

# **From Passion for the Real to Passion for Knowledge<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** In the last hundred years, the art scene underwent interesting changes. The beginning of the 20th century is marked by vibrant new avant-garde and modernist movements; all kinds of artistic experiments, accompanied by the idea that art can penetrate society and contribute to radical social change. Alain Badiou identified these endeavors as the passion for the real. After the second world war, this passion seems to slowly dissipate. The paradox lies in the fact that art institutions are today among the most woken, politically engaged, and enlightened ones, however effect of their political struggles is severely limited. The article argues that the passion for the real was replaced with the passion for knowledge. It traces the social and political consequences of this shift, but at the same time tries to determine other features of museums and art institutions that bear an emancipatory value and solicit compelling political lessons.

**Keywords:** avant-gardes, modernism, passion for the real, passion for knowledge, Banksy, aestheticization

With Plato, philosophy starts as a great disavowal of art, art's fiction, and illusions. In his essay "Under the Gaze of Theory," Boris Groys perspicuously observes a similar sentiment in the art sphere of the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century when artists begin to doubt modes of classical representation.<sup>2</sup>

With the rise of modernism and avant-garde, a philosophical preoccupation with false appearances and mystifying representation arises. One can wonder what brought about such a concern. On the one hand, technological innovations such as photography, film, etc., thrust upon visual arts to develop new visual styles and different kinds of artistic expressions. On the other hand, the social and political context determined the sensibilities of modernist and avant-garde artists: it became impossible to ignore Marx and Engels's Communist *Manifesto*, or, more precisely, the concept of class struggle in the art sphere. At any rate, the urgency of social predicament demanded a different kind of art. With regard to social antagonisms, classical representation started to feel inadequate, fake, manipulative – merely a bourgeois comfort. In other words: if we accept that society is filled with tensions and contradictions, with explicit and implicit struggles, artists can no longer produce seemingly soothing works.

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2 Groys 2016, p. 25

The birth of psychoanalysis in the late 19th century also may have triggered not so much a disavowal of representation but an explosion of modernist and avant-garde innovations (in style, approaches, works, procedures). Freud's concept of the unconscious radically changed the understanding of the subject. Psychoanalysis legitimized an anxious, troubled subject and (to some extent at least) endorsed his or her right to express and address her or his predicament in his or her own way. The notion of a subject as fundamentally unbalanced<sup>3</sup> resonated in various artistic experimentations: every single artist strived to create her or his distinguishable style, a unique touch against the proscribed artistic formulas of the past.

In spite of the possible conceptual background that sparkled great transformation in the western art world, it is nonetheless intriguing that the germ of philosophical aversion to representation penetrated art so profoundly. My thesis is that we can discern two very different aspects of the transformation that took place: if the drive of avant-garde movements at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was wholeheartedly invested in revolutionary change, it dissipated from the second world war on. I will try to elaborate how we can understand these changes with respect to social and political context.

### **The art of a blow**

In his *Theory of the Avant-garde* Peter Bürger connects avant-garde movements to art's role in the bourgeois society. He argues avant-gardes should be perceived as reactions to the aestheticism of the late 19 century. Art in this time becomes an autonomous institution, abiding by its own rules and following its standards. But the price for the almost absolute creative freedom is art's detachment from its social and political context – it loses any kind of real impact. This, of course, doesn't mean that aestheticism isn't critical of its social context, but that its criticism remains separated from the praxis of life, as Bürger puts it.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to this, avant-gardes strive to penetrate society with their art, they strive to create art that would produce a tangible social and political impact. Consequently, European historical avant-gardes attack the status of art in the bourgeois society:

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3 Fredric Jameson makes a similar point in his essay on postmodernism, discussing artistic sensibilities in modernism and postmodernism: "Edward Munch's painting *The Scream* is, of course, a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety. It will here be read as an embodiment not merely of the expression of that kind of affect but, even more, as a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself, which seems to have dominated much of what we call high modernism but to have vanished away -- for both practical and theoretical reasons -- in the world of the postmodern." (Jameson 1991, p. 19)

4 Bürger 1984, p. 49

“What is negated is not an earlier form of art (style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the live praxis of men. When avant-gardes demand that art become practical once again they do not mean that the work of art should be socially significant (...) Rather it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular context.”<sup>5</sup>

Avantgardists try to intervene in society, contribute to revolutionary goals, and by doing so redefine art's status in society. Bürger emphasizes the problems that arise with such an attempt.<sup>6</sup> However, the crucial question in my view is: what do avant-gardes propose instead of illusions and ideological mystifications produced within the autonomous institution of art?

They try to radically change the praxis of life (the existing *status quo*), and such a radical transformation demands a new art. In other words, modern and avant-garde formal artistic innovations do not simply denounce representation in favor of pure life or reality as it supposedly is, they establish a new kind of representation which amounts to a representation of the impossibility of creating pleasing images or to a representation of a distorted representation. Avant-gardes go even further and change the character of artwork more thoroughly: instead of traditional artifacts such as are paintings, sculptures, etc., they organize soirees and manifestations - they are predecessors of performing art and happenings. They intentionally focus on artistic practices that cannot be exhibited, fetishized, or sold at the art market. Besides that avant-garde movements go against the logic of artist-genius and instead work in groups as a collective body.<sup>7</sup> Avantgardists also redefine relationships with their audiences. The spectators are themselves treated as a collective that can participate in artistic endeavors and can learn from artistic practices – an idea that resonates with contemporary interactive art projects. On every level, avantgardists try to sabotage or eradicate the prevailing conditions of the art system.

