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Art beyond Spectatorship

Traditionally, art developed under the aesthetic regime. This regime can be described in a following way. The artist produced an artwork and brought it to the eyes of the spectator. The spectator looked at this artwork and formed his or her aesthetic judgment of it. The spectator defined the style, in which this artwork was made, found this style good or bad, similar or dissimilar to other historically known styles etc. In other words: the artist practiced vita activa – the spectator lived vita contemplativa. The artist created – the spectator compared and evaluated. Thus, the spectator – and not the artist - controlled the process of art production and consumption. The artists felt themselves delivered to the judgment of the spectator. Of course, they were able to manipulate spectator's gaze and operate by the means of seduction. The self-stylization was here the main artistic device. Still, the gaze of the spectator had always a certain surplus knowledge and also power over the gaze of the artist. The artist – even if he tried to appropriate spectator's gaze never really achieved a degree of the total self-reflection, self-stylization, aesthetic self-control.

(Good example: Oscar Wilde) As a spectator, one sees not only the result but also an effort that the artist applies to achieve this result. And that ruins, of course, the whole show.

Trying to escape this trap modern art started a struggle against the aesthetic regime. Contemporary art is heir of this struggle – and, at the same time, the failure of this struggle. Let me now describe the trajectory of this struggle – in pretty broad, maybe even vague terms. The main strategy was to destroy the secure position of the spectator, to abolish the aesthetic distance – to put the spectator inside the artwork. The aesthetic regime has these two basic presupposition: (1) the artwork is placed in front of the spectator (artwork as an object, but also theater, even music can be localized in front of a spectator) (2) the artwork keeps its self-identity through time (the whole museum system serves this goal: restoration, keeping constantly certain light, temperature, humidity conditions etc. – or the artwork are repeatable, like music). Under these conditions aesthetic contemplation, comparison and evaluation become possible: In a good museum one can compare French painting of the 19th Century with the Chinese vases of the Tang era etc. – and compare precisely in terms of style – ignoring their historical origin, their cultural function etc.

In the course of the 20th Century these conditions were undermined in two aspects: (1) Art ceased to be an object and became an event, and (2) Art became a "total" event, that means an event that included the spectator – so that the spectator lost his or her autonomous position vis a vis this event – having become a part of this event.

In the most systematic manner this concept was firstly formulated be Richard Wagner in his programmatic treatise "The Artwork of the Future" (1849-1950). This text has been written by Wagner in exile, in Zurich, after the end of the revolutionary uprisings in Germany during the year 1848. According to Wagner, The Artwork of the Future will be the Gesamtkunstwerk – the total artwork. Right at the beginning of his treatise Wagner states that the typical artist of his time is an egoist who is completely isolated from the life of the people and practices his art exclusively for the luxury of the rich; in so doing he follows the dictates of fashion. The artist of the future must become radically different: "He now can only will the universal, true, and unconditional; he yields himself not to a love for this or that particular object, but to wide *Love* itself. This does the egoist become a communist" (Wagner, p.94)

Wagner writes further: "The last, completest renunciation (*Entäusserung*) of his personal egoism, the demonstration of his full ascent into universalism, a man can only show us by his *Death*; and that not by his accidental, but by his *necessary* death, the logical sequel to his actions, the last fulfillment of his being. *The celebration of such a death is the noblest thing that men can enter on.*" (Wagner, p.199) Admittedly, there remains a difference between the hero who sacrifices himself and the performer who re-enact this sacrifice onstage – the Gesamtkunstwerk being understood by Wagner as a music drama. Nonetheless, Wagner insists that this difference is suspended by the Gesamtkunstwerk for the performer "not merely *represents* in the art-work the action of the fêted hero, but *repeats* its moral lesson; insomuch as he proves by the surrender of his personality that he also, in his artistic action, is obeying a dictate of Necessity which consumes the whole individuality of his being." (Wagner, p.201) In other words, Wagner understands the Gesamtkunstwerk as a way to resynchronise the finiteness of the human existence with its cultural representation – that also has to become finite. And it becomes finite because it destroys its own individual style, its visible personality – and discontinues itself. The individual style dissolves in the collectivity of the participants. Here nobody tries to create a masterpiece, to demonstrate one's own virtuosity. The

aesthetic distance disappears because everybody participates – connected by universal Love. And love needs no style – it creates intimacy that excludes any possibility of detached aesthetic appreciation.

