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Artification and the Aesthetic Regime of Art

Aleš Erjavec

Abstract

The author discusses "artification" and attempts to ascertain whether some common features can be found between artification and Jacques Rancière's aesthetics, especially his notion of the "aesthetic regime of art." The author argues that Rancière's project of "art become life" can be employed as a common denominator of both theoretical frameworks, that of artification and that of the aesthetic regime of art. Nonetheless, the art to which Rancière's notion primarily applies is different from art in the traditional sense, which seems to form the empirical basis of the notion of artification.

Key Words

aesthetic regime of art, "art become life," artification, art-like, play

1. Introduction

This article is divided into three parts. I first discuss "artification" and some issues arising from and around this term, and then present Jacques Rancière's notion of the "aesthetic regime of art" and some related themes. Finally, I bring together artification and the aesthetic regime of art in order to ascertain whether we can find some common conceptual and theoretical terrain, or at least some compatibility, between them or only dissimilarity and incompatibility. In this closing part, I also discuss whether the two notions, in spite of what appear to be insurmountable differences, are, or could be, of significance to each other and to the theoretical framework supporting each of them, or that they arise from completely different theoretical and even practical positions, suppositions, and dispositions, and therefore do not have anything in common.

Before I dwell on these issues, let me explain that my frame of reference will be both recent (modernist) and contemporary art, the main feature of which appears to be indeterminacy of its expressive, creative, institutional, and aesthetic attributes. At the same time, this is also art that, in its post-colonial instances, is a formation and creation of nineteenth-century European culture and its emerging social and cultural institutions. The two pivotal but opposed philosophical authors articulating this strand of thought on art and its philosophical reflection are, of course, Kant and Hegel. Contemporary art furthermore encompasses non-European art. An unlikely aesthetic source, André Malraux, observed in 1957 that around 1900 Europeans ceased to regard "primitive" artifacts as ethnographic curiosities and began to look at them as "art":

The metamorphosis of the past was first a metamorphosis of seeing. Without an aesthetic revolution, the sculpture of ancient epochs, mosaics, and stained glass windows would never have joined the painting of the Renaissance and the great monarchies;

no matter how vast they might have become, ethnographic collections would never have surmounted the barrier that separated them from art museums.^[1]

This signifies that since at least a century ago, Western art, together with its indigenous and non-Western similes, has been preparing the stage for the current situation, where all forms and instances of art coexist within a myriad of art worlds. These art worlds themselves exist and coexist in a temporal and cultural flux in which only the general term 'art' retains its permanence. Today, once a work is designated as art, it hardly ever loses this designation. This then means that an enormous, universally acclaimed although perhaps also ignored archive of past art exists in various art and culture institutions. At the same time, contemporary and recent art exists in our perception as "art," but is devoid of the same artistic permanence that traditional (representational) art has enjoyed. In contemporary art, it is increasingly the "process," or the "event" of the artistic act, including its contextual placement, that makes a work into a work of art. In contemporary art, modern and contemporary aesthetic and artistic criteria apply.

Therefore, the perception today is that we may no longer speak of the aesthetic experience of art but of an overlapping aesthetic and artistic experience, with the "artistic" being essentially linked to "political, moral, and ethical judgments [that] have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago."^[2]

2. Artification

Let me turn to artification. If I understand the term correctly, 'artification' covers the broad terrain of artifacts, events, and processes that are initially not regarded as art but may acquire such designation, to a greater or smaller degree, at a later time by appropriating or acquiring some art-like features. This, I hope, at least partly sums up Ossi Naukkarinen's and Yuriko Saito's description of the term in the introduction to this volume. They write: "The neologism refers to situations and processes in which something that is not regarded as art in the traditional sense of the word is changed into something art-like or into something that takes influences from artistic ways of thinking and practicing."^[3]

This programmatic description raises three interrelated issues:

(a) The first (to which I will return in the third part of this essay) concerns "art in the traditional sense." In my view, this is essentially or primarily art that can be recognized as such, that is, representational art. This may mean that the term does not include art that is non-representational, *and* most certainly not art that is art only in its "becoming," in the sense that it is attempting to broaden the existing agreement and understanding of what counts as art. Here I am referring to art that is still attempting to be recognized as art in the institutional sense. It seems that the phrase "art in the traditional sense" intends to limit art primarily to institutional art so as to avoid situations where just about anything could be regarded as art.

