

The paradoxes of art

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Art's paradoxical character lends itself to being elaborated upon by identifying several paradoxes at the heart of it. This goes for all of the arts – architecture, painting, sculpture, dance, music, literature and cinema. The first paradox of art is that all artworks are “singular” – particular and yet generically belonging to art in general. Art's second paradox is that it reveals and conceals at the same time. In Heidegger's terminology, this makes of art a privileged instance of *aletheia*, or “unconcealedness”. Paradox number three is that “art objects” are not to be merely “aesthetically” appreciated for their own sake, given their world-and-person-transforming capacity – it is *ergon* (work) and *energeia* together (Gadamer). Fourthly, although art is usually taken as an object of analysis, it (psycho-) analyses the viewer, listener or reader. In the fifth place, art indicts, and also redeems the world. The sixth paradox of art is that it is image as well as thing (Nancy). Paradox number seven about art is that (through the imaginary function of its images), it both liberates and enslaves. The eighth paradox is that the very faculty which enables artists to “create” artworks to begin with – the imagination – proves powerless in the face of the task confronting artists today, namely to find inventive ways of “presenting the unrepresentable”. The ninth paradox of art is that of its visibility or “sensuousness”, in relation to its increasing “spirituality” (since the 18th century). Art's tenth paradox is the fact that the political and the aesthetic, which are usually regarded as being mutually exclusive, converge demonstrably in both art and politics (Rancière).

Key words: art, aesthetic, image, imagination, paradox, political, sublime, thing

Die Paradokse van kuns

Die paradoksale karakter van kuns leen sigself daartoe om verduidelik te word aan die hand van 'n veeltal paradokse wat intiem daartoe behoort. Dit geld vir al die kunste – argitektuur, skilderkuns, beeldhou, dans, musiek, letterkunde en filmkuns. Die eerste paradoks van kuns is dat alle kunswerke “eenmalig” (of “singulier”) is – partikulier en tog generies deel van die sfeer van kuns in die algemeen. Kuns se tweede paradoks is dat dit tegelykertyd blootlê en verberg. In Heidegger se terminologie maak dit van kuns 'n bevoorregte geval van *aletheia*, of “onverborgenheid”. Die derde paradoks is dat “kunsobjekte” in die lig van kuns se wêreld-en-persoon-omvormende funksie nie alleenlik “esteties”, op sigself, waardeer moet word nie – kuns is tegelykertyd *ergon* (werk) en *energeia* (Gadamer). Vierdens, ofskoon kuns gewoonlik as voorwerp van analise benader word, word die kyker, luisteraar of leser self daardeur ge(psigo)analiseer. In die vyfde plek beskuldig kuns die wêreld, maar beredder dit terselfdertyd. Die sesde kuns-paradoks is dat dit beeld sowel as ding is (Nancy). In die sewende plek verslaaf en bevry kuns in gelyke mate deur die verbeeldingsfunksie daarvan. Die agste paradoks is dat die vermoë wat kunstenaars in die eerste plek in staat stel om kunswerke te “skep” – die verbeelding – magteloos is in die aangesig van die opgawe wat kunstenaars vandag konfronteer, naamlik om op vindingryke wyse die “onvoorstelbare voor te stel”. Die negende kuns-paradoks is die sigbaarheid of “sinnelikheid”, in verhouding tot die toenemende “geestelikheid” daarvan (sedert die 18de eeu). Die tiende paradoks is die feit dat die politiese en die estetiese, wat gewoonlik as wedersyds-eksklusief beskou word, demonstreerbaar in sowel die politiek as die kuns konvergeer (Rancière).

Sleutelwoorde: estetika, beeld, ding, kuns, paradoks, politiek, sublieme, verbeelding

Theodor Adorno (1984: 1) captured the paradoxical nature of art when he remarked that: “Today it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking. Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist”. What his observation does not make explicit (although it is implied) is that art's paradoxical character lends itself to being elaborated upon by identifying several paradoxes at the heart of this thing we call art (which Adorno himself does at length in the text cited, although I do not follow his course of reasoning here). This goes for all of the

arts – architecture, painting, sculpture, dance, music, literature and cinema (the “seventh” art). I shall name and elaborate briefly on some of the most salient of these paradoxical attributes of art, or the arts.

