

Deartification, Deaestheticization, and Politicization in Contemporary Art

Gerard Vilar*

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

The general subject of this paper is the precariousness of contemporary art. This precariousness has many faces and meanings, and in fact all of them are aspects of the general precariousness that characterizes the present-day post-globalized world in all aspects of life: from economy and labour to security, or beliefs and values. The precarious condition of contemporary art is an effect of a historical process that began with Romanticism. Hegel had perhaps the deepest insight into this process when introduced the topic of the end of art. From the times of Hegel's lectures on aesthetics to the present that topic has been an important way of dealing with the progressive process of art becoming ever more precarious. Many discourses try to come to terms with this condition by aiming to identify allegedly decadent traits or tendencies. Thus, since the nineteen-sixties some tendencies have been more and more present in many varieties of contemporary arts. I am referring to phenomena such as those that appear in the title of this paper: deartification, deaestheticization and politicization. We could say that these are common features of most contemporary artworks that deepened the discoveries and inventions of the classical avant-gardes. But any of these phenomena can be attributed several meanings; each has its own history. Let us consider *Crystal of Resistance*, the work of an important present-day artist: Thomas Hirschhorn. This is a good specific case on which to test some generalizations. The work filled every corner of the available space of the Swiss pavilion at the Venice Biennale last summer. When you enter the pavilion you receive a printed "artist statement" which is rather long and prolix containing the following vehement, ambitious and radical statements. For example: "I believe that art is universal, I believe that art is autonomous, I believe that art can provoke a

* gerard.vilar@uab.es.

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dialogue or a confrontation - one-to-one - and I believe that art can include every human being.” “With my work *Crystal of Resistance* I want to give a form that creates the conditions for thinking something new. It must be a form that enables 'thinking'. That’s how I see the mission of art: To give a form that can create the conditions for thinking something that has not yet existed. With this form I want to create a truth, a truth that resists facts, opinions and commentaries.” “Art resists political, cultural, aesthetical habits. Art resists morality and topicality. Art - because it is art - is resistance. But art is not resistance to something, art is resistance as such. Art is resistant because it resists everything that has already existed and been known. Art, as a resistance, is assertion, movement, belief, intensity, art is 'positive'. Art resists tradition, morality and the factual world. Art resists every argumentation, every explanation and every discussion.” And: “I want to work with the precarious and in the precarious. This is to be understood as the POLITICAL. The POLITICAL is, to understand the precarious not as a concept, but to understand it as a condition... the precarious leads to new forms, because the precarious shapes a new geography, because the precarious starts with a new exchange between human beings and because the precarious creates new values.”¹

All of that constitutes the artist’s reasons, that is to say, the discourse that unavoidably goes with the visible work. *Crystal of Resistance* is a huge and fascinating installation created from found materials along with the artist’s signature duct tape and tinfoil. It features crystal for its multifaceted, light-reflecting properties, as well as its association with genesis. The large-scale installation includes broken glass, war trophy photographs from the Internet, sticky-tape-swathed mobile phones, terrible pictures of war and violence in Arab countries, Barbie dolls and kitchen foil that together create a bizarre, glittering grotto of the contemporary world. The effects of such a crazy accumulation have at one and the same time both aesthetic and politic dimensions. The critic for *The Economist*, for example, says: “Hirschhorn’s *Crystal of Resistance* creates an idiosyncratic universe of ready-made stuff. Anarchic and politicized rather than orderly and neutral, the pavilion defies Swiss stereotypes. Mr Hirschhorn is an independent spirit who refuses to pander to political authority, fashion or the art market. His installation is filled with broken glass, silver foil, cardboard, Q-tips, plastic chairs, old mobile phones and colour printouts of low-resolution war photos, all held together by brown duct tape, a recognizable Hirschhorn motif. It is the antithesis of a boutique displaying luxury goods.” The famous critic Jerry Saltz says in his *New York Magazine* blog: “Hirschhorn’s full-on, all-out building-filling installation involves mannequins, aluminium foil, gruesome war pictures, and broken bottles. It’s a true overload, a fabulist fortress of shame, solitude, fury, resolve, and artistic/political ambition.” And Linda Fagerströms, an art critic from Sweden, even establishes a relation between this work and Goya’s “*Los desastres de la Guerra*”. Be that as it may, Hirschhorn’s work may well be an example of deartified and deaestheticized art, and fully critical, politicized art; but what does it

¹ <http://crystalofresistance.com/statement.html> [accessed on 2nd July, 2011]

really mean to apply such categories to such a work? In what follows, I will try to give a (not too) precarious answer.

