

The logic of equal rights

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To be able to resist an external repression we have to have a power of resistance – a power that is our own internal power. And to have a will to resist we have to have our own goals, or ideals, or principles, or, at least, our own territory, which we are ready and willing to defend. So the following questions arise – has art such autonomous goals, or ideals, or territory which is worth to defend? And has art an autonomous power of resistance that can be used against an external oppression?

All of us know that the autonomy of art was put in question and, actually, denied by many recent art theoretical discourses. If these discourses have right, it would mean that art could not be a source of any resistance to anything. Rather, art could be used only as a means, as a tool for a political struggle in the name of different political forces, ideals and principles. Or we can say that art can be used merely for designing, for aestheticising oppositional, or emancipatorial political movements – as it was always already used for designing and aestheticising the powers to be. In this case art would be only a supplement (in terms of Derrida) – so that art can be a medium of deconstruction but not a medium of active resistance. That seems to me to be a crucial question: Has art a power of its own, or it has only a supplementary power? That is why the question of the autonomy of art is – at least from my standpoint – the central question that should be answered in the context of a discussion on the relationship between art and resistance. And my answer to this question is yes, we can speak about the autonomy of art. And, yes, art has an autonomous power of resistance.

Of course, I don't believe that existing art institutions, art system, art world, or art market are autonomous. The functioning of the existing art system is namely based on certain aesthetic value judgements, on certain criteria of choice, rules of inclusion and exclusion etc. All of these value judgements, criteria and rules are, of course, not autonomous. Rather, they reflect the dominating social conventions and power structures. We can say: There is no purely aesthetic, art immanent, autonomous value judgement that could regulate the art system in its entirety. This insight brought many artists and theorists to the conclusion that art as such is not autonomous, because the autonomy of art was – and still is – thought as dependent on the autonomy of the aesthetic value judgement. But I would suggest that it is precisely this absence of any immanent, purely aesthetic value judgement that guarantees the autonomy of art. The autonomy of art means not an autonomous hierarchy of taste – but abolishing of every such hierarchy and establishing the regime of the equal rights for all the artworks. It means that art as such becomes the socially codified manifestation of fundamental equality between all the existing and virtual visual forms and media. Only against the background of this fundamental aesthetic equality of all the artworks every value judgement, every exclusion or inclusion can be potentially recognised as the results of a heteronomous intrusion into the autonomous sphere of art – as dictated by the outside forces. And it is this recognition that opens the possibility of the resistance against the intrusions into the art's territory in the name of art's autonomy – or, that is the same, in the name of the equality of all the art forms and media. So the autonomy of art is precisely constituted by the equality of all the images which gives the possibility to think and to criticise all the hierarchies as imposed from the outside. Of course, when I say "art" I mean "art" of today which is a result of a long battle for recognition that took place in the course of modernity.

Art and politics are connected in one fundamental respect: both are realms in which a struggle for recognition is being waged. As defined by Alexander Kojève in his commentary on Hegel, this struggle for recognition surpasses the usual struggle for the distribution of material goods, which in modernity is generally regulated by market forces. What is at stake here is not merely that a certain desire be satisfied but that it is also recognized as socially legitimate. Whereas politics is an arena in which various group interests have, both in the past and the present, fought for recognition, artists of the classical avant-garde have always contended for the recognition of all individual forms and artistic procedures that were not previously considered legitimate. In other words, the classical avant-garde has struggled to achieve recognition for all signs, forms and things as the legitimate objects of artistic desire and, hence, also of representation in art. Both forms of struggle are intrinsically bound up with each other, and both have as their aim a situation in which all people with their various interests, as indeed also all forms and artistic procedures, will finally be granted equal rights.

Indeed, already the classical avant-garde has opened up the infinite horizontal field of all possible pictorial forms, which are all lined up alongside one another with equal rights. One after another, so-called primitive art, abstract forms and simple objects from everyday life have all acquired the kind of recognition that once only used to be granted to the historically privileged artistic masterpieces. This equalizing art practice has become progressively more pronounced in the course of the twentieth century, to the same degree as the images of mass culture, entertainment and kitsch have been accorded equal status inside the traditional high art context. Now, this politics of equal aesthetic rights, this struggle for aesthetic equality between all visual forms and media that modern art has fought to establish was – and still is even now - frequently criticised as an expression of cynicism and, paradoxically enough, of elitism. This criticism was directed against Modern art from the right and from the left – as lack of genuine love for art or as a lack of genuine political involvement, of political engagement. But, in fact, this politics of the equal rights on the level of aesthetics, on the level of the