It should be kept in mind that a paradox is different from a contradiction (where something is both asserted and denied at the same time). While it also asserts ostensibly contradictory things, in the case of a paradox these things are both demonstrably the case. So, for example, it is contradictory to claim that Socrates is a man, but is not human. On the other hand, the paradoxical claim, that the rational beings called humans are capable of, and often perform, irrational actions, bears the hallmark of experiential truth, just as it makes sense to say, paradoxically, that communication is both possible and impossible (if the demonstrable failures as well as the successes of communication are kept in mind – something thematized strikingly in Iñárritu’s 2006 film, *Babel*).

When a paradoxical statement appears to gain a purchase on the phenomenon it implicates – being-human and interpersonal communication, respectively, in the two earlier examples – or to clarify it in some strange manner, it is indicative of a complex state of affairs. Art is such a complex phenomenon. Paradox is therefore a suitable figure for grasping its multi-faceted, mercurial, often enigmatic “character”, because a straightforward “description” of its features – one that obeys the laws of logic concerning contradiction, for example – is bound to run into difficulties. I put “character” in scare quotes because I am using it in the sense that Schopenhauer (1969, I: 130-132; 138-139) attributes to it when he claims that, given science’s trademark use of generalization, psychology is not possible as a science because an individual’s character is inscrutable, “singular”.

In the same sense, one may speak of the “character” of art, because strictly speaking there is no “art in general”, but only “individual” artworks implicated by the collective noun, “art” – novels, paintings, sonatas, musical performances, sculptures, and so on. While our language-usage of talking about art as if it comprises one, self-identical “thing” suggests that these works all have something in common (the so-called “problem of universals”), every artwork is “singular”, unrepeatably unique, except (paradoxically) as a “copy” or simulacrum without an “original”, in the case of a film, for example.

1. This instantiates the *first paradox*: unlike a sculpture or a painting, a film’s mode of being is not exhausted by its number of copies as so many “films”; there is only one *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941), and every “copy” of it brings it to life on screen as the distinct, singular cinematic artwork it is. The same goes for all the copies of a novel, where the latter is activated as artwork every time a copy of it is read. The *first paradox* of art is therefore this: that all artworks are “singular” – particular and yet generically belonging to “art” in general, or in the “universal” sense. To put it differently, “art” exists (spatio-)temporally as a multiplicity of singular “artworks”, but nevertheless one legitimately speaks of “art” as if the primary ontological mode of the artworks in question were not radical singularity. Moreover, their “singularity” is not ontologically identical (that is, regarding their mode of being), as shown in the case of films and literary works of art. Even more succinctly put, art is radically “singular”.

The paradoxical singularity of art was articulated by Walter Benjamin (1969) as the “aura” of the work of art – that air of uniqueness that clings to a painting or a sculpture in so far as they are rooted in a specific time and place (even as they surpass these in their validity and significance), and are, moreover, inseparable from their materiality. In Benjamin’s words (1969: 220-221):

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be...The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity...The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced...One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.

A poem is just as “material” in this respect as a painting, with its specific syntagmatic and paradigmatic combination of signifiers constituting the “materiality” peculiar to literary artworks. The significance of this materiality is evident in the highly auratic ageing of the material medium employed in a specific art form, from cracks in the pigment of an oil painting to the “dating” of the treatment of marble in a sculpture – before Bernini, for example, marble was never sculpted as if it was flesh, bearing even the slightest imprint of the force of another hand – and the quaintness of Elizabethan poetry’s diction.

However, one can take issue with Benjamin on art’s *aura*, specifically as far as the implications of copies regarding the “original” artwork are concerned. Jean-Jacques Beineix’s (1981) film, *Diva* – which thematizes the question of the “effect” of copies on the ontological status of the singular artwork (in this case the particular operatic performances by a famous diva, Cynthia Hawkins, who refuses to be recorded because she knows that every performance is unique) – furnishes the perceptual and conceptual means for a case contra-Benjamin. In brief, this amounts to the experientially demonstrable claim, that the recorded copy may indeed not coincide with, or be identical to the auratic “original” performance, but reciprocally endows it with even more aura, somewhat like a retrospective investment in its singular value (Olivier 2002: 136-141). The lesson that Cynthia Hawkins, the eponymous diva of Beineix’s film, learns from Jules, her greatest admirer and secret “recorder” (against her wishes), is that it enables her, for the first time, to hear herself sing when Jules plays the recording to her in an opera house. Moreover, it serves to confirm, albeit after the fact, the beauty of her singing performance, and attracts people to the opera house to hear her in person. This may be generalized regarding different arts, with more paradoxical implications: the fact that there are thousands, if not millions of copies of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, far from diminishing the aura of the “original” in the Louvre, enhances it. The copies, after all, derive their value from the inexhaustible aura of the singular painting dating from the Renaissance.

