Art Discourse

Meta-theory Minus a (Dialectical) Bite.
A Second Response to Camiel van Winkel's "Sandwich"

Steven ten Thije

Essay – February 9, 2014

In his latest response to Camiel van Winkel's *The Sandwich Will Not Go Away Or Why Paradigm Shifts Are Wishful Thinking* *[www.onlineopen.org/the-sandwich-will-not-go-away-or-why-paradigm-shifts-are-wishful-thinking]*, Steven ten Thije critiques his concept of the "sandwich" as an analytical tool. Ten Thije claims that Van Winkel's "sandwich" is nothing more than pure theory because it fails to offer the necessary connections to the extra-theoretical and, moreover, essentially ignores art altogether.

If we stick to food metaphors, we could say that Camiel van Winkel tends to sprinkle his responses with an ironic salt that tastes remarkably like vinegar. But regardless of how it is done, it is pleasant to be proven wrong on all points in that it allows the air to be cleared of several misunderstandings and, even if perhaps somewhat unfulfilling for him, it is good to see that we indeed agree on much more than meets the eye. There is no "normality" or "return" intended, we are all complicit in the "sandwich" and the Ivory Tower is for rent. (And, to return the favour, yes, I do think personality-based curators can be criticised.)

The word "marginal" is just a "neutral" term that we shouldn't make too much "fuss" about. I'm happy to let that be. Unfortunately, however, he also consistently warps my argument and elegantly sidesteps the core of my critique and, as a result, leaves me with that same feeling of "willful misrepresentation" he complained of in his previous response. If this was the extent of it, then the debate would simply come to an end with two men going their own separate ways, agreeing that the common ground is just too small for both of us to stand on.

However, Van Winkel's response began with a short presentation of his argument that felt refreshing and inspires me to do what I believe Van Winkel was hoping for: giving him a direct response to his proposal of the "sandwich as an analytical tool to understand the current state of discourse on art".

When one reads the original text together with his first response *[www.onlineopen.org/a-grotesque-situation]*, I can understand some of Van Winkel's earlier frustration. In my previous response *[www.onlineopen.org/who-is-making-the-sandwich]* I didn't engage too directly with the "sandwich" itself, because, aside of its relative accuracy, I wasn't quite sure how it functioned as an "epistemological model". Now it is clear that I should understand the "sandwich" as structurally linked to his previous work such as *Moderne leegte* and *The Regime of Visibility*. [1] In studies like these he dialectically links developments in art to cultural phenomena. For instance, in *Moderne leegte* he links city planning and architecture in the postwar Netherlands to minimal and conceptual art. His "paradigm shift" argument is much like city planning in that it is another cultural

phenomenon that he seeks to understand and reflect upon. Although, in this instance, he uses a model that is quite different from the ones he introduces in *Moderne leegte* because he ignores the artworks and instead focuses solely on discourse. Instead of a dialectics between art and culture, his "sandwich" offers a discursive dialectics, in which the three layers – "Romanticism", "post-structuralism" and "cultural studies" – balance each other out but also create a type of constant short-circuiting.

The entire "paradigm-shift" argument is a symptom of this short-circuiting phenomenon. I hope the reader will forgive me for briefly repeating the notion of his "sandwich" – albeit here in more dialectical terms. The "Romantic" tradition celebrates identity and the self. It's historical origin is situated in the early 19th century and was related to the birth of the civil subject and the nation state, which not only rejected the aristocratic model but also introduced a new type of heroic subject as well as the notion of heroic artists and art.

A prime example of this tendency is the position of artist Casper David Friedrich who abandoned hierarchical institutions such as the Church and the Academy and began drawing inspiration from his own individual, unmediated, subjective experiences. He painted churches in ruins to symbolise the waning influence of the aristocracy. Moreover, he celebrated the human subject as a being with the innate ability to experience the divine and know right from wrong. Of course, this is an overly simplified description of his complex position, but it illustrates the essence of the "Romantic" layer of the "sandwich".

