

Arts and Society: Participation or Flight?

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What I am now about to express was born from a feeling of doubt. This is no latent doubt but one that sporadically looms like a ghost in my head only to fade again when I find myself full of courage and dedication, involved with art and among artists.

This doubt concerns whether there really is a place for art in a world that is increasingly and militantly dominated and even terrorised by technique and technology, media and amusement and consumerism and cocooning, much more so than by reflection or by structures of abstract thought and action. As Virilio put it, it seems to be more and more the case that people and the human are becoming a subjugated link in a web which they themselves have brought to life and upon whom it now enforces its own will and loss of direction.

I know from looking at history that art is capable of resisting its enemies—even indifference. For it is indifference that dies and art that continues to think. However, I am afraid that today's enemy is of another kind, one of an unknown format. I fear that even more so than before today's society has found a means of isolating its art in a place where it can continue to feast but at the same time be silenced for the rest of the world.

We have to be brave enough to look at the facts squarely.

Is it not so that art seems to function almost exclusively within the media-like field of prestigious projects and even more so within show events? Putting the question is also answering it. I am not the only one who has discovered much to my distress that at these events all need for critical reflection—not to mention the wish for it—is hard to find or has even vanished totally, and that the challenge of arriving at real experience is finally lost from sight.

The reason for this is not hard to unearth. These events are almost always concerned with the show itself, with show for its own sake. What we are dealing with here is keeping up appearances, with events where people, because of the sense of security and protection they seek, do not wish to be confronted as individuals with the real questions and challenges of art but would rather remain involved with its social functions. Here art has become merely an alibi, stripped of its essential references to the past and to the future, for an event that focuses on the experiencing of now and which does not permit time for reflection or looking to the future.

My doubt intensifies when I leave the traditional free spaces of art and go out beyond the museums, art galleries and private collections, to the street or the roadside, to a footpath or a crossroad, to a small bridge in a city or to a lonely water tower, to a piece of waste ground, a viaduct or police station or to an empty house that no one wants to put up for rent.

And when I return from my barren journey, I wonder whether there is such a thing as free space these days (and therefore willingness), a space where artists—out of necessity of course—can express themselves freely and in harmony or be asked for advice?

I have a growing feeling that art can and may manifest itself only on the territories which have been allotted to it specifically for that purpose, in analogy with literature and its bookshops and libraries or with music and concert halls or religion and churches. Is it not more so than in the past that society is dividing itself up even more radically and perhaps more efficiently into functions, activities and forms of expression which operate independently and which are no longer in dialogue with each other? All attempts at building a global idea are forced to return to go—here I think of Christo or any of the important innovators in architecture—or can merely be talked out following exhausting battles with political cliques or the media. People have probably always needed the protective effect of categorisation; today however they hide in closed circles and experience the outside world mainly or perhaps even exclusively in a safe protected room by watching television.

And here precisely lies the contradiction with art, for art in principle is continually in search of openings and cracks. It goes without saying that the artist, given the very essence of art, does not wish his or her message to be reduced to the wallpaper of some event or to the possible oxygen of some closed circle.

Artists address society by using the very impulses and challenges that

society passes on to them. A limiting of their radius is therefore in contradiction with their task.

Nevertheless, we can see artists being forced by necessity to learn to live with these limitations. Many of them have made a virtue of this necessity and now hardly ever protest against the limitations forced upon them by society. Others take advantage of the small lines of feeling through which these closed circles (the art world, television, the press, religion, sports, politics, etc.) communicate, on condition that they speak the same language. It still remains to be seen whether this more or less artificial field is enough to allow sufficient breathing space for an individual voice, for personal creativity, for the necessary spontaneity of the artist and the resulting creative act along with its own inner logic and obsessions. I fear in many cases that this will not be so, for even within these closed circles, artistic needs and forms of expression seem to be increasingly reduced to those moments which have been proclaimed by society as “spare or free time.” And what in heaven’s name has art to do with free time?

I now return to the question: how can such a fragmented society deal with the spiritual dimension that is manifested by a work of art? How can it transmit and absorb that dimension into everyday life when there is so much interference in the communication between the various circles? If the artist is to survive then he or she is forced by necessity to manifest him or herself as exclusively as possible within the narrow framework of an art circle which in turn will begin to spin off on its own away from day-to-day reality. And even when an artist—like David Hammond for example—does all he can to escape from that circle, his work is only ever noticed and supported by a small of acquaintances who like him are trying desperately to create openings to reality. People and therefore the artist are imprisoned by far-reaching institutionalised and bureaucratised structures and systems which limit and condition their desire for creative action.

In this way all human action seems to have been transformed into instruments of necessity and leisure in a society which seems to function purely on economics and which speaks, acts, selects and legitimises things only through economic argument.

