

## FORUM

**BORIS GROYS**

*In the Flow*

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### INTRODUCTION

«Our contemporary age seems to be different from all the other historically known ages in at least one respect: Never before has humanity been so interested in its own contemporaneity» (ITF, p. 137), writes Boris Groys in his essay collection *In the Flow* (Verso 2016), the most recent landmark in his (art)philosophical path.

The interest in our contemporaneity and, above all, our ability to interpret it seem indeed to be crucial elements of the book, wherein Groys investigates the notion of art at the times of the multimedia and proposes to do «the rheology of art – discussion of art as flowing» (ITF, p. 2).

The analysis starts from the discussion of the avant-garde polemic against the institution of the museum at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and from their egalitarian considerations of contemporary art with respect to ordinary things. In order to affirm the equivalence between artworks and ordinary objects, one can either extend the museum privilege to all things (which is the path followed by Duchamp and his *Fountain*) or eliminate them. If the first option is impossible (the totality of the urinals of the world cannot enter into museums, Groys affirms), the second means that with the removal of the museum's boundaries the artworks enter into the flow of the time.

In this way, museums negate their traditional function, i.e. to resist the transience of the times which they inhabit. On the contrary, museums imitate and collaborate with the flow of the time: contemporary «museum ceased to be a place for a permanent collection, and became a stage for changing curatorial projects, guided tours, screenings, lectures, performances, etc.» (ITF, p. 3). At the same time, contemporary art also enters into the flow of time: in the majority of cases, contemporary art does not produce objects anymore, but instead produces events and information about events. Museums do not collect exhibited objects any more in an anonymous space, detaching them from the material flow of time, but the curatorial projects, through the theatricalization of the museum, become a temporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* that will be replaced by the next one. In this atmosphere, the spectators become involved. With this reconfiguration of the museum, the viewer's gaze also changes. It becomes an asym-

metrical gaze, because it is inside the event and loses the sovereignty on the things. Furthermore, contemporary art lives and survives in her nostalgic re-enactment in digital archives (Web sites of the museums, blogs, social media pages etc.), which catalogs her as metadata. In a certain way, contemporary art is compatible with the Internet and becomes possible through it. What is preserved nowadays is not an object without an 'aura' – Groys asserts – but the 'aura' without the object. Moreover, on the Internet, the museum «presents not a universal history of art but, rather, its own history, in the chain of event staged by the museum itself» (ITF, p. 19). Through the reflection on the relationship between event and its documentation, original and reproduction, a museum is not only a place for artistic events to occur in, but a medium for exploring the «eventfulness of the event» (ITF, p. 20). With the aid of the contemporary art that it hosts, the museum becomes a litmus test for the comprehension of our times.

Within the described above framework, which is developed in the Introduction («The Rheology of Art») and in the first Chapter («Entering the Flow»), Groys proposes a series of essays that are rather autonomous but that, taken together, describe different aspects or problems of art in the time 'in the flow'.

The volume goes on with an analysis, on the one hand, of the relationship between contemporary art and theory, and, on the other hand, of the relationship between contemporary art and praxis. «Under the Gaze of Theory», the second Chapter, deals with the centrality of theory in contemporary art. Groys' thesis is that today's artists need theory, in order to explain to themselves, and not so much to the public, what they are doing. He reflects on art that performs theory and on the aestheticization of theory, in the conviction that art performs the action and gives the proof of our being alive that theory demands from us.

With a reflection on the relationship between art and design – wherein the former refers to the domain wherein aestheticization means the defunctionalization of the objects and events; and the latter, wherein aestheticization, in order to make these objects more attractive but for the use – begins the reflection on art activism, which is dedicated the third Chapter («On Art Activism»). For Groys, the social relevance of contemporary art, in its non-

instrumental and non-teleological performance of life, is the production of the social as such.

The fourth Chapter takes into consideration the relationship between art and politics, from the point of view of the Russian avant-garde, the Russian Revolution and the particular case of Malevich («Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich»). Malevich with its *Black Square* is not a revolutionary artist because he criticizes a political situation. He is a revolutionary artist in a deeper sense of the term, because he gives all the goals up and «join[s] the universal material flow that destroys all the temporary political and aesthetic orders» (ITF, p. 74).

