Art Discourse

Concept Has Never Meant "Horse": A Response to Merijn Oudenampsen

Steyn Bergs

Essay – November 2, 2014

In his response to Merijn Oudenampsen's essay "Lost in Translation: On the Intelligibility of Art Discourse" Steyn Bergs tries to both complicate and adjust the essentially sociological account offered by Oudenampsen from an art historical perspective. Bergs wants to offer a clearer image of some of the intricacies of the functioning of art discourse in asking after what we mean by "a more accessible language in the arts" or "a more critical, intellectual and pedagogical relation to art."



Daniel Buren, Sandwichmen, Paris, 1968.

I read sociologist and political scientist Merijn Oudenampsen's essay "Lost in Translation: On the Intelligibility of Art Discourse *[www.onlineopen.org/lost-in-translation]*", which was featured on this website in July of this year, with a great deal of interest as well as with a fair amount of scepticism.

The piece struck me as interesting because it assesses an issue which I believe to be one of the more important and urgent issues in art today: the intelligibility – or rather the *alleged unintelligibility* – of art discourse. It concerns a debate between, on the one side, art world "insiders," and on the other, journalists and critics demanding a more "down to earth" approach in art discourse, if not its complete abolition. In this debate, the latter group

legitimises its claims by calling on (and ostensibly representing) the "general public";[1] art discourse in its current guise, it is argued, would drive off broad strands of potential audiences. In other words, Oudenampsen does an excellent job of showing the problem of the alleged unintelligibility of art discourse for what it mainly is: the populist hijacking of a potentially fruitful debate about art and art discourse, and its relation to the public sphere. Furthermore, I also found myself in agreement with Oudenampsen's conclusions, where he writes such things as: "To conclude, yes we are in need of a more accessible language in the arts. But no, that inaccessibility is not caused by the intellectual and academic colonisation of the arts. It is a particular, overly aesthetic and anti-intellectual way of relating to art and theory that seems to be the problem here." And: "... a more critical, intellectual and pedagogical relation to art is needed. It implies some degree of scepticism towards traditional ideas concerning disinterested art appreciation, which foregrounds form and is ill-disposed towards meaning." [2] I was wary of Oudenampsen's particular way of getting from his outline of the problem to these conclusions, however. First and foremost, I found it problematic that nearly all of "Lost in Translation" seems to be informed by a Bourdieuan view on the social roles and functions of art and art discourse. While this view is definitely not without its merits, I will argue here that it is nonetheless reductive of the nexus of reciprocal relations between art, art discourse and the public. It is highly necessary, in my view, to both complicate and adjust the essentially sociological account offered by Oudenampsen from an art historical perspective, since doing so will offer a clearer image of some of the intricacies of the functioning of art discourse, but also of what exactly we might mean by "a more accessible language in the arts" or "a more critical, intellectual and pedagogical relation to art."

I.

The contemporary reader is likely to think of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's introduction to *La Distinction* (1979), translated into the English in 1984 under the title *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, as characterised by a rather peculiar paradox. Bourdieu's ideas concerning art appreciation seem to have lost very little of their relevance today, while at the same time it is clear that, in some respects, *Distinction* was outdated in 1979 already, when it was first published.

It is probably not particularly necessary to enter into an elaborate demonstration of how Bourdieu's thought can be made productive here. [3] In fact, Oudenampsen's essay proves rather convincingly that the myth of an entirely natural and spontaneous art appreciation is still widespread, amongst newspaper critics as well as so-called insiders of the art world. Hence, critically scrutinizing the "ideology of charisma" – Oudenampsen's undertaking – seems to be as valuable an excercise today as it was in the 1960s and 1970s. What remains highly problematic in Bourdieu's analysis of "why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" [4] is that it comes at the cost of reducing, albeit perhaps more often than not implicitly, all cultural production (in the broad sense of the term) to an opposition between "high art" or "legitimate culture" on the one hand, and "low", "popular" or "vulgar" forms of cultural expression on the other. For the French sociologist, the field of art, or "legitimate art" is characterised by autonomy and the "pure gaze", a specific attitude towards cultural objects derived from Kantian aesthetics that is at once the result and the consolidation of artistic autonomy: "The pure gaze implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world, which, given the conditions in which it is performed, is also a social separation." [5] Note how Bourdieu here presents the separation between the sphere of art and that of everyday life as clear-cut and absolute.

