

THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF THE END OF ART

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I want with this paper to explore the concept of revolution as it relates to contemporary art. The sense of critique and radicality apparent within progressive modern art movements leads to a natural association of the concept 'art' with that of revolution, however in the current moment, contemporary art is criticised for its seeming inability to make critique or effect change, or for its collusion with neoliberal or capitalist structures. Much analysis to this effect can be found in articles from the online journal *e-flux*, where criticism – made by artists and theorists alike – includes questions concerning the validity of contemporary art's claim to political or social engagement, its identification with a postcolonial or de-bordered world, its complicity with the market, and its evasion of meaningful definition.

Critic, curator and historian Cuauhtémoc Medina describes contemporary art as, 'a regime of international generalization transmitting the pandemic of the contemporary to the last recesses of the earth'¹. Artist Hito Steyerl writes:

From the deserts of Mongolia to the high plains of Peru, contemporary art is everywhere. And when it is finally dragged into Gagosian dripping from head to toe with blood and dirt, it triggers off rounds and rounds of rapturous applause.²

Medina connects contemporary art's globalism with the buoyancy of the international art market, while Steyerl claims contemporary art not only *mirrors* the hyper capitalism typical of post-Cold war political paradigms, but that it *actively participates in* the facilitation of this order:

The Global Guggenheim is a cultural refinery for a set of post-democratic oligarchies, as are the countless international biennials tasked with upgrading and re-educating the surplus population.³

e-flux founding editors Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood claim that where it was once possible to make politically or socially engaged work and break with accepted forms of art, that now:

...the enclosure of contemporary art has accounted for this work in its calculations, for we have come to see the insertion of political art in museum spaces as a zombie-like caricature of social commitment, a walking dead of

¹ Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses,' *e-flux journal* 12 (January 2010), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-eleven-theses/>

² Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,' *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-art-contemporaryart-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>

³ Ibid.

social life and artistic currency that masks a total confusion with regard to the question of how to render artistic form relevant and challenging.⁴

Contemporary art's frequently celebrated characteristics of openness and indefinability also engender more negative outcomes for the field. The *e-flux* editors describe contemporary art as a glass ceiling or invisible barrier: something that we know exists, but cannot define. They liken this evasion to the machinations of capitalism, where individuals and relationships exist in a state seemingly unrelated to a larger whole, thus masking, 'the hidden ultimatum of an innocuous protocol'⁵. Also in *e-flux*, artist Liam Gillick states that where 'contemporary art' merely refers to, 'that which is being made now—wherever'⁶, it describes less a practice than a general 'being in the context'. Gillick claims that for artists who wish to radically differentiate their practice from that denoted by the term 'contemporary art', it is difficult to move against the stream since it goes in every direction. Interestingly, when referencing this desire to escape, to stand outside of or to critique contemporary art as an artist, Gillick doesn't specify here particular forms of work that he or others wish to 'radically differentiate' their work *from*. The desire to work against, outside of, or in critique of today's prevailing system tends to pit one against 'contemporary art' in its totality rather than against a style, medium or format.

In contrast, when radical artists of the modern era were excluded from or disenfranchised by institutionally endorsed forms or styles of art, they were able to envisage a new style, form or name for the art that might provide an alternative. This is evident in Warhol's motivations in making Pop art:

Leonard Kessler ran into Andy coming out of an art-supply store carrying paint and canvas. 'Andy! What are you doing?' he greeted him. 'He said, "I'm starting Pop art,"' Kessler recalled. 'I said, "Why?"' He said, "Because I hate abstract expressionism, I hate it!"'⁷

Warhol could both identify the style of art he hated and imagine the possibility of a new style or form to challenge abstract expressionism's painterly machismo. The disparity between the objects of modern and contemporary artist's antagonism points to a primary difference between the eras – namely, where modernism's progressive movements challenged institutionalised artistic paradigms via form, the openness to form of the current moment renders such a challenge impossible.