The function of all these changes, as mentioned, is the creation of a new world and a new man. Avant-gardes believe in absolute political creation or the creation of the political. Alain Badiou, in his book *The Century*, proposed the most accurate concept for their aspirations – the passion for the real:

“Can we observe, within in the century, the deployment of a critique of semblance, a critique of representation, mimesis, and 'the

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5 Ibid.

6The problem is that we cannot establish the function of art, which has transformed into the praxis of life, since it is indiscernible from form social life and hence is not autonomous anymore.

7 Ibid., p. 33

natural'? Quite apart from these verifications, which by and large we've already undertaken, we must acknowledge a strong current within the century's thought which declared it is better to sacrifice art than to give up on the real."<sup>8</sup>

What does this thesis, that art becomes sacrificed for the sake of the real, mean? Bürger's observation that avant-gardes strive to change the praxis of life, is quite in sync with this idea. The Real that avant-gardes are so passionate about has nothing to do with the immediacy of life, with direct depiction or revelation of reality. On the contrary, reality is something that must be eradicated and re-created. The real that avant-gardes aim at is a break with existing reality. Moreover, passion for the real demands creation of the new: new politics, new political subject.<sup>9</sup> Numerous formal inventions or creations of different avant-garde movements (from futurist "parole in libertà" to Malevich's *Black Square* or Tatlin's *Tower*) are designed to produce a direct political effect. The multiplicity of artistic activities create a real impact that throws us, the public, off our feet, that suspends our known horizon of sense and meaning and introduces the creation of a new one.

Following Badiou, avant-garde manifestos embody the essence of their movements. They are distinctive linguistic creations aimed at the direct inauguration of the event, of the new, the completely modern. It is important to note that with modernist and avant-garde movements art theory or the passion for theorizing also enters the art scene. Since the object of avant-garde no longer aspires to be beautiful, comfortable, calming, it needs a theoretical justification. Artists in this epoch start to write and provide analyses and conceptual frames of their work.<sup>10</sup>

What is the status of this enormous amount of theory created by modernists and avant-gardists? Is it merely to provide an understanding of otherwise hermetic, enigmatic works? My thesis is that theoretical production – often itself very mystifying and enigmatic – functions as yet another manifestation of the passion for the real. Manifestos can be considered an extreme version of this passion. They do not address the works of art but are an accompanying ingredient of the creative urge also found in avantgardist manifestations and avantgardists' attitudes.

"Since in such cases works are uncertain – almost vanished before they are born, or concentrated in the gesture of an artist rather than its result (...) – their gist has to be conserved in theory, commentary,

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8 Badiou 2007, p. 131

9 Badiou connects the creation of the new also to the avantgardist inclination to being completely modern – a phrase created by Rimbaud (Ibid., p. 134).

10 It would be actually hard to find a modernist that didn't establish her or his own theory: from Schönberg to Malevich.

declaration. Through writing one must preserve a formula for this bit-of-the-real extorted by the fleeting passage of forms.”<sup>11</sup>

Creating art no longer suffices. The art manifestation needs backing in a declaration or a gesture. Manifestos can be understood as a way to do things with words, to use J. L. Austin's formula. What does a manifesto do with words? What kind of words and what kind of actions are in play here? According to Badiou the meaning of words in the manifestos isn't essential. Manifestos are often intentionally misleading, shocking; they attempt to challenge, scare, disgust their readers, and they are not necessarily devoted to realizing their goals. Their explicit meaning is separated from their intended effect.

“My hypothesis is that – at least for those who in the century are prey to the passion of the present – the Manifesto is only ever a rhetorical device serving to protect something other than what it overtly names or announces.”<sup>12</sup>

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Avant-gardes were often accused of not delivering on what they promised in their programs, but this accusation is in Badiou's view misdirected. Manifestos are in essence a pure will for the new and cannot be reduced to a meaningful program with a clear strategy and rational set of goals. They are, on the contrary, enigmatic formulas that still puzzle us since it seems their meaning escapes the real message they are producing. As Badiou would say, they keep the passion for the real alive. One could also argue that a manifesto functions as a gesture. Relying here on Lacan's theory, manifestos' point or meaning should not be traced on the level of the enunciated but on the level of enunciation.

We can clarify some of these concepts by turning to the first and most influential avant-garde manifesto and analyzing the crucial features of these art forms. *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909 is an intriguing mixture of poetry, political program and eccentric theory of art.<sup>13</sup>

The manifesto starts with: “My friends and I stayed up all night, sitting beneath the lamps of a mosque, whose star studded, filigreed brass domes resembled our souls, all aglow with the concentrated

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11 Ibid., p. 137

12 Ibid., p. 138

13 Is it necessary to note that different avant-gardes produced an enormous amount of manifestos. Futurists alone were very productive in this genre. The reason I am taking only Marinetti's manifesto into account is simply that it was the first one; it was very notorious and influential: in next years and decades other avant-garde movements followed suit. That is to say, even when we can spot indicative differences among different movements, these are articulated, pointed out in their manifestos. When discussing manifestos in plural I am not unjustifiably generalizing this whole production, but I am considering the prevailing and shared features of this genre in historical avant-garde.

