

Did the Death of the Author Kill the Critic?

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Roland Barthes concluded his now infamous 1968 text with the observation that the 'birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes, 1968). Yet this seeming empowerment of the reader came at roughly the same moment that was declared to be in crisis. This crisis could be seen as the delayed effect of Duchamp's nomination, in 1913, of readymade objects as art, which entailed the splitting of the 'idea of art' from its aesthetic qualities. If art making could be purely nominal, a sheer act of naming, then what use would art have for the judgement of taste after this quantum leap? By 1969, in his text 'Art After Philosophy', Joseph Kosuth would distil Duchamp's gesture into the provocative conclusion that,

A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that the particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. [...] the "art idea" (or "work") and art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification. (Kosuth, 1969, p.83.)

For Kosuth then, the separation of art as idea from its formal and aesthetic criteria of validation allows the artist to dispense with the critic, and by extension, the reader, since art is quite simply art if you say it is. While this permission could theoretically be extended to anyone and thus may imply the abolition of a division between artist and viewer, or the faculty of genius and the faculty of taste in Kant's terms, its abolition of all criteria of judgement nevertheless renders the reading of art, its critical judgement, superfluous. By extension, the creation of art becomes the effect of a self-validating gesture. Where Barthes argued that all writing is only ever reading, through his deconstruction of the authentic authorial subject who he cast instead as a 'scriptor', or operator of pre-existing codes, Kosuth apparently argued the opposite – that artistic creation is only authorial. The fact that these two positions can be read as either the same – there is no difference between those who create and those who experience works of art – or as antithetical – there is only a reader, versus, there is only an artist – reveals a wider crisis over art and its ontology that their aesthetic politics could not bind to any single outcome.

This crisis can be broken down roughly into two steps. The first is outlined by Hegel who in his Lectures on Aesthetics, described a moment of scission, occurring during his own epoch in the late 18th century, where the total unity and identity of the artist's subjectivity, the material world around him, the formal qualities of the artwork, and its affect upon the viewer starts to break down in step with the disintegration of the religious faith that had once suffused and bound all these elements together. Hegel describes the aesthetic order that was being lost in this way:

By the substance of his material, a substance immanent in himself, [the artist] is tied down to the specific mode of its exposition. For in that case the material, and therefore the form belonging to it, the artist carries immediately in himself as the proper essence of his existence which he does not imagine for himself but which he is; and therefore he only has the task of making this truly essential element objective to himself, to present and develop it in a living way out of his own resources. (Hegel, 1975, p.603.)

When this total identity between God, man, materiality and art split apart contingency and reflectiveness come to take its place. There is no longer anything inevitable about the form and content of an artwork, nor the way in which it is beheld by the viewer. On the one hand the creative freedom of the artist becomes the content of the work as it is torn from the objective world of contents, and by the same token, the viewer's experience is split from that of the artist's. As Giorgio Agamben puts it in *The Man Without Content*,

The free creative principle of the artist rises up like a precious veil of Maya between the spectator and such truth as he can attain in the work of art, a veil of which he will never be able to take possession concretely, but only through the reflection in the magic mirror of his taste. (Agamben, 1994, p.37.)

Thus art becomes its own autonomous foundation and principle, but this precarious freedom is won at the cost of a separation from the viewer. The revocation of that split would become one of the key objectives of modernism.

In this first step, we can see the opening of a gap between the 'idea of art', understood as the autonomy of the creative principle, and the formal and aesthetic qualities of art; a gulf between the general and the particular. This first separation, between artist and viewer, as well as the conceptual and formal properties of art, would give rise to 'art for art's sake', and with it the denaturalisation of aesthetic forms which were no longer construed as natural and inevitable, but as the effects of contingent historical determinations. As Clement Greenberg argued in his 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', avant-garde artists tried to 'imitate God', by

creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similar or originals. (Greenberg, 1961, p.6.)

This self-understanding of art as its own originary force of creation triggers, for Greenberg, the melting of contents into forms, so that the work of art refers increasingly only to itself and its own conditions and no longer to what is outside itself.