My dissenting opinion would be that what is interesting in art is precisely the "excess" of art in its *becoming* art, in contrast

with art that is already art and has been assimilated into the institution called "art." This idea is also the dominant position of any *avant-garde* art, be it that of the classical *avant-gardes* or neo-*avant-gardes*, with the theory of the *avant-garde* of Peter Bürger in his *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974), along with that of Jean-François Lyotard. These represent perhaps the most obvious instances of philosophical theory highlighting the nature of such "becoming" and the transformation of non-art into art. This tradition, or project, emerged first with anarchism and then continued in the *avant-garde* activities of the twentieth century. Accordingly, a "theorist of anarchism understands art as an experience. . . . He struggles for a spontaneous 'art en situation' that depends on the moment and place (Proudhon)."[4]

An important strand of the philosophy of art during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries thus interprets art as authentically art only as long as it is still striving to attain the status of art, thus paradoxically losing its nature of authentic art once it is relegated into the cultural archive called the museum and art history. Or in anarchist terms and later *avant-garde* ones, "The artistic act is more important than the work itself." [5]

(b) Contemporary art is most frequently not concerned with the intentions of the artist. A work, just like any commodity, acquires its own life and intent, which is why the import of a work is on the side of consumption and not creation/production. If some of the crucial questions of art fifty years ago were, "What does the work mean?" and "What did the artist/author with his/her work intend to say?," then after the death of the artist or author and the deconstruction of his or her status as a Cartesian subject, such issues seem to have become redundant, also due to numerous other poststructuralist and postmodern claims. It is now as if the work itself speaks. If this was not the predominant case today, then the issue of artification would be best qualified as an issue about creation/production as approached and (re)solved by various theories of creativity linked to anthropological Marxism, on the one hand, and to the tradition of *la poïétique* as developed half a century ago by the French theorist and artist René Passeron, on the other.

We find ourselves now in the middle of the second issue that emerges from the description of artification as related to the "influences from artistic ways of thinking and practicing." In the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, creation was essentially represented by art and thus was opposed to repetitive and non-creative manual work associated with the industrial epoch. Today we no longer regard art as an exclusive or paramount form of creativity; with the development of the post-industrial society and its individualized forms of work, the issue of creativity has, at least for the time being, lost much of its relevance. This, of course, does not relate to "art in the traditional sense of the word," which retains its nature and, it has to be underlined, import for society. I want to note here the important but often insufficiently known successful efforts and practices in Finland to integrate art into education and art education into a general project of human well-being.

The presupposition emerging from the programmatic description of artification described above is that “artistic ways of thinking and practicing” are somehow different from the non-artistic ones. Such a statement would be true if we did not proceed from a general notion of creativity, wherein artistic creativity would be but a *specific* form of creativity, which also encompasses everyday activities and all those that can, with some measure of evidence, be called creative. Probably the greatest commodification of creative practices emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1980s with “creative industries.”

If we were to use the notion of creativity and creativeness as something typical of art and of describing “artistic ways of thinking and practicing,” then this would facilitate the integration of art into a general theory or philosophy of creativity. We would then be able to regard art as the paramount instance of creativity, with its other forms being seen as its lesser instances. Of course, such a viewpoint primarily concerns an artwork regarded from the position of its author. But does it really? Is this not a case of “art in a traditional sense of the word,” for it requires the link between the artist, the artwork, and the audience (the public)? This viewpoint depends on the supposition that “creative” art is art that is appreciated by the public. It is a position that, at first sight, is very distant from contemporary art and its art worlds, although also presupposed by them, and accords with the positions and practices of modern art during the first half of the twentieth century when it was the dominant artistic form.

(c) There is also the reverse side of the issue of artification: “Something that is not regarded as art in the traditional sense of the word [and] is changed into something art-like” can also appear under other kinds of conditions and circumstances. Consider the tradition of British “Arts and Crafts” started by workshops initiated by William Morris in the middle of nineteenth century and which advocated reverting back to medieval craftsmanship. Think, too, of the later *Jugendstil* (*Art Nouveau*, Liberty Style), which followed a similar utilitarian aesthetic tradition, or of the introduction in Germany, at the turn of the century, of innumerable workshops that followed in the steps of that tradition in Great Britain. (British success was so astounding that in 1896 “the Prussian government sent the “cultural spy” Hermann Muthesius to England on a six-year mission to study the secrets of British success. Upon his recommendation, workshops were introduced at all Prussian handicraft schools and modern artists appointed as teachers.”^[6]) The aim of such activities was the “cooperation of art, industry, and crafts in the ennoblement of commercial activity.”^[7] It was also from this tradition that the Bauhaus arose. Related cases of art willingly accepting a utilitarian function are those of Russian constructivism^[8] and, to some extent and in a different way, of Italian Futurism.