brilliance of an electric hart.”<sup>14</sup> The narrative of the manifesto starts with the insomnia of young people caused by unexplained excitement and enthusiasm. As the narrative progresses, we learn that they are taking a ride with a car – an object of modernity that futurists most cherish. They are racing around but when faced with a group of cyclists they end up in a ditch: “So with my face covered in repair shop grime – a fine mixture of metallic flakes, profuse sweat, and pale blue soot – with my arms all bruised and banged yet quite undaunted, I dictated our foremost desires to all men on Earth who are truly alive (...).”<sup>15</sup>

Already in this part, where the manifesto reads more like a lyricized story, we can sense a certain grit, stubbornness, and untamable passion of the writer. It seems the author is already challenging his audience with an unusual choice of words, descriptions, unusual objects of fascination (cars, speed), and an excessively heroic attitude towards life. All these features are intensified in the central part of the manifesto where the actual program of the futurists is laid out. It starts with: “We want to sing about the love of danger, about the use of energy, and recklessness as common, daily practice.” Followed by: “Courage, boldness, and rebellion will be essential elements in our poetry.”<sup>16</sup>

So, the excitement of the first introductory part is here emphasized and it builds up to very daring, almost crazy statements. The love of new machinery, technology and speed demands its aesthetic laws: “A racing car, its bonnet decked with exhaust pipes like serpents with galvanic breath... a raring motor car which seems to race on like machine-gun fire is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace.”<sup>17</sup> And later on: “There is no longer any other beauty except struggle. Any work of art that lacks a sense of aggression can never be a masterpiece.” Admiration for aggression and violence escalates to promoting war (“We wish to glorify war”) and the destruction of the old world, especially old art institutions: “We wish to destroy museums, libraries, academies of all sort, and fight against moralism, feminism, and every kind of materialistic self-serving cowardice.”<sup>18</sup>

Manifesto on the one hand provides intriguing images of modern technology and is, on the other hand, bursting with violence against everything old, against the traditional institutions, especially the cultural ones, and against women, too. The destruction of everything old, traditional, everything that society holds in esteem, is in a manifesto put

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14 Marinetti 2011, p. 2

15 Ibid., p. 4

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 5

18 Ibid.

in opposition to the praised new technological inventions. The manifesto is absolutely devoted to the art that celebrates these novelties. Moreover, it seems Marinetti is trying to invent a new language for these admired items. He celebrates the modern cities with all their new acquisitions and elements. For example, he promises he will sing praise to everything modern big metropolises have to offer: "(...) pulsating, nightly ardor of arsenals and shipyards, ablaze with their violent electric moons; of railway stations, voraciously devouring smoke-belching serpents; of workshops hanging from the clouds by their twisted threads of smoke; of bridges which, like giant gymnasts, bstride the rivers, flashing sunlight like gleaming knives, of intrepid steamships that sniff out the horizon (...)"<sup>19</sup> Marinetti is trying to invent a new language for a new modern world that has arisen in the early 20th century. He is trying to create poetry for objects that traditionally weren't the privileged subject matter of artistic endeavor.<sup>20</sup>

Marinetti provides new words and phrases for the adored new phenomena. But at the same time the creation of this new language already implies the creation of a whole new symbolic universe, where exhaust pipes and factory chimneys deserve special regard and are put on the throne of absolute beauty. On the other hand, this linguistic creativity seems to escape any definite meaning. It is not clear what Marinetti's text is communicating to us. Here we are confronted with the problem of the enunciation and the enunciated. We cannot discern the meaning of the manifesto on the level of the enunciated, it is not fully expressed or enacted on the level of the enunciated.

The true force of this manifesto is to be detected on the level of enunciation: the attitude, the will that can only be sensed between the lines – literally. One could say that the enunciated comprises the enunciation. Enunciation is a surplus of the enunciated. The question is, how can we conceptualize the enunciation of *The Futurist Manifesto*? In it we find a willingness to break with the old and inaugurate the new, the combativeness, the violence of the artistic agenda. In short – the passion for the real. This attitude seems to be the real message encoded in the enunciated. It is the surplus of the author's passion for the real that is a disturbing and incomprehensible part of the manifesto.

One could claim that the linguistic innovations of the manifesto serve as a break, as a punch in our faces. The manifesto uses words, the means of the symbolic, to produce a real effect. Marinetti's text was indeed received with fear and panic, it caused confusion and disgust

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19 Ibid.

20 The ambition to create new world through new poetic language dedicated to new modern technological achievements can be also traced in Marinetti's artistic invention "parole in libertà". Using this technique an artist extracts the words from their symbolic placements and uses them as objects – as visual elements of a graphic.

among his audience. Today – even though equipped with several studies of avant-garde movements, analyses of their work, etc. – we still can sense the unbearable core of this kind of writing. All our attempts at interpreting and understanding it don't seem to domesticate it, they don't help to embrace it as an unproblematic part of the history of art. A horrible dimension of the manifesto(s) persists even today. We can describe manifestos as specific formulas that successfully survived their time-travel to the 21st century, carrying with them the ungraspable force of passion for the real. Many modernist and avant-garde paintings, sculptures, plays and movies are today integrated into the art system, they are even among most valued art pieces – they are respected and enjoyed. But that doesn't seem to stand for manifestos – as if avantgardists went too far even for our permissive and liberal standards, as if there remains something unsupportable in their attempts, in their aspirations. Manifesto seems to be resilient towards time and fetishization.

The outcome of avant-gardes' aversion toward representation, fakery, and the illusion of art is an attempt to push art into life, to create new art as a raid that can transform the symbolic order. The manifesto is an indicative materialization of such an attempt since it uses the means of language as a tool of the radical transformation of this same order of meaning. To sum it up in Badiou's terms, one has to give up art to invent the real that one can then be passionate about. The real that avant-gardes are aiming at is not already waiting for us in life, it has to be constructed, created anew.