The Greenbergian reading of art thus results in the paradox that its autonomisation from its representational services, tied to a social order, was predicated on an ever more hermetic reference to its own determining

conditions. In Adorno's terms, autonomy and heteronomy are two sides of the same coin ('Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated' (Adorno, 1999, p.21)). The essence of art, and the motor of its historical progress, were now predicated on those techniques, materials and forms that constituted its media and genres, with which it could now play freely in a self-referring dialectic. This Greenbergian moment could also be construed as the high point, and simultaneously the last dance, of art criticism. The American critic's insistence that abstract art's isolation of its distinguishing characteristics, namely its medium specificity, guaranteed its aesthetic universality and objectivity, also positioned the critic within a legitimating realm of objectively or logically governed judgement, in his case, overtly inspired by Kant. The modernist critic was thus the neutral universal subject of aesthetic experience that could disinterestedly experience and transmit the equally universal meanings stored in the work of art. In its American inflection then, modernist criticism attempted to heal the split between the artist's creative freedom, the autonomy of the work and the viewer's reciprocal response through an objective logic that deflected the implications of Duchamp's bomb of contingency. The impact of its explosion is what I think we can call the second step or moment of the crisis to which I referred at the outset.

It is important to remember that while the demise of criticism is often lamented, this waning of criticism with a capital 'C' has been an effect of the backlash against the implied universals of such objectivist models of art. On the one hand, the pursuit of medium specificity can be shown to lead to the fraying of media into a field of singularities in which the medium is not abandoned but opened to its inherent dissonance. Juliane Rebentisch illustrates this tendency as follows:

Think of the graphic qualities of the printed word, such as were championed by Concrete Poetry, or the musical aspect of words, such as is encountered in the works of James Joyce or Gertrude Stein, or think of the sculptural quality of the canvas, such as is highlighted in the Shaped Canvases of Frank Stella. (Rebentisch, 2011, pp.53-54)

On the other hand, the modernist grounding of the artwork's autonomy in its independence from both artist's and viewer's subjectivity – its status as a 'quasi-subject' in its own right, as Adorno called it, has been consistently exploded in artistic experiments by most of the artistic movements that follow abstraction, from Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism through to performance, installation, appropriation and networked art. In critiquing Adorno's notion of the artwork as quasi-subject, Rebentisch says:

But the experience of quasi-subjective expression, however, corresponds here with the insight that expression is a quality that cannot be ascribed to the artwork alone – on the contrary it is a quality that appears only in and through the singularity of the encounter between viewer and work. (Rebentisch, 2011, p.57)

Interestingly then the modernist pursuit of universality, via the progressive theory of its internal development of forms, led both to the discovery of media's

innate plurality (as exemplified in intermedia artworks), and the collapse of the artwork's autonomy into the relational field of its constitutive experience. Following Juliane Rebentisch and Thierry de Duve, I want to argue that this turn towards relationality, intermediality, and distributed experience, often accused of polluting and destroying art's very concept, can – in its utopian and ethical form – be seen as guaranteeing its survival.

Indeed, the 1960s were rich with politically utopian and formally experimental readings of Duchamp's gesture that implied the universal power to create art, not simply, à la Kosuth, as an effect of nomination, but as an effect of a shared human faculty. Beuys's slogan 'Everyone an artist' encapsulates this most succinctly. To put it another way, if judging an object to be art can be said to create art, then for nomination to have any conceptual objectivity it must be the possession of all or none. As de Duve argues in his book *Kant After Duchamp*, this shared faculty can't actually be demonstrated – it is prevented by innumerable social, subjective, contextual, economic and cultural obstacles – but it must be logically assumed to exist if the very idea of art is to be sustained. Without this faculty, art after Duchamp would be reducible either to an arbitrary and solipsistic gesture or to a cynical effect of social privilege. As de Duve demonstrates, Duchamp's gesture can thus be seen to suture back together the faculty of genius, or art making, and the faculty of taste, or judging, but in an entirely new guise. The Kantian proposition, that establishes the objective foundation of aesthetic judgement as an undemonstrable but logically deducible shared human faculty, the so-called *senus communis*, is transformed by Duchamp. The nomination 'this is art', as with Kant's aesthetic judgement, is not reducible to any demonstrable concept since it is based in aesthetic feelings that are not universal. Yet the nomination 'this is art' also assumes the concept or Idea of art, which is a universal if undemonstrable concept. It is both subjectively experiential and objectively conceptual. The thesis and the antithesis are not contradictory. According to de Duve, this universal conceptuality no longer resides, as it did for Kant, in our shared ability to judge beauty, the *senus communis*, but in our shared power of creativity; a modern term that sutures together the creation and the experience of art through which it is mutually constituted.

