

## The Art Boom Paradox

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kazimir Malevich's famous black square brought the development of painting to an extreme through a new focus on the canvas itself as a medium for painterly illusionism. At the very same moment, Marcel Duchamp's readymade identified the museum as the predominant medium for cultural valorization. Half a century later, Andy Warhol would—under the rubric of *Business Art*, which he explicitly tied to the development and influence of galleries—usher in the era of the market as medium.<sup>1</sup> The art business has since been an object of fascination, whether for the esoteric groups of critical artists and critics inside the art world reflecting upon the entanglement and connections of art and its markets, or for the mass media that have remained distanced from the symbolic rituals of the art world. Gordon Gekko, for example, the fictive prototype of today's hedge fund managers in Oliver Stone's 1987 *Wall Street*, was portrayed not as just another lavish collector but as a savvy operator who had come to consider art primarily as yet another object for financial speculation—thus confirming both the masses' suspicions regarding high art's elitism and the insights of critical theory.

Today the discussion has reached a new level altogether. The market is clearly no longer a hidden presence that needs to be revealed: indeed we perceive it everywhere. We are witnessing a great pluralistic variety of and growing demand for artworks, expanding collections, and the increasing cultural importance of museums and biennials. The influence of the art market on the art world, its transformation into a functioning economy of luxury supplies and the corresponding accelerating professionalization of the art world have been widely recognized, and accordingly dubbed the “market as medium.”<sup>2</sup> Yet this successful expansion is also considered a problem for the art world—a paradox that can only be understood insofar as the expansion of the market is not just a neutral development behind the scene. The boom deeply affects not only the belief in critical art, but also the belief in art as such, as something that is culturally more important than the developments and products of the so-called culture industry. What is different today is therefore not the phenomenon of the market as medium, but that the market as medium reveals its own message: that, as a medium, the market itself is more significant and symbolically important than all the things it playfully circulates, distributes and exchanges on its surface.

<sup>1</sup> Andy Warhol, *I'll be your Mirror* (Carroll & Graf, 2004), 240.

<sup>2</sup> Hal Foster, “The Medium is the Market” (*London Review of Books*, 9 October 2008).

In other words, the market as medium disturbs the traditional symbolic economy of belief that the art world and the values of contemporary artistic practice depend upon. It is only one very obvious effect of this shift that market consciousness is no longer a sign of criticality. More important is the fact that the various oppositions and antagonisms that had structured the art world so far are increasingly neutralized. Inescapably, any artistic practice is burdened with speculation about its market value; the market as medium overwhelms all potential meanings and values of any practice with its own meaning: potential exchange value. The pervasiveness of the market as medium is such that one is tempted to adapt Brecht's famous old song about the commodity: if one really does not know the meaning and purpose of an artwork, at least one knows its price. In this light, all the oppositional practices that are being discussed in terms of their political or critical effects—pure aesthetics vs. institutional critique, cynicism and spectacle vs. critical art, relational vs. antagonistic aesthetics—appear not as alternatives *to*, but only as alternative commodities *within* the art supermarket. In fact, all kinds of artworks circulate on the market, even those that were produced either in its absence—antiques or artworks from former socialist countries, for instance—or by artists such as Lee Lozano who chose or were fated to produce artworks outside institutions and markets.

It is therefore not a surprise that the development of the market as medium should coincide with a certain cooling down of the art world, a phenomenon that is often recognized as a perpetual identity crisis of critique. Not only has the critique of the so-called spectacle become part of the spectacle, but the many attempts at a critique of critique show that by now this is widely understood. What is often overlooked, however, is how the spectacle of critique actually functions. It starts out by identifying and denouncing a certain cultural phenomenon—for instance as an unbearable threat to the existence of art, culture and democracy—before proposing a hopeful solution by opposing said phenomenon to a particular oppositional counter-practice. Contemporary art as such had often been justified, at least since the late 1930s and 40s, as in opposition to the so-called culture industry. This device has since been played out over and over again, with some variation, by artists and critics of all stripes: the scourge of postmodernism was pegged down by recognizing and naming an oppositional postmodernism; the prevailing impulse behind spectacular design and architecture was identified in contrast to oppositional counter-impulses and -strategies; the disappearance of a public was pinpointed by arguing for the many possibilities of artistically creating new publics; and so on and so forth. Despite its heavy theoretical superstructure, critique functions not unlike self-help or motivational management literature in other social spheres, in which the identification of the problem is always followed by a hopeful call for change illustrated by promising examples. This transformation of critique into self-help

literature for artists, however, is not what makes critique function as spectacle. It is the automatism with which this negation is performed that does so, by turning negation into a legitimized formula of the new and fashionable.