The clearest instantiation of the paradox attached to the singularity of the work of art is encountered in literary art. There must be hundreds of thousands of printed copies of Shakespeare’s works in the world, say of *Hamlet*, and yet, there is only *one Hamlet*, just as there is only one *July’s People*, by Nadine Gordimer. In fact, the more copies of a literary work are printed, the more it attests to its unique value, compounding the paradox. This raises the ontological question of the mode of being of literary works: in what does the being of *Hamlet* or *July’s People* consist? The answer can only be something to the effect that that the printed words embody a unique concatenation of signifiers, which, together, comprise what bears the name of *Hamlet and July’s People*, respectively. These signifiers need not necessarily be printed, of course; they could be auditory, as in a sound-recording, or comprise part of the soundtrack of films bearing those names. Even if all printed copies and audio-visual recordings of these works were to be destroyed, however, they could conceivably continue to exist in the memory of someone who has memorized them verbatim, as in the case of the destroyed texts memorized – and kept in existence – by individuals in the fiction film, *Fahrenheit 451* (Truffaut 1966). The indispensable element here is the singular combination of signifiers that comprise a specific work – unless these are to be encountered in some or other form, the work cannot be said to

exist, even if it once did (like those ancient texts annihilated by the great fire that destroyed the ancient library of Alexandria in the late 4th century CE).

2. Art's *second* paradox is that it *reveals* and *conceals* at the same time. In Heidegger's (1975; see also Thomson 2011: 76-93) terminology, this makes of art a privileged instance of *aletheia*, or "unconcealedness". This ties in with Heidegger's understanding of the artwork as an unresolved struggle between "world" (realm of openness and interpretability) and "earth" (that which resists interpretation and withdraws from scrutiny). It is this abiding "struggle" between openness and concealment that makes it possible to find valid, demonstrable new meanings in artworks in the course of history. Closely tied to this is the paradox that art *preserves* a world (as a totality of relations) and simultaneously *surpasses* it in so far as the culture of a different age may (and does) find resonance in it, even if the world preserved in the artwork is no longer extant. In other words, meaning in art is overdetermined. "World" also resonates with what Lacan calls the register of the symbolic, as "earth" does with the Lacanian "real", or that which surpasses the symbolic register of language.

3. Another paradox (number *three*), integral to this one, is that it is seriously mistaken – as most people (including most art critics) have done regarding the modernist conception of art – to believe that artworks are merely "art objects" to be *aesthetically* appreciated for their own sake. To believe this, and treat artworks accordingly, is to deny art its world- and person-*transforming* capacity, so clearly demonstrable in the way art changes people, and the way that it affords novel experiences by bathing things in the world in a new light (as witnessed in the case of an old lady in front of Picasso's *Guernica* during a Picasso Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in the 1980s, where she stood transfixed, with tears streaming down her face – evidently, the painting had transformed her world, and her with it). This paradox may also be articulated differently by saying that art, far from being just a multiplicity of "art objects", is *ergon* (work) and *energeia* together (Gadamer 1982: 99). It is *ergon* or "work" because – unlike the evanescent impromptu play of children, structured freely and spontaneously by its own internal impetus, the artwork's structure (for as long as it lasts) has a certain durability that comprises the basis for its "repeatability": a musical score and a drama are obvious examples, but every time one reads a novel, or views a great film, or appropriates the space of an architectural work, the work (*ergon*) is repeated, and *energeia* (energy) is "released". *Energeia* is the transformative "working" or "causality" that happens in the course of such reception or appropriation, when the interpretable meaning embodied in the *ergon* is transmuted into *praxis* and action. This is related to what Gadamer (1982: 274-275) calls "application", even if the actualization of action presupposes understanding and interpretation. What should be added, of course, is that such *energeia* can "do its transforming work" on condition that viewers, readers and listeners are receptive to it.