Though I risk falling into repetition, I do wonder whether in a climate like this, art can be considered as a fundamental option, as a substantial instrument for a society in search of new paradigms. I wonder whether art can be experienced as a dynamic source to be tapped in bridging or resolving the conflict between subject and object, or as the

elucidator of our identity and our place and part in society. The growing number of visitors to museums, attempts to attract record crowds to exhibitions, the building of new museums, the increasing number of enrolments for arts schools and conservatories, etc. seems as a trend to be motivated by economic strategy and conditions rather than by any desire to expand the mind. When art appears on the stage or is part of a public event, at most it plays a walk-on role in cheering up the economic and political powers that be, like the decorative fringe at the bottom of a curtain.

This is also too often driven by a need for nostalgia, which is supposed to serve as a coat hanger for all sorts of values which in fact can no longer be assumed, or values which are hardly relevant to the needs and demands of a living society, not to mention a future one.

When we are dealing with art, we almost automatically drag yesterday into the picture and put tomorrow off till the day after tomorrow. To my mind, we do so out of fear for the new and unknown, for things on which no consensus has been reached and also to escape the now. And this is precisely why we approach art from the aesthetic point of view and not for its message. Whoever continues in this vein can never actualise the energy of art in the same way Stravinsky did with the music of Pergolesi or Francis Bacon with the work of Velázquez. Both actualised the energy of art through message. In other words, the creative person does something with his or her past, others consume it.

Things get really worrying when art merely functions and finds its legitimacy within the economic processes of supply and demand, of speculation and profiteering, of power and prestige and no longer as a result of personal desire, no longer as a search and an adventure during which a person, be he or she armed with knowledge, experience and intuition or not, can independently reach certain conclusions and make a statement. It is clear that, in so doing, we stand in the way of such a fertile risk factor.

I wonder in all earnestness whether our society still offers us a seedbed for developing desire and risk or whether quite to the contrary, it merely freezes and lames our minds through its propaganda of fear. No one can deny that we are confronted with a growing fascination for catastrophe, for thoughts of doom that are not only visible in the media, TV serials, the gutter press and comic strips, but also in that way post-modern architecture and urban planning has become part of our lives, having first filled the treasure chests of urban developers. Even more disturbing in this respect is the rise of racism, a form of racism that is

orchestrated by politicians and rabble-rousers and that feeds on the apocalyptic, that possesses such a simplified scenario of catastrophe that it can put itself forward for millions of unsuspecting people as the ultimate liberator from a society that is threatened by the confusion and inter-breeding of race and blood and therefore doomed. In a recent interview in a Belgian newspaper, Freek de Jonge rightly remarked that this is no time to make people more afraid than they already are—but that is exactly what's happening. Fear is being laid like a leaden cloak on our creativity. The world offers less and less opportunities for sharpening the creative spirit in people, thereby allowing them to provide positive new impulses for society. The civil war in the former Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda, violence, terrorism and fundamentalism in the big cities, the millions of refugees in their no-mans-land, are all so crippling for our Eros. And to top it all, the French president, following some bland speech, carelessly sprinkles the whole lot with a carpet of atom bombs—can you think of any better way of making fear the order of the day?

In other areas too we are confronted with spiritual poverty and loss of creativity. Something which could have been seen as a guideline is now reduced to banal sign for a consumer item. Einstein's $e = mc^2$ is a slogan for a tobacco company, the *Monna Lisa* a bad copy and Mondrian's work is used to package cosmetics thereby giving the impression that it is as consumable as the product itself.

Historical values have been reduced to cliché concepts, their potential of forming a challenge in the building of new constructions being totally ignored.

Nor do intellectuals escape this creative malaise. Everywhere we hear remarks that put progress up for discussion, that announce the end of the new and even the end of the avant-garde. Michel Foucault predicted the end of humanity, Danto the end of art, not to mention the words I have written here for they are based in essence upon doubt and scepticism as regards the place of art.

But no matter how sceptical and pessimistic it may sound, my question here is meant in the first place to be critical. It is also based on my experience in Ghent, my home town, at Documenta in Kassel, and in Japan of late, and in other places where contemporary art must face the increasing obstinacy and sly appropriation of an essentially hostile audience both within the public administration as well as in the world of business, not to mention adverse public opinion. This attitude—particularly in these fearful days—is undoubtedly linked to

the force with which all great art crashes in revolt against society. The importance of its potency is either unconsciously or wilfully removed from the discussion and taken out of the dialogue, which is then postponed to a later date or merely allowed to be approached in reduced form within aesthetics.

To put it briefly, art thrives nowadays in a sometimes camouflaged, though more often strikingly negative climate. We can also ask to which extent something like this causes the artist to react. Does he or she adopt a certain position regarding it or does he or she simply become the illustrator of this *Zeitgeist*?

In a world that is increasingly complex, there are a number of points of view from which the artist can formulate his or her own answers. We can find almost as many constructions as artists. Like society, the art world is more fragmented than ever.

