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Origins of the modern notion of "useful" art

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LINK TO RECORDED PRESENTATION, unlisted:

<https://youtu.be/nRQhIVhO8HY>

I want to start with a quote taken from the catalogue of an open-air exhibition called "International Art in Public Spaces" organised by a municipality in Sweden. It is however a generic quote which could have taken from any similar political statement by local or national authorities in similar contexts. The quote reads as follows:

"A review of notable examples at both the local and regional levels reveals that deliberate strategies for the support of art profit community and economic growth." (Sculptura 2, 8)

Statements such as this one express the modern idea of the usefulness of art in its most pure and unreflective form. They express it as a matter of both communal and economic value. The rather simple argument I will pursue here is that it would not even be possible to imagine this kind of economic and social usefulness in art without the modern concept of art, and this modern concept of art is intimately connected to how social and economic life has been conceived in modern society; that is, after the French revolution. I think we must constantly remind ourselves that the modern idea of art as a singular concept and the modern idea of the people as the driving force behind a just and legitimate government originated at the same time. I also think we should be wary of thinking that economic claims about art, such as the one I just quoted, are necessarily opposite of seemingly radical or insurrectional claims.

Regarding the latter, I would also like to quote an article which provided to original inspiration for this presentation. It is a long review of the exhibition “Art and the French Revolution” at Musée Carnavalet in Paris in 1977, written by the British historian Hannah Mitchell. Regarding Jacques-Louis David and other painters with both artistic and political careers in the revolution, Mitchell writes the following:

“In stressing the artist’s social responsibility towards the revolution and in advocating that the arts be placed in the service of political and social change, these revolutionary artists were formulating what was then a quite novel theory; that of the political utility of art”. (Mitchell, 132)

This statement should be somewhat reframed. Was the idea or theory of the political utility of art really a novel theory? Probably it was, but only to the extent that it involved both a novel theory of politics and a novel theory of art. Or differently put: the political utility of art came as a consequence of the invention of art and politics as we still understand it today. Remember that in 1790 the philosopher and professor of the small University of Königsberg Immanuel Kant had his “third critique” published, the *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* or critique of Judgment, including the critique of aesthetic judgment. No matter how we judge Kant or blame him for various conceptual and ideological shortcomings, it is hard to deny that his definition of art was trailblazing in being a definition of a singular category which exists just because certain objects are judged as beautiful. It is not a question of specific skills and qualitative norms, as in earlier conceptions of liberal or beautiful arts in plural, but only the proposed existence of something called *Schöne Kunst*, or simply Art.

According to the third critique, the only function of this *Schöne Kunst* or Art is to give rise to a pleasure which is “without any interest”, “ohne alles interesse”. This might seem contradictory to any political or economic purpose of artmaking, and in a sense it is, but at the same time it confirms a radical discovery in 18th century philosophy and politics. It is a discovery which presupposes a certain kind of absence or emptiness. It doesn’t really matter what kind of objects are singled out as objects of aesthetic pleasure or whether all spectators agree that an artwork is good or bad; the only essential thing is really the capacity to make judgements and to feel pleasure. This capacity is recognized as a fundamental aspect of what it means to be a human and social

being. It constitutes what Kant terms in Latin “*sensus communis aestheticus*” or the common aesthetic sense. The exercise of the capacity of aesthetic judgment is also said to be a duty with a certain rational usefulness, but of a very peculiar kind. It does not require any particular skills and does not qualify any distinctions between learned and unlearned or highborn and lowborn, but only proves that an individual is capable of taking part in an exchange of opinions. The art which is the object of exchange has no objective in the sense of economic or social objectives; consequently the modern concept of art instituted by Kant’s third critique is essentially an empty concept. As later developments in art production and art theory demonstrate, it could be made to correspond to any object singled out for aesthetic appreciation.

