VANGUARDIST AESTHETICS: FROM HISTORICAL VANGUARDISM TO NEO-VANGUARDISM

Gabriela RĂȚULEA[1]

Abstract: *These article aims to provide the evolution of the vanguardist point of view on aesthetics. Vanguardism called into question modern and classical artistic methods and especially, aesthetical assumptions of modernity. If historical vanguardism exaggerated a series of the features of modernity, neo-vanguardism refuses the cult of novelty and rejects the permanent nihilism.*

Key words: *vanguardism, aesthetics, art, life.*

1. Introduction

Vanguardism was a typically modern reaction against modernity, in the sense it exaggerated a series of the features of modernity, among which the cult for critique and novelty, within the context of a plural crisis of modernity, such as the social and political crisis, the economic crisis, or the crisis of modern values (humanism). Within the context of a philosophical and cultural critique of the modern image of man, started by Marx, Nietzsche, or Freud, a form of philosophical and ideological protest discourse was born, doubled by a "revolutionary" social and cultural practice. The radical political discourse led to certain forms of engaged culture, aiming mainly at a critique of the capitalist system and of what is related to the bourgeois world. In short, we can say that vanguardist art is a revolutionary art, and to this extent, indebted to utopic imaginary.

2. Historical Vanguardism

The main features of vanguardism (Raţiu, 2000, pp. 89-92) are the following: (1) a cult of breakage and novelty with a progressive and Messianic attitude against traditionalism; (2) engaging in a political and social programme of revolutionary transformation of society (expressionism, futurism, and abstract art); (3) radicalising modernity by promoting idiosyncrasy and originality; (4) individualism as an expression of absolute freedom; (5) imposing new constraining norms in the name of difference; and (6) the tendency of self-suppression after everything is demolished. The last three features make up a sort of Hegelian triad that suggests vanguardism belongs to the logic

---

[1] *Transilvania* University of Braşov, gratulea@unitbv.ro, corresponding author

of modernity. "Eschatological rhetoric" is related to the same logic, promoted by the theorists of vanguardist trends. In common vanguardist discourse, we can see: the idea of a "pure painting" ascetic as compared to imitation (Malevici, Rodcenko, and futurists); the dissolution of art in social life; the role of art in building a new type of society (Tarabukin); the idea of "life as art" (Mondrian), replacing art objects with devices, attitudes, and concepts (Klein); and rejecting the identification of an audience with heroes (Brecht). In the field of philosophical and aesthetical discourse, we find the philosophical critique of capitalist society by the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse) or the critique of the illuminist project in authors such as Foucault, Habermas, and Baudrillard.

The starting point of vanguardist art is represented by a series of artistic manifestations from the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century, which called into question modern and classical artistic methods and especially, aesthetical assumptions of modernity: subject, object, representation, and work. It would be a matter of what was called "historical vanguardism": "from symbolism and impressionism to neo-impressionism, fauvism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, abstractionism, suprematism, constructivism, neo-plasticism, dada, and sur-realism" (Ratiu, 2000, pp. 57-58).

Vanguardism until World War II promoted a negativist view: refusing the concept of "work", figurative representation and naturalism, continuity of subject-object, and the rules of the aesthetic canon. The general tendency was that of promoting abstract and conceptual art, pure and concrete, deprived of immediate references to the real world perceived, or even separated from the naked reality, staking either on a subjective attitude or on being closed into perceptive mechanisms.

3. Neo-vanguardism

The relation of the post-war art with historic vanguardism is, simultaneously, one of breakage and continuity. An initial feature of neo-vanguardist art was inventing mystical artistic genres so that it sometimes becomes difficult to know if the work of an artist belongs to one genre or another. The main reason of this crossing of genres is found in technological development, as well as the diversification of materials. The forms of expression are countless, precisely because of a "union of art and technology" (Ratiu, 2000, p. 79), which has led to a devaluation of some genres such as painting. In this respect, we can remember "the combines" of Robert Rauschenberg, by which the artist has illustrated the idea of "an aesthetics of open work". The "combines" are transgressions of traditional genres: "if I call paintings what I do, they tell me they are sculptures, and if I name them sculptures, they tell me they are bas-reliefs or paintings" (Zaharia, 2002, p. 41).

Second, the importance of technology and computer science has led to the rejection of a subjective character in art. The main consequence of this is the shifting of interest from the end product (the work, an expression and testimony of subjective attitude) to the mechanics of production. At the same time, this is also a form of shifting from the spatial and static premises (museum or gallery) towards the temporality of a device.

