Revenge of the Symbols

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With works like 'the butt plug gnome' – the nickname given by the public to Paul McCarthy's controversial sculpture – art in public space touches a sensitive nerve. The symbolic meaning of this sculpture is misunderstood 'on the street'. According to Max Bruinsma, symbols are only meaningful within their own codes. That artists are looking for ways to provoke has become unsatisfactory, because the question of social responsibility is left unanswered.

Once, art served to connect the invisible to the visible world. You looked at a painting or sculpture and what you saw did not only resemble what was already there, but was also an image of something that could in no other way be represented so 'realistically'. Call it symbolism. Or think of the Greek word in 'metaphor': transport, transfer. Art could quite literally transfer substance from a world consisting purely of ideas and thoughts to the world as it optically presents itself to us.

To symbolize, it must be stressed, is not the same as 'making the invisible visible'. The symbol may be visible, but what the symbol represents remains unseen. We see an image of a candle which has just been snuffed out (by a breath? the wind?) and know, this is a symbol of life's vulnerable brevity. In the image of the dying candle we see something we cannot see: an idea. That is, at least, as it used to be.

When Frank Stella, asked what his work meant (in earlier days one would have asked: what does it symbolize?), answered: 'What you see is what you see', it could be interpreted as a banishment of any symbolism. Contemporary art, in this view, ads visibility to the visible world. In this apparently redundant operation the symbolic meaning of an artwork seems to vanish. A rose is a rose is a rose.

But still, symbolism will not have itself removed from the image without protest. The image may want to be 'a reality of and by itself', as in abstract art in the previous century, but we, viewers, read our own thoughts and ideas into it, even if the artist (or Clement Greenberg) would like to outlaw that.

Looking at the giant black garden-gnome-with-object-in-hand, now in the courtyard of the Boymans van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam, one can't help feeling that something is being symbolized here. This garden gnome, meanwhile popularly termed 'Kabouter buttplug' (the butt plug gnome), according to the artist, Paul McCarthy, represents a criticism on Western consumerism or the hypocrisy of Western civilization. It's not a gnome, but a representation of Santa Claus holding a giant anal dildo in his right hand as a Christmas tree and in his left Father Christmas's traditional bell. In contemporary language, you could interpret the work as: 'Father Christmas, up your ass! 'Here, the butt plug is a symbol with the force and charge of a stretched middle finger.

The sculpture has intensely stirred Rotterdam's emotions in the past few years. Commissioned by the municipality, it was meant for placement in a prominent public place in the city. But after a storm of protests against what large sections of the public

saw as an obscene, filthy, kitschy, banal and respectless provocation, the work finally found a place where it was tolerated, within the confines of Rotterdam's largest art sanctuary, Boymans van Beuningen. A temporary residential permit for an artwork seeking asylum. If all of this symbolizes anything, it is the fact that the codes for production and reception of art have evolved in radically different directions. For the artist, the work may represent a social criticism, the majority of his audience only sees in it an insult by someone mocking their values and standards – using community money, at that!

Embedded in History

A recent artwork by Carlos Aires in Vienna's public space – part of an art project consisting of a series of billboards on the occasion of Austria's eu presidency – depicted three world leaders (queen Elizabeth of England and the presidents Bush and Chirac) in an obviously sexual encounter. Since it is equally obvious that there can't be any question of realism (if only because two of the masked figures are women), it must be intended symbolically. The question is: what kind of symbolism are we dealing with here?

In the same project there was another work that stood out: a reclining woman with her nightgown pulled up to just above her breasts, frontally exposing her knickers, in European blue-with-golden-stars. This image, in its turn, was a direct pastiche of a famous painting, Gustave Courbet's 1866 *l'Origine du Monde*, an artwork that may be termed the mother of all shock art.

Shocking as this painting was considered in the nineteenth century, it was clearly rooted in tradition, which connected the depiction of the nude body with symbolic references to encompassing philosophical and ideological concepts. The naked Fortune, symbol of abundance, Hermes, naked but for his winged sandals and hat, as the messenger between gods and men, the half-naked Marianne, symbol of the French revolution . .. Mother Earth (Demeter for the Greeks) was depicted naked as well, with a scanty band of corn spikes around her waist. But to connect the 'origin of life'so unequivocally to a realistic rendering of a woman's sex, as Courbet did, was not just the ultimate consequence of the symbolic tradition; it was an obscene caricature of it. It was too literal.