In «Installing Communism», the fifth Chapter, Groys draws a parallel between Marx and Engel's shift from the contemplation of individual artworks towards the consideration of the context of their production and today's attention to the context, represented by the creation of artistic installation, conceived as «a space in which to explore the dependence of the artist on the art institution in general and on curatorial strategies in particular» (ITF, p. 84). Groys individuates this shift originally in the radical Russian avant-garde, and especially in Suprematism, and discusses the work of two Russian installation artists: the suprematist El Lissitzky and the more recent Ilya Kabakov.

Clement Greenberg's essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* is at the core of the reflections of Chapter 6 («Clement Greenberg: An Engineer of Art»). For Groys the reason why Greenberg consciously and provocatively read the avant-guard movement as a continuation of the artistic tradition is more political than aesthetic: the object of Greenberg's interest was the art consumer, which allowed him to avoid an opposition between the art of the future with that of the past, i.e. avant-garde with the previous art, rather suggested a contrast between high and low art. Indeed, he found the «new enemy» (ITF, p. 107) in the kitsch, interpreted as a specific aesthetic phenomenon of the modern mass culture, as «the only true aesthetic manifestation of our modernity» (ITF, p. 107). Groys states that the distinction between avant-garde and kitsch can be read not as the description of two different practices of art, but also as two different attitudes, through which our perception toward contemporary art continuously shifts: the avant-garde perspective is that of the producer, who is interested in the technical aspects; the kitsch perspective is that of the consumer, who wants in leisure time to enjoy the artistic effects.

The problematic status of the notion of realism is the topic of the seventh Chapter («On Realism»). To reveal the 'real' truth of a thing could be read as an 'unrealistic' operation, through which artists share the fate of disappearance of the things: In making the thingness of things – in Heideggerian terms – visible, artists take things out of the flow of the time and in a certain way betray them as thing. In the epoch of the Internet, in which all documentation is immersed in the apparently neutral flow of information, contemporary artists «take responsibility for individual things and their visibility» (ITF, p. 120) and in this way make their work political.

In «Global Conceptualism Revisited» (Chapter 8) Groys characterizes conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s principally as installation art and identifies its epochal meaning in the display of «the equivalence, or at least a parallelism, between word and image, between the order of words and the order of things, the grammar of language and the grammar of visual space» (ITF, p. 122). Groys highlights, then, that the visual grammar of the Internet does not basically differ from the grammar of an installation space. He reflects on the 'autopoietic' practice of the self-presentation on the Internet that involves hundreds of millions of people all around the world and on the problems that arise for artistic practice from a global scene that uses the grammar of the art.

In Chapter 9, «Modernity and Contemporaneity: Mechanical vs. Digital Reproduction», Groys critically observes the digital modalities of reproduction. If mechanical reproduction in modern times was a break away from the notions of nature and originality, digital reproduction has changed the relation between original and copy: The digital image is just an effect of the visualization of an invisible image file and the 'performance' of this digital data is always an act of interpretation of its form by the Internet user. In a provocative way, Groys interprets this phenomenon as a return to nature and even to supernatural and metaphysics, when he notices that «digital files appear by clicking on their names – as in earlier time we conjured spirits by calling their names» (ITF, p. 144) and when he says that we all have «digital souls» that are «reproductions of our off-line behavior – reproductions that we can only partially control» (ITF, p. 146).

«Google: Words beyond Grammar» analyzes Google as a «philosophical machine» that finds its own genealogy in the recent philosophy. By dissolving the discourse in an extragram-

matical way and turning it into clouds, Google is similar to Derridian deconstruction, which shares the same understanding of language as a topological space. Nevertheless, it is also an answer to deconstruction: because of the materiality of the medium, the potentially infinite trajectories of the words' migration from one context to another become finite in the Internet. The practice of the liberation of the words from the grammar is also similar to some artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Groys quotes Marinetti's *parole in libertà*, the Freudian use of languages by Surrealists, and conceptual art), but if with these artistic practices there were struggles both for liberation and equality, with Google and its dissimulation of political operations this utopic belief is, for Groys, betrayed.

In Chapter eleventh, «WikiLeaks: The Revolt of the Clerks, or Universality as Conspiracy», Groys considers the organization lead by Julian Assange. Groys reads Wikileaks as the reintroduction of universalism into politics, not a universality of content, but a universality of access through the Internet. Internet clerks – as Groys calls them with reference to Julien Benda's book – have replaced state clerks in a globalized world and understand their «universal service as conspiracy – and conspiracy as universal service» (ITF, p. 169).

