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*The politics of aesthetic equal
rights*

Boris Groys

In order to be able to resist an external oppression of any kind we have to have at our disposal an internal and autonomous power that we can use against it. And in order 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 are worth to defending? And has art an autonomous, internal power of" 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 are right, it would mean that art could not be an origin or 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 could be used merely for designing, for aestheticising certain emancipatory 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 (using a term introduced by Derrida) of a political power —so that art could be eventually used for the deconstruction of certain political claims and attitudes but surely not as a means of active resistance against them. This seems to be the crucial question: has art a power of its own, or is it 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, the art system, the art world, or the art market are or can be autonomous. The functioning of the

existing art system is namely based on certain aesthetic value judgements, certain criteria of choice, rules of inclusion and exclusion etc. All of these value judgements, criteria and rules are not, of course, autonomous. Rather, they reflect the dominating social conventions and power structures. We can say: there is no purely aesthetic, immanent, autonomous value judgement that could define and regulate the art system in its entirety and guarantee its autonomy. 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 is not based on the autonomous hierarchy of taste and aesthetic judgement. Rather, it is an effect of abolishing any such hierarchy and establishing a regime of aesthetic equal rights for all artworks. It means that art as such is a socially codified manifestation of fundamental equality between all existing and virtual visual forms and media. Only against the back-ground of this fundamental aesthetic equality of all artworks every value judgement, every exclusion or inclusion can be potentially recognized as results of a heteronomous intrusion of political or economical forces into the autonomous sphere of art. Therefore, it is the recognition of aesthetic equal rights that opens the possibility of resistance against any kind of political or economical aggression —a resistance in the name of art's autonomy. So the autonomy of art is precisely constituted by the equality of all artistic forms and media —an equality which gives the possibility to interpret and to criticize all the hierarchies as imposed from outside. But, of course, when I say "art" I mean art of today which is the 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 areas in which a struggle for recognition is being waged. As defined by Alexandre 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 groups of interest have, both in the past and the present, fought for recognition, artists of the classical avant-garde have already 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 visual signs, forms, and media as 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 the classical avant-garde has already 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 used to be granted only 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— frequently criticized as an expression of cynicism and, paradoxically enough, of elitism. This criticism was directed against Modern art from the right and from the left —so that Modern art was criticized for a lack of genuine love for eternal beauty and, at the same time, for a lack of genuine political engagement. But, in fact, the politics of equal rights on the level of aesthetics is a necessary precondition of any political engagement. Indeed, the contemporary emancipatory politics is a politics of inclusion directed against the existing exclusions of the political, ethnical or economical minorities. But this struggle for

inclusion is possible only if the visual signs and 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 higher aesthetic values. Only under the presupposition of the equality of all visual forms and media on the aesthetic level it is possible to resist the factual inequality between the images as they are imposed from outside while 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 surrendered to some extent 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, by which they mean that these days all forms and objects are "in principle" already considered works of art. Under this premise, the struggle for recognition and equality in art has reached its logical end—and has therefore become outdated and superfluous. For if, as it is argued, all images are already acknowledged as being of equal value, this would deprive the artist of the aesthetic tools with which the artist can break taboos, provoke, shock or extend existing boundaries of art—as it was possible during the whole history of Modern art. Instead, by the time history has come to an end each artist will be suspected of producing just one more arbitrary image among many. Was 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 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 more difference between good art and bad art. The only criterion now left for measuring the 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 continuing political struggles, as an act of political commitment. But such a commitment can always be viewed as being extraneous to art, intent on instrumentalizing art for 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 politicise art.

But equality of all visual forms and media in terms of aesthetic value does not mean erasure of the difference between good art and bad art. Quite the opposite is the case. Good art is precisely a practice that is aiming at the achievement and confirmation of this equality. And such a confirmation is necessary because formal aesthetic equality does not mean factual equality of forms and media in terms of their factual production and distribution. One can say that today's art operates in a gap between the formal equality of all art forms and their factual inequality. This is why there can be, and there is, "good art" even if all artworks have equal aesthetic rights. Good art is precisely art that refers to the formal equality of all images under the conditions of their factual inequality. This gesture of reference is always contextual and historically specific, but it has also a paradigmatic importance being a model for any further repetitions, for any further reproduction of aesthetic equality under various historical conditions. That is why every 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.

In Modernity, it is not to the "vertical" infinity of divine truth or beauty to which the "good" artist makes reference, but to the "horizontal" infinity of aesthetic equal images as Kandinsky did with his abstract compositions; as Duchamp did with his ready-mades; as Warhol did with his icons of mass culture. The source of the explosive impact that

these examples exert on the spectator does not lie in their exclusivity, but in their very capacity to function as mere examples of the potentially infinite variety of images. In this way, they are not only presenting themselves, they 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 images that gives these individual examples their fascination and varied significance within the finite contexts of political and artistic representation. Without doubt, each reference to the infinity of visual images 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 folkloristic dimensions of their immediate surroundings. In the name of specific, local cultural identity, regional milieus frequently exclude everything related to the mass media and that might seem too international and subverting the purity of a local identity. Both artistic strategies initially appear to be contrary to each other: one approach emphasizes images denoting national cultural identity, while the other, inversely, aims at the subversion of regional cultural 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 excludes the mass media images. But in both instances, the images in question are simply examples that point to the potentially infinite variety of what is artistically legitimate. 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 underlined in those areas where the use 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 it is still associated too closely with art etc. All these examples could mislead us to conclude that contemporary art always acts *ex negativo*, since its reflex in any situation seems to be 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 variety of images endowed with equal rights. In this respect, the ostensibly antagonistic art strategies are in fact often pursuing the same goal.

