

Art, Avantgarde and Autonomy: Why Art and Life May Have to Change Places

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One of the driving forces of the historical avant-gardes a hundred years ago, that is: of Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Russian constructivism – was the determination to "reintegrate art into the practice of life". Fusing art with life was partly a reaction to the dandyism of 'the art for art's sake' aestheticism, and partly a move to counter the anti-technological stance of literary modernism. Embracing new technologies of media and mobility, such as photography, the cinema, the motor-car and aeroplanes (and everything else that was 'resolutely modern'), avant-garde artists like Marinetti, Tristan Tsara, Hans Richter, André Breton, Vladimir Mayakowski and Dziga Vertov wanted to shorten the distance between 'art' and 'life': usually by (a form of) direct activism that involved group movements and manifestos, but also by happenings, the provocation of chance, and the productivity of coincidence. Key techniques were montage and collage, i.e. techniques derived from engineering, but now applied in the arts, as the combination of seemingly unrelated elements or materials, the calling up of random associations, the incorporation of the ordinary and the everyday into the art-work, or by verbal and physical attacks on the institution of art itself: "We will destroy the museums, the libraries, and academies of every kind. Let's set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the Venice canals to flood the museums!... Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discolored and shredded!... "so read the Futurist Manifesto in 1909, and the Dadaists exclaimed in 1918: "The new painter creates a world, the elements of which are also its implements. He no longer paints (symbolic or illusionist reproduction) but creates directly in stone, wood, iron, tin, boulders—locomotive organisms capable of being turned in all directions by the limpid wind of momentary sensation. All pictorial or plastic work is useless."

Instead of claiming the autonomy of the individual work, or insisting on the specificity of the artistic medium, art for Dada and Surrealism was mostly a matter of selecting a ready-made object – often industrially produced – and place it in a space or context, a museum or a gallery, where such an object of daily use had never been seen before. The most famous art-object of this kind was Marcel Duchamp's urinal, turned upside down and renamed "Fountain" in 1917, and the most infamous happening was the assertion by one of the Surrealists in the late 1920s, that the aesthetic act par excellence was to take to the street and shoot off a pistol randomly into the crowd.

One wonders whether this surrealist would have recognized as his followers the attackers of Paris, Nice, Orlando and Berlin? Maybe some of you will remember the composer Karl Heinz Stockhausen musing aloud in September 2001 that the downing of the Twin Towers on 9/11 was the kind of total work of art that artists could only dream of: "You have people who are so concentrated on one single performance, and then 5,000 people are dispatched into eternity, in a flash of a moment. I couldn't do that. In comparison with that, we're nothing as composers."

Luckily, it is not often that one hears anything as grotesque as this, but even Don deLillo asks, in his novel *Mao II*: "Have terrorists seized control of the world narrative, have they captured the historical imagination, have they become, in effect, the world's new novelists? For sheer influence over the human mind, they have already displaced the precarious hold that literature once had on our collective consciousness."

In less dramatic ways, art institutions, artists and public art funding have - over the past 30-odd years, tried to compensate and to regain territory for art to have a place and make its mark on our hearts and minds. Under such labels as "relational aesthetics" – defined as "art and exhibition practices that take as their point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context" – the art world has, since the 1990s wanted once more to bring art and life closer together. Relational aesthetics views the work of art as the "catalyst" or "facilitator", initiating a dialogue between contemporary issues and the film spectator or museums visitor. As Nicholas Bourriaud, who coined the term relational aesthetics, claimed: "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually provide ways of living, and models for action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist."

Supporters argue that instead of the artwork being merely an encounter between a viewer and an object, relational art tries to generate intersubjective events. Through these events, meaning and therefore also relevance, is elaborated collectively, rather than decided in the space of individual contemplation or consumption. It also redefines the role of the artist. Now, the artist is less an autonomous creator, and more someone who initiates a process, who sets up the conditions for such an encounter, who runs a laboratory rather than retreats to the studio, someone who thinks of his or her activity as "research" or "practiced-based theory", rather than as the creation of works that stand alone and speak for themselves. Critics of relational aesthetics are less impressed. Some maintain that yes, art can be cathartic, but it should never be sold to the public as spiritual or emotional therapy.

