

Institutional Change, the Concept of the Avant-Garde and the Example of Graffiti

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ABSTRACT. Despite originating from a desire to historicise and contextualise our understanding of what counts as art, the institutional theory of art has tended to characterise the artworld as a static body that is immune from substantive political change. In this paper I will argue that the concept of the avant-garde is an essential tool in understanding institutional practice in the artworld. Specifically, the concept of the avant-garde supplements the static institutional account of the artworld with an emphasis on changing and dynamic practice and theory. To that effect, I will focus on the changed status achieved by graffiti in recent decades. No longer is graffiti regarded as mere vandalism, it is now often regarded as a potential legitimate instance of art. This change can be seen in the increased commercialization of graffiti but also in the increased institutionalization of graffiti practice. This process has currently developed to the degree where graffiti is now identified as “street-art” and allocated a position within the narrative of art history. By insisting on the role of the avant-garde as central to the operation of the artworld we are able to treat of such developments and provide a more robust account of the artworld.

“When modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them” (Plato, 2004: Book IV, § 424c, p. 121).

1. The Institution

Initially defined by Arthur Danto, the concept of the “artworld” is characterized in this way: “to see something as art requires something the eye

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cannot descry — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (Danto, 1964: p. 580). The institutional theory of art can be seen as an attempt to approach aesthetics in terms of social and historical frames of reference. “What makes the piece art?” (Danto, 1964: p. 580) asks Danto, and the answer, simply put, is that the piece in question is in a gallery. In other words, something is art by virtue of its location in the artworld.

Danto uses the example of handmade artefacts to explain this claim. The idea of something being handmade as crucial to it being art was clearly subject to reconsideration in the work of Duchamp, Warhol etc. Once Duchamp’s ready-mades, for example, are displayed in galleries, the idea of art as something that is essentially handmade founders. Consequently, for Danto, the key common feature of art is not any essential feature of the work (for example, its readymade or handmade status) but rather, its status in relation to the artworld. For Danto acceptance in a gallery is acceptance of a theory of art by the artworld, and such work being considered as art. Instead of any essential or material quality Danto maintains, “museums, connoisseurs and others are [the] makeweights in the Artworld” (Danto, 1964: p. 584). Where Danto talks of makeweights Ekeberg talks of “prime movers” (in Mörtmann, 2006: p. 136). While in the words of Douglas, “Institutions do the classifying” (Douglas, 1987: p. 91).

Danto, in short, regards the artworld (through galleries, class ownership, critics, auctions etc.) as that which validates and sets the legitimate codes of interpretation and by extension economic value of pieces as art. Pierre Bourdieu develops the role of social class further. In *The Love of Art* (1990 [1969]) Bourdieu argues that the museum is overwhelmingly attended by the “cultivated classes”. As such, the art institution is one that reinforces class distinctions. Institutional theory offers us a macro-economic analysis of the aesthetic. By economic I refer to the production, distribution and the exchange of art goods and art services and the reception of these products.

Steven Davies offers a useful definition of the institutional theory’s approach to art: “To be an artwork, an artefact must be appropriately placed within a web of practices, roles, and frameworks that comprise an informally organised institution, the artworld” (Davies, 2006: p. 38). It follows that any significant procedural change to the operation of the artworld,

such as the advent of new aesthetic practices, needs to be tracked to provide the most robust account of the institutional theory of art. The central philosophical problem as we shall see with the institutional theory of art is the fact that the inevitable nature of change is not accounted for. In other words, the problem that the theory of the institution presents is that the scope for subversion is omitted. In the words of Bydler, “the institutional frames are fields where subject-positions are mapped out” (Bydler, 2004: p. 21).

2. *Graffiti as Street-Art*

If the artworld were that place where the being of art is clarified, subversion would appear to offer the potential for an understanding of the ontology of art as something that is necessarily subject to a changing economy. That the role of subversion affects the normative appreciation of art and the epistemological account of art, not to mention the functional realm of art within the artworld is also clear. Yet, to situate subversion of the artworld at the centre of the description of the artworld is to give subversion immense ontological importance.