3. Rancière’s “aesthetic regime of art”

Jacques Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic regime of art is of interest here. The dominant schema, explained in his numerous works, is that a new “regime” of art, namely the “aesthetic” one, emerged with romanticism and Friedrich Schiller, although sometimes he mentions authors who predate

romanticism, like Vico or Winckelmann. Rancière argues that this regime of art is still continuing, thereby supplanting both modernism and postmodernism, since both are purportedly theoretically insufficient. In his view, modernism is problematic, first, because it lumps together such disparate authors and works as Adorno and Futurism, and second, because it "wants to hold onto art's autonomy but refuses to accept the heteronomy that is its other name."^[9] He finds postmodernism problematic because it purportedly only reverses the logic of modernism, offering (through Lyotard, one of the main adversaries of Rancière) the sublime and the unrepresentable as the two main features of postmodernism.^[10]

Instead of notions of modernism and postmodernism, Rancière introduces the notion of an "aesthetic regime of art." Its purpose is to replace both modernism and postmodernism, which Rancière considers obsolete and erroneous terms. In his opinion, "The aesthetic regime of the arts, it can be said, is the true name for what is designated by the incoherent label 'modernity'."^[11] In the aesthetic regime, the criterion of art is no longer technical perfection, as in the representative regime, "but is ascribed to a specific form of sensory apprehension."^[12] Furthermore, the aesthetic regime of art resembles Fredric Jameson's "cultural dominant," for although it is purportedly the dominant regime in the last two centuries, it is admittedly not the only one to exist in this epoch, for it is supplemented and often in conflict with the previous two regimes, the "ethical regime of images," and especially the "representative regime of art" which immediately precedes the aesthetic regime. What is also typical of the aesthetic regime of art is that it is "the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the art, subject-matter and genres."^[13]

As we can see, Rancière's agenda is to offer his "regimes" as a novel taxonomy that is intended to supersede the present dominant one of the tandem modernism and postmodernism, something that is without doubt an ambitious project. Rancière's open-endedness of the aesthetic regime primarily implies the obsolescence of the "end of art" theories. In this it somewhat resembles Friedrich von Schlegel's revolutionary attempt to bring into competitive proximity two art formations of his own time, namely classicism and romanticism, with the latter seen as a continuing process. Romantic art was to strive towards ever higher accomplishments, a view at odds with the recent and dominant viewpoints on the decline or even end of art, such as those of Hegel, Heidegger, and especially Arthur Danto. Rancière's non-Hegelian view allows for no temporal closures of various regimes and for no totalizations.

One of Rancière's points of departure is Aristotle, with his claim that man is "political because he possesses speech, a capacity to place the just and the unjust in common, whereas all the animal has is a voice to signal pleasure and pain. But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voice."^[14] This is the point where politics is brought into Rancière's philosophy. Democracy is the possibility and the practice of making oneself heard. By making ourselves heard we become political beings: "Politics

consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals.”^[15] The distribution and redistribution of the sensible are also accomplished by art. In the realm of art similar mechanisms as those used in politics are at work, for they are “two forms of distribution of the sensible, both of which are dependent on a specific regime of identification. There are not always occurrences of politics, although there always exist forms of power. Similarly, there are not always occurrences of art, although there are always forms of poetry, painting, sculpture, music, theatre and dance.”^[16]

Throughout Rancière’s *oeuvre*, Friedrich Schiller is singled out as one of the pivotal references for his political philosophy and aesthetics. It is the concept of “play” or play drive (*Spieltrieb*) that is especially important here, for it brings together “art of the beautiful” and “art of living.” In Schiller’s view, which developed also as a critique of the French Revolution, play is of special importance. As he explains toward the end of the fifteenth letter in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing.”^[17] According to Rancière, play “is any activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons.”^[18] “Play” is a new form of distribution of the sensible, an activity with no purpose except itself and with no intent to exert power over others. An artwork is “given in a specific experience, which suspends the ordinary connections, not only between appearance and reality, but also between form and matter, activity and passivity, understanding and sensibility.”^[19]

It is not my intention to discuss Rancière’s philosophy and its various themes in detail. I have touched on only a few issues that could be relevant to our topic. Let me end this part by observing that, in Rancière’s view, artistic autonomy and heteronomy are always intertwined, with the aesthetic experience being autonomous and the creation of art heteronomous. In a way, Rancière’s theory, like that of some of the Romantics, echoes the ancient Greek conflation of art and community, that is, the organic consubstantiality of art and the life of the polis.