I can summarize my argument as follows. Over recent decades contemporary art has experienced different and obvious processes that have modified not only the very concept of art, but also the social functions of art and the traditional functions of artist, audiences and art world institutions. Deartification is one such process. This unusual classification was introduced by T. W. Adorno towards the end of his life, particularly in his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Most readers of Adorno in English do not know this term due to the problematic decision to paraphrase it in the translation, as was also the case with the first Spanish translation of this important book. *Entkunstung* or deartification refers to the losing of traditional or familiar artistic qualities of art works in contemporary artistic practices; a process that corresponds to the *deskilling* of the artist's competences. Some fifty years ago, Adorno was the first to understand that process as reification, commodification and ideological fetishism, and used it as to point out the dangers of a possible death of art. But new forms of art appeared just when he was making that assertion and, in the period after his death in 1969, the reverse of the Adornian point of view came to the fore: art rather *has to lose* traditional qualities in order to maintain its critical momentum and its role of resistance against the force of integration of the powers that be. After five decades of positive "deartification" in the sense of deaestheticization, dematerialization, and ephemeralization, art is threatened with extinction not because of the markets and capitalism, but rather due to radical defenders of politicized art that intend to blur the difference between art and "cultural practices", as is the case of many defenders of the contemporary "social turn" in art. I want to defend the idea that art can be "deartified" as much as you wish, with just one restriction: a difference must be maintained between art and life. If we cannot tell a performance from a social action, or an artwork from a real object, then we have no more art at all. In the traditional terms of art philosophy, some kind of recognizable "appearance" must be preserved in order to save art from its dissolution as already foreseen in the time of Hegel.

I will develop my argument in three steps. First, I will review the Adornian argument that to save art from deartification and preserve its authenticity, a negative radicalization of its appearance is necessary. Such a moralist argument is false, but the opposite point of view is also a mistake. Secondly, I will experiment with a definition of deartification as related to some alternatives—deaestheticization; dematerialization—and especially to the opposite phenomenon: *artification*. Finally, commenting on some examples, I will defend the notion that *recognition* could be a contemporary category to replace the old one of appearance, as a necessary step to preserve theoretically the difference between art and mere cultural practices.

Adorno on Deartification

Entkunstung or deartification is the word coined by T. W. Adorno at the beginnings of the 1950s to refer to the dialectical process by which art, or Art with a capital A, progressively loses its traditional qualities and properties to become another kind of thing. Adorno identified that other thing as products of the cultural industry, as a result of the ideological forces dominating administrated societies, and ultimately as mere commodities: a reified product which already is not a form of free thinking or of critical knowledge through the senses. This kind of —sometimes paradoxical— process is well known in the world of contemporary art. In a sense which could be described as dialectical, art has permanently experienced episodes of deartification for more than a century: on those very occasions when one of its traditional or familiar qualities has been denied in order to assert some other, new one. This was the case with the abuses of beauty, with the multiple ways of deaestheticization, with the different forms of dematerialization, with the increase of discursivity and with technologization, ephemeralization, etc. Most of these episodes and movements in art were perceived by audiences as paths to a deartification understood negatively at that moment, while later they have been conceived as moments of redefinition of art. Adorno rightly interpreted atonality as a movement in the redefinition of music, but, in contrast, saw dialogs with the rhythms of jazz in the works of Stravinsky or Gershwin as negative movements towards reification.

