

the art of commitment

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Introduction

In this text I defend the idea that art has a function and that the function of art is political.

I start by asking myself what is art? The various theories that I have found have made me reach the conclusion that it is pointless to try to define art. It does not matter what art is; we can decide that. What is important is the value art has for us. Its value depends on how it is used.

The idea of art for art's sake and that of artistic production as the reflection of the internal vision of the artist is relatively new. The function of art since prehistory has predominantly been that of advertising. Art has been and is consistently used by those in power as a tool for political propaganda.

With the arrival of photography, the function of art changes. The power, which nowadays is in the hands of big corporations and states, still uses visual production as a tool for political propaganda. Yet, the main visual output of our culture today, even though it is the art of the period, no longer comes from the arts world, but from the mass media, especially advertising. Art loses its main function but continues to serve those in power in the form of capitalism's perfect product.

Each system encourages in people the features that it needs to maintain itself and grow. The maintenance and strengthening of a system of power normally does not happen for the benefit of the people that compose it. Despite this, thanks to the technological advances in communication; today, people have a power of organisation and action that they have never had before.

The vacuum that art finds itself in is an opportunity for it to redefine itself. Art now has the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of society as a whole. What we value in art, its ability to enrich us as people, can now become its aim. It is time for art to commit.

What is art?

There are many ways of defining art. Hegel sees art as the 'sensual presentation of the Idea'¹. Since Duchamp, art is what the artist says it is.

However, even though some of the theories on what art is might seem contradictory, the truth is that they have a lot in common. To begin with, they are all based on the Western structure of thinking and, in addition, they all lead to the dead ends of either Platonic essentialism or the destruction of art.

Western thinking is based on axioms, ideas that are considered innate or metaphysical abstractions that are the base on which, by the use of reason and logic, the different disciplines of human knowledge are built. These disciplines (science, philosophy, art, history, etc.) are separated to make them manageable. But in reality human knowledge overlaps. This system of knowledge sees the world as something uniform, consistent and systematic. What falls within the system is considered to be 'reality', what does not, stays outside and does not exist. Truth is equated to a lack of contradiction.

We base thought on language and language is a human capacity that was developed much later than the senses. Art has prelinguistic and metalinguistic elements that we are not trained to decipher consciously. Obviously art does not exclude thought, concepts, or language, but these are not enough to apprehend a work of art.

Art is a human activity that we have created in our image, as we have done with our gods and our theories. Our definitions of art are also therefore based on the way we think.

One of the pillars of Western thought is Plato's work, particularly the theories concerning the separation of ideas (of superior value) and matter (of inferior value). This view of the material or physical world as an inferior copy of the ideal world influenced the foundation of monotheistic religions and the separation of body and soul, theory and practice.

Under the influence of Plato and Kant, "philosophical aesthetics supposes that there is a universal unchanging form called 'Art', which can be apprehended at any and every time".² Plato himself wanted to expel the artists from his ideal republic for being liars.

1 Graham, G. (1997) *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, p. 201.

2 Ibid, p. 182.

He said that if the idea was absolute and matter a less valuable representation of the idea, to represent matter was to deviate even further than matter from the original idea. For Plato, to represent the representation of an idea was perverse, because it lured people further away from the truth than they already were. Artists were therefore considered swindlers who confused people. Plato died too soon to experience conceptual art, which might have made him reconsider the exile of artists and maybe even to have given them a place in the aristocracy ruled (of course) by philosophers.

For Kant, the art object ought to have intrinsic beauty, value and significance, which differs from the extrinsic values, such as monetary value or circumstances of production³. Yet, no object exists outside its social context. Art practice, critique and institutions are social products, they have to be understood in their historical context. This is what the sociological approach to art defends. The main sociological theories are institutional, Marxist, structuralist and post-structuralist.⁴

Since Duchamp, art is what the artist says is art because of the authority of being an artist. By extension, institutional theory is what the art institutions define as art. In order not to self-implode, this theory requires the condition that the number of people that declare themselves artists and who confer to their work the status of art must be limited. If everyone in the world decided to be an artist and conferred to all their material and intellectual production the status of art, the concept of art would not make sense and would cease to exist. Institutional theory destroys art.