4. *Fourthly*, although art is usually taken as an object of analysis, paradoxically it (psycho-) analyses the viewer, listener or reader by the response it elicits on the part of the latter. Lacan explains this in his 11th Seminar (1981: 67-76) via the concept of the *object a* – that "little other object" (a specific sound-aspect of a song, a particularly noticeable "stain" or "knot" or "hard kernel" of some kind in a painting, a poem, a novel, a film) from the perspective of which the viewing, reading or listening subject suddenly or unexpectedly finds his or her life "framed" in a specific, revealing manner. According to Lacan, when one looks at a painting, one encounters there a "gaze" (on the side of the "object") distinct from one's own eyes' looking (on the side of the "subject"). In so far as the artwork as object "gazes" back at the subject (looking at it), the latter cannot see the perspective from which the gaze is directed at him or her, which implies that the gaze here marks the "rift" separating the conscious and the unconscious. As "*object a*", it functions as "cause of desire", indicated by the effect that the artwork has on the subject. The

melancholy key of a blues song by Bob Dylan, the dark silhouette of a promontory jutting out into a “wine-dark” sea in a painting, the wordplay in Dylan Thomas’s (1954) *Under Milk Wood* of 1953 (“The only sea I saw Was the seesaw sea With you riding on it...”), the function of the colour red in Byatt’s *Jaël* (2000), are but a few possible instances of artworks which may affect subjects in this way. Depending on the personal symbolic horizon of the subject, all of these “little other objects” (and similar instances in the different arts) have the capacity to resonate with the subject in question in such a manner that a deep sense of longing, or of melancholy, or anxiety, may be stirred in their minds. The *object a* as “gaze” thus functions to dredge up moods or feelings attached to the subject’s singular, but unconscious “desire” – that which constitutes us as distinctive subjects – and the fact that one seldom manages to articulate it in language is an unmistakable sign that this is the case.

Ian Parker (2009: 7) elaborates on this psychoanalytic insight as follows:

Art, whether in a gallery or recruited into advertising, provides another medium of representation through which we might be confronted, and confront ourselves, with the truth, even if we may never be able to put it into words. The shock of recognition, the uncanny sense that an image is familiar to us even if we cannot remember seeing it before, the experience of a sensation that we cannot even account for to ourselves, is something an artwork can produce. This art practice, so pervasive now in various sign systems designed to sell us something, sometimes sidesteps the ego, and something of the unconscious is made present; but then we need to ask ourselves, when we are in the presence of such images, whether we will put those impressions at a safe distance – assume that it is the unconscious of the artist that erupts in the work – or own up to what lies, and for a moment speaks the truth, within us as we view it.

5. In the *fifth* place, art *indicts*, and *redeems* the world. This happens in several ways, among others literary and cinematic satire, parody, romantic poetry, tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, fantasy and science fiction. Think of the way that Wordsworth’s poem, *Intimations of immortality*, films like Cameron’s *Avatar* and Proyas’s *I, Robot*, Bernini’s sublime sculpture of Saint Teresa’s passion, Caravaggio’s painting, *The calling of St Matthew*, Cervantes’s novel, *Don Quixote* or Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, indict the world as a place of injustice, wanton destruction, lack of libidinal fulfilment and often needless suffering. Simultaneously, by transforming it (and us), they offer a kind of redemption – what Gadamer (1982: 101) calls “redemption and transformation back into true being”.

Godfrey Reggio’s *Qatsi*-trilogy of films, particularly *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), are particularly telling instances of this simultaneous indictment and redemption. After a framing opening scene of a rocket during the first few moments of “lift-off”, the camera cuts to a series of cinematographically stunning natural vistas – mountains, lakes, rivers, valleys, caves – that lasts for approximately eighteen minutes. Then, suddenly, these tranquil panoramic images are interrupted by a scene of a huge earth-moving machine, emitting black smoke which eventually engulfs the entire machine. This introduces a protracted cinematic exploration of what one may describe, in Heideggerian terms (1977) as a technological assault on the earth, before the camera switches to urban scenes which reflect the technologically permeated lives lived by commuters in mega-cities. On the one hand it is unquestionably an *indictment* of a certain kind of life – the Hopi-language word, *Koyaanisqatsi*, means “a kind of life that calls for a different form of life” – but on the other the sheer formal beauty of the film (which contains no narration or dialogue; the image-sequences are accompanied by Philip Glass’s haunting music) performs a *redemption* in the sense of instantiating a fusion of advanced film technology and film art, which offers hope for the future.