As mentioned earlier, this dichotomous view was redundant even at the time when *Distinction* was published. After all, by 1979 "legitimate culture" had long come to include many practices that do not correspond to Bourdieu's definition of art, such as nineteenth-

century naturalism in theatre and literature, but also – and more importantly – the (historical) avant-garde. The latter, as we know, was essentially an attempt to sublate art into the praxis of everyday life by undermining its autonomy. The fact that by Bourdieu's time, the avant-garde had already entered the very institution it originally sought to oppose or attack – the institution of art –need not lead to the pitiful conclusion à la Peter Bürger that the avant-garde failed precisely because it succeeded as art – a conclusion that would in fact be very much in keeping with Bourdieu's views. Instead, it should lead us to conclude that, in the sphere of culture, the "high" and the "low" are dialectically intertwined, rather than adverse to each other. [6]

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno writes that the "constitutive paradox of art" is that it is both "self-sufficient, and differentiated from the empirical world, of which it nevertheless remains a part." [7] Artistic autonomy, for Adorno, is always aporetical; it exists only by grace of its relation to the extra-artistic. This is why *L'art pour l'art* aestheticism still draws on the realities of everyday life and never succeeds entirely at, as Bourdieu would have it: "imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products." On the other end of the spectrum, it is also why even the aforementioned Bürger himself (a theorist who is usually very keen on presenting the avant-garde as radically and deeply anti-artistic) sees himself forced to admit that, "It is only with reference to the category 'work of art', for example, that Duchamp's Ready-Mades make sense." [8] Autonomy and heteronomy both feed off and reinforce each other, and as a consequence, so do the (problematic) categories of "high" and "low" culture.

All of this might seem rather abstract and perhaps not of direct relevance to a discussion concerned with the alleged unintelligibility of art discourse. However, the point here is that, willy-nilly, Bourdieu's distinction between legitimate and popular cultural products is prone to facilitating populist "ivory tower" rhetoric. Therefore, employing a more complex conception of what art is cannot be a bad thing. Where culture is reduced to an opposition of "high" and "low" forms of expression, it becomes all the more tempting to simplify the role of art discourse as well. Tellingly, Bourdieu concludes his introduction to *Distinction* with two excerpts from pieces of theatre criticism, which, as Bourdieu himself puts it, "might almost have been written for the delight of the sociologist." While Bourdieu does not elaborate on these excerpts, his point in doing so is clear nonetheless: he wants to demonstrate how art discourse strives to render permanent the hierarchical separation between different categories of cultural production, to which equally hierarchical social categories – classes – correspond. When Bourdieu writes that art and culture serve to legitimise social (class) differences, then this certainly includes art discourse.

II.

It is true, of course, that art discourse can indeed fulfill such an ideological function, as Bourdieu asserts. One only needs to throw a quick glance at the overabundance of museum wall texts, gallery hand-outs, and (online) articles supposed to pass for art criticism to see this might even be the case for the greater part of all texts on art being produced: mostly, their function is above all to mystify. Still, it is important to note that art discourse can also take up quite a different role.

In his essay "Under the Gaze of Theory," theorist Boris Groys argues that art discourse – Groys uses the word "theory", but of course, art theory is merely a specific form of art discourse – can be seen as a form of "counterproductive advertising" for art: while it is in fact meant to make art more accessible and widen its audience, it narrows this audience down instead. [9] Still, this does not lead Groys to conclude that the function of art discourse (and especially the increasingly specialised, "difficult" or *theoretical* kind of art discourse) is to scare people off. Quite the contrary; Groys explains art's dependence on theory by the fact that theory offers art a perspective by which it might become universal. Artists, Groys argues, feel urged to appeal to everyone. In an increasingly globalised world, they can no

longer do so by underpinning the art they produce with artistic or cultural traditions, since these are not the same for everyone they are trying to reach. Thus, they turn to theory instead, since theory is, at least in principle, equally accessible and comprehensible for all people gifted with the ability to reason. [10] Art and art discourse, Groys concludes, are therefore essentially inclusive, and their interdependence stems from the urge artists feel to render their practice "super-social." [11]

Such a reading of the function of art discourse, by the way, in no way rules out the crux of Bourdieu's thesis that art and cultural consumption demarcate and reinforce class differences. Art and its discourse (you cannot have the one without the other) do indeed fulfill this social function: this is what is meant by the affirmative character of culture. However, all of this tells us more about societal inequalities than it does about the intrinsic qualities of any cultural product, be it a "high" or a "low" one. [12]