The artworld all too often is understood in terms of its traditional locations; the museum/the gallery etc. While the physical institution is no doubt central to the operation of the artworld, this is a consideration only in terms of the art gallery and overlooks the whole operation of the artworld. The tendency among philosophers has been to align through both history and theory the museum to the prison. However, like the prison the hard exterior masks a certain life that exists within and around the institution. These sites of incarceration may be behemoths but they still live. Dictionaries may be called the graveyards of language, but the theory of the artworld should not be reduced to such a level. The artworld lives like language lives. Such dynamism is seen in subversion.

Currently graffiti is the exemplar of subversive aesthetic practice insofar as it undermines distinctions crucial to the operation of the artworld. It is worth focusing, for a moment, on the limited scope of this claim. Graffiti is, I argue, the “current exemplar” of institutional subversion. I am not claiming that this is a position that graffiti will, or even can, maintain. Nor am I claiming that, despite its long history of institutional confrontation,

graffiti is the exemplar par excellence of aesthetic subversion. Rather I am claiming that graffiti is a useful example of the role of subversion itself in relation to the operation of the artworld. This is most clearly seen when we consider the movement from graffiti to so-called “street-art”.

Graffiti is a marking of the environment. “Tags”, the initial form of graffiti and one of the simplest are equivalent to writing “I was here”, “I exist” etc. Graffiti is an alteration of the ordinary. To spray-paint a building is to at the very least to stain it. The act of graffiti is unlike other artistic acts where the marks made occur most often in isolation of their destination (the gallery wall, the collector’s wall etc.). The cultural scratches of graffiti occur on the ordinary/the everyday/the lived. In short, the street is the canvass. Graffiti thrives on the choice of location.

Derrida, for example, understood the different aesthetic of display that comes with graffiti. For him the aesthetic of the outside can be described as an aesthetic of touching. Unlike the traditional gallery, where the viewer is forbidden to touch the exhibits, street art invites you to do so. In short, the law of untouchability is broken. Derrida reads religious ramifications into this distinction. He focuses on the spray-paint depiction of Jesus on a street wall. For Derrida this image highlights the unique nature of graffiti to us. Derrida postulated Jesus as the graffiti (the touchable) of god. Perhaps then, we can still regard graffiti as the touchable form of art. Althaus-Reid explains this thought; “you can never touch graffiti twice; it will be an *Other* graffiti. Graffiti are touched/ untouchable living scriptures. A graffiti Jesus may show us the presence of a moving Scripture” (Althaus-Reid, 2004: pp. 397-98). Powers notes a further difference here, graffiti is not only subject to the senses (touching) in a way that art in a museum is not; it is also subject to the elements in a way that a museum tries to overcome: “Thanks to a dedicated sun, most graffiti fades over time” (Powers, 1999: p. 6).

In the context of a gallery, graffiti presents us with the spectacle of rubbish in the form of art. The equating of art to trash, that ultimate institutional re-evaluation can be read as the trashing of art and the aestheticising of rubbish. One step further, it can be read as a critique of the distinctions of art and rubbish. This new critiquing of art then comes to stand for art. As Sylvère Lotringer notes “[C]riticising art, in fact, has become the royal way to an art career...” (Baudrillard, 2005: p. 10). More-

over, it is this commercial realisation on the part of the artworld that is a key driving force behind such re-evaluation.

Considering graffiti on the New York subway, Danto writes; “The writers themselves were literate to some degree in the language of visual expression, and beyond that they understood a great deal about the institutional character of art, so that when their work was brought into gallery space, they understood how to behave, what rhetoric to flavour their discourse with, what was expected of them: somewhere, without necessarily having entered the museums, they had internalized a great deal” (Danto, 1994: p. 351). The point here is more than the idea that museum culture permeates the visual imagery of society in general. It is that the curatorial operation is already central to the operation of the artist, even when the artist is considered a vandal.

