

Papers



Maria Alina Asavei is an art historian and critic from Budapest, Hungary. Currently, she is a PhD researcher in Philosophy of Art, at Central European University, working principally in the areas of art and disability, the politics of aesthetics, forms of artistic engagement during and after totalitarian regimes.

[1] Gregory Sholette's term from <http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/GiftsOfResistance.Periferic.1.pdf> [2] The philosopher Bernard Bosanquet (in "Three Lessons on Aesthetics") identifies two classes of things that are beautiful: easy beauty (which is pleasant to almost everyone, things that yield straightforward pleasure) and difficult beauty (which require from the spectator effort and concentration). Critical art is usually an edgy, disobedient and avant-garde art and its beauty is not immediately perceivable. It is not the kind of beauty which one just sees it. On the contrary, the beautiful in critical art is rendered by cognitive and ethical concerns. "What we know about an object and our beliefs and moral values always determine our opinion about what is beautiful and what is not beautiful. In this sense we could say that critical art's beauty is a "difficult" beauty and not easy recognizable because we don't immediately see it but we arrive at it after a process of deliberation. [3] Sabine B. Vogel, "Political Patterns-Changing Ornament", Nafas Art Magazine, July, 2011. [4] Jaudon&Kozloff, "Art Historical Notion of Progress and Culture", *Heresies*, No.4, 1978, pp. 38-42. [5] Sabine B. Vogel, "Political Patterns-Changing Ornament", Nafas Art Magazine, July, 2011. [6] Free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) in Kant's understanding is a pure (free) judgment of beauty, based solely on the purposiveness of the form of an object. This judgment is *pure* – a *pure* judgment of taste based on the subject's aesthetic pleasure. Objects which are freely beautiful have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing (like in Kant's example with the designs *a la greque*, music without a theme or without words, flowers, birds). Free beauty is self-subsistent (we like it freely on its own account). For more on this issue, see Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987. [7] Vogel ibidem 3 [8] Arthur Danto, "The Abuse of Beauty", Open Court, 2003. [9] Elaine Scarry's main argument is that objects and persons that we consider to be beautiful tend to be symmetrical because they provide empirical examples of balance and proportion. The symmetry standard (symmetry as a replication of similar parts) is the same instance of the

Functional Beauty and Handmade Political Art

Maria Alina Asavei



Functional Beauty and Handmade Political Art

Folk arts are usually secluded in the area of the “ornamental”; they are seldom seen as “political” or critical. By the same token, the artifacts of political expression are not seen as belonging to a tradition of art-making. However, despite institutional silence, there is a long standing, home-made tradition of making political art. Sometimes, these “gifts of resistance”[1] refuse the commercial appropriation and remain autonomously critical. They are autonomously critical in the sense that their critical stance is not imposed by what an institution wants them to be critical about. A carpet, for instance, is not always a textile floor covering but a way of spending time usefully, politically and critically and yes, it is beautiful: a beauty we fear. Starting with “the aesthetic era”, the established aesthetic theories define beauty as an ability of some objects to arise in viewers a distinctive type of unmediated pleasure – aesthetic pleasure. This ability to arise pleasure in attendants is the only purpose of beauty in aesthetic era. Then, beauty is understood as a functionless entity which merely gives us aesthetic pleasure. But is this so? Political home-made pieces don’t strive to conform to a hegemonic or paradigmatic concept of beauty but to a pluralistic understanding of it. How does beauty look is less noteworthy in comparison with what beauty does and means. Political-critical-home-made art usually exhibits difficult beauties[2], queer beauties and obscure beauties, which nevertheless, do not seem to be pleasant at the first sight (and, even if they are pleasant at the first sight in some cases, this does not mean that they don’t perform a critical function at the same time). Therefore, even if folk arts tend to be secluded in the ornamental’s domain, it does not mean that “the ornament” cannot act as an indicator of social change or as a critical reminder. And even if they are not called “art”, this does not mean that these forms of creativity from outside the mainstream artworld cannot act critically and progressively.

Critical Ornament and Functional Beauty

Ornament repeats animalistic, vegetative or geometric patterns applied to an image surface. It is commonly held that ornament serves “to heighten an aesthetic effect, to structure, accentuate or enliven surfaces, to frame, to fill –or to dignify”[3]. Sometimes, it does more than that but being too often associated with triviality, domesticity or “popular culture” fails to convince that beauty can be clever too. From the long history of its dismissal, it would be enough just to mention Adolf Loos’s invectives: “No ornament can any longer be made today by anyone who lives on our cultural level. It is different with the individuals and peoples who have not yet reached this level...I can tolerate the ornament of the Kaffir, The Persian, the Slovak peasant woman, my shoemaker’s ornaments, for they have no other way of attaining the high points of their existence. We have art, which has taken the place of ornament”[4].

