

Art Power

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The Logic of Equal Aesthetic Rights

If we want to speak about the ability of art to resist external pressure, the following question must first be answered: Does art have its own territory that is worthy of being defended? The autonomy of art has been denied in many recent art-theoretical discussions. If these discourses are right, art cannot be a source of any resistance whatsoever. In the best case art could be used merely for designing, for aestheticizing the already existent oppositional, emancipatory political movements—that is, it could be at best merely a supplement to politics. This seems to me to be the crucial question: Does art hold any power of its own, or it is only able to decorate external powers—whether these are powers of oppression or liberation? Thus the question of the autonomy of art seems to me the central question in the context of any 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 does have an autonomous power of resistance.

Of course, that art has such an autonomy does not mean that the existing art institutions, art system, art world, or art market can be seen as autonomous in any significant sense of the word. For the functioning of the art system is based on certain aesthetic value judgments, on certain criteria of choice, rules of inclusion and exclusion, and the like. All these value judgments, criteria, and rules are, of course, not autonomous. Rather, they reflect the dominant social conventions and power structures. We can safely say: There is no such thing as a purely aesthetic, art-immanent, autonomous value system that could regulate the art world in its entirety. This insight has 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 of as dependent on the autonomy of the aesthetic value judgment. But I would suggest that it is precisely this absence of any immanent, purely aesthetic value judgment that guarantees the autonomy of art. The territory of art is organized around the lack or, rather, the rejection of any aesthetic judgment. Thus the autonomy of art implies not an autonomous hierarchy of taste—but abolishing every such hierarchy and establishing

the regime of equal aesthetic rights for all artworks. The art world should be seen as the socially codified manifestation of the fundamental equality between all visual forms, objects, and media. Only under this assumption of the fundamental aesthetic equality of all artworks can every value judgment, every exclusion or inclusion, be potentially recognized as a result of a heteronomous intrusion into the autonomous sphere of art—as the effect of pressure exercised by external forces and powers. And it is this recognition that opens up the possibility of resistance in the name of art's autonomy, that is, in the name of the equality of all art forms and media. But, of course, I mean “art” to be understood as the result of a long battle for recognition that took place over the course of modernity.

Art and politics are initially 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 also be recognized as socially legitimate.¹ 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 mostly contended for the recognition of individual forms and artistic procedures that were not previously considered legitimate. The classical avant-garde has struggled to achieve recognition of all signs, forms, and things as legitimate objects of artistic desire and, hence, also as legitimate objects 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.

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 artworks, abstract forms, and simple objects from everyday life have all acquired the kind of recognition that once used to be granted only to the historically privileged artistic masterpieces. This equalizing of art practices has become progressively more pronounced in the course of the twentieth century, as the images of mass culture, entertainment, and kitsch have been accorded equal status within the traditional high art context. At the same time, 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 criticized as an expression of cynicism and, paradoxically enough, of elitism. This criticism has been directed against modern art both from the right and from the left—as a lack of genuine love for art or as a lack of genuine political involvement, of political engagement. But, in fact, this politics of equal rights on the level of aesthetics, on the level of aesthetic value, is a necessary precondition for any political engagement. Indeed, the contemporary politics of emancipation is a politics of inclusion—directed against the exclusion of political and economical minorities. But this struggle for 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 higher aesthetic values. Only under the presupposition of the equality of all visual forms and media on the aesthetic level is it possible to resist the factual inequality between the images—as imposed from the outside, and reflecting cultural, social, political, or economical inequalities.

As Kojève has already pointed out, when the overall logic of equality underlying individual struggles for recognition becomes apparent, it creates the impression that these struggles have to some extent surrendered their true seriousness and explosiveness.² 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, this 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 things 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 therefore become 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 possibility to break taboos, provoke, shock, or extend boundaries of the acceptable. Instead, by the time history has come to an end, each artist begins to 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 modern art, but also as its terminal negation.

