

THE ARTIST AS A POLITICAL ACTIVIST. THE ARTISTIC AUTHENTICATION OF THE SOCIAL FACT

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Abstract

The works of art, as productive forces, cannot be delimited from the social ones, therefore the work of art is subordinated to the social laws, according to the terminology set out by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. There is no conceptual dissolution between art and society and the artistic production is shaped, even in a latent way, by social production. But there is a relationship between society and art that permanently tries to balance the two forces, i.e. to mediate and to negotiate the antagonisms resulting from the dispute over hegemony. The mediator is the artist himself, the only one who has civically and artistically assumed rights and obligations. The artist is the one who decides when to place himself within or outside society and he claims his statute according to where he stands between these coordinates.

Keywords: *Art, Artist, Political Activism, Society, Mediator.*

Nowadays more than ever there is a question of authenticity; even the eligibility of the artistic act is questioned considering that the artist's figure is professionalized. The artist, as a citizen and as a creator, as an exponent of the artistic freedom, is asked to assume a double responsibility, sometimes a very dichotomised one. One speaks more and more often of the artist as a social activist, of the multifunctional artist, of the „working artist”, of performers, „one-man show”, of the manager-artist, of the „con-artist” (the speculative, fake artist). All these titles refer to how the artist communicates and externalizes his work. The attention is thus centred on the way the work of art is communicated, a work of art that becomes or doesn't become valuable (socially, economically, politically). Thus, the present undertaking analyses the liberated drives of the artistic act from a socio-philosophical perspective, using as guiding marks the next viewpoints, attributed by Adorno to the configurations of the arts and

society elements: „If works of art are indeed an absolute merchandise with a certain quantity of a social product, devoid of any appearance of living for society, an appearance that merchandise holds on to uncompromisingly, the determined production relationship, the form of the merchandise is included in the works of art similar to the social production force and the antagonism between the two”¹

THE ARTIST'S SOCIAL BECOMING FROM ZIVILATION TO KULTUR

As to the sociologic representation of art, Pierre-Michel Menger said, in *Art, politisation et action publique*, that two cultural perspectives dominated the last two centuries: one who receives the universal character of the work of art and ties artistic innovation to the democratization process (emerged in the 18th century through the Illuminist philosophy); and another one, based on concepts like the theme of articulating differences and relativities, defining art through the pluralism and the diversity of artistic forms that do not allow a classification (manifested since the 18th century).

Therefore, artistic products cannot be ordered in the cultural system by hierarchic criteria. First of all, culture, as an organizational system with both ordinary achievements and important works, becomes a form of rationalized organization through which society seeks to gain emancipatory power when fighting the natural given. So, through progress society finds its way in breaking natural limits and in claiming its new power (in this context, the term can be considered similar to authority), gained exclusively through creation. As a matter of fact,

this power is „present in all the orders of creation” (artistic, spiritual, scientific, symbolic even political) and the social belief is that through culture as whole a „collective liberator social system” can be established.

On the other hand, proclaiming the universal character of culture - vision that states the universally available content of culture (cultural heritage) - , its collectivisation, interpretation and evaluation is done by unanimous criteria because works of art are universally admired. This confers creation a social emancipative power. In fact, art and culture are seized by the elite because this apparently socially representative system is founded and addressed to the taste and will of just one structure, the elitist one.² Basically, it is this structure that assures the circulation of any cultural good, aesthetically representative for the whole society.

From the 18th century, the principles of positivism are questioned: culture is perceived as an introverted characteristic of individuals, not as a social objectivization of emancipation which maintains the human being in the circle of satisfying its needs through rapidly consumed and renewed production cycles, as Menger says. So, the artistic act is attributed to spiritual haven, to the detachment from the collective social influence; the cultural objective is fathoming and returning to one’s own being and an attempt of the individual to re-establish a link with nature.