And what is maybe even more important: the Gesamtkunstwerk is not a museum – it involves only the living – and leaves the dead behind. The totality of the Gesamtkunstwerk is totality of here and now, totality of life and living that has no outside. That means that the position of the disinterested, detached spectator practicing pure contemplation becomes impossible. Wagner speaks about joy of making art (dancing, singing in a tribe etc.) that does not presuppose any external spectator. One sings and dances because one is full of life and wants to celebrate this feeling. And it is a feeling that includes everything and everybody.

Wagner's descriptions of Gesamtkunstwerk very much remind one of description of festivals in the so-called primitive cultures as one find them in Roger Caillois' "Man and the Sacral". Or in the descriptions of the medieval carnival by Machail Bakhtin.
In both cases we have to do with the events that do not allow any external position, any spectatorship. (There is also a certain cruel side in Wagner's description of the Gesamtkunstwerk that one can

find also in Caillois and Bachtin: Wagner also writes that the people has the right and even obligation to suppress and even eliminate the enemies of the people. And the enemies of the people are precisely persons that remain detached, do not share the common enthusiasm, common ecstasy). So it is obvious that for Wagner the model for the Gesamtkunstwerk was the revolution of 1848 at which he participated (before going into exile to Switzerland). The revolution is a Gesamtkunstwerk because it involves everybody and allows no outside position. Even if at the first glance it can seem paradoxical the artist becomes more powerful and not less powerful if he destroys his own style. Namely, he becomes a subject instead of being merely an object – be it also an object of admiration. As Marshall McLuhan said about the artistic avant-garde: here the artist moves from the Ivory Tower into the Control Tower.

Indeed, according to Wagner, the performer of the role of the main hero controls the whole staging of this hero's self-demise, his descent into the material world – descent that is represented by the symbolic death of the hero on the stage. All other performers and co-workers achieve their own artistic significance solely through participation in this ritual of self-sacrifice performed by the hero. Thus, Wagner speaks of the hero performer as a dictator who

mobilizes the collective of collaborators exclusively with the goal to stage his own sacrifice in the name of this collective. In the sacrificial scene the Gesamtkunstwerk finds its end – there is no continuation, no memory, no further role for the dictator – performer any more. The artistic collective dissolves. The next Gesamtkunstwerk is created by another artistic collective, with a different performer-dictator in the main role. In other words Gesamkunstwerk is always radically temporary, finite. And its dissolution is final: it leaves only vague memories behind it.

Now one can say that Wagnerian artistic practice remained inscribed in the tradition of theater and so his project remained unfulfilled - because it did not really involve the spectators: they were still positioned in front of the stage. To become a part of the Gesamtkunstwerk the spectator has to enter the stage. And this is precisely what happens in the contemporary museums and art spaces. The contemporary name for the Gesamtkunstwerk is the curatorial project – with curator as dictator.

Not accidentally Harald Szeemann who initiated the curatorial turn in contemporary art was so much fascinated by the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk and made an exhibition "Hang zum

