Art Discourse

Who is making the “Sandwich”?
A Response to Camiel van Winkel

Steven ten Thije

Essay – December 31, 2013

In a critical response to Camiel van Winkel’s essay *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 insists that merely describing the sandwich is not enough; if we find it difficult to digest, we should ask ourselves: Who made this sandwich? Ten Thije rejects the black-and-white polarity that some insist exists between autonomous art and an art that is less so. He pleads for more generosity and a new attitude from everyone involved in the cultural sector.

In his essay *The Sandwich Will Not Go Away, Or Why Paradigm Shifts Are Wishful Thinking*, Camiel van Winkel analyses current trends in writing about art. His focus is on the current fascination for “paradigm shifts”, which are announced with rhetorical fireworks on e-flux, in catalogues and press releases. To try to understand this tendency, he tracks down three discursive layers that inform the contemporary writing on art, which he describes as, “the sandwich of academic-artistic discourse”, his phrase for a somewhat haphazard mix of traces of Romanticism, post-structuralism and cultural analysis. Even if a lot of what he says about the current predominant discourse on art is true, one is also left with an uneasy feeling after reading his essay.

I agree that there is a tendency towards a manic tone in much of the current writing on contemporary art. There is certainly a desire to tout each exhibition or event as a world-changing moment where the critical thinking of all the fashionable philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists (but rarely art historians) is translated into a palpable reality. Returning to the well-known model of, “avant-gardism”, art is still often considered the first place where a radically different future could potentially materialise. The problem with this kind of evangelical writing style about art is that it produces a sort of spiral movement upward, where each project has to out-do the previous one. Indeed, some of Documenta curator Carolyne Kristov-Bakargiev’s comments prove this point.

But it remains a question of just how horrible the situation is. Although the language used to promote art exhibitions and projects is often quite ecstatic, the explanation for their enthusiasm mostly deals with the fact that they are marketing texts that are supposed to be dramatic. And because art operates in a domain where ethics and aesthetics meet, it makes sense to point out the potentially new ways of living that the artworks may present. Art brings forth that which cannot be said and introduces the unknown into the known and, as a result, offers glimmers of something different, of something new. The immanent potential of change is certainly overestimated in the sense that every exhibition is promoted as earth-shattering, but people can understand the basic logic behind it.

There are also quite a few extra-artistic reasons for those who believe change is possible. If we look at recent history, we don't come away with an image of stability, not in the Netherlands or beyond its borders. Here in the Lowlands we have seen six different coalition governments in the new millennium and have stumbled from one embarrassment to the next: the banks, trains, schools, day care, the hospitals, the construction and real-estate sectors, the hysterical discourse about migration and illegality. All of the most basic systems in our supposedly well-oiled democratic society seem to be constantly short-circuiting. Combine this with the EU crisis, the autarkic wind blowing out of Russia, the NSA scandal, and the Arab not-quite-Spring, and there seems to be more than one reason to believe that a profound change in the world may be just around the corner.

But even if the paradigm-shift argument has something going for it, Van Winkel's argument should not be dismissed by proving it wrong in this way. His main point, that the current discourse around art is composed of three different – and sometimes even antithetical – ways of thinking, in itself is quite adequate. What *is* problematic about Van Winkel's essay, however, is that he doesn't offer any explanation for why we currently find ourselves eating this "sandwich". As a result, he gives the impression that it's all the evil plan of a group of overly eager curators. Van Winkel suggests that if we were to simply "stop" being so manic it would all just disappear and things would return to "normal".

This normality is not articulated explicitly, but is briefly hinted at in the paragraph where he compares today's situation with that of the 60s and 70s: "In [this period] the practice of decoding cultural production, although *marginal*, was still firmly embedded in various branches of critical theory. Today, now that the academisation of 'theory' is complete, this grounding has evaporated." [Italics added by author]

Here one senses a desire to return to a presumed division of tasks as it was practiced in the 60s and 70s. The main problem I have with Van Winkel's text is that he doesn't contextualise the current historical moment, the 60s or the 70s. This lack of contextualising has the ability to turn the causal "marginal" into a destructive force that will do much more damage than good.

