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Nieuwe Spiegelstraat 3
1017 DB Amsterdam
020 6230060
galerie@lievehemel.nl
di-za 12-18 uur

www.lievehemel.nl



ENDS OF ART: FROM NUL TO BIJL

Sven Lütticken

Many avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes have aimed to put an end to art as we know it. As a self-contained and institutionalized yet commodified entity, art betrayed the promise of the aesthetic. What should be a lived reality, a daily life of play, of situations, becomes a production line of reified objects. Hegel's 'end of art' was based on the assumption that spirit had left the stage in which it could still express itself in sensuous form, attaining a degree of self-realization where ideas have to manifest themselves 'directly' in conceptual language. By contrast, young Hegelians such as Cieszkowski and early Marx considered that both art and philosophy had to be sublated, merged, and submerged in praxis.¹ All alienating specialisms had to be overcome in favour of an activity that would fully manifest human potential, rather than stunt it.

This aesthetic and political promise ricochets through various avant-garde movements, propelling them to question and reinvent art. At times this project of ending art was more ludic and aesthetic; at other times, its political dimension was foregrounded. Sometimes this caused a rift within a movement, as with the Situationist International and its 'artistic' and 'political' factions. It is less well known that the same was true of Fluxus, but here the 'politicos' were not able to set the agenda.

For George Maciunas, the self-appointed chairman of Fluxus, the aim of an advanced art practice during the 1960s was to reintegrate itself into the social fabric. In contrast to Warhol's celebration of a remoteness and alienation offered by the circulation of the media image, Maciunas saw it as his task to replace the production of expensive artworks for a small elite with a new and useful form of art practice that was capable of integrating itself into, and of helping to reshape, the current conditions of work and labour. In 1966, Maciunas designed a pamphlet by Henry Flynt called *Communists Must Give Revolutionary Leadership in Culture*, and to the bewilderment and irritation of some of his associates, he regarded Fluxus as a revolutionary avant-garde in line with Constructivism and Productivism. The Fluxus festivals and events, and the many cheap 'Flux kits' he assembled, filled with artistic jokes and games, were continuing the fight to move away from precious objects; from the artwork as 'elephant' to the artwork as 'butterfly', to quote Tarabukin.

Though Maciunas and Fluxus were practicing their art at a time when centralized forms of monopoly capitalism were reaching their peak (and also showing immanent signs of decline), his rhetoric is intentionally reminiscent of Trotsky's call for a new and useful role for both art and artist — while giving an American spin to Soviet models by emphasizing 'career opportunities' in this 1964 letter to Tomas Schmit:

Fluxus goals are social (not aesthetic). They are connected to the L.E.F. group of 1929 in the Soviet Union (ideologically) and concerned with: gradual elimination of the fine arts (music, theater, poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture etc. etc). This is motivated by the desire to stop the waste of material and human resources (like yourself) and direct it to socially constructive ends. Such as applied arts: industrial design, journalism, architecture, engineering, graphic-typographic arts, printing etc. They are almost closely related fields to fine arts and offer the best alternative profession to fine artists. All clear till now?

Thus Fluxus is definitely against art object as non-functional commodity — to be sold and to make a livelihood for an artist.

It could temporarily have pedagogical function of teaching people the needlessness of art, including the eventual needlessness of Fluxus itself.²

¹ August von Cieszkowski's *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* (1838) had an impact on Marx, helping to shape his notion of praxis. Later, Guy Debord would find Cieszkowski to be highly congenial.

This rejection of the non-functional artistic commodity was widespread. In 1961, the budding Dutch Nul group, which was affiliated with Zero in Germany and Nouveau Réalisme in France, announced an "international exhibition of NOTHING" in "the world's first gallery for the latest [or: the last] art." The show, conveniently scheduled to open on April 1, had an announcement that took the form of a 'Manifesto Against Nothing', the text of which was largely by Carl Lazslo—who was a co-signatory alongside other international allies, such as Piero Manzoni and (future) Fluxus artist and gallerist Arthur Kōpcke.³ The manifesto stated that "a painting is worth as much as no painting" and that "no art market [kunsthandel] is as efficient as an art market."⁴ On the day of the announced opening, April 1, the gallery remained closed. Instead, a second manifesto was distributed. Designed like an obituary, it read as follows:

THE END

Since the liberation [in 1945], Our People have succeeded in raising themselves to the level of a Welfare State in which only the freedom to be poor and destitute has lost its right to exist. All of this has happened without any great flowering in the cultural sphere. While Dutch Art has fallen to a provincial level, the value of the Guilder is soaring. Up to now it was sacrilege to question the slogan: "No people can live without culture". However, today we declare:

The Dutch people have no need for art for their wellbeing. In fact, good riddance to art!

