The Uses of Art: Contemporary Changes in Cultural Consumption and the Function of Art

By Birgit Eriksson

Abstract

In recent years aesthetics and cosmopolitanism have been linked in new ways. On the one hand, contemporary research in the sociology of art indicates an increasing openness and a potential cosmopolitanism in aesthetic taste and consumption. On the other hand, aesthetic concepts and ideals play an important but often implicit role in some of the theories of globalization and cosmopolitanism that inform cultural studies. By examining the interaction between these two tendencies and relating it to sociological and aesthetic theories, I will discuss the characteristics and the possible social implications of the apparent new openness. Does it indicate an increasing tolerance and commonality? Or does it rather point towards a new and more individualized understanding of the social function and legitimacy of art?

Keywords: Art, cultural consumption, omnivore, cosmopolitanism, commonality, liquid modernity.

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The background for this paper is an interest in an old and still ongoing discussion in aesthetic and cultural theory, namely the contradictory potential of aesthetic communication and practice to, on the one hand, enforce power relations and maintain divisions between interpretive (social, ethnic, national, religious, gender etc.) communities, and on the other hand, to bridge across differences and thereby create commonality, cosmopolitanism or even universality. I will focus this discussion by looking at, on the one hand, how contemporary research in the sociology of art appears to indicate an increasing openness and a potential cosmopolitanism in aesthetic taste and consumption, and on the other, how aesthetic concepts and ideals play an important but often implicit role in some of the theories of globalization and modernity that inform cultural studies. By examining the interaction between these two tendencies and relating it to sociological and aesthetic theories, I will discuss the characteristics and the possible social implications of the apparent new openness. Does it indicate an increasing tolerance and commonality? Or does it rather point towards a new and more individualized understanding of the social function and legitimacy of art?

The Cultural Omnivore

In the beginning of the 1990s the American sociologist Richard A. Peterson and colleagues argued that empirical surveys of American taste (especially musical but also other forms of cultural taste) showed significant changes in high status taste. Contrary to what Pierre Bourdieu and most of the sociology of art had taught us since the 1970s, they found that cultural consumption was no longer characterized by hierarchical distinctions and snobbish exclusion of 'lower tastes' but by omnivorous appropriation. While traditional snobs preferred highbrow culture and avoided both middle and lowbrow activities, the new omnivores seemed open towards appreciating them all.[1]

The notion of omnivore has spread throughout contemporary sociology. Over the past 20 years numerous studies have followed the lines of Peterson's research, and the hypothesis of a shift from elitist snobbishness to eclectic and omnivore inclusion has been qualified in numerous empirical surveys based on data from various western countries. The methods and results vary but in general, sociologists agree that the diversity of taste is increasing and cultural consumption is becoming more heterogeneous and unpredictable.

One might of course object that this is old news and that Peterson and other sociologists supply little more than empirical support for insights that have been common sense in cultural studies at least since the theories of the postmodern and the rise of multiculturalism. In a way they just seem to confirm the familiar pic-

ture of a general shift from a former unitary, stable and hierarchical culture to the present variety of unstable, fragmented and intertwined cultural formations in our (depending on your preference) 'fluid', 'reflexive', 'second', 'individualized', 'late' or 'globalized' modernity.

What I find interesting in these studies of dissolving hierarchies and increasing breadth of cultural consumption, however, is that they also direct our attention towards the relationship between cultural taste and social life. If Bourdieu was right that aesthetic distinctions were not only signs of social hierarchies but also helped to sustain and enforce them, then we might ask whether an increasing aesthetic openness also sustains and enforces social, ethnic, religious and political tolerance. In other words: does the spread of omnivorousness equate to a – potentially cosmopolitan – growing tolerance towards the tastes, habits and values of others?

20 Years Later – The Omnivore Revisited

Since the 1990s the new omnivorousness has been interpreted in both optimistic and more sceptical ways. Many sociologists have understood it as a sign of a growing openness for and respect for the culture of others. In explaining this openness, Peterson points to how social mobility and the mass media have increased our familiarity with the taste and values of others, how the art world itself has moved away from fixed standards, and how omnivorous inclusion seems to fit an increasingly globalized world (Peterson & Kern 1996: 905–906).

