

Critical Discussion of Originality in Art through Boris Groys's Concept of *Kulturökonomie*

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Abstract

The aesthetics of the mid-19th century succeeded in displacing the traditional category of Beauty from artistic praxis. Beauty left an empty space that was occupied by the axiom of Romantic genius: originality. The distinction of the work of art by an aesthetic quality gives way to the sole intention of differentiating it from others with other aesthetic qualities. The lack of a value judgement allows Boris Groys to analyse originality through his logic of the economy of culture (Kulturökonomie). The article shows that Groys' theory fails to adequately explain the phenomenon of graffiti art. It, therefore, questions the effectiveness of his theory. Furthermore, it helps to avoid the current metamorphosis of art into rhetoric and emphasises the need for a theoretical framework to value originality through the materialisation of the idea.

Keywords: Originality; avant-garde art theory; aesthetic Beauty; *Kulturökonomie*; graffiti art; art's materiality.

1. Introduction

The question is this: Can we still maintain the discourse of originality? Originality is a fundamental question for today's artistic endeavour. The artist desires and pursues originality. Later, the art historian — either as such, as a critic, or as a curator of heritage — will judge whether he or she achieves it. It would be absurd to determine to what degree it did since the originality of the 20th-century avant-garde claims to start from an origin, that is, from a point zero that implies the nullity of all artistic tradition (Carl von Clausewitz, 1966, p. 430). By its manifest ideology, the avant-garde should initiate the *voyage* proposed in 1859 by Baudelaire (1983, p. 57) when he invokes death by claiming to abandon civilization and thus *plunge into the Ignoto to find something new* (Micheli, 1987, p. 51). Bürger (1987a) states that the vital aim of the European historical avant-garde is to undermine, attack and transform the bourgeois institution of art and its autonomous ideology, more important than changing only the artistic and literary forms of representation; that is, an attack on the separation between art and everyday life³ the avant-garde would thus attempt to integrate art into life. He differs from Adorno (1980), who bases his aesthetics on the principle of the autonomy of art. For Bürger, the avant-garde idea is a category of criticism, an abstract category of thought about modern art. For Adorno, it is an attribute of artistic practice. Bürger avoids conceptualizing what is affective and bases his argument on the systematic appearance of avant-garde objects, even canonizing their most salient attributes: inorganicity of form, tactics of impact and formalization of montage. These justifications for achieving a logic that can create the realm of aesthetics where ideology would be —for Bürger— concomitant, distance the ready-made from the creative dimension of the gaze to give it a simple bricolage status which reflects in the concept of the category of work established by him. Bürger criticizes Adorno for neglecting the communicative functions of art, for reducing the social function of art to negation, and for protesting against society. Adorno can thus betray Bürger's ideological determinism. However, both start by equating the concept of the avant-garde with that of the reorganization of vital praxis through art and, albeit by different paths, both arrive at the phenomenon of the loss of the proper aesthetic character of art to ensure its adaptation to the symbolic use of market society, Adorno's *Entkunstung*. However, art has played no role in this radical transformation. Baudrillard (1995) was right when he pointed out that art today is in the sphere of simulation and, thus, does not influence social and economic processes. Witte (1992) observes that the impotence of the writers of the former GDR in the face of the unification process is suitable proof because although they wanted to be the bearers of change, the winners of this revolution were Siemens and the Deutsche Bank. And that is why Witte speaks of the current situation not as modern but as postmodern.

2. Revisiting originality as an economic operation of the dynamics of intellectual markets

Observations of this kind force us to review the avant-garde concept through this idea of deartification (*Entkunstung*). The most profound revision was carried out by Groys (1992). This professor of Russian history of thought at the University of Münster understands the real, not the things in themselves, nor the cultural descriptions or representations hidden behind things in such a way that we should penetrate them, but the relations between cultural activities and products, the hierarchies and values that culture determines. Its concatenation is based on the fact that reality contains a law of aspiring to the new by the new¹. This thought is also in force in Postmodernism; however, Groys shows the abolition of the hope for the revelation of the hidden and the bringing to trial of

progress. On the question of the meaning of the new or whether it still has a meaning, this author brings an interesting perspective: he goes beyond the determination of culture as a dichotomy of the new and the old as a driving idea. He establishes a cultural process as an economic operation promoted by the laws of exchange, valuation, the dynamics of intellectual markets, and the utilization of cultural archives. This conceptualization (*Kulturökonomie*) bases cultural dynamics on the functioning of economic systems.

