

Art and Politics

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Between Purity and Propaganda

Joes Segal

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Introduction

In an interview from 1962, the American Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman reviewed the meaning of his abstract artwork: '[Art critic] Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly, it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism.' What is striking about this statement is not just that Newman apparently saw his abstract art as a tool to help defeat political systems, but also that he, in the heat of the Cold War, rejected both American 'state capitalism' and Soviet 'totalitarianism.'

In the meantime, the US State Department, supported by the United States Information Agency (USIA) since 1953, had aided, mostly behind the scenes, the organization of a series of traveling exhibitions of American art outside the United States. The idea was to showcase the high quality and diversity of contemporary American art in order to convince an international public of the open, tolerant and progressive character of American society. Among the traveling works were paintings by Newman. The American government used his work to engage in soft diplomacy or, to put it more crudely, in cultural propaganda. However, the works by Newman and other abstract American painters were not very popular among conservative critics and politicians. Congressman George Dondero (Rep., Michigan) even recognized in these incomprehensible and 'ugly' works a communist conspiracy, organized by the Soviet Union in order to destabilize American society. According to American politicians, the works of Barnett Newman, with their anti-capitalist *and* anti-communist intention,

exemplified true American values *and* posed a subversive communist threat.

Newman's example illustrates that the relations between art and politics are seldom straightforward. Even when the artist has well-defined ideas about the political meaning of his or her work, critics can interpret it in a radically different way. Moreover, politicians and government agencies may project their own ideas, interests and fears on artworks. This is due to the fact that the visual arts cannot easily be reduced to unambiguous statements or clear-cut arguments. Even the interpretation of a photograph, in itself a mechanical and 'objective' reproduction of everyday reality, derives its meaning in large part from 'subjective' elements like perspective, framing, lighting, focus, timing, caption and contextual presentation. In the visual arts the subjective element tends to be even stronger, because most artists do not aim to 'represent reality.' In the course of world art history, they have abstracted, idealized, romanticized, criticized and ridiculed this reality in every conceivable way.

Moreover, the interpretation of art is seldom unambiguous. This is understandable when we realize that we interpret visual images on the basis of a shared knowledge of interpretative traditions. Iconography, the sub-field of art history dealing with the symbolic meaning of visual motives, reconstructs historical meaning that is for us no longer self-evident or even comprehensible, because social, religious or cultural changes have disentangled the relation between image and traditional interpretation. On the other hand, the artist has the power to develop or refine existing traditions, or to appropriate them in accordance with his own views. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, the idea of an artistic avant-garde took root in parts of Europe: an art that would do justice to the quick

and radical changes of ‘modernization.’ Exactly because these avant-garde artists consciously separated themselves from well-defined artistic traditions, which they believed had lost their topical meaning, they could no longer rely on traditional associations between image and interpretation. This naturally implied a loss of guidance for the art public. Interpreting modern art became an adventure.

The essays in this book focus on one specific aspect of artistic interpretation: the political meaning of art. This meaning is in no way restricted to artworks with a declared political intention. The most interesting cases tend to be those works which at first sight are politically ambiguous or have no political meaning at all. According to the dominant view of post-war Western art history, modern art is considered ‘pure’ and ‘autonomous.’ American art critic and art historian Clement Greenberg expressed this idea in a very principled way: the ultimate aim of modern art is fundamental research into its own means of visual expression. Art, on the other hand, that is not self-referential but refers to external reality, real or imagined, should be dismissed as pseudo-art or kitsch.²

Although hardly ever expressed in such polemical terms, most reference books on modern art are clearly informed by Greenberg’s view, for instance in their sketching a ‘logical’ development towards abstract art and in their lack of interest in figurative and, for that matter, non-Western art forms. To this day, reference books in which Socialist Realist art receives the same attention as modern art are sparse. That is in no way self-evident: interesting and important artworks have also been produced in socialist regimes. In this collection of essays I use another perspective by analyzing the political implications of the very idea of a pure and apolitical modern art.

Why this book? Surprisingly, there are not many publications that explicitly focus on the multiform relations between art and politics in an international perspective. Historical studies tend to emphasize historical ruptures and preferably use the visual arts to illustrate such moments of fundamental change and discontinuity. Art historians, on the other hand, are less inclined to 'reduce' artworks to their historical context, but tend to emphasize the evolution of artistic styles and ideas as a dynamic process of action and reaction within the more or less autonomous realm of 'art.' In these essays I try to combine both approaches by focusing on the often complex and even paradoxical relations between art and politics. My thesis is that any attempt to define a clear opposition between 'political' art on the one hand and 'pure' or 'autonomous' art on the other, is fundamentally flawed, because these are theoretical concepts that do not reflect historical reality. In this sense, my approach differs from most other books on art and politics.³