4. “Art become life”

In an exhibition in the spring of 2011, in the entrance hall of the Research Center in Ljubljana, where I work, one of the works consisted of a canvas over which the statement “Public Art is for the Birds” was written in big letters. The sentence, of course, brings to mind the artist Barnett Newman who, in a statement made famous, exclaimed that “Aesthetics is to the artist as ornithology is to the birds.” Since its enunciation around 1952, this claim has been reiterated on innumerable occasions. Its original addressee was Susan Langer, and its intent was to denigrate attempts to introduce semiotics and linguistics into art criticism and aesthetics. It was also often interpreted as criticism of the beautiful on the part of Newman and his embracing of the sublime, although its most frequent interpretation was that of a criticism of aesthetics as such. Be

that as it may, for Newman aesthetics obviously was not relevant for art and did not aid in establishing its significance. This, of course, drastically changed in the decades that followed, for today authentic art appears essentially dependent on theory.

But in the 1950s this was not the case, nor is "public" art usually considered "authentic art" today. Instead, in the eyes of some or perhaps many, public art is nowadays often regarded as a type of art, if not "semi-art." Proper or authentic contemporary art is assumed to be that which is radical, in the sense of subversive and critical of society or of previous art. In both instances, it is the modern and modernist tradition that questions public art and continues to do so, in spite of many well-known instances of modern and postmodern public art, such as that of Henry Moore, Richard Serra, and Anish Kapoor.

If our vantage point is radical art, then, in our opinion, public art today may well be left to the birds and their multifarious activities on pieces of public art. In the eyes of the creator of the work exhibited in Ljubljana, public art may best be left to the birds, for it is not an authentic form of art that would be of genuine artistic concern. From this perspective, public art today may thus very well be seen as a form of artification, that is, an integration of mostly site-specific works into natural or urban ambiances. This was always a feature of public art, but today it is also such art that appears somewhat inauthentic. And this is the essential problem with artification, that people may regard it as inauthentic, especially if it is interpreted as something "art-like." In the Western tradition, kitsch is something that pretends to be art-like; it aspires to be art-like, but that is as far as it gets. It is fake art. As soon as it crosses the border into the realm of authentic art, leaving fake and kitsch behind, art re/distributes the sensible. It offers something new: it "speaks" instead of being mute and without a voice.

By gaining a voice and starting to speak and express oneself, an authentic artist effects a redistribution of the sensible and broadens the borders of what is perceived and sensed. It is a new "voice" to be heard or seen, in short, experienced, which is another way of designating the mechanism whereby a person becomes an artist and the work an artwork.

Of course, art that is happy with its subordination to another purpose or agency cannot attain its proper purpose, which is one of the reasons why artification encounters difficulties when grappling with art's assimilation. Only by "playing," by having a purpose without a purpose, is a man "wholly man." We may assume that such "play" and its creations are appreciated by the artist as well as by the public, although the relationship is by no means a stable and a predetermined one.

There are numerous cases when a work causes great satisfaction, in the sense of "play," to the artist but very little to the public. Amateur works are frequently of such nature. There is also the opposite situation, such as when an acclaimed artist makes a simple sketch, which for him is mere amusement, while for the public at large it represents a little masterpiece. Which is it? On the other hand, in modern art there are innumerable cases of art that was art for the artist

as well as for the public. This is even more the case in representational art. There, the "quality" and artistic value are relatively easily defined. As we see, art is given various kinds of reception, and especially today our "imaginary museum" is filled with very disparate objects and phenomena. Nonetheless, a salient feature of modern art is not only its variety but its semantic openness and its faith that it is the public that should accommodate the work of art and not the other way around.

Why is it necessary for art to be accommodated by the public?

Because (and in this we can follow Adorno) authentic art and culture require effort to overcome the resistance made to it. "Culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honoring them. ...Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through."[\[20\]](#) Interestingly, in instances where art attempts to imitate creations made according to the demands of the public, such fake art remains authentic art, just the opposite of kitsch. Take, for example, the project of Komar & Melamid's "Most Wanted," where the two artists created a series of paintings based on a survey of public preferences of the motifs, formats, and colors of individual paintings.[\[21\]](#) In spite of formally following the procedures of the market, the works actually functioned as any other authentic works of art. This illustrates that while artification as a transformation of art into non-art, or of non-art into "something art-like," may well work as an abstraction, it depends, in fact, on a variety of other factors.