However, Groys does not intend to subject culture to the forces of pressure and coercion of the economy; he does not attempt to link culture to an economic structure, for he avoids tautology by asserting that there is a parallel between economy and culture because "every description of the economy is, above all, a cultural argument, a cultural product." (Groys, 1992, p. 14). Thus, Groys' descent into reality is not intended to derive from the superficial level of economic affairs a thread leading to ultimate values and fundamental aspects of the human —as was Simmel's (1976) intention— but to identify the details and superficialities of life as the essential and profound. In this way, he can maintain the idea of economic promotions (*Ökonomischen Forderungen*) within cultural activity, even though culture is the sphere of economic logic par excellence, because of its dynamics and capacity (aptitude) for innovation. We must understand cultural development —according to Groys— as a logic of value estimation, as inalienable (*unverzichtbar*) for man as the economy itself². There is thus no utopia in argumentation, only rules of consequence. When Groys flees from postmodern thinking, when he exchanges the concept of progress for that of process, he wants to get rid of the conservatism it entails. Now, no end of history (Fukuyama), of the human being (Derrida) or of humanity (Virilio), or of creation (Steiner) can be posited, and the postmodern controversy remains as apocalyptic talk.

Nevertheless, Groys' exemplification of his theory through the ready-made using a psychological postulation³ demonstrates its inadequacy because such a postulate will become deterministic⁴. The problem is that if Groys proposes an economic logic, it does not allow for the concept of the unconscious. On the other side, which is the artist, if we can admit the unconscious within a radicality of the production of the object (formalism), we cannot accept it in the radicality of the ready-made because this is not based on an artistic counterposition, but on a transformation of culture in general (conceptualism). The other uncollectible aspect of the syneresis *Kulturökonomie* is the very knot of its logic. It is undoubtedly true that Duchamp's praxis did not work. After *Fontaine's* surprise at being presented in context, the logic of the economy of culture devalues its artistic dignity (*Kunstwürdig*) by introducing it into the archive of culture through memory. It has exchanged the profane for the sacred space with a new valorization. Now, that surprise has become another genre of object art⁵.

The artist only has to choose one object, thus demonstrating an interest that distances him from the others. But, how can we determine the quality of such an artistic presence? The answer, for Groys, is evident and demonstrative of his postulation because only the speculative intrigue of gallery owners determines value and price. The example chosen by Groys always proves him right in every assertion: even if Duchamp went into hiding for twenty years to make *L'etant donée* and this work did not appear until his death, today it is in the Philadelphia Museum, even with Duchamp's attempt to limit the payment for his ready-mades, they profited handsomely. With the innovation strategy (value-market-value-value), the next will always be defeated by this very discourse. Even if one were to discover the secret of escaping the strategy, the very discovery would be a step towards the same logic of economic culture because if one accepts Groys' concatenation (1992), "the new is inescapable, unavoidable, unrenounceable. There is no path leading away from the new because such a path would also be new" (p. 12).

3. Discussion on the logic of Boris Groys' Economy of Culture (*Kulturökonomie*)

To dismantle the discourse that Groys claims to be apodictic, we must change the example he offers. Duchamp has the possibility of opening up a new way of working with art but simultaneously suppresses the conception produced. Now, the ready-made becomes conventional, trivial, and uninteresting. However, the (supposed) logic of the economy of culture needs to maintain its ineluctable presence when we substitute the event of the ready-made for that of graffiti.