Some sociologists have, however, gone a step further by conceiving of the omnivore thesis as a rejection of Bourdieu's diagnosis of the distinguishing function of taste. Many academics with high cultural capital have for obvious reasons never been comfortable with Bourdieu's description of strong homology between taste, class and power. They happily welcomed research that seemed to emancipate taste from hierarchical power and give the taste of the cultural elite a more open and potentially cosmopolitan function.

Not only academic art connoisseurs but also sociologists and others who support the various accounts of late modern individualization (by Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim and others) have seen the omnivore thesis as an attractive alternative to the social determinism of the Bourdieu tradition. From this perspective the rise of the omnivore has been welcome as a confirmation of the late modern, free-floating and mobile individual's ability to release him- or herself from social restrictions and enjoy a wide variety of aesthetic experiences (cf. Wynne & O'Connor 1998 and Emmison 2003).

However, as Peterson and others argued, this is not necessarily the best way of understanding what was – and still is – at stake. Rather than leading to a total dismissal of Bourdieu, omnivore research may raise the following questions: What kind of change do the surveys indicate? Have the status hierarchies in cul-

tural taste habits disappeared or only changed? Is there a new cosmopolitan hierarchy of taste? And not least: how inclusive is aesthetic omnivorousness really? Does it equate social openness?

Regarding the first question – what kind of change the surveys indicate – various studies question the weakening of the link between class and cultural lifestyle in contemporary culture. To mention a few:

In 2002, Tally Katz-Gerro published a study of highbrow cultural consumption and class distinction in Italy, Israel, West Germany, Sweden, and the US. He found a certain correspondence between class and cultural lifestyle but also a variation by national context and a significant linkage to ethnicity, religion and gender.

In 2008, a study in Denmark by Annick Prieur and colleagues did not show any traces of a weak social structuring of taste and lifestyles. Neither did it indicate a decline in snobbishness and a rise in tolerant taste within the cultural elite. 'Cultural consumption appears to be highly structured by both economic and cultural capital' (Prieur, Rosenlund & Skjott-Larsen 2008: 63).

Another Danish study, based on surveys from 1964–2004, indicated that income, education and class are strong predictors of cultural eclecticism or omnivorousness, and that the social stratification of cultural consumption has not declined remarkably in the 40-years period of the surveys (Jæger & Katz-Gerro 2010).

In 2008, Michèle Ollivier published a study drawing on qualitative interviews on leisure and cultural activities conducted in Quebec in 2005. She was surprised by the strong condemnation of mass culture among highly educated respondents, by feelings of inadequacy expressed by the middle class respondents and by the language of 'class and respect' used by people with lower levels of education and income (Ollivier 2008: 130) – in other words by taste patterns very similar to the ones Bourdieu described in *Distinction*.

In 2011, a study by Amir Goldberg showed that Americans of high status have not overwhelmingly forsaken cultural hierarchies, and that they can easily be inclusive in their aesthetic taste without rejecting social exclusion (Goldberg 2011: 1428–29).

What these and other studies of leisure and cultural consumption indicate is that the existence of the omnivore does not mean the disappearance of the status hierarchies. As varied as their findings are, none of them supports the understanding of omnivorousness as a manifestation of a deeper historical shift toward social tolerance. If something has changed it is rather the *criteria* of taste as a status marker. Omnivorousness itself has become 'an increasingly common measure of high status over the second half of the 20th century in North America, Europe and beyond' (Peterson 2005: 263).