The aim of this book is to find out how the visual arts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have related to political dreams and realities. On the basis of seven case studies I want to explore how artworks can express, illustrate, support, construct, qualify, criticize or subvert political ideas, ideals and ideologies; and, vice versa, how they have been and are being used, directed, contested, dismissed, censored or reinterpreted by politicians and others. As Barnett Newman's example clearly shows, art's political meaning is constructed at various levels. Four of these will be prominently addressed in this book: artistic intention; critical reception; art historical and historical contextualization; and political use or abuse. In other words: what does the artist want to express with his or her work; how is it interpreted by professional critics and

the art public at large; how is it presented as part of a meaningful (art) historical process; and how is it deployed by politicians, governments and secret agencies to serve political interests? A complicating factor is of course that critics, (art) historians and politicians may have radically different viewpoints among themselves. Even the seemingly unambiguous level of 'artistic intention' can be problematic, as artists might not have a clear opinion about the political content of their work, might adjust their ideas according to the political circumstances, or might develop ideas that cannot be reduced to any political meaning whatsoever.

The concept of 'art' itself is far from unambiguous and constantly subject to more or less (un)inspiring attempts to define it. The borders between art and visual culture are hotly contested within the relatively new academic discipline of Visual Culture Studies, and increasingly within the more traditional Art History departments worldwide as well, and the same holds true for the traditional borders between 'high culture' and 'low culture.' This is a positive development, in my view, as the social and political meaning of visual culture is not restricted to the traditional domain of 'visual art.' However, in this book I take a pragmatic stance and focus on those visual works that played a significant role in the discussions on political identity and ideology. Commercial advertisements, traffic lights, and selfies posted on Facebook are therefore not to be found in this book.

The essays cover the years 1914-2014 and specifically focus on the role of art in times of political tension, crisis or rupture. At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, an important transformation took place in Western art. Influenced by the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolutions, history came to be

viewed as a process that was not primarily steered by fate or providence but by human intervention. This belief in human agency informed a series of competing utopian and ideological fantasies of a better or ideal future in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thanks to the rise of public museums, exhibitions, and an art market that became accessible to a rapidly growing number of people, many artists were less dependent on traditional commissions from the Church, the Court, and the aristocracy. Some of them served the growing tide of popular nationalism, others expressed social critique in their work or severed the ties with artistic traditions they believed were no longer able to express the modern sense of life. In short, the artist became part of public discourse.

However, it is not without reason that this book starts in 1914. With the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, the worlds of art and politics almost completely merged for the first time. All over Europe, artists volunteered for military service, supported the national cause with artworks and pamphlets, and all of a sudden publicly identified with an art history rewritten along exclusively nationalist lines. The war immensely reinforced a tendency to define the art world in terms of bipolar oppositions, a phenomenon that would define much of twentieth-century art history. Public debates during the First World War focused on national art vs. 'internationalism'; in Adolf Hitler's Third Reich national art was opposed to 'degenerate' art. During the Cold War, Western art critics and art historians played out the free, autonomous, pure, and modern art of Western democracies against the visual propaganda or 'kitsch' produced under state socialism; in the socialist world, on the other hand, future-oriented artistic engagement at home was confronted with formalism and 'bourgeois

decadence' in Western capitalist art. In all these cases, the struggle against the artistic Other implied a fight against the internal enemy: those artists and critics who identified with art forms now associated with the external enemy. In short: since the First World War, art has become a means to 'measure' political identity. The very structure of these debates show remarkable parallels in completely different historical contexts, as I will try to show.

The seven case studies in this book discuss the First World War, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, the Third Reich, the Cold War, the People's Republic of China, African-American artist Kara Walker, and public monuments in the post-socialist states of the former Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union. These topics exemplify different intriguing aspects of the interaction between art and politics. The first chapter takes a close look at the public debates on art and identity in France and Germany between 1914 and 1918 and makes the point that, paradoxically, there were strong parallels in the way both countries started to present their own art as 'truly national.' In the second essay, I describe the dilemmas which confronted communist painter Diego Rivera in the 1920s and 1930s when he accepted commissions from the anticommunist Mexican governments and from American capitalists. The next chapter, about the Third Reich, highlights the absurdities of a strict watershed between 'good' and 'evil' in the world of art, and places the discussion in a broader historiographic perspective. The fourth case study focuses on the early years of the Cold War in the Soviet Union and the United States, analyzing the discrepancies between national and international art politics in both countries and their striking parallels, in spite of unbridgeable ideological differences. The following chapter juxtaposes the art world in the People's Republic of

China under Mao Zedong with the radically different situation that gradually emerged after Mao's death in 1976 as a consequence of far-reaching economic reforms. The politics of artistic story-telling and the dynamics of 'minority' versus 'mainstream art' are discussed in the following essay on Kara Walker, whose works, referencing American slave history, have met with a wide range of extreme responses. The final chapter relates the fate of socialist public monuments after the regime changes of 1989-1991 in the countries of the former Eastern bloc. What happened to these monuments, how did their meaning change in a completely different political environment, which monuments were destroyed, what came in their place? In the Conclusion, I take up the central question about artistic purity and propaganda, and try to pinpoint the relevance of the seven case studies for our understanding of the interaction between art and politics since the early twentieth century.

