



Introduction to the Special Issue on Art and Politics

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Abstract

Art and politics are entwined in complex ways. Artworks gain political significance in dynamic networks and social processes that include the artists, the commissioners, their audiences and, not to forget, the historians who study them. This article traces some of the aspects that have defined the relationship between art and politics in Europe since the Enlightenment.

Keywords: art, enlightenment, Europe, modernism, politics

Introduction

This issue of the *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* is devoted to politics and the arts during the second half of the long nineteenth century. Politics and the arts, history and modernity – admittedly, it is quite an ambitious endeavor to deal with these four big concepts in one single journal issue. The topic of this issue came forth from the international conference ‘The Artwork Exposed: Politics and the Arts (1850–1914)’ which was held in Amsterdam on 17 and 18 April 2014.¹ The conference brought together young and established art and cultural historians and provided a platform to discuss the complex relationship between art and politics. The starting point for the discussions was the explicit conviction that artworks are visual objects that function in networks of intention, interpretation and social relations that include artists, commissioners, critics and audiences. It is within these

dynamic networks and social processes that works of art gain political significance. These axioms were informed by the fact that artworks are an essential part of cultural life. Usually, artworks are made for specific goals and presented in particular contexts; they are viewed and consumed by different persons, and eventually they are studied and analyzed by historians. They thus form an important part of cultural and intellectual life and at the same time they are constitutive of the meaning that human beings attach to their culture and society.

Art and Politics in Modern History

Ever since Enlightenment philosophers started to think about politics and the modern nation-state, they have also considered the role of the arts. The power and affective qualities of artworks have been known for ages. Visual symbols have emotive qualities; especially when embedded in age-old archetypal imagery, they are able to arouse deep-seated aspirations and emotions. Viewers are inspired to live according to the prevailing moral codes by evoking awe, fear or compassion in them through works of art. Since the Middle Ages these codes had been set by the religious authorities and, as a result, artworks functioned as a moralizing and socializing tool in the hands of the Church.

During the eighteenth century, however, political philosophers started to recognize the importance of these affective powers to inspire a sense of moral order that was based on the secular ideas found in the modern nation-state. They reflected upon the ability of artworks to shape social consciousness and hence to transform society. This power to affect people, for better or worse, became a double-edged sword. Philosophers were particularly concerned about guiding citizens towards the right, enlightened path of life, leaving behind the dark roads of superstition and ignorance. Since art was an important instrument to guide a nation's citizens in this process, it became a political responsibility to monitor, some would say to control, the production of artworks. These ideas were poignantly expressed by Johann Georg Sulzer, a Swiss mathematician and philosopher, in 1774:

The charming power of the fine arts can easily be abused to bring ruin upon human beings; like the paradisiacal tree, the arts bear the fruit of both good

and evil, and impetuous enjoyment of these fruits can corrupt people. [...] And if the power of the fine arts falls into treacherous hands, the most marvelous remedy becomes the deadliest poison. It is therefore the legislator's responsibility that not only public monuments and buildings, but all visible objects [...] are characterized by good taste [...].²

The importance of artworks and their ability to inform and influence their viewers was amplified in the nineteenth century when the rise of nationalism was accompanied by technical developments that made various forms of mass communication possible. At the time, the belief in the power of artworks, and visual images in particular, was untainted by present-day discourse analyses. Images were perceived as didactic, and debates usually centered on whether one agreed with the particular goals for which they were used or not.

Nowadays, scholars have lost this naïveté. A variety of theories focus on the discourses that frame the narratives in which images are read and aim to expose the underlying political agendas that define them. Without a doubt, these fields of research, such as postcolonial or gender studies, have enriched our understanding of the ways in which artworks function. At the same time, our thinking about the relationship between art and politics has become ever more complex.

History and Modern Art

Modernity is a term that has become a catch-all phrase; it is a term that gives us the impression that we all know and agree upon what we are talking about without being specific. What is more, the terms modernity, modernism and modern are often used interchangeably. In general, it remains unclear whether the word modernity refers to a time period (if so, from when to when?) or if it refers to a specific ideology (and if so, what does this ideology claim?). Usually, both notions are intermingled when we speak of modernity. It seems as if, instead of being a term that denotes an ideology, ideal or period of time with specific characteristics, modernity has rather become a useful device to create binary oppositions, such as modern versus old-fashioned, or modern versus postmodern.

Despite these terminological shortcomings, it is possible to state that the belief in progress and grand narratives lies at the heart of the concept

of modernity. This belief is based on the self-confident Enlightenment rationalism that the world can be shaped by man. Thus the world we live in evolves and becomes a better place as time passes by. As a result, the term modernity has mostly positive connotations. In the context of the arts, for example, modern Western states pride themselves on the lack of censure regarding the arts. Enlightened modern nation-states, epitomized by Western liberal, constitutional governance since World War II, grant freedom and liberty to the arts. Because freedom of speech and expression is valued above all, even the most provocative artists have the legal right to exhibit their works. But it must be remembered that the question of government influence on the arts is more subtle than that. For example, governments subsidize the art world through various financial and administrative channels, and this indirect support is inevitably subject to changing political agendas.