Similarly, when Oudenampsen writes that "the inaccessibility of art has historically been one of its defining characteristics," we can surely see where he is coming from: access to the realm art has always been denied to the majority of people; this is quite simply an unobjectionable truth. Still, after the entire history of the various (neo-)avant-gardes, institutional critique, and all the various forms of "socially engaged" art including relational aesthetics and what have you, the unambiguous characterisation of art as inaccessible is likely to be met with severe reservations amongst historians, theorists and critics of art. This is, above all, a matter of different disciplinary perspectives; sociologists are likely to be more interested in looking into the way art and culture function in the social field, while the aforementioned historians, theorists and critics will probably prefer a more immanent point of view. In a discussion concerned with what kind of art discourse is desirable, it would seem wise to include both perspectives.

III.

Above, I have asserted that much art discourse, perhaps even the larger part of it, is problematic since it functions as a means of mystifying art, of increasing the distance between art and its audience. This is not to say that the journalists and newspaper critics who purport to know what's best for the general public are right to criticise the kind of art discourse they describe as too "theoretical" or too "academic". The argument of these journalists and critics never really goes beyond the obstinate complaint that there is simply too much art discourse and – perhaps more importantly – that this discourse makes use of a language that, in their opinion, is too "highbrow". It is self-evident that this condemnation of art discourse simply because it makes use of words, concepts and terms that are allegedly beyond the grasp of "ordinary people" is highly patronising and condescending.

Furthermore, while their condemnation does nothing to change what Bourdieu might have called official or legitimate art discourse, it does play an instrumental role in keeping the public at arm's length, as it portrays the language current in art discourse as some kind of elitist lingo that the so-called ordinary people shouldn't bother to take seriously or try to understand in the first place. [13]

Oudenampsen is definitely right in arguing that if art discourse were academic, there would be more of a didactic aspect or function to it. And it is indeed this didactic function – and "didactic" is not meant in the pejorative sense here – that is more often than not traded in for mystification. In the art world, there seems to exist an appreciation for fuzzy, opaque and open-ended texts that often teach very little about the artworks to which they refer. Here, one is reminded of Bourdieu again, who not only pointed out this tendency towards the polysemic but also described how critics that adhere to a more "scholarly" approach are often accused of being pedantic. Yet it is obvious that such a scholarly approach would better suit the function of art discourse as Groys sees it.

The explanation offered in "Lost in Translation" for the phenomenonal absence of such pieces of art discourse is adequate: in (Dutch) art academies artists are taught to relate to theory in a primarily aesthetic manner, rather than in a rational one. This tendency can very reasonably be suspected to have blown over into the art world at large, Oudenampsen suggests. This is not only problematic for reasons of keeping the ideology of charisma intact; when artists, curators or critics produce texts that could have been written by Humpty Dumpty from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), they fundamentally undermine the social efficacy of the discourse they are producing. In Oudenampsen's anecdote, people seek to use the word "semiotics" because they think it has a nice ring to it, reinforcing the idea that abstract concepts can be appreciated or grasped spontaneously and thus shrouding the fact that these competencies are related to socialisation, education, and so forth. But what is in fact more detrimental to the decisiveness of so-called "aesthetic" art discourse is that it neutralises and undermines art's social potential. As we know, the academic world generally tends to be highly preoccupied with matters of formalism and mannerisms of writing; in the art world, the problem is rather different. Often, shared frames of reference and methodologies seem to be lacking, as does the rigor necessary to produce discourse that is based on reason and succeeds at appealing to the reason of others: words, theories and concepts are used to mean just what they are chosen to mean.

Consider, for instance, the following piece of text, issued by an art institution for the occasion of an upcoming exhibition:

(the artist) renders things visible by repetition, copying or reuse. Errors and mistakes do the same, they make you more attentive. The smaller the distance between two identical things – differences that sometimes can only be conceived of – the more interesting. What are they? Concise visual enigmas, sophisticated three-dimensional interventions, a minimal gesture, a subtle action, or a simple (ready-made) sculptural object. Sometimes uncommonly blunt and sometimes unexpectedly elegant – but always in earnest.

Clearly, the main purpose of this text is to mystify and legitimise ("concise", "sophisticated", "minimal", "subtle" and so on). Form definitely reigns supreme over function. As such, it does indeed further the ideology of charisma. What is in my view significantly more at issue here, however, is quite simply that it is downright impossible to extract any more or less univocal form of meaning from this excerpt, which all too seamlessly suits the convenience of the deconstructionist claim that every reading is a misreading. After all, it is extremely unlikely that you and I will interpret the claim that the work can be either blunt or elegant (yet is always in earnest!) in the same way – if we manage to interpret it at all, that is. Following Groys' line of reasoning, what this piece of discourse fails to provide us with, is some sort of common ground, a prism through which we, as social and more or less reasonable human beings, can collectively assess the work of the artist in question.