As we know, ornaments became inextricably bound up in discussions about taste and beauty. Yet, ornament does not necessarily talk about symmetry and harmony to satisfy a cataleptic aesthetics of pleasure but can talk about conflicts and injustices too. It is increasingly being used as a means of criticism: “of suffocating female role models; of totalitarian political systems; of standardizing behavioral patterns, expectations and conventions”[5]. Even mere decoration (“free beauty”[6] in Kant’s terms) acquires a political function. Then, the beautiful, “inoffensive” ornament started to be increasingly used by political artists from the art world or from the margins as a

balance and proportion for which we strive in just social arrangements. (See for a more detailed argument Elaine Scarry’s, “On Beauty and Being Just”, Princeton University Press, 1999). In my view, we don’t have to identify beauty with symmetry or balance in order to prove beauty’s functioning as an indicator for social justice. [10] James Smith, *Terry Eagleton*, Polity Press, 2008, p. 372. [11] J. A Passmore, “The Dreariness of Aesthetics”, in W. Elton (ed.), *Aesthetics and Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1954, pp.36-55. [12] Peter Benson, “On Beauty and Being Just by Elaine Scarry” in *Philosophy* Now, http://www.philosophynow.org/issue44/On_Beauty_and_Being_Just_by_Elaine_Scarray (accessed 12 February 2011). [13] See Kathleen Higgins, “Whatever Happened to Beauty? A Response to Danto”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, No.54, 1996, pp. 281-284. [14] This is the introductory plea of the Hungarian National Anthem [15] I have offered a more detailed analysis of Ion Grigorescu’s political art in “Aesthetics of Resistance and Persistence” in Alina Serban (ed), *Ion Grigorescu: The Man with a Single Camera*, Bucharest: Pepluspatru, 2012. [16] http://www.angelsbarcelona.com/artistas/grigorescu/press/IonGrigorescu_angelsbarcelona2009_eng.pdf (accessed 14.02.2012). [17] In another instance, ‘Arpilleras originated in Chile, where women political prisoners who were held during the Pinochet regime used them to camouflage notes sent to helpers outside. Even the most suspicious guards did not think to check the appliquéd pictures for messages, since sewing was seen as inconsequential women’s work <http://www.thefolkartgallery.com/arpilleras.htm> (accessed 15.02.2012). [18] Hubert van den Berg, “On the Historiographic Distinction between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde” in *Avant-Garde/ Neo-Avant-Garde*, Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.), Rodopi Editions, Amsterdam – New York, 2005, p.66. [19] Ididem 1. [20] Paul Mattick talks about Barbara Kruger’s work which is both accessible for the general public thanks to its use of imagery and verbal forms borrowed from mass communication and, aesthetically sophisticated for the specialists (Paul Mattick, “Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics in the Visual Arts”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Spring, 1993, p. 256. [21] Dave Beech & John Roberts propose a concept of philistine which is positive (very close to working class) and different from the concept of bourgeois philistinism. The philistine is defined as insensitive, uncultured, oppositional to art institutions, highly political, brutal especially in matters related to art. Philistine is the definitional other of art and aesthetics. The authors speak of *philistine modes of attention*- like popular pleasantness mingled with desire, uncultured form of reception (Dave Beech & John Roberts: “The Philistine Controversy”, Verso, London&New York, 2002).

means of criticism of the disturbed conditions of the world. To take just an example, the Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi's floor painting for the 10th Sharjah Biennial (United Arab Emirates) is a mixture of beauty and critique. As the curator Sabine Vogel posits: "Blood –red color everywhere. The whole courtyard is a shambles. Splatters cover even the stairs and the walls. But then you notice the little, white floral ornament. They are fused with the color of blood; they emerge from this image of violence"[7].