aesthetic value is a necessary precondition for such an engagement. Indeed, the contemporary emancipatory politics is a politics of inclusion – directed against the existing exclusions of the political minorities. But this struggle for the inclusion is possible only if the forms in which the desires of the excluded minorities manifest themselves are not rejected and suppressed from the beginning by any kind of aesthetic censorship operating in the name of the higher aesthetic values. Only under the presupposition of the equality of all the visual forms and media on the aesthetic level it is possible to resist the factual inequality between the images – as imposed from the outside, and reflecting cultural, social, political or economical inequalities.

As Kojève already pointed out, the moment when the overall logic of equality underlying individual struggles for recognition becomes apparent creates the impression that these struggles have to some extent surrendered their true seriousness and explosiveness. This was why even before World War II Kojève was able to speak of the end of history – in the sense of the political history of struggles for recognition. Since then, the discourse about the end of history has made its mark particularly on the art scene. People are constantly referring to the end of art history, with which they mean that these days all forms and things are ‘in principle’ already considered works of art. Under this premiss, the struggle for recognition and equality in art has reached its logical end – and became therefore outdated and superfluous. For if, as it is argued, all images are already acknowledged as being of equal value, this would seemingly deprive the artist of the images with which he can break taboos, provoke, shock or extend boundaries, since he will find none he can associate with his claim of revealing some previously concealed truth. Instead, by the time history has come to an end each artist will be suspected of producing just one further arbitrary image among many. Were this indeed the case, the regime of equal rights for all images would have to be regarded not only as the *telos* of the logic followed by the history of art in modernity, but also as its terminal negation. Accordingly, we now witness repeated waves of nostalgia for a time when individual works of art were once still revered as precious, singular masterpieces. On the other hand, many protagonists of the art world believe that after the end of art history there is no difference any more between good art and bad art. The only criterion now left for measuring the superlative quality of an individual work of art appears to be the art market. Or the artist can deploy his or her art as a political instrument in the service of the continuing political struggles – as an act of political commitment. But in such a political commitment is viewed as being extraneous to art, intent on instrumentalizing art for the external political interests and aims. And worse still, such a move can be dismissed as promotion for an artist’s work by resorting to the means of political profile-seeking. This suspicion of commercially exploiting media attention with implications of political commitment thwarts even the most ambitious endeavours to politicize art.

But the equality of all the visual forms and media in terms of aesthetic value does not mean an erasure of a difference between good art and bad art. Quite opposite is the case. Good art is precisely a practice that is aiming at achievement and confirmation of this equality. And such a confirmation is necessary because the formal aesthetic equality does not mean the factual equality of forms and media in terms of their factual production and distribution. One can say, that the today’s art operates in a gap between formal equality of all the art forms and their factual inequality. That is why there can be and there is a “good art” – even if all the artworks have equal aesthetic rights. The good art is precisely the art that refers to the formal equality of all the images under the conditions of their factual inequality. This gesture is always contextual and historically specific gesture but it has also a paradigmatic importance being a model for the further repetitions of this gesture. That is why a social or political criticism in the name of art has an affirmative dimension that transcends the immediate historical context of this criticism. By criticising the socially, culturally, politically, or economically imposed hierarchies of values art affirms the aesthetic equality as guarantee of its true autonomy.

The artist of the *ancien régime* was intent on creating a masterpiece, an image that would exist in its own right, that would belong to no particular group of images. He sought to create an image which would stand out from all other images as the visualization of a singular truth that in one way or another remained concealed by all other images. In modernity, on the other hand, artists have tended to present examples of an infinite sequence of images – as Kandinsky did with abstract compositions; as Duchamp did with ready-mades; as Warhol did with icons of mass culture. The source of the explosive impact that these examples exert on us does not lie in their exclusivity, but instead in their very capacity as mere examples of the potentially infinite variety of images. In this way, they are not only presenting themselves but also act as pointers to the inexhaustible mass of images, of which they are delegates of equal standing. It is precisely this reference to the infinite multitude of excluded images that lends these individual specimens their fascination and varied significance within the finite contexts of political and artistic representation.