If the same beings who can allow technology to assault the earth to the point of ecological dysfunctionality, are also capable of bringing cinematic art into being where *techné* and *poiesis* (Heidegger 1977: 34-35) become one, the possibility of a “turning” away from the stranglehold of technology as “enframing” (the “essence” of technology, according to Heidegger) is not out of the question. Even architecture is capable of such “redemption” – Gehry’s Bilbao Guggenheim, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, or St Vitus Gothic cathedral in Prague, modulates interior space qualitatively into spaces of spiritual redemption (and not only for so-called “believers”), which can only function on the presupposition that these spaces implicitly indict the degraded spaces by which they are surrounded.

6. Art’s *sixth* paradox is that it is *image* as well as *thing* (Nancy). Unlike the concepts of philosophy or of science, art’s inalienable medium is the image or “percept” (Deleuze), which is inseparable from imagination on the part of artist and audience/viewer alike. This is true not only for the visual arts, but for music and literature as well – musical symphonies and nuances do not have to be accompanied by the audience imagining landscapes (in the case of Sibelius’s *Finlandia*, of 1900, for instance); the musical sounds are themselves sound-images. As the case of music illustrates, sound-images do not have to – and often cannot – be understood as representing something, the way an image in (sur)realistic painting is taken as representing something (made explicit in Magritte’s painting, *This is Not a Pipe*). For this reason it is perhaps easier to grasp a sound-image as a (non-representational) “thing”, whereas in the case of an image in painting or cinema it is harder to grasp its thing-character, in contradistinction from the thing that it may represent. In his phenomenology of the image, Jean-Luc Nancy (2005) has shown persuasively that the image has the ambivalent status of both image *and* thing, precisely in light of the difficulty (if not impossibility) of distinguishing the image from the thing (2005: 2):

The distinct is at a distance, it is the opposite of what is near. What is not near can be set apart in two ways: separated from contact or from identity. The distinct is distinct according to these two modes: it does not touch, and it is dissimilar. Such is the image: it must be detached, placed outside and before one’s eyes. . . ., and it must be different from the thing. The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially.

If this seems counter-intuitive, think of Magritte’s painting (representation) of a pipe, which is often regarded with confusion by viewers who (in the face of the painted words, “This is not a pipe”, exclaim: “But it is!”). Or recall the seductive image of Bo Derek, emerging from the water to the strains of Ravel’s *Bolero* in “10” – when the film first appeared, men in the audience certainly did not respond to her image as if it was only an image!

7. Paradox number *seven* about art is that (through the imaginary function of its images), it both liberates and enslaves. *Texts of Pleasure* (Barthes 1975: 14) enslave in so far as one identifies with an easily recognizable world of spatio-temporal “normality”, in this way confirming and reinforcing the *status quo*. *Texts of Bliss*, on the other hand, liberate the audience, viewer or reader by drawing them into a world that is out of the ordinary, where the space-time and linguistic presuppositions instilled in the reader through “normal” (and normative) experience are put in question. The fictionally reconstructed, historical world of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) makes of it a *text of pleasure*, and although the sacrificial act on the part of Carton, for the sake of reuniting the woman he loves with her husband, speaks of the noblest action humans are capable of, Dickens’s reconstruction of the social ills of society is “normalizing” in the sense that the reader accepts this as a faithful account of all society *can* be. In this sense it enslaves. But a text like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which is a scarcely recognizable modern *Odyssey* – the story of a man looking for his home – presents readers with language which is, unless one perseveres, utterly impenetrable. *Ulysses* may be an extreme case in literature, though – small wonder that

Lyotard (1984: 80) names it as an example of the postmodern sublime, where the very means of presentation – language – is used to “present the unrepresentable”. This contrasts with the modern sublime, where the unrepresentable is suggested by its absence, for example in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1971).