IV.

In a text from 1969–1970 titled *Beware!*, artist Daniel Buren discusses, among other things, what exactly a "concept" is. Buren states that while the meaning of the word – especially since it had recently become a common trope in art discourse – is clearly ambiguous and up for debate, "its meaning is still restricted; concept has never meant 'horse'."[14] This seemingly bland assertion of Buren's – everyone will agree that concept has never meant "horse", right? – perfectly captures what can be perceived as problematic about the "jargon" of art discourse: the fact that it is not a functional jargon in the orthodox sense of the word. What is typical (and more or less unique) about art discourse is that it makes use of terms and concepts stemming from ordinary language as well as from a wide range of different disciplines. Moreover, as Buren's analysis of the concept "concept" illustrates, much of art discourse's commonplace tropes are historicised: they can mean and have meant different things not only within different discursive contexts, but also throughout time.

It is true, then, that art discourse is marked by a high degree of ambiguity, and that this ambiguity hampers the realisation of what Groys has identified as the universalising potential of discourse, turning art discourse into counterproductive advertising. Therefore, if we want to work towards "a more accessible language in the arts," coming to terms with this ambiguity is what we need to do. If we leave out of consideration the blunt suggestion that art discourse should simply be abolished altogether, we are left with two strategies for doing so.

The first option is to tackle the problem that art discourse does not have a clearly delineated language at its disposal by more or less artificially creating a new jargon for art discourse. This strategy is reflected, for instance, in theorist Stephen Wright's *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (2013), a brief list of terms and concepts created for the occasion of the *Museum of Arte Útil*, a recent project by artist Tania Bruguera, in which a part of the Van Abbemuseum was turned into a museum of useful art.[15] As the Van Abbe's website informs us, the observation that "much of the vocabulary that we have to describe art seems insufficient to deal with this type of practice" was the reason for the creation of this lexicon. It is clear that this strategy has the advantage of conceptual clarity and conciseness; it overtly attempts to equip art discourse with the readymade and functional jargon it so lacks. However, it also necessarily has the drawback of having to do away with concepts that, however ambiguous, cannot really be done away with. In his lexicon, Wright does not only offer a number of "emergent concepts," but also a series of "conceptual institutions to be retired," including the concept of autonomy, for instance.[16]

It is my belief that the answer to the ambiguity of art discourse does not lie in a tabula rasa approach, which always has the disadvantage of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As art critic and writer John Berger argues: "Mystification has little to do with the words used."[17] Rather, mystification relates to how art discourse *functions*. Therefore, the solution is not to impose upon art discourse a newspeak of sorts. As a result, the challenge for art discourse becomes to work its way through its own characteristic ambiguity in a productive manner. Returning to the above mentioned example of art discourse, it is notable that this fragment makes use of a couple of terms that are highly common in art discourse – yet do not *exclusively* belong to this domain – such as "intervention", "minimal" and "ready-made". Just like Buren's "concept", these terms are ambiguous: they can mean a relatively high, yet limited, number of things. In the quoted text, however, they *remain* ambiguous and opaque: what exactly does "intervention" mean here, and where or into what exactly does this intervention take place? Does the word "minimal" refer to a specific form artistic practice from the 1960s, or is it used in its quotidian sense? And is "ready-made" really just a synonym for "simple"? It is precisely from this ambiguity that these terms derive their mystificatory potential here.

Working through the ambiguity of these three terms, as a viable alternative to completely abandoning them, would imply contextualising, scrutinising and elucidating them, rather than using them gratuituously. It is easily imaginable that this would result in a discursive practice that could indeed be labelled as didactic, or even academic. We might just come to demand from anyone who tosses the word "semiotics" around a basic understanding of what the field in question actually is. Taking up more explicit critical positions and overtly positioning oneself vis-à-vis certain strands of ideas or thought might have to become standard practice. In some cases, *more* footnotes and historical or theoretical references might in fact turn out be necessary, since these can provide art discourse with a sense of transparency. The value of the belletristic tradition in art criticism might have to be questioned. Or to put it in Bourdieuan terms: we might have to start foregrounding art discourse's function over its form.

