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Art and Activism

(Against Groys)

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Translated by Manuela Zechner

Boris Groys, philosopher and art theorist, has recently published a text entitled 'On Art Activism' (*e-flux*)[1] or 'Kunstaktivismus' in German (*Lettre International*)[2] in two reputable journals. In this text he makes a claim that can only really be described as being totally false.

According to Groys, contemporary art activism cannot hope for support from beyond the arts, solely relying on its internal networks and the feeble financial help of progressive cultural institutions. This situation of art activism, as Groys variously emphasizes, is a *new* situation. Thus according to him, it requires new theoretical reflection. He differentiates this context from the Russian avantgardes of the october revolutions, which he considers to have acted in accord with those in power (in the socialist state). These avantgardes supposedly knew that power was on their side. He also refers to the pro-fascist orientation of Italian futurism to support his argument. It would seem that only someone ignorant of the history of artistic activism (art activism or activism in art) would claim that its opposition to given cofigurations of power is absolutely novel. They must be overlooking the entire body of

research and writing that addresses the theoretical connections between engaged art production and social movements, too.

Now we might simply confront Groys with an ABC of this research and literature – literally beginning with Alberro (2003)[3], followed by Bryan-Wilson (2009)[4], Camnitzer (2007)[5], etc – but there are indeed plenty of research assistants and interns that might take on this task. The question is why Groys didn't refer to them for such help. And there is another important question: why do journals like e-flux and Lettre International print a text that doesn't meet the basic requirements of an essay assignment (up to date with research)? The answer of course concerns the cultural capital attached to the name Groys, which sweeps editor's doors open. But there also seems to be a structural thing within the art world that makes it possible to claim just about anything.

Rather than a list of literature we might of course present a counter-argument. This is what I will briefly do below – not in order to claim superior knowledge, but to do some justice to the issue. My aim is to problematise domains of discourse and to figure out what I will tell my students when they come across Groys' text and ask me about it. (This is why I won't follow specific lines in his argument but rather refute his basic premise.) We may identify three key approaches to the different practices referred to as 'art activism' – a term which may itself be up for debate. Across these three areas there are disciplinary overlaps – arts, sociology, philosophy – as well as crossovers between different political positions.[6]

1. New standards (Thesis on ubiquity)

Some approach the coincidence of art and activism, of cultural production and social movements as an obvious thing. The boundary between the two is seen to be a merely disciplinary one, a categorisation produced by academic viewpoints that makes little difference in reality. Art as activism thus isn't an exceptional occurrence, and artistic activist as well as activist artists have been around since the beginning of modernity, they're all over. And they expanded their' social and machinic creativity in the most diverse directions'[7] in the course of the last two centuries. The theses of Brian Holmes but also of Paolo Virno and Jacques Rancière form part of those that take art and activism to be obvious allies. They might not be allies that have explicitly joined forces but they have a shared aim: both artistic avantgardes and radical movements have sought 'to explain that the old standards are no longer valid and to look for what might be new standards.'[8] These new standards are always seen as breaking with dominant norms and forms of subjectivation, thus making them oppositional. When Rancière asks whether art is resistant[9], his question is above all a rhetorical one. This impulse to resist also exists within the biopolitical conditions of the present. The ambivalence of such new standards, just as that of 'virtuosic work'[10] emerging from the domain of art to then become a general social obligation, remains a topic of heated debate.

We must however ask when it is that those new standards will establish themselves and prevail (not just as those of artists and activists). This question can however barely be answered by the mentioned approaches. When we ask about the conditions of possibility for such a process, we get to another question. If art and activism are both concerned with structures of perception, wouldn't they need to be distinguished regarding their effectiveness (but also regarding other effects of their reception)? Does the

brushing and sweeping of a square after the mayday protest march, as Beuys performed it with migrant students (who remained nameless in art history), really play out on the same level as the union-organised event itself? Can we describe and judge the practices of the Situationist International and the Socialist International with the same parameters?

2. Rifts (Thesis on non-reconciliation)

Such distinctions are made in approaches that are principally concerned with the 'structurally conditioned rift'[11] between the art field and movement practices. The departure point here is the assumption that these domains function according to different principles: different criteria determine success of failure, whether practices appear as legitimate or inappropriate, and there are other forms, norms and dynamics. This approach is represented by the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu, as well as by art theorists such as Verena Krieger or philosophers like Juliane Rebentisch, who have addressed these fundamental differences.