This passion for the real – a firm belief that art can directly intervene and change the existing order – keeps appearing throughout the 20th century. If nothing else, the persistence of manifestos in this century is indicative enough. Film movements (from the Soviet silent film to Italian neorealism, from the French New Wave to Danish Dogma 95), in particular, found manifestos an always convenient form of introducing the break with the existing order of images. Manifestos helped announce films that aimed at transforming not only the art of filmmaking but reality as such. One should emphasize, though, that after the “golden age” of historical avant-garde movements, manifestos usually lose the violent rhetorics, the outrageous slogans, and aggressive vocabulary. They often seem comprehensible and devoid of really enigmatic features. The enigma that remains is the choice of manifestos as a form of communication. As if historical avant-gardes established manifesto as a genre which with its transgressive form alone already guarantees a surplus of gesture, a surplus of action – a real effect. Manifesto as a genre compels the reader to take into account not just its content but also its intent to create a new reality.

## This is not a urinal

There exists another type of passion for the real in the early 20th century: Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. Let us summarize the emergence of this intriguing object. Duchamp bought a massively produced item – a urinal, which he then signed (as R. Mutt) and named *The Fountain*. He attempted to exhibit it at the show organized by the Society of Independent artists (which he co-founded), but this attempt failed due to the outrageous character of this piece of art.<sup>21</sup> Let us take a closer look at Duchamp's gesture: there is no more craft, no more artistic genius, no more predetermined artistic medium; the artist just takes an already-existing object and declares it his work of art. Urinal becomes *The Fountain* with a simple artistic gesture of renaming it. At the first glance there is no apparent difference between the two – looking at *The Fountain* one sees the urinal. However, this object, this ready-made sets in motion all sorts of speculative games.

With a simple artist's gesture, an ordinary object becomes something else, it no longer belongs to the ordinary world of profane objects. Gerard Wajcman ascribes this to the fact that *The Fountain* in comparison to a urinal is devoid of any function.<sup>22</sup> Duchamp's ready-made thus looks the same as any other urinal from the same production line – with the exception that it doesn't function as a urinal anymore. How can this almost magical transformation occur? It suffices that an artist signs his name (or pseudonym R. Mutt, as is the case with *The Fountain*). The signature is a guarantee that the transformation is the result of artistic intervention in the world of profane objects. The signature changes the object's status.

According to Groys, the crucial characteristic of Duchamp's ready-made is that it carries the traits of artistic subjectivity (the signature) and that it is accepted by an art institution. Museums have the power of transforming ordinary objects into art pieces. One can argue that *The Fountain* hardly got an institutional endorsement at the moment of its conception. The only "institution" that accepted the first public ready-made<sup>23</sup> and introduced it to the public was the magazine *The Blind Man*. Alfred Stieglitz's photo of it was accompanied by Louise Norton's editorial which should still be considered as a crucial piece of art criticism:

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21 It is not clear what exactly went on with the first ready-made; it seems it was not even officially declined, just somehow repressed. There is, however, a sense of irony in that this alternative, supposedly ground-breaking institution of independent artists excluded *The Fountain* from the show while, on the other hand, nothing less or more could be expected (as I'll argue later on).

22 Cf. Wajcman 1998

23 With the term "first public ready-made" I am simply referring to the fact, that the *Fountain* was first ready-made to be publically exhibited, while Duchamp's first ready-made *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) was but kept in his studio.

“Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He **CHOSE** it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”<sup>24</sup>

Thanks to this lucid interpretation *The Fountain* found its way into the public sphere and got its institutional endorsement, even though *The Blind Man* was not a widely accepted artistic magazine. It took several decades for this piece of art (which without Stieglitz and *The Blind Man* would be probably lost or forgotten) to enter the artistic canon. Its replicas were placed in important museums after the second world war while the original was presumably destroyed.

At first glance, one would think *The Fountain* is a piece of immediate reality that found its way to the art sphere since it was taken from the world of already existing objects. However, as we showed, we cannot think of this piece as an artwork without the artist's signature and its placement in the art scene – this was needed to transform an ordinary object to a work of art.

Duchamp's ready-mades follow almost to perfection the three moments of Lacan's definition of sublimation from his *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: sublimation is the satisfaction of a drive; sublimation creates socially acceptable norms; sublimation raises the object to the dignity of the Thing.<sup>25</sup>

Especially this last definition fits *The Fountain* perfectly: a urinal which transcends into a work of art by the artist's gesture – hence becoming the Thing. Its name – *The Fountain* – indicates that we are no longer dealing with an object dedicated to defecation but with a noble cultural artifact. When we eliminate the use of urinal, we change its original meaning. Moreover, the transformative Duchamps gesture of elevating an object to the dignity of the Thing reshapes the symbolic structure. To take an ordinary object and move it to an un-prescribed (unthinkable) place – the gallery or any other art institution – is a signifying gesture, it disturbs the functioning of the symbolic structure, it demolishes the pre-established order of things/signifiers (urinal becomes an exhibited item). If Marinetti tried to create a grain of the real by exploiting signifiers in an unexpected, provoking way, Duchamp's strategy is of a different kind. He doesn't create the new with existing signifiers, he just slightly repositions the elements of the signifying structure, which results in a great disturbance of the structure as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Norton 1917, p. 5