Here, we can give, as an example, the self-destructive mechanisms of Jean Tinguely that were exhibited in the garden of the Art Museum in New York. These mechanisms were made up of various materials taken over from old iron warehouses (containers, wheels, or electric devices) and equipped with engines programmed to start certain self-destructive operations. From the material "art object", they passed unto a process: art as a game, or art as an event, meets the requirements of post-modern thinking (Nietzsche) according to which art needs to be seen as a phenomenon of will. In this sense, art can no longer be doubled by an aesthetics that answers the question "what is a work of art?".

Thus, we witness a "de-aestheticisation" through de-materialisation, such as in the cases of Arte Povera, Process Art, or Conceptual Art. The term "de-aestheticisation" was used by Harold Rosenberg to name a reaction against "aestheticism" of these groups of artists, "trends that preach a complete renunciation to material work or, at least, the shifting of the emphasis from the end product of a creative process to the process itself" (Zaharia, 2002, p. 42). In Arte Povera, they insist on the idea of "poverty" in an art work (as a reaction to the "richness" of forms such as Pop Art), by "poverty" understanding the precariousness and the rudimentary character of materials and the lack of forming an artist under a master (the disappearance of "the school" or "the trend"), but especially the absence of sustainable aesthetic significances, given that the only "sign" of the art work is its unfolding as an event. Thus, "the slice of life" presented as a work cannot have too many meanings because it is nothing else than a form of cutting physical or social reality; apart from that, nothing remains from "the work" that can be seen again or analysed: resuming "an exhibition" implies the creation of a completely new event, in which the context decisively leaves its mark. A "poor" work is deprived of a message.

The de-aestheticisation of art was also sustained in a counter direction, seen with "conceptual art". Here, the emphasis lies first on the message, resorting to "the unmerciful reduction of aesthetical qualities" (Zaharia, 2002, p. 44). Radical conceptualists, who promote verbal work, insist on "the concept" that a work should portray. It is unimportant *who* creates the work: it may be created by all; it may be created by anyone who understood the message; or, lastly, even by an artist. Of course, it is preferable that the work is not created at all; this being the case for understanding "without remainder" of a concept. However, the created material object is as precarious as in Arte Povera, but the presence of the message changes the entire "perspective". De-aestheticisation is performed by transforming aesthetic (sensitive) qualities into conceptual qualities, and by passing from aesthetic contemplation to reflection and problematisation. "The archetype" of conceptual art is undoubtedly the *ready-made* of Duchamp; indeed, Duchamp, himself, passed to conceptual art in the 1960s. Regarding this aspect, Zaharia notes that "judged through the angle of the *ready-made*, the art work presents itself both as an intention of a work and as a material work proper. Moreover, we deduce that the work does not count much, eventually only the intention of creating it, the conception" (Zaharia, 2002, p. 46).

Another characteristic is the integration of art into life and the loss of distinctions between life and art. As a consequence of this, there are no aesthetic phenomena or an

autonomy of art; anything can become art. In this sense, neo-vanguardists refuse any aesthetisising practice of isolating a work of art into places especially designed, considering that art has to descend into the street. Thus, by "the aesthetics of an open work", we understand not only including elements from daily life into a work of art, but also the influence of art upon life. Significant in this respect are the actions of the Paris group GRAV, which created the most varied objects ("mountable and de-mountable sculptures, huge kaleidoscopes, and tools with strings") in the streets in order to take art out of museums and galleries; also, the happenings of the type Alan Kaprow from America or those of the group FLUXUS (Zaharia, 2002, p. 42).

Not least, artists turning art into a game and a phenomenon of will has lead to a change in the social aspect by exerting control over the audience. Thus, neo-vanguardist artists have become a minority group of elites that acquired a certain power that can influence the course of social events by rendering masses sensitive. This institutionalisation has led to a decline of vanguardist movements and to the "exhausting of revolutionary ideologies" (Raţiu, 2000, p. 83).

In conclusion, two fundamental aspects differentiate neo-vanguardism from the ante- and inter-war vanguardism: the refusal of the cult of novelty and the amendment of permanent nihilism, through forms of institutionalisation and the replacement of the anti-aesthetic attitude with *another aesthetics.* An example in this respect is the essay *Art of Another Kind* by Michel Tapié, who, admitting the breakage from traditional art, proclaims the need of a breakage even from vanguardism. From his point of view, the negation of classical art is still a form of its recognition; therefore, the need is felt of a third positive aspect that affirms a stand-alone form of art that is indifferent regarding the past. The conceptual scheme of Tapié is Hegelian (thesis, antithesis, and synthesis), in the sense that the negation of negation leads to a positive essence that surpasses the first two and affirms itself as an independent unity: "the direction is a new order, a new system of notions to the extent of our possible becoming" (Zaharia, 2002, p. 35). This "new system" would be the expression "of aspiration to another art, and, implicitly, a new aesthetics". Another author significant in this respect is Hans Sedlmayr, who proposed the necessity of counteracting "the art that does not want to be art". Synthesising various perspectives outlined with regard to the art of the 1960s, Zaharia groups them into three important directions: (1) anti-art as a radical novelty against classical art; (2) anti-art that contests nihilism and permanent revolution; and (3) a direction that contests anti-art, recognising a certain value of it.