Marxism, taken to its logical conclusion, also implies the end of art, more than its mere revision. Marx himself did not write much about art. For him, a society of free and responsible people would generate its own aesthetic, different from that which we understand as art today. Art as we know it today is, according to Marxism, a false bourgeoisie abstraction that should be abandoned. Therefore there cannot be a theory about it.⁵

3 Collins, J. and Mayblin, B.(2000) *Introducing Derrida*. Cambridge: Icon Books, p. 140.

4 Graham, G. (1997) *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, p. 185. Sociology of art is a label that Graham uses for the group of theories including Marxist aesthetics, structuralism, critical theory, deconstructionism and postmodernism.

5 Based on the chapter: 'Marxism and the sociology of art'. *Ibid*, p. 185-190.

Structuralism does not destroy art but it falls into the Platonic trap when it tries to detect reality behind appearances. The universal and atemporal grammar that structuralism tries to find manifested in particular historical cultures is an adaptation of Plato's theory, in this case in the form of a structure and its manifestation.

On the other hand, post-structuralism not only falls into the Platonic trap, but it also destroys art. Post-structuralism, in theory, gets rid of the structure and proposes freedom and play through the use of deconstruction. If we take this theory to its logical conclusion, there is no incorrect interpretation and no distinction can be required of us. This includes the distinction between art and non-art or the discrimination between what is aesthetically valid and what it is not. To accept this line of thought makes art disappear. If there is no distinction between art and non-art there is no art. Moreover, post-structuralist thinking falls into the Platonic trap as well. The inadequate representation of reality implies that there is a reality.⁶

Postmodernism, with its proposition that we are free to discover beauty anywhere and not only in the objects traditionally considered art objects, might be the only theory that does not necessarily destroy art and escapes Platonic essentialism. The problem of postmodernism is, however, that it does not exist. It has not yet been realised. The arts world is still predominantly modernist, however much it pretends otherwise. Postmodernism destroys the authority of the arts world.

Even though, despite Kant's efforts, art objects have no limits, it is true that art needs to separate itself from non-art to continue existing. Art observes its surroundings and in the act of observing separates from it. If art eliminates this distance it cancels itself.

That is why, for any theory of art to exist, it has to be possible to distinguish between what is art and what is not. To distinguish between art and non-art does not need to be an attempt to unveil a metaphysical truth. This does not imply that the distinction can be applied randomly. What is artistically significant needs to be identified, which requires critical judgement.

⁶ Based on the chapter: 'Derrida, deconstruction and postmodernism'. Graham, G. (1997) *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, p. 193-198.

The problem of defining art is that when we say that something is art, we are at the same time describing it and evaluating it. Art needs to be defined in relative terms and norms need to be established to identify art. These norms can be altered, but only if doing so is an advance. There is little use in trying to discover a concept of art or to try to establish conditions that certain objects and activities need to fulfil to be considered art. What is important about art is not what it is, but the value that it has for us.⁷

The fact that for thousands of years the majority of cultures have attributed a special value to the activities considered art suggests that certain things that we call art have an enduring value. According to Schopenhauer, what art lets us see and understand about human experience is what gives it significance and value. Works of art are knowledge. According to Collingwood, on the contrary, the value of art resides in expression of feeling and not in a special apprehension of reality.⁸

Through art we understand beyond thought. Art heightens awareness of the world around us, it advances our understanding of human experience.⁹

The value of art is in its ability to enrich us as human beings. The value that art has for us derives from the use that we want to give it, that is, its function. If we accept that art is valuable for humanity and we expect it to enrich us as people, does this coincide with the use art has been given through history?

7 Based on the chapter: 'Normative theory of art'. Graham, G. (1997) *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge,, p. 199-203.

8 Ibid, p. 202.

9 Graham asks the question: "Is the function of art that of heightening awareness of the world around us?" in the chapter: 'Art and understanding'. Ibid, p. 44-65.