This interpretation is confirmed in resent research on American culture, published in the anthology, *Engaging Art. The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life* from 2008. Here it is a common premise that the position of high culture arts as cultural capital is declining – a point also supported by the above mentioned Danish study by Prieur et al. Identifying oneself with a specific cultural and aesthetic regime is no longer high status but rather regarded as an indication of a limited horizon and understanding. Omnivorousness is now a normative standard for good taste and openness to the taste of others is socially valued by both omnivores and others. While

> middle-class respondents in the 1950s knew it was conventional to report an exclusive involvement with the traditional high arts (...) respondents today know that it is more fashionable to express an involvement with a much wider range of cultural forms. (Peterson 2005: 265. Cf. also Warde, Wright & Gayo-Cal 2008: 164 and Lahire 2008: 170)

Many surveys yield similar results and it is therefore fair to conclude that eclectic or omnivore openness to diversity is itself a way of demonstrating a form of distinction. It is a new form of cultural capital also in the Bourdieusian sense of 'cultural resources that are widely considered desirable but not equally available to all' (Ollivier 2008: 142).

Cosmopolitan Omnivores?

One may ask: Is this bad? Is it not positive if openness to diversity is the new norm? Does it not at least have a potential for increasing cosmopolitanism? While many of the above-mentioned studies have identified the openness to diversity as a question of mixing high and popular culture, others – including Prieur's study from Denmark – identify the new form of cultural capital in the preference for a global or international orientation instead of a more local or national orientation. This difference is visible in music and television preferences, in food consumption and in political attitudes (Prieur, Rosenlund & Skjott-Larsen 2008: 67). Respondents with a high level of (cultural as well as economic) capital have a – statistically strong – global orientation in these matters and show dimensions of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'connectedness' in both a literal and figurative sense:

> They make use of the Internet to seek information and communicate; they dismiss the notion that one ought to hire natives before immigrants when jobs are scarce; they support giving aid to developing countries; and they do not express any pride in being Danish or of coming from Aalborg. (Ibid.)

The conclusion of the study is thus that cultural distinctions exist in a contemporary Danish context but that the elite define themselves not as much through adherence to a traditional highbrow culture but rather through oppositions between the global and the local interpreted as 'the stuck and the mobile, the narrow and the open mind, the traditional and the creative, the reflexive and the non-reflexive' (ibid. 68).

However, as Prieur and her colleagues also remark, it is important to note that the very concepts of this polarization express the values and judgements of the elite. Ollivier makes a similar point when indicating the new rhetoric of openness to cultural diversity as founded on an opposition between the positive and associated terms diverse, open, hybrid, fluid, eclectic, global and cosmopolitan – and the negative and similarly associated terms of unitary, homogeneous, local, static, permanent and closed.

From the opposite point of view the negative side of this opposition could be related to 'values such as loyalty, stability, authenticity, having roots, choosing family over career' (ibid.). There is, however, a strong tendency to conceptualize social divisions and differences in a way that rather systematically depicts the orientation of intellectuals towards the world in a flattering light. And this is exactly what we do in associating aesthetic omnivorousness with a more general openness towards cultural and social diversity, 'spontaneously drawing up a flattering portrait of the new elites as being more tolerant, more eclectic, less sectarian (we might say "culturally cosmopolitan") than the popular classes who are labelled more constrained, less tolerant, and less open' (Lahire 2008: 184). In this self-flattering portrait we have no sense of the open-mindedness required for the 'popular classes' to engage in a world consisting of many other things than high arts and leisure activities, e.g. of neighbourhoods with social problems, educational systems with foreign norms and values, omnipresent demands of flexibility, self realization etc.

It is no wonder that intellectuals like to be described as tolerant, open-minded, cosmopolitan and creative connoisseurs and saviours of the world. But it is more convincing if the highly celebrated open-mindedness, creativity and reflexivity are also used for less self-flattering re-descriptions of the central oppositions of today's most popular theories of our globalized culture. It seems necessary, as Prieur and Ollivier also remind us, to pay more attention to the power relations that underpin societal and academic debates on cultural diversity – to analyse the ideal models of modern individuality in various depictions of contemporary culture, to ask who embodies them, and to look into their possible performative effects. It may be considered very positive that openness to cultural diversity represents a new aesthetics and a new ethos, but it is necessary to recognize that this openness builds upon, rather than displaces the older social and artistic hierarchies, which are now being reconfigured in more individualized ways.