Krieger considers 'ambiguity' to be the decisive 'aesthetic norm'[12] of modernity. She is clearly opposed to the univocality that political demands need to embody. And with Rebentisch – even if her approach doesn't at all thematically focus on activism and radical movements – the mentioned opposition expresses itself particularly when it comes to dealing with representation. Whereas the political logic formulates its 'representational logics notably as a critique of the exclusion of the poor and oppressed'[13], critical art is concerned with the rejection of clear representations. In this view, critical art aims to 'pointedly frustrate the referential deduction from representation to the represented'[14]. This happens even at a time when art is said to generally lose its

limitatitons, when transgressions into other logics are no longer exceptional[15]. The question of when the political in art in fact works (as irony, as subversive affirmation, as direct action...?) thus takes on weight in discussions.

The black and white image series 'before or after' (2011) by Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkácová nicely reflects on ambiguity and the question of representation. It consists of historical photographs from different demonstrations within feminist and women's movement contexts. The placards and banners carried by those in the pictures are covered with tape and new demands are written on them, such as 'coffee or milk', 'close or distant', 'subject or object' as in one particular image, or 'like or dislike', 'never or ever' in another.

If art and social movements or political engagement function according to such different logics, then why do they keep referencing each other and mixing? In the end the question is if, and how, those structurally determined rifts can be overcome.

3. Concatenation (Thesis on exception)

Finally there are approaches that deal precisely with those possibilities of overcoming the rifts. Here too there is the assumption that the logics of art and politics 'seldom, if ever, perfectly coincide'[16]. That aside, it's also clear that activists are always the minority in the art field (and artists even more so in movements) – so much for the supposed newness of depending on one's own networks – and tend to not even be mentioned as relevant actors by art-sociological studies. And yet – or maybe just because of that – there is the question of the conditions und which a 'concatenation between art and revolution'[17] can take place and

how we may grasp its historical conjunctures. The closure of spaces of political articulation (via repression) can trigger conjunctural high points of concatenation (because it seems risky to express oneself 'politically' while it still seems fine to do so 'artistically'), as was the case in the 1970s in Latin America.[18] Or it is in turn strong social movements whose contents or motives become attractive reference points for artists. And there are still quite a few other reasons apart from these two.

During the student protests against the neoliberalisation of higher education that emerged from the academy of fine arts in Vienna in autumn 2009, and which subsequently spread across the entire German speaking world, a banner hung from the foyer of the academy. It said 'What do you represent?'. Maybe this is where those criteria of representation that Rebentisch considers to be so divergent come together, in a mode of interrogation. On the one hand, as reference internal to the art world, this question was an allusion to a work of Hannah Wilke: a photograph in which the naked artist Wilke sits in the corner of a gallery surrounded by toy pistols, carrying the inscription 'What does this represent? What do you represent?' (1978-84). This work in turn refers to a two-frame comic of Ad Reinhardt. In the comic's first frame, a museum visitor addresses the question 'Ha ha, what does this represent?' to an abstract paining, while in the second frame the painting returns the question 'What do you represent?' (1946). The banner at the art academy too involves all these levels of representation. Because it of course also directly addressed every visitor entering the academy, asking them about their position, about what one stands for (representation) and whether this standpoint doesn't maybe contain an arrogant speaking on behalf of others (representation). A very political question indeed.

The Aesthetic

So the 'new theoretical reflections' that e-flux and Lettre International have Groys call for in fact already exist. They just happen to be ignored in this instance.

What is at stake across all three cases – standards, rifts, concatenations – is denouncing systematic injustice, calling on social structures and their fracture. It's not just that we should take artistic activism against the domiant social order into account, starting from, say, Camille Pissarros support for the Paris communards in 1871 up until the participation of Allan Sekula in the protests against the World Trade Organisation in 1999. What's more is that these orders aren't just envisaged as being institutionally and/or organisationally formatted, but also come to be grasped as symbolic formations. What has been registered and reflected theoretically and in activism since at least the 1960s is that this level, the aesthetic, understood as 'self-dynamizing sensual perception and affectivity'[19] – as opposed to instrumentally rational and rule-driven forms of thought and affectivity – is increasingly decisive within the social. The aesthetic is thus always understood and addressed as an arena of relations of power and dominance. It is in no way limited to a dichotomously functional level, where it either beautifies (Design) or neutralises (Art) – as Groys agrues in his article.