Abbé Grégoire coined the term “vandalism” in 1794 as France was undergoing the destruction of churches during “the terror”. The destruction of heritage alluded to, is not quite the case with graffiti, which produces its own heritage. The reduction of state funding for cultural sectors is a significant reason for the move of art institutions toward a corporate model of existence. In this model, graffiti is no longer equated with the vandalism of state heritage because state heritage is up for sale. Instead, graffiti is an inventive (and profitable) way to do business. In this new context, the vandal or graffiti artist may be considered as one who fights for public space, a kind of last bastion of independence. However, the fighting for public space is how the corporate model of existence works. Graffiti, thus, can be seen to collude in this game and as is the case in professional sport if the opposition has a star player you can always bet on him or her for your side. Graffiti is just selling something else.

The alternative means of distribution, used by graffiti, appeals to the artworld in the same way that new markets appeal to corporations. In short, new distribution channels mean new products can be sold (as art). The gallery of trash, thus, operates as an outsourced tier of a greater institutional network. Significantly, this practice maintains the scope for building reputations. As such, the economic basis for the artist is never undermined. This market also is highly attractive to the artist, as Lyotard knows: “It is understandable that the art-market, subject like all markets to the rule of the new, can exert a kind of seduction on artists” (Lyotard,

1991: p. 106).

Unlike the traditional gallery, the street as gallery is without a central curator. Instead, the art on the street is usually chosen solely by graffiti artists. This open curatorship renders the street closer to the role played by the studio than to the gallery. In fact, this approach to exhibition proposes a model of “collective curation”. By this term, I refer to both the fact of installation that accompanies the creation of street art, namely, the curatorial decision made by the street artists about the location and timing of their art, and the collaborative nature of this decision.

In relation to institutional theory we, thus, have, in street art, a loosening of the concept of art. No longer is something art if it is exhibited in an art gallery. This development calls for a change to the institutional theory of art. Specifically, it requires recognition of the possibility of change in terms of art practice. I will argue that the concept of the avant-garde can be such a concept. My thinking on the concept of the avant-garde can be captured in the two following lines. The avant-garde can simply be change in the artworld. Scope for change in the artworld makes subversive work inclined to function as the means by which the artworld can expand.

3. *The Avant-Garde*

As far back as Clement Greenberg’s essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1961 [1939]), the notion of the avant-garde has been identified in relation to the economic and political conditions of the time. For Greenberg, this social and historical import distinguishes the avant-garde from say bohemia. While creativity and originality are central to both, the avant-garde is in some way a focused social critique. As such, the theory of the avant-garde compliments the institutional theory of art.

Furthermore, Bürger claims, “the apartness from the practice of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in society now [in the avant-garde] becomes the content of the works” (Bürger, 1999 [1984]: p. 27). That is to say, that in claiming the title art, as the art institution so emphatically does, a distance from the everyday (from social criticism) is instituted. The implications of this formulation are that, within the gallery setting the criticism of the avant-garde is necessarily abdicated.

It is in this sense that I will use the term avant-garde. While this term

could be used to refer to a specific historical genre or method of art, I am most definitely not using the term in this sense. Likewise, I am not making a normative claim along the lines that avant-garde art is in someway “advanced art”. Instead avant-garde is a fleeting feature of disparate artworks (often depending on context) that challenge the existing institutional status quo. In practice I use this term as a more precise term than subversion, it is subversion in relation to the art world. I use the term in relation to graffiti for two reasons. The first is to emphasise the historical continuity of such challenges and the second is to emphasise the temporary nature of institutional subversion via graffiti.

The avant-garde, as I shall use the concept, is often an attempt to critique the relationship between institutional art and commerce, yet, this is a difficult, if not impossible, task to undertake in a contemporary capitalist economy and society. One of the key distinguishing features of street art has been the commercialization of graffiti practice.

“Does becoming part of the art establishment give new meaning and purpose to these artists’ lives, or has it merely spawned another money-making game for its participants, while weakening graffiti’s soul-energy as “outsider” art?” (Gablík, 1984: p. 106). Herein lies the dilemma for graffiti as street art; in succumbing to institutional recognition one appears to forego the avant-garde aspiration of social critique and change. In so doing, any claims to being critical are abdicated. The reason being that by this account the avant-garde institution is impossible. The institution in Bürger’s account is described as that which protects art, creating an aestheticist art. This aestheticism is in strict isolationism compared to the avant-garde. Here, art foregoes its communicative and critical social possibilities, primarily by succumbing to commercial demands.