To the end of his well-known, merciless attack on jazz of 1953, *Timeless Mode*, Adorno coined his new category to refer to some aspects of what the most popular music of his time was experiencing: “art is deartified [die Kunst wird entkunstet]” because it “presents itself as part of this adaptation to what its own principle contradicts”. Such adaptation occurs in as much in the art works “instead of the realization of the utopia, these disappears of the image.” That is to say, art, instead of being an appeal to change life, to challenge the absence of freedom and the permanence of injustice, becomes a product that serves to dominate and suppress free individuality by way of its commodification and aestheticization. Jazz is for Adorno a false art in three aspects. First, as a commodity, as a marketable asset and product for consumption, i.e., as a typical product of the culture industry which is neither popular nor the spontaneous product of people’s creativity; rather it is the product of market experts, the design of late-capitalism engineers. Second, jazz reveals itself as false free music if we consider its formal properties, its nature as a musical language; because it is a strictly standardized language that at every moment is regulated and restricted, even during the moments of improvisation when its nature is essentially restricted to patterns, it becomes evident that the alleged freedom of the jazz artist is a false appearance. Lastly, in terms of the audience, Adorno sees a false or wrong effect on them in that they learn to submit their will uncomplainingly to the rhythms of jazz and its patterns: such an effect is, in his opinion, a way to reinforce the sadomasochist character traits of the personalities of the individuals who learn to obey what they secretly hate.

Some years later, in his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno was to use the category of *Entkunstung* more systematically in developing his normative theory of art. In the first place, to be authentic art, works must point to something more than themselves, something like utopia or transcendence. In that sense Adorno writes: “Only in the achievement of this transcendence, not foremost and indeed probably never through meanings, are artworks spiritual. Their transcendence is their eloquence, their script, but it is a script without meaning or, more precisely, a script with broken or veiled meaning... Art fails its concept when it does not achieve this transcendence; it becomes deartified”.² Therefore, there is a logical aspect in the phenomenon of deartification besides the ideological and socio-historical aspects, that is to say, art that does not achieve transcendence fails: it does not correspond to its definition and therefore it does not measure up conceptually, it does not meet the necessary condition for being art. This is one of the main aspects of deartification. The other has to do with the transformation of artworks into something onto which spectators and audiences simply project themselves and enjoy, instead of attending to the requirements of a demanding comprehension from a necessary distance in front of the work. “As a tabula rasa of subjective projections, however, the artwork is shorn of its qualitative dimension. The poles of the artwork’s deartification are that it is made as much a thing among things as a psychological vehicle of the spectator”.³ So, in the contemporary world we find a passion to touch everything, to allow no work to be what it is, to dress it up, to decrease its distance from the viewer, a symptom already noted by Walter Benjamin in his well-known essay on post-auratic art. What a deartified work no longer says is replaced by the beholder with the standardized echo of himself, to which he hearkens. Instead of forgetting himself, the consumer can arbitrarily project their impulses, their mimetic remnants, on whatever is presented to them. Prior to total administration, Adorno believed, the subject who viewed, heard, or read a work was to lose himself, forget himself, extinguish himself in the artwork. Authentic art requires there to be a distance between the work and the subject who wants a relationship with autonomous art. Such a distance is obliterated in the products of the culture industry that are so common in the administrated society, something that reinforces the annihilation of free individuals and their replacement by good, obedient, and satisfied citizens, who reject authentic art and demand more of the same. “Those who have been duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities were never familiar with art: They are therefore able to perceive art’s inadequacy to the present life process of society –though not society’s own

² T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London and New York: Continuum, 1997, p. 104. Translation modified: it is translated instead as, “it loses the quality of being art”.

³ AT, p. 23. Translation modified: it is translated as, “deaestheticization” instead of the original “deartification”.

untruth- more unobstructedly than do those who still remember what an artwork once was. They push for the deartification of art”.⁴

Speaking from the present, everybody can see that even in the best case Adorno’s arguments are only partly true.

First, utopia or transcendence has today to be interpreted in deflationary terms. Art is a way of thinking through the senses, and on many occasions it is even an active way of knowledge. Whether this kind of thinking connects with utopia or transcendence or not depends on the kind of work under consideration. It is far too Hegelian to require transcendence always in every artwork. If one insists on speaking of transcendence, then it is necessary to qualify it with some adjectives, such as: “usually intramundane”, “extraordinary but profane”, etc. Artistic thinking or knowledge removes us from the humdrum of everyday ideas and practices, it helps us to see things from other points of view, whether indicating utopia or not. Very often Adorno’s categories seem to encourage theological interpretations or at least to favour such connotations. But today art is not a privileged vehicle of religious beliefs, no more than nature or the markets are.