Today art museums —and, especially, Modern and Contemporary art museums— are playing a crucial role as archives where the documentation of the Modern struggle for aesthetic equality is kept and made accessible, so that it can be used as a starting point for the critical engagement with our contemporary cultural situation. In recent time, the museums are increasingly being viewed with scepticism and mistrust by 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 changes 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 against 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 this 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 the 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.

No wonder that art institutions are still typically displayed in the mass 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 accused to be 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 it's 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 mass media market just like any other product? From a mass 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 mass media channels. Of course, this readiness on the part of art to become involved in the mass 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 to address and seduce a much larger audience; it is an economically effective way of earning money — instead of begging for it from the state or private sponsors. The circulation in the mass media gives the artist a new sense of power,

social relevance and public presence within his or her own time. So the call to break loose from the museum also amounts *de facto* to a call to medialise and commercialise art by accommodating it to the aesthetic norms generated by today's media.

Indeed contemporary mass media has emerged by far as the largest and most powerful machine for producing images, certainly vastly more extensive and effective than our contemporary art system. We are constantly fed with images of war, terror and catastrophes of all kinds, at 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 or rock-star or TV-entertainer or sports hero generates thousands of images through their public appearances, much more than any living artist. At first glance the diversity and scope of mass media images may appear to be almost immeasurable. If one adds to the images of politics and war 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, therefore, vastly more limited than the range of images preserved in museums of Modern art or produced by contemporary art. 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 towards the introduction of aesthetic equality that contemporary mass media ostensibly lack.

First of all, the global media market lacks the historical memory which would enable it to compare the past with 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 subject is highly problematic, particularly in these times of globalisation. 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 can-not 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 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. 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.

This also explains why the assessments and selection criteria in the context of art museum shows differ so frequently from those that

prevail in the mass media. The issue here is not that curators and art initiates have exclusive and elitist tastes quite distinct from those of the broad public, but that the museum offers a means of putting in question the dominating contemporary mass media taste and fashion by comparing them to the radically egalitarian projects of artistic modernity. This means that today's museums are in fact institutions designed not merely to collect art of the old epochs, but to reproduce, reaffirm and reactualise the principle of aesthetic equality of all forms and media. The reaffirmation of aesthetic equality is a necessary starting point for museum's self-criticism as well as for criticism directed against the aesthetic inequality practiced by contemporary mass media. The fact that the principle of aesthetic equality was and is re-presented by a relatively small minority of artists and art theoreticians does not mean that this principle is undemocratic, elitist or cynical. And this fact also does not relativise the universal validity of the principle of aesthetic equality. The universal claims of this kind are often forwarded and supported by small minorities against a majority that is inclined to believe in the validity of different aesthetic hierarchies. It would be a disastrous mistake if the museum was to emulate the strategy of self-denial and strive to show the people only "what they really want to see". In the context of mass media art is characteristically condemned to constantly reiterate certain external features in an attempt to make art publicly identifiable as art and in doing so, to re-assert permanently the dominating tastes and value judgements. Thus, it is precisely the mass media that 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 of high quality, which is why such art never manages to cut itself free from the traditional systems of preferences. And even when the media endeavour to present unspectacular, everyday life by the means of the so-called reality shows, all they are doing is quoting the "ready-made" procedure that was embraced by the museum long before, thereby revealing once again their debt to museum tradition.

In contrast to the mass media, art museums as places of historical comparison between past and present, between original promise and

contemporary realization of this promise possess the means and possibilities to be sites of critical discourse. Given our current cultural climate the art museum is practically the only place where we can actually step back from our own present and compare it with other historical 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 reminded of the egalitarian art projects of the past so that we can measure our own time against them.

Art and politics: Resistance and Re-Appropriation

Yves Michaud

In spite of my essay's very general title, I will obviously not attempt to consider the totality of the debate about the relationship between art and politics. I simply wish to reopen it to make a small contribution to the understanding of current art and politics.

I.

The nineteenth-century avant-garde artist occupied a double political space: one's political commitment was expressed through work in art as well as through direct political action. Painter Jacques-Louis David rendered homage to the Roman style in art with his commitment to the neoclassical style and yet he also played a role as a representative at the Convention during the French Revolution. Another example of this twofold artistic and political involvement is that of Gustave Courbet, an anti-academic painter but also a militant for the Revolution of 1848 and, later, a supporter of the Commune. Courbet was at once committed in the struggle against bourgeois power in politics and