25 Lacan 1992, p.112

26 I owe this thesis to Gerard Wajcman elaboration in *L'objet du siecle* (Cf. Wajcman 1998).

This massive disturbance in the symbolic is connected to the idea that sublimation creates socially acceptable values. The emphasis of this definition is on the creation of new values as the result of artistic sublimation. In the case of *The Fountain*, one might say, it radically transformed art institutions which eventually became open to Duchamp's innovation and conceptual art. What at first appeared as an impossibility within the art system gradually became its very core. A seemingly innocent gesture of only repositioning one element of the symbolic universe caused the transformation of this universe as a whole, creating new possibilities, new boundaries for art, new artistic conditions and new values. *The Fountain* broadened the understanding of what art is or could be. The example of *The Fountain* is valuable also because it shows that for a radical change within a certain signifying order you do not need a spectacular, grandiose gesture – on the contrary, a minimal move as is an innocent repositioning suffices to thoroughly transform the character of art system as such. Duchamp's urinal also points to another paradox – when such an artwork appears there is no place for it, it can only expect disallowance, revolt, a harsh critique. Paradoxically, its appearance in the art world only retroactively creates the conditions for its own emergence and its recognition. This unwelcome piece of art creates a space which it will be eventually occupying.

And, back to Lacan's definitions of the sublimation, where does the satisfaction of the drive come in? I believe we can trace it to the artist's subjectivity, to his or her willingness to risk everything, inclusive of his/her wellbeing, for his/her creation. It is the indifference towards the fate of the artist that makes him/her a subject of the drive, dedicated to following through with a seemingly outrageous idea. In other words, creating new social values, transforming an object into a Thing, demands a specific type of subjectivity ready to jump into an abyss without any guarantee of surviving the fall.

Lacan's concept of sublimation is close to Badiou's passion for the real – both concepts imply the renunciation of the existing values and the creation of new ones. Let us repeat, passion for the real is not a passion for the existing set of objects and the existing order, but – on the contrary – a passion for the radical transformation of the prevailing reality, for a new social frame, which also demands new art and a specific type of subjectivity.

So what happened later to the passion for the real? Can we still trace it? Can we find it today, in life, art or politics?

### **Knowledge and pleasure in art**

A notorious event took place a few years ago at the Sotheby's auction: one of the paintings that were auctioned was Banksy's *Girl with Balloon*. But as soon as the work was sold for nearly a million pounds it started to

self-destruct. Banksy anticipated that the painting will be sold and built a self-destructive mechanism into the picture. Not surprisingly this incident soon became viral and the subject of much analysis. Some of the critics were enthusiastic about the event since – in their view – it succeeded in shading light onto the corrupt artistic system and market. Other reactions were more reserved since it became clear that Banksy's gesture and his picture would now generate even more profit and bring prestige to the auction house it was critical of.

This event is a good illustration of what is going on in the contemporary art world. More precisely, it raises a question about the true impact of political engagement of art and about the knowledge that provocative artworks generate.

Banksy, who started his career as a master of graffiti, is one of those famous contemporary authors that constantly promote radical political agendas in their work: he reacts to any kind of injustices of today's world, from the despair of the Palestinians on the West Bank to the corruption of the capitalist system and migration crisis in Europe. However, no matter how radical Banksy's political position might be, he is praised and valued by the (art) establishment. In other words, the status of his work within the art system and art market is in no way compromised by his political engagement. On the contrary, Banksy's rebellious status in the art world seems to generate even more attention and money. *Girl With Balloon* is not in any way different in this respect, even though the self-destructive painting is obviously a revolt against established institutions.

One should notice that a self-destructive work of art is not a novelty in the art world.<sup>27</sup> The critique of the art system is at least as old as modernism itself. Let us remember Bürger's analysis of avant-garde (or later neo-avant-garde) as a large movement against the established artistic norms, against cultural heritage and autonomous institution of art as the ideological support of the existing social order. Avant-gardes problematized the existence of art institutions: "Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticizes schools that precede it but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society."<sup>28</sup>

This dire skepticism about art institutions implores avant-gardes to work on art that would function outside institutions, that would intervene directly into life. However, their project, looked at retroactively, has failed. Art institutions have changed due to modernist and avant-garde

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<sup>27</sup> Let us give just two examples: in 1960 the dadaist artist Jean Tinguely exhibited *Fragment from Homage to New York* in New York's Moma – an installation that started to dismantle in front of the audience. Also, the British author Gustav Metzger created since 1959 a series of his paintings with acid, so that acid destroyed the paintings while creating them.

<sup>28</sup> Bürger 1984, p. 22

tendencies, adapted to all the radical, unaccepted art of early modernism, and opened up their doors widely to all sorts of experimentation, critique, and scandal. However, as soon as these provocative, challenging works were exhibited within the walls of museums and galleries, the passion for the real seems to have dissipated. The protest, the radical politics of avant-gardes lost its edge as soon as they became canonized and included in art institutions' collections.

One might say that Banksy's protest – aimed at the art system – managed to accomplish exactly the opposite of the artist's intentions: the value of the painting has been raised. Moreover, the idea of self-destructive painting created the true aura of this artwork and became even more cherished in its semi-demolished form, now entitled *Love is in the Bin*. Not to mention the publicity that Sotheby's got for its “hosting” the artist's performance.