The post-Duchampian discovery that creativity is a universal faculty that unites aesthetic judgement with the genius of art making has practically become a truism in contemporary society. Creativity is everywhere, imputed to everything, and even demanded at every turn. But if we look more closely at its outcomes, we must ask how the presumption of a universal creative faculty translates into the reality of artistic practice and the social system that sustains it. In order to do this, I want to briefly focus on one of the most perverse, or extreme points of contradiction to be found in today's post-Duchampian art practice, namely artworks situated within the conflict zone of urban regeneration. Here we see the collision between what Boris Groys has called the 'logic of equal aesthetic rights' – in which notionally anything can count as art, and anyone can make it – and the exclusionary politics of neoliberal urbanism, in which all lives are not equally counted.

In London, in the last year alone, we have seen numerous cases of the controversial commissioning of artworks sited in former social housing estates now undergoing regeneration, a.k.a. privatisation. These recent cases are striking for two reasons: the first is the seeming oblivion of participating artists to the real suffering of communities whose clearance and relocation the regeneration scheme always entails, and with which the artwork almost inevitably colludes. The second is the increasingly vehement response to these aesthetic acts of class war on the part of the affected communities. In two recent cases, the proposed artworks were stopped by community action. In Southwark's gigantic and brutalist Heygate Estate, local activists and ex-residents managed to block Mike Nelson's project, commissioned by the high-profile public art agency Artangel, to deconstruct one of the decanted blocks into a pyramid. They argued that it crassly converted the private memories of former tenants into artwork, taking people's personal lives as material and ignoring the bitter conflict that had raged around the estate's demolition for a decade. To what degree it was the persuasiveness of the argument itself, put forward by activists and ex-residents speaking in the national press, or the growing public scandal that convinced the local council to drop the project is moot – local people's verdict over the artwork was heard.

Meanwhile, at another famous brutalist estate in Poplar, East London, Bow Arts Trust had been given management of a number of flats to lease as artist's studios in its iconic Balfron Tower, while the block's council tenants were decanted ahead of its conversion into luxury flats. The artists in turn were given a few weeks notice to quit in order to make space for Bow Art's summer programme of events. Artists, used as the symbol of universal creativity and its power to transform social and economic woes, can just as quickly be driven out like cattle. One of the highlights of the summer's events was to be Turner prize nominated-artist Catherine Yass's piece Piano Falling, in which she proposed to chuck a piano off the 26 storey building –creating a swan song for the 'lost socialist ideals of modernist housing'. This time, fiercely critical local residents gathered a petition of 254 signatures to stop the piece. Speaking to the press, one local resident complained, 'if chucking a piano off the Balfron Tower isn't anti-social behaviour, I don't know what is.'

In both cases, creativity's presumed universality has lent itself to use by a system that in every other respect acts to dismantle the universalist promises of the welfare state. We can also see the transformation of site-specific or new genre public art, which originally critiqued the implied neutrality of the artwork's site and audience, into a means to neutralise those self-same particularities within art's universalist programme. 'Everyone an artist', helps to ensure only the privileged few are, as the ubiquitous spectacle of creativity acts to mask the disappearance of the social provision that helped to underwrite creative time in the past. If the utopian trajectory of 'art as idea' as it evolved after Duchamp had elevated the everyday, and ordinary people, through the creative power of art, today its democratic principle is abusively used to dissolve all particularities into the universal equivalent of value.

Although this account might seem to spell its overwhelming failure, I would like to emphasise how the democratisation of creativity inherent in utopian modernism is today being enacted through the increasingly popular exercise of critique. One might say it is merely the automatic consequence of the 'coming closer' of art, as Walter Benjamin called it, that people whose own communities and ultimately lives are nominated as art are exercising a reciprocal judgement over that use. But in both of these recent cases, locals and ex-residents could easily have decided that the battle to preserve social housing had been lost, and it was pointless to contest the artworks parasiting on their remains. However, what both campaigns highlighted was the fact that the rights given to art were greater than those given to people. Art has the right to memorialise, or the right to anti-social behaviour, but people don't. To put this in theoretical terms, the community's judgement was that the regime of equal aesthetic rights was being abused, and converted into a means to silence the universality of creativity behind the spectacle of artistic exception. The vehemence of their campaigns leads us to consider that the redistributed criticism of art in the 21st century is the place in which art's universal foundation is really enacted. It is perhaps here that we see most vividly the fulfilment of the utopian aims of modernism, even amidst the ubiquitous conversion of creativity into a debased tool of urban regeneration, work intensification and widespread precarity.

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