



Introduction





The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude

The art world has changed out of all recognition in the last twenty years. Not only has the number of people that call themselves artists increased tremendously since the nineteen eighties, but society's attitude to art and artists has changed too. In those days, any eighteen year old who told people he wanted to go to an art school got some funny looks from friends and acquaintances. And such a wish was often vetoed by parents, or at least hedged around with the condition that the youngster first learned 'a real profession'. Twenty years later, much less fuss is made when someone chooses to ply a creative trade, and the exotic aura around the artist's calling has evaporated somewhat. Today, creativity, innovation, authenticity and even idiosyncrasy are embraced by the business world and governments alike. The 'progressive' entrepreneur has grasped the benefits of artistic entrepreneurship for his Post-Fordian business, and politicians embrace the arts with a view to an attractive creative city that can hold its own in the global competition of places to be. In other words, art — or at least 'the artistic' — has been promoted in the course of twenty years from the margins of society to its heart. Or, as the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno declares, echoing the German writer Hans Enzensberger: art has been diluted in society like a soluble tablet in a glass of water.

This book will defend the hypothesis that modern art has played a role in this process itself, because the social structure of the early modern art world was one of the social laboratories in which the current Post-Fordian work ethic was produced. It is all part of the post-industrial economy to focus on qualities such as communication skills, eloquence, creativity and authenticity, as well as to think in terms of projects, with temporary contracts or none at all, flexible working hours and physical and mental mobility. But these qualities were once defended, and in fact still are, as the central values of the art scene. And with them the art world fits seamlessly into the spirit of capitalism's endless spiral of accumulation, as the French thinkers Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have convincingly argued. Or, to paraphrase them: art criticism has been absorbed by the capitalist ideology, and is nowadays productively put to work within the neoliberal labour system.

This last sentence introduces a loaded word that will feature regularly in this book, namely 'neoliberalism'. Since this idea appears here in the role of ideological enemy, some explanation seems in order. First of all, let us be clear: this book is not a plea against liberal or neoliberal politics. As long as an ideological programme





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is defended in the political arena, it explicitly admits to being an ideology which people can be for or against. No good democrat can have anything against that. What is more, let us not forget that both liberalism and neoliberalism prize individual freedom and autonomy very highly. And these are crucial values which modern art and artists could hardly survive without. In other words, we too enjoy the fruits of neoliberalism.

The neoliberalism that does occasionally come under fire in this book is of another order entirely. This is the neoliberalism that has left the political area and, just like Virno's soluble tablet, has dissolved into society to permeate it. It includes an ideological programme that denies that it is an ideology. This neoliberalism takes the form of a pervasive crypto-ideology — in other words, it purports to be the only 'realistic' option. It goes even further than that: neoliberal principles are seen as natural, and as intrinsic to human behaviour. Such a crypto-ideology therefore denies the distinction between nature and culture. A cultural product, which is what every ideology is, is presented as the only possible natural state of affairs. Anything else is dismissed as naive gibberish and banished to the graveyard of utopian dreams. With the manager as protagonist, this neoliberalism has crept into other areas of society that lie well beyond the market and the economy. In educational circles, for example, it has become commonplace to hear people talking of output and returns on investment — as if they were talking about a bank. Even in politics, neoliberal discourse is very widely accepted, whether in the neoliberal, the Catholic or the Socialist camps. And — to stay within the territory of this book — in the field of art and culture, when people talk about grants they no longer talk in terms of 'nurturing' the arts and our cultural heritage, but in terms of 'government interventions', as if they were referring to an unavoidable market correction, a necessary evil. At least, this is what is happening in the Netherlands. Moreover, the artist must also be an artistic entrepreneur, while cultural participation is first and foremost a matter of viewing statistics and visitor numbers. As we all know, there is hardly a museum, theatre or public broadcasting corporation in Europe that has escaped this logic of accumulation. In their own way, the mass media too have largely been reprogrammed in line with neoliberal thinking. And what are we to think of the 'value-free' scientific research that unquestioningly places itself at the service of this logic and decks it out with the most sophisticated methodological rules?





In the name of efficiency, freedom of competition is seen as a universal good, and nobody looks at what might be lost to it. This sometimes leads to a blind logic of accumulation of which the latest financial crisis is perhaps the most obvious result. Once again: it is not political and publicly expressed neoliberalism that this book opposes. One can only respect those who speak out in the political arena, if only because these are people who have the courage to show their true colours. Whether we agree with their political stand is another matter. But at least we are able to take up a position on it.

Another word that crops up a lot in this book is 'globalization'. The term is chiefly used to refer to the latest wave of globalization that has swept across the globe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Critics sometimes claim that globalization is a fashionable term that has been so overused as to become almost meaningless. They also claim that globalization has been going on ever since the first trading towns grew up. There is little to be said against these points. And yet we really can identify different waves of globalization, the latest of which is characterized by a global hypermobility of people, money, goods and information. It is the speed with which this happens nowadays that distinguishes the new wave of globalization from previous ones. Moreover, today's globalization is marching in step with the spreading monolithic paradigm of free market capitalism, itself shored up by the creeping neoliberalism I have already mentioned. This is the globalization referred to in this book.