Accordingly, we now witness repeated waves of nostalgia for a time when certain individual works of art were revered as precious, singular masterpieces. On the other hand, many protagonists of the art world believe that now, after the end of art history, the only criterion left for measuring the quality of an individual artwork is its success on the art market. Of course, the artist can also deploy his or her art as a political instrument in the context of various continuing political struggles—as an act of political commitment. But such a political commitment is viewed mostly as being extraneous to art, intent on instrumentalizing art for external political interests and aims. And worse still, such a move may also be dismissed as mere publicity for an artist's work by means of political profile-seeking. This suspicion of commercially exploiting media attention by means of political commitment thwarts even the most ambitious endeavors to politicize art.

But the equality of all visual forms and media in terms of their aesthetic value does not mean an erasure of all differences between good art and bad art. Quite the opposite is the case. Good art is precisely that practice which aims at confirmation of this equality. And such a confirmation is necessary because formal aesthetic equality does not secure the factual equality of forms and media in terms of their production and distribution. One might say that today's art operates in the gap between the formal equality of all art forms and their factual inequality. That is why there can be and is "good art"—even if all artworks have equal aesthetic rights. The good artwork is precisely that work which affirms the formal equality of all images under the conditions of their factual inequality. This gesture is always contextual and historically specific, but it also has paradigmatic importance as a model for further repetitions of this gesture. Thus, social or political criticism in the name of art has an affirmative dimension that transcends its immediate historical context. By criticizing the socially, culturally, politically, or economically imposed hierarchies of values, art affirms aesthetic equality as a 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 as the ultimate visualization of the abstract ideas of truth and beauty. 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 impact

that these images exerted on subsequent art production lies not in their exclusivity, but instead in their very capacity to function as mere examples of the potentially infinite variety of images. 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 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 aesthetically equal images. Without doubt, each reference to this infinity needs to be scrutinized and wielded strategically if its use in any specific representational context is to be effective. Some images that artists insert into the context of the international art scene signal their particular ethnic or cultural origin. These images resist the normative aesthetic control exerted by the current mass media, which shuns all regionality. At the same time, other artists transplant mass-media-produced images into the context of their own regional cultures as a means of escaping the provincial and folkloric dimensions of their immediate milieus. Both artistic strategies initially appear to oppose each other: one approach emphasizes images that denote national cultural identity, while the other, inversely, prefers everything international, globalized, media related. 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 infinite, “utopian” realm of aesthetic equality. These examples could mislead us to conclude that contemporary art always acts *ex negativo*, that 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 the examples of a critical position ultimately refer to the single, utterly positive, affirmative, emancipatory, and utopian vision of an infinite realm of images endowed with equal aesthetic rights.

This kind of criticism in the name of aesthetic equality is as necessary now as ever. The contemporary mass 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 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 generates thousands of images through public appearances. Correspondingly, politicians are now also increasingly judged on the aesthetics of their performance. This situation is often lamented as an indication that “content” and “issues” have become masked by “media appearance.” But this increasing aestheticization of politics offers us at the same time a chance to analyze and to criticize the political performance in artistic terms. That is, media-driven politics operates on the terrain of art. At first glance the diversity of the media images may appear to be immense, if not nearly immeasurable. If one adds images of politics and war to those of advertising, commercial cinema, and entertainment, it seems that the artist—the last craftsperson of present-day modernity—stands no chance of rivaling 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, rendering mass media nearly tautological. The variety of images circulating in the mass media is much more limited than the range of images preserved, for example, in museums or produced by contemporary art. That is why it is necessary to keep the museums and, in general, art institutions as places where the visual vocabulary of the contemporary mass media can be critically compared to the art heritage of the previous epochs and where we can rediscover artistic visions and projects pointing toward the introduction of aesthetic equality.