This layer is then dialectically opposed by the "post-structuralist" tradition, which debunked the heroic subject of modernity. Writers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in many very different ways began developing a radical critique of the entire notion of the subject. Their famous "death of the author" idea is further illustrated by Foucault in his "Order of Discourse", his famous 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, which opens with these lines: "I wish I could have slipped surreptitiously into this discourse which I must present today, and into the ones I shall have to give here, perhaps for many years to come. I should have preferred to be enveloped by speech and carried away well beyond all possible beginnings, rather than have to begin it myself." [2]

The first "I" becomes blurred at a crossroads of various traditions of speaking that meet within the arbitrary historical subject, which Foucault wants to trace and understand in relation to each other. The "post-structuralist" layer presents the heroic self as annulled by the murmuring that emerges from the archive of discursive traditions.

I personally feel least familiar with the last layer of the "sandwich", which in Van Winkel's reading seems to produce a dialectical synthesis of the first two layers and is called "cultural studies". This recent discursive tradition features the subject-position central to Romanticism being translated into abstract and generic subjects such as gender, class or race. Cultural studies draws its inspiration from both sides and creates a perpetual mini-dialectic in which a cultural group gets dressed up as a kind-of super-subject and is invested with heroic agency that reminds one of Romanticism and is used to overcome the limitations of this subject-position. The feminist position, for example, ultimately leads to a total implosion of the notion of gender out of which emerges a new, genderless category referred to as queerness.

Here is where the "sandwich" produces a constant desire to announce "paradigm shifts", which – especially in the fine arts – will never truly produce a shift in the "sandwich" itself, or even any real dialectical development, for that matter. This becomes pertinent when we revisit the Kuhnian notion that a "paradigm shift" marks a revolution in understanding in which phenomena that were once incomprehensible suddenly become comprehensible. "Paradigm shifts" mark an instant of radical reform in which something is lost and something is found and these phenomena go unrecognised from within. What is essential

here is that data considered inexplicable suddenly becomes coherent and vice versa. The possibility of a shift starts with a dialectical exchange between the theory and the data.

The false nature of the "paradigm shift", that seems so essential to today's art world discourse, is the fact that it is not at all clear what is confronting what. Is art supposed to instigate a shift in another field outside of art, or is it art itself that is going through a "paradigm shift", or perhaps both? Here a knot is tied that is difficult to untangle because it is entirely unclear what is data and what is theory. Here language becomes "obscure" and "academic" and the "mannerism" commences. Next to ***e-flux***, Van Winkel refers to the ambivalent blessings of "artistic research" in which art itself enters the world of academia and becomes knowledge production, but then runs the risk of ending up in a closed loop where it becomes both the data (as the work) that it then itself explains (as the research). When the specificity of art is no longer understood as an autonomous force that stimulates the reflection and understanding of our contemporary position by differing, it gets lost in an amorphous zone where theory, art, utopianism and marketing all commingle to become an undifferentiated whole.

The question that Van Winkel seems to want to ask is: Where does the rubber meet the road; or perhaps: Can the rubber ever meet the road again? Here is conceivably where the unfortunate misunderstanding between us begins. Because we share a concern for the fact that a substantial part of the cultural criticism in and about the contemporary art world simply never ends up being read by anyone outside the art world itself; that any real dialectical exchange between an artwork and another cultural context is almost impossible because the entire world of art production and its reception is self-contained in a discursive vacuum. However, the more pressing question for both Van Winkel and myself is: What can we ***do*** in this situation? And here is where I feel Van Winkel's essay falls short. The "sandwich" may very well function as a tool for analysing how and why certain discursive patterns in contemporary art writing are indeed ineffective or flawed, but it offers little perspective on whether it is possible and, if so, how one could constructively act upon the presented data in this situation.

