Rightist Hobbies and the End of Art

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According to philosopher and cultural theorist Johan Hartle, the rightwing populist criticism of art is anything but democratically inspired. The democratic legitimacy of art is in fact destroyed by the present 'culturalist paradigm', which is dominated by a romantic, nostalgic longing for the restoration of cultural unity. Instead of a 'leftist hobby', this attempt at restoration is actually the ultimate 'rightist hobby', which is blind to the diversity and contradictions so characteristic of the modern age.

1. Leftist Hobby. Wilders as Art Philosopher

Wilders expressed it clearly: The institutionalized and subsidized Dutch culture is, in his by now winged words, a 'leftist hobby', a cultural curiosity of a social elite. As a tolerated partner in the present Dutch government coalition, the rightwing populist politician Wilders is a mirror and an allegory of the Rutte cabinet. His utterances often make the implicit claims that underlie government policy explicit, which is true here as well.

By suggesting that public institutions have been appropriated by private ('leftist') interests, Wilders poses a seemingly democratic question about the legitimacy of public institutions. In doing so, he also alludes to the universalistic tradition of the modern Western concept of art, and even the tradition of avant-garde and institutionally critical art – rather surprising for a rightwing populist politician!

In order to understand the universalistic claim of the Western concept of art, it can be helpful to look at the development of Kant's philosophical aesthetics. As late as the year 1787 (thus three years before the publication of his seminal work on aesthetics, the *Critique of Judgment* (Kritik der Urteilskraft), Kant maintained that it was impossible to establish a philosophical justification for the judging of taste.[1] Since aesthetic preferences always depend on physical and cultural conditions, and thus are conditional and not universal, empirical and not transcendental, Kant had not planned to investigate aesthetics. In the *Critique of Judgment*, the construction of potential universal aesthetic judgments remained dependent on the construction of an ideal community: the *sensus communis.* Through the *sensus communis*, Kant could allude to a universal sense of aesthetics that differs from all merely empirical cultural contexts.

This construction was necessary as a regulatory and normative framework, but it has always remained shaky. Nonetheless, thinkers from Hegel to Bourdieu have fallen back on this universalistic norm in order to criticize the reduction of art to specific cultural contexts. Philosophical reflection on the present economizing should consider this tradition and make it clear that in the seemingly democratic sheep's clothing of the criticism of the elitist art system there is a 'culturalist' and anti-democratic wolf.

2. The End of Art. Hegel as a Critic of Conservative Cultural Policy

The title of this essay refers directly back to the often misunderstood theme in Hegel's series of lectures on the philosophy of art, *Über die Philosophie der Kunst*. [2] Few philosophers have emphasized (and problematized) art's universalistic claims so extensively as did Hegel. According to him, the greatest potential of art (the ideal) was realized in the society of the ancient Greeks. At that time it was possible to worship the beauty of art directly. This claim had a social-theoretical background: the 'highest potential' of art, as realized in antiquity, had explicitly practical dimensions.

In a more or less homogenous society such as the Greek *pólis*, in which religious and cultural practices are not differentiated, art represents a general, connected way of life. The Greek city state and its culture (religion, art) were a happy compromise between the 'Oriental despotism' of previous societies on the one hand, in which the subject was completely subordinate to the state, and 'modern' subjectivism on the other. Whereas the 'internalized' modern subject often comes in conflict with the hostile outside world, the individual in the *pólis*, according to Hegel, was able to integrate his or her subjective freedom within objective social and political structures. Classical art is the manifestation of this. Thus the ancient temple was not only an architectural form; it organized a way of life and expressed that directly in a material manifestation. This is the ideal of art that Hegel recognizes in ancient (Greek) art. [3]

Hegel's famous claim that art's highest potential could only be realized in the past, and that therefore art *in that sense* was past history, has to do with this interpretation of ancient cultural life. In modern society, because a diversity of ways of life exist side by side, the absolute idea of art cannot be manifested by specific material works of art. Only at the level of the concept's contradictory movements (through intellectual debates and abstraction) can the universal still be represented; art strives to become philosophy, without ever being able to reach that goal. [4] Beauty loses to reflection. Its highest potential comes to an end. [5]

According to Hegel, this development is unavoidable. And from this perspective, a nostalgic return to a mythical unity of the people, such as remained important in the conservative tradition of German mythology from Schelling to Heidegger, is just as dangerous as it is naive; for post-ancient, Christian, 'romantic' art can never offer a stable accommodation for a *Geist* that has outgrown art. Yet, precisely such a romantic-nostalgic project – in other words, the attempt to revive cultural unity or to artificially re-establish it – is the central element of conservative cultural policy. Conservative political projects, from Thatcher to Rutte, are structurally tied to this. [6] They cannot tolerate social diversity. They are the cultural-political manifestations of what I call the 'culturalist paradigm' in art.

3. Habitus, Art and Social Elite

Pierre Bourdieu's empirical investigation into the social definition of cultural preferences also touches upon the question of what relation exists between art's claims to universalism and its specific cultural contexts. Bourdieu ascertained that even avant-garde art is favoured by more or less homogenous social groups, and in fact particularly so. Art that seemingly is no longer socially representative also remains indirectly connected with certain social milieus, according to him. He describes the capacity to enjoy the pure form of contemporary art as the privilege of a highly educated (sometimes apparently leftist) citizenry – a capacity that is related to financial and symbolic privileges. Thus, Wilder's 'leftist hobbies' is not so far off at all.

