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PHD THESIS SUMMARY

The status of the contemporary artist in the artistic capitalism.

Between critic and superstar

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Keywords: artistic capitalism, the status of contemporary artist, social role of the artist, critic, superstar, avant-garde, institutional recuperation of the avant-garde, anti-capitalist artistic practices, artworld, paradigm of contemporary art, social critique, artistic critique, consumer society, spectacular, transaesthetic age, star system, spectacular starification of the artist, consumerism, Takashi Murakami, Superflat, otaku, Cool Japan, brand, mr. DOB, simulationism, fashion, Vuitton Shop, aestheticization of the everyday life

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to examine the transformations that the status of the contemporary artist has undergone in "artistic capitalism", conceptualized by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy as "an unprecedented new form of economy, society and art in history¹". In artistic capitalism, the systems of production, distribution and consumption are impregnated and remodeled by operations of a fundamentally aesthetic nature, which integrate an artistic and emotional dimension in the consumerist universe through an action of stylization of market goods². With this aim in mind, two "poles" were proposed, that of the "critic" and the "superstar", and we outlined the theoretical investigation of the contemporary artist's status in relation with these two poles. These were open-ended terms and were explored and explained throughout this paper and defined in relation with "art" and "life".

Hypotheses

The main hypothesis of the research was that the status of the contemporary artist has undergone a shift from society's margins (the archetype of the "Marginal artist" of modernity) towards its center, in tandem with structural changes that happened in society due to artistic capitalism itself. The secondary hypotheses, concerning the two proposed "poles" were that: 1) the status of the contemporary artist kept the "critical" pole that was gained in modernity, 2) the critical possibilities of art, as well as the artist underwent a transformation following the transition from modernity to postmodernity, 3) the "superstar" pole attributed to the status of the contemporary artist is a result of artistic capitalism.

¹ Gilles Lipovetsky–Jean Serroy, *L'esthétisation du monde. Vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste*, Gallimard, 2013, p.14

² Ibidem

Personal contribution

The personal contribution consists of (i) the proposal of the two poles as reference points in the investigation of the contemporary artist's status within artistic capitalism and (ii) the proposal of a case study concerning Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's practice. In this case study, we started from the hypotheses that: 1) Takashi Murakami is the paragone of the artist of artistic capitalism, 2) both poles can be observed in his case, and the particular way they articulate can give us additional clues about the status of the contemporary artist in artistic capitalism. The personal justification for choosing this topic and approaching it from this angle is also highlighted in the *Personal motivation* section. It refers to a series of empirical observations based on personal experience, made during the period in which I worked as a curator at the experimental gallery "Șoimii Patriei"³. The main purpose of the gallery was to serve as an exercise interface intended primarily for students of the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca and also, it offered a first curatorial exercise opportunity for me as well. These empirical observations led towards gathering observations that were theoretically developed in this thesis (the clash of two different *ethoses* of art, modern and contemporary, the search for transgression and the importance given to the act of transgressing by artists, the implicit idea that the role of contemporary art is to "question", the relationship between contemporary artists, the fashion world and its trends, etc.).

The originality of the work is represented, besides the proposal of the aforementioned case study, by the addition it brought to the scarce treatment of the topic of artistic capitalism (and transaesthetic age) in Romanian academic literature. We ought to mention the noteworthy contribution of Oana Camelia Șerban, *Artistic Capitalism. Consumption of the work of art in four steps: Marcuse, Baudrillard, Debord, Lipovetsky* (2016)⁴. We also ought to mention Dan Eugen Rațiu's contribution regarding the social role of the artist, extracted from the ideological genesis of artistic capitalism in his articles "Artistic Critique and Creativity: How Do Artists Play in The Social Change?" (2011) and "Artistic Critique on

³ The gallery existed between 2010-2019. It was founded by the artist Markos Tünde, together with her business partner Lőrincz Gyula. They were joined by the art historian Bogdan Iacob, initiator of the project and curator. The main purpose of the gallery was to serve as an "exercise space", designed primarily as an opportunity for a "first show" for the students at the University of Art and Design in Cluj. Thus, it mainly showed first time exhibiting (extra)emerging young artists, its experimental openings leading towards exploring various directions of artistic practices and implicitly different approaches of art. I took over the role of curator from Bogdan Iacob in 2015, activating in this position during 2015-2016.

⁴ We ought to mention the recent Romanian translation of Lipovetsky and Serroy's book, *Estetizarea lumii. A trăi în timpul capitalismului artistic*, trad. Oana Camelia Șerban, ed. Cartea Românească Educațional, 2021. As this translation did not exist when we begun this research, we worked exclusively by using the original French version of the work of the two sociologists, *L'esthétisation du monde. Vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste*, Gallimard, 2013, and in a future rewrite we will use its translation into Romanian.

