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# The Sublime in Business

[Translated from Estonian by Liina Viires]

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the [info@institute.hr](mailto:info@institute.hr).

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I\_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, [www.institute.hr](http://www.institute.hr).

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Heie Treier

## The Sublime in Business

The following presentation draws attention to the *context* surrounding us, which forces art to adjust to it as well. For isn't business the button that activates capitalist society, whose reality artists have related to in various ways via their creations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century? The presentation's title was inspired by Swedish economist Pierre Guillet de Monthoux.<sup>1</sup>

### **The sublime**

The key word in avant-garde art was "sublime". The category of the sublime originated from Kantian philosophy and that in turn from Plato. Sublime aesthetics are said to contain two-part emotions – pleasure and pain, which are described as developing in a work of art through a special kind of sensitivity, if the feeling of pleasure derives from a certain universal principle of consensus. 20<sup>th</sup> century art is said to have made the attempt to make visible that, which was impossible to make visible. They were dealing with powerful abstraction, which culminated in abstract art.

While developing the philosophy of Plato further, Kant discovered other paths of development in the writings of 20<sup>th</sup> century art theorists Benedetto Croce, Clement Greenberg and others. In 1939 Greenberg published an essential piece of writing entitled "Avant-garde and Kitsch" in which a clear line is drawn between abstract art and art depicting the natural, whereby the criteria are exterior sensations of *form*. Avant-garde (abstractionism) is sublime and progressive, kitsch is fascist and thereby backward. This was in fact an adequate deduction in the context of the day, since avant-garde art with all its searches for form often became a martyr in the hands of the

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<sup>1</sup> Monthoux, Pierre Guillet de. *Det sublimes konstnärlinga ledning. Estetik, Konst och Företag*. Nerenius & Santérus Förlag, 1993.

fascists as well as Stalinists. Yet 1960's pop art struck a crack into Greenberg's handling, erasing the line between "high and low". By the first half of the 1980's, the situation in art had once again changed, in light of which the ongoing strong influence of Greenberg's formalism seemed all the more absurd. Critics of Greenberg in the U.S. began to take a closer look at the context of art, including leaders of the postmodern "uprising": Victor Burgin, Thomas McEvilley and others and the art situation as a whole, which had changed behind their backs. By the early 1990's the said "uprising" had reached Estonia as well.

Since Estonia is emerging from a variation of society just recently modernist, that being the Soviet Union, we should initially draw our attention to changes which have occurred in language use. For modernism as a system, operating with binary forces, it was characteristic to judge certain words as good or bad *a priori*. For instance, the following was taught in Leninist social theory: socialism is good, capitalism is bad; atheism is good, religion is bad; materialism is good, idealism is bad, and so on. Similarly, in modernist art theory, where a distinct line was drawn between "high" and "low", kitsch belonged to the latter and "sublime" to the first. Doing business or speaking on the theme is taboo and so on. Art history is led by "the progress of beauty".

In postmodernism the "indifference" of words and terms placing value (good-bad), has been emphasised. This depends on the context in realistic life and conversation, as well as interests. For example: an axe in itself is not good nor bad, it can be used to build or to kill, whereas those activities can be good or bad depending on the context. The word "positive" need not only designate that which is good, for instance in the combination "HIV positive". Context is a key concept in postmodernist art.

Therefore, a postmodern art theorist must study the *context* of a work of art with great care. This is the reason for attention being directed at *society* and other such factors. Contemporary art critics keep away from value judgements and concentrate instead on the analysis of a work's role, its importance in society, message, and so on, in other words on the work's *content*.<sup>2</sup>

Since in this case the notion of the "sublime" speaks of the main thesis of avant-garde art, let us look at what Estonian art's relationship has been with avant-garde, as well as in relation to the sublime. Estonia sits as a small

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<sup>2</sup> McEvilley, Thomas. Re-evaluating the Value Judgement. *Art & Otherness. Crisis in Cultural Identity*. Document text. MacPherson & Co., 1992, pp 17-25.

nation in the middle of the power games of large nations and our economics, politics and so on, have been determined by larger nations. A notable paradox does exist in Estonian avant-garde, which derives from the isolation of the Soviet era.