In the era of the market as medium, this mechanism becomes obvious. “Oppositional” practices such as market-reflexive art, recessional aesthetics, precarious aesthetics, etc. still sound reassuring to many cultural producers, trained and conditioned as they are to connect art to and reflexively justify art for its purported “critical” impulse and engagement. In the light of the market as medium, however, which overturns all meanings and values and replaces them with its own message, critique’s automatism of playing out oppositional signifiers has lost the persuasiveness it might once have enjoyed.

At least to some degree, it is clear today that this phenomenon of the market as medium relates to a restructuring of culture at large. What we are witnessing is the disappearance not only of persuasive oppositions within the art world, but of any convincing and meaningful opposition between art and the culture industry itself. On both sides it is possible to find very interesting, reflective and aesthetically ambitious works. This of course does not mean that aesthetic or even material differences no longer exist between different spheres of production and their institutions—in a certain way those are intensifying. But the old romantic belief in art as an inherently oppositional force, together with a battery of fascinating theoretical concepts still passed on in schools and universities, seem rather odd, comical and at any rate no longer sustainable today. Such a phenomenon—in which the belief in art’s necessity and meaningfulness is fading, in which positions and oppositions lack any impact, in which a certain cultural framework has clearly reached its limits—is however not historically unprecedented. Relatively recently—not even one hundred years ago—such a loss of belief was most famously expressed in Walter Benjamin’s insight that the aura of art had disappeared. Almost simultaneously, if in a different manner, Martin Heidegger dealt with the same problem in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in which he observed that the art of his time had lost its impact and essential function.

As an example of such possible impact and function, Heidegger famously chose van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes. He demonstrated that when actively engaging with the painting, something surprising can happen to the viewer: simply looking at the pair of shoes can summon an entire world, in this case for example the world of the peasant woman whom Heidegger—quite consciously in his subjective, imaginative and reflexive role—imagines to be the owner of the shoes. This disclosure of a certain world as “truth,” as Heidegger called it, has often been misunderstood. Meyer Schapiro famously criticized Heidegger for his false assumption that this was a pair

of peasant shoes, claiming instead that the shoes were actually van Gogh's own, the shoes of an artist and city dweller.<sup>3</sup> Later on, Jacques Derrida rightly criticized Schapiro for his false reading of Heidegger, since Heidegger's attempt had obviously not been to try to locate the truth of the painting in the true identity of the owner of the depicted shoes.<sup>4</sup> But Derrida pointed out that Heidegger's subjective construction was indeed inappropriate, since regardless of whether the pair of shoes belonged to van Gogh or to a peasant woman, it is not clear whether one can identify a pair of shoes in the first place. In any case, what was important to Heidegger in van Gogh's painting was not a verifiable truth, but rather the possibility of a forceful impulse emanating from the work of art that might open up in the viewer the conception and construction of a particular world—be it the world of the peasant woman, the city dweller, or deconstructive *différance*. An artwork should contain within it the potential to turn the viewer toward a different world.

Heidegger's demonstration apparently corresponds to a rather traditional understanding of art. What makes it specifically interesting is his observation that, as far as he could tell in his time, no one was relating to artworks in this essential way anymore. Artworks seemed to be dealt with just like anything else. For even if the "works themselves stand and hang in collections and exhibitions," are they really there "in themselves as the works by themselves" or merely "as objects of art industry?" To put it concisely, most artworks are embedded in the art business. "Works are made available for public and private appreciation. Official agencies assume the maintenance and care of the work. Connoisseurs and critics busy themselves with them. Art dealers supply the market. Art-historical study makes the works objects of science."<sup>5</sup> Heidegger suggested that amidst this "busy activity" we cannot "encounter the work itself," that is to say the possible impact art should essentially have.

One is tempted to imagine Heidegger as an ancestor of contemporary institutional critique. Institutional critique too tries to disrupt the common and prescribed ways of seeing, the view of the connoisseur, in order to lay bare the actual business of the art industry, its institutions and its reified character. In this sense, one could say that institutional critique sets to work the hidden truth of the contemporary art world. Similarly, Heidegger went out of his way to emphasize that all "works have this thingly character. ... What would they be without it?" Rhetorically, he went on to suggest that this "rather crude and external view of the work" may be "objectionable:"

<sup>3</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object - A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh," in: *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> See also Jacques Derrida, *The Truth of Painting* (The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language and Thought* (Harper & Row, 1971), 40. The German *Kunstbetrieb* is best translated as "art business."