⁴ Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood, 'Breaking the Contract,' *e-flux journal* 37 (September 2012) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/breaking-the-contract/>

⁵ Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle, 'What is Contemporary Art? Issue Two,' *e-flux journal* 12 (January 2010) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/what-is-contemporary-art-issuetwo/>

⁶ Liam Gillick, 'Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place,' *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-art-does-not-account-for-that-which-is-taking-place/>

⁷ Victor Bockris, *Warhol* (London: Frederick Muller, 1989), 135

It's in relation to the challenge of artistic form, or the politics of that which constitutes contemporary art, that a 2013 essay on Malevich by Boris Groys is relevant. In a view of the Russian avant-garde as a collaborator in, or co-producer of, the October revolution, Groys asks whether the movement can:

...function as an inspiration and model for contemporary art practices that try to transgress the borders of the art world, to become political, to change the dominant political and economic conditions of human existence, to put themselves in the service of political or social revolution, or at least of political and social change?⁸

Groys' essay does raise interesting ideas concerning this question, however it's within his argument's more confusing or misguided assertions that I believe we can locate the issues at stake in considering contemporary art's revolutionary potential.

Groys describes the political action of current art as twofold, being:

- (1) Critique of the dominant political, economic, and art system
- (2) Mobilization of the audience toward changing this system through a Utopian promise⁹

Groys states: '...if we look at the first, pre-revolutionary wave of the Russian avant-garde, we do not find any of these aspects in its artistic practice'¹⁰, asserting further that while Malevich's work was *revolutionary*, it was not critical. Groys bases this assertion on his own idea that, 'to criticize something one must somehow reproduce it – to present this critical something together with the critique of it'¹¹. It seems here the fact Malevich's work was not mimetic prevented its critical potential since it was unable to *represent* that which it was criticising.

Further, Groys claims that Supremacist artworks' 'non-participatory' nature rendered them unattractive to wider audiences and unable to 'mobilise the masses'. 'In fact', Groys claims:

...such a mobilization could only be achieved through the use of modern or contemporary mass media, like the press, radio, cinema...or today...Twitter messages and so forth.¹²

When he limits the potential for mobilization to the realm of mass media, Groys instantly disqualifies the ability for any art, modern or contemporary, to affect the mobilization or real-world outcomes he previously declared inherent to considerations of political art today. More importantly, by applying what seems a particularly contemporary paradigm of political art – that is, an assumption of

⁸ Boris Groys, 'Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich' *e-flux journal* 47 (September 2013) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60047/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

representation or participation – to Supremacist artworks, Groys ignores the fact that it was precisely Malevich's *refusal* to make mimetic or participatory work that was in itself revolutionary.

Groys goes on:

...the suspicion arises that Malevich's famous *Black Square* is unrelated to any political and social revolution – that it is an artistic gesture that ultimately has relevance only inside artistic space.¹³

While he subsequently attempts to counter this suspicion, Groys' apparent need to raise it *at all* suggests the argument's validity – that is, that art can be neither revolutionary nor political when it operates solely in relation to artworld concerns. Groys' preliminary question concerning contemporary artist's ability to, 'try to transgress the borders of the art world...to put themselves in the service of political or social revolution' reflects what I believe is an often-cited but ill-investigated assumption that art is ineffective when it is *about art* and that art's revolutionary nature should lie within the outcome of real-world engagement or practical change. Groys' assertion concerning the mass media's greater efficacy towards mobilization than that of art indicates a gap between demands that political art produce practical, real-world outcomes versus a sense that it cannot achieve this, that its very form *as art* renders it ineffective.

Groys' discussion locates Malevich's revolutionary spirit most significantly in relation to the lack of nostalgia he expressed in his writing, rather than in the nature of his artworks. Groys' insistence on representation and participation in relation to revolutionary or political art is an example of what I believe is a more general amnesia concerning that which was actually revolutionary about modern art movements: primarily, their attempt to comment on the nature of art itself, to criticise institutionalised artistic paradigms and locate new or more 'real' art by challenging these paradigms *via form*. Such revolutions of form may have, and often did, occur alongside or in tandem with political or social revolution, but the primary value of artistic revolution – at least in the modern era – relates most significantly to a concern with art as art: to questions concerning what art *is*.

