# Artistic Freedom and Globalization

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**Many culture and art critics have pointed to the negative impact of globalization on the art world over the last decade. As this concept has been linked to a variety of phenomena such as 'commodification', mediatization and uniformization, it has become heterogeneous and anaemic. Sociologist Pascal Gielen attempts to clarify the relationship between globalization and all the evils ascribed to it. In order to give art a renewed role in inspiring reflection, he calls for the creation of a free zone in which globalization is accepted in all its complexity.**

For a work of art to be considered 'a good work of art', it should preferably be created within an autonomous free zone. As Luc Boltanski and Laurant Thévenot put it, this means that in the creative process, only an artistic value system should be taken into account.[1] Considerations of a commercial or political – and sometimes even legal – nature are unthinkable. 'Commercial' is also probably the most commonly used term of opprobrium in art criticism. Pierre Bourdieu in fact based his sociology of art to a large extent on the distinction between the commercial and the non-commercial, or as he put it between the 'short-term and long-term market'.[2] A *genuine* artist renounces transient financial profit seeking, we are told. Those who hope to make any claim of greatness in the art world should only concern themselves with artistic questions. These questions, according to Arthur Danto, were defined, far into the nineteenth century, by a linear development, namely a quest for as truthful a representation of reality as possible.[3] Only when the dominance of the aristocracy and the church weakened, and the academy was forced to put away its collective system of rules, did anything like artistic freedom or autonomy emerge. Art got the chance to focus entirely on itself, so goes the familiar story of art history. In the jargon of sociology, and more specifically that of systems theory, this is referred to as the art world 'functionally differentiating itself' and taking its place as an autopoetic reality alongside the law, economics, politics, etcetera.[4]

This is the universally accepted story of modernity. However, it is also (thanks to Kant, among others) the origin of the idea of 'pure' art: an artefact that solely serves aesthetic pleasure and thus otherwise floats, free, in a social vacuum. Yet according to the critique of many sociologists, including yours truly, this pure art has never existed. The loss of the aristocracy and the church have in fact turned the artistic artefact, within both the modern and late-modern condition, into a heterogeneous jumble. The democratization of society has allowed anyone and everyone to claim the artwork, which means it is political *and* economic *and* legal *and* pedagogical, and of course artistic as well.[5] More, in fact: the autonomy of the work of art, like artistic freedom, is guaranteed within this heterogeneous arena. It is precisely *because* an artefact is produced with politically stipulated subsidies, is purchased by a well-to-do collector, is legally protected and secures intellectual property rights, is featured in schoolbooks and constitutes an artistic answer to an artistic problem, that the artwork becomes firmly anchored as an artwork and that it can claim a right to artistic autonomy. Moreover, the more heterogeneous the network to which the object belongs, the more performative the latter becomes. The object is elevated to the status of a

quasi-subject or of a semi-social actor capable of setting the most diverse of actors into motion. If, for instance, someone were to deface *The Nightwatch* with a knife tomorrow, this act would activate a gigantic network of curators, politicians, insurers, attorneys, critics, and so forth.

The consideration of the artwork not as a pure object, but as an 'and-and-object' – which admittedly derives significantly from Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (hereafter ANT) [6] – is crucial to any discussion in the art world about marketization, 'commodification', etcetera. It shows, for example, that a so-called commercial artwork is still an artwork because it continues to 'network' – albeit minimally – with the artistic value system. Should it cease to do so, it is simply no longer an artwork. It is reduced to mere consumer item or property. This is why, among other things, it is vital that an artwork from a private collection be regularly exhibited in a museum or art centre. Or that it at least be featured in a few catalogues. This preserves its connection to the art world and maintains its status as a work of art. Of course an artistic product can be more 'commercial', but it can also be more political than artistic (although this is particularly difficult to assess). It is important that the artwork be continually appropriated, or in ANT terms, 'wrapped up' by other network configurations and thus by other value systems as well. Everything depends on which actors connect with the work and how it continues to 'network' (or not). Armed with this view of the artwork, the debate on globalization and a growing 'commodification' of artistic space can be observed.