Among the multiple elements that characterise postmodern art, we can identify a common aim of proposing "art for life" or "life as art"; we could see in this tendency a sort of practical principle that the representatives of all trends observe. It could be a matter of a principle for "a postmodern aesthetics". In this sense, we consider that "the social sculpture" of the artist Joseph Beuys is a model of understanding the significance of postmodern art. Beuys considered that, by "social sculpture", each man could be "carved" to become an artist. Consequently, the entire social body could be transformed through the artwork. The instrument of this sculpture is language; the artistic process is represented by actions meant to start: discussions and attitudes, expositions and testimonies, and opinions and beliefs, regarding everything that characterises the

human universe. Therefore, postmodern art tried to surpass nihilist and reactive, and ideological and revolutionary vanguardism to integrate art into the process of social life and to dissolve it without proclaiming "the death of art." According to Richard Shustermann, this theoretical and aesthetic option is founded on a fragment from Wittgenstein that said: "ethics and aesthetics are the same thing" (Wittgenstein, 1991, p. 21). Schusterman considers that this thing can be said in three senses: (1) they both see the world "from the outside"; (2) they both refer to "what is mystical", that is to what has an absolute value; and (3) they both deal with the problem of happiness. Schusterman finds this maxim of Wittgenstein relevant because the coincidence of aesthetics with ethics "represents the expression of some important opinions and theoretical problems, equally ethical and aesthetical, from our postmodern era" (Schusterman, 2004, p. 227). Art and art critique have to be stimulated morally, socially, and politically. Schusterman argues this by upsetting the theoretical perspective, pursuing not so much an ethical becoming of the aesthetic but rather the aestheticisation of the ethical. He notes: "the observations in terms of aesthetics are or should be crucial for setting the mode in which we choose to conduct our life and in which we evaluate what a good life is" (Shusterman, 2004, p. 228). The aestheticisation of the ethical applies both to the private and the public fields. In a political sense, Schusterman states a unique thesis regarding social justice, namely: "the postmodern society has to ensure the possibility (if not the support) of a satisfactory life from an aesthetic point of view for its individuals". As a result of this upsetting of perspective, the idea of a postmodern aesthetics can no longer be doubted. This perspective is also strengthened by Ferry, who notes that, in postmodernity, ethics is not one of merit or of excellence; postmodern ethics is an ethics of authenticity (Ferry, 1997, p. 325). Authenticity being a concept firstly aesthetical, the possibility of a postmodern aesthetics is thus sustained by the principle, "be yourself", which, translated in the language of aesthetics, means that "the death of art" is its life.

4. Conclusion

Taking into account the anaesthetical or anti-aesthetical dimension of contemporary art constitutes a negative feature. Precisely for this reason, a number of authors less interested in the aesthetic problem but more attentive to the extra-aesthetical aspects (such as the political and social programme of contemporary art) could differentiate between historic vanguardism and neo-vanguardism. Historical vanguardism promoted a negativist view: refusing the concept of "work", figurative representation and naturalism, continuity of subject-object, and the rules of the aesthetic canon. The general tendency was that of promoting abstract and conceptual art, pure and concrete, deprived of immediate references to the real world perceived, or even separated from the naked reality, staking either on a subjective attitude or on being closed into perceptive mechanisms. The relation of the post-war art with historic vanguardism is, simultaneously, one of breakage and continuity. First of all, neo-vanguardist art invented mystical artistic genres so that it sometimes becomes difficult to know if the work of art belongs to one genre or another. Second, the importance of technology and computer

science has led to the rejection of a subjective character in art. In the third place, the integration of art into life and the loss of distinctions between life and art. And last but not at least, turning art into a game and a phenomenon of will has lead to a change in the social aspect by exerting control over the audience.

References

Ferry, L. (1997). *Homo aestheticus*. Bucharest: Meridiane.

Raţiu, D. E. (2000). *Moartea artei* [The Death of Art]. Cluj-Napoca: House of Scientific Book.

Schusterman, R. (2004). *Estetica pragmatistă. Arta în stare vie* [Pragmatist Aesthetics. Art in a Living State]. Iași: European Institute.

Tapié, M. (1997). *Un art autre* [Art of Another Kind]. Torino: Edizioni d'arte Fratelli Pozzo.

Zaharia, D. N. (2002). *Estetica postmodernă* [Postmodern Aesthetics]. Iași: Dosoftei.

Wittgenstein, L. (1991). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Bucharest: Humanitas.