Steyn Bergs is an art critic and a researcher. Currently, he is conducting his PhD research on the commodification of digital artworks at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Together with Rosa te Velde, he is co-editor-in-chief of *Kunstlicht*.

Footnotes

1. It is tempting, yet not entirely justified, to juxtapose these writers with Domeniek Ruyters and Vincent Van Velsen who, as insiders, would represent the art world in this debate: Van Velsen's piece was explicitly framed as an opiniated text, and the same goes for Ruyters' text, which is even written in the first person singular. Neither claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to be giving voice to the art world at large. The wilful polarisation of public debates in the media is typical of populism-fueled art scandals. See Maria Karlsson and Måns Wrange, "Scandal Success! The Political Economy of the Art Scandal," in Nina Möntmann, ed., *Scandalous: A Reader on Art and Ethics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).
2. Merijn Oudenampsen, "Lost in Translation: On the Intelligibility of Art Discourse," *Open!*, 2 July 2014, www.onlineopen.org.
3. Bourdieu was more multifaceted a thinker than is shown in this essay; I am limiting myself to his book *La Distinction* (1979) here, the work Oudenampsen draws from, so as to keep things comprehensive.
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 7.
5. Ibid., p. 5. It is worthwile noting that, while Bourdieu specifically focuses on Kantian aesthetics, earlier philosophical origins of the "pure gaze" and the "ideology of charisma" can be discerned. One particularly interesting precedent would be David Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757). Here, Hume postulates a "great resemblance between mental and bodily taste," and quotes the following passage from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605): "It is with good reason, says Sancho to the squire with the great nose, that I pretend to have a judgment in wine: This is a quality hereditary in our family. Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One of them tastes it; considers it; and, after mature reflection, pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather, which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom an old key with a leathern thong tied to it." See David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," accessed through www.bartleby.com. Hume thus argues that elite groups naturally gifted with better "mental taste" surface completely spontaneously, and that the shared judgements of these groups form the base for a standard of taste in cultural objects.
6. "High" and "low" are used here in their Bourdieuan sense, "high"art being more autonomous with respect to everyday life than "low" art. However, one might also wonder to what extent these rather restrictive categories are useful at all.
7. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 373.
8. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 56.
9. Boris Groys, "Under the Gaze of Theory," e-flux journal 35, no. 5 (27 August 2012): p. 1, worker01.e-flux.com.
10. Claims to universality should always be regarded with profound suspicion. In writing about the universalizing potential of reason, however, Groys is clearly thinking of "reason" along the lines of Terry Eagleton's definition of the word: "[Reason is] the kind of discourse that would result from as many people as possible actively participating in a discussion of these matters in conditions as free as possible from domination." Terry Eagleton, I*deology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 31.
11. Boris Groys, "Under the Gaze of Theory," p. 12.
12. In a lecture on 25 September 2014 at University of Amsterdam titled "Critical Sociology and Sociology of Critique: A Journey Through French-Style Critique," sociologist Luc Boltanski noted that, in Bourdieuan social theory, "the stress is put on the positional properties of actors rather than on the situation." Loosely drawing on Boltanski, I

believe it is more adequate to consider inaccessibility as a positional property of art, rather than its defining characteristic, as Oudenampsen does.
13. Jacques Rancière writes: "Militant workers of the 1840s break out of the circle of domination by reading and writing not popular and militant, but 'high' literature."Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy," *New Left Review* 14 (March–April 2002): p. 134. It is clear that these journalists and critics do not aim to provide "their people" with access to the perceived "ivory tower of high culture" as much as they desire to tear down this edifice.
14. Daniel Buren, ***Beware! (1969–70)***, web.mit.edu.
15. In fact, the Museum of Arte Útil, which focused on use-value in art and where a great deal of artworks and projects both historical and contemporary that walked the thin line between art and activism were collected or represented was highly exemplary of how the remnants of Kantian aesthetics (such as the supremacy of form over function) have been and are being thwarted from within the realm of art, thus complicating Bourdieu's dichotomising view on culture.
16. See www.museumarteutil.net. I am aware, of course, that this lexicon was developed within the framework of Arte Útil specifically, but I nonetheless believe it provides a useful example here.
17. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Publishers, 2008), p. 15.

Crosslinks

Lost in Translation: www.onlineopen.org/lost-in-translation

Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse

This text was downloaded on November 7, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/concept-has-never-meant-horse-a-response-to-merijn-oudenampsen