not become units through selective attribution by an observer; they are nothing but instances of the ways in which the system recursively refers to itself.

4.

Art is just one cultural principle besides others and interacts with all other cultural techniques. It is possible to describe the way in which art may contribute to the human being's existential nexus, how art participates in generating subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and each individual's particular world view. Art does not contradict reality, rather, with its specific logic and methods, it contributes to the production of reality by society as a whole. Following

Bourdieu's approach based on the analysis of struggles and on a theory of conflict, art is also a weapon in society's everyday power struggles. However, as such, it is not very useful for artists opposing hegemonic positions in society; rather, art serves persons who have already accumulated a certain amount of the different kinds of capital (cf. Bourdieu 1987; Laclau/Mouffe 1991), who are, in other words, representatives of hegemony. For, in spite of the importance of *economic capital*, the use of *cultural and symbolic capital* may decisively influence the way in which competition for legitimation power is resolved. The term *symbolic capital* covers things like prestige, renown, or social recognition. Bourdieu characterises *symbolic capital* as a sometimes overwhelming force that is able "to enforce certain meanings and get them accepted as legitimate by covering up the actual underlying power relationships sustaining this force". (Bourdieu/Passeron 1973:12)

We may also conceive art as an ensemble of disciplines that process cultural data in their specific ways. These disciplines may thus be equated with different notations (*Aufschreibesysteme*; this expression for storage media is due to Friedrich Kittler). Viewed this way, we may look upon art as a medium for storing its continuously relationship-forming stocks of data. Throughout the ages, a kind of "groomed semantics" (Luhmann) evolved, perpetuated by the differentiation and recombination of evolutionary functions and mechanisms. Luhmann defines a society's semantics as "its semantic apparatus, the stock of rules available on the processing of meaning". (Luhmann 1993:19)

5.

It by no means contradicts the ideas just expressed to draw attention to the usually quite limited number of individuals whose ideas and manifestations explicitly prompt new communication acts: in other words, there are very few individuals who profoundly influence artistic discourse. In connection with the neo-avant-garde movement "art without works", George Macuinas and Henry Flint must certainly be named. Among the wider circle of protagonists of the "fluxus scene", those two were the main exponents of its marxist-leninist faction. In 1964, at the first performance of "Originals" by Karlheinz Stockhausen in New York, they openly opposed the majority of the group who leaned towards Duchamp's line. In his well-known letter to fluxus member Tomas Schmit dated February 1, 1964, Maciunas wrote that the aims of fluxus were social, and not aesthetic. Exactly as the LEF group before him ("Left Front in Art" in the Soviet Union in the 1920s), Maciunas argued that artists should spend their talents "on socially constructive aims". In applied art, for example, this should be "industrial design, journalism, architecture, engineering, graphic design and printing, etc.", which "are all closely related to the fine arts and offer artists excellent opportunities to change their job". (Maciunas 1965:36) Vow! This fits in nicely with the neo-liberal concept of Creative Industries. To be sure, Maciunas made his recommendations in the hope that capitalist society could be revolutionised and turned into a socialist paradise this way.

More radical-democratic forms of political emancipation were attempted by Joseph Beuys who replaced Duchamp's anti-art principle by the concept of "social sculpture", in order to widen his artistic activity to the sphere of practical politics. In 1964, during an Action in Düsseldorf recorded for television, Beuys wrote the following sentence on a white board: "Marcel Duchamp's silence is over-estimated". This must be considered as a programmatic event

regarding Beuys's work. In 1967 he founded the German Student Party (*Deutsche Studentenpartei*), followed in 1971 by the Organisation for Direct Democracy (*Organisation für Direkte Demokratie*) and in 1972 by the Free International University (*Freie internationale Universität*). No doubt, Joseph Beuys in his roles as teacher and artist, who also showed great talent in making use of the mass media, substantially contributed to furthering critical thinking and action by many of his fellow human beings. At the same time, Beuys also reached the highest rankings on the art charts during his lifetime. His objects, sometimes just parts preserved from some Action, were soon traded like relics and ended up in exhibitions and museum collections all over the world.

Obviously, today no one would claim that a master of "art without works" has left behind no work. The creative activity of Beuys is a perfect example for form as anti-form, art as anti-art and market as anti-market. His manifestations, which were intended to resist any kind of evaluation or utilisation, finally also became promising investment targets kept by famous collectors. In spite, or perhaps because of this, Beuys as an exemplary figure is still very popular with present-day exponents of "art without works".

6.

The fate of musealisation caught up with all important members of the fluxus movement, of arte povera, of various forms of junk art as well as process and concept art, to name just a few branches of the neo-avant-garde. Even the most minute souvenir from an Action, or even documents about happenings that had taken place during this era, found their way to the art market. However, what has really remained were genuine artistic achievements, the

determination to pursue thought about traditional conflicts to a radical conclusion. Yet, the effects beyond the sphere of art were minimal, if discernible at all. It remains sheer fantasy to believe that the art system could penetrate other social systems. Systems-theoretically, we are only dealing with penetration if one system's complexity - ie indefiniteness, dependence, selectivity - becomes available for building-up another system. At best, art may be guided by emancipatory politics, it cannot become a hegemonic bloc itself. Art would be incapable of that.

However, if the social conditions are right, it is quite possible for art to have an impact on the political sphere - not on politics itself. A case in point were the student revolts of the 1960s and 1970s. There is evidence that theories of art and aesthetic strategies developed by the so-called *Situationist International (SI)* did in fact exert a certain influence. The main spokesman of SI, Guy Debord, called for a cultural revolution as early as in 1958. For this purpose, he developed a theory of situationist action, mainly in order to put an end to the misery of certain forms of culture, not least the "rotten cadaver of art", that had decayed long ago. The marxist-leninist factions of the protest movement remained suspicious of SI ideas. While the marxist-leninists wanted to abolish capitalism, SI was content with the aim of "pursuing the beautiful confusion of life to its perfection". (Cf. Ohrt 1990) In a way, this is another demand that has since been realised by society as a whole.