“Shippers or charwomen in museums may operate with such conceptions of the work of art. We, however”—addressing his cultured audience and readership who had learned to administer a particular canonical cultural knowledge and appreciation of artworks—“take the works as they are encountered by those who experience and enjoy them.” Nonetheless, Heidegger concluded, it is impossible “even to the much vaunted aesthetic experience to get around the thingly aspect of the artwork.”<sup>6</sup>

In this light, it seems likely that Heidegger would have respected but not fully endorsed the perspective of institutional critique, which indeed does work on the level of his “charwoman.” The problem for him would very likely have been the following: the moment institutional critique is acknowledged as art—and historically, its representative works were almost immediately accepted into museums and collections—it becomes an object of art connoisseurship and business itself, thereby losing its impact.<sup>7</sup> The modern museum serves to collect, conserve and culturally valorize particular ideas, imagery and forms according to given criteria. This affects the art of any given world and time. For example, once transposed into the museums of the modern world, the statues of Ancient Greece that once had had a religious function became objects of aesthetic contemplation and historicism. All artworks—whether of the past or contemporary—are treated as things from the past, as artifacts of a lost world: “World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves to be sure that we encounter there, but they themselves are gone by. As bygone works they stand over and against us in the realm of tradition and conservation. ... The whole of art industry, even if carried to the extreme and exercised in every way for the works themselves, extends only to the object-being of the works.”<sup>8</sup> So even if Heidegger did not engage directly with the question of contemporary art—which surely at least partially owed to the political context of 1935—his structural analysis may be applied to it. In the modern world, contemporary art is always already conserved as a work from the past; it is produced only in order to be *musealisiert*—to be from yesterday.

While Heidegger did not explicitly say so, the logic of his writings implies that the enframed modern world, within which the art world plays a distinct role, cannot be overcome by means of any (neo)-avant-garde art practice operating from within an enframed art world. All that the emergence of ever-renewed art-isms and hopeful

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> A paradigmatic example was Benjamin Buchloh’s 1988 essay “Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason,” in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (The MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, 40ff.

avant-gardisms manages to demonstrate is that such strategies belong to the same tidal wave of “progress” constituting this very world and belonging to the tradition of the Enlightenment, a tradition that—since it reifies all beings—Heidegger understood instead as tragic darkening, a *Verhängnis*. For Heidegger, any art that can be found inside an already-enframed world, however new and effective it may once have been, always already indicates a certain *will to know*, that is to say a *will to preserve*. No matter how forcefully contemporary artists and critics might choose to foreground their alterity, be it critical, spectacular or both, what they are primarily doing is deploying strategies mandated by and acquired from the institutions or discourses that constitute their present. In this sense, contemporary art practices are necessarily conservative, with regard not only to the art sphere but to the entirety of the prevailing reality of their contemporary world. They keep reiterating and reaffirming an originary event that once constituted it and its institutions. When contemporary artists today, consciously or not, seek for example to be highly innovative, dynamic and “rule-breaking,” they are also mimicking and entrenching the key imperatives that govern this Western liberal world.

And yet Heidegger believed in and even called for a leap out into the openness from the enframed world of the present, from its opinions, its styles and its values. At the end of his essay, he discusses an “essential art” providing precisely such a possibility—an art outside the enframed art world. The impact of such an essential art is to open up clearings and set a new world to work, which must be read as the development of a new criterion that bypasses altogether the already-enframed art business and modern bourgeois tradition. Heidegger’s new criterion changes the perception of art, for such an essential art is not necessarily identical with the art works of the art business, validated by aesthetic-scientific criteria, but can potentially be found anywhere: wherever certain *things* discharge excessive impulses that interrupt existing frames and set a new truth to work.

That this is a more or less typical avant-garde operation becomes clear in Heidegger’s answer to the question where it is a work of art belongs. “The work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself. For the work-being of the work is present in, and only in, such opening up.”<sup>9</sup> But what distinguished Heidegger’s radical approach from his artist contemporaries’ own is that it did not stop there; and it is this radicalization, this meta-avant-garde shift that is often not clearly seen or acknowledged, perhaps because it feels threatening. For whereas a Marcel Duchamp suggested that it was enough to admit all existing things, images and forms that are deemed sufficiently effective, beautiful or interesting into the archival museum’s collection, Heidegger’s own conclusion—like the radical

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 41.

Russian avant-garde's—far transcended the art business to encompass the entirety of the enframed social world.