Culture will gain a new sense, more appropriate to the registry of art, religion or moral values. Culture’s universal heritage is replaced by the intimate reflection on individuality; the whole is entwined from the perspective of unifying differences and particularities set free from the mystified significations, from moral and religious authority. Thus, culture takes the form of the feeling of recognising the other as a relativism of the world representation. The artist is interested exclusively in how he can release his individual creativity, in the liberalized expressivity: the new projected cultural form isn’t interested in progress, but the artistic movement, its capacity to manifest itself.

Practically, nowadays the notion of artist is reinvested to recover the spiritually individualized symbolic deficiencies. The artist is valued and incorporated into art not just for his productive quality, for being a creator of artistic goods, but as a participant to his own becoming in a society that belongs to the right to difference and to the right to particular expression.

„If we seek a simple image to exemplify the difference between the individual’s integrity in a less differentiated society and the interrelationship within a more differentiated one we can think of the quality of the roads in each society. They are, in a certain way, spatial functions of social integration, which is no longer expressed quadri-dimensionally. Let us think of the bad roads from the warrior society, characterized by a less developed natural economy. Circulation is, in most of the cases, very low: the main danger man represents here for his fellows is a warrior attack or a plunder”.³

It is necessary to return to the history of the linguistic customs in order to see how the term „culture” evolved to a representing indicator of social progress. In the 18th century, in German society, the opposition between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* marks at some point the tension of the middle class and the court aristocracy and, as Norbert Elias underlines, the Germans considered that being a courtier was similar to acting like a Frenchman. After the French Revolution, the German *Kultur* is imported by the French and becomes characteristic to defining the new space after the Old Regime.

Elias also says that the ascending evolution of German bourgeoisie „from the condition of a second grade social class to that of the bearer of German national conscience and, finally - much later and just conditionally - to that of a dominant class; from a class that was firstly bound to understand and justify itself especially by raising against the upper class of courtier aristocracy, then by confining itself from the rival nations; in this context the antithesis *Kultur/Zivilisation* and its whole semantic content, sense and function; a predominantly social antithesis becomes a predominantly national

one".⁴ In fact, the concept of *Kultur* was belonging to the intellectual element of the middle class and its content was antinomic: it characterized superficiality and profoundness. This term becomes the emancipatory centre of this middle state because it is the first that substantiates its self conscience and it is rather preoccupied by pure spirituality, art, religion, philosophy than by economy or politics. *Kultur* is used to delimit art from the economic, political and social fields.

ANTI-DEMOCRATIZATION. ARTISTIC FABRICATION OF SOCIAL SYMBOLS

According to the theoretical political premises of Jacques Ranciere from a position justification point of view, art has two attitudes. In the autonomous position, art will confer the artist its whole instrumental and the artist's stake will be the social acknowledgement of his autonomy and gaining the right to have his own and different place in society. But the accent is placed on the inventory of art, that has to merge with the social reality if social fact can be shifted in the artistic environment.

Of course, in this context where social fact is the basic material of the artistic process, the hegemony arts wants to establish within society depends on the sense attributed to the social fact by art. The predilection towards what theoreticians call „the small social histories“, assimilated in the collective mental as a sum of factual representations make the artistic discourse interested in verifying the work of art's authenticity at the highest degree of social participation the artist can manifest. In this case, art isn't an extension of abstractly signified political domain, but a politization of the social.

Nevertheless, the liberalisation of art by what Pierre-Michel Menger class a manifestation of the public cultural action is justified by the closeness to society of the innovating artist and doesn't imply the affirmation of social democracy. The function of cultural politics is assured by the request (object of democracy) and offer (as a supporting object). Even if complementary, the two structures have

different existential reasons and the cleavage between them is more accentuated as the artist tries to recover this distance through his work of art. The art's attempt to reflect social ideas often leads to an ideological dissemination of non-democratic forms by the artistic fabrication of political and social elements. One of the most violent aspects of artistic fabrication was assimilated in the situationist criticism as a misappropriation (Guy Debord, 1967), i.e. it challenges the theoretical authority designated by tradition and establishes new developments by depreciating tradition and transforming it into a quote.