Let's return to the sentence quoted above, because, even if it is only one sentence, the image it produces is illuminating: the decoding of cultural production firmly embedded in the various branches of critical theory. It is both a hierarchical and a systemic image. One used to be able to adequately analyse cultural works with "critical theory". Knowing Van Winkel's earlier work, it is clear that this is what he himself aspires to in his own writing – and not without merit. The division of tasks that Van Winkel values is one where a group of specialists creates a lively and dedicated context for both the production and reception of artworks in a small, isolated corner of the public sphere. Philosophers, art historians and artists work alone and together in this system and collectively form a balanced environment for the production and reception of artworks. The exchange that these specialists engage in is organised around one of Van Winkel's key concepts: autonomy.

One of Van Winkel's main reproaches to the current art world is its squandering of its own "autonomy". He also made a similar claim in less nuanced terms several years ago during the intense debate surrounding the cuts to Dutch arts funding. He believes that the defenders of "paradigm shifts" are the enemies of art's autonomy as he notes here: "[In current art criticism] there is only a thin dividing line between, on the one hand, a campaign to promote political activism and social interaction in art and, on the other, the political imperative that works of art be functional and that artists make themselves useful to society. Both sides demand that art proves its immediate 'relevance'."

This presents a compelling picture: Whereas, art used to function as an open system that could be critically interrogated by critics and academics to glean its possible meaning, art is now forced to respond to a political issue. This may be the case in a certain context

(remember the debate over Nicolas Bourriaud's term "relational aesthetics" that developed in the 90s), but for me it's just too generic a description of the "sandwich". The three events that he mentions, Documenta XIII, the Sidney Biennale and Former West can all be easily criticised from a number of angles, but not because they featured or celebrated art's "immediate relevance".

But more problematic than just being generic is that it establishes a black and white opposition between an art that is autonomous and an art that is not autonomous. On top of that, because Van Winkel doesn't discuss the ways in which the the 60s and 70s differ from the current situation, he implies that several individuals simply "chose" to do things differently. He suggests that people decided out of free will to stop making autonomous art. The subtexts of his argument is that we could just simply "choose" to return to the model created in the 60s and 70s, which is a very problematic conservative proposition.

I think, however, that there is no going back and the umbrella term I would apply to this transformation that has taken place is "globalisation". A term that is itself somewhat under-theorised in Van Winkel's work. I realise the term is problematic in its vastness, but I want to introduce it to refer to the post-1989, socio-economic and political reality, which was marked by an enormous increase in people's mobility with the advent of cheap air travel and the Internet. A development both accommodated and itself aided by neoliberal politics and the meteoric rise of corporate influence globally. In the art world, this trend inaugurated a global art scene whose dynamics was quite different from that of the pre-1989 one. This was largely due to the introduction of massive amounts of newly available private capital that was applied in a much more marketing-like manner. The explosion of new biennales across the globe – there are now over 100 art biennales – is perhaps the most visible symptom of this change. [1]

The new art professional who was best equipped to facilitate this new demand was the personality-based curator. As Claire Bishop has already noted in her earlier essays on curating, the curator's language is linked to a distinct type of marketing where artistic, political and commercial interests attempt to find their equilibrium. [2] This development, however, has less to do with "free will", and more with the influence of emerging forms of funding and the new ways in which the interests of the public and private sectors are negotiated.

In the pre-1989 period, private capital was chiefly involved in the acquisition of art and, in the US, in the endowment funding of art institutions. These funds were used by moneyed individuals to appropriate symbolic capital to gain public respect; the private funds were invested to gain status in the public sphere. This meant that private capital was invested in the public sphere and had to abide by the public system's rules. This began to change in the 90s, with the rise of neoliberal policies, so that the balance tilted; the public system started mimicking the private system. Phenomena such as the biennale being used as a "city marketing" tool, the museum as a way to attract business, cultural organisations that needed to comply with new business-like efficiency standards, creative industries and the creative city inaugurated profound changes to the professional culture that runs the art world.