The shift from a sense of revolution via form to today's paradigm of real-world change can be located within the outcomes of the conceptual era, arguably the last identifiable movement prior to the inception of the contemporary period. I'll discuss this via Lucy Lippard's 1997 analysis of conceptual art in her essay *Escape Attempts*. In her text, Lippard refers to the fact of conceptual art's many and varied forms or styles, including mail art, earthworks, performance art, happenings, actions and even minimal art. Lippard defines 'capital C' conceptual art as having been:

¹³ Ibid.

...work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or 'dematerialized'.¹⁴

While acknowledging that conceptual art may today appear timid and disconnected in comparison to the political activism of the time, Lippard describes the conceptual artists themselves as having looked and sounded like radicals. Even if the art was apolitical, in its presentation the form (or lack of a form) this art took was radical: it was often the *form* of conceptual art that was political over its content. Lippard describes conceptual artists as wanting to attack notions of originality, individual style and genius, which were associated with 'patriarchal, ruling-class art'. Artists whose work we may understand as visual or object-based today in fact desired an alternative to the object, demonstrating an overwhelming impulse towards dematerialization that Lippard describes as an attempt to escape the 'frame-and-pedestal' syndrome. Ultimately however, Lippard is realistic about the actual outcomes of this period:

However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread).¹⁵

While in 1969 artists did not believe anyone would pay money for objects such as photocopies, documentary photographs, written projects for unrealised works or spoken words, Lippard writes that only three years later such objects were selling for large amounts of money in the US and Europe, and major conceptual artists were represented in prestigious galleries. The flexibility of art's institutions to accommodate the ephemeral, everyday nature of conceptual objects and actions can be narrated as the colonising forces of the market, or neoliberal capitalist culture, moving to prevent art's escape from its clutches. It can equally be theorised as the outcome of the modern impulse toward the absolute freedom of art as a concept, culminating in the stretching of the boundaries of its definition within the conceptual era to include all forms, and non-forms, as 'art'.

Where this move originates as an impulse toward freedom, it paradoxically tends to increase the sense of confinement by 'art' as a concept: when art's institutions accept the identification of the concept 'art' within each and every possible situation, location, action or object, the attempt by this concept to escape, or to exist *convincingly within* the everyday, is thwarted. Art's citation or location within the realm of 'non-art' results less in art's freedom than in the colonisation *of the everyday* by the institution of art. Conceptual art's attempt at withdrawal and escape can be seen to have unwittingly resulted in this colonisation by its effective re-entrenchment of the concept 'art' within

¹⁴ Lucy Lippard, *Escape Attempts*, from *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 1997, University of California Press, pvii

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pxvii

both objects and non-objects, within art *and* within non-art. As philosopher Jean Baudrillard describes:

Some say that art is dematerializing. The exact opposite is true: art today has thoroughly entered reality. It is in museums and galleries, but also in trash, on walls, in the street, in the banality of everything that has been made sacred today without any further debate. The aesthetization of the world is complete.¹⁶

When art as a concept is identified in all forms, no form will allow its escape via critique *as form*. No 'outside' exists from which to challenge art's definition: when art is *everything*, it has no definition, since there is nothing to define it *against*. Malevich's monochrome was revolutionary because it challenged the expectation that a painting should depict something, but the absence of standardised expectations for the format of art today renders its revolutionary potential *via form* impossible. It was not only the sentiments expressed in Malevich's writing but the very form his artworks took which contributed to the destruction of long-standing cultural traditions.