Your cleaning lady fights her boredom with modern music, your dentist collects modern art, your accountant amuses himself with Tinguely's machines:

You can no longer use art to improve your status!

Therefore a group of prominent artists takes the initiative to:

1. **Decide to stop making artistic products**
2. **Promote the liquidation of all institutions that still [make a] profit from art.**

Thus we've closed the avant-garde Arthur Kōpcke gallery in Copenhagen, breaking off all commercial relations. In this country, we're starting with Galerie 207 (Willemsparkweg 207) in Amsterdam. Henceforth the undersigned will occupy themselves exclusively with the dissolving of art circles and the closing of exhibition spaces, which can finally be given a more dignified purpose.

On behalf of Galerie 207 in Amsterdam: **Cornelius Rogge**

The provisional action committee:

Armando (Amsterdam), Bazon Broch [sic] (Itzehoe), Henderikse (Düsseldorf), Arthur Kōpcke (Copenhagen), Silvano Lora (Paris), Piero Manzoni (Milan), Megert (Bern), Henk Peeters (Arnhem), Schoonhoven (Delft).⁵

This April Fool's Day stunt was clearly informed by practices such as Manzoni's and Yves Klein's; Klein had, after all, purified the white cube and turned it into a *vide* (at the Iris Clert Gallery, 1958). Here, however, this 'zero' aesthetic becomes a form of proto-institutional critique. It is not so much that the art space needs to be emptied out and turned into an 'immaterial zone of pictorial sensibility' à la Klein; it needs to be closed down, and art as we know it needs to be overcome. Or has it, in fact, already been overcome? On the one hand,

² George Maciunas, 'Letter to Tomas Schmit, January 1964', in: Emmett Williams and Ann Noëll (eds.), *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas, 1931-1978*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1997, p. 104.

³ There exist different permutations of Kōpcke's last name; this text sticks to the spelling in the referenced manifesto.

⁴ Wim Beeren (ed.), *Actie, werkelijkheid en fictie in de kunst van de jaren '60 in Nederland*, Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1979, p. 30. Author's translation.

⁵ Ibid., p. 31. Author's translation.

E I N D E

Sinds de bevrijding heeft Ons Volk zich weten op te werken tot een Welvaartsstaat, waar alleen de vrijheid tot armoede en ellende zijn bestaansrecht heeft verloren. Deze resultaten zijn tot stand gekomen, zonder dat er van enige bloei op het terrein der cultuur sprake is geweest. Waar de Nederlandse kunst is afgezakt tot een provinciaal peil, stijgt de waarde van de Gulden. Was het tot nog toe heiligschennis te twifelen aan de slogan: „zonder cultuur kan een volk niet leven”, nu verklaren wij:

Het Nederlandse Volk heeft voor zijn welzijn helemaal geen kunst nodig, ja: kunst kan gemist worden als kiespijn!

Uw werkster verdrijft haar verveling met moderne muziek, uw tandarts verzamelt moderne kunst, uw boekhouder amuseert zich met de machines van Tinguely:

U kunt met kunst uw status niet meer verbeteren! Een aantal vooraanstaande kunstenaars neemt tans het initiatief:

1. **Besluit het vervaardigen van kunstvoortbrengselen te staken;**
2. **De liquidatie te bevorderen van alle instellingen, die zich nog aan de kunst verrijken.**

In Kopenhagen sloten wij zodoende de avantgardegalerie Kōpcke en verbraken alle winstgevende betrekkingen. In eigen land wordt begonnen met de sluiting van de zgn. Galerie 207 (Willemsparkweg 207) te Amsterdam. Voortaan zullen ondergetekenden zich doorlopend belasten met het opheffen van kunstkringen en het sluiten van tentoonstellingsruimten, waaraan dan eindelijk een waardiger bestemming kan worden gegeven.