What is at stake here – I think – is not cosmopolitanism understood in the double sense, which implies that we have obligations to other human beings beyond those to whom we are closely related and that we value others not just as specimens of universal humanity but as having lives whose meaning is bound up with particular practices and beliefs that are often different from our own (Gray 2006). These ideas of obligations and 'bound up meanings' do not seem to fit into a world in which self, culture and society are conceived as multiple, fluid and frag-

mented, and openness, flexibility, mobility, self-realization etc. appear as normative ideals regulating all aspects of social life (Ollivier 2008: 121). As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, many of the values that were seemingly uncontroversial 50 years ago are currently being revaluated, condemned, ridiculed and dismissed. Today, old values and anti-values have been given new names to facilitate the revaluation: once-wanted security has been renamed 'dependence', something to be avoided, and once-fought uncertainty has been renamed 'flexibility', the most powerful tool of life success (Bauman 2002: 24). According to Bauman we are living in 'times of disengagement', characterized – among other things – by the successful not wanting the commitment of long-term ethical communities but only accepting these if they do not restrict the right to live a life of one's own (Bauman 2001: 39). Those who are successful have become so by translating uncertainty into independence and flexibility, and one way of doing this is turning away from local restrictions and long-term ethical obligations and choosing instead more temporary aesthetic communities. This might be the background for a trait of the omnivores identified by Oriel Sullivan and Tally Katz-Gerro, who describe them more specifically as 'voracious omnivores' and thereby indicate that the omnivorous consumption

> is not necessarily about participating seriously in large numbers of activities for long periods of time but about cultural tasting and switching among, or differently combining, those activities. Voraciousness may therefore not be about commitment to many activities but about commitment to not leaving many activities untouched or unpractised. (Sullivan & Katz-Gerro 2007: 134)

This does not seem like the highway to cosmopolitanism. One might even ask if the smooth and swift eclectic switches that characterize voracious omnivorous consumption indicate that we are on the way to change our approach to and idea of art. Is it a sign that we are giving up the highly influential idea of art as leading to inter-subjective and intercultural understanding and communication?

Modernity and the Utopia of Art

The idea of art as having an inter-subjective, communicative and civilizational potential was dated back to Kant by the French philosopher Yves Michaud in 'The End of the Utopia of Art' (1998).[2] In this essay Michaud described how there has been a privileged relationship between what he calls the utopia of art and the utopia of democratic citizenship for over 200 years. He identifies three utopias as characteristic of modernity: the utopia of democratic citizenship, which has to do with freedom and equality, the utopia of labour, which has to do with social change, and the utopia of art, originating in Kant.

In his third critique, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* from 1790 Kant described aesthetic relationships as founded on the judgement of taste. Contrary to the determinate judgement that subsumes the particular under the general and relies on prescriptions, concepts and rules, the judgement of taste is formulated without any given

rules or concepts when it goes from the particular and subjective to the universal. Through the judgement of taste it is possible to conceive of a certain ideal sociality in which we – free of particular interests and given concepts – can establish a public sphere of communication around artworks: The social or even universal potential of the judgement of taste is based on its ability to release the individual from both personal and social limitations and interests and reach out towards a 'subjective universality'.

No wonder then that Kant's aesthetics has played an important role far beyond the fields of art and art theory and that this importance in no way seems to be diminishing. Aesthetics as it has been understood in the Kantian tradition seems to be in high esteem in contemporary theories of both cosmopolitanism and our late modern condition in general. The current diagnoses of our late modern culture – as 'fluid', 'reflexive' or 'individualized' – seem to call for aesthetic and reflective judgement. In a culture of dynamic changes, mobility and networking, experience and routine are losing ground and we have to be open to changes and to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures (cf. Sennett 1998: 9). In Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim's *Individualization* it is thus assumed that while the 'first modernity' depended on the prescriptions and rules of the determinate judgement, in the present or 'second modernity' this is replaced by the reflective judgement. We no longer have general rules or determining concepts to rely on, and we therefore cannot subsume the particular under the universal but have to find the rules ourselves (Lash 2002: ix-xi). And this – according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim – is the only way in which we can hope to cope with both individualization and globalization.