Starting in the end of the 1960's, a generation of powerful, young artists and critics entered the scene, who brought influences from American pop art to Estonian art (SOUP 69). They identified themselves as followers of avant-garde. However, one must perhaps distinguish between the various meanings of avant-garde in different contexts. In the Estonian context everything should be clear – of course it was avant-garde that was being dealt with; energy had been siphoned from Russian avant-garde since the beginning of the century on the one hand (Malevitch), and from American art on the other, which in the 1960's was pop. It is in terms of the latter that questions begin to arise. Taking Clement Greenberg's definition as a starting point, according to which avant-garde is purely the abstract art of form whose opposite is kitsch, commercial, or art tracking no matter what kind of nature, we then see that avant-garde had a different content than what it was considered to be in Estonia. If in the U.S. pop art was a rebel against Greenberg, then in Estonia, pop art was interpreted according to Greenberg's own criteria. The Campbell's soup can, as a symbol of the welfare society unattainable in the Soviet Union, became the *sublime*, a symbol of freedom in Estonia (although the seriousness of the time was mixed with humour). Since it was a symbol of capitalism and thereby the enemy of Soviet ideology, it could not be freely manifested until the end of the 1980's, late, during the Perestroika era. And so, we could read the condensed translation of J.F. Lyotard's writing entitled "The Sublime and Avant-garde"<sup>3</sup> in the magazine "Kunst" in 1987. From amongst the many texts of postmodern theorist Lyotard, the one that was chosen to be translated paradoxically introduced him as the one who manifested avant-garde.

In current, 1990's art, the sublime category fails to exist or is presented as a parody, which seems to mock all the ideas of the previous generation. The postmodernist era is an era without an illusion of progress, without great and violent utopias, without innocence. Art of this era is considered "good" when within its games are played three, five, or tens of times, which can even seem cynical. Sincere optimism has left art, which was characteristic of earlier avant-garde and especially the 1960's. True power is however in the hands of the media and commerce, which those of us living in early-

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<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. Sublime and Avant-garde. *Kunst* 1987 / 2, pp 54-59.

capitalist Estonia are also starting to believe. Advertising truly does present Campbell's soup and Pampers diapers as *sublime*.

## **Business**

In Western art of the 1960's (neo-dada, pop art, Fluxus), the attention of artists wandered from purely aesthetic values to areas beyond art; importance was placed on the areas where art and life met. Business was also looked at from the point of view of art.

In 1963 Daniel Spoerri opened a temporary restaurant within a gallery; in 1964 Pieter Engels from Holland started up a funeral home by the name of ENIO; in his widely quoted book "From A to B and Back Again" Andy Warhol wrote that good business is even better than art and Joseph Beuys held lectures on the theme "Art = Capital". Yet the points of view of the latter two artists were somewhat contrary to one another. If Warhol was representative of almost machine-like creation ("Factory"), then Beuys kept to the side of the working people, defining capital not as money, but as "creative human capital" (Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophic influences).

The economic boom of the 1980's was reflected as an economic boom in Western art as well. One aspect of this was the record auction price of Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" (see Guinness Book of World Records). At the same time a number of artists from various different European countries developed independently of each other, who through their activities directly entered the social-economic sphere and began to consciously manipulate it. The difference from the artists of the 1960's was that now they openly masked themselves as businessmen. Mystifications of companies were created, and the successful ones directed themselves toward monetary gain without shame. Relying on the 1993 art exhibition "Business Art/Art Business" at the Groningen Art Museum as a source, let us list a few noteworthy examples.<sup>4</sup>

In 1985 the Paris print studio "Minium" created the mystical artist named Phillipe Cazal and began advertising his company, the company's design and products. 1986 saw the start of a Dutch pseudo-business "Fi\$h Handel & Servaas", which began producing pseudo cans of "Fish Air" as well as all kinds of other supplies. In Italy many such mystifications popped up, for instance the pseudo financial association "Banca si Oklahoma" (1976),

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<sup>4</sup> Business Art Business. Groningen, 1993. Exhibition catalogue.

pseudo advertising company “Name Diffusion” (1991) and non-functioning machine shop “Technotest” (1991). Let us also add Finn Alvar Gullichsen along with his Bonk Business to this list, who over the years has started successfully selling his product, that being art. Similar examples can be found in German, Swedish, American and other art.

Amongst Estonians this phenomenon has been dealt with in the 1990’s in a slightly “softer” form by Marko Mäetamm, Hannes Starkopf, the creative unions “Neoeksprepost” (Andro Kööp, Urmas Puhkam), DeStudio (Peeter-Maria Laurits, Herkki-Erich Merila) and “Shop” (Tiina Tammetalu, Kai Kaljo, Ann Lumiste). Of theorists let us mention the Linnar Priimägi phenomenon – he has developed the “religion of beauty” on the basis of German classical philosophy. The “Mannerism” he defends and series of articles about advertising as today’s “highest” form of art (see issues of the magazine “Favoriit”), create an intellectual base for budding national commerce and a user-society.

It is clear that the art world must take a stand here, whereby the one-sided ignoring or scorning of such wide-spread tendencies, or their labelling as “commerce” will not become productive. Obviously Greenbergish, and other such ideals must be forgotten, since it is impossible to analyse this kind of conceptual business-art with such a so-called toolbox, where the basic theoretical notions are only line, colour, surface, material, sublime, etc. There must be something to do with a kind of (warning?) symptom or characteristic (opening up creativity?), which hints at what is going on in the society and economy.