Voor de Galerie 207 te A'dam: **Cornelius Rogge**

Het voorlopig actiecomité:

Armando (Amsterdam), Bazon Broch (Itzehoe), Henderikse (Düsseldorf), Arthur Kōpcke (Kopenhagen), Silvano Lora (Parijs), Piero Manzoni (Milaan), Megert (Bern), Henk Peeters (Arnhem), Schoonhoven (Delft).

fig.1 Nul Groep, *EINDE*, 1961. Facsimile reproduction, in: Wim Beeren (ed.), *Actie, werkelijkheid en fictie in de kunst van de jaren '60 in Nederland*, Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1979, p. 30.

the authors declare that the affluent society of the Cold War no longer needs culture, nor any specialized 'artistic products'. On the other hand, these products are said to be everywhere: people use art as another way to fight boredom. What, on this level, is the difference between Tinguely and a popular TV show? The end of art, it would seem, has already happened because of art's fatal success (in which 'provincial' Dutch art, however, hardly seems to partake). The closing of the gallery as a specialist and elitist institution, then, is only consequential. To some extent, this parallels the Situationists' ideas about the *dépassement de l'art*: the Situationists, too, considered art to be already dead, having been integrated into the spectacle. To discontinue the making of art for the gallery system or to close down galleries is a strike against what art has become—in the name of what it could be.

The 1961 gallery closure was not to be the last 'art strike' scheme. In a marginally more realistic proposal, in 1977 Gustav Metzger argued that a three-year strike would be enough to bring down the entire art-industrial complex:

Art Strike 1977-1980

Artists engaged in political struggle act in two key areas: the use of their art for direct social change; and actions to change the structures of the art world. It needs to be understood that this activity is necessarily of a reformist, rather than revolutionary, character. Indeed this political activity often serves to consolidate the existing order, in the West, and in the East.

The use of art for social change is bedevilled by the close integration of art and society. The state supports art, it needs art as a cosmetic cloak to its horrifying reality, and uses art to confuse, divert and entertain large numbers of people. Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose the umbilical cord of the state. Art in the service of revolution is unsatisfactory and mistrusted because of the numerous links of art with the state and capitalism. Despite these problems, artists will go on using art to change society.

Throughout the century, artists have attacked the prevailing methods of production, distribution and consumption of art. These attacks on the organisation of the art world have gained momentum in recent years. This struggle, aimed at the destruction of existing commercial and public marketing and patronage systems, can be brought to a successful conclusion in the course of the present decade.

The refusal to labour is the chief weapon of workers fighting the system; artists can use the same weapon. To bring down the art system it is necessary to call for years without art, a period of three years - 1977 to 1980 - when artists will not produce work, sell work, permit work to go on exhibitions, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art world. This total withdrawal of labour is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the state. The years without art will see the collapse of many private galleries. Museums and cultural institutions handling contemporary art will be severely hit, suffer loss of funds, and will have to reduce their staff. National and local government institutions will be in serious trouble. Art magazines will fold. The international ramifications of the dealer/museum/publicity complex make for vulnerability; it is a system that is keyed to a continuous juggling of artists, finance, works and information - damage one part, and the effect is felt worldwide.

Three years is the minimum period required to cripple the system, whilst a longer period of time would create difficulties for artists. The very small number of artists who live from the practice of art are sufficiently wealthy to live on their capital for three years. The vast majority of people who produce art have to subsidise their work by other means; they will, in fact, be saving money and time. Most people who practice art never sell their work at a profit, do not get the chance to exhibit their work under proper conditions, and are unmentioned by the publicity organs. Some artists may find it difficult to restrain themselves from producing art. These artist will be invited to enter camps, where making of art works is forbidden, and where any work produced is destroyed at regular intervals. In place of the practice of art, people can spend time on the numerous historical, esthetic and social issues facing art. It will be necessary to construct more equitable forms for marketing, exhibiting and publicising art in the future. As the twentieth century has progressed, capitalism has smothered art - the deep surgery of the years without art will give it a new chance.

*Gustav Metzger, 1974.*⁶

In order for Metzger's Art Strike to succeed, it would have to be adopted widely. Needless to say, this did not happen. Historically, the strike has been a successful tool in situations with a high degree of organization, of social coherence in factories and industrial sectors. Even the *general strike*, theorized by radical leftists in the early twentieth century as a means to push the capitalist order to its breaking point, was based on the social organization of production under industrial capitalism. This form of capitalism may have been alienating, reducing workers to cogs in the machine, but in doing so it brought them together and laid the basis for their potential unification—much as capitalist entrepreneurs tried to prevent workers' self-organization. By contrast, artists were seen as lone creators par excellence; the notion of an art strike would have been completely absurd before the rise in collective activity during the 1960s and 1970s, which went hand in hand with a new theoretical appreciation among certain leftist theorists of cognitive and 'creative' labour.⁷ Nonetheless, in the 1970s as in today's 'creative economy' with its proliferation of precarity, there are massive disincentives against joint action—and especially against joint strike action. When everyone is hopping from project to project, trying to survive as a corporation of one, albeit in different networked constellations, everyone is also their own scab. Nonetheless, art-strike proposals and related notions have the value of articulating the constraints and contradictions of praxis within—yet against—the art world. When pro-situ huckster Stewart Home proposed an art strike in the late 1980s, which would last from 1990 to 1993, the amount of discourse and debate this generated showed that at the height of the Reagan-era art boom, the art strike was impractical as ever, but necessary as an idea, as a myth, as a blocked escape route.⁸ The same is true today. Projects to interrupt the production of art, or to do away with institutionalized art altogether, have also taken other forms. In 1979—which would have been during Metzger's Art Strike—the Belgian artist Guillaume Bijl imagined an 'Art Liquidation Project' that he ascribed to the government rather than to himself. Instead of siding with the fiction of an art strike and ascribing to artists the agency to bring down the art market and even the state, Bijl penned a fake manifesto in which the state itself—or some unnamed agency speaking in its name—announced that it