Therefore, behind the "sandwich" lies a complex realignment of both the public and private sectors, wherein the private sector has now taken the lead. It is in the context of this realignment that I find the use of the term "marginal" very problematic. Van Winkel uses the term when describing the 60s and 70s and the practice of decoding cultural production, but its implications are quite serious. This is especially so because I've heard Van Winkel use this term on other occasions to explain his own practice of insisting why one shouldn't over-estimate the (political) impact of art theory and art criticism. [3] In principle, this would seem to be a gesture of laudable modesty, or even realism. However,

his use of the term "marginal" ends up being completely annulled by the lack of contextual analysis in his defense of the autonomy he identifies in the art of the 60s and 70s. He offers no real context for the use of "marginal" and so it becomes just another part of the Ivory Tower where one can retreat to do one's work isolated from society. But this Tower can only exist if it is understood as something that constructively interacts with its environment (which ultimately supports it financially).

The 60s through 70s period was a time when the public sphere was still considered an acceptable force that stimulated difference and variety in the market. It was a time when artists and critics could develop a distinct sense of autonomy that allowed them to operate independent of conventional market and political forces. Today, the entire notion of the public sphere seems almost nonexistent. Not even politicians believe that the public sector should be governed by practices that are not somehow based on market principles. Therefore, we see today's market-driven world all too easily mistaking the celebration of marginality as a call for annihilation.

If one fails to clearly link and promote one's practices to the public interest – and thereby forcing one to behave differently – it will merely feed the fire that burns you. Thus the sensibility and critical awareness that Van Winkel demonstrated in his earlier work on the art and architecture of the 60s and 70s is not well served by his attempt to argue that there are distinct differences between today's art and that of the 60s and 70s. If he feels we have lost something in how art's current social and political "use" often overshadow qualities he valued in the works from the 60s and 70s – something I would agree with to a certain extent – he would be better off if he simply tried to understand why these qualities no longer flourish in today's art world and come up with strategies for reinventing them for today's world.

The economic crisis of 2008 and the debate that began in the Netherlands after the first cuts to the cultural sector several years ago, have both led to the mobilisation of many concerned people, including myself. We have begun to think about how we can recuperate art as an essential part of the public sector. This will not be an easy task and will require the forging of alliances that reach beyond the art world because its not only art that suffers from its absence in the public sphere and the disappearing boundaries between public and private. Awareness is increasing so that when the next chaotic cycle hits the marketplace, different practices will be employed to help us define the various boundaries of that chaotic situation.

More in general I am also making a plea for a bit more generosity and curiosity that will avoid the typical black and white oppositions between autonomous art and an art that is not. However, my call to arms to Camiel van Winkel is to insist that merely describing the sandwich is not enough; if we find it difficult to digest, we should ask ourselves: who made this sandwich? Because I believe this "who" is neither an individual nor a small group of powerful individuals, nor an anonymous system with divine-like inevitability. No, this "who" is comprised of the patterns of behaviour that we – everyone who is involved in the cultural sector – reproduce. These patterns are quite strong, but we can change them if we realise that it will require an act of translation that will reinvent the values of the past in a new form for today's art world. This will more clearly reflect both the changes that have already happened and the direction we want to take these influences. And I know what you're thinking right now: "This sounds a lot like you're calling for a paradigm shift…"

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. As described in *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain #16*, *The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon. Strategies in Neo-political Times* (NAi Publishers: Rotterdam 2009).
2. Claire Bishop, "What is a curator", IDEA arts + society #26, 2007. See: idea.ro
3. Most notably in a public discussion after a 27 November 2008 lecture as part of the "Now is the Time" lecture series: w139.nl.

Crosslinks

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

Tags

Art Discourse

This text was downloaded on November 28, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/who-is-making-the-sandwich