How then to handle contemporary conceptual so-called art? What rules are being followed in the game? Whether we want to or not, the process seems to be indifferent and dependent on certain objective factors. I would like to draw attention to two tendencies leading to opposite directions. First of all – the aesthetic sphere is entering the economic sphere; artists are beginning to play according to economic rules. Secondly – economics and business are themselves becoming aesthetic.

## **The aesthetic sphere leans to business**

\* Aesthetic and art history literature do not provide answers to contemporary questions about art. Art theorists must read economic theory books.

\* The main point of departure of business activities is a business idea, which provides a germinating base for the business' success or failure. Similarly to a businessperson, an artist must keep in mind a definite concept to follow, which he or she must consistently develop. The concept provides the artist with free hands in terms of the form or lack of form of the work of art.

\* The second basic notion of business activity is the business' expansion across the region, state and world. Artists have also become consistently more global. Travelling through countries and visiting exhibitions you will be convinced that the McDonald's phenomenon exists for certain artists' names as well.

\* The philosophy of success, positive thinking. The elementary, strategic weapon of advertising and the business world has also reached the hands of artists. The stressing of success seems compulsory, as was the case in terms of U.S. artists in the 1980's. The artist as a star (Schnabel, Koons, Kostabi).

\* Just as any proud company conducts market research to receive feedback concerning their product, so does there exist a communication with the public in art (Komar & Melamid, "In the Land Most Beloved by America", etc.). Artists test their works in the contexts of various cultures and nations (a parallel in the advertising world would be the experience of the Benetton company).

\* A businessperson risks. Currency rates fluctuate daily, the rises and falls are often difficult to predict. Fashions and trends change quickly in art. An artist must alter his or her image like an MTV star. The rates of artists sway, yet so do the rates of styles, materials, aesthetics, eras, shades of colour, and so on.

\* Large corporations, brain trusts, are leading the business world. The decisions made by them are *collective*, with computer information networks, the Internet, and information analysis playing a vital role. Collective authors have even developed in art. The myth of the unique author has been "exposed" (Barthes). Still, this is mostly necessary for the selling phase of works.



\* Authorship in art is preserved as is a company logo in business. For instance, Henry Ford has not himself crafted a single car driving around bearing his name. In the case of a work of art, it is never certain how many authors it may have, either directly or in an indirect way.

\* The main criterion of aesthetics, beauty, has moved to stores and the advertising world. We often fail to meet with it at today's exhibitions of "serious" art, or if we do, then we are most often presented with an *analysis* or *parody* of beauty.

\* And finally – the possibility of corruption in the business-, as well as art world.

### **The business sphere leans to aesthetics**

\* Cash has begun to disappear from circulation and is being replaced by bank cards. Monetary calculations seem to be turning into pure mathematics and money itself into an abstract kind of numerology. Bank transactions, manipulations, calculations of percentages, etc., take place beyond our field of vision in computers, leaving behind but a trace on the screen, on a document, on a cheque.

\* Hand in hand with this, crime is also becoming aesthetic. In certain cases, a criminal need only own a computer and the right information to bring to life a very refined idea indeed.

\* The world's development is not determined by heavy industry, but rather by the information industry. The notion of capital has changed as compared to the time of Karl Marx – capital as the creative human labour force (Beuys), the circulation of money occurs in the same manner as information circulation (Lyotard).

\* Creatively-minded economists study aesthetics as well, writing economic studies based on it. Professor Guillet de Monthoux of the business administration department of Stockholm University divides his book into chapters on Kandinsky, Beuys and Schiller.

\* Beuys is the originator of the idea to found a business school where artists teach future businesspeople aesthetic systems. In business, as in

art, there are often no rules to follow – you must have creativity, intuition and good taste.

\* Business management and financing are spiritual activities, creation, by which, upon achieving success, you may experience a feeling called the sublime (pleasure and pain).

### **In conclusion**

The mutual approach of aesthetics and economics can, on the one hand, be interpreted as the logical result of the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, where the borders separating art and other disciplines and areas (science, philosophy, politics, industry, pornography, medicine, and so on) are constantly being erased.

On the other hand, doubt can be felt concerning all that is going on. We see how the world's processes are becoming constantly more refined, within which finding your way becomes complicated. In the case of the existence of such art are we not dealing with the sign that unhealthy tendencies are present in the economy – destruction of the world's irreplaceable natural resources is being considered in the name of split-second profit. Externally, the pseudonyms of contemporary artists may perform the play entitled "Success", yet are they not in fact quietly criticising the pointlessness of over-production and waste, while the majority of the world is suffering from need and under-production?

The Republic of Estonia, in its legislation has known how to unequivocally apply the process to benefit the state – artists are taxed as dealing in "small enterprise", regardless of the fact that the majority of *loca*/artists are playing the art game according to the old rules and the art market is practically non-existent.