

## Principles of Hope

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One of the oldest avantgarde gestures aims at the reconciliation of art and social practices by abolishing artistic autonomy. From constructivism to conceptualism, we recognize an avantgarde by its characteristic attempts to collapse the difference between art and social practice. The classical starting point for many contemporary theoretical treatments of the problem of autonomy is Peter Bürger's "Theory of the Avantgarde"(1974). According to Bürger, the autonomy of art has traditionally been defined as art's independence from praxis. From a neo-marxist perspective he argues that the conditions for autonomy are social and historical. Autonomy is a construct of bourgeois society: i.e. a function of the liberal, capitalist, democratic, social order.

The separation of art from social praxis is itself a social fact. For this reason, Bürger is sceptical about the anti-autonomy gestures made by the avant-garde, and he argues that such gestures do not get the depth of the problem. As long as the bourgeois order remains, artistic autonomy cannot and should not be willed away. His argument, like that of Adorno, is that art as a reflexive sanctuary has the responsibility to criticize society, not by engaging with politics, but by withholding itself from society and politics. Because of that freedom, art has a value in itself.

Current art practice shows a renewed interest in the social responsibility of art. The problem addressed now seems to retain the autonomy of art (the critical distance of the aesthetic) but at the same time to break the active-passive opposition. One could describe this new artistic engagement "as a cultural struggle, where artists integrate the art institution's modes of operation into an expanded artistic praxis and attempt to prevent the art work's mere implosion in the art world. Here, art work and everyday life supplement one another in a determined manner; and the presence of the aesthetic in the social can be understood as a qualitative requisite for reconsidering circumstances and conditions, in the real and imagined space which is our historical reality."<sup>(1)</sup> The interesting aspect of this expanded art is its relatively autonomous position, which again provides a sanctuary where new things can emerge. Art is the location with the possibility of representation, of shaping images, and of activating the process of perceiving images. With that, current art is more than mere works of art (the autonomous objects of the classic avantgarde): it is a process of reflection, discussion and activation extremely well suited to act as an impetus for creating the space (of autonomous communication) where people are invited to start thinking again about how things should be represented.

The new emphasis appears to be on creating a real interface with the world. Much social engaged art has at its core a form of "collectivity", only becoming meaningful when it actively involves the participation of other individuals. Individuals who seem to be living in a society that is pervasively technological and totally overwhelmed by the aim of consensus. Individuals who can collect thrills and sensations, without real experiences. Thus, the main point is the lack of experiences, in particular the experience of facing the other, since such an experience presupposes an openness to a difference lacking in the (postmodern) subject conditioned by the mass media. This individual is only able to accept the other, if it supports him/her understanding of him/herself. Thus, it implies a fatal lack of ability to confront the other in mutual respect. It is a type of individual that is a passive by-stander, who only follows the rules, and who doesn't create or interpret things him/herself.

Now my central claim - with the help of the work of the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk - is that, instead of meaninglessness and an inability to confront the other, contemporary art demonstrates in fact, the opposite. This avantgarde art isn't flat, or just ironic (transavantgarde art of the 80s), but is very aware of our current realities. Both the presupposition and the very effect of Van Heeswijks dealing with varied versions of reality is based on a comprehension of the fact that there is not just one reality, but numerous versions of realities shaped and defined with different values, interests, aims, needs and fears.

An example. The work Valley Vibes (Exhibition, Democracy!, (2)): an encased trolley full of sound equipment. The trolley is available for people living in areas of London undergoing urban regeneration to use as they wish. Responding to flyers and posters, people may borrow the trolley for parties, for weddings and other functions, using it as a sound system. Others use it to record themselves, their poetry or music, or to voice their opinions on subjects such as the conditions of the area.

While experiencing this work, you have to accept a plurality of views and values, from which it is your task, your responsibility, and your freedom to make a choice. This is a start in which you realize that you are never able to fully know the other, or yourself. You come to understand, slowly but surely, that instead of trying to keep up the **hopeless** illusion of total knowledge, and the illusion of controlling uncertainties (such as the process of your identity), you are able to face the other, and yourself. You are on the verge of being able to confront the plurality of realities and experiences, and also of being able to confront the otherness, the other existing values, with mutual respect and recognition, which does not and cannot mean relativism. What it means is that you have to put forward your own values and needs, which you then have to compare with other alternatives.