⁶ Gustav Metzger, 'Art Strike 1977-1980' in *Art into Society—Society into Art*, London: ICA, 1974, p. 74. Accessible through: http://www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/y_Metzger+s_Art_Strike.html.

⁷ As former *Kunstlicht* editor Roel Griffioen recently remarked during the symposium *Fueling Precarity* at Casco, Utrecht, 31 April 2016.

⁸ See Stewart Home et al., *The Art Strike Papers*, Stirling: A.K. Press, 1991.

would close down all museums, and subsequently all private galleries, since art had proven to be non-functional and unproductive. Art spaces would be converted to more 'useful' functions such as driving schools, hospitals, training centres, and tax offices:

PROJECT FOR ART LIQUIDATION

BY ORDER OF THE STATE

- Due to art's non-functional nature.
- Due to the lack of space that several ministries have had to contend with recently.
- Due to the economic marginality of the art market, which is rife with tax evasion?
- Due to the annually rising costs of the ministry of culture.
- Due to the mounting general crisis, for which a solution needs to be found urgently.
- Due to the degrading nature of the new tendencies in art.
- Due to the anarchist mentality of many contemporary artists.

WE ARE OBLIGED TO CLOSE ALL MUSEUMS and transform them, as quickly as possible, into spaces suited for more practical purposes;
ART GALLERIES ARE TO FOLLOW; with the same aim.

THEY WILL BE REPLACED BY A.O.:

- Tax audit offices (department of the Ministry of Finance).
- Hospital wards (department of the Ministry of Health).
- Retraining centres (department of the Ministry of Labour).
- Military training centres (department of the Ministry of Defence).
- Career guidance services (department of the Ministry of Education).
- Data banks (department of the Ministry of Justice).
- Driving Schools (department of the Ministry of Roads and Bridges).⁹

A couple of years ago, Bijl noted that the original art liquidation proposal has once again become "very contemporary" in Belgium and Holland, due to right-wing populists such as Bart De Wever and Geert Wilders.¹⁰ Though these demagogues are well known for their attacks on minorities, they also attack art, calling it an elitist reserve and a 'left-wing hobby', to quote Wilders. An instrumentalist view of art gained ground—even before the rise of Wilders and his minion, VVD chairman and former State Secretary of Education, Culture, and Science Halbe Zijlstra. This instrumentalism takes several forms. There is the 'abolish all subsidies for art' variety, which is often coupled with paeans to 'the free market'. Let the market take care of things; all hail the Private Collector and the Blockbuster Exhibition! Then there's the notion that art, if it is to be subsidized, indeed needs to be more accountable, to have measurable impact. A recent attack on 'wasteful' art funding by the right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf* and Zijlstra's VVD reads like an unwitting nod to Bijl's art liquidation programme.¹¹ However, one key factor has changed: the focus on state-run services in Bijl's text anchors it in the welfare-state 1970s, whereas current attacks on art's wastefulness have to be seen in the context of a neoliberal notion of governance.

Building on the art liquidation text, Bijl's 'transformation installations' involved the temporary transformation of art spaces into simulations of various types of offices and shops. A few were more or less directly linked to the art liquidation text, in particular the first one, *Driving School Z* (1979). While this and some of his subsequent

⁹ Previously unpublished document, collection of Guillaume Bijl. Author's translation.

¹⁰ Guillaume Bijl, email to the author, 31 August 2013.

¹¹ 'Kunstgeld verstrooid', in: *De Telegraaf*, 7 May 2016, p. 1.

PROJECT m.b.t. KUNSTLIQUIDATIE.