## Globalization

To begin by getting a clear picture of globalization, the best thing to do is to look back at history. Marshall McLuhan, after all, came up with the clearest definition back in 1964, with the universally renowned metaphor of 'The Global Village'. [7] Primarily as a result of a rapid global dissemination of electronic mass media, the theorist saw the emergence of a world like a village. In this he mainly focused on communication networks, which can spread the same news around the world as quickly as a piece of gossip circulates around a local community. If we now pick apart this metaphor a bit more, we can observe that, in concrete terms, globalization consists of a shrinking of space and time. [8] Today in Rotterdam, for instance, we're about three hours' travel time from Paris, which gives us an entirely different sense of space from that of our ancestors in, say, the late Middle Ages. Ever-greater distances are being bridged with ever-greater speed. While world travel and trade already existed two centuries ago, the difference is in the tremendous speed with which this happens today. This creates a sense of 'instantaneousness'. [9] What is known here can essentially be known on the other side of the globe within seconds. What is more, an event on another continent can have a rapid and profound impact on our actions within our own familiar environment. A well-known example is the virtually instantaneous effect on the American and European economies as a result of the transfer of huge populations from the Chinese countryside to the cities. The global 'meshwork' of networks is like a hyperkinetic nervous system. This is precisely where the difference with the international networks of a few centuries ago lies. Globalization today is primarily to do with speed.

## Effects on the Art World

Fast-moving global flows generate a vast array of transformations. A concrete and striking example for the art world is intensive global mediatization. This has led to the emergence of an attention regime that seeks out the new at ever-greater speed. Art movements evaporate in trends and 'hyped-up' exhibition concepts in rapid succession. Art production and presentation too have become, in other words, 'instantaneous'. [10] Moreover, needless to say, the artistic landscape is getting more colourful. In their compulsive search for the new, internationally operating curators scour virtually every region of the world. Eastern Europe had its turn with the fall of the Berlin Wall, Africa soon followed and now China is

'in'. Whether this phenomenon presages a truly symmetrical and polyphonous arts landscape or a new Western cultural imperialism, we won't go into here. What matters is that these expansions have led to a gigantic accumulation of products. And we have to take the word 'product' seriously here. In spite of the rhetoric about process in the1990s, it is primarily the artistic result that has taken centre stage. Ultimately there has to be something to look at, or something to buy. The process itself, for that matter, has also become a product (for exhibition). Under the pressure of the attention regime, the art world has indeed become highly 'commodified'. Because everything must operate quickly, free zones, devoted to development, are coming under pressure.[11] An in-depth discussion about an artistic development, a serious public debate about a work of art or a thorough essay about an oeuvre become secondary, because they take up time. Nevertheless, it is precisely such painstakingly argued reasoning that distinguishes an artistic or cultural object from a consumer good. The more words and arguments are expended on an artefact, the better it becomes anchored in the public space. Those who exhibit or buy contemporary art without arguments not only reduce the artwork to a consumer good, but also deny it a place in the public debate.

If on top of that national political institutions withdraw from the scene because they no longer understand very much about these globalized, idiosyncratic artistic flows, the artistic work loses its previously described and necessary heterogeneity. The artefact gets out of balance and becomes primarily a consumer good, or else it is degraded to a purely artistic object, because it is only understood within an internationally operating peer group of art specialists. Let us be clear about this: an in-crowd of art experts is indispensable for the continued development of the art world. An unevolved arts policy, however, is forcing this group ever further into isolation, making it ever more difficult for them to connect to a broader public debate. The result is that even higher-educated people with broad cultural interests also turn away.

This result is related to a second effect of globalization. For institutionalized speed also sucks a great deal of intimacy out of the public space in which the artistic might flourish. Indeed, today's public space is too focused on popular entertainment and consumer use, leaving no room for exchanges of ideas and reflection. This more 'intimate space' is reserved for the previously mentioned international peer group or for the private sphere of the collector. The multiplying global artistic flows cause the artistic landscape to change rapidly, making it difficult for those with broad cultural interests to follow the discourse about art. With the advent of modernity, an artistic movement would come along to replace the preceding one – roughly – every ten years, but again, today this happens much faster.