It is not necessarily the case that a *text of bliss* assumes as extreme a form as *Ulysses*, however. As an eco-political *text of bliss*, Cameron’s *Avatar* (2010) may at first appear to be an easily recognizable *text of pleasure*, but although the linguistic and space-time coordinates seem to belong with the latter, the ecologically sound world of the fictional Pandora contrasts so starkly with the increasingly ecologically degraded world of earth that one soon recognizes its *text of bliss* status. With John Hillcoat’s film (2009), *The Road* (based on Cormack McCarthy’s novel) this is even more so, albeit in terms of the *abjection* (Kristeva 1997: 153-154) by which the intra-cinematic world is characterized: nature that has collapsed to the point of the absence of animal and plant life; internecine cannibalism on the part of the remnants of the (in)human race. But whether in the guise of a *text of bliss* of abjection, or one of utopian freedom, or virtually ineffable otherness, the point is that such texts liberate through the very imagining of otherness, or difference, from extant reality, from the tyranny of the *status quo*. Through such rare gifts, art keeps alive the awareness that what exists, is not all that is possible (as Adorno would say), or in Heideggerian terms, that any extant world is but one historical actualization of the inexhaustible multivocality of being. In this time of technophilia, which conflates *one* manifestation of being – (“enframing” as the essence of) technology (Heidegger 1977) – with being in its totality, this kind of liberation of and through art is indispensable.

The phenomenon of *kitsch* (Harries 1968: 73-83, 149-152; Olivier 2009) also resorts under this paradox of enslavement and liberation through art. To be more precise, kitsch – bad, anaesthetizing art – is probably one of the most persistent “problems” of the present time, in so far as it presents a virtually insurmountable obstacle to all attempts at breaking the deadlock of the dominant economic system (neoliberal capitalism) and its concomitant social alienation (Parker 2011: 86-90). Kitsch in its varied forms, from television soapies to Hollywood feel-good movies and “sweet kitsch” greeting cards, holds up a false image of the world and of social relations by glossing over the less pleasant and appealing aspects of life, such as the inevitable pain and suffering that befall most people some time in their lives. In so doing, it reinforces the ideological subtext of neoliberal capitalism, namely, that everyone can become rich, and that money is a panacea for all social problems. In this sense, then, kitsch enslaves: it functions like an addictive substance which anaesthetizes people’s latent sense of what real fulfilment would entail, and replaces it with a sentimentalist version of (pseudo-) fulfilment.

8. The *eighth* paradox of art concerns what Lyotard (1991: 136-143) refers to as an aspect of the art of the sublime (which is characteristic of our time), namely that, because the imagination’s capacity to produce adequate forms suffers shipwreck in the experience of the sublime, afforded by the sheer complexity of postmodern culture (in contrast to the experience of beauty), art must rely on “qualities” of matter that are unrepresentable, for instance nuance and timbre, to “present the unrepresentable”. One might say (as Derrida might) that nuance and timbre are the unrepresentable *differance* of the sublime (Lyotard 1991: 140):

Nuance and timbre are scarcely perceptible differences between sounds or colours which are otherwise identical in terms of the determination of their physical parameters. This difference can be due, for example, to the way they are obtained: for example, the same note coming from a violin, a piano or a flute, the same colour in pastel, oil or watercolour. Nuance and timbre are what *differ* and *defer*, what makes the difference between the note on the piano and the same note on the flute, and thus what also defer [*sic*] the identification of that note.

The paradox here is that the very faculty which enables artists to “create” artworks to begin with – the imagination – proves powerless in the face of the task confronting artists today, namely to find inventive ways of “presenting the unrepresentable”. And from the musical examples provided by Lyotard it would seem that music is an underestimated source of experiencing the sublime. This is related to what was earlier (paradox number one) called the paradoxical *singularity* of art. Lyotard (1991: 155) draws attention to the distinctive, *singular* timbre of a violin’s sound on the particular occasion of a musical performance. Just as Benjamin (1969) discerned the artwork’s “aura” (as index of its singular uniqueness) as emanating from the spatiotemporal coordinates of its provenance, so Lyotard challenges one to be passible to the ephemeral spatiotemporal qualities of a strictly unrepeatable musical performance (see in this regard Olivier 2002).

