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THE BORDERS OF BOUNDLESSNESS. A REASSESSMENT OF THE DISSOLUTION OF BOUNDARIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTWORLD

To paraphrase Allan Kaprow: life in a gallery is like fucking in a cemetery. We could add that things become even worse as the gallery spills back into life: as the gallery/cemetery invades life, one begins to feel unable to fuck anywhere else.

Hito Steyerl, "Art as Occupation", 2011

INTRODUCTION

In this article, the 1970s critique and subsequent critiques of inter- and post-media aesthetics and of the transgression of boundaries in contemporary art are examined against the background of two 21st-century phenomena: the continuation of the "explosion of aesthetics"¹ (Gianni Vattimo) and the economic assimilation of art as a paradigmatic trend in the contemporary artworld on the one hand, and the international rise of populist, authoritarian, totalitarian movements and governments on the other. I argue that after decades of positively connoted boundary-pushing and boundary-dissolving, of mixing media and transcending disciplinary demarcations, of extending notions and hybridizing social subsystems, of criticizing the autonomy of art as a bourgeois myth, a crucial task of today's artworld is to reassess the relevance of boundaries and autonomy, to discuss them thoroughly and, if necessary, protect the autonomy of art in ways that do not lapse into reactionary longings for purity and segregation. The article does not advocate a specific understanding of the autonomy of art or promote a specific demarcation life between art and other social subsystems. Rather, it is a warning against

¹ G. Vattimo, *The end of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Cambridge 1988, p. 53.

reflexively connoting the expansion of boundaries in a positive way, and an invitation to develop a sensibility for the ambiguity of boundaries and their situation-specific necessity in ethical terms.

CRITICISM OF DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES IN THE ARTWORLD: A BRIEF AND INCOMPLETE PREHISTORY

In 1974, the art critic Rosalind Krauss warned against trivializing the dissolution of art's boundaries in the "post-medium condition". With recourse to Frederic Jameson, she argued that "this leeching of the aesthetic out into the social field in general" ran the risk of mimicking the boundlessness of capitalism.² In the same year, Allan Kaprow, the pioneer of Happening, criticized the dissolution of boundaries between video art and entertainment for a broad audience: "Like so much Art Tech of recent years, video environments resemble world's fair 'futurama' displays with their familiar nineteenth-century push-button optimism and didacticism. They are part fun house, part psychology lab."³ While artists like Stan Vanderbeek sought to become "artists in residence to the world"⁴ through collaborating with big-tech companies, it was Kaprow, of all artists, despite contributing substantially to the extension of the notions and practices of art, who drew attention to the limits of extension.

Fast-forward to the 21st century. In 2003, echoes of Krauss' criticism reverberated in Pamela M. Lee's article "Boundary Issues: The Art World Under the Sign of Globalism" for *Artforum International*. Whereas "globalism" today is commonly related to right-wing or far-right cultural criticism, it was different in the early 21st century, when left-wing anti-globalist movements such as Attac thrived. This was also the time when "biennialization" and "globalization" were among the much-discussed, much-criticized topics in the art world (and beyond). In this connection, Lee posed the question: "What happens to the art world when the world itself is progressively aestheticized under the regime of global spectacle?"⁵ Curator Douglas Crimp made a similar diagnosis, albeit

² R. Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea", in: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 2000, p. 56.

³ A. Kaprow, "Video Art: Old Wine, New Bottle", *Artforum* 1974, Summer, 12(10), available online: <https://www.artforum.com/features/video-art-old-wine-new-bottle-214242/> [accessed: 4 March 2024].

⁴ S. Vanderbeek quoted after G. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York 1970, p. 349.

⁵ P.M. Lee, "Boundary Issues: The Art World Under the Sign of Globalism", *Artforum International* 2003, November, 42(3), available online: <https://www.artforum.com/>

not limited to the artworld, in the catalog of the 1977 *Pictures* exhibition: "While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems as if they have usurped it."⁶

Like Krauss in 1974, Lee drew inspiration from Jameson, who defined globalization as "an immense enlargement of world communication, as well as of the horizon of a world market".⁷ Lee expressed her skepticism towards an artworld that sees itself as a passive mirror or distanced critic of this condition rather than as an integral, productive part of it.⁸ For her, the task was to bring art down to earth, to the sphere of immanence, instead of likening it to St. Augustine's "City of God", as Artur C. Danto did in 1964.⁹ Thus, she declared the time of "cool, critical distance" to be over.¹⁰

