The Sandwich Will Not Go Away Or Why Paradigm Shifts Are Wishful Thinking

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Camiel van Winkel postulates the notion of a sandwich of artistic-academic discourse to dispute the supposed paradigm shift in the arts and society as put forward by key figures in the institutional art world. Considering the paradigm shift a mere escape fantasy, Van Winkel senses a distaste for the autonomy of art. Steven ten Thije, researcher and curator of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, will soon offer his response to Van Winkel's essay *[www.onlineopen.org/who-is-making-the-sandwich]*.

Although an extremely secular place, the institutional art world often proves susceptible to the prophecies of a New World Order. Like a chameleon on acid, it has a remarkable potential for identifying, absorbing and promoting so-called *paradigm shifts*. 2012 was a very productive year in this respect. The artistic director of dOCUMENTA (13) tried to seduce us with her self-declared "holistic and non-logocentric vision," a vision which "is shared with, and recognizes, the shapes and practices of knowing of all the animate and inanimate makers of the world, including people". This last addition is not an ironic afterthought: irony doesn't flourish in the particular language that is used to announce paradigm shifts. Christov-Bakargiev is serious in her plea for "a sensual, energetic, and worldly alliance between current research in various scientific and artistic fields and other knowledges, both ancient and contemporary." [1]

Paradigm Shift

In the spring of 2012, the artistic directors of the 18th Biennale of Sidney published a statement in a similar spirit, suggesting a profound change in world view. "We are moving on from a century in which the radical in the arts largely adopted principles of separation, negativity and disruption as strategies of change. Based on oppositional thinking, such modernist principles proved tenacious and acted as a default criticality in a world in which the drive to progress became more complicated and the consequences more ambiguous. A changing reality is apparent in a renewed attention to how things connect, how we relate to each other and to the world we inhabit. Art is a part of this growing awareness. Where once there was an emphasis on alienation and distance, there are now concurrent shifts of thinking that are informing the work of artists and writers across the world. These shifts – incipient and partly unformed – are only now beginning to be acknowledged, but are of real significance." [2]

Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, responsible for this visionary statement, characterise twentieth-century art as antagonistic, negative, critical, and always aiming at rupture and separation. They feel that these critical strategies no longer work in a world that is increasingly complex. "In the arts, as elsewhere, analytical reflection has led to an understanding that human beings are highly dependent upon our often overlooked relationships with others and with our common world. While this connective model is still embedded in a few societies, established western cultural patterns have tended to

emphasise the fragmentation and isolation of the individual. As a result, there are relatively few remaining models of participatory forms of perception and sensibility." A highly idealistic model aimed at collaboration and participation, the Sydney Biennale set out to connect artistic practices to movements and processes of social change already happening in the world. "With the creation of conditions for an encounter in consonance with our surrounding world, this event will bring emphasis to what is already happening at large." Thus their project embodied a turn towards an artistic and curatorial model that is inclusive rather than exclusive; that no longer alienates people from each other, from art and from the world, but that brings together and connects. "Artists work in a context that allows for mutual recognition and audiences from differing backgrounds will be part of this continual development, finding their own direction in these connections. It is in this altered attention to one another – in the meeting and making of ideas together – that constructive consequence can follow." In the final instance, this utopian set-up is supposed to overcome the conventional limitations of art production. "Artists, who can often feel isolated in their practice, will come together with neighbouring artists. Rather than one work appearing to link to one or two other works, an attunement between all creative impulses will take place in time: projects will correspond as if evolving from each other and progressing through the sequence of venues and buildings. This interconnection and interdependency will occur in the knowledge that audiences, too, will take elements from the exhibition and connect them with their own experiences. In this shared space, the meaning and consequence of the artists' works will be engendered."

It is not difficult to identify other voices from the institutional art world that have recently announced a radical paradigm shift. The statement issued for the Former West Research Congress, which took place in Vienna in April 2012, is phrased as a series of rhetorical questions suggesting that the paradigm of contemporary art has become obsolete.

