

“We Can Imagine a Society without Art”

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We may ask ourselves why local communities are not closer to the visual arts today. Some might feel that this distance is a positive indicator, namely following the argument that art must be free, critical, and of the highest possible level. As this reasoning goes, the community or general public tend to be unable or unwilling to appreciate such art. In spite of the truth of this view, the question persists, how are the visual arts to have a role in public life? Some might yet maintain that art is to be autonomous and that it is not necessary—or even desirable—for it to have a voice in the public sphere.

One problematic aspect with these scenarios is that, severed from both general public and public life, art's diversity

becomes a concern. With limited communication to the community and a weak voice in public life, artistic diversity heavily relies on the diversity of the artists. This is, art might be diverse given the diverse personalities of the individuals who produce it. But is even this diversity of personalities diverse enough? Access to art schools is unfortunately

limited and people from certain backgrounds and walks of life might not even consider an art career as an option. Institutions and the art world at large have their inner rules, tending to naturally promote some types of artists to the detriment of others. In the larger context, is being autonomous all that art can be? Could we consider that artists, institutions, and communities are today missing something that art has the potential of fulfilling?

Since the last decade, the world has been experiencing profound geopolitical changes. These include a shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world, with the consequent reshuffling of world powers.¹ Even if the deep changes in arts and culture might not yet be as visible, they are imminent. Mass protests worldwide point at the malaise of vast sectors of the population, willing to take a stronger stand in decision-making processes. These movements might seem different, sometimes even antagonistic, but they respond to inequalities and injustices generated by an economic system that has divided humanity into two—the famous 1% and the rest of us. Exciting opportunities await artists today to redefine what the art of the future will be in all its diversity.

In his conceptualization of intellectuals, Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci explains that every new social group simultaneously creates both itself and strata of intellectuals.² Gramsci's concept of intellectuals encompasses broader groups than what the term regularly does, including scholars and artists together with bureaucrats and cultural mediators. In the shape of narratives or worldviews, these intellectuals confer the needed homogeneity and awareness for the new social group to function. According to Gramsci, the new, non-traditional intellectuals actively melt their own work with everyday practical and public life, remaining intrinsically connected to their social class or group.³ Gramsci sets a high task upon the shoulders of artists (and other intellectuals), but he, at the same time, envisions a fuller breadth for art as an engaged expression for new social movements.

As opposed to scholars, artists develop a practice interlocking both the intellectual and manual dimensions of labor. Speaking about the hurdles to spawn new intellectuals, the most arduous task, Gramsci points out the need to recast the relationship between manual and intellectual labor. These two components of labor, *sforzo muscolare-nervoso* (muscular-nervous effort) and *sforzo intellettuale-cerebrale* (intellectual-cerebral effort), should achieve a new balance “ensuring that the muscular-nervous effort, an element of

¹ For a recent analysis, see Jim Reid et al., “The Age of Disorder—The New Era for Economics, Politics and Our Way of Life,” Deutsche Bank, September 9, 2020, https://www.db.com/newsroom_news/2020/the-age-of-disorder-the-new-era-for-economics-politics-and-our-way-of-life-en-11670.htm.

² Gramsci coined the well-known term “organic intellectuals,” as opposed to traditional intellectuals, to describe those social agents who put forth an organic ideology, articulating the interests of subaltern groups in a unified narrative. See *Prison Notebooks* (Q12, §1-3).

³ Antonio Gramsci, “Per la storia degli intellettuali,” 1932, *Quaderni del carcere, Vol. III*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), Q12, §3, 1551.

general practical activity, constantly innovating in the physical and social world, becomes the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world.”⁴ This “new balance,” described by Gramsci as most difficult to achieve, is already intrinsic to the visual arts, a field dealing with materiality and intellectuality at once.

In Aristotelian terms, the *praxis* (doing) of an artist has historically involved *theoria* (thinking) and *poiesis* (making) in a material or sensuous form.⁵ This traditional combination of materiality and intellectuality has, however, been disrupted through a sequence of historical changes.⁶ The rupture with representation of the external world—resulting in art becoming rather a presentation of the inner universe of the artist—took place first. Traditional techniques requiring the skill of the hand, that the visual arts share with the crafts and with manual labor in general, became consequently redundant. Exempted from the need to represent the external world and from the use of technical skills, artwork could then take up an essentially theoretical form to the detriment of its other intrinsic component: materiality—conversely, and probably even as a reaction to that, some art became almost purely material, abandoning intellectuality. This balance between intellectuality and materiality, intrinsic to art but so difficult to achieve for intellectuals in general, has been gradually undermined resulting in its increasing alienation from society.

Social alienation in art can be traced back to Romanticism or, even earlier, when, no longer limited to religious content, artists could give free rein to the expression of their own subjectivities. Romanticism accentuated this tendency, leading to a more radical social escapism through its typical subjectivism and aestheticism coupled with the mystical conception of the artist as genius. The avant-gardes, from the late 19th century on, heavily challenged the representational function of art together with the traditional skills of the hand required to render figurative and universal representations of the external world.⁷ The influential text “Ornament and Crime,”⁸ written in 1910 by Austrian

⁴ Gramsci, *loc. cit.* (our translation).

⁵ Paul Oskar Kristeller produced a comprehensive historical debate on the status of the visual arts and their roots in materiality. Kristeller points out that it was only in the 18th century that the term Art with a capital A came to be identified with a special group of disciplines known as the major arts or Fine Arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry). Before that, the five disciplines were divided into high and low-level arts. Associated primarily with crafts and manual labor, the visual arts belonged to the latter—with poetry and music at the top of the hierarchy. See “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Oct., 1951): 496-527 and “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Oct., 1952): 17-46.

