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The Epistemological Force of Art

the stake of creation

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I already stated my doubts and concerns related to Ziarek's philosophical work in *The Force of Art*. Having been studying contemporary philosophy for the last couple of years, I have to say that it's the first time I experience such resistance to a text. Now that the course is over, I am still more than doubtful about his address of a contemporary notion of power. I'm sorry that I have to express my struggle since I didn't expect the whole course to be structured around this book, especially since I was very much appealed by the other literature you proposed.

For this essay I didn't want to spend my energy expanding on Ziarek's conceptual framework, therefore I decided to propose a parallel track following the work of Paul Audi, a french philosopher concerned with the ethics of creation or what he calls aesth/ethics. I'm also building my argumentation over the work of Nathalie Heinich, a sociologist who has been studying contemporary art from the perspective of her discipline.

Parallel, then, in that it shares the same aim as Ziarek's work: to understand what is the force of art in relation to power. I voluntarily decided to avoid addressing the economical implications of this issue, as well as diving into a critique of technique, to focus on the matter of contemporary art as a normative paradigm and on the ethics of creation. I hope this short essay will be of interest as a potential alternative to Ziarek's take on art by focusing more in its integration to the social.

Nathalie Heinich, sociologist, studies what she calls the paradigm of contemporary art. To understand what she means by paradigm, we must know that she borrows this concept from the field of science, as defined by the philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn, and transposes it to the artistic world. A paradigm, according to Kuhn, is a system of thought, of concepts, on which during a given period of time, a given scientific discourse or theory is based. The life span of a paradigm is limited to the period when this discourse or theory prevails in scientific circles. Thus Nathalie Heinich formulates the hypothesis that contemporary art constitutes not only a genre, a movement or a historical marker, but also a new general structure of the functioning of the art world, in other words a paradigm¹.

Before confronting our subject of study, contemporary art, let us take a look at the three paradigms of art that Nathalie Heinich has distinguished since the end of the Middle Ages: the classical, the modern and the contemporary. Historically, the classical paradigm of art corresponds to the supremacy of academic art, based on the principle of beauty, of an ontology of art that tends towards both the real and the ideal. Through the hegemony of the academic doxa and a cyclical and retrospective mode of reference to the “masters”, the classical paradigm governs the artistic norm and determines the first acceptance of the term “art”.

We can date the entry into the modern paradigm of art with the famous episode of the *Salon des Refusés* in 1863. This pivotal moment constituted a real revolution with which the birth of impressionism was associated. Painting the impression is then equivalent to transcribing reality through the prism of interiority. The very look prevails over the realism or idealism of the composition. From a craftsman or a painter subjected to the hierarchical system of the Beaux-Arts, the creator of artworks becomes an “artist”, at the center of a definition of art. The artist inspired by the muse is therefore replaced by another, concerned about the transcription of a personal vision. Van Gogh and the figure of the cursed poet are good embodiments of this archetypal figure in modern art. It was in fact at this time that the term artist in the modern sense of fine arts practitioner was coined, and with it the creation of a new social status for creators: *“the progressive imposition of the word ‘artist’ signals the success of the identity metamorphosis attempted by painters and sculptors, crystallizing a new definition of the activity of creators — then performers — of works of art. This is a group that has managed to gain recognition as a group and as a prestigious group — to the point that ‘artist’ will end up being*

1. Nathalie Heinich, *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain. Structures d'une révolution artistique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014, 373 p.

equivalent, in modernity, to a kind of noble title.”²

The explosion of borders that sounded the death knell of modernism was the revolution brought about by the Dadaists and Marcel Duchamp, with the refusal of his sculpture *Fountain* at the Armory Show in 1913 as a breaking point. By encouraging spectators to question themselves about the nature and no longer about the value of the objects produced — a change that heralds contemporary aesthetics — what they have challenged, even beyond the aesthetic category traditionally associated with art, namely beauty, is the essentialist or substantialist conception of art, which makes the quality of artwork a feature of the object as such³. Substituting presentation for representation through Ready-Made, Marcel Duchamp determines the premises of an irreversible evolution of the value system, which shifts the quality of the work from objective to subjective. This quality is no longer inherent to the object, but to a context of circulation of this object that elevates it to the rank of a work of art.

