

## Art and Its Own Power

Submitted by [Branka Ćurčić](#) on Fri, 2008-07-11 10:50

The latest book by Boris Groys - "Art Power". The book reveals some of the contradictions of modern art, where the lines to today's power assigned to art - exclusively based on the existing free market, the art market - could be drawn from. In the "Art Power", Groys starts with the thesis that the field of modern art is not one of a pluralism, but rather of logic of contradictions, by giving an example of art movements which immediately provoked countermovements - thesis and antithesis summing zero, a perfect balance of power. As a consequence of the Enlightenment, when the notion of power bigger than any other (of God) disappeared, belief in the balance of power started, Groys explains that modern art gained its own power of regulatory character, excluding everything that could distort that balance. Not only that modern as well as contemporary art is controversial, but the very art work itself, so called "paradox-object that embody simultaneously thesis and antithesis". Writer denounces possibility of any open interpretation of an art work (potentially infinite plurality of interpretations) not imposing on spectator any ideology, theory or faith. Therefore, he is putting an end to strives of art theorists such were Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes, who proclaimed necessity of exactly this interpretational openness. Groys simply believes that this is not possible, characterizing it as an illusion. Art is predominantly commodity and as such, it implies imposing of certain dominant ideologies on its spectators - clearly, ideology of a free market. According to him, as paradox-object, these art works require a perfectly paradoxical and self-contradictory reaction, becoming normative of any contemporary art work, which successfully handles thesis and antithesis and governs the balance of power. By reading the book further, it seems that Groys is appropriating idea of "controversy", considering it, apparently, as the main principle of building his arguments. Further on, it is interesting to see how Groys observes possibility of critique today, of notion of art and revolution, of political art, institutions of art and of art market. He is making rough division of modern art created under art market as a commodity, and art as a tool for political propaganda, exclusively connecting the last with art of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, i.e. with totalitarian regimes. This exclusivity becomes blurred when he states that "his own essays collected in this book are also motivated by a wish to contribute to a certain balance of power in today's art world - namely, to find more space in it for art functioning as political propaganda". It remains unclear if he observes present "regime" as totalitarian one. Maybe things should be observed more narrowly - he actually speaks of totalitarian character of art market by saying that "the dominating art discourse identifies art with art market and remains blind to any art that is produced and distributed by any mechanism other than the market." Groys further argues that under the "morality of art market", all art produced under the non-market conditions was excluded from the field of institutionally recognized art as one that perverted political aspirations of true utopian art. He argues that dissident art of Soviet Union tends to be neglected by the dominating art theory, which both true and untrue. In most of the former socialist Eastern European countries it could be hardly said that this kind of art is institutionally recognized (of course, there are example of that practice), unless we accept figures of private collectors and art collections of banks as relevant "institutional" players in the existing art market. He continues with the impossibility of any substantial critique in contemporary art and of commodified art objects, which are to differentiate from other commodities through its ability to become critical and self-critical commodity. Therefore, he denounces any critical potential of art today and only in few moments in the book states few strategies which lightly could go in critical direction, mostly based on retrieving the autonomy of art - "It is also interesting that even the most severe judgment on the moral dimensions of the free market never leads anybody to conclude that art that was and is produced under those market conditions should be excluded from critical and historical considerations." Therefore, self-critical commodity is a paradox by itself, concerning Groys, and as such it perfectly fits into dominating paradigm of modern and contemporary art and it also means that it can not be truly political. It could be noticed that in the book, he rarely makes clarification of what should be understood as "political art". Usually,

we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?

this term is identifies with art as a political propaganda and only in few occasions “political” art is identified as art that tends to transcends the borders of the art system (by creating new paradox – paradox of staying exactly in the boundaries of the very system). “Art becomes politically effective only when it is made beyond or outside the art market – in the context of direct political propaganda” - by this, Groys is referring only to art made under totalitarian regimes, Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany, basically denouncing any political notion of art created under (neo)liberal capitalist democracies of Western world (as the one that only confirms that condition). One conclusion that could be made out of this is that there is no real differences in between these basically “totalitarian” systems, although he is never openly expressing it (except when stating that it is “dark suspicion” to think that market operates by an “invisible hand”, which should have led to closer examination of relations between market, art market and the roll of a state). Groys considers Islamist videos and posters functioning in the context of the international antiglobalist movement to be those creations made outside the dominating art market, they are overlooked by institutions of the art market (which shows to be less and less the case). Usually, they are funded by the state or political and religious movements, therefore, they are created “outside” the art market, which leads us that this could be politically effective. But, if art made under “non-institutional” conditions is really critical, then it becomes easily included in the art institutions that tended to exclude it and it leads to further stabilization of these institutions. Groys draws conclusion that internal critique of the art market only can improve the market and not change it fundamentally. Soviet art, Islamist videos or posters are created and distributed in ways other than those which follows the logic of the art market. What stays at the end is that today's art object is a paradox-object, because it accumulates a paradox: it is an image and a critique of image at the same time. Groys further discusses autonomy of art as a precondition to autonomous power of resistance. He believes that art world can not be observed in any significant sense as autonomous, since it is regulated by many rules and aesthetic value judgments which reflect power structures and dominant social conventions. Still, he argues that there is no immanent aesthetic value that art could be judged from, therefore, he appeals to establishing “the regime of equal aesthetic rights for all art works”. There lays potential for resistance as a precondition to any political engagement. According to Groys, this is the only way to resist inequality between images as imposed from the outside, which reflects social, cultural and political inequalities. He finds that exactly this is the moment which would deprive artist to break taboos, provoke and/or extend boundaries of acceptable. By criticizing socially, politically and culturally imposed hierarchies of values, art gains its autonomy and its resistance potential. According to Groys, contemporary politics of emancipation is a politics of inclusion which acts against the exclusion of political and economic minorities. He speaks both about politization of art and culturalization of politics. These arguments he further partially continues in his essay dedicated to biopolitics, as the true realm that is manifested today, in which political will and technology's power shape things (life). What is interesting in relation to resistance in art, is that Groys simplifies notion of revolution to its narrow historical dimension which attempts to replace society as it is with a new, artificial society. He sees position of artist within it as decisive one, concluding in that manner with the great “disappointment” because of inability of the avant-garde art to bring a new humanity. After many contemporary discussions about art and revolution, Groys doesn't take closer look at the necessary wider picture which inevitably brings three stances (of insurrection, resistance and constitutive power) in the relationship of art and revolution. Groys finishes the book with few essays concerning Socialist Realist art and later, concerning process of privatization in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries as a permanent state and/or artificial paradises of post-communism, where struggle for distribution, appropriation and privatization is permanently repeated. Branka Ćurčić Published at:

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