And yes, art can be political, and aesthetics cannot be divorced from ethics, but art must not try to legitimate itself as a form of social work. Nor are artists agony aunts that tell us how to conduct our lives or help us solve our problems, whether personal or social.

Yet the fact is that art and artists have been depending more and more on the state, on a city or municipality to subsidize not only museums as public institutions, but to support individual artists by way of grants and commissions, through public acquisitions and other forms of aid, for which these bureaucracies, these politicians and these funding bodies do require some kind of accountability and commitment by the artists, such as: to contribute to the public good and somehow show themselves responsive to the taxpayers who trust them and have invested in them. The idea that art can better and enrich the lives of ordinary people does not seem to them such an extravagant expectation.

Other voices, however, point out that “relational aesthetics” is merely an ideology: it rationalizes trends and tendencies that have originated elsewhere – namely in the phenomenon that also arose in the 1990s. Since then we have witnessed how the Museums of Modern Art and even classical Museums have transform themselves into Museums of Contemporary Art or Kunsthallen. Such Museums of Contemporary Art are run more like a department store or a trade fair than a traditional museum. They put on temporary exhibitions in blockbuster format rather than highlight and display works from their own collection (if they still have one); they maintain an extensive and expensive museum shop, and they build an atrium that houses a coffee bar and a restaurant. In short, museums have become a mass medium, which tries to fuse the playful with the educational, and the spectacular with the tasteful. Relational art is the perfect fit for such a museum of contemporary art. But so is the post-industrial, contemporary city.

Because these museums as mass medium are now a crucial part of every urban ecology, often located near the water or in the vicinity of parks and green spaces. They are crucial instruments of city branding, they are indispensable for cultural tourism, and they are an integral part of the enhancement of the quality of life, by which European cities, but increasingly also Asian cities, want to attract young professionals and especially the so-called creative industries of ‘media’ and high-tech, of design and fashion. Art, in other words, like ‘culture’ in general, has become a public good to be consumed, and serves as a lubricant in almost all areas of contemporary life.

No wonder that philosophers and cultural critics are not entirely happy with these trends, and several of them – among them Boris Groys and Jacques Ranciere – have proposed that it is time to reconsider the arguments in favour of the radical autonomy of art, such as it had prevailed during the years of high modernism in the United States – the 1940s and 1950s – and such as it had been formulated, at around the same time, by critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, notably by T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their famous chapter on the “culture industry” and later on, in Adorno’s *Art as a Form of Negative Dialectics*.

Following in the footsteps of Adorno, the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere, has argued that ‘art-for-art-sake’ had proved a better defence against totalitarian temptations than avant-garde activism: after all, Marinetti had supported Italian fascism, and many Russian avantgardists were coopted to Stalin’s version of Soviet Communism. According to Ranciere, neither extreme (art for art’s sake, nor art as activism) can rescue the subversive potential of art, which involves what he calls a ‘double heteronomy’, that is, outside pressure and interference:

“Whether the quest is for art alone or for emancipation through art, the stage is the same. On this stage, art must tear itself away from the territory of aestheticized life and draw a new borderline, which cannot be crossed. This is a position that we cannot simply assign to avant-garde insistence on the autonomy of art. For this autonomy proves to be in fact a double heteronomy, in the same way as the autonomy of Schönberg’s music, as conceptualized by Adorno, is a double heteronomy: *in order to denounce the capitalist division of labour and the adornments of commodification, it has to take that division of labour yet further, to be still more ‘inhuman’ than the products of capitalist mass production*. But this inhumanity, in turn, makes the stain & blur of what has been repressed appear and disrupt the perfect technical arrangement of the work. The ‘autonomy’ of the avant-garde work of art becomes the tension, between the bonds that tie Ulysses to his mast and the song of the sirens against which he stops his ears.”