While it is certainly compelling that the artworld should acknowledge their active complicity in global affairs, the media artist Hito Steyerl did not leave it at that. In her article "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life" (2011), Steyerl implicitly continued Krauss', Kaprow's and Lee's criticism and expanded it to include some crucial new components. While Lee basically recalled Krauss' warning against boundary-pushing art becoming a pseudo-critical framing of corporate capitalism's expansion, Steyerl postulated a much more powerful and active role for the arts in contemporary life: "The incorporation of art within life was once a political project (both for the left and right), but the incorporation of life within art is now an aesthetic project, and it coincides with an overall aestheticization of politics. On all levels of everyday activity art not only invades life, but occupies it."¹¹ In consequence, "life has been occupied by art, because art's initial forays back into life and

features/boundary-issues-the-art-world-under-the-sign-of-globalism-167783/ [accessed: 4 March 2024].

⁶ D. Crimp, "Pictures", in: *Pictures. An exhibition of the work of: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Philip Smith*, ed. Committee for the Visual Arts, Inc., New York 1977, pp. 3–29, 3.

⁷ Quoted after Lee, *Boundary Issues...*

⁸ See J. Scheller, "Size Matters. 'Exhibition Agency' und die Erhabenheit des Globalen am Beispiel von Großausstellungen", in: *Transdisziplinarität in Kunst, Design, Architektur und Kunstgeschichte (Artificium - Schriften zu Kunst und Kunstvermittlung)*, ed. K. Imesch, K. Daguet, J. Dieffenbacher, D. Strebel, Oberhausen 2018, pp. 17–30.

⁹ A.C. Danto, "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy* 1964, Oct. 15, 61(19), pp. 571–584, 582.

¹⁰ Lee, *Boundary Issues...*

¹¹ H. Steyerl, "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life", *e-flux Journal* 2011, December, Issue 30, available online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/30/68140/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life/> [accessed: 4 March 2024].

daily practice gradually turned into routine incursions, and then into constant occupation."¹²

The trend towards post-autonomous art under the auspices of liberal postmodern consumer and mass media cultures ties in with the avant-garde's paradoxical urge to expand, which was once intended precisely to serve autonomy, and at the same time severs the ties to this phase in the history of art, as Steyerl explains: "If the origin of artistic autonomy lies in the refusal of the division of labor (and the alienation and subjection that accompany it), this refusal has now been reintegrated into neoliberal modes of production to set free dormant potentials for financial expansion. In this way, the logic of autonomy spread to the point where it tipped into new dominant ideologies of flexibility and self-entrepreneurship, acquiring new political meanings as well."¹³ In a nutshell, the sprawling heteronomy of avant-garde art was intended as a gesture of distinction and autonomy. This gesture became "occupied" or "usurped" in the "post-medium condition" understood as a correlate to what Lee subsumes under "globalism".

Philosopher Gernot Böhme has coined the term "aesthetic capitalism"¹⁴ for a broader understanding of this condition, i.e. one not satisfied with commonplace criticism of neoliberalism. "Aesthetic capitalism" refers to the most recent form of capitalism in highly developed consumer societies, which is based on the dissolution of the boundaries between art (as a sphere of aesthetics, sophistication, imagination, creativity) and life (as a sphere of basic needs, necessities, restraints), with utility value taking a back seat to exchange, symbolic and aesthetic values. Along these lines, sociologist Andreas Reckwitz aptly writes that contemporary culture is "no longer a clearly delineated subsystem, it has rather transformed into a global hyperculture in which potentially everything – from Zen meditation to industrial footstools, from Montessori schools to YouTube videos – can be regarded as culture and can become elements of the highly mobile markets of valorization, which entice the participation of subjects with the promise of self-actualization."¹⁵ In this hyperculture, which is characterized by the disintegration of boundaries between the various social spheres, art is just one unit among other units. It seems as if the return to immanence has been completed.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ G. Boehme, *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus*, Berlin 2016.

¹⁵ A. Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities*, Cambridge 2020, pp. 8–9.

THE NEED FOR SANCTUARIES: ART IN THE POST-POST-MEDIUM CONDITION

Under the conditions as sketched above, in view of the ongoing post-medium condition and the ongoing “explosion of aesthetics” (Vattimo), it must be discussed how contemporary boundary-pushing or -dissolving trends in the artworld such as inter- and transdisciplinarity, socially engaged art, activism, artistic research, art-education-as-art, and the criticism of the autonomy of art can prevent themselves from reproducing, and be it in a non-intentional way, the role of the accomplice or ‘useful idiots’ as suggested by Krauss, Kaprow, Lee, Steyerl. “Cool, critical distance” is for sure no antidote, nor is retreating into the ivory tower. But criticality and criticism in fact presuppose not only a reflexive but also a corporeal, a spatial distance to what is criticized, at least temporarily. Metaphorically speaking: A mirror that lies on the object it is supposed to show remains blind. Checks and balances between different systems of society can only work if it does not mean that everyone is made an accomplice. Just as there are ethically sound reasons to separate the powers of the legislature, executive, and judiciary, or the powers of the state and religion, notwithstanding their actual fundamental entanglement, there are legitimate reasons to draw boundaries between art and everyday life, art and politics, art, and activism, and so on. It is true that these spheres cannot be *separated*, but it is also true that they must be *differentiated*.