Since the founding of SI, a wide spectrum of youth cultures ranging somewhere between art-culture and socio-culture have made their appearance. What developed were patterns of action and forms of artistic expression that oscillate between the criteria of symbolic and social profitability. The minimum common consensus in all their undertakings is revolt against "the cultural grammar". As this term implies, it structures the different kinds of

social space and is an expression of societal power and dominance relationships. Famous precursors with proven links to the present were the surrealists and dadaist. The long line of forerunners and successors of SI includes, *inter alia*, the beatniks (recalling the theory of cut-ups by William S. Burroughs); Gruppe Spur/ Subversive Aktion; Kommune 1; the Enragés (the enraged ones), who created many of the slogans, posters and wall newspapers in May 1968; also, the Provos, the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO); the Yippies; Indiani Metropolitani (recall Radio Alice, a remarkable early example of a free radio station outside the reach of advertising pressure); not to forget Agentur Bilwet and the Neoists. This list of names is incomplete. Most of those groupings wanted to sever their ties with art and are yet linked to it in a reflexive way. Clearly, they are part of the tradition named "art without works".

7.

There is proof that the evolution of ideas shaping modern literature and art corresponds to modern developments in the human and natural sciences and in technology. The correlation between social semantics and social structure in turn explains that all those developments are related to changes in the structure of society as a whole. In retrospect, the so-called cultural revolution of the 1960s turns out to have been an adaptive movement which, after the decline of bourgeois ways of life and thought, put Western societies on their track to mass democracy. It is probably not totally off the mark to believe that post-1945 neo-avant-garde productions, compared with those of the classical modernists whose tradition they share, are mostly avant-garde turned into kitsch: art kitsch whose increasing use of pop codes reconciled art

culture with the pluralistic tastes of mass democracy even before the 1980s.

Whatever the criticism levelled against the fine arts in their traditional shapes, the most important reason for discarding panel paintings or sculptures are changes in apperception brought about by the new standards of media-driven communication. Art in general, but above all "art without works" can only be properly understood if it is related to the expansion of the mass media. This was even the case before so-called media art appeared on the scene in the 1950s and it was not accidentally called "cybernetic art" in the early stages. The history of this art form shows that the intention of the founder of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, who meant to combine engineering and the humanities in cybernetics, was put into practice in the art sphere - through application of the logic of art - by media art. Development from the use of video technology by the fluxus movement up to today's complex, dynamic network projects on the Internet illustrates that Wiener's conception has indeed been an important guiding principle of media art. The increasing sophistication of so-called observer-settings in art are moving the relationships among the different actors to the centre of artistic discourse. Explicitly communication-oriented works are created and are emerging within socio-technological ensembles consisting of human beings and telematics machines located in a cybernetic-media world.

Since the 1990s, a tendency has reappeared among the circles of young people making up the art scene: the art object which, in the 1980s experienced its - so far - last zenith as pastiche or text, is being replaced by various services. Even if those practices are intended to be acts of opposition against the instrumentalisation of art by cultural representation, one cannot fail to notice that this kind of art is structurally determined by and linked with processes

taking place in society as a whole. On the one hand, this trend is analogous to the neo-liberal economic policy of outsourcing production to low-wage countries and of increasing investment in services. On the other hand, many of those artistic practices can clearly be interpreted as criticism of neo-liberalism. This is the case, similarly to what happened during the 1960s and 1970s, when exponents of "art without works" join various social movements and take up their demands. For example, they adopt political demands regarding democracy, incorporating theoretical positions critical of capitalism, or in favour of feminism, or supporting cultural and ethnic pluralism; or they bring in topics like the meaning of gender, class, race, ethnic origin, nationality, sexual preferences, etc. All such artistic practices are based on a certain conception of art expressed by Judith Butler in "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity": "The 'unthinkable' therefore is completely part of culture; but it is completely excluded by dominant culture". (Butler 1991:121)

8.

Looking back, "art without works", like modern art as a whole, has proved very successful. Its theories and forms of practice live on in a multitude of ego-constructs, eg among so-called life aesthetes whose connection with art is often just marginal. Life aesthetics has nothing to do with classical aesthetic sensitivity, taste, style, etc; rather, it has to do with an attitude, the concern of individuals for successful integration of their actions in their individual aesthetic ego-constructs within scaleable *lifeworlds*. Thus, behaviour which in the past used to be restricted to artists or the occasional eccentric, today is the most common form of socialisation for individuals aged 18 to 40. Different as they may be from each

other, they have in common their diversity and complexity regarding attitudes and self-images, breaks and contradictions in their thinking, indiscriminate recycling: sample, mix and remix. De-territorialised communication and de-contextualised information, the sign of all kinds of current literary-artistic avant-garde (recall the techniques of collage or cut-up that continue as samples in digital culture) - all this has become quite commonplace for today's life aesthete and Internet user.

A crucial concept in understanding social structure and semantics is complexity. Therefore, functional analysis in systems theory is concerned with complexity rather than with the problem of preserving what exists. (See Luhmann 1987:90) If we follow Niklas Luhmann in analysing the way in which different media and forms have historically coped with complexity, then this development is also a succession of successful semantic inventions. This of course also applies to the development of modern art, and consequently also to "art without works". Viewed in this way, it becomes clear that the methods of coping with complexity have undergone change in the past few decades: from reductionism (centralisation, hierarchisation) to abduction (decentralisation, dispersion and networking).

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