Still, it appears that there are times when non-art may turn into art and the other way around, without endangering the artistic and aesthetic status of art, but the contrary. I refer to examples of what Rancière calls the project of "art become life."[\[22\]](#) The project is consubstantial with the aesthetic regime of art. It already inspired, in their dreams of artisanal and communitarian Middle Ages, the artists of the Arts and Crafts movement. It was taken up again by the artisans of the Art Deco movement, hailed in their time as producers of "social art," as it was by the engineers and architects of the Werkbund and the Bauhaus, before again flowering into the utopian projects of situationist urbanists and Joseph Beuys' "social plastic."[\[23\]](#)

Although artification is said to concern "art in the traditional sense," it would appear that while some of the movements mentioned above produced works of craftsmanship and thus probably belong to that gray area between the realms of utilitarian production and its aesthetic features, there is no obvious contradiction between the two. In these instances, utilitarian and aesthetic functions and features are conflated seamlessly, even opposing and thus relativizing the old aesthetic belief that a utilitarian object must lose its practical function if it is to attain an aesthetic one. Art Deco or Bauhaus chairs, lamps, architecture, and cutlery are practical and aesthetic; they are non-art (having a practical function) merging with art (having an aesthetic function). Instances of such utilitarian aesthetic works can also be found in Russian constructivism and productivism; in Italian Futurism, with

objects ranging from the “anti-neutral clothes” of Giacomo Balla to the architectural sketches of Antonio Sant’Elia; in the “paper architecture” of Lajos Kassák and the more recent “architecture of nothing” by Gábor Bachman; and in the coffee cups, passports, and armbands of the Slovenian artist collective Neue Slowenische Kunst.

In brief, the conflation of art and non-art, or the passage of non-art into utilitarian aesthetic and artistic objects, occurs all the time and, as the cases just mentioned illustrate, it is definitely not limited to art in the traditional sense but is as often created by avant-garde artists. In such a context, the issue of subordination of art doesn’t arise; form usually follows function. It is this terrain that could also be relevant to artification.

Before the advent of the aesthetic regime of art, that is, the period of artistic modernity and postmodernity, *Mimesis* separated out what was art from what was not. Conversely, all the new, *aesthetic* definitions of art that affirm its autonomy in one way or another say the same thing, affirm the same paradox: that art is henceforth recognizable by its lack of any distinguishing characteristics—by its indistinction. . . . In short, the specificity of art, finally nameable as such, is its identity with non-art. [24]

It is this problematic statement that serves as the conclusion of this essay because it reveals the limits of Rancière’s otherwise useful and important enterprise. Theories of modernism and postmodernism point out certain essential characteristics of the art of the last two centuries, a task as yet not accomplished by the “aesthetic regime of art” that lumps together art of impressionism with abstract art and Duchamp’s projects. Put differently, the art it highlights and comprises is even more disparate than Adorno and Futurism. My reservations are directed also towards some of the other tenets of Rancière’s theory, for the aesthetic regime of art is an interrelated notion within his philosophical framework. Nonetheless, I think that this criticism does not weaken the argument that the project of “art become life” remains valid, both in Rancière and elsewhere, when referring to artification and utilitarian creations of certain traditions and endeavors, in addition to aesthetic avant-garde movements and their related radical projects.

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Endnotes

- [1] André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux* (Paris: NRF, La Galerie de la Pléiade, 1957), p. 27.
- [2] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 51-79; ref. on p. 77.
- [3] Ossi Naukkarinen and Yuriko Saito, "Introduction," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 4, 2012.
- [4] André Reszler, *L'esthétique anarchiste* (Paris: P.U.F., 1973), p. 6.
- [5] *Ibid.*
- [6] Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919-1933*, (London: Taschen, 2006), p. 10.
- [7] Quoted in *Bauhaus 1919-1933*, p. 12.
- [8] See, for example, Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions. The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005); Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer. Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, Vol. 30 (Autumn 1984), 82-119.
- [9] Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 68.
- [10] See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 28-29 *et passim*. Rancière frequently uses "modernism" and "modernity" synonymously.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- [12] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 29.
- [13] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 23.
- [14] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 24.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- [17] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 80.
- [18] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 30.
- [19] *Loc. cit.*
- [20] Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 232.
- [21] See *Painting by Numbers. Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, ed. by JoAnn Wypijewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
- [22] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 38. Of course, the project of "art become life" carries another



meaning, namely the unity, or mutual support, of artistic revolutionary and social (political) revolutionary projects.

[23] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 38.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 66.