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The emergent artistic object in the postconceptual condition

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Entwinement of academic and artistic production

Introduction

In the following I will summarize my artistic position and the way in which my artistic position is deployed in constructing the thesis. The thesis is structured through a purposeful partition and juxtaposition between *academic* (chapters 1-4) and *artistic* (documentation section) production. This artificial division aims at highlighting the interdependence of these two forms of production. The relationship between the two categories will be reconsidered. The entwined condition of art, critical theoretical production and curating within the political economy as well as in artistic production, has been extensively discussed in the previous chapters. It is precisely this entwinement that is the central topic of my research project.

While I emphasize the entwinement of textual (academic, discursive) and artistic production, and perhaps paradoxically, I uphold the distinction between the two forms of production (similar to the way the interdisciplinary character of artistic production was approached and researched in the *Benjamin in Palestine and Van Abbemuseum* chapters). Precisely by upholding the distinction, the positional interrelatedness and the multi-registered role text performs, can be investigated. This analytic methodologic approach of a separation of positions is reflected in the structure of the thesis in total. By deliberately dividing it into an analytic style of writing (the academic section) and more artistic way of presenting (the documentation section) the model of the art-aesthetics relation as phrased by Rancière is put to work, as an investigative tool within the thesis as such. The position of artist that I bring to the thesis as author is mobilized and becomes part of the research. The artistic and performative critical construct of academic and artistic production addresses the condition of cognitive capitalism in an infrastructural sense.

Immanent critique and assembled position

Through this artifice of a structural academic/artistic division and my own artistic production, the multidisciplinary make up of artistic production of which I am part myself is revisited. In doing so, I operationalise the notion of what could be called an *immanent critique*, a critical approach developed during the Romantic period and made explicit by Walter Benjamin. Immanent critique discards a clear-cut object/subject distinction, as it understands that observation alters and is itself part of the aesthetic assessment. Every step in the artistic chain of production is considered both as an act of reception as well as of production, mutually

affecting each other. This means that no unequivocal demarcated function exists for the positions within the chain as these are all involved in the processes of aesthetics. To quote Graeme Gilloch, a reader of Benjamin in this respect:

In other words, the truth of the work of art is both constructed and discovered by the critic. Immanent criticism, then, privileges neither the object (the artwork) nor the subject (the critic); or rather, it privileges both. For the Romantics and for Benjamin, this 'problem' is pre-empted or circumvented by dissolving the subject-object distinction altogether - the critic simply facilitates and partakes of the self-knowledge of the artwork. Nevertheless, it is a tension which is unresolved - indeed, one which, articulated in terms of the figure of the 'engineer' (the principle of construction) and the notion of 'afterlife' (the principle of decomposition and disclosure) lies at the heart of Benjamin's work.²⁴⁹

As this tension inevitably remains unresolved, authorship within the artistic field becomes a matter for all parties involved: artist, curator, theorist alike. It is a matter of shared authorship in production. Therefore, the way in which the artist positions himself becomes a matter of politics, as every function and position involved is co-creator in the processes of production: it is an assembled position. This assembled authorship is deployed in my artistic practice, in which I mix visual arts, art criticism and curating, as is demonstrated in the Documentation section.

Play of positions, artistic positioning

My artistic profile must be understood as a mobilisation of critique, addressing the interconnectedness of art, criticism and curating. It is my claim that when this interconnectedness is insufficiently recognized, this will lead to a structuring and accommodation of the division of labour. The mobilisation of my artistic profile within this research project must therefore be understood as analogous to that of the *engineer* as mentioned in the quote by Gilloch. The mobilisation through the role of the artist – the role I strategically occupy – is shaped through a technique of deconstructing the qualities that make up the field of art (i.e. the supposed separation between artist, critic/theorist and curator) and of (re)constructing an artistic position.

²⁴⁹ Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin, Critical Constellations*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002.

The central place and weight of the first four chapters within the thesis as a whole, that are written in an analytical and critical style, is counter to what usually is expected from an artist. This undercutting of expectations is instrumental to questioning the respective roles conventionally performed in the assembly of artistic aesthetics. The reconsideration of functions – in this case performed by me – is not only the task of the artist; it is equally a task for the curator, organizer, critic and platform. In fact, one of the tenets in this dissertation is that the exceptional position of the artist is a problem that needs to be solved. My insistence on the artist-position does not aim at recuperating a special place for the artist, but rather as a means to address the obfuscated entwinement we find ourselves in and to critically reflect on the role of the artist. The notion of the aesthetic engineer is equally at play in Benjamin's *Author as Producer*²⁵⁰ where he argues that the place of the *intellectual* to be indispensably linked *with* production. The quintessential notion of aesthetic engineering we also find in the conclusion of chapter 3 – the Benjamin in Palestine conference – where the organisation of the conference is identified in terms of such an engineer. I hope to have demonstrated that aesthetic engineering is the central principle in Rancière's art-aesthetics relation. Whereas Rancière starts with this relation as the basis for politics in general, I use it to investigate the hiccups that occur in the current fabric of artistic institutional formation and politics.