The theoretical insights on which most of the essays are based are a product of the alchemy between the sociology of art and critical social theory. The key writers in the former discipline are Pierre Bourdieu, Nathalie Heinich and Bruno Latour, chief architect of the Actor-Network theory (hereafter ANT), while the work of Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and Eve Chiapello play an important role too. The second 'discipline' is chiefly driven by the mainly political-philosophical insights of Chantal Mouffe, Paolo Virno, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (although the work of Pierre Bourdieu can equally well be placed within this critical tradition).

This perhaps rather idiosyncratic seeming combination of sociology and critical social theory grew out of personal interest, but it also relates to the evolution of the sociology of art. First of all, it should be pointed out that not many new ideas have surfaced in





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the sociology of art since the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann. Most art-sociological theory restricts itself to commentary on, and fairly modest revisions of the work of these godfathers of the discipline. This is particularly true of the work of Bourdieu. Most cultural sociological research — and certainly quantitative research — does not go beyond adding to and perhaps refining the insights that the French sociologist first aired in the nineteen sixties. Secondly, it would appear that critical social theory was banished from most sociology departments after the nineteen seventies. And in the name of value-free research, sociology finds itself swept along in a methodological current dominated by quantitative methods. The discipline technocratizes and rejects — or, rather, suppresses — any ideological positioning. What this means in practice, however, in the context of the above-mentioned all-pervasive neoliberalism, is that sociology blindly follows the dominant paradigm. This book is an attempt to give back to critical social theory its meaningful place in the sociology of art.

While regularly homing in on theoretical and empirical insights, the book takes the form of a collection of essays, and is quite insistent on this point. The essay form allows for more hypothetical, speculative discourses, alongside normative, ideological and political ones. Moreover, the essays in this book were originally written independently of each other, although they have been thoroughly revised to make this volume a coherent whole. In some cases, especially the older essays, this means that they were half-written. Notwithstanding the chosen format, half of the essays are based on classical empirical research such as document analysis, in-depth interviews, data analysis, and participatory observation. Other contributions are based purely on theoretical insights and are speculative in nature. The different types of essay are deliberately presented here without differentiation, however. Implicitly, this choice underlines that even the best-grounded empirical research — quantitative research included — cannot do without the speculative space created by the sociological imagination, while speculations about society will be unlikely to convince the reader if they are not supported by empirical observations, however intuitive these may be.

The book consists of three parts. The three essays in Chapter One look at the facts about the art world and its institutions, such as museums and biennales. But these institutions are mentioned chiefly in order to illustrate the theoretical framework of





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the book as a whole: notions such as ‘multitude’, ‘Post-Fordism’, ‘immaterial labour’ and ‘biopolitics’. The second part of the book zooms in on the perception of art and cultural heritage in the context of globalization, and examines the influence on our collective memory of both the nation state and the rise of mass media and the internet. A stroll through the Post-Fordian city shows us how it uses art and aesthetics to take part in a global competition between places to be. The last two essays in the middle section analyse how museums present — or can present — both art and the past in a more reflective and yet political way. The third and last section of the book returns to the production side of the art world. It outlines the impact of globalization and the still expanding neoliberalism on artists and other actors in the art world, and goes on to point out a few alternative avenues. Whether these are convincing alternatives or whether they belong largely to the world of the murmuring is left for the reader to decide.

It remains for me to say a word of thanks. In the first place, to Fontys College for the Arts, and particularly to its director, Rien van der Vleuten, who made the Arts in Society research group possible, thereby creating a rare intellectual space in an educational climate in which almost everything is evaluated in terms of returns on investment. This programme represents a commitment to a long-term approach which it is hoped will make for sustainable quality art education. This is why we have chosen to launch a series of publications which we hope will gradually infiltrate the school’s curriculum — and be consulted well beyond it too.

Many thanks, as well, to my colleague Paul De Bruyne, and to those of his associates who offered feedback and enthusiasm. Colleagues at my other workplace, Groningen University, also deserve a mention for the amicable atmosphere and solidarity they create on the generally informal workfloor there. There are few universities where you can still find this. I would also like to express my respect for Valiz publishers, who were happy to commit themselves to this publication and to our forthcoming, more or less speculative, writings. I’m especially grateful to Rudi Laermans, who critically examined various earlier incarnations of essays in this collection, and who remains an important fellow-thinker or partner in crime. And finally, much love for Liesbeth. In an earlier publication I said that living with a writer is a bit like a polygamous marriage. She still stands by me after the sixth book — or is it the seventh? The only possible response to this is one of admiration and respect.





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