Kant’s Dove

By Alt Går Bra


In our article for the previous issue of Billedkunst, we spoke of exciting opportunities awaiting artists today to redefine the art of the future.¹ We referred to indicators of profound changes, including mass protests—with vast sectors of the population worldwide expressing their will to take stronger stands in decision-making processes—and the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world.

In that article, we discussed Antonio Gramsci and the role he bestowed on organic intellectuals, including artists, as a catalytic for change. Characterizing the current situation in a recent article, philosopher Alain Badiou calls to embrace affirmative dialectics as a more fruitful way to engage with present events, “…negation, which unifies, does not bear in itself any type of affirmation, creative will, nor any active conception of the analysis of the situations and of what can be or should be, a politics of a new type.”

In the present text, we would like to reflect upon ways of affirmative engagement, departing from some considerations on the relationship between art and society. One of the philosophers we mentioned in our previous article, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, analyzes this relationship in several of his works, including his first full-fledged book Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics.

Best known as a thinker of the philosophy of praxis—thus an heir of Antonio Gramsci and György Lukács—, Sánchez Vázquez made important contributions to aesthetics and the sociology of art. Very influential in Latin America, this Mexican philosopher is yet to be fully discovered elsewhere. He dedicated a total of ten books to aesthetics—published throughout his life—a theme recurrent in many of his other works. Here, we will primarily refer to two of his books, the aforementioned Art and Society from 1965 and Cuestiones estéticas y artísticas contemporáneas from 1996.

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4 Stefan Gandler's book Critical Marxism in Mexico contains a comprehensive bibliographical appendix on Sánchez Vázquez, which the present article uses as reference. Stefan Gandler, Critical Marxism in Mexico: Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 363-408.


A Radical Conception of Art

Not many philosophers have expressed such profound appreciation for art as Sánchez Vázquez did. His finest articulations of this esteem emerge in his discussions of the relationship between art and society.

Sánchez Vázquez opens one of the most fascinating chapters of his Cuestiones estéticas y artísticas contemporáneas by stating that “If humans are above all practical beings who transform and create, producing a humanized nature with their work and creating through this very process their own social and human nature, art is, then, an essential human activity.” In this chapter, Sánchez Vázquez puts forth his radical vision of art as a sine qua non of human nature. He posits the relationship between human beings and art as a necessity: “Art exists only for and because of human beings (understood in social and not purely individual terms); human beings, likewise, exist only when they transform and create,” with art being the quintessential act of transformation and creation. Sánchez Vázquez remarks that it is through art that human beings most poignantly affirm their human condition, and it is through art that they are able to acquire the fullest awareness of their humanity.

With transpiring frustration, Sánchez Vázquez asks why such an essential human activity has been declared dead for so long and with such persistence. Turning frustration into critique, he claims that those who announce the death of art do not really mean so, but they are rather affirming that art can be replaced by science and technology. In Art and Society, Sánchez Vázquez indicates the reasons why art is nowadays the target of such hostilities, “In a world where everything tends to be quantifiable and abstract, art, which is the highest sphere of expression of the concrete, of the qualitative, enters in contradiction with this alienated world, and, at the same time, appears as an insobornable redoubt of the human.”

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8 All citations of Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez are direct translations from the Spanish original by the authors. Chapter “Socialización de la creación o muerte del arte.” [Socialization of the creation or death of art] in Sánchez Vázquez, Cuestiones estéticas y artísticas contemporáneas, 150.

9 Ibid., 151.

10 Sánchez Vázquez, Las ideas estéticas de Marx, 116.
What Is Art?

Art, according to Sánchez Vázquez, can only be the production of knowledge and creative work, its function being to enlarge and enrich reality. Art is indissoluble from society, even if this relationship has always been complex. Claiming art’s independence from society so that it can reach higher levels of freedom or development would be reasoning like Kant’s dove, who got the idea that without the resistance of the air, it could fly at full speed in all freedom. Sánchez Vázquez, however, admits the undeniable divorce between art and the public in our time vis-à-vis what he qualifies as a false dilemma: “art of the elites or art of the masses, privileged consumption of works of art or massive consumption of artistic subproducts.” In his view, the response should be no other than the outright rejection of this dilemma.

A “Popular Art”

A “truly popular art” should be used to oppose that false dilemma.

In spite of the ambiguity of the term, Sánchez Vázquez insists in reclaiming “popular art” or “truly popular art” to name what he defines as authentic art. He points out that the false dilemma is structured around two misleading uses of the term “popular art”: either as art for the masses or as populistic art.