Contemporary comments on Courbet's *Origine* can be summarized as an anticipation of Stella's dictum: 'What you see is what you see. 'That was the problem: what Courbet's contemporaries saw was a 'beaver shot', not a noble symbol. The near photorealism of the image was an obstacle blocking the symbolic interpretation of the artwork. The canvas makes you face the fact that in earlier renderings of the naked body which were meant to be interpreted symbolically, 'the nude' was always employed differently: within a strict context of compositional and stylistic models aided by equally context-dependent aspects such as pose, attributes, background and expression.

What is the context of an image like Tanja Ostojic's, the Berlin based Serbian artist who paraphrased Courbet's Ori-gine? An old-fashioned symbolic interpretation of her work results in connecting the idea of 'origin' to the idea of the European Union. Now we can go various ways: does the eu flag cover the origin? Or does it represent it? Or is the flag a fig leaf? Or an obscene sign? Does it cover or provoke? We can only think the latter if we recall the connection with the Courbet painting's reception history, in which the reclining woman's pose is seen as 'inviting', corporeal, and not symbolic. It is this interpretation that comes to the contemporary viewer's mind most. It has been a while since our culture saw the female nude as representing 'beauty, truth and goodness'. Now we see 'sex'.

Under these conditions, can a work like Ostojic's be seen in a symbolical way at all? The artist thinks it can: the message can be interpreted in various ways, she says, but for her it is associated with Europe's strategy to shut out foreigners, which she herself has been closely confronted with. 'As the European Union states are sharpening the control over non-citizens, the immigration police even check the warmth of bed sheets in

intermarriages between eu- and non-eu-partners. 'The artist's intention is therefore to symbolize a sexual politics of exclusion: 'a world only accessible with this sign of approval. '

Provocation

Now as an art historian, I'm quite well versed in symbolic interpretations, and with the information the artist provides I can imagine what she means, but I can't help a feeling of arbitrariness. There is nothing in the image that makes her interpretation of it inescapable. The reference to an existing painting with a rowdy reception history, in particular, causes one to almost automatically take the billboard as a provocation, as a caricature. For those who do not know the artist's intention – and this knowledge cannot be presupposed, especially with regard to art in public space – the billboard connects the accusations of pornography, with which Courbet was confronted, with the plethora of sexually charged imagery spread through today's media. Related to the eu symbol on the underpants, this connection almost inescapably leads to the most obvious interpretation: that the eu, that is its ideals, is pornographic, or obscene, and that the Union peddles its wares with raunchy methods similar to cheep groin-directed advertising. Symbolism can be literal.

The problem with symbolism these days is that, on the one hand, artists have given up any claim to universality – their symbolics is what *they* mean by it – while on the other hand the public interprets from what is or may be considered general knowledge. In this conflict between idiosyncrasy and public taste, only a rather specific form of symbolism seems to have survived, that of satire, caricature, ridicule. However one interprets Aires' nude threesome, it's clear that it's mockery. The means employed by Ostojic, Aires and McCarthy can almost without exception be called classically satirical. Already in ancient Rome, degrading sexual or animal symbolics were used for caustic criticism. A famous example is graffiti depicting a crucified donkey ridiculing the devotion of early Christians to their savior.

I am less interested here in the question of whether this is good or bad art, than in the question of the response these works provoke. For over a century and a half now – since Courbet, to summarize – art sees it as its task to provoke, to shock. Early avant-garde movements such as Futurism and Dada, in particular, did not shun a bit of *é pater le bourgeois*, outrage the middle-class. But although the stunned *bourgeois* in those days also cried 'they should be stopped', the net result of such actions and reactions was the opposite: in art, one could increasingly do as one pleased.

Shift of Power

There is one important difference between the tolerated provocations of old and the artworks that rouse emotions today. Art around the turn of the pre-previous century was confined to ateliers, galleries and exhibitions, and at most stirred debates in the columns of newspapers and magazines; current provocative art spreads out over all the media, as soon as someone cries: 'Hurry up, come and see, they're being offensive! 'This exclamation comes from a cartoon, commenting on the eagerness with which 'offended' parts of the population in 1970s Dutch culture followed provocative television programmes like *Hoepla* and the *Fred Haché Show* (the first tv shows in the Netherlands which featured nudity, to the fascinated outrage of decent citizens). This period represents a turning point in art's reception. At the beginning of the century, the debate mainly played between people who understood the accepted artistic codes, regardless of whether they were out to explode or preserve them. With the expansion of the audience for art, from the mid-twentieth century onward, the average knowledge of the principal artistic discourses is diminishing and reception codes from outside the arts are being introduced.

Or re-introduced. Over the past centuries, religious, social, political and ideological criteria may have been carefully filtered out of art, but it is good to realize that the 'autonomy' art

thus acquired not only knows an end, but once had a beginning as well. Before Courbet and his contemporaries rocked the fundaments of accepted artistic reception with their personal, *allzumenschliche*, interpretation of established symbolics, art was not a mere cultural expression, but an instrument of culture in the hands of reigning political and religious powers. Now it appears that, once again, art is becoming instrumental, this time managed by popular culture and its agents, its vociferous representatives in media and politics.

