

Erasing of Context Through Hyper-Production

Anarchism and Art

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We will take a look at art from the political aspect and at interpretation of art through political systems, look at how they overlap, and the relationship between art and anarchism. We will examine how the ideas of freedom and autonomy in the politics and art developed together and how they overlapped, starting at the end of the 18th century during Enlightenment and throughout the 19th century and a fast development of capitalist relations and the bourgeois society. As the capitalist civil society developed, art became liberated from church and classic institutions, as well as from dwelling under dominant classes. A paradigm about an autonomous artist who can change the society with his work was developed during Romanticism. Anarchism of the 19th century was based on the political activity and struggle against all forms of domination and governance that was separated from the people. Artists who created their own autonomy also shared views of anarchists. Let's mention some of the cases from the 19th century which constitute these relations.

Gustave Courbet is a well known French artist, and also a revolutionary of the Paris Commune. His artistic work initiated the so-called Social Realism, i.e. Realism in painting. On the other hand, Courbet demolished various bourgeois symbols and monuments (for example, the Vendome column) and was an active member of the Communal Council. During the Communards' fight against the bourgeoisie, he lucidly advised that artwork could be used in the revolutionary fight by using the paintings of Botticelli, Raphael and other ancient masters from the Louvre as barricades. During the second half of the 19th century, the poet Mallarme publicly supported anarchists during a court procedure. Rimbaud abandoned the role of a bourgeois poet despising it, and left for Africa. Tolstoy liberated serfs of the taxes and fees by giving them land and creating a kind of a free co-operative...

However, art as we know it today emerged in the conditions of the nascent bourgeois society and the rise of the capitalist production, so that symbolic language used by artists in the production of artworks is the language formed in the culture of capitalist relations.

During the 20th century and the modernist project that was striving to change society - thus having an undeniable political role - artistic strategies and initial positive background of the avant-garde got transformed in the means of propaganda of the totalitarian systems, such as fascism. Philosopher Adorno analyzed these aspects in his cultural studies and developed a term culture industry after immigrating to the United States. As historical process progressed over totalitarian and technological eras, art adopted all applicable forms of a cultural product in the culture industry. The development and history of film industry is the best example of this process, and so is the history of popular culture. The illustration and final determination of visual culture industry in the so-called "high" art can be seen in the act of tautological appropriation by Warhol and other pop artists. Same as Adorno, a philosopher of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, defines the concept of cultural product and emphasizes that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Georges Bataille wrote about the Potlatch in culture, i.e. the need to produce excessive materiality, generated by the society itself, in order to destroy it ritually later on.

After the World War II, as state cultural bureaucracies grew stronger, art production was supported by the institutionalized esthetics of blocks of the time. In the East-European cultures, canonized socialist realism held sway, while the paradigm of a free artistic expression was built in the West, filtered through art market and the myth of a great modernist artist. Jackson Pollock produced abstract expressionism, supported by the government and cultural policies of the United States. There is a catalog from 1961 of the exhibition of “Contemporary American Art” which was realized in the American Embassy in Belgrade (in Yugoslavia, a socialist country, with a specific role between two blocks), representing the entire art scene of the time: De Kooning, Pollock, Mark Rothko, etc. – almost all artist of that heroic abstract expressionism.

During those cold war years, the Situationist International begins its activity. Situationist theoretician Guy Debord criticized art heavily, removing from Situationism all those who produced art through the system of institutions and, as he put it – expanded the field of spectacle. Situationists write that culture is a commodity that sells everything else, which seems very modern even today.

The activity of the conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, the “anarchist and shaman”, is very interesting. He gives a definition that “Kunst=Kapital”. Using that, he reflects on the ontological existence of art in the field of capitalism. No matter how much he plays on the verge of excess and politics, Beuys’ freedom still remains in the frame of a specific West Germany’s (Social or Christian Democratic) capitalist system of that period. His political role served as a kind of a mirror (that works as a mediator) for artists living in former East Germany. Beuys’ mirrored subject gave the illusion of extreme liberties, i.e. as much as it was possible that an artist is free in West Germany.