Likewise, the individual finding itself in the role of exercising a judgment could be any individual belonging to the abstract totality known as common people, or simply “the people”. Of course, this totality is just as empty as the modern concept of art, because simply being part of the people does not require any further qualifications or determinations. One could put it drastically and say that the category of Art and the category of the People were discovered at the same time and that both discoveries contributed to the revolutionary concept of equality. To confirm the existence of certain capacities as belonging inherently to all people and to expect the exercise of such capacities as an existential duty also meant that the individuals granted this status also must have certain rights. As the philosopher Jacques Rancière has put it, it meant that the part with no part in society, *la part sans-part*, was at least formally recognised and given the name people, *le peuple*. In the long run, it also made it possible to imagine an art which would be an art for anyone, i.e. an art which would potentially influence or be of benefit for everyone. This leads us back to the modern idea of usefulness, and it also means that in the egalitarian tradition of art and politics inherited from the Enlightenment we can also find the seed of instrumentalism in both totalitarian and economic varieties.

While reading my previous thoughts, I have been showing you two of the most famous examples of modern political propaganda; the coloured etchings composed by Jacques-Louis David in his capacity of painter of the revolution and member of the committee of public safety during the so-called “reign of terror” in 1793 and 1794. A more widely known work by David is shown here and I find it impossible not to include it in the present argument. I also cannot help returning to the Marxist art historian Timothy J. Clark and how he took

David's painting of the murdered Marat as the point of the departure of the analysis of modernism and power in his *Farewell to an Idea* from 1999. We could spend hours dwelling on Clark's pertinent remarks concerning all various details of David's painting, such as the *assignat* or banknote on the wooden box which served as a table in Marat's frugal living quarters, or the manner in which the box has been depicted as perpendicular to the picture plane. For the objective of this presentation, however, the empty upper part of the painting is really the only relevant part. It is, if you like, the first modernist realisation of abstract totality as absence of figuration. This is also how Clark sees it. Her also sees it as a first sign of a new regime of representation necessitated by the discovery of the will of the people as the driving force behind a legitimate democratic government. This is essentially how Clark argues that David's painting presents the necessary conditions for the black square of Malevich and its brief influence on the revolutionary consciousness of the Soviet Union. What is, then Clark's main argument for this connection? Fundamentally, Clark points out the paradoxical nature of the painting and of the public ceremony for which it was made. He stresses that David's whole career testifies a dedication to authenticity and a vivid presence of the real. Sometimes, however, this presence can only be evoked by means of absence.

The painting shows Marat as the martyr of the revolution and the people. The painter David presents us with his body and the very scene of his martyrdom with a pretention of giving us the equivalent of a *tableau vivant* or indeed a *nature morte*. The painting was placed as the centre piece of the defilement and ceremony dedicated to the memory of Marat in Paris on 16th October 1793. This ceremony instituted the following cult of Marat for the rest of 1793 and much of 1794. As a martyr of the people, Marat is also implicitly an embodiment of the people. As Clark points out he is, however, an incomplete embodiment. The body we see here is one afflicted by leprosy. It had thus started to disintegrate already before the death of its owner, and most of it must be kept hidden. Moreover, the people which is a part with no part cannot be represented by a single individual. As soon as an individual, such as Marat, steps forward and speaks he is no longer a part of the part which has no part in public life. So *where* is the people for which Marat had given his life and which supposed to defile and behold this scene of his martyrdom in October 1793? According to Clark it is present by means of the sheer absence of the upper half of the painting. Clark describes this absence or negativity is a visual parallel to the purely negative conception of *le peuple* in Jacobin thought; the people being everything that aristocracy and clergy was not, but otherwise unspecified. A

more traditional representation of martyrdom or sainthood would include representatives of specific groups in society as devotees. But it seems that such paintings as David's Marat already prefigures the representational order known as modernism; an order which made earlier iconographies of religion and power impossible to maintain.