⁶ See, for instance, Arnold Hauser’s vol. 3 in *The Social History of Art*, trans. Stanley Godman (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁷ For alternative critiques of the avant-gardes, see Mikhail Lifshitz’s *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop-Art*, trans. David Riff (Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2018) and Juan José Sebreli’s work in Spanish *Las aventuras de la vanguardia* (Madrid : Sudamericana, 2003) and in French translation *La trahison de l’avant-garde*, trans. Luis Dapelo (Paris: Editions Delga, 2015).

⁸ Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” in *Ornament and Crime*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Classics, 2019).

architect Adolf Loos, is a clear condemnation of the dexterity of the hand. Favoring an elite architecture, Loos compels the aristocrat to reject skillfully produced ornaments. The ornament that is crime is that feeding from the ancestral roots of the peasants and skillful men and women, some of whom had then become part of the urbanized proletariat. Modern architects, according to Loos, must abandon ornament if they want to keep dictating what is exclusive, and instead use their whim. Skill is to be replaced by arbitrariness, an innate quality of the elites—unattainable to the rest. Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and many of the most admired architects from the last century implemented and further developed ideas from “Ornament and Crime.”



Loos’s text has a parallel in the visual arts, the 1939 essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch” by New York-based art critic Clement Greenberg.⁹ One of the most influential essays on art from the 20th century, “Avant-garde and Kitsch” is likewise set to conceive an art for the elites in spite of claiming itself Marxist at the beginning and the end, “today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs.”¹⁰ Ornament for Loos and kitsch for Greenberg have a common root, the backward peasants, who in the case of Greenberg are even further creeping into the cities. If high-culture is to survive, it needs to find new parameters of exclusivity, “ability to read and write became almost a minor skill like driving a car, and it no longer served to distinguish an individual's cultural inclinations, since it was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes.”¹¹ Greenberg would

⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch” in *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 3-21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

later declare: “aesthetic judgements are immediate, intuitive, undeliberate, and involuntary, they leave no room for the conscious application of standards, criteria, rules, or precepts.”¹² In this definition, aesthetic judgement seems to be an innate trait—proper to the elites, who are better by birth—, whereas what the avant-gardes “leave no room for” seems to be everything one can learn—proper to those not born to the elites.¹³ Just like Loos, Greenberg calls to replace traditional skills and representation as parameters of judgement by arbitrariness, by the whim of the artist or perhaps just that of the art critic.



While these influential thinkers were deploying their ideas, others theorized an art that speaks to larger audiences.

Some of them are well known, such as William Morris or the aforementioned Antonio Gramsci, whereas others have been either disqualified such as Arnold Hauser—namely through debates with the powerful Ernst Gombrich—, or ousted such as György Lukács—by both the current right-wing government in his natal Hungary and important sectors of the Left—, or forgotten such as Mikhail

Lifshitz and Lucien Goldman, or yet never risen to worldwide fame such as Janet Wolff, Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Juan José Sebrelli, and Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez—just to name a few. The art that these thinkers theorized has never fully come to life, so their exploratory and analytical power are yet to be investigated.

¹² Clement Greenberg, “Complaints of an Art Critic,” in John O’Brian, *Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), vol. 4, 265.

¹³ In his book *Sons of the Gods, Children of the Earth*, Peter W. Rose offers an interesting historical analysis of how the elites wage their class struggle in the ideological battlefield. Focusing on Ancient Greece, Rose coins the concept of “inherited excellence” to refer to the elites’ claim to superiority on the basis of birth. Rose remarks that the “valorization of the principle of inherited excellence readily leads to the consolidation of power and wealth which is sufficiently self-sustaining that ability is no longer a necessary prerequisite to the exercise of authority.” *Sons of the Gods, Children of the Earth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 76.

Given the brevity of this article, such discussion will have to be developed in a forthcoming piece. The current text only intended to remark the need for an art that is more in tune with the latest historical developments and to mention potential alternative frameworks. Future lines of inquiry to develop a new art could include topics such as the social production of art, discussing the many factors involved in the making of art—well beyond individual artists themselves. As Janet Wolff observes, “the idea of the artist as sole originator of a work obscures the fact that art has continued to be a collective product.”¹⁴ Technology, social institutions, and finances are the three main factors enabling and simultaneously limiting the production of art, according to Wolff. This is, art production is dependent upon available technology—for instance, the advent of printing—and social institutions affecting, “*who* becomes an artist, *how* they become an artist, how they are then able to *practice* their art, and how they can ensure that their work is produced, performed, and *made available* to a public.”¹⁵ Finally, the third factor concerns economic circumstances, having a strong impact on what gets produced, performed, and made available to audiences. As Arnold Hauser would put it, “We can imagine a society without art, but not art without society.”¹⁶

Images:

Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat (La Mort de Marat or Marat Assassiné)*, 1793, oil on canvas, 162x128 cm, Bruxelles, Royal Museums of Fine Arts.

Vincenzo Camuccini, *The Death of Julius Caesar (La morte di Cesare or Morte di Giulio Cesare)*, 1806, oil on canvas, 707x400, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

Giotto, *Jesus Chasing the Merchants from the Temple (La Cacciata dei mercanti dal Tempio)*, 1303-1305, fresco, 200x185 cm, Padua, Cappella degli Scrovegni.

¹⁴ Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40 (italics in the original).

¹⁶ Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art*, trans. Kenneth J. Northcott (New York: Routledge, 2011), 92.