The function of art through history

Today we are used to understanding art as an ontological issue because of Kant's influence. The ideas of art as the expression of the inner vision of the artist and of art for art's sake prevail. In Plato's and Aristotle's time, however, the tradition was more evaluative than metaphysical. For Plato, the final evaluation of any work of art has to take into account the aims and values of society as a whole¹⁰. And certainly through history, artistic production has mainly had a political, religious and social purpose¹¹. Yet, it cannot be said that art has been used with the aims and values of society as a whole in mind. In general, the production of art has always been in the hands of power and it has been consistently used by the ruling classes as a tool for political propaganda. Its function has been advertising.

In the prehistoric period art was a magical instrument and its value was that of cult and ritual. Further on, during the ancient civilizations, its function expanded. To the ritual, ceremonial and magical function, the propagandistic value was added. Art was used to proclaim and show the power of kings and emperors.

The funerary monuments, palaces and temples, with their painted and sculpted reliefs, were made to convince the people of the divine and absolute origin of the power of the ruling class. The political message was: this system of power emanates from the gods, there is no possibility of change and wishing it is inconceivable.

In Europe, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Industrial Revolution, artistic production was almost exclusively in the hands of the church. The church, like the powers before it, also used art as an instrument of political propaganda. Cathedrals, stained glass windows, altarpieces, crucifixes, etc., were all designed with the same purpose in mind and their power of persuasion and intimidation on a mainly illiterate population was immense. The message was clear: the church represents God's will, accept the injustices on earth and you will go to heaven, protest and you will burn in hell.

10 Graham, G. (1997) *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge., p. 200-201. Graham quotes Beardsley, an American philosopher of art: "the dominant movement of Plato's thought about art, taking it all in all, is strongly moralistic in a broad sense... it insists that the final evaluation of any work of art ... must take into account the all important ends and values of the whole society."

11 Honour, H. and Fleming, J. (1999). *A World History of Art*. London: Laurence King Publishing. p. 25.

Later, when Europe starts to industrialise itself, the church and the aristocracy lose power in favour of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie takes over the use of art as a tool for propaganda. Artistic production directed by the bourgeoisie was mainly composed of oil paintings, ideal for proclaiming the material wealth and superior morality of the ruling class¹². The message of their propaganda was similar to the ones before: our values represent the good, to follow them gets the reward of social and economic success.

With photography the function of art changes. The art for art's sake proclamation is born. Photography becomes the new way of representing what we understand as reality. Reproduction techniques substituted art for a language of images¹³. Art loses authority and, even when it claims to deal with what we call reality, becomes increasingly self referential.

The main discipline within the language of images that substitutes old art is advertising. Advertising is the continuation of the art before photography both in its role as the main visual production tool of this culture as in its use by power as a tool for political propaganda.

Today, the bourgeoisie has lost power in favour of big corporations and states. This new power, like all former ones, uses art with political purposes. Again, as before, the message of corporations and states is simple: market economies are the way to happiness and welfare, all other alternatives are doomed to failure and go against human nature.

So what place does what we currently think of as art have today? The art of the past, to save itself, claimed that its only aim was itself, art for art's sake. This way it found a place in the machinery of the new power, it became the perfect product of capitalism.

Art was never a basic need. When it lost its political function the only way of selling it was to mystify it. To mystify art serves two purposes: on one hand it obscures the propagandistic use of art in the past and on the other it creates a product that is perfect for market speculation.

The market promotes the idea that the price of the art object reflects its spiritual value. But objects do not have spiritual value, but material value. To pretend otherwise is to

12 Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books, p. 90.

13 This idea of a language of images replacing old art is crucial in understanding advertising as the new art. *Ibid*, p. 33.

surround them by a false religiosity¹⁴. Because the main purpose of the art object today is to be a product, its emphasis is on its exhibition value, its rarity, and the price it reaches in the market.

The mystification of the visual arts is needed in order to speculate with products that are not of necessity and that reach huge prices. Kant's philosophy about the intrinsic value of the object independently of the context, is an idea still very present both inside and outside artistic circles, and backs the mystification of the artistic object.

The fact that advertising is the art of the culture that we live in is hidden for two reasons. One is that propaganda depends on its invisibility to work, and so the production of images is used to promote the idea that nothing has changed¹⁵. The other is that the perfect product is used by the market to give credibility to the system.