Accordingly, an account of the avant-garde must be descriptively set within its economic and social conditions. It is for this reason that we must regard street art in terms of the prevailing institutional setting: that is the capitalist conquering of urban space and the contemporary advances in technology, namely, the internet, advertising etc.

The revolution promised by the avant-garde then becomes no more than a search for new things to sell. In this sense, the *avant-gardiste* is but the entrepreneur of culture. This account, however, is overly negative. It equates the dominant institutions such as the artworld with what

Adorno calls “the culture industry”, where all products are mere reconfigurations of what has been commercially proven. In doing so, it overlooks the significant achievements of the avant-garde, such as structural and infrastructural change of the criticised institutions.

This account, no matter how accurate, (Greenberg is correct for example, when he writes that “Kitsch's enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself” (Greenberg, 1961 [1939]: p. 11)) and appropriate, is partial. This account overlooks the tangible social and institutional change achieved by the avant-garde. In short, it overlooks the possibility of the avant-garde to subvert the existing institutional network. For example, contemporary art practice shows an ever-increased emphasis on site-specificity, trans-nationality, trans-disciplinarily, intersectionality, temporality etc. Exhibitions are increasingly *ad hoc* projects that are valued for their ability move across boundaries. Such developments only make sense when the concept of the artworld is supplemented with the concept of the avant-garde.

Bürger recognises such critical force. He notes that the art institution “only became recognisable after the avant-garde movements had criticised the autonomy status of art in developed bourgeois society” (Bürger, 1999 [1984]: p. *lii*). We can only recognise the nature of the contemporary art institution when we pay attention to those critical forces that it is subject to, and the new economic possibilities it realises because of such criticisms. Bürger understands the autonomous art institution and the reified art it contains is a product of bourgeois society. Avant-garde movements operate where this autonomy is undermined. The paradigmatic example of such autonomy is witnessed in the notion of the “sacred” in bourgeois society.

“The avant-garde artist has worn many guises over the first hundred years of his existence: revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, mystic” (Krauss, 1985: p. 157). Why not street artist? Or perhaps is the street artist (as an example of the current avant-garde artist) the culmination of all of above?

This *avant-gardiste* desecralization of culture can be identified in terms of institution as Bürger is willing to do, or it can be accounted for in terms of changing technology *à la* Benjamin. Benjamin outlines the “auratic” conception of the artwork (Benjamin, 1992 [1936]), whereby the artistic aura

of the artwork results from its unique handmade production. In a consideration of the artworld and the avant-garde, “aura” can be understood as an institutional concept. The art institution thrives on this concept of rarity. Traditional art institutions by their very nature are exclusive organizations. It is within this limiting framework that the traditional institution knows how to sell itself and its work. The best examples of this occur where a unique feature of work that can otherwise be easily reproduced is elevated to special status; for example, limited prints of photographic work. Such artificial claims to significance are symptomatic of an attempt to identify the uniqueness of a piece. The value of the work is invested in this unique quality.

The salient point however, is that the avant-garde, at its most potent, provides a critical alternative to the problems that arise out of contemporary culture or simply to the institutional framework of bourgeois society. Thus, in the words of Bürger: “the intention of the avant-gardiste may be defined as the attempt to direct toward the practical the aesthetic experience...” (Bürger, 1999 [1984]: p. 34). The strength of the avant-garde to provide an alternative to the dominant institutional framework is its ability to operate on the combined levels of purpose, production and reception. It is this ability to address the economic foundations of the artworld that is the unique value of the avant-garde. Such a quality is clearly visible in graffiti/street art.