What does this mean? How can we interpret Banksy's project? Nothing seems to invigorate the art system more than such provocative attempts and radical criticism of the art world. The shock, the scandal, the critical message keeps the art system alive. One has to wonder why is it so. The answer can only lie in the fact that no critique or any radical political gestures executed within the art system can change or transform anything. Moreover, the art institutions guarantee that its declared radical politics will have absolutely no effect in life, in socio-political reality.

This realization requires that we discuss the changes in the Western art world and society in the last hundred years. Fredric Jameson's legendary text 'Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism' can help us to see why the passion for the real faded. The prevailing feeling that nothing radical, new, engaging, revolutionary can take place in art, is analogous to the predicament of our liberal societies since the sixties. The crucial characteristic of postmodern society is that it permits all radical, critical political and cultural trends – as long as the capitalistic economic frame remains unproblematized. Some of the characteristics that Jameson ascribes to the postmodern condition (the loss of sense of history, the blending of high and low art, its dedication to surface without any depth, etc.) have important political consequences. Everything in our life has become culturalized. One can talk of the managerial culture, minority culture, the culture of resistance, etc. And when every aspect of society becomes perceived as a cultural problem, when politics becomes the question of culture and of managing cultural differences (cultural diversity, different lifestyles), we lose exactly the political grasp on society. Society seems to be functioning well as long as we transform the real existing problems, antagonisms, inequalities into the question of respecting cultural differences. In other words, emphasizing cultural differences erases the underlying economic contradictions, conflicts, tensions, and antagonisms that cannot be reduced to the question of cultural differences and diverse lifestyles.

When every difference is accepted into the prescribed political and economic frame, the justified critique of the system also seems to miss its target:

“The shorthand language of co-optation is for this reason omnipresent on the left, but would now seem to offer a most inadequate theoretical basis for understanding a situation in which we all, in one way or another, dimly feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash* are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part since they can achieve no distance from it.”<sup>29</sup>

The strategy of late capitalism in the West is to encourage or at least tolerate any form of resistance, as long as it is taking place under the umbrella of the existing economic order. This brings us back to the art system where we can easily approve of artistic or curator's political agendas (targets of their criticism are usually convincingly identified: from acknowledging antagonisms produced by the capitalist economy to recognizing ecological perils ahead); however, the form in which this sort of criticism takes place guarantees that nothing will change. The institutional frame incapacitates any political effect. In other words: every criticism is welcomed, every revolutionary idea embraced, since the frame in which they are articulated makes all these endeavors irrelevant, impotent. The situation today very much resembles the struggle of aestheticism of the late 19th century which we discussed earlier – with one exception: now not only society and economic order are the targets of artistic criticism, but also the art institutions. However, as I tried to demonstrate, art institutions are only too eager to display artistic criticism of their own problematic role in contemporary society.

I am tempted to argue that the cultural turn of late capitalism owes its strategy to the art system which, after the second world war and especially from the sixties onward, opened itself to art criticism and revolt which in turn disempowered radical projects. The amortization of radicalism goes hand in hand with another process: capitalization of the cultural sphere. Notwithstanding their declared critical goals, the cultural field, museums, and galleries began to function as a lucrative field for capitalist profits. The paradox lies in the fact that the more an art institution is subdued to the capitalist logic, the more critical and woke it is becoming.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Jameson 1991, p. 42-43

30 This thought has been extensively developed by several contemporary theoreticians. Let us point out at least a few of them. Chantal Mouffe compares contemporary art institutions to theme

At this point, we have to address a reasonable and to some extent correct consideration: shouldn't we embrace a society that has become open to radical art and radical self-criticism? Should we not acknowledge progress in the fact that women, people of all races and various minorities, etc., are finally getting recognized by art institutions and society? The answer is yes, of course. However, the problem is if we see this as the only and an already accomplished goal of contemporary politics. The liberal endorsement of minorities can serve as a tool to preserve the underlying conditions of exploitation which generate the antagonisms of today's society. So we shouldn't accept the false dilemma: either liberty of minorities or the fight for economic justice. One does not exclude the other. We can strive for both at the same time. Today, however, we seem to be satisfied with pushing just the first agenda, as if this already represents a great political achievement.

### **The art of the non-dupes**

The debate about the art system becoming the playground for our liberal sensibilities, an exercise in self-reflection without any real political power, demands further elaboration. Let us go back to Banksy's self-destructive painting. His project owes a great deal to Duchamp's conceptualism. Duchamp's ready-mades broadened the understanding of what artwork can be – anything that is made by an artist and approved by art institutions. The self-destruction of an artwork can thus also be perceived as a work of art. The crucial aspect of self-destructive (suicidal) painting is that the work that undergoes its demolition also generates knowledge. A transformation of *Girl With Balloon* into *Love is the Bin* invokes the events in art from the 19th century on. Modern artwork is an artwork that is self-reflexive, that is thoughtful or full of thought and that provides a thesis and knowledge about itself. The art aimed at questioning traditional representation, suspicious of institutions and striving to destroy traditional modes of representation, produces or at least implies a certain knowledge. It demands that we recognize the history of art and the logic of functioning of images and institutions that harvest them. It demands that we think of power structures as well as of the context of every artwork. We cannot understand *The Fountain* without considering

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parks aimed at attracting great masses to generate great profits (Cf. Mouffe 2013); Julian Stallabras examines how art institutions are dependent on the capitalist market although operating under the assumption that they are a free space of thought and political engagement (Cf. Stalabrass 2006); Claire Bishop, among other things, emphasizes the compromises big art institutions make in their programming due to market demands and also how spectacular architecture - "starchitecture" - of contemporary art institutions became another vehicle for attracting massive audiences (Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao being the prime example) (Cf. Bishop 2014); Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen comes to a similar conclusion of finding artistic political engagements ineffective. (Cf. Rasmussen 2017); Bojana Kunst also debates today's enlightened art system which keeps the conditions of exploiting artists intact. (Cf. Kunst 2015)

all this. Without this knowledge and realization, the famous ready-made could never be perceived as an artwork but would remain a urinal. As I tried to show, at the beginning of the century such knowledge was still a by-product of the passion for the real. It was there in support of the artistic ambition to abolish the previous artistic modes, including the art institutions, and to participate in the creation of a new world. After the second world war and especially in the last five decades, the passion for the real became almost obsolete, while knowledge, self-reflection, self-awareness of the contemporary art became a fundamental ingredient of any artifact and any respectable art institution.