Without boundaries, there can be neither critique nor politics in a strong sense – thus one could paraphrase philosopher Chantal Mouffe’s concept “agonistics”.¹⁶ Ultimately, a lack of boundaries prevents decision-making and tips over into arbitrariness, which in turn is exploited by those who are already in higher positions of power. To give an example: When institutions like the Tate Modern in London or the Museum M+ in Hong Kong evolve into hybrids where the boundaries between museum, mall, gastronomy, tourist hot spot, education and research facility, family entertainment, hub for power-critical activism, location marketing, etc. dissolve; when they, implicitly or explicitly, suggest that they are capable of excluding nothing and nobody from resolving the conflict between commercial or political constraints and independent critique, of being politically correct and subversive at the same time, the question of boundaries emerges naturally. The same applies to artists such as Olafur Eliasson, who could be described as an “embedded art-

¹⁶ C. Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, London 2013.

ist" in analogy to the "embedded journalist".¹⁷ The Icelandic-Danish star of the artworld has also been called "a frontiersman in the hazy boundaries between contemporary art-making and start-up culture".¹⁸ Eliasson's case raises the question of the extent to which one can be artist, designer, educator, activist, entrepreneur, philanthropist, mainstream, counterculture, corporate cooperation partner, critic of capitalism, environmentalist, polluter of environment, etc. without compromising one through the other. To give a concrete example: As a critical activist-artist ("activist"), Eliasson warns against global warming in projects like "Ice Watch" (2018). The latter consisted in bringing blocks of glacial ice from Greenland to London, where they melted in front of the Tate Modern and the Bloomberg headquarters. But by bringing the blocks of ice to London by ship, Eliasson, who generally pursues resource-intensive projects and is also a frequent flyer, is complicit in what he criticizes. In a utilitarian manner, Eliasson's big tent art or catch-all art (in analogy to "big tent party" and "catch-all party") insinuates that in sum, everything is right. Yet if everything is right, something is wrong. Eliasson's example thus points to the necessity of drawing boundaries, just as purists and isolationists show the necessity of opening up to hybridization.

It is salient to stress that "boundary" here does not mean a rigid distinction between friend and enemy, as put forward by jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), who has a lasting influence on both right-wing and left-wing thought.¹⁹ It also does not mean an absolute demarcation line that isolates a singularity like, for instance, death in the philosophy of Heidegger. In the sense of Derrida, "borderlines are not as secure, as inflexible, as Heidegger pretends, and under analysis, the uncrossable edges that are intended by Heidegger to insulate certain disciplines, concepts, or states, from their opposites, prove susceptible to contamination."²⁰ Nor does drawing boundaries imply an ontology of fixed social realms. My argument is more of a pragmatic nature, derived inductively from social practice and experience, not deductively from ideas and concepts. In an analytical sense, boundaries are needed whenever a specific aspect of reality is to be examined – simply because it is impossible to examine reality

¹⁷ J. Scheller, "Zur Heimholung der Künste in Kultur und Gesellschaft durch Künstlerische Forschung", in: *Laienherrschaft. 18 Exkurse zum Verhältnis von Künsten und Medien*, ed. R. Widmer, Zurich/Berlin 2014, pp. 201–212.

¹⁸ M. Speed, "Open House: A Look Into STUDIO OLAFUR ELIASSON", 032c 2017, October 30, available online: <https://032c.com/magazine/open-house-a-look-into-studio-olafur-eliasson> [accessed: 4 March 2024].

¹⁹ C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, Berlin 1932.