An inevitable problem for any potential avant-garde such as street art is the limit of an avant-garde. Insofar as any criticism is successful, it will become the new order, the new institution to be criticised etc. Thus, this strength becomes in time the weakness of the avant-garde. In the words of Bürger there is a prevalent tendency that “institutionalises the avant-garde *as art* and [this] thus negates the genuinely avant-gardiste intentions” (Bürger, 1999 [1984]: p. 58). While this certainly can be counted as the death of an avant-garde, it cannot be considered as a failure of the avant-garde. This is achieved, according to Frank, when the “anti-principles of creativity...become rule-book stuff in their own right (Frank, 1998: p. 92).” For Frank these practices serve to fuel the ever-changing fashions of the consumer based society. Perhaps such an inevitable death and commercial usurpation may be a small price to pay for a degree of institutional change.

This model of the avant-garde helps provide the narrative for explain-

ing and documenting the process whereby graffiti can become accepted within the artworld in general. It is only ex-institution that the critique of the institution can flourish. It is only now that the overall operation of the artworld can be seen. Nonetheless, the theory of the avant-garde compliments the institutional theory of art because like the latter in the words of Bürger: “the model [of the avant-garde] provides the important theoretical insight that works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works” (Bürger, 1999 [1984]: p. 12). Street art for the most part can be seen to meet this criterion. As such, the model of the avant-garde helps explain how the institutions of the artworld can be subject to radical change.

As an attack and critique on the commercial, graffiti proposes what at first may seem like a paradoxical economy where purchase and possession (standard capitalist practice) do not rule. Rather, the economy proposed is one of critical dialogue with the surrounding environment. Insofar as the traditional artworld begins to consume street art, it begins to annex the street and graffiti with it. In other words, as long as graffiti avoids commercial exchange it does not develop into the artworld genre *per se*. This utopian position only lasts so long. Eventually, graffiti gives way to street art and is deemed worthy of commercial exchange. One could claim that when graffiti becomes a thing of mainstream display, and commercial activity, that is becomes street art, the initial rebellious features are overcome. While it would be extreme to declare the death of graffiti, we can certainly detect an end to graffiti being the current exemplar of the avant-garde.

It is Bourdieu’s “pure aesthetic model” that we find graffiti being subsumed into. Graffiti begins with the artist categorised as anonymous and autonomous. These notions are so strong that graffiti is often regarded as a product of a group, be it the city, the youth, the disaffected etc. Thus, when we become able to name graffiti artists the work is in a different economy. That economy is the traditional economy of the artworld. Here too, the graffiti artist begins to trade his/her work.

This change is marked by a change of name: the term graffiti is now replaced by the term street art. The acts of mimicking the economy of the artworld render the economy of the street artworld but a functioning

arm of the greater capitalist economy. The initial critique, if it has not now become impossible, has at the very least to be reconsidered. By this account, the economy of street art is just the latest in a series of inclusions into the economy of the artworld. The promise of a new distinct artworld economy has been overcome.

Analysing the name “street art”, we find that the two words are joined for mutual benefit. “Art” is used for and because of institutional validation. “Street” is used for validation within the graffiti and avant-garde communities. These benefits ensure the exclusion of other possible names; one could be “career graffiti”.

This account is already overly negative as a certain critical potential of street art persists. Even if we are to accord the artworld such overbearing strength, it is only a strength based on a certain degree of flexibility. There is necessarily an infrastructural flexibility to incorporate graffiti, albeit, in the guise of street art, in the first place.

Throughout, I have been more concerned with outlining how romantic notions of graffiti, or the avant-garde for that matter, are not viable, rather than demonstrating what I consider to be good graffiti or bad graffiti. Likewise, I was not interested in simply criticising the existence of art galleries and museums. These institutions are often of great value. In fact, the privatization and corporate invasion of public space presents us with the paradoxical scenario where museums are a potential refuge for the graffiti artist. That this has become the case is proof that graffiti is now embedded within the institutional narrative of art history.

4. Conclusion

To conclude; in the words of McClellan; “[C]hange may appear subtle because it does not necessarily entail discarding the past ideals and parts of the collection; instead, new or modified ideals are added to old, yielding a complex set of goals that aspires to serve a widening set of constituencies” (McClellan, 2008: p. 14).

What is certain however, and the example of graffiti makes this clear, is the fact that any institutional account of art and the economy of the artworld must reserve a place for the role of subversion and changing aesthetic practices due to the insatiable commercial appetite for the new.

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