We substitute it for graffiti and not for the radical dematerialization of the object presence of conceptual art because this instituting of art as a mental process —just like the Hinge Principle postulated by Duchamp— does not escape the logical-linguistic figure that is shaped in the symbol. Reasoning with the will to limit, the plot of absolute conclusion in the limit does not distance itself from the dialectical structure of the logos (thinking-saying). We must understand that the negativity given in the limes —the pretended referent to silence— we can legitimately turn it into a positive one. Trias (1991, p. 406) supports this ontologically by stating that "it must be conceived as a way of being and existence, the presence of an absence". It would be unhelpful to deconceptualize Groys' theory here through Trias' total re-creation of ontology. Groys' logical space operates in an aesthetic realm of a different level. However, the graffiti example does fulfil the requirement of moving on the level Groys works on, which allows us to make a correct substitution of the ready-made.

At the end of the eighties, interest in exhibitions of an art that has come to be known as graffiti began. From then until today, counting the institutionalized macro-exhibition, the gallery shows, and the actions organized by municipalities, we have seen an average of one exhibition per year. The most outstanding was the one at the Palais Chaillot of the Musée National des Monuments Français in Paris and, most notably, the one that the Fundación La Caixa dedicated to Keith Haring in Madrid. However, all these exhibitions made the severe mistake of calling what they showed graffiti art. If we look for a definition of graffiti, we are most likely to find inscriptions drawn on walls or other places, preferably in urban environments and in an anonymous manner; not political graffiti but rather writings of a personal nature to testify to the presence of an author in a specific place. Although with different syntaxes, all definitions share the same semantic values without daring to mention the primary characteristic of what has been called the graffiti phenomenon: illegality. A serious omission if we consider that it is a form of radical revolt in the domain of signs. Its messages escape the combinatorics of the system through their lack of content. As empty signs, they break into the entire signs of the city and destroy them by their very presence. They destroy the medium of communication through the creation of a dominant non-language. The semiotic arbitrariness of society is attacked and thus falls into illegality.

Regarding the assessment of this proposal, some share the opinion of Addison Parks (1982), describing it as *criminal mischief*, while others identify with the opinion of Genis Cano (1987), defining it as a *delightful crime*. Some agree with Monfarrege (1982) and, without wishing to judge, only describe it as a *creative urge*. Regardless of our position, we can never deny the quality that Alexandre Cirici (1983) emphasized: graffiti is a heroic art. He was referring to an artistic activity with real difficulties and dangers that do not produce economic benefits but only aesthetic ones. It is an activity that does not seek art as an everyday event but everyday life as an artistic event. Art can be sold, but everyday life cannot. However, when Cirici spoke of heroism, didn't he know that on the fifteenth of September of the previous year, a graffiti exhibition opened at the Razor Gallery in Soho, where the works ranged from two to three thousand dollars? Presumably, he was unaware that what was presented was not graffiti (Appuhn, 1984) but graffiti-style canvases. Here, the term heroism is intimately linked to illegality, so graffiti must be carried out with the nocturnal and premeditated nature that the forbidden demands to achieve the freedom envied by so-called serious art —whose hands are always tied by the demands of the market. Yes, it is a heroic art because it does not seek profit but the relief of its need.

However, the *establishment* is all-powerful and eventually assimilates the danger of an art without ties (Gablik, 1987). It cannot allow art snipers. So, if graffiti is no longer graffiti on canvas, how can a wall be commercialized? Whoever presented himself as an alternative hid the most desired advantage of established art. It was not the work (wall) but the author (writer) being marketed. Borders are crossed without paying tariffs, insurance, or transport, only the author's ticket to produce the work wherever he or she is sent. Now, the market has a reason to be interested. The accusations of criminality disappear, and the provocative figuration of Jean Michel Basquiat on any support is accepted; Keith Haring becomes a serious painter despite continuing with his chalk, the great Lee will also fall, Futura, Crash, Dondi and Zephyr do not stop travelling (Castleman, 1987). No time is left for the night, and the great God, money, satiates the foul play. What can be called post-graffiti begins. Groys' *Kulturökonomie* normalizes graffiti by seducing its heroism when it achieves the loss of illegality (Fortuny, 1992a).