If “relational aesthetics” is the sirens’ song and the “autonomy of art” is the mast to which Ulysses asks his men to tie him, is it then the State or the respective government minister, as the agent of this double heteronomy or outside interference, who can steer the ship into safer waters? Maybe the problem has to be posed differently. Let’s assume that the ‘art’-‘life’ dichotomy, in the form of the relation to the State at one end, and responsibility to the public at the other end, is indeed one of the primary concerns of the art world today.

Since in addition, all artists think of themselves as avant-garde as a matter of principle, and therefore have a stake in independence and autonomy, then Ranciere's idea of a '*double heteronomy*', i.e. of a mutually conditioned 'outside determination' should also be taken seriously into account. We can start by agreeing that 'art' and 'life' are both coming under pressure, as it were, by external forces, and this in such a way that they mutually reconfigure or antagonize each other, without fully reflecting these outside forces. However, I am not sure that the State and the public are the only external forces responsible for this renewed tension between 'art' and 'life'. Just as important, if not more so, is the impact, for instance that design has on both art and life, with the combined effect that *today life and art are, if anything, too close together* – not because of relational aesthetics or the pressure on art to be socially relevant, but because our very idea of what is "art" and what is "life" has changed so much in the last thirty years that we need to remind ourselves of some of the basics, even before we can decide what might be their proper relation to each other.

Why do I say that "life and art are now too close together"? One of the major developments of the 20th century – reflected in the debates around bio-power, bio-politics and the condition of the post-human – has been the way that life has become more like art, and this in several distinct ways; first, in the Western world, everyday life has in almost all its aspects fallen under the regime of *style*, usually seen as the consequence either of a relentless *aesthetisation of life, public space and politics* (to use Ranciere's term which echoes Walter Benjamin) or of *commodification* (to use the Marxist term) not just of objects, but of affects, not just of needs but of desire itself.

Yet in the form of *design*, this "will to style" has become much more than either the aesthetized life or the fetish of the commodity: design has become the very term of our attempt to control the world and shape our environment, and it has become the tool of our *self-determination* as individuals and as political collectivities: we want to take control of our lives by giving it shape and design, not just by preserving and prolonging it as much as possible, but in order to improve it, to maximise and optimise it. What Michel Foucault analysed as the '*care of the self*' has been pushed further into '*care of the future self*' - a forward-looking venture that converts personal goals and ideals, into a kind of aspirational self-'serving' entrepreneurship.

Second, this notion of *design*, in conjunction with *technology* and *engineering*, is the pervasive force not just in the sphere of ‘social engineering’, in ‘government planning’ or personal life-style choices: the so-called life-sciences (biology, molecular genetics, the neuro-sciences) are reshaping our understanding of ‘bios’ and ‘zoon’ (that is, life as animate matter and life as sentient beings) in the terms more familiar from the built or constructed environment and from technological systems, while biological processes or the natural properties of plants and animals become increasingly available as ‘technologies’ for the development of new materials, modified food, but also for enhancing the possibilities of human life, in the transition to the post-human: think of artificial enzymes or proteins, gene therapy or stem cells, all of which are now the ‘building blocks’ or design elements for a whole range of new life forms.

If ‘life’ has thus become more like art, in the sense that reality is shaped by ‘design’ and artifice, and life, in its very fabric is now a matter of engineering: genetic-engineering, neuro-programming and bio-technology, while artificial intelligence, in the form of ‘embedded software’ and ‘smart devices’ manifests itself in fully embodied ways at the most levels of human communication and everyday interaction with the material world, then it is not surprising that the question: what future for ‘art’ has re-appeared with special urgency, which is to say: with as much anxiety as cynicism.