There, art meets the boundaries of tolerance, which it could cross with impunity under the protection of its earlier autonomy. Many contemporary artists, among whom are undoubtedly the ones mentioned above, will agree with the idea that art should – once again – find a social relevance. But while artists tend to find this renewed relevance by extending the freedom attained within art's discourse to a broader social context, the public demands that this socially oriented art speaks not (only) for the artist, but (also) for them. The mere thought of such a popular voice position would never appear to the likes of Frank Stella, who reject any interpretation beyond the fact that an artist made something.

For 'what you see is what you see' also means 'take it or leave it'. It is a somewhat arrogant stance, but also a consistent one, directly related to the nineteenth-century idea of *l'art pour l'art*. Today, neither artists nor culture in general accept this isolated position of art anymore. But art's renewed confrontation with popular culture also has its uneasy aspects. Artists who refer to a 'giving-the-finger' kind of symbolism – a time-honored mark of a rougher, lower-class culture – still rely on the subtle and multi-level interpretational models of 'high' culture for guidance in interpreting such 'corny' gestures.

It's the revenge of the symbols; they only work meaningfully within their own codes. Outside of these, they explode, with considerable collateral damage. Mixing different codes results in mixed metaphors which can be as multi-interpretable as they are 'in your face'. The 'butt plug gnome' and 'Courbet revisited' are prime examples: anal dildos and pantyhose are only marginally embedded in traditional symbolic codes, if at all – direct sexual symbolics have always been interpreted within art as pornographic or obscene. In this respect, the public outrage concerning such works is culturally speaking arch-consistent. As important as the question of a dwindling tolerance vis-à -vis the symbolic discourse of what art can or may express in public space, therefore, is the question of what art can or may want. Mere provocation is not an entirely sufficient answer anymore, because it leaves the question of the artist's social responsibility – which art itself has challenged – wide open.

Postscript

This essay was written at the beginning of January this year. Since then - it's February now - the 'revenge of the symbols' has taken a completely new turn, with 'collateral damage' few would have thought possible: burning embassies, molested Europeans, dead protesters. In the light of the 'cartoon riots', my hypothesis of a clash between hardly compatible reception codes of the autonomous arts and public discourse sounds utterly academic. From this – academic – point of view one could hold that the events underline my idea that the caricature is the about the only culturally functioning symbolic category these days (apart from the brand, I must add), but that seems a rather cynical conclusion now. The international commotion surrounding the 'Allah cartoons' has, however, made the question of which cultural function exactly is exercised here, and what that means for the position of the artist, a very urgent one.

In the current debate 'freedom of expression' (read: autonomy) and 'respect for others' values' (read: politeness in the public discourse) are being confronted as two in fact

irreconcilable cultural axioms. An axiom knows no 'on the one hand / on the other'. '1+1' can never result in 'okay, let's say a bit less than 2'. Once again, it appears that the axioms of art and free expression can fundamentally clash with those of the public discourse and (inter) cultural manners.

At such moments, the inescapable question becomes: where do you stand, on which values is your house built? If the history of Western art and culture of the past 4000 years has shown anything, it's the struggle between the autonomy and free will of the individual versus the forces that strive to derail that free will, or to curb it, for the sake of redeeming individual souls or preserving the collective peace. That is what Europeans have come to term the condition humaine. It is often overlooked that the secular Western individuality and penchant for freedom au fond have a religious source too: the myth of the Fall of man, which granted man the (cursed) capacity to discern between good and evil, and the duty to choose between them in freedom. Seen this way, the real dilemma of the current crisis is not so much the question whether we should give in to the pressure to curb our freedom of expression out of respect for others, but whether we can tolerate that others want to take away our choice to decide for ourselves. Not only in the light of the two centuries old universal declaration of human rights, but on the basis of one of our oldest existential myths and its millennia of reception history in Europe, the answer to that question should axiomatically be: no, that is intolerable. Apart, therefore, from questions of whether the damned cartoons and the artworks mentioned above are good or bad, offensive or not, we can, on the basis of our own cultural values, say no other thing than: 'take you filthy hands off of our filthy artists! ' [1] After that, we can talk quality and responsibility again.

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Footnotes

1. Variation on a comment during the Second World War, protesting the deportations of Jews from Amsterdam, regardless of whether they were liked or not: 'Take your filthy hands off of our filthy Jews!'

Tags

Art Discourse, Autonomy, Public Domain, Public Space