We agree with Delgado-Gal (1996, 179) that the theory that starts from Hegel to relate the expressiveness of art to the socio-political environment does not work because it does not allow us to understand the effect that a canvas produces in us. We also accept that with the expressive-sociological theory, we do not know how to justify this apprehension. Nor do we doubt that art is not a symbolic language because, if other forms can replace the form of the sign that signifies without losing content, in art, it cannot. This is so because the form is essential to it, and this comes from the fact that it is an expressive form; that is to say, a perceived form that is simultaneously deduced since, as cognitive beings, we receive nothing in the blank. Thus, it is established that the formal is presented to our intelligence thanks to the plastic manipulation of a form from a system of concepts.

However, what is valid for understanding what happens to the spectator must also be valid for the artist because they only diverge because of their different cognitive context in proportion to the parallelism of the history of culture. The two can only meet thanks to the essence of art, and if paintings are essentially vehicles of expressive values, the starting point will be the (i.e. expressive) form —as Delgado-Gal maintains. However, philosophical analysis as a tool for reflection always presents an axiomatic problem: if we assume that a painting is essentially where what we value is expressed through vehicles, why is not the essence of art its materialization?

4. Conclusions

We have seen how the infrastructure of the art world assimilates any alternative creativity. Today, to save graffiti ideology, it should be subjected to reflection using the methodology of postmodernity: deconstruction. In other words, to submit it to a process of symbiotic osmosis of the isthmus divergences in a non-systematic integration agglutinated by the subjectivity of the author who creates it (Fortuny, 1992b). Thus, we can establish a new concept of graffiti, for example, transgraffiti. Decomposition of the graffiti construction and re-composition according to

criteria such as appropriation, rewriting and revisionism. We could focus our interest on providing content through a symbiosis between visual signs and written language, achieving it through the epitome as a working tool; that is to say, to delimit an essential content in its coherence. Thus, it would cease to be a non-language and become a unidirectional discourse with explicitly subversive content. From this could emerge the transgraffitiepitomic: a schematic formalization generically synthesized from the multidisciplinary complexities surrounding the graffiti dynamic as a fact of alternative creation. In this example, we approximate it to the conceptual sphere, but deconstruction can be carried out with any other terms according to the subjective revision of each deconstructor. The serious thing is that by using the methodology of postmodernity, we create from graffiti the transgraffitiepitomic or any other concept that will be nothing more than a recombinant hybridism —simulacrum. Postmodernity cannot take us beyond fragmentation, confusion of codes and slight nuance; in other words, the neutral work that reinterprets aesthetics by creating only rhetoric. Within the domesticated aesthetics of the end of the century, graffiti can be subversive only in formal aspects. The transgraffitiepitomic is nothing more than an *in vitro* creation resulting from a concrete subjective deconstruction to demonstrate that alternative art can no longer be anything other than that simulacrum. Postmodernism offers a hermeneutic with which we cannot recover the lost heroism of graffiti.

Groys argues that if post-modernity succeeds in proposing a hermeneutics that is not a simulacrum, it will never be possible to enjoy a model of genuinely heroic artistic creativity, for he believes in the impossibility of obtaining an art *ad honorem* due to human nature. We insist on a view that is erroneous because it is deterministic. Here, the artist always has the last word, which belongs to the realm of thought. Whether or not one can escape from the mere aestheticist depends solely on the aesthetic thought contemporary to the artist. Whether or not Postmodernism is nonsense, the fact is that today, the proposal that heroic art is full of content if it manages to maintain the difference between graffiti as art and graffiti-style art⁶. The ready-made attempted to destroy its art by showing an everyday event as an artistic event, but this was not enough of a setback. Graffiti, on the other hand, is an activity that does not seek art as an everyday fact but everydayness as an artistic fact. Ready-made art can be sold, but everydayness cannot. Consequently, graffiti constitutes a natural aggression, the only one of all known art. It is a corollary assertion that graffiti could be the only avant-garde art.