The last Chapter is dedicated to «Art on the Internet». Groys meditates on many aspects of the migration of art and literature in the last decades from institutional spaces to the Internet. He takes into account topics such as the change in the artworks space that becomes de-institutionalized and de-fictionalized, the increase of art documentation through and the use of the cultural institutions of the Internet as the principal place of their representation, the globalization of the author, the problem of the control of the Internet. If the museum became the graveyard of modern utopias, then the «Internet has become not a place of realization but rather a graveyard for postmodern utopia» (ITF, p. 185).

Many of the topics contained in the book are new, many others are present in Groys' previous works and experience – especially within the framework of the age 'in the flow' – further developments. Among others: the reflection of the meaning and function of museums in the age of the new media (that Groys inquires, inter alia, in *Logik der Sammlung. Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters*, 1997; *Topologie der Kunst*, 2003; *Art Power* 2008; *Going*

*Public*, 2010); the analysis of the Avant-garde and its development in the Soviet Union (among others: *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, 1988, Eng. transl. 1992; *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment*, 2006; *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, 2010); the analysis of the notion of 'new' (*Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*, 1992, Eng. transl. 2014) and of the media in the contemporary age (*Unter Verdacht. Eine Phänomenologie der Medien*, 2000, Eng. transl. 2012). Issues and problems are elaborated in a comprehensive picture taken at the boundary of many fields, such as philosophy, history of art, politics, theory of art and media (the same interdisciplinary perspective that we can find in others Groys' volumes: *Das kommunistische Postskriptum*, 2006, Eng. transl. 2009; *Die Kunst des Denkens*, 2008; *Einführung in die Anti-Philosophie*, 2009, Eng. transl. 2012).

The Forum presented here for the journal «Lebenswelt. Aesthetics and philosophy of experience» gathers together contributions, in form of comment or question, on different aspects of Groys' essay collection. Moreover, in order to face the complexity and the vary range of topics of the volume, the perspectives of the contributors are varied, ranging from the philosophy of art to the theory of new media, from the history of art to the theory of the museums and others.

Terry Smith gives special attention to the first part of the book, and proposes some reflections and questions on the first three Chapters of the book. He starts with a consideration on the difference between his own approach (more inductive) and the approach Groys takes (more deductive), then deals with different topics such as temporality and equality. The contribution ends with some remarks on Documenta 14 and the relationship between the documentary character of art and its contemporaneity.

Elena Tavani's contribution links many crucial points of Groys' book together. She starts from a general consideration of «art as flowing», and deepens the topic of the installation art, while stressing the problem of the reduction of the «autonomy» of art into «property». She then goes through the political aspect of the book and asks what «critical art» can mean; she thus analyzes the notion of «aesthetic experience» and the changing nature of communication between artist, artwork and viewer, where 'form' is used as a poetic/rhetorical device; and concludes her investiga-

tion with a consideration on the performative character of theory and the problem of technology.

Elise Archias goes through the different moments of the books, from Groys' understanding of Greenberg's distinction between avant-garde and kitsch to his interpretations of Google and Wikileaks. Her main critique is on the emphasis of the notion of «common mortality» and highlights the possibility to discuss alternatives, based on what she – in Enlightenment terms – describes as a concrete and social notion of «practice».

Claire Bishop concentrates her contribution on the essay «Google: Words Beyond Grammar», and reflects on Groys' parallelism between Google meta-grammatical way to operate and artistic movements like Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism. She asks herself whether it is possible to think beyond these historical art perspectives and whether contemporary art can challenge the epistemology and aesthetic of Google.

Mario Farina takes into account the general thesis of art entering into the flow of time as a paradigmatic turn in reading contemporary art. Paying attention to the social processes of production and reproduction of life that have determined this turn and to the objectual character of the artworks 'in the flow', he highlights the role of literature as a particular form of art that violates the 'thing-character' of art itself.

Yvonne Förster concentrates on the relation between art and technology. She deepens the general framework of a time 'in the flow', and analyzes the conception of a humanity mediated and permeated by technology. With a series of examples from the dystopic narratives, drawn especially from the movie imaginary, she proposes a notion of art as a critical and performative practice of experimenting with new technology in direction of a critical Post-humanism as a new paradigm in contemporary art.

At the end of the Forum, Boris Groys replies with a comment to the previous contributions.