Second, it is certainly the case that products of the culture industry such as films, novels and TV series are usually—though not always—designed to entertain and to make money. When they are pure entertainment, we could endorse Adorno’s criticism to a certain point. But sometimes, a few of these products have enough artistic quality to be considered artistic products, masterworks of their kind, if you like, as is the case of Coppola’s *The Godfather*, Rowling’s *Harry Potter* or the BBC’s adaptation of *I, Claudius*. Everybody is or can be a consumer of both culture industry products *and* select works of art. I often read both cheap best-sellers *and* novels by Thomas Bernhard. Some works, such as some novels by Ian McEwan or Cormac McCarthy, are even both things at once: best-sellers and great novels. Therefore, to be a product of the culture industry, and so deartified in Adorno’s sense, does not always entail a complete and automatic loss of artistic quality.

Obviously, there were other kinds of deartification movements not identified by Adorno; in part because he had no time to reflect on them, in part because of his prejudices. Deartification is a historical category in its references, besides being a systematic category. Since about 1900 each generation has identified different traits, features or symptoms of deartification. That process continues even today, although we have probably reached a limit. Today in some cases art is deartified to become a cultural practice of a kind other than artistic; for example a political, anthropological, celebratory or festive practice, and when this happens, art probably disappears by fusion or confusion with life. When art and life coincide, paradoxically art vanishes. Adorno saw this kind of end of art through the fusion of art and life, but only considered the case of the culture industry, not the case of

⁴ AT, p. 22. Translation modified: it is translated as, “deaestheticization” instead of the original “deartification”.

a radically politicized art. And perhaps more importantly, Adorno did not see the other dialectical aspect of deartification: *artification* processes.

Artification and Deartification

Among the many phenomena of contemporary art that have shown some recurrence or continuity over the years since the times of the First World War and the ready-mades of Duchamp are phenomena of artification.

Artification is the process of considering as art some object or practice that was not considered as art previously. A lot of different objects, practices and technical products, new and old, have experienced such transfiguration, to use a word introduced by Arthur Danto 30 years ago. Artification has been a massive movement whereby art has expanded unstoppably beyond its *terroir*. Important milestones in that process were the recognition of photography as art in the 1970s, or the recognition of appropriationism as a honourable artistic practice in the 1980s.

Deartification is the loss of traditional or familiar qualities or properties that were possessed up until a certain moment; for example, deaestheticization and dematerialization were important aspects of deartification. The aesthetic dimension was a fundamental dimension of art until the irruption of the avant-gardes, meaning that recognizable form and aesthetic qualities were the support of artistic meaning. After Duchamp, such a dimension may be present or not, and in most contemporary artworks it is absent or it is irrelevant.

In a sense, artification and deartification are parallel phenomena. Duchamp and Picasso were, respectively, at the very beginning of these two movements. Cubist collages and ready-mades were practices of artification and of deartification. A collage ratified elements of everyday life such as newspapers or tram tickets, and at the same time deartified the venerable practice of painting by that very gesture. A ready-made artified ordinary objects, such as bottlers and snow shovels, and at the same time deartified the old practice of sculpture.

Artification is going on today within the boundaries of art through fashion, design, and popular practices such as cartoons or graffiti. An interesting movement in artification is taking place today with avant-garde cuisine. Thus, what creative cooks such as Ferran Adrià, René Redzepi, Massimo Bottura and Heston Blumenthal have been doing with their dishes and menus is artifying something that until now was considered a mere craft or a minor art. This is the case because we are in presence of something new: a dinner at “El Bulli” restaurant is not merely an aesthetic experience of tasty dishes; it is an occasion to think with the senses about our body, its capacities to interact with the world, and the many ways to say something in a non-propositional language, such as edible metaphors, ironies, and other tropes. Edible language is edible art.