Capitalism as a Practical and Theoretical Problem” (2018). Far from being an extensive study of the topic of artistic capitalism, this paper rather proposes its thematization as a general “frame” from which we extracted and developed aspects that we considered significant for our purpose.

Methodology

Given the nature of this research, we chose an interdisciplinary approach, which made use of theories and notions from sociology, philosophy of art, critical theory, elements of art history and visual culture, alongside with notions of cultural economy. Thus, the documentation process was directed in relation to the affiliation to the research topic. The selection of the publications used (books, academic articles but also online resources) was justified by the relevance for the chosen topic, even if it meant we had to extend the interdisciplinary area.

This paper is divided into three chapters that operate as "layers" of construction and answers given to the addressed issue. We used analyses of the selected literature in the first two chapters, in order to extract a set of principles transformed into "analysis codes" which we applied on a set of data in the case study proposed in the third chapter. The selection of this "data set" which led to the construction of the case study was justified precisely by the principles extracted from the first two chapters.

Chapters summary

The first chapter tackles the notion of the "critical" pole attributed to the status of the contemporary artist. The chapter begins by introducing the three ages of world aestheticization prior to the transesthetic age attributed to artistic capitalism (Lipovetsky, Serroy): ritual artification, aristocratic aestheticization and modern aestheticization of the world. The modern (Western) aestheticization of the world is the era of great radical oppositions (pure-impurity, high art - art for the masses, etc.) and is also the era when consumer society emerged. From this very stage of the modern aestheticization of the world we draw forth the idea that still remains to the present day of the "critical role of art" as well as the artist (hypothesis 1), identifying the moment of the historical avant-garde as being the moment of maximum tension between "art" and "life", in which a dissolution of the first into the second was attempted. Starting from the relation "art" - "life" and from the critique of the bourgeois idea of "autonomy of art" and "ideology of the artist" we analyzed the three models of anti-capitalist artistic practices proposed by Gene Ray in the tradition of critical theory

(also referencing Adorno's *culture industry*). Starting from the emergence of the Duchampian *ready-made* and the idea of aesthetic indifference, we thematized terms from Arthur Danto's philosophy, the *transfiguration of the commonplace* and the *artworld*, along with the theory of The End of Art. We then discussed Hal Foster's view of the critical possibilities of art in a posthistorical pluralistic context, showing how the critical possibilities of art have shifted toward institutional critique and are rooted in maintaining the tension between "art" and "life", and not in an attempt at sublimation (hypothesis 2). Thus, "the failure of the avant-garde to destroy the institution of art" led to new critical possibilities.

Chapter two tackles the notion of the "superstar" pole attributed to the status of the contemporary artist. We began the chapter by presenting the general characteristics of the transaesthetic era, which is aesthetically modeled by the logic of consumption that is also applied to art ("art for the market"). In addition to the de-absolutization of art, the status of the artist was also de-absolutized and the democratization of the creative ambitions was met with a shift towards the professionalization of art paradigm. We have identified the *star system* that is linked with the birth of cinema (which marks the inaugural stage of artistic capitalism) as the origin of the "superstar" pole attributed to the status of the contemporary artist. The justification is given by the existence of a particular relationship that the idea of "star" establishes between the notions of "artist", "work of art", "product" and "brand" (hypothesis 3), and this relationship can also be applied in the case of spectacular starification of contemporary artists.

As for the active side of the artist's status, namely the social role of the artist, we underlined it following the ideological genesis of artistic capitalism. We made use of Boltanski and Chiapello's view that propose the reading of the *spirit* of the current form of capitalism as the result of a non-Hegelian synthesis between capitalism and its critiques. They propose two types of critique, a "social critique" and an "artistic critique", and in this paper we have followed their account on how the "recuperation" of the artistic critique by capitalism has led the former to its current form, artistic capitalism. We also highlighted the two sides of the artistic critique (the demand for autonomy and the demand for authenticity) and analysed their recuperation cycles. We then identified the issue of authenticity as a mark of the transition from modernity to postmodernity in the case of the contemporary art paradigm as theorized by N. Heinich and we drew relevant aspects for the proposed poles, both the "critical" and the "superstar", some of which are: the shift of art beyond the object, the need for mediation, the paradox of distances and the "permissive paradox", along with the tendency towards the "heteronomization" (fr. „hétéronomisation") of art.