²⁰ D. Brandes, "Derrida and Heidegger: A Lively Border Dispute", *Dalhousie French Studies* 2008, 82, Spring, pp. 17–27, 24.

in its entirety. Drawing boundaries and separating entities from other entities then does not mean ontologizing or essentializing the respective demarcated zones but proceeding in a heuristic way.²¹ Boundaries are also crucial when it comes to value judgments and thus ethical considerations, which play a vitally important role, particularly in contemporary art. Along these lines, the art historian Claire Bishop has put forward “the assumption that value judgements are necessary, not as a means to reinforce elite culture and police the boundaries of art and non-art, but as a way to understand and clarify our shared values at a given historical moment.”²² Moreover, boundaries of different types and of varying permeability inevitably arise whenever, in concrete situations, in a concrete lifeworld, under concrete environmental, sociopolitical, and economic circumstances, there is a need for the protection of certain life forms, or when there is a diversity of sometimes incompatible lifestyles and mentalities, i.e. social plurality. Perhaps the first physical boundary invented in the distant past was a fence, or some other cultural technique used by the physically weak to protect themselves from the physically strong. Perhaps the first physical boundary was created by a contemplative soul who was tired of wandering around, who longed for a place to rest and to reflect and who needed a safe space to do so. Perhaps the first metaphysical boundary was a utopia aimed at separating human beings from the cruelty of nature and establishing an alternative ethical order based on social justice rather than the “survival of the fittest”. We do not know, and we cannot know. In any case, a boundary is a profoundly ambiguous structure whose understanding requires a sensibility to the particularities of contexts and their genealogies.

The *Sanctuarium* by the artist Herman de Vries, born in 1931, are a good example of this ambiguity. De Vries, of all artists, who himself stands in the tradition of “explosion of aesthetics” (Vattimo) and the general hybridization of art, has been demarcating areas with fences or walls for decades, for instance, in public parks such as the “Leibfriedscher Garten” in Stuttgart in 1993 (ill. 1). Within the boundaries of these areas, nature is protected from human intervention and unfolds in its own unpredictable ways. Each of de Vries’ *Sanctuarium* is a *memento naturae* and a gesture of protest against “our overly one-sidedly developed technological-commercial nature”, as the artist wrote in 1993.²³ De Vries’ human intervention against human interventions

²¹ See B. Latour, *Pandora’s hope: essays on the reality of science studies*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1999.

²² C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London 2012, p. 8.

²³ H. De Vries, “Sanctuarium”, in: *Kunst, Natur, Schauspiel*, ed. F. Werner, Stuttgart 1993, pp. 41–45, available online: <https://www.hermandevries.org/texts/text-1993-sanctu->



1. Herman de Vries, *Sanctuarium*, 1993 (location: Leibfriedscher Garten, Stuttgart). Credits: PJT56 / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0

epitomizes the ambiguous nature of boundaries in several ways. Not only does the boundary of the respective *Sanctuarium* protect nature because the latter has become ‘weaker’ than human culture in the course of evolution, nature, which in turn remains inherently cruel to the weak (“survival of the fittest”), is also protected from human culture and technology precisely *through* human culture (conceptual art) and technology (fence, wall). Within the confines of the *Sanctuaria*, nature enjoys a paradoxical autonomy; an autonomy that is only realized through heteronomy, i.e. through the intervention of a neo-avant-garde artist. De Vries’ *Sanctuaria* thus suggest that autonomy and freedom require boundaries under the given circumstances.

That being said, as a first step, kneejerk normative judgments concerning boundary-pushing and dissolving in the artworld must be questioned. And there is plenty of reason to do so. In what Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel have called the artworld of “the global contemporary”,²⁴ shifting boundaries and border crossing often have undisputed positive con-

arium.php [accessed: 4 March 2024].

²⁴ See H. Belting, A. Buddensieg, P. Weibel (eds.), *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2013.

notations, while the formation of boundaries has negative ones. It is fair to generalize that leading institutions of contemporary art such as the Tate Modern or Museum M+ seek to constantly expand the scope of their collections, their impact, their media, their research, and their engagements with society at large. The same is true of art biennials by-and-large.²⁵ In a similar vein, art universities are deconstructing disciplinary fragmentation through hybrid degree programs such as the “Dirty Art Department” at the Sandberg Institution, Amsterdam, or presenting study programs as “a flexible, interdisciplinary major that allows you to push traditional boundaries of artistic practice ...”²⁶ Social responsibility and openness towards society at large are habitually emphasized as well. In these contexts, the autonomy of art, which entails unpredictability and uncontrollability within the confines of its own sanctuary, can be seen as a series of boundaries or obstacles on the way to the desired goals, above all, to the desired process of opening up. Hence, it must be viewed with suspicion. Autonomy can appear as the antagonist to what Lee called “immanence”; a realm to which art and its criticism are expected to return. Accordingly, the term “autonomy” is hardly ever found in respective mission statements or programs, while “boundary”, as outlined above, appears only as something to be questioned, challenged, pushed, transgressed, overcome. And is that not justified? After all, the autonomy of art has long been considered as a bourgeois fig leaf for social detachment, as a culturalist Western myth that shrouds colonialist and imperialist exceptionalism, or as a legitimatory discourse to absolve art from social responsibility, not to speak of the autonomy of art as a part in Western Cold War propaganda.²⁷ But not everything that emerges within a specific spatial and temporal context is identical to the basic tendency of that context. To use an analogy: being part of an intelligent institution does not mean that I am intelligent as well. And being part of the history of “the West” and its dominant sociopolitical tendencies does not mean being identical with this history or being so permeated by it that one cannot detach oneself from it.