In a remarkably straightforward manner, this text identifies the whole field of contemporary art with a (neoliberal) political regime. It suggests that contemporary art came into existence in 1989, when the Berlin Wall collapsed and globalisation entered a new phase. Since then – for more than 20 years – the "normalizing practices" of contemporary art have been "complicit" with "the reality of the global neoliberal order". "Is it possible to think of so-called Contemporary Art as art – or an art historical period even – emerging from 1989 and developing in parallel to other hegemonic formations such as global neoliberalism? Could it then be argued that, in sync with the current seismic shifts in society, politics, and economy, it now also faces if not a dead end then a number of challenges that take it to task? Is Contemporary Art, as an iconographic source of the political architecture of the world of the last two decades on its way out so to speak, together with the system that made it possible?" This militant line of questioning continues, and a renewed connection between art and politics is projected into the near future. In this new situation, we will find ourselves having moved "beyond" the framework of contemporary art. "What kind of challenges and possibilities might then lie before us in the space of art in times like ours? Can we speculate collectively on how to move beyond the present confines of Contemporary Art's practices, and begin articulating what can appear from its 'formerness?' What are our responses to – and proposals for – the times ahead?" The answers to these questions line up in the form of more questions. "Are new models of small translocal organizations already being created that are outside of the known forms of artistic self-organization, art institutions, and aesthetic disciplines?" And, further on, "To what extent … is the field (of Contemporary Art) still of relevance to the far-reaching practices of self-organized collectives? And how have these group initiatives changed the field themselves? What emerging propositions are being articulated in response to these modes of cultural production? How can we arrive at a deeper understanding of the possibilities at hand by looking at a set of concrete practices that function as meaningful interruptions of the business-as-usual model that has been established over the course of the last two decades?" [3]

There are clearly differences between this text and the statement by the Sydney curators. If the paradigm shift identified by Former West amounts to a break with the paradigm of contemporary art, the one announced in Sydney breaks with the paradigm of the (modern) avant-garde. Yet the nature of these two shifts is similar. The starting point may be different, but the direction is the same. Both texts foresee and advocate a move beyond the confines of the current system of art production; their commitment is to new, "translocal" forms of organisation. The paradigm shift, they imply, has already happened in the world out there, and if art wants to keep up, it should let go of the old conventions and habits of art production and dissemination.

The Sandwich of Academic-Artistic Discourse

In order to analyse the discursive framework of this supposed paradigm shift, I propose taking a step back and considering the following notion: *the sandwich of academic-artistic discourse*. This is my alternative to the idea of a paradigm shift. Instead of a break or radical transition from one historical world order to the next, I propose an epistemological model that is layered like a sandwich.

The sandwich of academic-artistic discourse has at least three layers. The bottom layer – the oldest one – is the legacy of the Romantic cult of the artist. This is a heavy layer: rich, greasy and hard to digest. It's a thing from the past that will not go away. It is the cult of the mythical, hyper-individual artist, always true to his or her inner self; the belief in the authentic creative act that cannot be explained rationally, but that reveals some hidden deeper truth. This Romantic cult of the artist was not confined to the historical period of Romanticism in the late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth centuries; its legacy stretched well into the twentieth century, where it was manifested in the idea of the spontaneous expressivity of the artistic gesture. As such, and in contemporary form, it is still with us today. It is a burden from the past, a ghost that cannot be wished away, no matter how naive we may find the idea.

The middle layer in this triple-decker sandwich is the layer of post-structuralism. I will not discuss the philosophical merits of this term, nor the accuracy of its use in the artistic context. The important thing is that this second layer of the sandwich counteracts the first one. It undercuts the notion of authenticity and spontaneous creation. According to post-structuralism, there is no creative act that does not somehow reproduce earlier creative acts. The artist, or author, never "owns" his or her work. To think about art in terms of authorship and individual expression is a convention designed to limit the number of possible readings of the work in question. The author is an invention, a disciplinary tool or framework that makes us believe we find reflected in the work of art the personality of its maker / producer. In reality, everything is text, and every text is made up of fragments of older texts. In post-structuralism, the "self" loses its centre; it is constituted by discourse, made up of signs and signifiers. There is no authentic point of origin that can be reached by stepping out of the textual realm.