It does not matter that advertising is not recognised as the art of the moment. In prehistory the emphasis of art was placed in its cult value, as a magical instrument. Only later would these objects be recognised as art¹⁶. Something similar happens with advertising, which is also a sort of magical instrument and is not considered art either. It can be said that art has always been used as an instrument of magic, it has always contained a promise, which has always been false. The church promised heaven, the bourgeoisie success, corporations promise happiness.

The aura of the object did not disappear, as Benjamin said, with the methods of mechanical reproduction. It was the art object, with aura included, which disappeared from old art to reappear in the new art, advertising, in the concept of a product and its branding.

The function of art in each period feeds from former functions. Thus, the ritual function of prehistory has continued in all following functions, even if to a lesser degree. The same is true of mystification, still present in advertising, even if it is not its main function. To the different functions of art visual languages are also added, these get reinterpreted and give credibility and a sort of lineage to the contemporary visual language. That way

14 Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books, p. 21.

15 Ibid, p. 33: "Yet very few people are aware of what has happened because the means of reproduction are used nearly all the time to promote the illusion that nothing has changed except that the masses, thanks to reproductions, can now begin to appreciate art as the cultural minority once did."

16 Benjamin, W. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

advertising uses references to the art before it to suggest cultural authority, some kind of dignity and even wisdom and to place itself over mere material interests¹⁷.

The current context

Today in the West we live in an advanced capitalist market economy. This system is based on the relationship between supply and demand and on the specialised nature of the production of goods and knowledge.

After the fall of communism, capitalism has managed to establish itself as the only option. It is so unquestioned that even the term capitalism has ceased to be used, as apparently the alternatives have dissolved. It could be said that we have internalised capitalism to the point that we do not need to talk about it any more. Capitalism is equated to the reality of human condition and any suggestion towards the possibility of an alternative is labelled naïve or utopian.

But, is it true that capitalism is a reflection of human nature or, on the contrary, has it permeated so totally that it has modified human nature?

For a system to work without friction, to maintain itself and grow, the people that form it must internalise the features that the system encourages. The capitalist system depends on the constant growth and renewal of demand. Yet the need for products has a limit, so the demand has to be created. Capitalism needs people to consume more and more while at the same time needing them to want to consume the same things. For production to be profitable the needs and tastes have to be standardised and they have to be easy to influence and anticipate.

To hide the fact that the majority is exploited and manipulated, capitalism needs to create illusions. The more advanced the technology and communications, the bigger the need to create illusions. The main tool to create and strengthen illusions is the media, advertising in particular. As through Western history, the production of images is used by power to create illusions, as a tool for political propaganda to control people. Before photography that was the function of art, now it is the function of advertising.

17 Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books, p. 135: "But a work of art also suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest".

The main illusion encouraged by the capitalist system is that people are free and independent because they live in a democracy.

For people to feel free and independent while allowing themselves to be directed and to fit without friction into the social machinery, which are two contradictory concepts, they have to be convinced that they like doing what they are supposed to do, that they choose it freely.

For a capitalist society to maintain the illusion that it is the only possible system it must replace the need for social change with a desire for a change in products and images.

The freedom to consume a great variety of products is equated to freedom itself.

Advertising turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. It helps to mask and compensate for the lack of democracy in society¹⁸.

In addition, for people to keep consuming, false standards, attainable only through consuming, need to be generated. The function of advertising is to make people feel dissatisfied with their way of living, to envy the improved alternative of themselves that is offered to them through the purchase of products.

Today, the pursuit of individual happiness is considered a universal right. Despite the fact that advertising promises happiness and that the majority of people are not happier buying, advertising does not lose credibility. This is because advertising is about social relations, not objects¹⁹. Advertising feeds on the anxiety that is generated by lack of freedom in the current system and is directed towards the hidden desires of people, basing its strategies on Freud's theories of the unconscious²⁰.

It is difficult to believe that we are manipulated to such a degree because we have learnt to assume that, because we live in democracies, we can choose. We prefer to think that we consume because we want to and that no one manipulates us because, if we were to

18 Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books, p. 148-149.