9. The *ninth paradox* of art is what Adorno (1984: 139) calls the paradox of its *visuality* (or more broadly, to include all the arts, its “sensuousness”), which he links with Kant’s remark in the *Third Critique* (1969), that art’s enjoyment “occurs without a concept”. This has given rise to the cherished bourgeois idea, according to Adorno, that art is inalienably visual (sensible). And yet, he points out, since Kant (in the 18th century) art has become increasingly “spiritual”. Corroboration for this may be found in Hegel’s (1975, 1: 141-142; Olivier 1998) famous thesis (in the first half of the 19th century) of the “death of art”. This is the claim that the “highest vocation” of art had been reached in his (Hegel’s) own time – namely to give expression to *Geist* or Spirit in sensuous form – and that art having passed through the stages of symbolic, classical and romantic art, which could no longer “contain” the Idea in sensuous form, had to relinquish this “highest vocation” in favour of religion and (eventually) philosophy. In other words, for Hegel the history of art was marked by an increasing “spiritualization” of art, reaching its apogee in romantic art. The fact that he (Hegel 1975, 2: 388-397; Olivier 1998) foresaw art continuing to exist beyond that in the guise of a “critical art” (which no longer served the progress of Spirit as the sensuous embodiment of the idea), further confirms Adorno’s claim: the “visual” or sensuous nature of art notwithstanding, it displays a demonstrable “spiritual” character.

But on what grounds can one claim this? One finds evidence of art’s “spiritual” character in the work of Karsten Harries (1968: 61-73, 89-90, 102), specifically in his argument that early 20th-century non-representational art movements such as abstract expressionism, constructivism and suprematism, mark the retreat of art into the domain of the spirit, given the fact that extant social reality (of wars and economic hardship) had become unacceptable, and therefore “unrepresentable” to art and artists. The *paradox* is therefore that, regardless of its *prima facie* “visual” – that is, sensuous – character, the “meaning” of abstract art was inseparable from the world of the (freedom of the) spirit. Malevich’s suprematism, particularly his “white square” (Harries 1968: 64, 68-69), epitomizes this spiritual freedom in so far as viewers are literally free to “see” or imagine *anything* in the square white expanse that their gaze can conjure up there. In the absence of any signifying markers to guide interpretation, it has been given “freeplay”.

Tom Wolfe, too, in *The Painted Word* (1975), lends credence to this paradoxical state of affairs, albeit with satirical intent. Wolfe ridicules the fact that, in the American art-world of the twentieth century, an artist has “made it” once he or she has been fortunate enough to have their artworks declared the embodiment of an important art theory by someone like Hilton Kramer, an eminent art critic. Hence, for Wolfe, despite its putative sensuous character, art was by implication art theory (“intellect”, “spirit”) masquerading in visual, sensuous clothes.

Karsten Harries, in his *China Lectures* (2007: 27-28), corroborates this by pointing out the paradoxical truth about Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*. It would not pass for art by traditional aesthetic criteria, but consider the significance of the increasing “spiritualization” of art, which

here manifests itself in the fact that individual artworks, today, are situated in the context of the art world and of art criticism. Just like the pioneering artwork in this regard, Duchamp's *Fountain*, Warhol's *Brillo Box* is a case in point: it does not differ from Brillo boxes in the supermarket in appearance, but only in its "mode of presentation, the artist's intention, the historical and spatial context into which he chose to insert his work" (Harries 2007: 28). In other words, it is regarded as an artwork because of being inserted in a "spiritual" context, that is, in the intellectual-cultural context of art and the "artworld" as an institution, which therefore, paradoxically and counter-intuitively, becomes a constitutive element of the artwork in question, despite the intuitive belief, that art is art by virtue of its perceptible sensuousness.

10. The *tenth paradox* of art is highlighted by Jacques Rancière (Tanke 2011: 75-85), a philosopher who has, virtually single-handedly, provided the intellectual means for rewriting the history of the arts with his notion of the "three regimes of art". These are the "ethical regime of images" (which, like Plato did, denies art legitimacy because it rejects the ethical claims of images), the "representative regime of art" (which, like Aristotle, limits art's legitimacy to hierarchically valorized representations of social reality) and the "aesthetic regime of art" (which is predicated on the ontological and ethical "equality" of everything in the world, as well as its artistic treatment). These novel categories challenge customary concepts such as "modern" and "postmodern" by demonstrating how different "regimes" intersect, in surprising ways, long after the historical heyday of one of them is supposed to have come to an end.