In some cases, it is precisely the “explosion of aesthetics” and the transgression of traditional boundaries of art, for instance, regarding media and technology, that enables the re-entry of what the respective socio-political, moral agenda seeks to criticize. In 2014, the Karlsruhe Center for Art and

²⁵ See W. Chin-Tao, “Biennials Without Borders?”, *New Left Review* 2009, May/June, 57, pp. 107–115.

²⁶ <https://saveuarts.org/6324/academics/undergraduate/art-interdisciplinary-bfa.html> [accessed: 6 December 2024].

²⁷ For a brief overview see J. Siegmund, *Zweck und Zweckfreiheit. Zum Funktionswandel der Künste im 21. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 2019, pp. 64–69.

Media (ZKM) presented an overview of art and activism in the exhibition *Global Activism*. The term “artivism” was used to great effect in the accompanying publications. The exhibition consisted of an exuberant conglomeration of wishes, demands, complaints, and dreams, presented on posters, screens, flyers, and blogs, by NGOs, artists’ collectives, and individual campaigners. This ranged from general calls for world peace and freedom to specific criticism of greedy landlords and demands for the resignation of specific politicians. Exhibits included original memorabilia such as parts of the “protest fence” built by the campaigners against the new Stuttgart Central Station (“Stuttgart 21”) and wallpapered with expressions of discontent (ill. 2), video documentation of actions by the Occupy movement and the Russian artist collective Voina (*Smooch the Cop*, 2011), as well as mixed-media installations on topics such as the Tunisian revolution in 2011 (Patricia K. Triki & Christine Bruckbauer, *Chronology 2011-2013*, 2013) and illegal accounts in tax havens (Paolo Cirio, *Loophole for All*, 2013). With the abundance of forms, media, formats, approaches, processes, etc., the exhibition demonstrated that the proclaimed new “ism” referred to an attitude rather than a particular style. The concerns were too diverse, the strategies too different to be squeezed into one aesthetic formula. In any case, art was



2. Protest Fence, Stuttgart Main Station, author unknown, 2011. Credits: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=114688095>

called upon to leave the comfort zones of reflection or symbolic interaction with the world and instead to engage directly, through manifold means and methods, with the urgent political struggles of the present. At times, this led to curious outcomes. The electronic gadgets that were omnipresent in the ZKM exhibition showed resistance, rebellion, dissent on their display sides, often referring to capitalism and authoritarianism. However, if one stepped behind the iPads and flatscreens, one would see the logos of the corporations, the TÜV and ISO labels and the “Made in China” stickers, i.e. “made in an authoritarian one-party state.” The rights to the Guy Fawkes mask which appeared in many videos as a symbol of dissent are owned by Warner Bros. Discovery. And thus, the media deconstructed the message.

That said, after years of criticism of autonomy and concomitant criticism of boundaries, after including ever more media, technology, sign systems, and practices, perhaps it is time to reassess autonomy and boundaries in the way that postcolonial theorist Nikita Dhawan does in relation to the modern European era: “Without justifying colonial violence, the postcolonial world must learn to love the legacy of European modernity. As experience in many post-colonial contexts has shown, criticism of modernity has strengthened authoritarian and nationalist regimes.”²⁸ In fact, it is simplistic to equate boundaries and autonomy with eurocentrism, with a colonialist mindset or reactionary, right-wing conservative attitudes just because their proponents celebrate borders and inequality (see Carl Schmitt above and see next chapter). As explained above, boundaries are very ambiguous and arise from specific situations that need to be carefully examined and viewed in a *dialectical* light. Expressed in a handy formula: the more institutions, discourses, aesthetics, etc. open up, the greater the potential not only for inclusion and diversity but also for infiltration, appropriation, instrumentalization by those who actually oppose openness, or unintentional self-contradiction (see the example of the ZKM above). While the early avant-gardes and the post-war neo-avant-gardes had good reason to challenge the codified boundaries of academic art, Salon Art and Abstract Expressionism through pushing, blurring, dissolving the boundaries between art and life or broadening the scope of media, and while contemporary postcolonial theorists, artists, activists have good reason to challenge the codified boundaries of the era of Western exceptionalism, be it on the ground or in the minds, in ethics or aesthetics, the changing contemporary geopolitical conditions give good