19 Ibid, p. 132-133. "Publicity is never a celebration of a pleasure-in-itself. Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he-might-be enviable? The envy of others. Publicity is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour."

20 Bernays, E. (1928) *Propaganda*. New York: Ig Publishing. Bernays was Freud's nephew and used the theories about unconscious desires to develop advertising techniques. He believed that the masses were irrational and incapable of responsible political action and that by making them direct their energies towards buying, horrors like Nazism would be avoided.

discover the opposite, we would use our power in the next elections to change things. Yet, current Western democracies do not give power to people. Advanced technology allows greater collective organisation as an alternative to the polls. In practice, however, this power of organisation is rarely used politically.

Democracy is believed to be rational and to represent the will of the people. However, current democracies encourage irrationality, the evasion of social responsibility and ignore the will of the voters. They do it through the structure itself.

Current democracies do not reward rationality nor the effort to build a constructive criteria for the benefit of majority, because they value every vote equally. They include and exclude randomly from the democratic process, giving preference, for example, to an ignorant and indifferent adult over a 16 year old person with perfectly valid and rational propositions. By valuing over everything the decision of the majority, they allow the violation of human rights and turn into a mere question of numbers. Numbers that, although they represent people, never give them real decision making power, as power is dissipated through its distribution. Even if each vote had a certain amount of power, because current democracies are not direct, we will never know what the people that we choose to represent us will do in our name. There is the risk that they decide to act against the will of their voters. Such was the case in the United Kingdom and Spain with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In cases such as this, the power is not the people's.²¹

How the current context shapes people

The main symptom of the current system in people is the loss of the ability to discriminate. To distinguish between the essential and the insignificant is very difficult in this society.

On one hand, the media and technology produce a fast, constant and varied stimulation of the nervous system. Physiologically, the effect is that of a mental saturation that reduces our ability to discern. We perceive the different stimuli, but the value that we attribute to them is the same.

21 A more detailed version of the theoretical problems of democracy can be found in Graham, G. (2002) *The Internet: a philosophical inquiry*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, p. 71-82. Although this book focuses on the Internet, the argumentation is valid in general.

The media promote a cultural phenomenon known as ‘illusory reality’. Virtual reality in games and the internet, the cult of fame, reality shows, public confessions, etc., contribute to the confusion between the real and the imaginary. Theories on what is real apart, this confusion between fiction and life also reduces our ability to discern between the important and the superfluous.

Advertising encourages this confusion, as it allows it to give importance precisely to the superfluous. Also, advertising suggests a future that is incessantly postponed, it excludes the present and eliminates all possibility of development²². This has a paralysing effect on people, which is strengthened by the inability to establish priorities.

The inability to distinguish between the significant and the insignificant which is translated into the inability to establish priorities, is also reinforced by the internalisation of the specialisation of the methods of production. The specialisation in the methods of production, be it physical or intellectual goods, prioritises the detail over the general, the personal over the group. This makes us lose perspective of society as a whole, so we do not feel responsible for what we do not see, or do not feel close to. Sometimes we are not even capable of seeing ourselves as a whole. This lack of perspective also effects how we establish priorities.

The supply and demand model has extended to all spheres of life, from work and family to sexual life. People see each other as products and experience their lives as an investment that should give them the greatest possible benefit under existing market conditions²³. The pleasure of consuming substitutes other pleasures.

22 Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books. p. 153: “Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it.”

23 The idea of Capitalism shaping the character of people can be found in Fromm, E. (1995) *The Art of Loving*. London: Thorsons, p. 67. “Modern Capitalism needs men who co-operate smoothly and in large numbers; who want to consume more and more; and whose tastes are standardised and can be easily influenced and anticipated. It needs men who feel free and independent, not subject to any authority or principle or conscience – yet willing to be commanded, to do what is expected of them, to fit into the social machine without friction; who can be guided without force, led without leaders, prompted without aim – except the one to make good, to be on the move, to function, to go ahead. [...] What is the outcome? Modern man is alienated from himself, from his fellow men, and from nature. He has been transformed into a commodity, experiences his life forces as an investment which must bring him the maximum profit obtainable under existing market conditions.”