Chapter three consists of a case study of the artistic production and the "cultural artefacts" of Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. As for the methodology, we were primarily interested in the *principles* underlying his approach and strategy at the expense of a detailed analysis of his entire artistic production, as aforementioned. In the beginning of the chapter we presented the context of the cultural export of pop culture elements used by him in his artworks, thus bringing up the notions of softpower and "Cool Japan". The motivation for doing so lays in the existence of a global fascination towards Japanese culture, our focus being on Japanese pop culture. Its leitmotif elements (manga, anime) are found "in the marrow" of the Japanese artistic corpus. We then followed the particularities of the Otaku subculture and the cultural products consumed by its members, showing that what we're dealing with is an attraction to a "pseudo Japan". The mass culture considered to be eminently Japanese (manga, anime) has a double origin, American and Japanese, and is in fact a "domestication" of American mass culture imported in postwar Japan (Hiroki Azuma). This Westernization of Japan through consumerism is the target of Murakami's "criticism." Using Hiroki Azuma's vision, we showed that the otaku subculture is linked to an eminently postmodern mode of cultural consumption (animalized⁵ and "database" type) and we underlined the importance of "derivative works" in this subculture of simulacrum, where the copy-original distinction is erased. Drawing on Murakami's best-known works (*Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy*), with which he gained his status and fame within the international contemporary art scene, we pointed out that the artist, "an otaku who could not become one," uses *shock value* and makes use of the otaku culture imagery while borrowing only its surface design and we called into question the potentially subversive character of the artworks. We analyzed the Superflat manifesto (an "-ism" and also a possible "art of the future"⁶) that we consider to be a part of the artistic body of work of Murakami, and we also analyzed his views on art in the context of hybridizations of the transesthetic era. The distinction between minor and major arts, high art and mass art and art and commerce is, according to him, a Western invention taken over by the Japanese and his neo-pop artistic proposal is meant to overturn the paradigm. The spectacular, hybrid and celebratory dimension of art is found in the Japanese avant-garde. Next, we proposed a comparative analysis of the organization of Andy Warhol's The Factory v. Takashi Murakami's KaiKai Kiki, with an emphasis on the

⁵ Hiroki Azuma makes use of Alexandre Kojève's vision of posthistoric societies, US animalization, and Japanese ceremonial snobbery, but postulates the idea of Japan's animalization. The justification for its post-war "Americanization" of Japan is that it happened through the consumer society.

⁶ Takashi Murakami, *Superflat*, MADRA Publishing Co., Ltd., 2000, *The Super Flat Manifesto*, p.4

particularities of the second, which operates as an emulation of a corporation that produces both art and goods. We then analyzed the iconic character-signature-brand of the artist mr.DOB and his significance in Murakami's artistic strategy. Finally, we analyzed the Vuitton Shop installation and the meeting of the two brands, Vuitton and Murakami, emphasizing the articulation between art and commerce. The installation can be read as an institutional critique but also as transforming an eminently commercial act into an artistic act. We noted the clever way in which Murakami made use of the most potent form of stylization of the transaesthetic era, fashion, to promote its own brand.

Conclusions

The hypotheses that we started the case study from were that the two poles, the "critic" and the "superstar", will be observed in the case of Takashi Murakami and this will give us clues about the status of the contemporary artist in artistic capitalism. However, we observed that we are dealing with a possibility that the status of the artist can simultaneously contain both poles (through playing with the very idea of mediation) and each can be contextualized by the other and the ambiguity given by the inflation of interpretations specific to the contemporary art paradigm is part of the (artistic) game. In Murakami's case, the poles that are part of the game and contextualise each other extend to the dynamic between "Japan"- "West", art-commerce, high art-mass art. We used the case study targeting the practice of the Japanese artist in order to draw some specific variations that the status of the contemporary artist may entail in relation to the idea of *brand*. Analyzing his witty (artistic) strategy and the production of cultural artefacts, addressed to both the "art world" and mass cultural consumption, we pointed out the specific operations through which he transforms the very idea of "brand" as a mark of the superstar into an artistic medium. Thus, we concluded that Takashi Murakami is indeed the paragone artist of artistic capitalism. Considering the purpose of this thesis, that is, the investigation of the status of the contemporary artist in "artistic capitalism", we formulated a series of hypotheses. These guided our research process, which generated the following conclusions: following the transition from modernity to postmodernity, the critical possibilities of the artist have undergone a shift from big oppositions to "subtle displacements", which can only be read contextually. The status of the artist has undergone a shift, due to both democratization of creative ambitions and professionalization of art. The contemporary artist has borrowed spectacular mechanisms, and the superstar pole, attributed to his status, is a result of artistic capitalism. Therefore, in the paradigm of contemporary art and its aspects of

"heteronomization", along with its shift towards discourse and hyperinflation of interpretations, the two poles, the critic and the superstar can coexist in various configurations, without them implying an opposition.

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