Van Winkel ***describes*** the logic of the "grotesque" situation we find ourselves in but this does not qualify as dialectical analysis. In his defence, however, I must say that he is also careful to not refer to his "sandwich" as a dialectical analysis, preferring the more neutral "analytical tool" and "epistemological model". But it is this analytical neutrality, which attempts to reveal the logic of what we know, that ends up disappointing us, especially compared to his more explicitly dialectical earlier work. He ends up transforming his argument into almost pure theory, or meta-theory, without offering any clear links to the extra-theoretical that could dialectically develop his argument. This is why I wrote my "schoolmasterly" explanation of globalisation and neoliberalism. I think these are precisely the two phenomena that need to be addressed as the real political and economic context for the "sandwich". Without a context of this kind, the analytical tool only ends up performing half of its dialectical function and I'm afraid that that is ultimately no dialectic at all. This is also why the primary emotion the text arouses is frustration because one clearly senses that Van Winkel is not terribly positive about the current state of affairs, and finds himself completely trapped by them.

However, neoliberalism and globalisation, important as they may be as defining-the-current-moment phenomena, only represent ***half*** of what is missing in Van Winkel's analysis. It is art itself – or more precisely, the artworks – that are the most striking in their absence. (This critique was also articulated by Frank Reijnders in his review of Van Winkel's "De mythe van het kunstenaarschap" (The Myth of Artisthood) *[www.onlineopen.org/de-mythe-van-het-kunstenaarschap]*. [3] Comparing Van Winkel's own analysis in ***Moderne leegte***, or ***The Regime of Visibility***, with his "sandwich" as "analytical tool", the main difference we notice is that art itself has vacated the field of inquiry. Of

course, one can argue that this is a strategic choice of a temporary nature, but the argument thereby misses the one element that could actually produce a real dialectical argument.

This is also why his simplistic criticism of the Van Abbemuseum and the Museum of Arte Útil [4] is so disappointing and even substandard for an academic of his stature. Maybe he is critical of the museum's prevailing rhetoric, but by limiting his criticism to what the museum proclaims, instead of also including what the museum chooses to exhibit, he produces a very biased and limited view that ignores the many and varied artists and artworks represented in that museum. Here is where I would like to request that Van Winkel show some curiosity or generosity because the artists and artworks exhibited in the Van Abbemuseum have their own unique place in the world and should not be summarily discounted simply because of their context. Taking these works seriously as independent voices capable of dialectically engaging with their context, would be completely in keeping with Van Winkel's own expertise. Such a dialectical analysis could provide rich new perspectives on the current state of the art world and beyond. If not, I'm afraid that my "father" remains trapped in a paternalism that only sets the limits of where we are currently at in the form of a meta-theory minus the necessary dialectical bite.

Steven ten Thije is a research curator affiliated with the Van Abbemuseum and the Universität Hildesheim. He was a coordinator of The Autonomy Project and co-organizer of The Autonomy Project Symposium (autonomyproject.tumblr.com). He co-curated *Spirits of Internationalisms*, part of the European collaborative project l'Internationale.

Footnotes

1. Camiel van Winkel, *Moderne leegte. Over kunst en openbaarheid* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1999); and *The Regime of Visibility* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005).
2. Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse", in Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* Boston, London and Henley: Routledge, 1981 (51).
3. Frank Reijnders, "Het soevereine kunstenaarschap. Kanttekeningen bij een mythe", in *De Witte Raaf*, No. 131, January–February 2008. Available at: www.dewitteraaf.be.
4. *Museum of Arte Util*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 07-12-2013 / 30-03-2014.

Crosslinks

De mythe van het kunstenaarschap: www.onlineopen.org/de-mythe-van-het-kunstenaarschap
The Sandwich Will Not Go Away Or Why Paradigm Shifts Are Wishful Thinking: www.onlineopen.org/the-sandwich-will-not-go-away-or-why-paradigm-shifts-are-wishful-thinking
A Grotesque Situation : www.onlineopen.org/a-grotesque-situation
Who is making the "Sandwich"?: www.onlineopen.org/who-is-making-the-sandwich

Tags

Art Discourse

This text was downloaded on November 12, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/meta-theory-minus-a-dialectical-bite