This radicalization of the common avant-garde strategies can only be understood if one considers Heidegger's intuition that the essential artwork is not bound to institutions such as museums nor to any other particular segment of the art business, but that these institutions are themselves artistic products. For him the Greek temple, to which he “purposefully” turned as an example, must be understood as a work of art that installs the Greek world as truth, a distinct social and cultural reality with its own set of values, beliefs and morals:

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of a rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. ... It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny of the human being. ... Only from and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation. ... The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it.<sup>10</sup>

And as soon as the belief in this truth—in the authority of a god—subsides, the world with all of its values and understandings of right and wrong begins to fall apart, as did the ancient Greek world, the Roman Empire, and Christianity. So will the *Gestell*, the framing structure, of the modern world, at least according to Heidegger's romantic-idealist hopes. At the same time, Heidegger implied that in order to exist, such a world must be created in the first place. For “to be a work means to set up a world. But what is it to be a world?” Heidegger asked rhetorically, concluding that the “answer was hinted at when we referred to the temple.”<sup>11</sup> It should be clear at this point on which level Heidegger situated the work of art as opening up the truth of a new world: for one of the ways such a “truth occurs” is “the act that founds a political state.”<sup>12</sup>

The innovative and radical turn that led Heidegger to his utopian conclusion was as optimistic as it reads threatening today given the historical context of the text. There is of course no doubt which political side Heidegger initially threw in his lot with. However, his radical avant-gardism did call—if in a different jargon—for an *Umfunktionierung* of culture very similar to that proposed by Walter Benjamin in the light of the Soviet productivist experience.<sup>13</sup> The Soviet model of Russian

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 41ff.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Gough, “Paris, Capital of the Soviet Avant-Garde” (*October*, Summer 2002).

communism never appeared to Heidegger as a way out of the modern enframing; in his view it was merely oppositional to the other dominant model of redesigning the world according to modern rational criteria, liberal Americanism. Avoiding the term “capitalism,” he understood both as heirs to the same unfolding of technocratic and scientific rationalization. German fascism, which Heidegger saw as a movement devoted as much to the past as to the future, appeared to him at least in its ideal form as the only possibility that might prompt the German *Volk* to leap out of nothingness and recreate a new Greek beginning, complete with new temples, new values and new ways of being and seeing. As rector of the University of Freiburg, he seemed eager not only to refound this modern temple institution, but also most naïvely to become the high priest of that movement, preaching the fundamental law of Being.

Disillusioned by the fascist leader’s obvious unwillingness to be shepherded by a famous German philosopher and his academic peers, Heidegger would come to realize that behind its theatrical and aestheticized surfaces, fascism merely reproduced—even sharpened—the same old nihilistic logic of modernity. In the last paragraphs of his essay, one can find several suggestive questions addressed to his audience and at the same time to the German people as such: “Are we in our existence historically at the origin? Do we know, which means do we give heed to, the nature of the origin? Or, in our relation to art, do we still merely make appeal to a cultivated acquaintance with the past?”<sup>14</sup> It is relatively clear that by 1935—he had resigned the rectorate in April 1934—Heidegger no longer really believed that the German fascist movement would bring about this “leap out of nothingness.” But his conviction that the progressive modern world must be radically reconfigured would never change, as especially evidenced in his later writings about a world having become a technocratic *Gestell*.

Inspiring though such complex notions as the *Gestell* and its relations to the question of technique would later prove to postmodern theory, Heidegger’s utopian solution was precisely the kind of “artistic” model that most postmodern artists and critics always refused—for good reason—and that most people keep rejecting today. It may however no longer really be a matter of choice, since a new world is being set up as we speak in which cultures are being fundamentally restructured according to the economic criteria of growing businesses. Obviously this development does not stop at the doorstep of the art sphere. But the avant-garde subject who is performing this cultural restructuring is not an artist enlightening his or her audiences by means

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, (Blackwell Pub, 1990) and Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophisch-Politische-Profile*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 78.

of relational, precarious or archival aesthetics. Instead it is the “artistic” guild of bankers and hedge fund managers who—within the limits of the *Gestell* but nevertheless in utter coherence with Heidegger’s criteria—set up a new world and set to work a new truth. The precise ways in which cultures will change cannot be anticipated. But there is no doubt that artists, curators, critics and cultural producers at large are not agents but spectators to these restructurings, following them more or less consciously, reflectively and critically by performing and producing an uncanny mimetic carnival of more or less symbolic images, forms and texts—powerless reactions that paradoxically are often interpreted as proofs of art’s “power.”