²⁸ N. Dhawan, “Frankfurter Fritten und Currywurst: Kritische Theorie, Postmoderne und Postkolonialismus”, in: *Alles auf einmal. Die Postmoderne, 1967–1992*, ed. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH, Munich 2023, pp. 128–133.

reasons to reassess the importance of boundaries for art – precisely, and only seemingly paradoxically, to protect the freedom of art to decide whether it wants to open or close its gates.

AUTONOMY RECONSIDERED: THE AUTHORITARIAN MIND'S PREDILECTION FOR EMBEDDED ART

This freedom was referred to by the artist Artur Żmijewski in an interview with the author in 2018. While the above discussed criticism of the 1970s, the early 2000s and the early 2010s mainly concerned the economic, neoliberal appropriation and instrumentalization of contemporary art that had become so hybrid that it lent itself to all sorts of purposes, Żmijewski highlighted the growing danger of *direct political* appropriation in the context of the recent international rise of populism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism: "The appropriation of art by business is nothing compared to the appropriation of art by politics. The latter is much more dangerous. [...] Today, populists abuse the subversive strategies of the arts: breaking taboos, scandals, but also more subtle methods."²⁹ Along the same lines, the author and critic Angela Nagle had outlined one year earlier in her book *Kill All Normies* how recent far-right and radical-right movements make use of experimental, transgressive art and aesthetic. Nagle argues that their symbolic and discursive means draw a lot from the 1968 generation, the surrealists, Marquis de Sade, and post-war rebel subcultures.³⁰ Żmijewski, in turn, not only stressed the necessity to defend critical art's boundaries against the intrusion of those who are opposed to an open society, but also the need for more clearly defined terms and concepts in the artworld and beyond, i.e. for *definitional* boundaries. He felt that popular claims such as "the private is political" had lost their critical impact and were in danger of tipping over into something reactionary: "If we are no longer able to define politics today, if we declare everything to be politics, then we are overshooting the mark. That really scares me. The fact that politics, especially violent politics, can once again penetrate all areas of life is not least a consequence of the view that everything is political. If the private sphere is political, this is tanta-

²⁹ J. Scheller, "'Das ist das Wesen des Totalitären.' Bloss keine Politisierung der Kunst: Der polnische Künstler Artur Żmijewski verteidigt seine Freiheit", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 2018, 20 August, p. 31.

³⁰ See A. Nagle, *Kill All Normies. The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump*, Winchester/Washington 2017.

mount to inviting politicians to penetrate our private lives. And that is the essence of totalitarianism."³¹

In fact, it can be argued that the postmodern and post-structuralist tendency to define, for instance, politics, power, racism, or art in ever broader terms has had its justification and has contributed, among other things, to understanding how racism persists in the guise of culturalism or how power functions not only vertically but also horizontally. But as the author Sergei Gerasimov has pointed out convincingly, particularly those people who have become fully committed to a certain concept and way of thinking "know exactly where they want to go but have no idea where and when to stop."³² According to Gerasimov, "any useful idea that goes beyond its scope becomes harmful. The problem is that every idea tends to outgrow this area on its own."³³ This "outgrowth" is dangerous because the respective protagonists continue in their usual ways even if the situation to which they and their ideas originally responded has changed and circumstances require new approaches. Sensibility gives way to ideology, thinking turns into a "thought style" (Ludwik Fleck) watched over by a "thought collective" (idem) eager to secure internal harmony.³⁴ In addition, they tend to underestimate the unintended consequences or, to use an economic term, the "external effects" of their actions in a changing environment. Żmijewski observed such changes and at least partially readjusted his focus. Borrowing a term coined by art historian Irit Rogoff, one could argue that Żmijewski now advocates "criticality" not only regarding power structures but also in relation to his own practice: "'Criticality' as I perceive it is precisely in the operations of recognising the limitations of one's thought for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than re-thinking a structure."³⁵

Hence, it is not self-contradictory that an artist like Żmijewski, who has defined art unmistakably in post-autonomous terms as an "instrument" and whose work has radically pushed the boundaries of art, most notably by blending it with activism in the context of the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012,

³¹ Scheller, „Das ist Wesen..."