In art history the concept of modernity is unthinkable without the writings of Clement Greenberg. It was Greenberg who canonized the fusion of art history with the enlightenment idea of progress. According to him, high art progressed by making the formal, technical and material aspects of the artworks visible. In essence, the history of modern art was a continuous move towards abstraction. Greenberg's concept of modern art has become deeply entrenched in popular thinking about art. Furthermore, the idea of an ongoing artistic revolution has overlapped with the above-mentioned modernist belief in political and social progress. As a result, works of art that represent traditional artistic styles are usually considered as backwards and as representing conservative ideas, while avant-garde artworks are considered as culturally and politically progressive. Even art historians have to make a conscious effort not to equate the style of an artwork with the supposed political intention of its maker.

Laura Prins takes up this complex issue in her case study on print-makers in fin-de-siècle France. She describes how politically engaged artists struggled to express their anarchist sympathies while maintaining their artistic autonomy. Their main problem was to find suitable subjects for their politically inspired artworks; subjects that could be easily read and correctly identified without being overly didactic, illustrative and, hence, regressive. To make matters even more complicated, the editors were uncertain about the target audience for the prints. The working classes were the intended audience, yet it was the more affluent

bourgeoisie that had the financial means to buy and collect these artworks. Nowadays, it is the historians' turn to face the confusion when studying anarchist printmaking by weaving together the multifaceted and inherently contradictory aspects that define the topic.

The importance of analyzing artworks in their specific political and social contexts while remaining aware of changing attitudes over time is emphasized in the article by Bart Pushaw. He presents a case study that exemplifies the manifold ways in which political events and artistic creation relate to each other. His study of the institutionalization of the art world in the Baltic region in the period from 1860 until World War I shows how artists, critics and patrons formed networks that rose above the existing ethnic boundaries – boundaries that since then have materialized as national frontiers and therefore tend to pre-determine discussions about the Baltic art world.

The article by Marie Tavinor investigates the Venice Biennale which was founded in 1895 and is nowadays considered as a solely artistic showcase for contemporary art. However, Tavinor's close examination of the reception of British art in the Italian press reveals the extent to which aesthetic judgment was colored by political preferences during the first two decades of the Biennale's existence.

These studies show how patrons, artists and viewers tried to interpret and change the world they lived in. They witnessed political changes whose outcome was yet unknown. In their efforts to make sense of the events that they were witnessing, they sought parallels between the outside world and the world as it was depicted in artworks. These parallels were based on the symbolic, visual or emotive associations that the artworks evoked.

Most of all, artworks inspired people's feelings, whether this was the longing for social harmony, a sense of home and regional belonging or admiration for a political ally. Artworks are more than the physical material of which they are made; they are more than a sum of technical and formal elements; they are more than simple propaganda tools. Artworks are complex and inherently irrational objects that unveil more than their creators ever had in mind. Like a kaleidoscopic lens, they allow us to study the past in its countless facets. The articles in this issue are attempts to broaden debates about politics, art, modernity and culture in ways that include the complexities and contradictions underlying the topic.

Notes

- 1 The conference took place at the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and was organized by Laura Prins and Camelia Errouane. For the conference program, see: <http://www.camelia-errouane.com/portfolio/the-artwork-exposed-conference>. For a conference report, in Dutch, see: <https://www.historici.nl/nieuws/verslag-statuomanie-opportunisme-en-idealen-politieke-dimensies-van-kunst-de-negentiende-eeuw>.
- 2 Johann Georg Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste. Zweyter Theil* (Leipzig, 1774) 614–615: ‘Die reizende Kraft der schönen Künste kann leicht zum Verderben der Menschen gemißbraucht werden; gleich jenem paradiesischen Baum, tragen sie Früchte des Guten und des Bösen, und ein unüberlegter Genuß derselben kann den Menschen ins Verderben stürzen. [...] Und wann die Kraft der schönen Künste in verrätherische Hände kommt, so wird das herrlichste Gesundheitsmittel zum tödlichsten Gifte [...]. Es muß dem Gesetzgeber eine wichtige Angelegenheit seyn, daß nicht nur öffentliche Denkmäler und Gebäude, sondern jeder sichtbare Gegenstand selbst aller mechanischen Künste das Gepräge des guten Geschmacks trage [...]’.

About the Author

Camelia Errouane studied art history at the University of Amsterdam, where she graduated cum laude with a Master’s thesis entitled *The Impossibility of Picturing the Past: On Photography, the Archive and the Colonial Legacy*. She also obtained a Master’s degree (M.Sc., cum laude) in Business Studies from the same university, specializing in finance and the cultural industries. Among other professional activities, she has worked as an assistant-curator at a private art collection. Currently she is finishing a PhD project on the art politics and patronage of the city of Paris at the beginning of the Third Republic (1870–1900). E-mail: c.f.errouane@rug.nl