The third layer of the sandwich is the most recent addition. It is also the most academic tier. I would describe it as the layer of cultural studies. The term cultural studies represents a specific approach to the academic study of culture that dates from the 1970s. This approach entails the consideration of all levels of culture, in the widest sense of the term, dismissing the conventional division between high art and mass culture. It considers the production, dissemination and reception of culture to be intimately related to aspects of ideology, class, nationality, politics, economics, ethnicity, and gender. Thus the aim of cultural studies is to understand how meaning is produced in specific social and cultural practices. Classical notions of art and aesthetics are challenged by applying the perspective of "culture."

The critique of the canon and other academic notions have been integrated into the discourse of the art world via this third layer. As a result, the discursive sandwich has acquired an increasingly academic flavour in recent years; the fashion for "artistic research," so prominent nowadays, is a symptom of this academisation. More and more, the production of works of art is coloured by the premises of cultural studies. One of those premises is the idea that every artefact is a carrier of meaning. According to Graeme Sullivan, in *Art Practice as Research* (2005), "objects carry meaning about ideas, themes, and issues. As an object of study an artwork is an individually and culturally constructed form that can be used to represent ideas and thus can be examined as a source of knowledge." [4] If the work may be analysed as a carrier of meaning and a source of knowledge, it follows that it can also be produced as such. Seen from this perspective, the artist at work is a researcher who examines the meanings that his or her materials carry. By doing so the artist produces real knowledge.

Just as the layer of post-structuralism in the sandwich has had the effect of compensating for the burden of the Romantic cult of the artist, we could say that the layer of cultural studies has helped us deal with the problematic aspects of post-structuralism. After the death of the author as proclaimed by Barthes in 1968, it proved difficult to believe there was still any kind of critical agency at work in cultural production. This problem was solved by applying the perspective of cultural studies, which tends to ascribe critical agency to collectives, classes, and communities. Critical agency survived, yet the Romantic myth of individualised authorship was avoided. Cultural studies provided the institutional art world with an intersubjective, contextual model of culture, which softened and transformed the rather paralysing idea that, as Derrida puts it, "il n'y pas de hors-texte."

When we step back and look at the sandwich of academic-artistic discourse from a distance, one thing becomes clear. Adding another layer has never had the effect of making older layers disappear. The layers sit squarely on top of one another; they interact; the latest one does not replace the previous ones. The sandwich just grows in size.

An Arrangement of Signs

Seen in this light, the discursive sandwich is a mannerist outgrowth of the "aesthetic regime" as described in Rancière's *Distribution of the Sensible*. It is produced in the space between the two poles of fictionality: "the potential of meaning inherent in everything silent and the proliferation of modes of speech and levels of meaning". [5] Since the aesthetic revolution of Romanticism, telling stories and inventing histories is no longer different from the "arrangement of signs" that registers the passing of time on the mute surface of the material world. "The Romantic Age actually plunged language into the materiality of the traits by which the historical and social world becomes visible to itself, be it in the form of the silent language of things or the coded language of images. Circulation within this landscape of signs defines, moreover, the new fictionality, the new way of telling stories, which is first of all a way of assigning meaning to the 'empirical' world of lowly actions and commonplace objects." [6] On every level, things carry the poetic traces of time. Both artists and novelists write history by assigning meaning to material fragments and assembling those fragments into a whole that speaks. Thus writing – writing history – is always a way of *making* history: a material rearrangement of images and signs.

If this was new at the time of Balzac, at present we find ourselves struggling with the long aftermath of this aesthetic condition. Both in its production and reception, contemporary art is cast in a post-conceptual, referential model. [7] Artists decipher the signs of the times by appropriating fragments of the world and assigning meaning to them; we in turn decipher the references in their work. This situation seems to work for artists, just as it works for us. The discourse of contemporary art is aimed at identifying references, one after the other, in a clever and individualised bibliographic style. The richer the palette of references identified, the smarter the identifier can claim to be. Here's an example, which

shows how "art writing" has acquired its bad reputation: "Asymmetry haunts the conceptual edifice and thematic zones that constitute the interventionist and site-related, multimedia work of Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson. The artists' venture into the mechanics of asymmetry is an attempt to decipher the logic of power division which upsets a balance of justice and disturbs a constitution of equality. Asymmetrical power relationships lie at the foundation of a world of precarity and political confusion, influencing the manner in which social and political life is structured and policed and how legislative and juridical systems are established. Castro and Ólafsson's emphasis on asymmetry is the expression of the artists' post-Machiavellian, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri-inspired, confrontational and agonistic perspective which articulates a difference, heterogeneity and ambiguities of today's world of deregulated finance, social conflict and depolarized, intellectual debate. Asymmetry appears in their portraits and interventions as yet another vehicle of indeterminacy, estrangement and alienation." [8]

In the 1960s and 70s, 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. Decoding art and culture has become a free-floating academic activity, mostly with a legitimating function. Only embarrassing simulations remain of the old roots in political and critical theory.