Hence, it is not to the ‘vertical’ infinity of divine truth that the artist today makes reference, but to the ‘horizontal’ infinity of equal images. Without doubt, each reference to the infinity of the artistic range of imagery needs to be scrutinized and wielded strategically if its use in any specific representational context is to be effective. Thus the images some artists insert into the context of the international art scene are the kind that signal their particular ethnic or cultural origin. These images thereby relativize the normative control exerted by the current internationally predominant aesthetic of the mass media that shuns all regionality. At the same time, there are other artists who transplant mass media images into the context of their own regional cultures as a means of

escaping the provincial and folkloric dimensions of their immediate surroundings – in the name of specific, local cultural identity these milieus frequently exclude everything that is related to the mass media and might be seen as international, up-to-the-minute and 'cool'. Both artistic strategies initially appear to be at loggerheads: one approach emphasizes images denoting national cultural identity, while the other, inversely, endeavours to upgrade anything that pertains to the mass media and facilitates the subversion of regionalized identity. But these two strategies are only ostensibly antagonistic: both make reference to something that is excluded from a particular cultural context. In the first case, the exclusion discriminates against regional images; the second targets mass media images. But in both instances, the images in question are simply examples that point to the unbounded realm of what is artistically legitimate. But there are numerous other such examples: attempts are now being made to introduce 'lower' forms of art into museums and art galleries, and, conversely, to establish 'high' art in the domain of mass media. By the same token, the merits of craftsmanship are extolled in those realms where the principle of the ready-made has become a matter of course, while elsewhere, the notion of craftsmanship is now being challenged precisely in those areas where craftsmanship is still associated with art. In the same vein, we can witness images of humanity being pitted against the excesses of nationalism, war and intolerance, while elsewhere, in contexts that uphold humanity itself as an unshakable norm, attention is focused on blood-curdling aliens, vampires and genetically modified monsters. All these examples could mislead us to conclude that contemporary art always acts situationally and *ex negativo*, since its reflex in any situation is to adopt a critical position merely for the sake of being critical. But this is by no means the case: all these examples of a critical position ultimately refer to the single utterly positive, affirmative and emancipatory vision of an infinite realm of images endowed with equal rights. In this respect, these ostensibly antagonistic and purely negative strategies are in fact both pursuing the same strategy.

And this kind of criticism is now as necessary as ever. The contemporary world of media has emerged as by far the largest and most powerful machine for producing images – vastly more extensive and effective than our contemporary art system. We are constantly fed with images of war, terror and catastrophes of all kinds, a level of production with which the artist with his artisan skills cannot compete. And in the meantime, politics has also shifted to the domain of media-produced imagery. Nowadays, every major politician generates thousands of images through his public appearances. Correspondingly, politicians are now also increasingly judged on their aesthetic performance. This situation is often lamented as an indication of how 'content' and 'issues' have become masked by 'surface allure'. But this increasing aesthetisation of the politics gives at the same time a chance to analyse and to criticise the political performance in artistic terms. The media-driven politics operates namely on the terrain of art. At first glance the diversity of the media images may appear to be immense, if not almost immeasurable. If one adds images of politics and war to those of advertising, commercial cinema and entertainment, it seems that the artist – the last craftsman of present-day modernity – stands no chance of rivalling the supremacy of these image-generating machines. But in reality, the diversity of images circulating in the media is highly limited. Indeed, in order to be effectively propagated and exploited in the commercial mass media, images need to be easily recognizable for the broad target audience. This makes the mass media extremely tautological. The variety of images circulating in the mass media is vastly more limited than the range of images preserved, for example, in museums or produced by contemporary art. Thus the majority of images still remains excluded from circulation in the media. That is why it is necessary to keep the museums and, in general, art institutions as places where (1) the visual vocabulary of the contemporary mass media can be critically compared to the art heritage of the previous epochs and (2) where we can rediscover artistic visions and projects pointing toward introduction of aesthetic equality.