According to Bourdieu, art can be described as an expression of a specific *habitus*. 'Habitus' simultaneously refers to what one possesses (*habitus* as the participle of the Latin *habere*) and what one has internalized (habits and physical practices). The habitus is

the result of a differentiated socialization process; during this process, the conditions are created for the 'proper' way of perceiving art, such as progressive art demands. The creation of an institutional framework and the relative autonomy of this art are, says Bourdieu, the result of a historical struggle. Autonomy becomes possible through intra-aesthetic debates in which dependence on external power structures is temporarily driven back. The relative autonomy of art is thus possible because there is a tension between its own claims and its reduction to ideology and the influence of social elites. Autonomy then only exists when the logic of producing art can be defended against the inclination to be dependent on economic forces and on the cultural narcissism of social elites. Bourdieu understands artistic freedom as a merely gradual distance from the field of power. At the same time, this autonomy is merely *relative* because art production always necessarily remains dependent on economic structures: without money, institutions and artists cannot work.

The seemingly innocent world of art is thus always susceptible to private social appropriation. It is always in danger of falling back into the 'culturalist paradigm' – not only with rightwing populists, but also and particularly among circles of 'enlightened' art lovers. Bourdieu has sought for theoretically-based answers in order to defend art's claims of universalism, and within that framework has also collaborated with progressive artists such as Hans Haacke and Andrea Fraser. Both have analysed in their work how patriarchal power structures and elitist appropriation influence the aesthetic field.[7] It is through such criticism of forms of private appropriation that the universal potential of art can temporarily and partially be realized.

4. Art as 'Rightist Hobby' and the Defence of Aesthetic Universalism

As is apparent from the above, the 'culturalist paradigm' exists in at least two forms: art can be understood as an expression of a specific national culture or as the de facto property of a specific social milieu. Both of these forms of 'culturalizing' art are not 'leftist, but 'rightist'. They are based on exclusive constructions of cultural identity and the symbolic reinforcement of social inequality. Both aspects of *art as a rightist hobby* have clearly crystallized in the present Dutch art debate, and the cutbacks will only establish them all the more strongly.

Self-criticism has – luckily – had a long tradition in the history of art. To this end, the critical sociology of art and artistic practice have forged various alliances. In the history of progressive art, there have been a number of reasons to critically consider the institutional conditions under which art operates. The defence of art's public and universal content was undoubtedly one of the central motivations in this regard. It is only against this background that, for example, Hans Haacke's statistical surveys on the social makeup of visitors to museums or the Guerrilla Girls' posters on the lack of female artists in public collections can be understood. On the basis of its own autonomy and its own claims to universalism, art became potentially critical – particularly when it came to the exclusive and culturalist appropriation of art itself.

It goes without saying that this art is not so easy to consume as the populist criticism of elitist art would like it to be. As Bourdieu puts it: 'The modal readability of a work of art (for a given society in a given period) varies according to the divergence between the code which the work under consideration objectively requires and the code as an historically constituted institution.' [8] In other words, art itself also requires a particular institutional level. There is a connection between institutional codes and the intellectual standard of art. Owing to the objective standard of reflective art, which is established through historical discourse and preserved there, social criticism is also manifested in progressive art institutes.

It is ironic, but not surprising, that those art institutions which recognize that art can be a hobby of social elites, and which problematize this in their projects, are precisely those that are seen as awkward for the rightwing populist agenda. With the cutbacks, organizations that participate in debates criticizing the roles of institutions and society as a whole in today's art discourse accordingly have been taking some hard knocks. Where theoretical reflection on art (and the institutional requirements for its adequate reception) is willingly damaged, art's metamorphosis into a 'rightist hobby' will be the result.

Universalism is not a corporatist compromise, and certainly not the general opinion of the majority. The democratic legitimacy of art is not restored by the 'culturalist paradigm', but destroyed. With the government's economizing, institutional conditions are being eliminated, without which the criticism of art's elitism can hardly still take place. That is why opposition to the cutbacks cannot simply defend the remains of the status quo. Rather, it must go on the offensive and raise the question of the exclusive structure of the art world, without falling below the formal and discursive level of contemporary art practice.

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Footnotes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), A22/B25 ff.
2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung von 1826* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2004), 54 ff.
3. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1986), 25 ff, and Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst*, op. cit. (note 2), 146, 150. My interpretation is strongly inspired by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert. See for example: Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert: *Einführung in Hegels Ästhetik*, (Munich: W. Fink, 2005), 30, 47, 50 and 97.
4. The idea that modern art had actually become philosophy (of art) was the pseudo-Hegelian narrative that brought Arthur C. Danto media acclaim in the 1980s and 1990s.
5. Also see Gethmann-Siefert, *Einführung in Hegels Ästhetik*, op. cit. (note 3), 107 ff, 131 ff. For Hegel's criticism of Schelling, see 152.
6. For Thatcher's cultural policy, see: Stuart Hall, 'The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Human-ities', *October*, vol. 53 (summer, 1990), 11-23.
7. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Foreword: Revolution and Revelation', in: *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), xiv-xv; Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).
8. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Outlines of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception', in: Randal Johnson (ed.), *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (London: Polity Press, 1993), 224.

Tags

Art Discourse, Autonomy, Democracy