Gesamtkunstwerk". (The Tendency to Gesamtkunstwerk, 1984). But what is the main difference between a curatorial project and a traditional exhibition? The traditional exhibition treats its space as anonymous, neutral one. Only the exhibited artworks are important – but not the space in which they are exhibited. Artworks are perceived and treated as potentially immortal, even eternal – and the space of the exhibition as contingent, accidental. It is merely a station on which the immortal, self-identical artworks take a temporary rest on their wanderings through the material world. On the contrary, the installation – be it an artistic or curatorial installation – inscribes the exhibited artworks in this contingent material space. The curatorial project is the Gesamtkunstwerk because it instrumentalizes all the exhibited artworks, makes them to serve a common purpose that is formulated by the curator. At the same time a curatorial or artistic installation is able to include all kinds of objects – some of them time-based artworks, or processes, some of them everyday objects, documentations, texts etc. All these elements, as well as the architecture of the space, sound or light loose their respective autonomy and begin to serve the creation of the whole in which visitors and spectators are also included. Thus, the unmoving artworks of traditional type become temporalized, subjected to a certain scenario that changes their perception during the time of the installation because this

perception is dependent on the context of their presentation – and this context begins to flow. Thus, ultimately, every curatorial project demonstrates its accidental, contingent, eventful, finite character – its own precariousness.

Indeed, every curatorial project necessarily has a goal to contradict the normative, traditional art historical narrative that is embodied by the museum's permanent collection. If such a contradiction does not take place the curatorial project looses its legitimation – an individually curated exhibition that merely reproduces and illustrates the canonical art historical narrative simply doesn't make any sense. For the same reason the next curatorial project should contradict the previous one. A new curator is a new dictator who erases the traces of the previous dictatorship. Thus, the contemporary museums become to be increasingly transformed from the spaces of the permanent collections into the stages for the temporary curatorial projects – temporary Gesamtkunstwerks. And the main goal of these temporary curatorial dictatorships is to bring the art collections into the flow – to make art fluid, to synchronise it with the flow of time.

Nowadays one speaks time and again about the theatralisation of the museum. In our time people come to exhibition openings in the

same way as they went to opera and theater premieres in the past. This theatralisation of the museum is often criticized because one tends to see it as a sign of involvement of the museum into the contemporary entertainment industry. Indeed, today the museum ceases to be a space of contemplation of unmoving things. Instead, the museum begins to be a place where things happen. The events that are staged by the museum are not only curatorial projects. The contemporary museum is also a place of lectures, conferences, readings, screenings, concerts, guided tours etc. The flow of events inside the museum is today often faster than outside its walls. Meanwhile we got accustomed to ask ourselves what is going on in this or that museum?

However, there is a crucial difference between the installation space and the theatrical space. In the theater the spectators remain in the outside position towards the stage – in the museum they enter the stage, find themselves inside the spectacle. Thus, the contemporary museum realizes the modernist dream of a theater in which there is no clear boundary between the stage and the space for the audience – the dream that the theater itself was never able to fully realize.

But now let us ask the following question: How can we speak about style of a curatorial project? Such a project is not only part

of a flow – it is also flowing. Contemporary installations and curated exhibitions very often include sound tracks, videos, films, performances etc. That means: they are changing by time. They cannot be fixed and stabilized. They cannot be also really re-enacted because they are too much site- specific, dependent on a certain kind of technology. Of course, one can try a reenactment and reconstruction of a passed curatorial project based on their fragments and descriptions. Such a reenactment could be seen recently in Venice as the exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" (1968 in Bern) was re-enacted at the Fondazione Prada. It was a very well made, very professional re-enactment – and so it provoked a next and even stronger wave of nostalgia. Some people thought: oh, how it would be great to go back to the 1960s and breath again the wonderful atmosphere of that time. And: How awful is everything on the Biennale itself and all the fuss related to it compared to the sublime askesis of the "When Attitudes Become Form". (But some other visitors from the younger generation found the exhibition non-impressive – and liked only the beautifully looking guides in their best Prada clothes.)