In recent time, the museums are increasingly being viewed with scepticism and mistrust by the art insiders and by the general public. On all sides one repeatedly hears that the institutional boundaries of the museum ought to be transgressed, deconstructed or simply removed to give contemporary art full freedom to assert itself in real life. Such appeals and demands have meanwhile become quite commonplace, even to the extent of now being regarded as a cardinal feature of contemporary art. These present-day calls for the abolition of the museum appear to take up on the earlier avant-garde strategies and so continue, virtually unchallenged, to be whole-heartedly embraced by the art community. But appearances are deceiving. The context, meaning and function of the calls to abolish the museum system have undergone fundamental change since the days of the avant-garde, even if at first sight the style and diction of their formulation seems so familiar. Prevailing tastes in the nineteenth and the first part of twentieth centuries were defined and embodied by the museum. So in these circumstances any protest directed at the museum was simultaneously a protest against the prevailing norms of art-making – and by the same token also the basis from which new, groundbreaking art could evolve. But in our time the museum has indisputably been stripped of its normative role. In our own era it is the mass media that dictate aesthetic norms. The general public now draws its notion of art from advertising, MTV, videos, video games and Hollywood blockbusters. And that means that in the context of contemporary, media-generated tastes the call to abandon and dismantle the museum as an institution has taken on an entirely different meaning than when it was voiced during the avant-garde era. When people today speak of 'real life', what they generally mean is the global media market.

And that means: Nowadays this protest against the museum is no longer part of the struggle waged against prevailing normative tastes in the name of aesthetic equality but is, inversely, aimed at stabilizing and

entrenching currently prevailing tastes.

Art institutions, however, are still typically displayed in the media as places of selection, where specialists, insiders and the initiated few pass preliminary judgement on what is permitted to rate as art in general, and what in particular as 'good' art. This selection process is based on criteria that to a wider audience seem unfathomable, incomprehensible and, in the final count, also irrelevant. Accordingly, one wonders just why anyone at all is needed to decide what art is and what is not. Why can't we just choose for ourselves what we wish to acknowledge or appreciate as art without recourse to an intermediary, without patronizing advice from curators and art critics? Why does art refuse to seek legitimation on the open media market just like any other product? From a media perspective the traditional aspirations of the museum seem historically obsolete, out-of-touch, insincere and even somewhat bizarre. And contemporary art itself time and again displays an eagerness to follow the enticements of the mass media age, voluntarily abandoning the museum in the quest to be disseminated through media channels. Of course, this readiness on the part of art to become involved in the media, in broader public communication and politics, in other words to engage in life beyond the boundaries of the museum, is quite understandable. This approach allows it address and seduce a much larger audience; it is a decent way of earning money – which the artist previously had to beg for from the state or private sponsors. It gives the artist a new sense of power, social relevance and public presence within his >>or her<< own time – rather than eking out a meagre existence as the poor relation of the media. So the call to break loose from the museum also amounts *de facto* to a call to medialize and commercialize art by accommodating it to the aesthetic norms generated by today's media

The global media market lacks the historical memory which would enable it to compare the past with the present and thereby determine what is really new and genuinely contemporary about the present. The old product range in the media market is constantly being replaced by new merchandise, barring any possibility of comparing what is on offer today with what used to be available. As a result, media commentary has no choice but to turn to fashion. But fashionability itself is by no means self-evident or indisputable. While it is perhaps easy to admit that in the age of mass media our lives are dictated predominantly by fashion, how confused we suddenly become when asked to say precisely what is en vogue just now. So who can actually say what is fashionable at any moment? Passing any kind of judgement in this is highly problematic, particularly in these times of globalization. For instance, if something appears to have become fashionable in Berlin, one could quickly point out that this trend has long since gone out of fashion measured against what is currently fashionable in, say, Tokyo or Los Angeles. Yet who can guarantee that the same Berlin fashion won't at some later date also hit the streets of Los Angeles or Tokyo? So, when it comes to assessing the market, we are *de facto* at the blind mercy of advice dispensed by marketing and fashion gurus, the purported specialists of international fashion. Yet such advice cannot be verified by the individual since, as everyone knows, the global market is too vast for him alone to fathom. Hence, where the media market is concerned one has the simultaneous impression of being bombarded relentlessly with something new and also of permanently witnessing the return of the same over and over again. The familiar complaint that there is nothing new in art has the same root as the opposite charge that art is constantly striving only to appear new. As long as the observer has nothing but the media as a point of reference he simply lacks any comparative context which would afford him means of effectively distinguishing between old and new, between what is the same and what is different.

