

The neo avant-garde's failure was its success: Art and Context.

Alain Viguier. Proposal for the 2005 AAANZ Conference Transforming Aesthetics, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney (keynote address: Nicolas Bourriaud).

In art, the word "context" is widely used. Still this notion is too heterogeneous to provide any overall and precise concept. This notion, as for many other prevailing notions in art theory, was largely formed during the time of the neo avant-garde, in the 1960s and 1970s. I propose to examine what the notion of "context" can stand for in our present historical situation against this background.

Throughout XXth century avant-garde art, and more importantly through the neo avant-garde, there has been an unresolved contradiction between "aesthetic reification and the concept of aesthetic use value". This thesis expressed by Benjamin Buchloh underlies actual art theory in more than one way. The main procedures of the neo avant-garde in countering aesthetic reification were to break the work's unity and limitations in time and in space, and to break the boundaries between production and reception by promoting an active spectator. The opponents, in both procedures, were the "autonomous" work, the "easel painting", and the museum representing a separation between art and life. As a corollary to this opposition there are two discontinuous meanings to the word "context". On one hand, you have the context as what is colonised, indexed, reconstructed by the artwork while being incorporated into its own syntax. On the other hand, you have the context as what the work is enclosed in or "confined" in: the museum, the institution, the "artworld". Despite the work's failure to escape "cultural confinement" (Robert Smithson), the criticism exercised by the neo avant-garde has proven to be immensely productive. In wanting to bridge the gap between art and life, works have often indexed the institutional context itself. In the early 1970s Buren wrote: "The artwork appears when the museum disappears". The traditional easel painting did block recognition of context, and the new works were often working at showing the contextual conditions in which they appeared. If art did not destroy the museum, it was nevertheless an extraordinary revelator and deconstructor for it. This is why Kosuth could say in the 1980s that the failure of conceptual art was its success.

What the neo avant-garde was becoming more and more conscious of is art's conceptual and relative nature and of its institutional nature. Works are defined as conceptual not because a concept replaces the physical work, but because many artists (at the time of the popularisation of the ready-made) show that a same physical form can have many different meanings. Meaning (a work's predicates or characteristics) is not inherent to physical form, but is related to cognitive process and context. For Goodman, form is never already informed and therefore we never know what a work "is" before knowing "how it works" (and knowing first that it belongs to the category "art"). A work needs to be "implemented" in order to be appreciated. The aesthetic attitude is a permanent recreation, active and restless.

Goodman's idea of works as "worlds" corresponds to the emerging relativism and pluralism in the art of the 1960s. A relativism which had as a corollary the "museum's ruins" since it also meant the disappearance of general criteria in the evaluation and in the classification of artworks. Many art historians had adopted a perspectivist approach and agreed that criteria of appreciation were not applied from the outside but derived from the works themselves. As Goodman says: a visual organisation which is incorrect in Raphael's world can be correct in Seurat's world. This relativism is reflected in group exhibitions from the 1960s onward.

The relativism of the artworks has had implications in the museum context. General rules in curatorial practices which are applied in exhibition, conservation, restoration, documentation or expertise, were no longer adequate to many of the works. These practices were becoming much more flexible while adapting to different cases and they were evolving into what was to be termed "new museology".

Despite the structural antagonism of the neo-avant garde's ideal of escaping the "prison house" of the art institution and despite the fact that the "easel painting" remained a matrix in the organisation of art, there has been an intense and productive collaboration between artists and institutions all the way. And distance today allows us to recognise the close correlations over the last decades between transformations in art and transformations in the art institution and more particularly in the museum context. It would not be correct to talk of the critical effects works have exercised on the institution without talking about the potential this institution had for using these effects in its own transformation. What art has been able to do to the institution, the institution has been able to do it to itself. The history of neo-avant-garde art and the history of the art institution are closely interrelated.

Goodman uses the word "implementation" not only in reference to one's perception of the work but also, in a loose way, in reference to the way one shows it (in order that it works). Implementation also consists in showing, in framing, in reproducing a work. He invents the word "maintenance" to talk about these concrete procedures of implementation. It is through a work's "maintenance" that it is kept working; the way of showing and of handling (e.g. restoring) a work is necessarily adequate to what this work "is". Maintenance, just as implementation, partakes of the aesthetic attitude of an active spectator although, in this case, the spectator is also an actor (curator, restorer, photographer, etc.) who implements the work through adequate actions. But the active attitude in implementation and in maintenance is necessarily always doubled by a contemplative attitude. The spectator and the actor are engaged in the active process of an always "unfinished" work, while at the same time, at another level, they are contemplating a "finished" being (in order to maintain it as what it "is"). An artwork has necessarily a degree of generality to be able to have a public existence and to be able to occur at different times and in different places or to be named under a title.

Works by the neo avant-garde were losing their formal unity, but they were gaining at the same time their conceptual unity. A work's "being" is a type which programs a physical occurrence rather than it is a physical object. A sort of being which belongs to what the philosophers Gérard Genette or Roger Pouivet have called a "restricted ontology" (ontologie restreinte).

We also find two discontinuous meanings to the word "interactivity" which correspond to the division I have talked about in the current meaning of "context". This division also corresponds to the traditional division between spectator and actor. In one sense, "interactivity" means the direct and immersive (haptic) relation between the spectator and the work. From the point of view of the neo avant-garde, there is no interactivity with a "finished" work. But in another sense, from the point of view of the curator or of any other actor, "interactivity" is also what happens in the maintenance of a work as a "finished" being.

Contextual works can't be separated from their exhibition and from their particular occurrences. Some works only subsist between exhibitions as instructions on a piece of paper and as purely intellectual property. Many works involve complex installations, partial or complete restorations which demand a strong involvement on the part of those who show and keep them. The frame of maintenance is not what comes second to a work, they both work together; the frame seems to be no less ordinary than the work itself in making a "being's" existence possible.

While defined against, unity, autonomy and contemplation, the neo avant-garde contextual and interactive works were producing a theoretical blind-spot as for accounting for their own existences on that other level of the context and of interactivity. Considered as a place of confinement to be challenged rather than as an extension of its own logic, the frame, the context of maintenance, has not been accounted for in theory for reasons which are structurally built in it.

The destruction of the work's physicality, of its unity, of its spatio-temporal limitations, of the boundaries between subject and object, has worked at redefining the work's unity at a conceptual level, at redefining its ontological status, at redefining its space outside Euclidian and naturalist coordinates, at redefining the spectator's place and at redefining grounds in economic value. But the world the neo avant-garde has been changing is the world we are now living in (for some time). Nevertheless beyond the loss of the neo avant-garde's critical edge, many assumptions and procedures in art have remained based in that time. When Buren said "the artwork appears when the museum disappears", this criticism was active and problematic. But since then, ironically, the negation of the work's unity has progressively appeared to be blocking the recognition of a broader and non divided conception of "context".