The former conception denotes an art consumed in large numbers, an art for the masses. Assuming that “popular art” is art for the masses, according to Sánchez Vázquez, implies the existence of another art, and art for the minorities, an “antipopular” art. In his view, this conception of “popular art” presupposes that it is only by denying its own nature and means of expression that true art can aspire to communicate to larger audiences. This first component of the false dilemma closes the doors to authentic art, what Sánchez Vázquez calls a “truly popular art, ” which is the art produced not for the minorities nor for the masses, but for the people.

The second component of the false dilemma, uses the term “popular art” to denote populistic art, a type of art that represents the people displaying conformist idiosyncrasies and picturesque habits. According to Sánchez Vázquez, this conception is as false as the former since it establishes a superficial relationship with the people and leads to a costumbrist, populistic, and rather backward type of art.

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11 Kant’s quote is as follows: “The light dove, in free flight cutting the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space.” Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 129.

12 Sánchez Vázquez, Las ideas estéticas de Marx, 261.
True, authentic art, in Sánchez Vázquez’s view, is that which is quantitatively open to the majority, instead of narrowing itself to cultural and financial elites, and qualitatively profound and fecund, instead of complaisant and populistic.

Subjectivation

*Cuestiones estéticas y artísticas contemporáneas* closes with a chapter analyzing the thoughts of artist Diego Rivera. In this chapter, Rivera’s ideas resonate with those of renowned contemporary philosophers including the aforementioned Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. Rivera’s thoughts relate to the former in their affirmative aspect and to the latter in their conception of collective subjectivation.

Sánchez Vázquez quotes Rivera as follows: “The artistic object—as any other product—creates a public sensible to art and capable of aesthetic enjoyment. Production, therefore, not only produces an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.” This is Rivera’s concept of a “popular art,” an art that is not populist but that addresses itself to the people, as subjects and not as masses. The key of Rivera’s concept is in the latter part of his statement, when he claims that art produces “a subject for the object.” As Sánchez Vázquez points out, the current system is hostile to art because, as a totality, it needs for

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13 Chapter “Claves de la ideología estética de Diego Rivera” [Keys of the aesthetic ideology of Diego Rivera].
14 Sánchez Vázquez, *Cuestiones estéticas y artísticas contemporáneas*, 201.
the whole to be subordinated to the market. Artwork is, therefore, forced to become, above all, a merchandise—either to be sold at the highest possible price in the market or to be diluted into a lower product that can be sold in mass to the general public. A “truly popular art” needs to produce a new subject, different from both the elites and the masses, claims Sánchez Vázquez.

A concept central to Jacques Rancière's thought, subjectivation is a rather complex idea, which he, however, describes in a simple and effective manner in the following paragraph:

“We are surrounded by people who want to save the planet, head off to treat the wounded in all four corners of the Earth, serve meals to refugees and fight to revitalise deprived neighbourhoods. There are a lot more people committing themselves today than in my own era. We do not lack for ideals, but for collective subjectivations. An ideal is what incites people to concern themselves with others. A collective subjectivation is what makes all these people, together, constitute a people.”

Rancière’s collective subjectivation is a strategy of identification outside the given categories, which in Rivera's thought art has the capacity to produce, i.e. not only an artistic object but also a subject, a collective subject, a people.

The shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world could be read in those terms, as the result of the struggle of those in the periphery for greater geopolitical equality. Worldwide mass protests could be understood as a movement parallel to that, at the national and regional levels, with people in the streets refusing to keep playing the role of inaudible masses.

**An Art for the People and by the People?**

Not only does Sánchez Vázquez refer to the need for an art addressing the people as subjects but also to the role of the people in the production of art itself. With the advent of industrialization and urbanization, Sánchez Vázquez remarks that a new struggle against creative human capacity took place, resulting in the subordination of creativity to profit. As we pointed out in our previous article in *Billedkunst*, this issue emerged in Adolf Loos's article “Ornament and Crime,” with its negativity toward the strain of creativity in the popular classes. According to Sánchez Vázquez, popular artistic expressions such as folk art tend to be no longer perceived as the articulations of collective creativity and become eventually degraded as curiosities and collector's

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16 Sánchez Vázquez, *Cuestiones estéticas y artísticas contemporáneas*, 54.
items—ineluctably deemed the expression of either brutes or noble savages. This tendency values creativity concentrated in individuals with exceptional talent to the detriment of modest artists and amateurs. As our previous article remarked, that exceptional talent is sometimes determined by arbitrariness or simply a whim, often finding support in dense theoretical apparatuses, rather impenetrable for most.  