What is the source and the logic of this ongoing *Umfunktionierung*? Outlining in his book *Zorn und Zeit* the state of our contemporary world and its differences from only about thirty or forty years ago, the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk points to an obvious but rarely acknowledged fact: the social, economic and political success of the Western world in the late twentieth century was made possible only by the existence of the Soviet empire.<sup>15</sup> Endowed with enormous military power as well as the ideological claim of having overcome class society, the latter constituted enough of a threat to the West that a great many concessions were made in order to redistribute accumulated wealth and soften class distinctions. Alexandre Kojève had already pointed to the fact that Western liberalism after the Second World War was in a certain sense fulfilling the communist dream better than the countries of “really existing socialism.” In spite of the structural inequalities it also engendered, “controlled capitalism” gave the majority of its peoples—even the socially unsuccessful—relative security as well as consumer satisfaction. The capitalist West learned to appear to respect the natural and cultural limits of human dignity. At least for a certain period, individuals were given an opportunity for self-realization according to their abilities and needs. The American of the Californian Hills appeared to Kojève as a prototype for the coming Soviet individual.

By contrast, with the exception of China whose communist party chose a different strategy under Deng Xiaoping, the socialist countries’ eager attempts to overcome class society came at the cost of economic stagnation, “consumer unhappiness” and an incapacity to keep up in the competition with the Western world. The competitive potlatch between East and West to bestow more gifts, more rights and more satisfaction to their respective populations in the here and now eventually proved unsustainable for countries that were ideologically committed to social equality above all else. Yet, until their eventual demise in 1989, the very existence of the European socialist countries unquestionably forced Western market societies to dispense all manner of social benefits to their populations.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006); all quotes in this paragraph and the following two from pages 335-337.

It is only logical from this perspective that the gradual decline of the threat presented by the Eastern bloc should have engendered profound political revaluations and strategic shifts in the former West. In particular, it produced a sudden decline in social benefits and economic, political and cultural belief. Sloterdijk traces this shift in the “psycho-political atmosphere” to the year 1979. That was the year the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and faced the beginning of its own end; the year newly elected prime minister Margaret Thatcher began the neoliberal restructuring of Great Britain and beyond; the year Ayatollah Khomeini led the Islamic revolution in Iran. All of those moments marked a shift of what is constitutive of our current time, culture and belief system. Needless to say, this has also affected the conditions of contemporary art, producing what I would call the “art boom paradox:” the simultaneity of the art sphere’s stunningly accelerating economic expansion on the one hand, and its deepening crisis of meaning and belief—and therefore its cooling down—on the other.

The ebbing and ultimate collapse of the threatening presence of “really existing socialism” shattered the stability of the former West. Since it no longer limits the limitless economic forces once analyzed and described by Karl Marx, one of the most urgent questions of our time has become: what might? Following the sudden destruction of the European socialist states, Jacques Derrida had hoped for the resurgence of a “specter of Marx,” but it is clear from the political and economic developments of the past two decades that this has not been the case.<sup>16</sup> Despite a deepening sense of skepticism, most people simply see a crisis as a crisis, a catastrophe as a catastrophe, institutional problems as institutional problems—all natural phenomena of a culture-become-second-nature, to be resolved by the clever adjustments and snap judgments of politicians and experts who are paid to resolve them. From this perspective, no problem seems to be unmanageable by traditional means. This is why Sloterdijk, only thirteen years after Derrida’s hopeful call for a re-affirmation of Marxism and unwilling to participate in ghostly invocations of any sort, states that no re-animation by philosophical congresses—and we might add here: no re-animation by critically-minded artistic practices within the established realm of galleries and contemporary art museums—shall return to the hollow pumpkin of Marxism its power to haunt.<sup>17</sup>

Our reality is conditioned by an ongoing restructuring that makes the carnival of conferences and occasionally brilliant media performances by critical theorists such as Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou seem rather disconnected from any actual

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International* (New York / London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Sloterdijk, *op. cit.*, 333.

influence on the developments. The problem, however, is not that the “hollow pumpkin” has lost its power to haunt, as Sloterdijk suggests. It seems that we are indeed haunted by the specter of communism, but in a completely different sense. We are haunted not by communism’s promise of a future with more democratic and individual rights, a better and more just distribution of accumulated wealth, and more responsibility toward the environment, but instead by the afterimage of the failures of the historical attempts to achieve those goals. The dominant postmodern discourse has managed to create a frame of mind that intuitively connects the idea of communism to Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism and all of the cruelest episodes of the long history of revolutionary attempts to reconfigure our societies that began with Jacobinism. Most thinking today is governed by the belief that any such attempt will lead directly to yet another totalitarian regime. This is most likely also the reason why even those who are ready for structural changes demand nothing. The art boom paradox notwithstanding, it is not surprising therefore that the belief in the “power of art” endures.