„Certainly the modern era brought artistic fabrication in a profoundly contradictory situation, especially the fabrication of visual arts, which impose themselves only by dangling speech: indeed, how can the requirement of people emancipation, inherited from the Revolution, be reconciled by the means of these arts, which are based on the shaping of the masses through the emotion hidden by forms and colours? Clearly, if the artist's freedom can be confused with the freedom to organize and form the masses, then a question arises: that of knowing to what point the exercise of the visual arts is compatible with the existence of a democracy that would want to be based on the rule of the debate“⁵.

For example, Hannah Arendt demonstrates in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the racist attitude originates in the German artistic thought, which will use it to unite the people against any non-German domination.

Thus, „the conscience of a common origin“ had the role of stimulating nationalism, but national feelings were expressed without hurting a people or a race; they later became stereotypical formulas of racism. Puerile xenophobia seems to have lead to racism along with the political romanticism thought. „No real object, no historical event, no political idea were immune to the risk of being subjected to the irresistible self destructive mania through which these first literates could always find new and original occasions to have new and fascinating ideas“⁶ The worship specific to the followers of

Romanticism created a mass ideologization. Mussolini was the first to use Romantic prerogatives as an instrument for ideologization. German intellectuals supporting the „native personality”⁷ rapidly adhered to social anti-Semitism, which derives from a wrong view of „the force of genius”⁸.

„In his very sophisticated and spiritual way, Bretano underlines the contrast between the «native personality», the genius and the «philistine», that he identifies with the French and the Jews”⁹. Racism was created by prestigious intellectuals, a discriminatory attitude used by the Creator in order to justify his superiority. The White Clown was the Artist who created the conditions to proclaim the Dictator’s authority. If the Tirant is also the Clown, August the Fool is no longer a merry andrew, he’s a pseudo-tumbler, the unsubjected Creator, who is an inhabitant of the regime and not its creator. „Is the White Clown just the ridiculous Authority and August the Fool, the unsubjectedness, the laughter and the suffering?”¹⁰.

THE DISSIDENT ARTIST’S CRISIS OR WHEN ART IS DEPRIVED OF INDIGNATION

Under the form initiated by Nathalie Heinich, the „triple game” of transgressions, reactions and integrations, the corpus of contemporary art was used in order to affirm its opposition against the political mainstream. But in this case doesn’t art tend to circumscribe itself as an alternative politics? Is the work of art more valuable if it’s involved in a political action? Where does politics begin and where is art over?

The large number of structures and methods and specific interactions that contemporary art invests in society brings into debate how much the work of art remains autonomous to politics and if the art institution doesn’t change into a political institution. Considering that figurative art is no longer incorporated into contemporary art, social statements became the main object of a work of art. A work of art without a statement is an

„emaciated” one, a decomposition of the artistic concept, an arid element, an isolated product of reality especially that even the aesthetic experience of collective life reconfiguration – that Ranciere refers to in his reflections on the artistic criticism theory - is missing. As we said before, contemporary art gains the role of becoming a public cultural action, an outsourced manifestation of the social expression potential of which the artist is capable. Thus, „the worker-artist” has the responsibility to react to the stimuli of social reality and to adopt a militant attitude towards them.

Having the same motivation, artistic dissidence, that has a long history (culture is the most popular form of resistance in the face of oppression), it attracts the public more than the formalism of the political discourse because art is envisaged as a subjective reflection on reality. Through this subjectivism, recognized and assumed, art is perceived as a more democratic space than any political democracy.

Departing from the principle of knowledge established by sociologists, „logic doesn’t reside in the institutions or their external functions, but in the way they are mentioned in the reflections about them. In other words, the reflexive conscience overlaps logic and institutional order”¹¹. Art does not just imagine its own political institution, but it reconfigures the one already present in society because it belongs to it; reality is understood by the contemporary artist as a construction in-the-make. As a political institution, art can de-structure the social discourse better than the social discourse. From the middle of the 20th century the segment of art within society, an instrument of social and artistic criticism, becomes more popular. It brings forth the dissident artist, a citizen who opposes the majority’s opinion and renegotiates his liberties.