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IN OPDRACHT VAN DE STAAT

- Wegens het onfunctionele karakter van kunst.
- Wegens het gebrek aan plaatsruimte, waar verscheidene Ministeriën de laatste tijd mee te kampen hebben.
- Wegens het oneconomische aspect van de kunsthandel, waar belastingsontduiking schering en inslag is?
- Wegens de jaarlijkse toenemende onkosten van het Ministerie van Cultuur.
- Wegens het algemeen groeiende krisisklimaat, waar een dringende oplossing voor moet gevonden worden.
- Wegens het degraderend karakter van nieuwe kunsttendenzen.
- Wegens de anarchistische instelling van vele hedendaagse kunstenaars.

ZIEN WIJ ONS GENOODZAAKT ALLE MUSEA TE SLUITEN en in een zo kort mogelijke periode te transformeren tot een voor meer praktische doeleinden geschikte ruimte :

KUNSTGALERIJEN ZULLEN VOLGEN; met hetzelfde doeleinde.

ZIJ ZULLEN VERVANGEN WORDEN DOOR o.a. :

- Belastingcontroleburelen (departement van het Ministerie van Financiën).
- Hospitaalafdelingen (departement van het Ministerie van Gezondheid).
- Herscholingscentra (departement van het Ministerie van Arbeid).
- Militaire Opleidingscentra (departement van het Ministerie van Landsverdediging).
- Beroepsoriëntatieburelen (departement van het Ministerie van Onderwijs).
- Informatiebanken (departement van het Ministerie van Justitie).
- Autorijscholen (departement van het Ministerie van Bruggen en Wegen).

fig. 2 Guillaume Bijl, *PROJECT m.b.t. KUNSTLIQUIDATIE*, 1979. Unpublished document, scan provided by Guillaume Bijl.

transformations had a certain low-rent sadness to them, others were devoted to the kind of conspicuous consumption that would become characteristic of the Reagan/Thatcher/Kohl era. *Chaussures Icécé* (1980) mimicked a fancy shoe shop; then there was a *Casino* (1984), *A Fashion Boutique* (1985) and a *Fitness Center* (1985). Here the original starting point of his practice—art being attacked for being unproductive—was flipped around. Rather than perpetuating the Productivist critique of ‘useless’ art, Bijl showed the integration of art into an economy that was increasingly dependent on luxury goods and so-called ‘cultural commodities’. This means that art, in a broad and commodified sense, is now seen as an economic engine rather than as an exception. This also means that all art now has to obey economic imperatives, as defined by neoliberal policymakers or their de facto populist allies. And if it doesn’t obey these economic imperatives, it had better be a good puppy and become the mouthpiece of whatever ideologemes the current paymasters want to put out there. Much the same goes in academia, for those who want to have a shot at government funding.

In an odd case of victim blaming, some have argued that previous (avant-garde and leftist) critiques of the autonomy of art set an agenda that was then taken up by Wilders and De Wever. This disregards the fact that avant-garde critique attacked ‘autonomous’ art precisely because it was not autonomous enough, a corrupted semblance of free aesthetic play; because it curtailed and perverted the promise of the aesthetic. Furthermore, these changes did not occur because some lefties foolishly dared attack the autonomy of art, thus providing Zijlstra, Wilders, or De Wever with fodder, but because of real social and economic pressures. In the face of deindustrialization, art and culture gained a new centrality—not so much as engines for growth as for wealth redistribution from top to bottom. Returning to some nostalgic idea(l) of autonomous art is an ahistorical fantasy. In some ways, art has indeed ended—though in ways that are the precise opposite of the (fictional) closures and strikes under discussion here. In the age of Gagosian, Bertolt Brecht might have asked what the closing of a gallery is compared to the opening of a gallery.

This text is based on a section of the critical reader *Art and Autonomy*, which will be published by Afterall later this year.

Sven Lütticken teaches art history at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. His books include *Idols of the Market* (2011) and *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (2013).

VALUE IS AN AMBIGUOUS HYPEROBJECT

Market for Immaterial Value & Steyn Bergs

Value is an ambiguous hyperobject
It is everything and nothing at the same time

Genuine things are those to which commodities and other means of exchange can be reduced, particularly gold. But like gold, genuineness, abstracted as the proportion of fine metal, becomes a fetish. Both are treated as if they were the foundation, which in reality is a social relation, while gold and genuineness precisely express only the fungibility, the comparability of things; it is they that are not in-themselves, but for-others. The unguineness of the genuine stems from its need to claim, in a society dominated by exchange, to be what it stands for yet is never able to be.

–Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*¹

¹
Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 153-4.