This reduced ability to establish priorities based on what is important and what is not, and experiencing life as an investment, together with the contempt of rationality encouraged by the democratic ideal, favour the cult of opinion, in detriment of criteria based on knowledge. The democratic ideal also encourages the idea that rationality is normal and that what is normal is true. This supposition is false.

The idea of truth for us, if not for all then at least for many, is more comfortable than the idea of truth itself. Thus, often we use opinion when we do not have knowledge.

Because opinion is personal and subjective, we experience diverging opinions as personal attacks. Influenced by the democratic ideal, we tend to value all opinions the same, whether they are based on well founded criteria or not.

However, despite the fact that we fit within the system without friction, we are also aware that social conditions are unfair. This contradiction makes us feel powerless. What we are and what we would like to be, does not coincide, not when we see the injustice around us nor when we believe the message of advertising.

Sometimes this contradiction makes us act. Often we continue life submissive. A submissive character is a mutilated character, whether it fits or not with the needs of a system²⁴.

The arts world in the current context

Academic discourse and artistic production are a reflection of what surrounds them. The people that form the arts world, have obviously also internalised the needs of the system in which they live and have developed theories that adapt to that system.

Exceptionally, a revolutionary theory such as postmodernism is produced. Postmodernism is to art what socialism is to politics: a good idea that nobody seems to know how to apply in practice. Postmodernism claims that we are free to discover beauty everywhere, and not only in the objects that are considered art. The arts world tries to tame the concept and pretend it is not there, because postmodernism destroys the authority of the arts world on the subject of beauty and aesthetic significance.

24 This idea of the submissive character as a mutilated character can be found in Fromm, E. (1981) *Sobre la desobediencia*. Barcelona: Paidós, p. 27.

However, the arts world had already lost this authority when it stopped being the instrument of propaganda of the system. Beauty was the only concept the arts world retained any authority on, after the art for art's sake claim, but postmodernism came and dissolved the authority that was left.

Photographic documentation and its use in the media snatched the authority that the arts world had over the concept of truth. Beauty was liberated by postmodernism. Advertising is the authority on subjects like taste, form, status, etc. By declaring that the only aim of art is art itself, the arts world dismisses its lost authority on these subjects as irrelevant.

The art for art's sake claim, which includes socially committed art (which is why it does not work), saved the arts world when it saw its existence threatened by photography. But the walls that it built became a prison. From its golden cage art pretends to be rebellious, it refuses to see itself as the perfect product that it is: elitist, empty and superfluous.

If art is not interested in truth, which it does not want to see, has nothing to say about beauty, and does not admit any other function that is not that of self perpetuation, does it make any sense that it continues existing?

In the world of art the lack of significant artistic criteria is perhaps even more acute than the lack of criteria in the rest of society, precisely because art declared itself as a luxury item.

Within the arts world, the analysis of the quality of objects that are declared art objects, appears to be missing. It seems politically incorrect to say that an artwork is good and why. Even in elitist artistic circles floats the fear of taking responsibility for an opinion and defending it with arguments based on knowledge.

The Socratic maxim that the more one knows the more one knows that one knows nothing is probably not the motive behind such lack of willingness to decide what one considers artistically significant. Rather that the arts world, in general, is confused and is scared of what it perceives as its irrelevance. As with any fear, the reaction of the arts world is defensive. The artistic jargon is more and more convoluted, each time more has to be studied to learn that beauty is everywhere and that the artistically significant is decided by the market, based on the price that can be obtained for a given artistic product.

Perhaps for fear of contradicting the market, the arts world learns from advertising and promotes amongst its members the anxiety not of not having, but of not understanding. The accusation of not understanding what a work of art is about hangs heavy over artists and critics heads, threatening to fall. (Is it full of coal or paper?).

The reaction to this permanent anxiety is, again, defensive, and hides behind opinion. If we do not have criteria at least we have opinion. It is our democratic right. Thus, artistic criteria gets reduced to 'I like it' or 'I don't', 'It works for me. I buy it.'