Combined with an enormous accumulation of artistic products (and artists) this continually produces more 'objective culture', as the German sociologist Georg Simmel puts it. With this notion, he was referring, back in the late nineteenth century, to a culture that is alien to us or that becomes alienated from us.[12] Human hands may generate artistic products, but at some point these escape, and the distance becomes too great. They become alienated from our own 'subjective culture'. This phenomenon generates the sense that they can no longer be appropriated, because the key to specific artistic codes is gone. And yet, Simmel argues in a highly inspiring dialectic concept, we need this objective culture. Indeed we must literally get through it in order to create our own subjective culture. To put it more fashionably in ANT jargon: the artist is always outside himself; without external connections an artistic identity, however idiosyncratic, is simply not possible. Indeed it is in the individual and eclectic tinkering with objective cultures that a subjective culture takes shape. But this can only take place in intimate public spaces, meaning primarily zones of inertia that temporarily slow down these global flows, giving the viewer the time to understand a work. They are places where he gets relevant explanations or can read up as necessary.

It is fairly self-evident that blockbuster exhibitions, rapidly touring expositions or short-lived art-tourism events lack this inertia. It is in fact up to the government to create or support these 'intimate zones' in order to subsequently channel global flows within them, but more on that later. When this fails to happen, contemporary global developments remain mainly the preserve of an in-crowd, but more to the point, even local artists are likely to turn away. Due to a lack of instruments for an international connection, they remain local, by which we mean also merely national or provincial.

Finally, we can point to yet another effect of globalization, one that sociologists refer to as the 'de-differentiation of functional subsystems'. The idea is that a society is divided into different systems, each of which has a specific function in the society, like economics, politics, the law, education, the arts, etcetera. Rather than speak of 'functional subsystems', however, we write here, following the lead of Boltanski and Thévenot, of different 'value regimes'. [13] The reason for this transformation is an issue of theoretical technique, as well as a discussion among sociologists we had better not expand upon here. The point is that different values apply in economics than in politics, law, art, etcetera. Depending on the value regime, one must also consider other criteria if one is to 'make it'. As everyone knows, economics is primarily about accumulating money. This is something different from accumulating power in the political arena, or issuing just verdicts within the legal system.

What might be highly valued within the economic or political regime – Boltanski and Thévenot speak of 'grandeur' – need not necessarily be so in artistic terms. This is why, for instance, many artists live in poverty, something the Dutch economist and artist Hans Abbing once pointed out. [14] Many artists reject immediate profit-seeking and it is precisely why they enjoy a certain status in the art world. Bourdieu advocated this idea back in the 1970s. What matters is that there are different value regimes, and therefore divergent value hierarchies. Under the pressure of globalization, the boundaries between these regimes are beginning to 'de-differentiate'. This does not mean that they are vanishing, but that they are shifting, being renegotiated or redefined. The best-known example is the direct effect of the rise of globally operating multinationals within the economic regime on national labour policy. What is considered important by business leaders on the one hand and political leaders on the other is, simply put, being renegotiated and revised. In other words, value hierarchies are constantly reordered, or they can also merge into a new hybrid regime. In regard to the latter, think for instance of the rise of the creative industry as a melting pot of artistic and economic values. But more than two value regimes can be combined, too.

Back to the arts landscape: consider the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. This museum of American origin was recruited, paradoxically enough, by a nationalist party as a way to proclaim the Basque identity in opposition to Spain. Moreover, it now serves not only as a lure for many domestic and foreign tourists, but also for high-tech companies to fill a new Silicon Valley. So the art museum was not simply built to exhibit artistic work in optimal conditions – at the very least, political and economic considerations also came into play. The striking architecture, moreover, was intended to give Bilbao a globally recognized identity. Again, the paradox is that this was done with the flagship of America and with an American / Canadian architect. So identity can be purchased, and other cultures can also serve to give one's 'own' culture a recognized identity. As the political and economic regime took over, the artistic regime was relegated to the background, and the Guggenheim now has few relevant connections to the global contemporary art network. Its heterogeneity is out of balance. It is hardly nurturing a healthy local art scene, nor is it creating links between local artists and global networks. The costly (art) investments thus merely stimulate an international artistic anchorage, still propped up to a certain extent by the Guggenheim collection. The actual international flows that crisscross the building belong to entirely different value regimes. The artistic space here is, at the very least, severely circumscribed.