It is the museum that gives the observer this opportunity to differentiate between old and new, and to critically challenge with his own eyes the what the media insist is novel, >>up-to-date<< and groundbreaking. For museums are repositories of historical memory where everything is kept and shown that has gone out of fashion, that has become old and out-dated. In this respect only the museums can serve as sites of systematic historical comparison that enable us to ascertain what really is different, new and >>contemporary<< – and to discover what is making false claims to be so, something that, although produced in the present, might in fact merely be repeating long-established patterns. The same, incidentally, applies to the assertions of cultural difference or cultural identity that persistently bombard us in the media. In order to critically challenge these claims we again require some form of comparative framework. Where no such comparison is possible all claims of difference and identity remain unfounded and hollow. Indeed, every important art exhibition in a museum offers such a comparison, even if this is not explicitly enacted, for each museum exhibition inscribes itself into a history of exhibitions that is documented within the art system. Naturally, the strategies of comparison pursued by individual curators and critics can in turn also be criticized, but such a critique is possible only because they too can be measured against the different curatorial strategies in evidence within the art system. In other words, the very idea of abandoning or even abolishing the museum would remove the possibility of holding a critical inquiry into the claims of innovation and difference with which we are constantly confronted in today's media. This also explains why the assessments and selection criteria in museum art shows so frequently differ from those that prevail in the mass media. The issue here is not that curators and art initiators have exclusive and elitist tastes quite distinct from those of the broad public, but that the museum offers a means of comparing the present with the past that repeatedly arrives at other conclusions than those implied by the media. An individual observer would not necessarily be in a position to undertake such a comparison if the media were all he had to rely on. So it is hardly surprising that the media also end up adopting the

museum's diagnosis of what exactly is contemporary about the present, simply because they themselves are unable to perform a diagnosis of their own.

It is still possible to talk about the age of enlightenment or the era of the artistic avant-garde in spite of the glaring fact that both the enlightenment or the artistic avant-garde were only of concern to imperceptibly marginal minorities and by no means reflected the mentality of the absolute majority of the population at the time. This means that today's museums are in fact machines designed not merely to collect, but also to generate the present through their comparison between old and new, between identical and different. There is no basis to the notion that the process of creating art occurs first in the media before it is subsequently represented in the museums. Instead, we only recognize something as being up-to-date, >>truly contemporary<< and thus 'real' art once we realize that this art has yet to be collected by or represented in the museum. Rather than reality coming first, with its museum re-presentation following on in second place, it is the museum collection that tells us what in the here and now may be considered real >><<. In other words, the museum of contemporary art is ultimately a producer of contemporary art by the way it establishes what has not yet been collected and thus what, by implication, must be 'contemporary'. By contrast, in the context of mass media art is condemned to constantly reiterating certain external features in an attempt to make art publicly identifiable as art. Thus the media promote a kind of art that is often erroneously called 'museum art', in other words, the kind that strives to be demonstrably artistic, spectacular and extraordinary – which is why such art never manages to cut itself free from traditional genres. Admittedly, among all the media-tailored appropriations of traditional artistic prototypes there are also examples of shifts, modifications and re-inventions that do indeed have aesthetic appeal. Yet, here too, all such shifts and deviations can only be recognized as such once they have been held up for comparison in the museum with their historical precursors. When shown in the media, these appropriations merely spawn a sense of malaise since there is no aesthetic framework at hand to properly assess them by. But even when the media with their plethora of reality shows endeavour to present unspectacular, everyday life, all they are doing is quoting the 'ready-made' >>procedure<< that was embraced by the museum long before, thereby revealing their debt to museum tradition.

In the age of mass media the museum seems likely to perform the following task. It has lost its traditional role of setting aesthetic norms and defining public taste, a function that is now been assumed by the media. But for their part, the media have proved incapable of reflecting upon their own role. For a start, they lack any historical memory that might enable them to lend precise definition to the current norm as such – and, most importantly, the media are trapped in a state of permanent self-denial. They might prescribe aesthetic norms by invoking the *zeitgeist*, but in the same breath they would rather not admit to this accomplishment as their own, pretending instead that they are merely following audience tastes. Hence, for all their loquaciousness the media in fact cultivate a strange zone of muteness that manifests a deep-set incapacity to discuss their own role as active norm-setters – let alone to critically examine these norms in the light of their own claims that they embody the *zeitgeist*. It would be a disastrous mistake if the museum were also to emulate this strategy of self-denial and likewise strive to fulfil the claim that it is only showing people 'what they want to see'. For in stark contrast to the mass media, museums possess the means and possibilities to be sites of critical discourse. Furthermore, given our current cultural climate the museum is practically the only place where we can actually step back from our own present and compare it with other eras. In these terms, the museum is irreplaceable because it is particularly well suited to critically analyze and challenge the claims of the media-driven *zeitgeist*.

The museum is a place where we are remembered of the egalitarian projects of the past – so that we can measure our own time against it.