The selection of these seven topics is largely subjective. It would have been possible, for instance, to write about the intricate relationship between Italian Fascism and Futurism, to discuss the artistic repercussions of the Spanish Civil War, or to analyze the tensions between artistic regionalism and federalism in former Yugoslavia. It would also have been interesting to speak about the clash between modern, socialist and religious imagery in 1970s Iran, to confront the competing art traditions of North and South Korea, or to analyze the various constructions of artistic identity in post-apartheid South Africa. The options are manifold. My choice is based on a combination of expertise and the development of a rich and more or less coherent argument.

The respective case studies are organized around different questions, and these questions impact the choice of source material. For instance, in the first chapter about

World War I, my argument is largely based on the contemporary art debates in France and Germany, in the second chapter on Diego Rivera I make extensive use of biographical studies, whereas in the chapter about the Third Reich I mainly focus on the art political structures and ideology in theory and practice. The aim of these case studies is not to construct an idealized matrix of different forms of interaction between art and politics. Starting from a number of radically different cases, my hope is to convey a deeper insight into the sometimes tragic, sometimes (tragi)comic parallels, contradictions and misunderstandings between both worlds.

Although this book is limited in size, it covers a wide field. I am well aware of the risks this entails. Behind the concise case studies lies a world of complex and intense academic debates that cannot possibly be summarized in all their nuances and intricacies. Nevertheless, I hope that I have somehow succeeded in integrating the essence of these discussions where directly relevant to my broader argument. Of course I take full responsibility for the content, but not without thanking a few people who have been enormously helpful during the writing and translating process. The concept for this book was developed from a series of university courses I presented at my former home university, Utrecht University, as well as at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Stimulating discussions with students both in the Netherlands and in the United States helped me to further develop my ideas. My friends Ruurd Bakker, Job Creyghton, Patrick Dassen, Joris van Eijnatten and Sophia Zürcher provided me with very useful comments and criticism. I am grateful for their time, commitment and sagacity. Conversations with Marieke Drost, who invited me to present some of my ideas on Dutch national radio

in a series of three interviews, have been a great source of inspiration. Marjolijn Voogel and Inge van der Bijl from Amsterdam University Press critically read the original Dutch manuscript in its preparatory phase and helped me a lot with their enthusiasm and good advice. Chantal Nicolaes, Jasmijn Zondervan and Toon Vugts were of great help during the production phase of the Dutch version. I wrote the English translation of this book in Los Angeles, where I have been working as Chief Curator of the Wende Museum of the Cold War since September 2014. I am very thankful again to Amsterdam University Press, and to Inge van der Bijl and Chantal Nicolaes in particular, for their trust and support in realizing the English translation. My friends Debra Marlin and Donna Stein helped me a lot with their critical comments on the first draft of the English version; Jessica Hoffmann did a wonderful job in very thoughtfully reviewing the whole manuscript. Justinian Jampol, Executive Director of the Wende Museum, was a great source of help and inspiration throughout the process. Last but not least, this book would never have been written without Patricia and Semna, the two most important people in my life.

1. Positive and Negative Integration

The First World War in France and Germany

Exuberant crowds in the streets of London, Paris, Berlin and St. Petersburg define our image of the early days of World War I. Countless photos document the impassioned way Europe's urban populations greeted the war in those days. Not everyone was happy. Recent studies have shown that especially among workers and the agrarian population, anxiety and skepticism might have been predominant. These feelings were, however, largely absent among the urban middle classes and the political, intellectual and cultural elites. For many years, conservatives and die-hard nationalists had pressed for a 'purifying war' to enhance the nation's international power status, to release its vital energy and, last but not least, to exorcise the forces behind the alleged cultural crisis and decadence of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. But also liberals, social democrats, national minorities and even former pacifists expressed their full support for the national cause, albeit mostly in a somewhat less exalted fashion. They all recognized the moment of truth.

Visual artists did everything to carry the moment. Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Max Beckmann, Paul Klee and Otto Dix served in the army, August Macke, Franz Marc and Albert Weisgerber died in battle, Oskar Kokoschka was severely wounded. Forty-seven-year-old Henri Matisse protested the fact that he was considered too old for active service; Pablo Picasso, who as a Spaniard living in Paris did not directly participate in the war, painted a still-life