Museums are increasingly being viewed today with skepticism and mistrust by both art insiders and 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 become quite commonplace, to the extent of now being regarded as a cardinal feature of contemporary art. These calls for the abolition of the museum appear to follow earlier avant-garde strategies and as a result are wholeheartedly embraced by the contemporary art community. But appearances are deceiving. The context, meaning, and function of these calls to abolish the museum system

have undergone a fundamental change since the days of the avant-garde, even if at first sight the diction of these calls seems so familiar. Prevailing tastes in the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries were defined and embodied by the museum. 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. The general public now draws its notion of art from advertising, MTV videos, video games, and Hollywood blockbusters. In the contemporary context of media-generated taste, the call to abandon and dismantle the museum as an institution has necessarily 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 usually mean is the global media market. And that means: The current protest against the museum is no longer part of a struggle being waged against normative taste in the name of aesthetic equality but is, inversely, aimed at stabilizing and entrenching currently prevailing tastes.

Art institutions, however, are still typically portrayed in the media as places of selection, where specialists, insiders, and the initiated few pass preliminary judgment on what is permitted to rate as art in general, and what in particular is “good” art. This selection process is assumed to be based on criteria that to a wider audience must seem unfathomable, incomprehensible and, in the final estimation, also irrelevant. Accordingly, one wonders why anyone at all is needed to decide what is art and what is not. Why can’t we just choose for ourselves what we wish to acknowledge or appreciate as art without looking to an intermediary, without patronizing advice from curators and art critics? Why does art refuse to seek legitimacy on the open market just like any other product? From a mass media perspective, the traditional aspirations of the museum seem historically obsolete, out of touch, insincere, 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, the readiness on the part of many artists to become involved in the media, in broader public communication and politics—in other words to engage in “real life” beyond the boundaries of the museum—is quite understandable. This kind of opening allows the artists to

address and seduce a much larger audience; it is also 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 rather than forcing him or her to eke out a meager existence as the poor relative of the media. So the call to break loose from the museum amounts de facto to a call to package and commercialize art by accommodating it to the aesthetic norms generated by today's mass media.

The abandonment of the “musealized” past is also often celebrated as a radical opening up to the present. But opening up to the big world outside the closed spaces of the art system produces, on the contrary, a certain blindness to what is contemporary and present. The global media market lacks in particular the historical memory that would enable the spectator to compare the past with the present and thereby determine what is truly new and genuinely contemporary about the present. The 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 in the past. As a result, the new and the present are discussed in terms of what is in fashion. But what is fashionable is itself by no means self-evident or indisputable. While it is easy to agree 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. Who can actually say what is fashionable at any moment? 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? When it comes to assessing the market, we are de facto at the blind mercy of advice dispensed by market gurus, the purported specialists of international fashion. Yet such advice cannot be verified by any individual consumer since, as everyone knows, the global market is too vast for him or her 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. The familiar complaint that there is nothing new in art has the same root as the opposite charge that art is constantly striving to appear new. As long as the media is the only point of reference the observer simply lacks any comparative context which would

afford him or her the means of effectively distinguishing between old and new, between what is the same and what is different.

In fact, only the museum gives the observer the opportunity to differentiate between old and new, past and present. For museums are the repositories of historical memory where also images and things are kept and shown that have meanwhile gone out of fashion, that have become old and outdated. In this respect only the museum can serve as the site of systematic historical comparison that enables us to see with our own eyes what really is different, new, and contemporary. The same, incidentally, applies to the assertions of cultural difference or cultural identity that persistently bombard us in the media. In order to challenge these claims critically, 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.

Of course, 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 previous curatorial strategies that are kept by the art memory. In other words, the very idea of abandoning or even abolishing the museum would close off 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 selection criteria manifested by contemporary curatorial projects 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 sharply 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 conclusions other 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 at the end of the day 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.

Thus today's museums are in fact designed not merely to collect the past, but also to generate the present through the comparison between old

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and new. The new is here not something merely different but, rather, a reaffirmation of the fundamental aesthetic equality of all the images in a historically given context. The mass media constantly renew the claim to confront the spectator with different, groundbreaking, provocative, true and authentic art. The art system keeps, on the contrary, the promise of aesthetic equality that undermines any such claim. The museum is first and foremost a place where we are reminded of the egalitarian projects of the past and where we can learn to resist the dictatorship of contemporary taste.