The ready-made does not establish Duchamp as a performer but as a transformer because it (re)novates but not (in)novates. Graffiti, on the other hand, could, but is graffiti art? Groys would turn to the question in a non-explicit way because, for him, it makes no sense to ask what is or is not art. After all, the context inevitably assimilates everything that has the appearance of art. It is only this assimilation that gives it the name of art (*Kunstschaffen*). In this respect, and the face of our misunderstanding of his logic of the economy of culture (*Kulturökonomie*), Groys may object that graffiti activity is not an artistic creation. However, with this argument, he would turn his discourse into an entelechy.

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Footnotes

¹ *Es gibt keine Möglichkeit, die Regeln des Neuen zu brechen, denn ein solcher Bruch ist genau das, was die Regeln erfordern. Und in diesem Sinne ist die Forderung nach Innovation, wenn man will, die einzige Realität, die in der Kultur zum Ausdruck gebracht wird. Denn unter Realität versteht man das Unausweichliche, Unverfügbare, Unverzichtbare. Indem die Innovation unverzichtbar ist, ist sie Realität.* (Groys, 1992, p. 12)

² *Die ökonomische Logik manifestiert sich auch und speziell genug in der kulturellen Logik. Deswegen ist die Kultur genauso unverzichtbar wie die Ökonomie selbst. Und die Ökonomie der Kultur ist somit keine Beschreibung der Kultur als Repräsentation bestimmter ausserkultureller wirtschaftlicher Vorgänge, sondern der Versuch, die Logi der Kulturellen Entwicklung selbst als eine ökonomische Logik der Umwertung der Werte zu verstehen.* (Groys, 1992, p. 15).

³ *Wenn ein Kulturell valorisiertes Objekt sich von den gewöhnlichen Alltagsdingen äusserlich unterscheidet, entsteht nämlich die psychologisch völlig verständliche Versuchung, diesen äusseren Unterschied als Grund für den Wertunterschied zwischen diesem 'künstlerischen' Objekt und alltäglichen Dingen auszugeben.* (Groys, 1992, p. 74). The underlining is ours.

⁴ Boris Groys was unconcerned when I was able to bring it up during the conversation we had on the tenth of June 1993, thanks to José Lebrero Stäls' invitation to the art criticism workshop at Montesquiu. Groys insistently defended that Apollinaire's avant-garde came about thanks to the eagerness of collectors who had run out of anything to collect. This problem of the artist-collector anxiety split only leads to the absurd dilemma of which came first, the chicken or the egg. It is easy to feel self-confident postulating a theory within such a *constructio*.

⁵ *Für die Kultur als Ganzes ist in jedem Einzelfall nur wichtig, dass die Wertgrenze, die das kulturelle Gedächtnis vom profanen Raum trennt, erfolgreich überschritten und damit eine Innovation zustande gekommen ist. [...] Die Innovation wird nämlich von der Kulturökonomischen Logik erzwungen, die die Kunst, die wie eine Kunst aussieht, stets von neuem abwertet. Der Beweis, dass die Kunst des Ready-made auch eine Kunst ist, erweist ihr damit keine guten Dienst.* (Groys, 1992, p. 65, p. 77)

⁶ *Wanted Magazine*. (Madrid) 1995, no. 2. *Art Attack Artist Magazine*. (Barcelona) 1996, no. 1. *Underground Productions*. (Stockholm) 1996, no 8. *There's no Limits*. (Zürich) 1996, no. 3. The fact of being able to quote the previous magazines marks the limits, reveals their underground, breaks their strategy, and can easily subject them to the established judgement; so little remains in them of that initial heroic graffiti, something I maintained in *Luego. Cuadernos de Crítica e investigación*, (Fortuny, 1992b), and to which Ibáñez (1996, p. 40) did not pay attention, as he trusts that graffiti-style art can still decapitate art.