One of the implications of the post-human horizon, as I have just been sketching it, is that the very idea of art – whether as a special form of creativity or even of art as a ‘technology’ – will all but disappear, at least as a separate realm. Even the concept of ‘medium’ will be expendable. Notions like ‘cyberspace’ are already quaint and antiquated, and ‘virtual reality’ will soon become a pleonasm: a redundancy after having been a contradiction in terms. A good example that reality is already colonized by the virtual are human-computer interfaces. They were initially modelled around our presumed familiarity with the book, the office desk, or the cinema, but today the operating systems of our digital devices increasingly model themselves around our primary perceptual organs and senses: sight, hearing and touch, facial recognition and speech interaction. In short, they are becoming ‘transparent’ and invisible, or as Steve Jobs used to say, every aspect of the Apple interface must be “intuitive”.

The combined forces of design and engineering, in other words, are part of the heteronomy, the outside interference that reshapes art and life and their relations to each other. But there is another heteronomous force that plays into the equation. This is the fact that one of our most basic ontological categories, namely the nature/culture divide, no longer holds: the human impact on nature has been such that we are living in the anthropocene, i.e. the geological macro-epoch where culture dominates nature to the extent that it determines nature. This, too, is part of the post-human, and its most important implication for our argument about art, autonomy and the avantgarde, is that the *post-human proceeds from the assumption that human beings are so adaptable and flexible that they can be seamlessly aligned and synchronized with intelligent machines*. In the post-human, there are no essential differences between bodily existence and computer simulation, between cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, between robots running on programmes or algorithms, and humans pursuing lofty goals or following their baser instincts: all are merely the various aggregate forms of one substance: *information and data*.

So where does this leave us? In one sense, if the avant-gardes, both then and now, aim at closing the gap between art and life, then they have achieved more than they may have wished, because they have succeeded to the point of having not only made art but also themselves obsolete. And much of what one sees in galleries today is proudly displaying this obsolescence: artists reverse engineer practices that now executed digitally, and they hand-craft objects that used to be industrially produced, but have been superseded by electronic devices. The “Nuts and Bolts” installations currently on display as part of IFFR are eloquent witnesses: They touch us with their vulnerability (to indifference and condescension) and they tread a narrow path between nostalgia and utopia – the utopia that a simpler life and a more authentic art might still be possible.

It is to this utopia that I want to appeal by way of conclusion, but with a slight twist. As I have argued, the post-human position implies a more or less *smooth alignment* between man and machine, between bios and techné, and thus it operates with an ‘*adaptationist*’ model of *evolution*. However, according to some credible studies of evolutionary biology, neuro-sciences and the philosophy of consciousness (Francisco Varela, Thomas Metzinger, Antonio Damasio and Daniel Dennett), this smooth alignment theory is questionable: *Human beings are constitutively un-adapted*.

And Slavoj Žižek, in his book *The Parallax View* – one of the possible inspirations of the Parallax section of IFFR this year – goes even further: what makes us human is precisely that we are an accident of nature. In all likelihood, we remain this accident, because consciousness is actually due to a malfunction of evolution: we weren't supposed to have so much agency or control over our environment – and the fact that we seem to be set on destroying this environment – and us with it – just proves how maladjusted we actually are.

And here lies the chance for art. As 'life' becomes more 'artificial', by being designed, engineered and programmable, 'art' should become more life-like: in the sense of giving renewed scope to accident and the unpredictable, to chance and contingency, to the random and the redundant – all properties of 'life' as it has evolved – in order to re-establish its autonomy as art. It would even take up one part of the legacy of the historical avantgardes, who may have been too eager to cast their lot in with technology and engineering, but who had the proper respect for *the provocation of chance, and the productivity of coincidence, and the possibilities of an open future*. It suggests that the heteronomous forces I have been invoking are best understood if we do not expect them to fuse art with life, nor to oppose art and life, but to effect a different re-alignment, namely where **art** and **life** might be allowed to **change places**.

And this means that art may have to be stripped of meaning and design, of goals and purpose, of social relevance and immediate relatability – and whatever other forms of interaction we have in mind for it. - But precisely because such an art would then be in the service of 'life', it deserves our special attention – which means: it deserves to be financed and funded by the State, and to be supported and subsidized by its citizens and the public.