One can say that we still live with the alternatives this development left us with, and that it has made it very hard for us to stay satisfied with the merely symbolical function of art or of artistic communication. We still rather expect that art should bring us into a direct relationship with the real or affect our individual existence as human beings. It is not enough that it merely confirms the values of imaginary communities and relationships. We all more or less take for granted that Art, or Art in the modern sense instituted by Kant's third critique, is good for more than that. I therefore want to briefly show two examples which are definitely *not* modern art or *Schöne Kunst* in this sense because they function solely according to the logic of conventional iconography and symbolism. The first is the famous allegory from 1577 showing William of Orange as S:t George and as saviour of the protestant Netherlands. It is an image in which each element is readable and which presupposes a spectator acquainted with all the religious and symbolical knowledge required for decoding it. The female personification to the right is of course far removed from any personification of common people; she represents the faith to which the saved were supposed to submit.

The next example is very different but still in the same tradition of political allegory. It is a print from August 1st 1779 showing the English king George III with all his weapons of colonial oppression being thrown off by the horse America. The horse represents the part which defined itself as the oppressed one, but by means of a fully symbolical device in which animals are made to stand for national characteristics. Let us then again return to Jacques-Louis David and his representation from 1791 of the oath of the tennis court in July 1789. This image gives us a vivid impression of how the representatives of the third estate wanted themselves to be seen at the moment of the inception of the national convention. They are the crowd composed of an economical and intellectual elite who here steps forward and claims their status as representative of the whole absent part called *le peuple* or the masses. However, the crucial symbolical device here is not the crowd but the relationship and handshake between three representatives of the second and third estates at the centre of the

composition. In this manner the image represents the turbulent moment of transition between the earlier division of French society and the imagined non-division of modern democratic government.

In 1789 the totality of a societal formation driven by the impersonal force of popular will was still not possible to represent, probably not even possible to imagine. In David's painting of *Marat* four years later it had to be suggested as a mysterious absence. With hindsight it turned out that the fate of the republican experiment was to develop into a new variety of its antithesis; a new kind of absolutist rule. Napoléon Bonaparte ascended as the modern Caesar and as the common man of the people invested with the immense symbolical power of its combined aspirations. Therefore Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' stately portrait of Napoléon Bonaparte as emperor Napoléon I is probably something as paradoxical as the first concrete representation of the people in power, also known as populism. The unflattering manner in which Ingres has exposed his emperor as an embodiment of all secret vices and egocentric wishes of each one of us is not evident until one looks closely at the face.

This coloured engraving produced by someone at the fringes of David's and Ingres' sphere of influence gives a crude and therefore clear idea of how the purely symbolical function of art in the service of the state is the opposite of any modernist conceptions of the goodness that art is for. The image and its inscription state bluntly that the painter of histories, *Le peintre d'Histoire*, is one who is encouraged by ruling classes to exalt their government by recourse to the allegorical paraphernalia of earlier governments and mythologies.

This conception of the symbolical function of art for the state existed in early modernity as the opposite of the romantic aesthetics with which I started. In the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant and later of high romanticism art springs less from established representational orders but is closely connected to the idea of spontaneous genius. It is in the power of the genius to provoke the sensation with which we can identify if we are capable of taking part in the communal experience known as *sensus communis aestheticus*. This fundamentally democratic conception of art and aesthetic opinion fuelled political notions of how art can be art for, by and about common people. Again, the very notion *le peuple* or common people in modern political thinking produced a pluralism and openness which can also be described as conceptual emptiness. It is noteworthy

that when Jean-Jacques Rousseau attacked the theatre and gave his recommendations for entertainments suitable for a popular republic, he explicitly envisioned an absence which would provide spaces for popular presence. I quote from Rousseau's letter on the theatre to D'Alembert from 1758, as follows:

“But what then will be the objects of these entertainments? What will be shown in them? Nothing, if you please. With liberty, wherever abundance reigns, well-being also reigns. Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves, make them actors themselves, do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.”