What is left is the "communicative openness" Habermas describes in his Theory of Communicative Action. One should not avoid the dialogue about one's claims for validity, but accept it as a constructive given, precisely from the awareness of the omnipresent pluriformity. According to Habermas, this dialogue forms a meaningful perspective within each cultural system. Afterall, everyone actively participating in the dialogue presupposes implicitly the validity of the principles enabling the dialogue. However, one could grant that only by the mere fact of one's participation. A direct consequence of this is that one has to assume that the established criteria for the dialogue will express a guideline for the dialogue's valid principle. These (in line with Bloch's transcendent utopian "Prinzip Hoffnung") principles of hope imply that one can only encounter the otherness of the other, if one supposes that the other with his/her principles will claim an equal validity as well.(3)

Thus, we have come to the position I have been striving for. The question about otherness, especially about how it is received and reflected in contemporary art, come down to the concept of responsibility. You and I, We, have a responsibility towards ourselves and others to try to relate to this plurality of ways of being that is always both inside and outside ourselves. It is about trying to meet the other. Questions about the terms on which you are ready and able to face and cope with it. To what extent are you able to question your own presuppositions and opinions? Van Heeswijk answers that question: "We should return to point zero: the moment where the I ends and the other begins. Perhaps it is here that meaning can be formed: through the interaction of constantly changing practices and activities. If such a point is actually reached, it goes without saying that experience can never be direct and singular. Experience emerges because of the color of different, intersubjective, aesthetic, sense oriented systems. This shared experience, within which we come into being and become aware of being, will lead to a much

more pluriform world of meaning."(4)

By this, Van Heeswijk redefines the artistic sanctuary as a mental space where a new moral attitude might be formulated. Such an attitude should embrace the pluriformity of our contemporary society and attempt to escape from mass media's relativism and fundamentalism. Since today's mass media promise that everything is allowed, a major question is how the spectator deals with that. When one enters the mass domain, one is allowed to become whatever one chooses. In fact that is the law prescribed by the mass media. One could call that phenomenon "event capitalism", or "empire"(negri and hardt). There is just no limit to what one can watch with respect to intimacy, and to what one can buy and become. In this current situation where popular culture tells us "everything is allowed", art has the task to say that that isn't really the case. This isn't real communication or freedom. Therefore, Jeanne van Heeswijk developed the work Draw a Line for a recent exhibition called "Territory"(5). That work draws a line in both a literal and metaphorical sense. It is tired of all those discussions on how boundaries fade away. Precisely in communication with the other there is a clear dearth of artists who currently dare to draw a line by simply saying: "I think that is going much too far."

That is a very strange development in the field of current art. What we discover now is that 19th century avant-garde art, unknowingly, was the promotor of mass media. In fact, by stating we are allowed to show everything, the avant-garde has functioned unconsciously as the motor of the mass-media, since the concept of freedom as defined by the avant-garde has been assumed by the mass-media. Today, art has a new option in being the only sanctuary where one can hear something is not allowed. That position of saying "no" is one of the major principles of a redefined avantgardistic engagement.

#### Notes:

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1. Lars Bang Larsen, Aesthetics of the Social, in Daniel Birnbaum (ed.), "Like Virginit, Once Lost. Five Views on Nordic Art Now", Propexus, 1999, p.59.

2. Exhibition Democracy!, Royal College of Art, London, 2000.

3. Cf. Thierry de Duve's interpretation of Kant's *sensus communis*. It is the assumption that each human being is equipped with a similar universal universal faculty of judgment because of the possibility of communication. (Thierry De Duve, Kant after Duchamp, Cambridge MA, 1996).

4. Jeanne van Heeswijk, in: Exploding Aesthetics, L&B 16, Series of Philosophy of Art and Art Theory, Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds.), Amsterdam/Atlanta, 2001, p.177.

5. Exhibition Territory, Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Tokyo, 2000.