Let us try to establish the nature of this knowledge. One must not mistake it for philosophical or theoretical knowledge, although it often relies on contemporary theoretical concepts. This is not an art that develops concepts about itself in the Hegelian sense. Conceptualism in all its shapes is not some kind of developed stage of artistic spirit with full self-understanding. It is rather a type of knowledge about how classical representation is no longer possible (in any sophisticated society), and about how art is no longer naive or mischievous. This applies to artists, their artworks, contemporary art institutions, and ultimately to the audiences themselves. All of these agents strive to prove that art is no longer the victim of deception, misrecognition, and self-delusions. They reassure us that they are aware of the fakery (of traditional representation), and that they are not susceptible to it. The art system thus becomes a place of contempt for deceptive images: instead of producing self-knowledge, it promotes a raising of (political) awareness.

At this point, one should emphasize that these institutions also provide another type of knowledge – knowledge connected to the institution's programs, knowledge which deals with historical contexts, scientific facts, and arguments (which we find in the books, catalogs, etc.). This knowledge belongs to the sphere of academia and is part of the so-called scientific knowledge. It is not to be mistaken for the knowledge we are interested in, the one that asserts its resistance to any kind of deception. I would argue that self-reflexivity and self-awareness in the art are also responsible for the art institutions' receptiveness to popular genres, kitsch and degraded taste – to everything, basically, as long as this play with references is accompanied by a better knowledge or awareness, either in the form of irony or in the form of self-theorization.

In comparison to avant-gardes and modernism in which theory is used as another manifestation of the passion for the real, contemporary art (system) is characterized by the passion for knowledge. The main function of this knowledge is, again, not the progress of (scientific) knowledge, not the development of art theory or art, but a declaration of one's enlightenment, awareness, or wokeness.

It has become very important to declare and constantly prove that one was able to avoid any kind of deception. This brings us to Lacan's

famous slogan from an unpublished seminar: “Les non-dupes errant.” In translation: “the non-dupes are mistaken”, or, “the non-dupes will be deceived”. The tendency to remain aware and undeceived is according to Lacan a guarantee that we will be deceived exactly where we believe we were able to get rid of any trace of deception. So why and how will the non-dupes become deceived?

As Alenka Zupančič argues – contemplating a broader socio-political context –, our awareness of all monstrosities, corrupt governments, antagonisms of capitalism, and the ecological doom does not contribute to any significant social action or change. On the contrary, the more we are enlightened (the more we are aware of different kinds of social catastrophes) the more we remain inactive, and at the same time pleased with ourselves. Zupančič connects this insight to Mannoni's formula of fetishism: “I know well, but..” Fetish stands in place of the truth and thus enables us to believe whatever we believe. However, the situation as illustrated above is even more complex and can be seen in connection to Freud's concept of *fausse reconnaissance*, the wrong memory or *déjà raconté*. Freud took note of patients who during the analysis hastily recognized a certain trauma or fact of their traumatic history as something they already know or have already acknowledged. This allows the patients to dismiss something essential to them or to their psychological mechanism as unimportant – as something they can remain indifferent to. *Fausse reconnaissance* is a tool that can keep the most traumatic, significant elements at a safe distance so that they cannot affect us. Zupančič's crucial point is that the repression of traumatic events persists not because we excluded the repressed but exactly with the help of acknowledging it.<sup>31</sup>

I would argue we are dealing with a similar predicament also in the field of art. Knowledge has become the fetish and the goal in itself. On the level of production, distribution, and consumption (of artworks), the most important thing seems to be the accompanying awareness. To know better is the primary goal which also guarantees that nothing will change – on the contrary, this knowledge functions as a kind of buffer that disables us from taking action, henceforth endorsing the current state of affairs.<sup>32</sup>

Art institutions that are susceptible to contemporary sensibilities (gender, religion, race, etc.) and strive to embrace all of the minorities, differences within art system – a stance we can also perceive as part of the non-duped mentality – remain entangled in the art market, in the

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31 Cf. Zupančič 2016

32 There are many examples of this sort of attitude. For example, the incarceration of Julian Assange is widely accepted or tolerated, although his discoveries have potentially fatal consequences for our democracies. A great deal of Covid denial and anti-vaxxer mentality can also be ascribed to the urge to possess better knowledge. Similarly, the acknowledgment of climate change doesn't seem to trigger any real political measures.

functioning of the capitalist system. The more these institutions are woke and aware of injustices, the more we can be sure that in essence – on the level of institution's functioning, on the level of profits and distribution of power – nothing will change, except perhaps a better self-image and self-admiration of the art institutions.