In my opinion however we can point to a number of tendencies which become more prominent when set against the backdrop of the negativity outlined above.

Firstly, there is a group of artists who structurally speaking find their challenge in chaos, considering chaos as a revolutionary force that generates the future, as do many scientists nowadays.

For these artists chaos is the locus of experience. They enjoy and experience "chaos" as a new possibility in resolving the ever widening gap between object and subject.

The Fluxus movement and the film artist Jean-Luc Godard are the mentors of this approach.

Their reality consists more so of an awareness of running parallel with the world through artificial constructions and situations in which they find their realness, which will always remain problematic. They look at the world with much less irony and with less provocative criticism than the Fluxus artists. They become completely involved in it, in this chaos, because they still wish to discover things. The process becomes more important than the answer, which explains their interest in the transience of existence, for the decline and loss of things around us (see Fabrice, Hybert, Kinoshita, Jason Rhoades).

Then we have the artists who stare the sombre issues of this fearful atmosphere straight in the face. They attack this threat with their own symbols and signs. They protest openly, showing the scars of destruction and creating new often visionary openings. Here I think in particular of Bruce Nauman, Thomas Schütte, Marlène Dumas and Cady Noland.

They directly explore the critical function of art. This is why their work is so saturated with social and political involvement, more through its sheer physical power than through the images it chooses. This involvement is more directly visible among some of the them. Then their intention is to lay bare, criticise and denounce the strategies of power and the market, as is the case with David Hammons, Dara Birnbaum and Matthew Barney. Barney in fact creates an artificial almost surreal reality which, because of its fascinating fairy tale semblance possesses a subversive and perverse undertone that contains both warning and catharsis.

Others, like the Flemish artist, Thiery de Cordier protest in silence and retreat from approaching danger to their fortresses. They express their protest through silence and resistance. Convinced of their viewpoint, they formulate their own alternatives and reflections from this position of conscious isolation. Such artists remind one of certain neo-platonic idealists like Gauguin who left for Tahiti or D.H. Lawrence, who retired to Mexico.

There are others then who choose travesty and camouflage. Cindy Sherman, for example, dresses herself up in other forms and combines her reality with quotations from art history. In so doing she comments on and asks questions about the identity and social position of women projected by cultural and social codes of behaviour. Whereas Cindy Sherman uses masks, Luc Tuymans camouflages and hides his fears and vulnerability behind the dangerous beauty of a traditionally executed painting.

The videos of Bill Viola and Gary Hill possess that same sense of the veiled and the elusive. They allow us to reach through to a world that lies hidden behind reality and confront us with the limitations of our perceptions by suggesting new relationships in time and space.

And finally, there is a fifth group of artists who by blowing up glamour and kitsch and making it more explicit, wink ironically at the banality of our society of excess and waste. By adapting cynicism as a basic standpoint some try to keep fear and depressing feelings at bay. Jeff Koons is a striking example of an artist of this kind. Personally, I prefer artists like Haim Steinbach who unravels the world of objects, recovering them and presenting them in new relationships which result in a linking of clarity and enigma.

But whatever attitude the artist adopts, it is striking how he or she experiences this resistance in and from the world as providing not a negative but a positive point of departure. By using it as material for their

creative idealism, they go against the negative impulses of society. Hindrances and opposition allow noteworthy artists to formulate things even more clearly. They do not start from consensus but divide this consensus and create their own space within it.

This space then is more than just a hole in familiarity. It immediately links itself up with the familiar; it seeks to link every single point of its essence with that environment and therefore with us. So a work of art, despite its individuality, remains completely open to all those who dare confront it within the complexity of its contemporary context.

For this reason too, I assert that investing in art is the same as investing in the sources a society can draw upon for its energy. If art takes place in an organised context, as is so often the case at present, or serves as a decor for prominent economic forces or as a disguise and an alibi for essentially uninterested parties to the discussion, then it is pointless. Then it only serves to camouflage the seeming certitude of our existence.

This is why I say: leave art to the visionary. That is where it belongs. From there it can offer us answers. There it can check fear and doubt. By visionary I mean linking things with each other beyond any system and therefore beyond the limits it sets, not like creating a machine that we might manipulate. Machines, though they may be powerful, are still limited. Their functionality is built up of the decisions they are made from. The visionary is not so. The visionary is a machine before there is any machine, before function acquires substance. And only in art has the visionary given form to itself and therefore cancelled any wish for feasibility.

And so I return to my first question, to my former doubt. And I will even try to provide an answer: if the visionary fades or is given up in other domains of existence, then those very domains is where art should be, more than ever before. The challenge is enormous for us all, for art allows us to look beyond the borders of fear. How we should look is another matter. But art is awaiting its moment patiently. It waits and answers only those who have found an answer themselves.