In the current global cultural production, through cultural management and mediation, art is produced in the context of marketing campaigns for financially powerful bodies and companies, cultural tourism, etc. - i.e. sectors which can generate fresh profit. In the age of post-fordism, new museums are built instead of factories, all kinds of things are restored and made into artifacts, festivals are organized in great numbers, same as biennials, music and hybrid festivals, etc. Already for a long now we find art reduced to the role of decorating neoliberal capitalism, functioning in the form of a mere market product. We see the modification of art into marketing strategies and corporate culture. The heritage of the artistic avant-garde, with its conceptual and visual experiments, is part of today’s marketing strategies. For example, we feel free to state that without the collage at the beginning of the 20th century, there would have been no graphical operative computer systems or many other technological-conceptual products. And in a way, with their practice called *détournement*, situationists opened the door for today’s models of para-advertising.

In a culture, besides marketing strategies, there is also present a political mediation, which according to the theory of identity, transfers the former partition of society into classes to the paradigm of different identities. In the Balkans, this kind of mediation is very apparent in the recent economic and political processes. Contemporary art is used both as a means for political propaganda and for the expansion of the market. Various brands have been imported from the dominant cultural areas and are implanted by propaganda tools and the media into the market of a subordinated cultural habitat. This transfer of cultural packages is locally put into practice uncritically as a form of “cultural karaoke”. At the same time, in these surroundings, particular profiles have developed for dealing with specific tasks in cultural politics. For the initiation of the transition in Eastern European cultures, contemporary art served a position described as “Soros-Realism” (after the name of the foundation mainly financing these kind of programs in Ex-

Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe during the nineties). Cultural politics and the agendas they impose are realized through the neoliberal strategies of the free market and with the help of the (European) totalitarian bureaucratic apparatus. We witness the expansion of consumption and cultural hyper-production, the branding of a region and the processes of gentrification providing ground for future economic investments. In Belgrade, Serbia, a good example of the transition process in the arts is the “October Salon”, an until now conservative manifestation, which is currently becoming an international biennial, Belgrade meeting the same fate as the other main cities of the region. The aim is to have an exhibition similar to anywhere else in the region or Europe, the ideal effect being to change the city’s global image and to stimulate larger future economic investments.

Throughout its history, institutional art has already repeated the act of recuperation so many times that everything can be offered on its market. Consequently, the art works presented at these kind of biennials and shows look equally unconvincing. All possible kinds of conceptions have already been recuperated a thousand times and multiplied in the digital media. The concept of copyright cannot cope with the contemporary remix culture. The performative has become the manifestation of the spectacle and the creativity of the “virtual bodies”/“avatars” takes place inside of the defined corporate spaces of net games (such as “Second Life”). Context alone is not enough for the affirmation of an art work. Or rather, we observe the erasure of context itself - more precisely, the subsumption of all contexts into one single context, the celebration of capitalist superiority in corporate culture.

As regards the question of context, it is interesting to have a look at exhibitions like the show about the RAF (Red Army Fraction), which was realized in a quite relaxed way some years ago at Kunstwerke in Berlin. Accompanied by a fat catalogue, it promoted an aesthetic image of the RAF, showing art works, films and documentations representing something like the “radical art” we can enjoy today while having a coffee at the gallery’s bar. A similar treatment of the issue is exemplified in the worldwide retrospectives concerning the Situationist International during the last few years. They tend to show the situationists in their aesthetic and formal aspects, to the neglect of the true political context. Currently there is a show about SPUR, a section of situationists from Munich. The interpretation of their activities also concentrates on their aesthetic and formal aspects, putting the political in the background. The same process has happened to Dada and Surrealism too, as the phenomenon of these movements has for the most part entered the archives interpreted through the aesthetics and theory of the image, whereas their main aim of changing something through direct action in everyday life (also the main aim of anarchist groups) is disregarded.

In his essay *The Case Against Art*, the anarchist writer John Zerzan criticizes postmodern and other aspects of art and its entrance into civilisation. Zerzan doesn’t criticize art as such, but the ways it is presented in a culture. For him, art is problematic because it speaks in a symbolic language mediated through experts who tell us what art is and what we should learn and experience as art.

The majority of artists in the field of anarchism are linked in their activities to postanarchism or queer theory. A large number of participants in the field of contemporary art consider it inevitable to actively enter the art system, claiming that we cannot neglect it nor find any strategy to avoid it. According to them, it is necessary to enter the system with an rhizomatic idea about relations and to “invisibly” destruct and destroy it through various positions of identity - to play

with the system in a way that simply makes its functioning impossible on different levels. This is more or less the current state of the discourse between postanarchism and contemporary art. The attitude of anarchists towards art has always been critical and entrance into the system (even as an extreme strategy/anti-strategy) especially problematic. Only free play in everyday life can open a space for direct interpersonal contact and direct action and the symbolic models of artistic communication cannot replace that.

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