Style of writing in regards to the academic section, prose as art, appropriation of theory

The analytical viewpoint and style of writing in the four case studies in the academic section are in line with Romantic thought where critical prose is actually considered closest and essential to art. Gilloch writes:

It is only in critical prose that the poetic work of art is reflected, brought to self-consciousness and dissolved into the Idea of Art, that the Gesamtkunstwerk is infinitely reconstituted. Hence, though it may appear paradoxical, the Romantics came to see prose rather than 'poetic' writing itself as the fundamental basis or 'creative ground' (SW1, p. 174) of the 'idea of the poetry' (SW1, p. 174), the Idea of Art. For Benjamin, 'The conception of the idea of poetry as that of prose determines the whole Romantic philosophy of art' (S W1, p. 175) and points unequivocally to the critical sobriety and austerity of the Romantics' thinking.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, New Left Review 1/62, July-August 1970

²⁵¹ Ibid.

Here I want to refer back to chapter 2 and the Autonomy Project at the Van Abbemuseum, where I used a quote by Rancière in which he describes that prose contains a poetic quality. Following Hegel, Rancière claims that prose in regards to aesthetics can open up to what is *other*, or to what is unknown. At the moment when this othering quality decays, the text becomes *mere* prose and normative, and will come to serve politics as it is. Rancière, through Hegel, suggests that this enables a dialectics in how we perceive heterogeneity and also, I argue, how we may perceive the potentiality of prose. To quote Rancière:

Poetry is poetry, says Hegel, so long as prose is confused with poetry. When prose is only prose, there is no more heterogeneous sensible. The statements and furnishings of collective life are only the statements and furnishings of collective life. So the formula of art becoming life is invalidated: a new life does not need a new art. On the contrary, the new life is specific in that it does not need art. The whole history of art forms and of the politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art could be staged as the clash of these two formulæ: a new life needs a new art; the new life does not need art.²⁵²

Performance of writing

Throughout the readings of the cases I applied an analytical style, appropriating the medium and the position of theorist. This interrupts the logic of the convention of the ‘artist’ as one who is supposed to bring original and new insights exclusively through experientially based aesthetical expressiveness (a poetics), rather than through reasoned judgment, which is usually reserved for the critic and excluded from the artist’s task. I deploy the figure of the artist to ward off the decay of prose as writerly performance. The deliberate negation of what the artist is supposed to bring to the art-aesthetics relation serves to emphasize the art-aesthetics bind and the structural interdependence between the two. Here my artistic intervention is particularly aimed at the roles reflection and communication have as the pivotal media connecting the fields of artistic production. The four platforms that I explored as case studies were thus ‘read’, and in these readings the cases were considered for their production model. Considering these readings in the logic of immanent critique then, means that these readings should not be seen as a conventional critique that maintains a distance between subject (I as interpreter) and object (the case), but as a critique that reads along and with the potential of the cases to be understood, *and* subsequently how this critique can be

²⁵² Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London – New York, 2010, p.124

conceived as potential object for new readings that provide a new aesthetical exchange. The readings of these four chapters through the essayistic academic format are therefore intended as generative aesthetical objects, as potential artistic propositions. This way, the role of the critic can be considered as existing on the same level as the role the artist.²⁵³ As stated before, it is my claim that this more holistic and recursive approach, geared against the division of labour (which is the condition of heteronomy we found ourselves in), would enable a clearer political position for art production and the role of the artist. This also entails that my readings of the cases have political consequences, as they are concerned with the mode of production and are, in themselves, forms of production – as discourse.²⁵⁴ The appropriation of the analytic style serves to emphasize the role of reception, and therefore the role of the critic (as generative and artistic author) in the positional chain of production (in the life of production as social construct). In a sense these texts oscillate indeterminately between art and aesthetics, an oscillation that I also enact in my position as critic and/or artist.

As said, the first four chapters have a distinct academic and essayistic style, which is juxtaposed with different forms of writing and presenting in the Documentation section. The subjects that are discussed in the Documentation section refer to the composite art-aesthetics nature of art production in the Rancièrian sense. This section consists of varying elements: projects, documentation of exhibitions and installations, and additional texts, each of which will be discussed and introduced separately. These supplements are to be understood in the vein of an Infrastructural Critique formulated by Marina Vishmidt, as discussed throughout the thesis.

²⁵³ This also explains the conceptual distinction I arrived at in discussing the manners in which Peter Osborne and Jacques Rancière positioned themselves in the Autonomy Project at the Van Abbemuseum in chapter two. Osborne maintains an assessing distance to an object under scrutiny, while Rancière takes on a more imbricated position and becomes a more fully-fledged *author* himself.

²⁵⁴ This refers back to the argument made by Malik and Phillips in chapter two, in which they imply a meta-political position for the arts.