This process has resulted in the dispossessing of the creative talent from vast sectors of the population, concentrating artistic creation within a limited number of individuals, effecting, in turn, a separation of art from society. Sánchez Vázquez, who praises the capacity of art to remain this relentless stronghold of creativity, however, points out that the very existence of art is dependent on society at large. As our previous article pointed it out in the words of Janet Wolff, “the idea of the artist as sole originator of a work obscures the fact that art has continued to be a collective product.”

Far from objecting individual talent, Sánchez Vázquez praises the skill of great artists who have brought creativity to the heights of human existence through their masterpieces. He concludes Art and Society with Marx and Engels’s response to Stirner to summarize his point on art by the people, “... it is not as Sancho imagines that each should do the work of Raphael, but that anyone in whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance.”

A Final Thought: On Political Art

It could be useful to close this article with some observations about political art. Is the “truly popular art” that Sánchez Vázquez spoke about what we would call political art today? Perhaps, we should begin by asking what political art is or we could also ask what apolitical art is. We will look for the answer going back to Sánchez Vázquez’s analysis of Diego Rivera’s texts, where Rivera is quoted referring to apolitical art as he speaks of the artistic theory of l’art pour l’art. Rivera remarks: “This artistic theory, which pretends to be apolitical, actually possesses an enormous political content: the implication of the superiority of a minority.” And what is the impact of the artistic theory of l’art pour l’art according to Rivera? He answers, “This theory serves to discredit the use of art as a revolutionary weapon and serves to affirm that all art with a theme, a social content, is bad.” If Rivera’s thoughts are to be taken into account, it would be, then, difficult to

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17 “Just like Loos, [Clement] 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.” Alt Går Bra, “Vi kan forestille oss et samfunn uten kunst,” 56.
20 Sánchez Vázquez, Cuestiones estéticas y artísticas contemporáneas, 199.
21 Ibid.
name a certain art political and another one apolitical, in short, to speak about political art per se.

Sánchez Vázquez does not make a distinction between political and apolitical art, but he sees instead all art as being in an indissoluble relationship with society. And since society is in permanent movement, as a tightrope walker on the rope of history, Sánchez Vázquez puts forth the idea that artists are constantly changing their positions toward society: sometimes being more harmonious with it, at other times just trying to escape from it, and sometimes profoundly engaging with it in protest and rebellion. In Sánchez Vázquez’s view, none of these approaches seem to be necessarily more or less political per se.

Jacques Rancière can, again, help us further clarify this subject with more recent examples. In a lecture he gave at the 2nd Moscow Biennale in 2007, Rancière referred to a type of art many would qualify as political art:

... parodies of promotional films, reprocessed disco sounds, media stars modelled in wax figures, Disney animals turned to polymorphous perverts, montages of “vernacular” photographs showing us standardized petty-bourgeois living-rooms, or overloaded supermarket trolleys, huge installations of pipes and machines representing the bowels of the social machine, swallowing everything and turning everything into shit.⁴²

There is little doubt that most of these dispositifs aim to help us discover the wrongdoings of the current order, but, as Rancière points out, since “it will be hard to find anybody who still ignores them [the wrongdoings of the current order], the mechanism ends up spinning around itself and playing on the very undecidability of its effect.”⁴³ Regardless of their intentions, these artistic strategies tend to reinforce the omnipotence of the system, thus contributing to the consensus. Dissensus, on the contrary, focuses on opposing ways of understanding the relation between the particular and the universal, the logic that separates the few experts from the masses. Artistic investigations, according to Rancière, could more fruitfully focus on what he calls “the part of the uncounted” or “the part of those who have no part,” since “This is the kind of universality that politics is about: the capacity of anybody.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid.
⁴⁴ Ibid.
It is very exciting to imagine the myriad ways in which artists will engage with the current indicators of profound changes in a multipolar world.

Artists, of course, can also choose to ignore the current events or to acknowledge them and disengage. After all, as Sánchez Vázquez would say, what is human is tragic. And it is precisely this tragicity, originating in the artform of Ancient Greek tragedy, that terrifies most of us the most—our very capacity to transform and create in face of the unknown—what makes life exciting and worth living.

Images:
Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads (El hombre en el cruce del camino)*, 1934, mural, repainted after the Rockefeller Center original, Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes.

Diego Rivera with a xoloitzcuintli dog, photograph, anonymous, Mexico City, Frida Kahlo Museum.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, *New Democracy (Nueva Democracia)*, 1944, mural, Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes.