

Politics as pretext: what are the recognizable critical functions of text in contemporary art?

As the first bit of information on what follows, this may be slightly underwhelming. My paper will not provide you with a clear and satisfying answer to the question it raises. To recognize and rigorously map the critical functions of text in contemporary art is a demanding challenge, requiring a long and patient research commitment and I will not pretend to have already gone through this path now.

Yet, this paper won't entirely disappoint your expectations. After all, answers are purely eventual and not logical consequences to a question. Posing this question, I do not aim or expect to find a straightforward solution. Rather, I aim to bring attention to a certain problem and to define the perimeter and extension of its context.

Writing and, more generally, the use of text as a visual, conceptual or political element played a pivotal role in the history of art. Present in pre-war avant-gardes' prints and manifestos as much as in pop art advertising appropriations, text is also the place where art, poetry and politics fused in the conceptual practices of the Sixties inspired by the "linguistic turn" in Anglophone philosophy. Today, artworks often employ text within practices engaging with documentation, video and installation, where critical writing also appears as one of the constitutive elements.

Not by chance, in recent years, several publications have addressed the history of text in art and the relation between text and image:

- a) Hunt, Lomas and Corris *Art, Word and Image* (2010), for example, is a study spanning from classical Greece to modern digital media. But it sticks to the conventional and rather loose division between pre and post 1945 art...
 - b) Simon Morley's *Writing on the Wall* (2007) puts a stronger emphasis on the postcolonial and virtual landscapes of art after 1989, yet terminologically and critically framing its research within 'modern art', thereby avoiding to address contemporary art in this context.
 - c) Aimee Selby's *Art and Text* (2009) is another rich source of information on the topic. However considering the post-conceptual genealogy of contemporary art, the book tendentially embraces the idea of "text art". Which implies both:
 - it's categorisation as another artistic form, medium or genre;
 - it's supposed reached art historical comprehension.
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In spite of the many differences they present, there are two main commonalities shared by all of these publications share:

- 1) Art historically, the study of text and contemporary art is inspected within the trajectory of the history of the avant-garde, weaving direct links between the different pasts, presents and futures puncturing the dynamics of debordering of art and politics since the last century. In these studies, the idea of the Avant-garde as a distinct form of temporal time – other than the Modern and the Contemporary – is not addressed.
- 2) The very definition of a critical conception of contemporary art – able to define it beyond merely chronological coordinates – is missing and bypassed.

Arguably, however, the investigation of the **critical functions of text in contemporary art** requires two corresponding orders of premises:

- **First: to broadly define what we mean for Contemporary Art;**
- **Second: to distinguish between the history (or narration) of the avant-gardes and the**

Avant-garde as a particular *temporal mode of experience*.

Even the most detailed art historical survey on the topic is not sufficient for our purpose when these two aspects are not considered.

Only in this way we may become able, for example, to track the substantial difference between a manifesto written in 1909 and one produced in 2015.

This is why politics works here as a pretext. Because addressing the critical function of text in contemporary art requires a qualitative and not merely chronological distinction between the different times of the avant-garde, the modern and the contemporary. This means grounding our investigation on discrete *temporalizations of history*, wherein – following Benjamin – politics does not represent a separate sphere of action but a specific temporal mode of experience – able to flow and transfigure in visual and literary forms. Therefore, to each temporal mode of experience its own specific relations to the past and the future. To each historical time, its form of political experience. It is under this light that we become able to unveil the subtle caesura between the function of text in contemporary art and those it performed at different moments of art history.

Benjamin's juxtaposition of political and historical experience will be, however, the only fragment I borrow from the German thinker's wider definition of the concept of history. A fundamental fragment, however, to address his description, in the *Storyteller*, of the modern transition from the epic, to the novel, to information. Employing literary forms as epiphenomena of historical change, in fact, Benjamin allows us to grasp their collective and political dimension, while questioning their legacies to our days.

Before approaching the *Storyteller*, we will first need to engage with the two premises outlined above: the interconnected ideas of contemporary art and of the avant-garde.

1) contemporary art

Following the approach of Peter Osborne in his recent *Anywhere and not at All* (2013), I define contemporary art as post-conceptual art. Post-conceptual art cannot be grasped aesthetically only and requires a historical and ontological approach. Post-conceptual art is not just what chronologically follows the experience of conceptual art. It is a category working at the level of the constitutive elements of the artwork, not a traditional art-historical concept at the level of medium, form or style. Most importantly, contemporary post-conceptual art is the artistic counterpart of the historical time of the Contemporary. The Contemporary does not merely define what happens to occur together in time but ambitiously evokes the historical and critical periodizations where the concepts of (classical) antiquity and of modernity usually stand out – in so taking the position once occupied by the idea of Post-modernity.

Starting with the transition from Modern to Contemporary art institutions in the late forties, the development of a critical and art historical understanding of “the contemporary” has its most recent historical counterpoints in two events: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the inauguration of the World Wide Web two years later. These events configured turning points in the history of artistic avant-gardes – and of the world. Globalization was entering its present borderless phase. 1989 made geopolitically visible the historical passage from the modern time of Reinhart Koselleck's “horizons of expectations” to the present confusion of the fields of art, politics and society, variously embodied by the resurgence (and the instant-failures) of recent forms of art activism.

The gradual demise of the concept of post-modernity in favour of the idea of the contemporary has

a fundamentally threefold character:

- 1) the logic of the post grounding the concept of post-modernity projects an inherent linearity and contiguity to the succession of different historical times – a form of ill-concealed historicism.
- 2) the idea of the post-modern is rhetorically constructed on the recognition of the end of grand-narratives while factually constituting itself just as another one
- 3) post-modernity – postmodernism more poignantly in this case – has been often and primarily conceived in terms of the rejection of the discrete formalism of Clement Greenberg’s elitist modernism. The latter being just one – although epidemically successful – of the many isms of modernity.

In turn, the contemporary is not defined negatively – in opposition to modernity. The contemporary builds upon the loss of historical futurity consequent to the subsumption of the temporality of the avant-garde by that of the modern. Although configuring a discrete form of historical self-consciousness from that embodied by the modern – one taking the traits of a shared condition – the contemporary acts supra modernity. It provides a fictional standpoint able to bring together – although only speculatively – the different times and spaces of the “multiple modernities” structuring the political economy of globalization.

Only understanding the contemporary as a distinct form of historical time does the concept of contemporary art acquire more than a merely chronological connotation.

2) the avant-garde

All this considered, distinguishing between the historical time of the avant-garde and its art historical narration, appropriation and reconstruction becomes crucial. Described as before, contemporary art is, in fact, necessarily post-avant-gardist art.

The history of the avant-garde is often recounted as a linear “narrative of the triumph, heroic last stand and collapse of a collectivist vision of society” (Bishop, 2013). The critical antithesis between Peter Burger and Benjamin Buchloch on the originality of post-war avant-gardes being a crucial reference point here. Their opposite positions inaugurated the history of the avant-garde as a privileged subject of art historical confrontation, susceptible to be stretched and twisted depending on the chosen stance. Moreover, the introduction of new (geographical) genealogies for conceptual art – I am thinking of Camnitzer, 2007 and Groys, 2010 – further helped to expand the possible narratives of the history of the avant-garde. Yet, this does not erase our century-long distance from the revolutionary “horizons of expectation” driving early twentieth century avant-gardes.

Different from the blurred ones of the contemporary, the horizons of the avant-garde were strong and intact. Revolutionary, indeed. They allowed for the conception of radically different futures and for the enactment of pre-figurative approaches to life and politics aimed at directly embodying such futures. In art, this moment was described with the idea of the “sublation of art into the praxis of life”, to use Peter Burger’s famous words.

- This was the time when, for example, Russian Futurists – turned Constructivists – declared “irreconcilable war against art” to find “the communistic expression of material structures”.
- And the Futurists aimed at “breaking down the mysterious doors of the Impossible”.

Only when conceived in terms of its discrete relations to social, economic and political change, can the historical time of the avant-garde be productive for our analysis.

After this long set of considerations, we can step back and attempt to outline the critical difference between a manifesto written in the early twentieth century and one produced today – in so paving

our way towards Benjamin's Storyteller.

Many, like Martin Puchner in his recent "Poetry of the Revolution" (2006), still resist the idea that the time of the manifesto is over. Those identifying with such a position, in fact, correctly argue that artists and groups continued to produce manifestos with impunity up until our days. Able to work as both a visual and a literary representation of art's stance towards its present (its past and its future), the manifesto-form is the historical paradigm of art's political and poetical recourse to text.

If the Manifesto-form has survived, however, the same cannot be said of its critical and political function. Avant-garde manifestos all widely drew from the idea of poetry embraced by Marx and Engels' 1848 *Communist Manifesto*: the idea of a poetry for the future, where poetry collides with the act of making – in so following the Greek etymology of the word *poiesis*. It is exactly a corresponding lack of futurity that characterises contemporary manifestos – grounding instead on contingent critiques and explicit art historical references.

Contemporary manifestos are projected onto fictional and imaginary futures – distant from actual political ones. The pasts, the futures and – most importantly – the presents of contemporary art can be hardly defined by clear, programmatic, statements. Art after conceptual art and Institutional critique, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Internet, 9/11 and the establishment of cultural and postcolonial fields of studies finds in the manifesto just another of its innumerable hybridisations.

An important example is, here, Julian Rosefeldt's recent film/installation "Manifesto".

Not only because of the radical material and conceptual extremisation of the traditional Manifesto-format that it embodies, but also because it brings together almost 60 different manifestos gathered in a thematic rather than chronological order. Rosefeldt's work – which I would not consider a filmic experiment only – best reveals the miscellaneous and appropriating logic of contemporary manifestos.

Early twentieth century manifestos, instead, were the literary correlate to specific avant-gardist orientations towards practice – peculiar modes of historical experience. They moved in-between aestheticization of politics and politicization of art. The temporality they embodied, however, was soon voraciously subsumed by modern art institutions in so undergoing a rapid process of political sterilisation.

In this context – at the intersection of avant-garde and modernity – moves Walter Benjamin's *The Storyteller*.

In the essay, Benjamin interprets types of artistic prose as the spectrum of historical types. In other words, he looks at different narrative forms as expressions of the changed social conditions of communicability of historical and lived experience. In particular, he looks at the development of the narrative tradition, through **three main stages** – all, it should be remarked, characterised by juxtaposing and uneven genealogies:

- 1) **The epic**, based on the oral tradition of the story, aimed at sharing truth and wisdom in a collective moment of listening;
- 2) **The novel**, bound to the establishment of the printed process and to the format of the book – to be consumed privately;
- 3) **Information**, that develops out of the same premises that allowed for the novel to establish in so threatening it.

Information is the literary form that responds to new forms of sociability of the culture industry. It

is **promptly verifiable** and **easily understandable**. It is exemplified by the newspaper and “doesn’t survive the moment in which it was new”.

Benjamin clarifies that the aim of his study is not to depict his present as a moment of decay. Rather, his analysis primarily aims at deciphering and understanding the historical processes that “gradually removed narrative from living speech”.

This schema was hugely influential for the curatorial approach to conceptual art in the late sixties and early seventies. Not by chance, this was also the moment when the century long process of problematization of the power of language was taking its post-structuralist turn.

Two important examples are,:

- Harald Szeman’s 1969 *When Attitude Become form* was subtitled ‘Works, concepts, processes, situation, information’;
- Moma’s 1970 seminal show *Information*.

Art, however, did not dissolve into information. The multiple uses of text and language in conceptual art responded to the specific art historical task to surpass material objectivity, medium specificity and visuality inherent to the dominant aestheticizations of Greenbergian modernism.

In spite of its post-conceptual genealogy, the uses of text in contemporary art faces a far different artistic, social and political moment.

Questioning the critical function of text in contemporary art means investigating its role and significance within the present landscape of systemic social and political crisis. Within and beyond the prominent stages of international biennials, triennials and documentas the significant presence of textual elements in art raises and radicalises issues of translation, of the traceability of linguistic (and artistic) traditions, and of audiences’ identification.

Today, we encounter text in three main forms:

- As **fictional narration** (or **story**) particularly within archival and documentary art practices;
- As **literary fragment**, metaphor or **maxim**;
- As **graphic representation** (or **words**) within the digital images of videos and net-based practices.

The actual material instantiation of these forms is variable and often overlapping.

With a non irrelevant dose of imagination, we may go as far as identifying an unexpected – and jeopardized – return to the power of narrated language in the same artistic – visual – field that once fiercely embraced its decay. There is no doubt that the social and political significance of stories and maxims *as* contemporary artworks is something other than that of the storytelling declared dead in Benjamin’s essay. Still, investigating the space of text in contemporary art under this light seems to provide us with an original critical and narrative frame to conceive contemporary artworks beyond their narrower institutional conditions of possibility but in direct in relation to the politics moving individual and collective identities in our times of radical multiculturalism and rising xenophobia.

It is against these complex cultural and political discourses that the critical function of text in contemporary art shall be studied and deciphered. In this direction, asking ourselves “who reads contemporary art?” seems another good question to leave unanswered.