For Nathalie Heinich, Duchamp’s urinal constitutes a kind of pre-history to the paradigm of contemporary art, which for her established itself in the 1950s. She cites three events, emblematic moments that follow Duchamp’s precursor act: De Kooning’s drawing erased by Rauschenberg in 1953 (USA), the paper screen crossed by Murakami in 1955 (Japan), the void exposed by Yves Klein in 1958 (France). What is the common point of these proposals, which exemplify the four major genres of contemporary art (ready-made, conceptual art, performance, installation)? What the four of them bring about, leaving the modern paradigm, is the irreversible desacralization of the work of art as an object⁴. The work is no longer there: it is therefore more a question of the stories that accompany the act or object that define the existence of the work of art

This is where Nathalie Heinich finds her research subject. For it is now a question of grasping the singularity of works, not as an objective property of objects, but as a value projected on these objects, the result of a valuation operation, what she calls “a regime of singularity”. To do this, Nathalie Heinich studies everything that takes the form of normative assertions by the actors and which refers to principles that are supposed to be universal. In doing so, she creates a typology of the different registers of values called upon in the evaluation of contemporary art.

2. Nathalie Heinich, *Être artiste. Les transformations du statut des peintres et des sculpteurs*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1996, p. 29

3. HEINICH Nathalie, *Herméneutique et sens commun : l’artiste contemporain, le CNRS et les physiciens*, in *Raison présente*, n° 107, p. 77

4. Nathalie Heinich, *Le paradigme de l’art contemporain. Structures d’une révolution artistique*, Paris, Gallimard, series: « Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines », 2014, p. 103

In the order of values used in the realm of artistic evaluation, we find first beauty, then meaning and authenticity. If the former is quickly put aside because of its inadequacy in analysing the proposals of contemporary art, the value of meaning remains widely discussed. In fact, this is a consequence of the systematic deconstruction, in contemporary art, of traditional criteria for evaluating the work that can generally be reduced to the generic notion of beauty.

Therefore, this deconstruction leads to a shift from the aesthetic question to the hermeneutical question. The object is thus made artwork by the discourse, not only that of the artist but also that of the artistic institution framing it, giving it life⁵. What is on display is the product of a complex system of interconnected actors, of which the circulation of the objects is only one dimension. The ways in which the various satellite components of the art object are diffused in the social fabric is just as important.

Finally, the value of authenticity, abundantly mobilized, is useful in understanding the stakes and the nature of the reception of contemporary art. It has the particularity of involving both the author and the work in the sense that it is determined above all by the intention that governed the elaboration of the latter. The singular aspect of authenticity as a value of artistic evaluation is that its purpose is to differentiate authentic from inauthentic, in other words, it is an exclusive mode of distinction: it is art or it is not, and it is a matter of separating “anything” from “true creation”. In other words, in the evaluation of objects and creative processes, we tend to move away from an axiological order of values to an ontological order: that of the nature, artistic or not, of the proposal.

I have reproduced the sociologist’s argument here not to continue with an analysis of the ways in which contemporary art is received, but to stress the relevant use of the term “paradigm”: whether it is the dematerialization of art, the new role assigned to mediation and the hermeneutical process for the decoding of works, or the ever more pronounced integration of the context, it is clear that contemporary art has characteristics that clearly distinguish it from modern art — Heinrich sums it up by talking about “dematerialization”, “conceptualization”, “hybridization”, “ephemerization” and “documentation” — and which are accompanied by an epistemology of its own.

4. “when the Musée national d’art moderne buys a shop (Ben), or exhibits a refrigerator (Lavier), a jazz drum set (Armleder), a garbage can (Arman), it would be naïve to believe that it is only the object that is exposed: it is also the museum that exposes the exposed object. What is to be seen is not the object, but the object made by the artistic institution” Nathalie Heinrich in *Le triple jeu de l’art contemporain : Sociologie Des Arts Plastiques*, Paris, Les Ed. De Minuit, 2006, p. 343.

Hence the cleavage that sometimes manifests itself between the general public and insiders of contemporary art: “*contemporary art today forms a specialized world, an autarkic world that refers to a tradition so specific that it is accessible only to a small number of connoisseurs*”⁶

It can therefore be observed that today, contemporary art, accompanied by its modes of analysis, is established as a new, accepted and shared definition of what artistic practice is. From now on, art can no longer be studied and understood solely through its aesthetic qualities, but must also be through its integration into a social and discursive reality, a space of conventions and norms that is the one of contemporary art. We also note that the artist cannot establish himself as an artist on his own, only a collective and impersonal authority, the ensemble of media and institutional systems that frame the artist’s social function, holds this power of recognition. Thus, in order to grasp the creator’s field of possibilities, it is necessary to understand what defines art in our society, since there can be no legitimate artistic production outside of this definition imposed by the existence of a socio-political group that maintains it as a norm. To quote Nathalie Heinich : “*what makes contemporary art is integration into the network of contemporary art. Literally, being of this world is the condition for the existence of the objects — things, images — that form its boundaries, landmarks, markers — but not the goals, not the objects in the sense of purpose and end of the activity. Objects — artworks — are only instruments of the circulation of people. No way to stop, no way to wait for them to stop us, since they are there to make us circulate from one proper name to another, from one story to another...*”⁷