For present purposes, however, it is important to note that Rancière has argued against the widespread conviction – whether on modernist (the aesthetic is one of several specialized domains of rationality) or postmodernist grounds (the aesthetic encompasses everything, including the scientific) (Habermas 1985: 9; Megill 1985: 2) - that art is confined to the politically innocuous sphere of the aesthetic. Instead, he argues, art is capable, precisely by virtue of its aesthetic dimension, to shape and structure the political realm, while conversely, "politics" also has an aesthetic function, in so far as it can bring about fundamental changes in perceivable social reality. It helps to recall that the concept, "aesthetic", derives from the ancient Greek term denoting sensory perception. It is through his notion of the "distribution" or "partitioning of the sensible" (Tanke 2011: 74-75) that Rancière brings art and politics together: to "partition" or "distribute" the sensible means that the world of the senses, but also the "sensible" world in the sense of the "commonsensical" world, is structured or restructured in ways that allocate "parts" or "places" to different people, and classes of people, in different ways. The arts all have the broadly "discursive" capacity (where meaning has effects of power) to cast the perceivable world in a specific social, political or cratological perspective – tragedy (which depicts social reality in terms of the cosmically significant suffering of noble heroines or heroes) does this differently from comedy (which represents people from lower, less noble, classes, as the subjects of the comical, rather than the tragic).

Similarly, "politics" – which Rancière distinguishes from all-too-familiar party politics – is a disruptive way of asserting the "equality" of the people through events such as the French Revolution or (closer to home) the Marikana protests, which is precisely where the aesthetic dimension of politics emerges. No less than art's aesthetic function, politics also "(re-) distributes" the sensible. "Politics" contrasts with the function of what Rancière dubs the "police" – a play on the ancient Greek word, "polis" – his term for so-called "democracies" in which social and political space is parcelled out in irredeemably hierarchical ways, with no concern for the "part of those with no part" (the poor, the dispossessed, the marginal). It is those "with no part" in the space partitioned by the "police" (obviously not in the usual, restricted sense) who are responsible for the unpredictable manifestation of "politics" in diverse ways of asserting "equality".

It is with regard to “equality”, finally, that art and politics meet: in contrast to the hierarchical partitioning function of the other two artistic regimes, the “aesthetic regime of art” has as its “object” a world where everything and anything is an equally worthy “subject”, to be treated in any stylistic manner imaginable. That is, the world is subject to a radical “equality” for the arts under this regime, which art of this kind introduces into the world disruptively through “dissensus” (Rancière 2007: 560). Similarly, “politics”, as the only true, usually disruptive manifestation of “democracy”, presupposes the radical “equality” of all political subjects, unlike the pseudo-democracies of this world, characterized by hierarchical structures where there is always already a “consensus” about who is fit to govern, and what benefits their supporters will receive.

The paradox should be clear: far from art and politics, respectively, being outside of the realm usually attributed to the other, they converge through their shared *aesthetic* function of “(re-) partitioning or (re-) distributing the sensible”. Art therefore has an undeniable political function, and *vice versa* – not in the superficial sense of art being something that can be “applied” to politics, or politics lending itself to being thematized in art, but in the fundamental sense of art being *constitutively* political, and politics being *constitutively* aesthetic. In Rancière’s words (2011: Chapter 9), recasting Schiller’s claim that the foundation of art and of life is to be found in the aesthetic: “...there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely *the aesthetic*”.

Conclusion

These are just some of the most salient paradoxes of art – or, to be more precise – of all the arts. One might speculate that they issue from something at the very kernel of art, figuratively speaking, which (somewhat like Lacan’s “real”, which is supra-linguistic, but nevertheless has “effects” in the symbolic register), manifests itself in particular, identifiable paradoxes, such as the ones discussed here. If this is the case, however, it stands to reason that these are not the only paradoxes generated by this paradoxical, “extimate” (intimately conjoined with, and yet exterior) gist of art as phenomenon.

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As an undergraduate student, **Bert Olivier** discovered Philosophy more or less by accident, but has never regretted it. Because Bert knew very little, Philosophy turned out to be just up his street, as it were, because of Socrates's teaching, that the only thing we know with certainty, is how little we know. Armed with this *docta ignorantia*, Bert set out to teach students the value of questioning, and even found out that one could write cogently about it, which he did during the 1980s and '90s in opposition to apartheid. Since then, he has been teaching and writing on Philosophy and his other great loves, namely, the arts, architecture and literature. In the face of the many irrational actions on the part of people, and wanting to understand these, later on he branched out into Psychoanalysis and Social Theory as well, and because Philosophy cultivates in one a strong sense of justice, he has more recently been harnessing what little knowledge he has in intellectual opposition to the injustices brought about by the dominant economic system today, to wit, neoliberal capitalism. His motto is taken from Immanuel Kant's work: "*Sapere aude!*" "Have the courage to think for yourself!"