Ornament does not attempt to beautify the state of affairs and to inflict in spectators an aesthetic pleasure but action and indignation. But this does not mean that ornament is no longer beautiful. As Danto would say, "It would be helpful then to differentiate between beauty and 'beautification' (as equivalent of deception) and understand that if beauty is internally connected to the content of work, it can be a criticism of the work that it is beautiful when it is inappropriate to be so"[8]. Looking fit for a purpose is not the only form that functional beauty can take. Ornament does not look fit for opposing the mechanisms of power and exclusion but its beauty functions like a form of formal dissidence, as fragile as it is. Beauty should not be restricted to a certain restricted type of pleasure if we want to account for the social and political relevance of it. Nevertheless, beauty can have a political-critical impact if we are to consider it not only as a peculiar type of aesthetic pleasure but also as a possibility of healing the troubled social situations or to be critical about. In order to be empowering, beauty needs in the first place to be re-appreciated. The problem is that it cannot be appropriately re-appreciated by just making it into an analogy for just social arrangements (as Elaine Scarry has argued[9]). For contemporary political artists "beauty" is an ambiguous, misleading and ultimately a "useless" concept. My intention is to offer an account of beauty in such a manner that it will not be prejudicial to purposive, critically and politically concerned art. Many contemporary artists argue that being 'too beautiful' and 'too aesthetic' is a negative judgment (an interesting examples is the artist Shirin

Neshat: she expresses herself in content and form, and is politically engaged vis-à-vis both gender issues and Islam; however, her work has been criticized for being 'too beautiful' and 'too aesthetic'). This tendency places the theoretical concern with beauty in a totally different dimension than the concern for social justice. Simply put it, if a political message is at stake beauty should disappear since beauty blocks the forcefulness of the message. We have reasons to accept this argument only if we endorse a definition of 'beauty' which emphasizes immediate pleasantness, purity and "disinterestedness" but, in the real world of art, beauty is none of these. Many theorists involved in the art world business follow Gertrude Stein in holding firmly that 'beauty' is better to be avoided in contemporary political art because its presence would redirect viewer's attention from social injustice. She once said that to call a work of art beautiful means that it is dead (because beautiful has come to mean "'merely' beautiful") and this dictum seems still powerful and convincing for many. Eagleton stressed forcefully in his "Ideological Aesthetics" avant-garde's decision to avoid beauty: "The avant-garde's response to the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic is quite unequivocal. Truth is a lie; morality stinks; beauty is shit. And of course they are absolutely right. Truth is a White House communiqué; morality is the Moral Majority; beauty is a naked woman advertising perfume. Equally, of course, they are wrong. Truth, morality and beauty are too important to be handed contemptuously over the political enemy"[10]. Besides these critics, Passmore added[11] the contention that beauty expresses the wrong social values (the bourgeois' values) and Peter Benson accused beauty of being non-democratic (it is distributed unequally among people and those who can produce it (artists) are a valued minority, a favored elite)[12].

All these diatribes are based on the assumption that beauty has no function (excepting the aesthetic pleasure it affords) and our responses to it are immediate responses (we just sense that something is beautiful without asking why that something is beautiful). The problem is not with "the beautiful" but with what beauty consists in and what beauty does. As Kathleen Higgins[13] suggests, beauty may exactly serve the goals from which it seems to distract by creating an indispensable mental awareness which is unavoidable for political-critical art. Beauty is not at odds with critical awareness but on the contrary, it could be one of its legitimate expressions if we understand beauty differently from what the mainstream aesthetic theory holds. In critical art's case, beauty has many functions (critical, social, remedial, curative, dignifying...). The kind(s) of beauty that political-critical art works have in virtue of their functions require knowledge of those functions.

An example of ornament, whose main function is to act as an indicator of social changes is a special type of embroidery which used to decorate the rural kitchens of both poor and aristocratic families from nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. This wall-hanging embroidery, usually tells a story, a riddle or an apothegm meant to protect the owners of the house. Sometimes, it expresses a hidden desire or an advice for the young wives. In some cases, the message inscribed in cloth is ironical and critical. The Hungarian artist Krnács Ágota exhibits in the public space an enlarged photograph of this critical embroidery (within the temporary exhibition "God bless the Hungarians with good cheer and prosperity"[14]). The black irony is ubiquitous, including the traditional embroidery which turns out to be more than an ornament. Its beauty is not merely decorative but an ironico-critical one. The embroidered inscription states :

"We have all for baking and cooking, we don't need to go to the neighbors for anything". This is a subversive sentence for all those who know the art of "good cheer and prosperity" in Hungarian official politics.



The Beautiful Carpets of Anger

A carpet is usually a functional and a beautiful object. It is also a reminder of the anonymous human labour. The Romanian political artist Ion Grigorescu recurrently uses the idea of 'carpet' in his conceptual production^[15]. He uses both the carpet *per se* and the concept of a carpet. The installation *The Diplomatic Tent* (National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, *Salonul de Proiecte*, 2011) reflects Grigorescu's preoccupation for the way in which social organizations reproduce the same pattern of exploitation after the fall of communism. The 'tent' is like a carpet made of videos and photographs depicted through printing on textile, alluding to the Orient. Understood as a mental and symbolic space where the artist constructs his artistic identity and performs his contextual politics, the Orient is omnipresent in this installation. Its main instantiation is the frieze-like oriental decorative pattern which can be found at the

edge of many images from *The Diplomatic Tent*.