### Guaranteeing Free Space: Four Positions

Within the globalization debate, four different positions can be identified.[15] These can be distilled into four attitudes that may be adopted by arts policy-makers as well as artists and arts organizations. Each defines artistic free space in a different way, leading to the development of diverse strategies. For the record: nowhere in the existing literature has a connection been made between the four positions within the globalization debate, the art world and its 'commodification'. What follows is thus a speculative conceptual exercise, which might give rise to concrete proposals.

The so-called hyper-globalists adopt the first position. They view the economy, and more specifically the neo-liberal market, as the engine of the globalization process. Financial flows, in other words, form the foundation for other global shifts. Saskia Sassen's analyses, for instance, are predicated on these premises to a significant extent. What the sociologist absolutely does not share with the hyper-globalists, however, is the embrace of this process. To hyper-globalists, financial flows must always be completely unfettered. This means that cultural, political or legal obstacles should be removed as much as possible. Within this reasoning, art too is merely an instrument of the free market. The economic free space has thus been given priority over the artistic.

A globally operating arts network is of interest to the hyper-globalists only if it installs a standardized culture. If, for instance, a Dutchman and a Japanese both know Vincent van Gogh, and appreciate him to the same degree to boot, that might well promote healthy trade between the two. The Guggenheim strategy is thus completely legitimate for the hyper-globalists. Imposing the same collection all over the world, after all, evokes a shared cultural frame of reference, which can facilitate other exchanges. Globalization, from this standpoint, differs little from what used to be called 'Americanization' in the1970s, but never mind.

Politicians who develop an arts policy based on this perspective will primarily support large-scale mediagenic art events. In addition, a highly visible arts infrastructure – think of many German museums, for instance – has to increase the appeal of specific sites. Within such conditions, therefore, there is scarcely any question of a free artistic space. Indeed, it is virtually taken over by other value regimes.

Anti-globalists adopt a second position. Although there is a great ideological difference between them and the hyper-globalists, they do share the economic frame of reference. Within it, paradoxically enough, neo-liberals and neo-Marxists find each other. Anti-globalists, however, do everything in their power to limit the impact of global economic flows. In an almost protectionist attitude they try to shield the local culture and economy from foreign influences. Art becomes an instrument to display local identity, as frequently happens with art in the public space. In Flanders, for instance, we might point to the proliferation of public artworks erected at traffic junctions, which barely surpass local academicism. Anti-globalism easily gets bogged down in narrow 'localism'. Here, as with hyper-globalists, the local art scene has little connection to developments in the international professional art world.

Sceptics – the group that adopts the third position – belong to an entirely different camp. They distrust the hyped-up globalization rhetoric and argue that the nation-state still plays the most significant role, including in the global arena. One oft-cited example is theUSA, a nation-state that sets much of the world agenda. In contrast to the hyper- and anti-globalists, sceptics emphasize not so much the economic, but the political value regime. National politics still determine to a large extent what happens inside and outside national borders. The artistic free zone must primarily be guaranteed within these borders. This can be done with generous subsidies to home-grown artists. The formerBKR fine arts

endowment in the Netherlands is a relevant example of such a 'national' policy, which incidentally should not be confused with ideological nationalism. An arts policy of this sort is primarily concerned with serving its own citizens, which is why it entails so much attention to public participation. Many government subsidies, after all, require solid political legitimacy, which in a democracy must still be obtained from the electorate.