Thus, the restoration of a curatorial project is impossible. Its reproduction – re-enactment – is also impossible. So the aesthetic comparison between different curatorial projects   becomes

impossible. Moreover, our own, immediate experience of a curatorial project can be only partial. We always have a limited time to remain inside the installation space, we cannot see this space from all the possible angles and different trajectories - and we also cannot follow its whole development. So to understand a curatorial project in its entirety we have to rely on its documentation – even if we are immediately confronted with it. We have to read the curatorial statement, get acquainted with the history of the project that cannot be fully represented in the exhibition space etc. After the end of a curatorial projects the only things that remain will be also documentations: a catalogue, or a filmic documentation, or a website. These documentations are always also partial – because the camera also cannot film the whole space from all the angles. Looking at the documentations we see only fragments of the installation, only certain angles from which this installation was visible, only certain moments in its history, only partial description of how it functioned.

In other words our aesthetic experience of a curatorial project – and of all the elements of this project, including paintings, photographs, movies, videos, sound tracks, texts etc. – is from the beginning mediated by the documentation. And we can revisit this

project only through the archive of its documentations. Now: Such an archive is always incomplete. And the documentations has always their own style – that not necessarily coincides with the style of the exhibition – whatever sense we are ready give to this word. The archive of project's documentations is also always updated – because our technology is changing, the documentations become to be presented in different media (for example, digitalized), in a different stylistic way etc. – and that changes their style in a truly radical way.

And this question is in no way external to the art process itself. The contemporary art exhibitions include more and more documentations of the artistic performances, events, long term projects, other exhibitions and installations – alongside the traditional artworks. Later curatorial projects include the documentations of the previous curatorial projects as their elements. So we have here layer after later of documentations that make the stylistic analysis of the artwork more and more improbable. Contemporary art production coincides with its archiving. But all the archives are stylistically indefinite -
even if the way of their presentation can be stylistically different in each particular case. Moreover, art documentation begins to look like a regular bureaucratic documentation – and its presentation

increasingly looks like a regular power point presentation as it is usual in the contemporary bureaucratic meetings.

This homogenized and at the same time indefinite style of contemporary art has also to do with the emergence of the Internet as the main space in which contemporary art is presented. Indeed, I would suggest that the Internet transformed the art system in the same way in which photography and cinema transformed painting and sculpture. The same can be said about the museum – as the central institution of the traditional art system. The Internet made the museum's function to represent the art history obsolete. Of course, one can argue that in the case of the Internet the spectators lose a direct access to the original artworks – and thus the aura of authenticity gets lost. And so museum visitors are invited to undertake a pilgrimage to art museums in search of the Holy Grail of originality and authenticity. But at this point one has to be reminded that according to Walter Benjamin who originally introduced the notion of aura, artworks lost their aura precisely through their museumification. The museum has already removed art objects from their original sites of inscription in the historical here and now. Thus for Benjamin, artworks that are exhibited in museums are already copies of themselves – devoid of their original aura of authenticity. In this sense the re-inscription of

artworks into the context of an art museum precedes and prefigures their re-inscription in art-specialized websites. The Internet merely continues the process of the de-auratisation of art that was started by the art museums. Many cultural critics have therefore expected – and still expect – that public art museums will ultimately disappear being unable to compete economically with private collectors operating on the increasingly expensive art market and become substituted by much cheaper, more accessible, virtual, digitalized archives.

To find the relevant information on art we search for it on the websites of the museum but also in blogs, social media pages, on Twitter etc. We do not so often visit a museum as we follow its activities on the Internet. And on the Internet the museum functions as a blog. The contemporary museum presents not the universal art history but, rather, its own history – as a chain of events that are staged by this museum itself. But most importantly: the Internet relates to the museum not in the mode of reproduction but in the mode of documentation. Of course, the permanent collections of the museums can be reproduced on the Internet but the museum's activities can only be documented.