(Rousseau, 126)

If the old idea of art as purely symbolical representation should be distinguished from art as the realisation of communal experience, I think that both should be distinguished from a third variety which is art as a special kind of commodity which increases the wellbeing and wealth of economic society. This third modern manifestation of the usefulness or goodness of art is clearly stated in the essay by Jonathan Richardson called “A Discourse on the Science of a Connoisseur”, printed posthumously by his son in 1773. The main objective of Richardson's essay was to establish that the art of painting and the education of painters in England must aim at the same level of quality as in Italy and France in order to achieve with a minimum of material investment a maximum of economic profit. In his discourse he makes clear that the economic prosperity of a nation is proportional to the level of aesthetic and intellectual refinement of its male elite, or differently put its Gentlemen. With a logic not unfamiliar from neoliberal reasoning of today, the increasing wealth and education of Gentlemen is also said to be of benefit to the people at large:

“The dignity of the science I am recommending will farther appear if it be considered, that if gentlemen were lovers of painting, and connoisseurs, it would be of great advantage to the public, in

First, The reformation of our manners.

Second, The improvement of our people.

Third, The increase of our wealth, and with all these of our honour and power.”
(Richardson, 267-268)

Finally I think it is an example of the supreme irony of history that these early ideas of both the egalitarian and national economic aspects of cultural production are today part of the public rhetoric of certain organisations and businesses of which I will now give one example. The example is a Swedish one, an organisation for the intervention of cultural produces at workplaces. The name of the organisation is TILLT, an acronym akin to the Swedish word for trust, *tillit*. It markets itself with a webpage and a youtube video from which these two stills are taken. They aim to show how grey and dreary the stereotypical industrial workplace is and how happy and productive all workers will become as soon as they have been visited by artists from TILLT.

I quote the following from the webpage of the organisation:

OUR VISION: TILLT has a vision of a sustainable society where art contributes to human growth. We initiate development projects where art and culture meets the challenges in different, non-artistic societal arenas. WHAT WE WANT: We want to create and carry out high-quality projects about current societal questions, where artists are creative motors. We have identified several focus areas that we feel are important to our work and they are continually updated. We want to challenge, while simultaneously keeping participation, interactivity, diversity, motivation and reflection as essential ingredients in our projects. We believe that these are the prerequisites for the possibility of individuals, organisations, and society being able to make informed choices.

<http://tillt.se>

In my personal opinion, these messages are not dramatically different from this standard poster from Soviet Union in 1938. With its image of mandatory productivity and health, it exclaims “HELLO, OUR DEAR STALIN!”

Mitchell, Hannah, “Art and the French revolution: An exhibition at the Musée Carnavalet”, *History Workshop* 5 (Spring 1978), pp. 123-145.

Richardson, Jonathan, “A Discourse on the Science of a Connoisseur” in id., *The Works of Mr, Jonathan Richardson. Consisting of I. The Theory of Painting. II. Essay on the Art of Criticism so far as it relates to Painting. III. The Science of a Connoisseur. All corrected and prepared for the Press by his Son Mr. J. Richardson.* London 1773 (MDCCLXXIII), Printed for T. Davies, in Ruffel-Street, Covent-Garden.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D.Alembert on the Theatre* (trans. Allan Bloom), Chicago (?) 1959. (1758)

Sculptura 02: International Art in Public Spaces, Falkenberg Sweden 18 maj-15 sept 2002.

TILLT: <http://tillt.se/en-GB/about/what-is-tillt>

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AMNMxVXTfU (1 min 50 sec)

“If gentlemen were lovers of painting, and connoisseurs, this would help to reform themselves, as their example and influence would have the like effect upon the common people. All animated beings naturally covet pleasure, and eagerly pursue it as their chief good ; the great affair is to chuse those that are worthy of rational beings, such as are not only innocent, but noble and excellent. Men of easy and plentiful fortunes have commonly a great part of their time at their own disposal, and the want of knowing how to pass those hours away in virtuous amusements, contributes perhaps as much to the mischievous effects of vice, as covetousness, pride, lust, love of wine, or any other passion whatsoever. If gentlemen therefore found pleasure in pictures, drawings, prints, statues, intaglias, and the like curious works of art ; in discovering their beauties and defects ; in making proper observations thereupon; and in all the other parts of the business of a connoisseur, how many hours of leisure would here be profitably employed, instead of what is criminal, scandalous, and mischievous!”
(Richardson, 270)