³² S. Gerasimov, "Jede Idee neigt von sich aus dazu, über ihren Anwendungsbereich hinauszuwuchern. Es ist dies das Gesetz der Bösartigkeit von Ideen", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 2023, 29 October, available online: <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/sergei-gerasimow-krieg-stagebuch-aus-charkiw-teil-4337-ld.1758500> [accessed: 4 March 2024].

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ See L. Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, Chicago 1979.

³⁵ I. Rogoff, "From Criticism to Critique to Criticality", *transversal* 2003, 1, available online: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en> [accessed: 6 June 2024].

now defends the freedom and autonomy of art (ill. 3). Just as Herman De Vries' *Sanctuarium* enable freedom and autonomy through a heteronomous demarcation of boundaries, Żmijewski's radical art benefits from an institutionally, discursively, but also legally and economically protected sanctuary in order to be free to break boundaries at all. It should be added, as the literary scholar Ernst van Alphen emphasizes, that Żmijewski "radically opposes the idea that the so-called autonomy of art implies that all kind of excesses in art are by definition legitimized."³⁶ Again, the necessity to draw boundaries becomes evident, if only from an ethical point of view. To rephrase and expand on Steyerl's statement: The incorporation of art into life was an ethical-political project directed against the principle of *l'art pour l'art* and Salon art, then became an economic project, and now the autonomy of art becomes, or rather: must become an ethical-political project under new auspices.



3. Nada Prlja, *Peace Wall*, 2012 (Berlin Biennale 2012, location: southern end of Friedrichstrasse, Berlin). © Artur Żmijewski

³⁶ E. van Alphen, "The performativity of provocation: the case of Artur Żmijewski", *Journal of Visual Culture* 2019, 18(1), pp. 81–96, available online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1470412918811240> [accessed: 4 March 2024].

Regardless of their moral, political, ideological differences, the forms of boundary-pushing, -blurring, and -dissolving discussed in the previous chapter may reinforce each other and, particularly in the course of institutionalization and professionalization, may (unintentionally) jeopardize the critical role of the arts at a time when the freedom and autonomy of art are under pressure from a surge of illiberalism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism. The unintentional dimension is key here. Intentions do not equal outcomes. As the example of the ZKM has shown, even the seemingly unproblematic use of a wider range of media can have the “external effect” of benefiting an authoritarian regime if their components are produced mainly there. And the very methods that have benefited progressive causes can benefit regressive ones, depending on the context, as Nagle has shown. These are precisely the challenges that need to be addressed in the 21st century. And it must be made clear that drawing boundaries and insisting on the autonomy of art is not synonymous with a reactionary or aloof stance.

Even if contemporary right-wing and far-right artists, activists, cultural commentators, and decision makers are trying to claim artistic autonomy and artistic freedom, which previously had Kantian or left-liberal connotations, for their own political purposes,³⁷ authoritarianism actually prefers art that is not only organically embedded in society and in line with its basic tendencies, but also predictable and controllable. Hence, the autonomy of art and art institutions is a no-go for authoritarianism, as is the autonomy of science. A telling example can be found in the history of the Venice Biennale. When the Italian Fascists had consolidated their power, the Biennale was transformed from a municipal entity to an “autonomous entity” in 1930 (*Ente Autonomo Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia*). However, “autonomy” meant that the hitherto municipal institution was placed under the direct control of the central state and thus lost significant freedoms to make decisions at a subsidiary level. The new board of directors consisted of five people chosen by Mussolini himself.³⁸

Authoritarianism may like to use the permeable borders of the post-medium, post-autonomous artworld to sneak into and occupy the latter, but it does so with the aim of erecting new, ideologically conformist borders. In an authoritarian state, and even more so in a totalitarian state, there must be no boundaries between art and society, or art and politics, or art and economy.

³⁷ Wolfgang Ullrich has discussed this regarding the situation in Germany, see W. Ullrich, *Feindbild werden. Ein Bericht*, Berlin 2020.

³⁸ J.A. May, *La Biennale di Venezia. Continuität und Wandel in der venezianischen Ausstellungspolitik 1895–1948*, Berlin 2009, p. 129.