Back to deartification: it occurs today mainly in installations and in performance, as in the work of Hirschhorn mentioned at the beginning, a work that does not raise any doubts about its condition as art. One faces a different case, as I said before, in artistic projects or propositions of dubious artisticity. For example, a Catalan artist and critic defends as an alternative to the productive walking of consumers in shopping malls and commercial centres, an idle walk, as resistance to consumption, to productivity. Well, it may be a good idea as a cultural practice of resistance, but I presume that it is not art, since it is very hard to recognize it as art, i.e., as something other than mere and sheer walking. Another example could be the *Itinerant Home* of Mary Hale (2009), a sequel -or expansion, if you like- of the *Refugee Wear* of Lucy Orta (1992), inspired by the situation in New Orleans after the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. *Itinerant home*, the artist tells us, provides a point of discussion of different housing possibilities. The installation takes the form of a wearable, inflatable house which shelters multiple wearers working together to navigate through historic neighbourhoods and water bodies of New Orleans. It expands on the definition of body wear, going beyond the gallery to be seen and worn by the public of New Orleans in the context of their historical building stock. Allegedly, it symbolizes and stimulates ways of thinking about the architecture of the home and the future of the city. Actually, it is only a festive occasion to enjoy with some friends via a toy for adults, playing and joking, which is fantastic, but typically remains outside the playground of art. It is a case of a sort of relational art that fails to open up a way of thinking and, therefore, falls out of the domain of art: it is deartified to the extreme of no longer being art. Of course, that is not a final judgement; in some pragmatic circumstances it could avoid its banal destiny, after all, it is a question of how to use the signs and symbols.

Art, Politics and Recognition

A philosophical reflection is necessary on an important present-day dichotomy: art versus cultural practices. Such a difference has only existed in recent centuries, and has become more and more problematic in the last fifty years. The situation today is well known: anything and everything can be a work of art, everybody an artist, everybody a critic, and anything goes. However, the possibility of a deartified world foreseen by Adorno has not come about. We continue to distinguish art from other things, however difficult it may be. And it is necessary to maintain the differences between art and life, as Adorno defended.

Political art, or art with strong political motivation, is a contemporary terrain where we can easily find the phenomenon of extreme deartification. That politicization can take deartification to the limit is something that is not at all new. But has been around for at least the last hundred years. Think about the propaganda artefacts of various ideologies and regimes of the 20th century. What is new is that the contemporary art panorama has generalized the use of some very radical strategies invented by situationists and conceptualists in the 1960s and 1970s, which were highly antagonistic at the time, to the point that now they

often completely fail and push artistic projects into banality and triviality. The reason for this can be found in the enormous changes in the sociohistorical context. One very important example of such change is the expansion of the art world out of the institutional places that it occupied fifty years ago. The art world as a world of institutionalized reasons (Danto) has become a space without boundaries; it has become a kind of atmosphere that includes everybody.

Art has to appear as art for a community: it has to be recognizable as such by some people. However, today that very often has nothing to do with visual or tonal properties. Art today does not appear in the way it used to in the past. Whether art makes an appearance depends now more on the ability to identify the singular communicative situation peculiar to art; to recognize the situation as an artistic one, and that means to recognize the reasons for art. Differences between a police report, an artistic statement, a poem, a scientific communication or a religious homily are not always a question of style or visual properties, but depend on a pragmatic situation in a space of reasons. Unlike common situations, an artistic communicative situation does not take for granted the usual meaning of signs and symbols, rather it questions and disputes their meaning, questions the usual grammar of discourses to raise a validity claim concerning the intelligibility of the very artistic languages themselves.

Art making such an appearance today depends on the pragmatic capacity of individuals, which is a cultivated common sense for different communicative situations, with artistic communication being one of them, even though it is special because it questions the usual grammars. So, recognition is the contemporary philosopher's stone to tell art from other practices. Recognition, obviously, is not a subjective act, but an intersubjective one. It has a community as its subject. One can pretend to have created a work of art, but without recognition at a certain moment there is no art. The question that is immediately raised is: How many people constitute a community of artistic or aesthetic sense? This question has no simple answer. The art world is today global and tribal, democratic and snobbish, universal and singular. How many people form a community? There are no theorems in aesthetics and the theory of contemporary art.

Deaestheticization, dematerialization, ephemeralization, are not dangers *per se* for art. On the contrary, as in the case of Hirschhorn, they are the very media of an art of our time. But without recognition, deartification can cross the limits of artisticity and make of works mere cultural practices. In the example of Hirschhorn's Venice installation, a failure of recognition is wholly impossible. There are too many elements inviting us to recognize the work –curators, critics, journalists, county bureaucrats, philosophy professors and other species.

Hirschhorn's art appears as something challenging to our understanding; as precarious in its meaning as it is in its materials, its disposition and its composition. The aesthetic of precariousness, of his precarious art, is for me a real and correct way of producing political art today. But to justify those last sentences would require another paper.