The artist

Despite the fact that the traditional figure of the artist has personified the power of seeing and making visible, the truth is that most artists through history have seen and have made visible what they have been told to. Western artistic production is in general homogenous, conformist and compliant. The arts world, after being substituted as the propaganda tool of power, continued to serve the ruling class by the production of luxury goods with an infinite potential for speculation in the market. Today, to commit to the art for art's sake claim is to politically commit to the maintenance and strengthening of the market economies and to the condemnation of the arts world to irrelevance.

Thanks to technological advances and to the civil rights movements, today in the West, people have more power than ever before. At the same time, never before has the propaganda machinery been so systematically unleashed in order to prevent people from using that power.

As people, artists are trapped in the same contradiction as the rest, living in a society that they recognise as unfair, on which they depend and whose values they have internalised. Generally, as with the rest of people, artists tend to go with the system. Sometimes however, they rebel.

There have always been rebellious artists for whom seeing and making visible what they were told by the power was not enough. In fact, looking at the history of art, the artists that are valued are precisely the ones that did more than just be an instrument.

These rebellious artists generally committed to their ideas and defended them. They worked for their freedom with its associated responsibility. Freedom and responsibility

are two concepts that go hand in hand. When we feel social responsibility we commit politically. Political commitment derives from social responsibility.

The art of commitment

Artistic practice exists within a context and uses elements that have a historical, political and social dimension. When we make art we establish a set of priorities and we confer importance to a series of elements. Each choice positions our work in the world. Artwork defining itself as apolitical is like people defining themselves as apolitical. They do not exist. It is not necessary for artists to be aware of the political dimension of their work for the work to have it.

It is undeniable that the language of the visual arts is politically effective. If it were not, art would not have been used as a tool for political propaganda for centuries. However, for a work of art to be politically effective it has to be coherent with itself.

A politically committed art is an art that is conscious of itself and of the political dimension of the world. Committed art is a comment. Traditionally, this comment has been in the form of the proposal of an alternative to the society that we live in or a negation of the established order.

Commitment in art is not in the content, but in the form. Art with an openly political message becomes mere propaganda and the information is assimilated according to the stereotypes and prejudices of the viewer. Personal experience is the only way of transforming our consciousness to inspire us to take responsibility, and the typical reaction in front of a work of art is aesthetic.²⁵ Therefore, it is in the aesthetic experience that any reaction has to occur.

The content is inevitably trapped in the form, that is, the set of techniques, rules, subjects, styles, etc., that a given historical context generates. When the form is intelligible it becomes comfortable, whatever the content. Therefore, it is the form that determines the work of art, and a work of art cannot express non conventional ideas if it uses conventional means of expression. The form wins over the content and if the content contradicts the

25 Parreño, J. M. *Contra un arte por compromiso*.

form it gets sterilised²⁶. The rebellion against the form makes artistic quality suffer.

Art does not enrich us if it tells us a story that we already know. The new propositions in ways of seeing and understanding human nature and the environment are what makes art advance. For art to develop it needs to be capable of looking beyond the system of which it is part, it has to dare to look. To develop, art needs to be capable of leaving the institutional frame behind.

Politically committed art is a subject that systematically generates discomfort within artistic circles. The reaction to the proposition that art should contribute to make the world a better place is generally defensive. Any allusion towards the power of art to improve the world that breaks with the established system is met with accusations of naivety or even stupidity. Generally the reply is that to have a political effect is beyond the reach of art. Yet, it is obvious that art is politically effective, as is proved by the use it has been given by the ruling classes for thousands of years. The discomfort might come, not from disagreeing with the proposition itself, but from what it implies: commitment.

Commitment is an action, it does not have content. Although we also commit when we agree with prevailing ideas, it does not feel like commitment because it is easier to go with the flow than to break new ground. Yet agreeing also implies a commitment, even if less noticed. Not to commit politically to anything is to commit, by default, with the status quo.

Now that art is no longer the official propaganda tool of the system, it has the opportunity to explore new ways to work for the enrichment of society as a whole and not only to serve a few. It is time for art to commit.

26 Based on Adorno's ideas in Adorno, T. (1977) *Commitment*. In: *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso.

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