### **What remains of museums?**

Contemporary art museums are part of what we can call our current predicament. The passion for knowledge that is encouraged there is in the end the passion that ultimately – regardless of our intentions and well-meaning – serves the existing structures of power. However, one would be wrong to generalize this idea; not only because there are major differences between different museums in different parts of the world, but also because there persists a museum's function that is quite different from the one we dealt with until now.

I am referring here to a thesis Boris Groys's developed in his essay "On Art Activism". He locates the power of a museum into the very fact that it aestheticizes artifacts, which in turn renders them non-functional. He argues that aestheticization does not contribute to the improvement of life or progress.<sup>33</sup> Museums are cemeteries, Groys asserts and finds this characteristic exactly the most worthy one. If we compare design and art institutions, we realize that design is aimed at changing the *status quo*, improving objects and consequently our lives. "Art seems to accept reality, the status quo, as it is. But art accepts the status quo as dysfunctional, as already failed from the revolutionary or even post-revolutionary perspective. (...) By defunctionalizing the *status quo*, art prefigures its coming revolutionary overthrow. Or a new global war. Or a new global catastrophe. In any case, an event that will make the whole contemporary culture, including all of its aspirations and projections, obsolete, (...)"<sup>34</sup>

The mere existence of contemporary art institutions therefore functions as a radical statement about the nature of our predicament.

Groys goes on to say: "Modern and contemporary art wants to make things not better but worse, and not relatively worse, but radically worse – to make dysfunctional things out of functional things, to betray expectations, to demonstrate the invisible presence of death where we could see only life."<sup>35</sup>

Groys sees art's political potential in its aestheticization of things. "In fact, total aestheticization does not block but rather enhances political

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33 Groys 2016, p. 47

34 Ibid., p. 54

35 Ibid., p. 57

action.” He concludes: “Thus, total aestheticization, not only does not preclude political action, it creates ultimate horizon for successful political actions if this action has a revolutionary perspective.”<sup>36</sup>

We should also point out the consequences that aesthetization has on the spectator or the audience: very much like in the case of Duchamp's ready-mades, aestheticization introduces a world of different objects that have no prescribed meaning. Art institutions are places where one can wonder, where one can get excited or appalled, but in any instance these are spaces where things can function as enigmas, as questions and not as answers to our profane problems. In this sense, art institutions are in the vicinity of philosophy, since nothing in this world is pre-established or pre-figured. On the contrary, museums are institutions where ordinary things can become something entirely different, and the spectator is invited to participate in this philosophical game. Museums also address the viewer in a different way than consumerist institutions or the workplace. He or she is not at the service of anyone or anything but is allowed to consider the viewed artifacts in his or her way.

In my view, it is also crucial to emphasize that museums function as an intermediary between the spectator and the artifacts. Only the authority of the museum (its curators, professionals, its academic and technical infrastructure) enables us to approach these artifacts in such a philosophical, mindful way. In other words, if we were to analyze why contemporary museums are so popular (or were before the pandemics), the answer does not lie only in the consumerist capitalist appropriation of the art world, but in the indirection of the museum spaces where the program is still curated. Museums are alluring because they keep a certain form of intellectual life alive – they encourage the work of thinking, interpreting and discussing in a civilized manner.

Moreover, museums are one of the last institutions that cultivate curatorship. All other institutions that were based on this type of intermediary (newspaper editors, advisers, selectors) are slowly disappearing. The streaming platforms, the online bookstores, the instant news feed without the intermediaries, etc., are indicative of our culture. The curating institutions are vanishing in favor of everyone becoming his or her own curator: from choosing food or books to TV series and movies.

As with many changes in our society, this one also presents itself as a new form of liberation and freedom. We are no longer bound to the tastes of others but can refer to our own tastes and find what we like. And the only response that is expected from us comes in a form of a “like”. The argument for our like or dislike is no longer needed or expected. However, I would argue that this new curator-less world is very terrifying and to some extent a dangerous one. Not only because the abandonment of intermediaries results in maximizing profits on our (consumers)

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36 Ibid., p. 60

account, but also because it impoverishes our public space and its mental condition. In the case of consuming culture, public space is exactly the space where we can gain some distance (from our tastes: dislikes and likes) and try to understand what was it that appealed to us, or what disturbs us, or what and why has left us indifferent. It is a space where one is not bound to his or her own taste but where the tastes can be rationally discussed. The Kantian idea of aesthetic judgment – subjective but at the same time in need of universal approval – can inspire us here. Kant's conception implies that we are not alone with our tastes. We can debate our tastes. What our taste should be is not prescribed in advance, but the form of discussion or of argumentation is: the argument should be apprehensible to all of us, it refers to the universal audience of thinking beings. This public discussion is not necessarily about knowledge (gaining or exhibiting knowledge), but about creating the space for developing thoughts. Again, in this case, universalism does not imply we have to or should like or dislike the same things: we can direly disagree about our tastes, but the form of the argument should be communal, quite literally aimed at forming a community, a collective (despite our different tastes). To put it simply, this type of debate can include very diverse people, opinions, attitudes, life styles, and in this way exhibits a more productive kind of political community. In this sense institutions that still nourish curatorship and public space that is otherwise disintegrating, are most important. In our predicament, where the passion for the real seems impossible and the passion for knowledge is at best (politically) insufficient, we should perhaps try and foster the passion for aestheticization in groysian sense, based on our full acceptance that the *status quo* of our social reality is irremediably failed (which is not hard with the pandemic and the new war on the horizon). This could be a stepping stone for rebuilding the public space and from there – perhaps – also an effective political engagement.

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