The interaction between the three layers of the discursive sandwich – the cult of the artist, the death of the author and the legacy of cultural studies – has triggered the production of the type of discourse that accompanies contemporary art today. It puts the artist in an ambivalent role, which combines critical agency with sensitivity and receptivity. The artist is author and visionary medium alike.

Clearly, the ambivalence is felt by most of the people who are involved. It may translate into a nostalgic desire to restore a social function to art that it never really had. It may also result in fantasies about an imminent paradigm shift, a move "beyond the contemporary" – the ultimate escape. Many seem to be uncomfortable with the fact that art is just art. Many seem prepared to give it up for something better, something less detached and more "involved." They continue to defend the special status that artists still have in society but, at the same time, they intimate that art is less important than the social context from which – through a game of signifiers and referents – it by definition separates us. This unresolved duality is often masked by rhetoric and hyperbole.

Anti-art

In the mission statements of Former West and the Sydney Biennale, one senses more than a distaste for the autonomy of art. Underneath the superficial message of hope, change, and renewal, contemporary art is practically declared dead. These statements imply that the system of contemporary art is insular, self-centered, and inaccessible; that it is isolated, exclusive, and allows no scope for participation or collective action. Contemporary art is seen as an elitist activity for a small circle of insiders.

If you compare this message to the anti-art attitude of avant-garde movements such as Dada, it seems evident that the current discourse is highly institutionalised and academic. Focusing on process and form rather than substance, it is pervaded by mannerisms. It also, incidentally, makes the institutions even more important than they already are. The paradigm shift that is proclaimed could be seen as a bleak shadow of the cultural revolution that historical avant-garde movements once saw as their goal.

Most problematic, perhaps, is the extent to which these curators and authors seem to have integrated the populist anti-art discourse that we have come to know so well. Political arguments against the elite and inaccessible world of contemporary art have apparently invaded the self-image of the progressive wing of the art world. Although the Sydney

statement explicitly denounces polarisation and emphasises the will to connect, claiming to bridge the gap between advanced artistic production and the public, it features a leftist populism that shares the premises of its right-wing counterpart. A similar tendency can be discerned in the Former West statement. Although the text explicitly accuses the contemporary art world of collaborating with neoliberal politics, it takes an ambivalent position. However different the call to "move beyond the present confines" of contemporary art may be from the anti-art sentiment exploited by populist leaders, it is similar to it in that it dismisses the autonomy of art. 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 prove its immediate "relevance."

The wish to escape from the specific context of contemporary art seems futile. The idea of a paradigm shift is a mere escape fantasy. True paradigm shifts can only be identified in retrospect. By definition, contemporary art will not move "beyond the contemporary." The sandwich of academic-artistic discourse cannot be discarded, or ignored, or wished away. It will stay with us. It may get fatter, richer, and perhaps harder to swallow. In twenty or thirty years time, we may come to the conclusion that at some point another layer has been added. For now, we have to deal with what we have.

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Footnotes

1. Opening statement by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, in: *dOCUMENTA (13). Das Begleitbuch / The Guidebook* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012) p. 2.
2. Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, *18th Biennale of Sydney: all our relations*, bos18.com.
3. Opening statement of 3rd Former West Research Congress, Vienna, 19–20 April 2012, www.formerwest.org.
4. Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research. Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), p. 80.
5. Jacques Rancière, "The Distribution of the Sensible," in: *The Politics of Aesthetics*, tr. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 37.
6. Ibid., p. 36.
7. Cf. Camiel van Winkel, *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed: Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012).
8. From the e-flux announcement of Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson's exhibition "Asymmetry," curated by Adam Budak at TENT, Rotterdam (6 February 2013).

Crosslinks

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