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[1] Boris Groys: „On Art Activism". In: *e-flux*, Nr. 56, 06/2014, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/

[2] Boris Groys: „Kunstaktivismus. Die totale Ästhetisierung der Welt als Eröffnung der politischen Aktion“. In: *Lettre International*, Nr. 106, Herbst 2014, S. 88-92.

[3] Alexander Alberro: *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*. Boston: MIT Press 2003.

[4] Julia Bryan-Wilson: *Art Workers. Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2009.

[5] Luis Camnitzer: *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation*. Austin, TX: Texas University Press 2007.

[6] Vgl. ausführlich: Jens Kastner: „Kunstproduktion und soziale Bewegungen. ?
Zur Theorie eines vernachlässigten Zusammenhangs.“?
In: Christian Steuerwald und Frank Schröder (Hg.):*Perspektiven der Kunstsoziologie. Praxis, System, Werk*. Wiesbaden: Springer/ VS Verlag 2013, S. 129-148.

[7] Brian Holmes: *Escape the Overcode. Activist Art in the Control Society*. Paris, Eindhoven Zagreb, Istanbul 2009: Vanabbemuseum, S. 408.

[8] Paolo Virno: „The Dismeasure of Art.“ An Interviev with Paolo Virno. Von Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen. In: Pascal Gielen und Paul De Bruyne: *Being Artist in Post-Fordist Times*. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers 2009, S. 17-44, hier S. 19.

[9] Jacques Rancière: *Ist Kunst widerständig?* Berlin: Merve 2008. Vgl. dazu ausführlich Jens Kastner: *Der Streit um den ästhetischen Blick. Kunst und Politik zwischen Pierre Bourdieu und Jacques Rancière*. Wien/ Berlin: Turia + Kant 2012.

[10] Paolo Virno: *Grammatik der Multitude. Öffentlichkeit, Intellekt und Arbeit als Lebensformen*. Wien: Turia + Kant 2005, S. 69.

[11] Pierre Bourdieu: *Die Regeln der Kunst. Genese und Struktur des literarischen Feldes*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2001, S. 399.

[12] Verena Krieger: „Ambiguität und Engagement. Zur Problematik politischer Kunst in der Moderne." In: Cornelia Klinger (Hg.*): Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit. Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag/ de Gruyter 2014, S. 159-188, hier S. 162.

[13] Juliane Rebentisch: „Realismus heute. Kunst, Politik und die Kritik der Repräsentation." In: Cornelia Klinger (Hg.*): Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit. Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag/ de Gruyter 2014, S.245-262, hier S.257.

[14] Ebd.

[15] Vgl. Juliane Rebentisch: *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*.
Hamburg: Junius 2013, S. 25ff. und Tom Holert: *Übergriffe. Zustände und Zuständigkeiten der Gegenwartskunst*. Hamburg: Fundus 2014.

[16] T.V. Reed: *The Art of Protest. Culture and Activism from the Civil Roghts Movement to the Streets of Seattle*. Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press 2005, S. 303.

[17] Gerald Raunig: *Kunst und Revolution. Künstlerischer Aktivismus im langen 20. Jahrhundert*. Wien: Turia + Kant 2005, S. 7 und S. 63ff.

[18] Vgl. etwa Jens Kastner: „Praktiken der Diskrepanz. ⍰ Die KünstlerInnenkollektive Los Grupos im Mexiko der 1970er Jahre und ihre Angriffe auf die symbolische Ordnung.“ ⍰ In: Jens Kastner und Tom Waibel (Hg.): *…mit Hilfe der Zeichen | por medio de signos… Transnationalismus, soziale Bewegungen und kulturelle Praktiken in Lateinamerika*. Atención! Jahrbuch des Österreichischen Lateinamerika-Instituts, Bd. 13, Wien/Münster: LIT 2009, S. 65-80 und Anna Longoni: „‚Vanguardia' y ‚revolución',
ideas-fuerza en el arte argentino de los 60/70“. In: *Brumaria. prácticas artísticas, estéticas y políticas*, Madrid, Frühjahr 2007, S. 61-77.

[19] Andreas Reckwitz: *Die Erfindung der Kreativität. Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2012, S. 25.