The question we then ask ourselves, and which Paul Audi formulates in his *Discours Sur La Légitimation Actuelle de l’artiste*⁸, is the following: is there still a way to distinguish artistic creation and cultural production? To answer this question, Paul Audi chooses to take as his starting point the UNESCO definition forged in Belgrade on 27 October 1980 in a report entitled Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist⁹: “ We understand by artist any person who creates or participates through his interpretation in the creation or recreation of works of art, who considers his artistic creation as an essential element of his life, who thus contributes to the development of art and culture, and who is recognized or seeks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not he is bound by any working relationship or association whatsoever” . The au-

6. Nathalie Heinich, *Expertise et politique publique de l’art contemporain : les critères d’achat dans un Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain*, Sociologie du travail, 1997 vol. XXXIX, n°2, p. 208

7. Nathalie Heinich, *Face à L’art Contemporain*, Paris, L’Échoppe, 2003, p. 10-11

7. Paul Audi, *Discours Sur La Légitimation Actuelle de l’artiste*, Paris, Encre Marine, 2012, 104 p.

9. <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/governance/status-artist>

thor does not fail to observe that this “we” by which this definition opens refers here to the instances supporting the rules of the social game, the set of public and institutional agents that Paul Audi summarizes in “the art and the culture”.

He then proposes an analysis of this definition in five points:

1. The artist is first and foremost a creator: to create is to make artwork.
2. An artist is any person who participates in the creation or recreation of a work of art. The status of artist can therefore also be enjoyed by those who partially create and those who perform; technicians are excluded.
3. Apart from creators and performers, any person who considers his or her artistic creation as an essential part of his or her life is considered an artist. Here, the definition does not provide any further explanation of what it means by “life” or “essential elements”, and therefore leaves a free field of interpretation.
4. The second part extends the status of artist to all persons who “contribute to the development of art and culture”. Here, we must ask ourselves why the definition distinguishes art and culture: is there anything in art that precisely resists being absorbed by culture? By linking the two terms in the definition, it then becomes possible to apply the label of artist to all those who are involved in the creation or recreation of a work of art, directly or indirectly, without necessarily behaving as creators or performers themselves.
5. “... a person who seeks to be recognized as an artist. Recognition, or even the only desire for recognition, is sufficiently characteristic of the artist’s being an artist.

For Paul Audi, this definition is based on three models:

When the definition declares that the artist is the person who creates a work or who participates by his sole interpretation in the creation or recreation of a work (points 1 and 2), it refers to Marcel Duchamp’s model; this one institutes the artist-being on a saying that is a doing. To designate an object by saying “this is art” is to use a performative statement to establish a ready-made into an artwork.

When the definition stipulates that the artist is the one who considers his artistic creation as an essential element of his life (point 3), Paul Audi refers to Joseph Beuys, this “essential element” referring to a vital, creative and productive force of his means of subsistence, such as it characterizes the very essence of this artist who is the human being in general. Beuys’ model institutes the artist-being on an act that is not a saying, or even on an essence of man: *“everyone is an artist.”*

Finally, when the definition states that the artist is the person who happens to be recognized or who seeks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not it is linked to a working relationship or association of any kind (point 5), Paul Audi links it to the model developed by Yves Klein, who institutes the artist-being on a statement, on the artificial nature of a statement: a fictional speech, itself therefore an object of art. Instead of situating himself in Duchamp's performative statement, or in the performing being of Beuys' creative subject, he places the artist's instance of legitimization only in what he says he is, and not in his actions: "*I will be a painter. They'll say of me: he's the painter. And I will feel like a painter, a real one, because I will not paint, or at least not in appearance. The fact that I exist as a painter will be the most formidable pictorial work of this time.*"¹⁰

The integration of these three models into the definition recognizes that artists are today simultaneously heirs of Duchamp (performative statement), Beuys (performative being) and Klein (performativity of the subject). If we stop at these points in the definition, we notice that the artist is nothing more than that being whose characteristic is to only allow himself when it comes to identifying himself as an artist. However, there is a danger in this constitutive freedom: it prevents any act of external legitimization, any normative instance. It is the abolition of all norms.

The authors of the definition, having measured this risk, added in conclusion this last criterion: the contribution to art and culture (point 4). This is where Paul Audi asks the question: "Why is culture invoked as an instance of legitimization?" It is through this problem that we will finally arrive at the subject that interests us, namely the question of art as a space of emergence confronted with what is commonly called "culture", and to which art, as accepted and legitimized at the level of society, is supposed to contribute.