In Lippard's claim concerning conceptual art's having remained 'art-referential' she reflects Gillick's desire to escape contemporary art in its entirety – a desire to separate art from the concept 'art'. A relationship exists between the modern project to set art free of mimesis or engagement, the conceptual project to set it free from objects or materiality, and current artist's apparent desire to free it from the confines of 'art' altogether. All these projects represent the destruction of, or a lack of nostalgia for, traditional cultural forms and institutions, that which Groys identifies as having been revolutionary in Malevich. His original question regarding the potential for contemporary artists to transgress the borders of the art world in order to 'become political' recalls conceptual art's ideals of escape, but stops short of considering the impact this movement's perceived failure has had on the conditions that determine current art. Groys' question implies that transgression of the art world's borders is merely a step toward contemporary art's 'becoming political'; instead, it is the act of transgression *itself*, or art's ability *to transgress*, which constitutes the entirety of art's political act.

In the 1960s and as the result of an encounter with Pop Art, New York artist and philosopher Arthur C. Danto stopped making art in order to focus on philosophy, a realm he believed art had finally and fully entered once its objects were no longer discernible from ordinary ones. Danto viewed modern art's progressive project as a philosophical project of definition, where the properties deemed necessary that an object be considered *art at all* were visually challenged and refined. When anything or everything could *be* art, when the objects of art fully resembled, or even were, ordinary

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, 'Towards the Vanishing Point of Art (1987),' in *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 104

objects, this project in its visual sense was complete. Danto set about attempting to create a definition for art via philosophy as his contribution to the continuation of art's self-critical project. In his first major treatise on art in 1981, *Transformation of the Commonplace*, Danto wrote that,

...the history of art has come, in a way, to an end. It has not *stopped* but ended, in the sense that it has passed over into a kind of consciousness of itself and become, again in a way, its own philosophy.¹⁷

While Danto's theory that art has ended *as art* was subject to scrutiny and debate in philosophical publications and symposia during the 1980s and 90s, it didn't have much impact on the field of contemporary practice. In 2006, theorist Eva Geulen described the end of art discourse as having come to 'a peculiar sort of end in sheer exhaustion'¹⁸; she claims that, 'nowadays it is de rigeur to debunk the end of art as a white elephant of modernity'¹⁹. In Peter Osborne's 2013 attempt at a philosophy for contemporary art, he rejects Danto's end of art theory as a negative contribution to contemporary discourse. Even Danto himself may have been concerned by the negativity of his statement, seeming to want to soften its blow by describing the featureless, stylistically open state of contemporary art as a kind of utopia, the final fulfilment of the freedom to which modern art had historically striven. For contemporary artists seeking to undertake a critical or revolutionary practice however, this stylistically open state represents instead a barrier to practice.

My view of the concept 'art' is more contingent than Danto's, and I find his project to locate a definition of art for all time less useful than his theorisation of art as having ended. A definition of contemporary art as the end of art accommodates the openness, plurality, a-historicity and sense of the particular that is true to current art, and accounts for the sense of art's inescapability in the contemporary moment. To give up making art in favour of theory tends to restrict the idea of the end of art to the realm of theory *only*, in a view of philosophy taking over or destroying art. Conversely, as a practitioner, an end of art statement made in conjunction with ongoing practice is empowering, allowing for an engagement with theory or critical discourse when critique is not possible via form, and for a sense of escape from the concept 'art'. The contradiction embodied via this practice – declaring the end of art while continuing to make it – reflects the contradiction inherent to the tendency for art to flourish and expand at its end.

Where Supremacist art destroyed long-held cultural traditions by eradicating representation, Conceptual artists were equally destructive when they eradicated the object. In responding to Groys' suggestion that contemporary art model itself on the Russian Avant Garde, an end of art statement

¹⁷ Arthur Danto, *Transformation of the Commonplace*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), vii

¹⁸ Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour After Hegel*, trans. James McFarland (California: Stanford University Press, 2006), 3

¹⁹ Ibid.

may allow for the 'death of cultural nostalgia' or lack of 'sentimental attachment to the culture of the past' displayed in Supremacist art, Conceptual art and other revolutionary movements. In the instance that the concept 'art' is the sole surviving element of the modern's reductive critical project, it is perhaps art *as a concept* for which we now lack nostalgia.