Meanwhile one began also to document the work of the artists who

produce artworks in a more traditional manner because they increasingly use the Internet or at least personal computer during their working process. And that offers a possibility to follow the whole process of the art production from its beginning to its end because the use of the digital technique is observable. Here the traditional boundary between art production and art display begins to be erased. Traditionally, the artist produced an artwork in his or her studio hidden from the public view – and then exhibited a result, product, artwork that accumulated and recuperated the time of absence. This time of temporary absence is constitutive for what we call the creative process – in fact it precisely is what we call the creative process. André Breton tells a story about a French poet who – when he went to sleep – put on his door the announcement: Please, be quiet – the poet is working. This anecdote summarizes the traditional understanding of creative work: creative work is creative because it takes place beyond the public control – and even beyond the conscious control of the author. This time of absence could last days, months, years – and even the whole life. Only at the end of this period of absence the author was expected to present a work (maybe found in his papers posthumously) that would have been then accepted as creative precisely because it seemed to emerge quasi out of nothingness. However, the Internet and the computer in general are a collective and observable,

surveillable working places.

Now if the public follows my activity all the time then I do not need to present it with any product. The process is already the product. Balzac's unknown artist who never could finish the work on his masterpiece would have no problems under these new conditions- documentation of his efforts would be already this masterpiece and he would become famous. The documentation of the work on an artwork is already an artwork. In the Internet time became space, indeed – and it is the visible space of permanent surveillance. If art became a flow - it flows in a mode of self-documentation. Here action is simultaneous with its documentation, its inscription. And the inscription simultaneously becomes information that is spread through the Internet and becomes instantly accessible for everybody all over the world. That means that contemporary artwork can produce no product – and still remain productive.

But, what is even more important here: not only art production but also art contemplation became now traceable and analyzable.
The traditional opposition contemplation vs. action has reflected the following empirical fact: the human eye leaves no traces on the object of contemplation. After I looked at an image one cannot find

ant traces of my gaze on this image. But these traces are available if I look at something in the Internet: here to see something I have to click on it, maybe to enlarge the image etc. All these operations are traceable. Thus, the Internet turns vita contemplativa into vita activa. Contemplation becomes action. The spectator is caught into the art event – his outsidedness is undermined.

We tend to speak about the Internet in terms of infinite data flow that transcends the limits of our control. But, in fact, the Internet is not a place of data flow – it is a machine to stop and reverse the data flow. The unobservability of the Internet is a myth. The medium of the Internet is electricity. And the supply of electricity is finite. So the Internet cannot support the infinite data flows. The Internet is based on a final number of cables, terminals, computers, mobile phones, and other equipment units. The efficiency of the Internet is based precisely on its finiteness and, therefore, on its observability. The search engines such as Google demonstrate that. Nowadays, one hears a lot about the growing degree of surveillance – especially, through the Internet. But surveillance is not something external to the Internet, or merely a specific technical use of the Internet. The Internet is by its essence a machine of surveillance. It divides the flow of data into small, traceable and reversible operations and, thus, exposes every user to

the surveillance – real or possible. The Internet creates a field of total visibility, accessibility and transparency – and documentability.

Here the notion of style returns in a certain way. For our human eyes the archives of art documentation are aesthetically indefinite. The aesthetic homogeneity of contemporary art is obvious for any visitors of any contemporary art exhibition. However, the notion of style remains relevant for the algorithmic gaze – for the algorithmic analysis of our Internet activity – including our art activity. Here one can actually speak again about certain life styles and behavior pattern: how and what we buy, how we travel etc. But these life patterns and styles are visible only for the algorithms – not for humans. We are dealing here again with the asymmetry of gazes I was speaking about at the beginning of my talk – but transposed on a different level. The gaze of the traditional spectator is caught by the mass of documentation – it is a trap that this gaze cannot escape.

However, the algorithmic gaze – being able to operate by big data - cannot be caught and disarmed by any mass of documentation.
It even adds to the art documentation the data on the private life of the artists, curators, visitors etc. Here the notion of style emerges

again – but of style invisible for our eyes. Today the algorithm is the only spectator, critic and historian of art – because only the algorithm is able to survey and analyze the whole vast field of contemporary art and, thus, make an informed judgment about any individual work of art. In a certain way it is a return to the Medieval condition: in the Middle Age the artists worked for God, today they work for the algorithm.