For example, Mikkel Bolt mentions in *Political Art Between Reform and Revolution* groups of artists like Artist Placement Group and Art Workers Coalition; they intervened in urgent political issues like the Cold War or the Vietnam war, intending to distance themselves from the institutionalized structures of cultural or

political practice. During their actions, even the central art galleries in New York became a space for protest; one of these galleries, MOMA, was accused of generating an imperialist and sexist expositional policy.

The opposition act – ranging from dissidence to revolt – interceded by art accelerated the artist's professionalisation as a political activist. For example, during the „war of culture“ of the 90s in the USA photographer Andres Serrano becomes the subject of different debates between the leaders of conservatory and liberal political factions because of his series of works „bodily fluids“, „the klansmen“ and of his reinterpretations of religious iconic clichés.

Moreover, the Daniele Buetti's installations propose an imaginary complex built by images specific to publicity campaigns that Buetti modifies and thus changes their aesthetic sense and social reference. Likewise, Franz Ackermann's approach, a nomad of perception, presents the interpretation of sensorial experience at a psychic level in different parts of cultural contexts using painting as a main channel. At the same time the performance of Oleg Kulik (Russia) questions the human condition during the post-communist transition. Likewise, in Great Britain there is a strong movement of conceptual art, YBA (Young British Artists) whose productions capture public attention; the group starts to act as a public voice representing the social segment.

Another British artist, Ceal Floyer, proposes the dematerialization of the art object, replacing it by evidence of daily reality, like receipts or garbage bags filled with air. On the other hand, one of the artists tries to pass over the political substance of our times, the issue of cultural identity, artists like Takashi Murakami and Yoshito Nara, who reinterpret the objects specific to non-Japanese culture by combining elements of fantastic imaginary.

In another train of thoughts, there is a tendency to link art to society, to give a political characteristic to the artistic act and to rediscover the link between man and art, that becomes known along with the avant-garde as a critic of modern criteria. But the repetition of questioning

and decomposition of social principles, the never-ending revolt of the artistic process of our time make us wonder if contemporary art cannot be defined, eventually, as a specific politics of society, where the artistic political manifest demands the re-evaluation of the social freedoms.

The socially active artist tries to set himself and the others free; he acts and brings to the public attention a social fact from his reality, but that reality will no longer belong exclusively to him because he doesn't want to represent it for himself, but to show it to the others and then they can make it a characteristic of their social given. The appropriation (at a group level) of the social given starting from the artistic statement is determined by how much society will invest in the artistic circulation of a social given. The next example, from the history of DAAD Gallery, shows how this group went bankrupt because its artistic statement no longer had an object in the new social democratic reality. Artistic dissidence had lost its goal; when the opponent disappeared, it no longer had sense.

„Through the creation of DAAD Gallery in 1978 by intense cooperation with the National Gallery and the Arts Academy, the program dedicated to the artist was integrated in the Berliner artistic scene. The fall of the Berlin Wall ironically offered the pretext of cutting the program's budgets, a program that once had an ideologically-cultural base. Along with the financial needs, a legitimacy crisis emerged. What could be is cultural-political mission then, after the downfall of socialism, especially if the reunification process had unleashed phenomena like xenophobia and right wing radicalism, which were opposed to the internationalism that characterized many decades? The art program of DAAD, this island of the happy, was confronted with the image of the foreign enemy and with the fact that Berliner culture had served as an ideological-cultural battlefield in the confrontation between the Eastern and Western blocks“¹².

Starting from the embellishment of the political field, contemporary art finished its own

form of politising the social field, redefined revolt and then made it its goal, creating a new type of social activism. Contemporary art's discourse can't be separated from its political element, that it incorporated in the cultural institution. For the matter, it is confronted nowadays with a big identity crisis and as violent as Piero Manzoni's statement might seem – that *painting is not meant to decorate apartments, but it is a war instrument used to attack and defend against the enemy* – it contains a truth about how the object of contemporary art works; social contemplation isn't enough for the contemporary art.

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