Yet this approach, too, is ill-equipped to deal with global artistic flows. On the contrary, by placing such a heavy emphasis on public participation, the national art scene seems to be turning in on itself. After all, the first priority is to adequately supply the national market, so that the participation debate gets bogged down in numbers. There is little inquiry into how a somewhat broader and potentially interested audience might be brought into contact with global flows. Attention to the previously outlined 'intimate passages' is lacking. In this case, while there is an artistic free zone, it is insufficiently heterogeneous. The political value regime prevails over the economic value regime, providing little incentive to look beyond national borders. **16**

For artists as well as for art organizations and an arts policy, the fourth position, that of the transformalists, generates perhaps the best opportunity to recreate a free artistic zone, in which art and the necessary discourse can flourish. The transformalists assume that globalization is a unique process with contradictory movements. There is an increase in global networks, but at the same time there is the emergence of regionalization, for example in the Basque country or Flanders. The Treaty of Maastricht on the Europe of the Regions is also coloured by this dual movement of space expansion on the one hand and a new 'feudalism' on the other. Furthermore, transformalists argue that global (uniform) flows are constantly appropriated and relocalized, while local culture is absorbed into global flows. As Simmel puts it, objective culture subjectivizes, and subjective culture objectivizes. This is why, for instance, the internal organization of the Guggenheim in Bilbao differs from that of the Guggenheim in New York, if only because of the differing influence of the trade unions. What matters is that it is precisely in this dual movement that a 'transformalist arts policy' attempts to guarantee artistic free space. It doesn't overreach in a over-hyped participation policy, but neither does it isolate a small internationally operating in-crowd. On the contrary, bridges are built between the two, and as indicated, 'intimate zones' are particularly suited to the purpose, precisely because they slow down global flows, generating a greater opportunity for individual appropriation.

But what does this intimate space exactly reveal? A place of intimacy, according to Simmel, is a site in which 'secrets' are divulged. Whenever someone is entrusted with a secret, after all, an intimate relationship develops, sometimes even a love story. An artwork too, given sufficient 'inertia', can reveal secrets. It no longer presents itself as a superficial image, but as a multifaceted being. This may be because it is accompanied by a story by the artist, a good exhibition text, a passionate guide, etcetera. But these are more the classical 'access methods'. A work of art can also show its political, economic and legal colours, and so appeal to a more heterogeneous audience. But even more significant is that the product shifts to the background even as the development process is exposed. Insight into the wings, after all, reveals the personal motivations of the artist, but also her or his ideological, legal and economic work contexts. The isolated artist's studio or the romantic garret is making way – with some frequency – for the public space of the open studio, in the broadest sense of the word (a museum, for instance, can integrate the characteristics of an open studio as a mental space). Words dominate here, good arguments and particularly dialogue. These resist commodification, safeguarding the free space from the dominance of a particular regime, precisely because it opens itself up in all its heterogeneity.

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## Footnotes

1. L. Boltanski and L. Thévenot, *De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).
2. P. Bourdieu, 'La production de la croyance: contribution à une économie des biens symboliques' in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales,* 13, 1977; P. Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).
3. A. Danto, *The philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
4. N. Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995); N. Luhmann, 'Ausdifferenzierung der Kunst', Institut für soziale Gegenwartsfragen Freiburg I. Br. und Kunstraum Wien (ed.), *Art & Language & Luhmann* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1997), 133-148; N. Luhmann, 'Die Autonomie der Kunst', Institut für soziale Gegenwartsfragen Freiburg I. Br. und Kunstraum Wien (ed.), *Art & Language & Luhmann* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1997), 177-190.
5. P. Gielen, *Kunst in Netwerken. Artistieke selecties in de hedendaagse dans en de beeldende kunst* (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2003).
6. B. Latour, *Wij zijn nooit modern geweest. Pleidooi voor een symmetrische antropologie* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1994).
7. M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).
8. See, among others: J. Urry, *Sociology beyond Societies* (London: Routlegde, 2000).
9. Ibid.
10. P. Gielen and R. Laermans, *Een omgeving voor actuele kunst. Een toekomstperspectief voor het beeldende-kunstenlandschap in Vlaanderen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2004).
11. Ibid.
12. G. Simmel, *Een keuze uit het werk van Georg Simmel* (Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1976).
13. See note 1.
14. H. Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts (*Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002).
15. D. Held, A. Mcgrew, D. Goldblatt and J. Perraton, *Global Transformations. Politics, Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).
16. Not to be confused with the traditional Dutch 'pillar system' of party politics – the current political regime after all continually seeks its legitimacy in (unmediated) electoral support, for which it increasingly relies, via the media, on democratic populism.

## Tags

Art Discourse, Media Society

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