For Paul Audi, culture does not have the nobility that its place "*in golden letters on the pediment of a ministry of the republic*" gives it: it is rather the "great cultural broth of mass culture", the product of cultural industry as predicted by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who as early as 1949 in their study entitled *The industrial production of cultural goods*¹¹ diagnosed that "*today aesthetic barbarism realizes the threat that hangs over intellectual creations since they were united and neutralized as culture*". A cultural in-

10. Audi, *Discours Sur La Légitimation Actuelle de l'artiste*, p. 41

11 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York, Continuum Pub. Co, 1972.

dustry that has only grown stronger since then. Paul Audi therefore affirms the “dialectical opposition of Art and Culture” which cannot be dispensed with in any genuine creation, in the sense that artistic creation consists of an insurrection against the established order in Culture. He makes an essential distinction between the two: “art never makes the apology of society; culture always makes it”. Thus the formula of the sculptor Carl André sums up quite well the artist’s posture in time of culture: “*art is what we do, culture is what is done to us*”.

What becomes of the artist assimilated by the cultural industry, reduced to the rank of “cultural agent”, a cog in the social machine? On the other hand, what can be done when anyone who refuses the status of “cultural agent”, to submit to the game of spectacle and production, de facto deprives himself of the possibility of enjoying the appellation of artist? Paul Audi’s exposé, if we cross it with Nathalie Heinich’s analysis of contemporary art, is irrefutable and leads us to this thorny question: at what level is it possible for the artist to escape the normative and reductive aspect of this mandatory dubbing, carried out by “cultural” “authorities”, to the reign of culture or the paradigm of contemporary art?

First of all, Paul Audi criticizes the posture of the artist who seeks to denounce the system while being part of it, feeling obliged to systematically denigrate this notorious society of the spectacle or hegemony of culture in a denunciation that ultimately proves to be the best guarantee of its durability. Moreover, the “cultural” is recognizable by the following: there is no longer any difference between the scandalous and the conventional, the most audacious revolt and the flattest conformism¹².

Finally, Audi manages to establish a criterion for acceding to the qualification of artist that escapes any normativity, not being based on the position of values that condition its establishment a priori but on internal, intimate or personal criteria, i.e. relating to the artist’s autonomy. It is his responsibility towards himself, in other words: the ethics of creation. For the artist, this would thus be found in his refusal to satisfy this or that human “need” which would be prescribed by the normative injunctions of Culture, in favour of an implementation, in an work of art, of a creation capable as such of opening the always ethically salutary field of the possibles.

I quote Paul Audi when he develops what he means by opening up the field of possibles: “*In saying this, I am not only talking about the production of works of art strictly speaking; I am thinking first and foremost, and even more importantly, of the release, better: of the*

12. Audi, *Discours Sur La Légitimation Actuelle de l’artiste*, p. 59

*liberation, through what these works express, when they really exist, of new possibilities of life, of unprecedented powers — power to be, to do, to imagine, to think, and so on — whose only discovery and revelation can be, for anyone who takes part in it, or experiences it, an awakening of the spirit, if by the latter term we mean [...] the being-inspired by his own aspiration to increase the very power of life [...]*¹³.

It is therefore a question of restoring power to life, not only through the production of a work, but also through what could be called the act of creation, i.e. the establishment of a possible — to create relating to the act of growing (*creare*), it is a question of expanding the field of the possibles. This is the whole ethical, aesthetic and by extension political stake of the act of creation since the creative artist undertakes, through his practice, to answer this question of ethics, which Wittgenstein formulates in his diaries: “*the question is: how are you going through this life?*”¹⁴. The artist’s ethics, his responsibility, is placed in his appropriation of this question which is done by creating.

Ultimately, the challenge of creation therefore lies in the fact that this question, to which the creator devotes himself unreservedly, is confronted with the modes of production of culture, in which, as we have seen, the challenge is not to answer an ethical question but to go through life, precisely, without asking how. Where the urgency of creation lies in this relationship to life in its temporality, culture consists in its essence in killing time. It is the logic of entertainment, of cultural production that satisfies the men’s need for feast, to use a Nietzschean expression¹⁵. Art then aims to distract men from the hardness of their condition, or to fool their boredom.

Thus, we succeed in formulating one of the major political issues of contemporary art: that of not subjecting the creative act to a legitimization confined to the values that govern the evaluation of art according to the paradigm of contemporary art, while defending societal spaces for creators who are trying to escape the hegemony of the cultural industry. What material conditions do they have access to, what policies to support and nurture these practices? It is a question of encouraging a form of dissent to culture, which is necessary for the balance of our society.

13. Ibid, p. 67

14. Paul Audi, *Créer : Introduction À l’esthétique*. Lagrasse, Verdier, 2010, 860 p.

15. “*The art of artists must one day disappear, entirely absorbed in human’s need for feast : the artist withdrawn to the sidelines and exhibiting his works will have disappeared.*” Nietzsche in *Posthumous Fragments* (1881)

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