The ideal is an organic, unified whole where art is in principal harmony with the alleged “will of the people”. That these “true” and “authentic” people do not exist, but must be created and sustained artificially through propaganda, acts of oppression, or violent purification, is one of the aporias of authoritarianism. This aporia also shows that non-autonomous art, within the confines of the respective collectives, is fundamentally in the interests of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. If a distinct message is to be conveyed to the population at large, there must be no boundary in the form of a social subsystem called “art” (or any other autonomous subsystem) that would transform the message in unpredictable ways. There must also be no restrictions in terms of media and technology, as this would limit the reach. This is one of the reasons why philosopher Boris Groys spoke of “The Total Art of Stalinism”. In a cynical way, “the Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project”.³⁹ This transformation implies that art has to engage, it has to transcend the boundaries of the ivory tower, the white cube, the studio (associated with allegedly self-sufficient “formalism”), it has to become socially, politically, and economically *relevant*. Art has to move from autonomy to heteronomy in a non-dialectical way (i.e., unlike the dialectical treatment of heteronomy in the cases of De Vries and Żmijewski). Art that does not fulfill the expected purpose is under suspicion. While in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes socially engaged art that does not conform to the respective ideological guidelines is rigorously combated or assimilated through more sophisticated means, it is not socially engaged art *as such* that is under attack but only this or that *direction* of socially engaged art.

Now, this analysis is not intended to insinuate that socially engaged art necessarily has authoritarian or totalitarian traits. That would be a form of context-independent ontologizing or essentialization that would fundamentally contradict the purpose of this article, as outlined in the second chapter. Rather, the aim is to highlight that opening up to other social subsystems brings with it not only opportunities but also risks, that these risks can be of a non-intentional nature, and that they relate not only to instrumentalization by the economy but also by politics. In the face of the 21st-century polycrisis, in the wake of which populist and authoritarian movements are gaining ground in many places, this danger is particularly significant. Therefore, the theory and practice of shifting and dissolving boundaries in the artworld must be reassessed and freed from their commonplace, ideologically self-sufficient

³⁹ B. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, London 1992, p. 36.

elements. There are times when boundaries must be deconstructed and there are times when boundaries must be reconstructed, or at least reconsidered. How and by whom this should be done cannot be decreed by any authority but should result from the deliberations of the stakeholders in the artworld themselves. This article cannot and will not do more than provide an impetus and some open questions, some pressing problems to be discussed. However, I cannot deny that it is also based on a normative assumption, which can best be outlined with a quote from the theologian Paul Tillich: "The boundary is the best place for acquiring knowledge."⁴⁰ I would just add that at times, the boundary also becomes, and must become, a place where knowledge is *protected*, especially knowledge about the ambiguity of boundaries.

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⁴⁰ P. Tillich, *On the Boundary. An Autobiographical Sketch*, New York 1967.

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THE BORDERS OF BOUNDLESSNESS. A REASSESSMENT OF THE DISSOLUTION OF BOUNDARIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTWORLD

Summary

In this article, the early critique of intermedia aesthetics and border-crossing in the arts is reassessed against the background of the contemporary dissolution not only of media boundaries but also of disciplinary, categorical, social boundaries. In 1974, the art critic Rosalind Krauss warned against a trivialization of the dissolution of art's boundaries in the "post-media condition". With recourse to Frederic Jameson, she argued that "this leeching of the aesthetic out into the social field in general" ran the risk of mimicking the boundlessness of capitalism. In the same year, Allan Kaprow, the pioneer of happenings, criticized the dissolution of boundaries between video art and entertainment for a broad audience: "Like so much Art Tech of recent years, video environments resemble world's fair 'futurama' displays with their familiar nineteenth-century push-buPon optimism and didacticism. They are part fun house, part psychology lab." Today, it is worth reconsidering these statements against the backdrop of paradigmatic trends in the post-media condition and the post-modern "explosion of aesthetics" (Gianni Vattimo): inter- and transdisciplinarity, socially engaged arts, activism, artistic research, critique of the autonomy of art, creative industries... Regardless of their differences, these trends reinforce each other and, particularly in the course of institutionalization and professionalization, may (unintentionally) jeopardize the critical role of the arts at a time when the freedom and autonomy of the arts are under pressure not only from economic capitalization but also from illiberalism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism. In what Belting and Buddensieg have called the art world of the "the global present", border shifting and border crossing usually have positive connotations, while border formation has negative ones. The autonomy of art implies boundaries that are viewed with suspicion. Yet also for the authoritarian and instrumental mind, the autonomy of the arts is a taboo. There must be no boundary between art and society, or art and politics, or art and economy. With that said, I argue that in order to secure the critical role of the arts in democracies, it is salient to secure their autonomy and to exchange anew ideas about the meaningfulness of not absolute but relative boundaries between categories, disciplines, social systems. This means leaving behind the self-referential rhetoric of dissolving boundaries as something inherently good and re-evaluating the critique of the 1970s in light of the socio-political and economic trends of the present.

Keywords:

boundaries, postmodernism, poststructuralism, globalism, activism, intermedia, post-medium, populism, autonomy, authoritarianism, totalitarianism