This decorative framing reminds us about the way a carpet looks like. One of the images shows a group of politicians (allusion to the political hegemony) gathering inside a tent. The artist inserts himself in the middle of this community, re-enacting an image from his film *Ame* (1979) in which he is performing his own circumcision. He combines again old works with new ones (like in *Recent Photographs*, 2004) and alludes to the idea of a conceptual carpet hanged vertically and made of photographs and paintings imprinted on fabric (alluding to “When the poor has a carpet he imagines being rich” from his larger project “The poor people are fending for themselves”, Barcelona, 2009). The recurrent use of the idea of carpet in his art production could be interpreted as a subtle political gesture. According to Grigorescu, a carpet is an element that defines the difference between poor and rich: “The poor appreciates them more and use them daily for praying, for sitting and so on”[16]. A carpet is not only a

line of demarcation for identifying the poor and the rich but it is also a way of camouflaging messages in the colourful fabrics. The oppressed ones question in this manner the authority and leave their testimony inscribed in clothes. A carpet can be also seen as an emotional release, like in the case of the Chilean *arpilleras de adorno* (decorative *arpilleras*). Originally, these *arpilleras* were exclusively detailed hand-sewn, three dimensional textile pictures which tell the story of those who disappeared during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s[17]. The mothers and other female relatives of these “*desaparecidos*” (disappeared ones) made wall hangings as a means of documenting the futile search for their loved ones and as a means of commemoration. The carpet then is not only an item which demarcates the poor and the rich but also delineates the perpetrators from the oppressed, the weak from the powerful and the marginal from the *status quo*.

In a rural area from Eastern Europe, in a remote Hungarian village, an old peasant woman shows me her hand-made “red carpet”. She “just” made it to cover her tiny bed but all her family and guests refuse to sit on it. The carpet has a lot of ornaments on the margins but instead of flowers or geometrical forms, the viewer is faced with bleeding hearts or hearts in flames. Although, the frieze is symmetrical and colorful, this decoration is set free to convey new contents. It is not just formally beautiful, inoffensive and decorative but offensive and political through and through. The old artisan told me that those bleeding hearts tell the story of illness and pain in a country where the old people are left without pension to struggle with poverty and seclusion. Intentionally or not, the formal issue of beauty is re-contextualized into a political critique. The resistant aesthetics is at work in a Romanian village too. Another old artisan is well-known as the “artist of seeds”. Beside the carpets with portraits of the political leaders made of different kinds of seeds, he has a collection of scarecrows in his garden. And scarecrows get critical too (each of which impersonates a cinema star).

“Gifts of Resistance” and Political Effectiveness

These “gifts of resistance” are not appropriated by commercial art. Usually they don’t take part in established and mainstream artworlds. A legitimate question is, then: Is this homemade criticism politically effective? To answer this question we have to firstly answer to “Where, when and for who is political-critical art effective (if it is effective)?” There is a tendency to question political art’s effectiveness on the grounds that art is powerless or functionless and “it would never stop a war”, because it has no chance to succeed in stopping injustices and raising awareness, as long as it is “a commercialized repetition of its historical precursors”[18]. Art as resistance or critique is said to be just as meaningless from the point of view of its effectiveness as commercial (decorative art) is. Yet, even if this argument is something heard frequently, I don’t think is accurate. As Hubert van den Berg convincingly argues, “... resistance, a revolt or a revolution, is not necessarily meaningless, when there is little or no chance of success or victory. The fundamental question rises here, whether the relevance of resistance should only be measured by its chance of success. Does not resistance, does not revolt possess always a moral dimension as well?”[19]. Homemade critical art’s effectiveness rests in its moral dimension. The answer to the question “for who is political-critical art effective” is sadly, for those who share the “vocabulary” or the “cultural code”. In other words, some critical art instances (apart of

how much anti-aesthetic and anti-elitist is their strategy intended to be) remain inaccessible to the non-specialist viewer. Yet, nevertheless, there are pieces of critical art reasonably accessible to a general public, while revealing “further complexities to those able to set it conceptually within its art world context”[20]. Homemade critical art is effective both for specialized public and for “philistine” (understood in positive terms as those proposed by Dave Beech & John Roberts[21]).