Many recent works on globalization and cosmopolitanism indulge in metaphors of flow, mobility and complexity while paying less attention to economy, institutions, borders and power – and sometimes approaching a kind of wishful thinking where free cosmopolitan subjects move smoothly in a world beyond clear borders, coherent societies and confrontational dichotomies of 'we' and 'them' (cf. Urry 2002).

But the idea of subjective universality also has more specific relevance for current discussions of globalization. The concept of subjective universality fits right into the central ambition of cosmopolitanism, namely to conceive of others as both different *and* equal. As Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande have described it, the crucial question for cosmopolitanism is to find a way of dealing with cultural differences that neither dissolves all differences in a universalistic sameness nor absolutizes them in a postmodern or multiculturalist particularism (Beck & Grande 2007: 12–15). The rapidly increasing attention to cultural diversity[3] following from the compression of the world through globalization makes it necessary to find a way between these equally unattractive alternatives. Whether current theories of cosmopolitanism see one or the other – universalism or particularism – as the most serious pitfall varies, but they all seem to insist on a necessary combina-

tion: That the vision of the world's unicity must necessarily be followed by a multiplicity of perspectives and an awareness of the many possible worlds (Rumford 2008) – or the other way around: that the positive recognition of differences must be followed by ideas of mutual perspective-taking with others, of partaking in a common humanity, and of a certain fund of universal rights and norms (Beck & Grande 2007: 13–15).

This ambition of balancing differences, of mutual perspective-taking and of commonality has close links to aesthetics in the Kantian tradition. As Michaud argues, the core ambition of his third critique was to address the question of communication and inter-subjectivity. What counted were not specific artworks but the establishment of communication in the aesthetic experience. In the judgement of taste according to Kant we communicate the mental state we are in when our cognitive faculties, imagination and understanding are in free play. And when we communicate this mental state to each other, we appeal to what is common to everyone, and both participate in and help to realize an inter-subjective human community. In this way the communicability of the aesthetic experience can civilize and thereby qualify the common man for political freedom and equality. 'The utopia of art is a communicational, democratic and civilizational utopia' (Michaud 1998: 149), embedded in the emancipatory and egalitarian project of the enlightenment and the French revolution – in what Michaud calls the citizen-based utopia of modernity.

A New Legitimacy?

This utopia of art – the utopia of possible communication, of sympathy, of community – has played an important role in modernity. In various theories of aesthetics art has been seen as a kind of ideal role model for the world – a place for qualities that turned out to be hard to realize in modern society. According to Michaud the only problem with this utopia of art is that its promise of inter-subjective communication and community turned out to be an illusion. When studying aesthetic communication in practice, it is not universal communicability and sympathy that is most conspicuous, but rather division between cultures, classes or groups. In reality, Michaud states, 'nobody actually agrees on anything. (…) The aesthetic community is in fact skirmish and strife' (ibid. 151).

Paradoxically it was the radical democratization of the judgement of taste and its subsequent separation into various 'taste communities' that threw the utopia of communication into question. One can, like Bourdieu, conceive of this separation as a *hierarchical stratification*, arguing that taste marks status, reproduces class distinction and thus functions 'as a sort of social orientation, a "sense of one's place"' (Bourdieu 1994: 466). Or one can, like Gerhard Schulze, Simon Frith and others see it as a *horizontal segregation* into separated interpretive communities, incommensurable language games and thus isolated cultural spheres of meaning

production and circulation.[4] In any case there is little sympathy and commonality between the various interpretive communities; rather, there are symbolic power struggles (Bourdieu) or lack of communication (Schulze, Frith).

Is this the end of art then? Obviously not. But according to Michaud it points towards the end of a specific *representation* of art – of the utopia of art and thereby also of its privileged relationship to the utopia of democratic citizenship. And this means that art loses its obvious legitimacy in modern, democratic society. People do not have the reverence for art that they had when Bourdieu made his survey in France four decades ago and found a mono-cultural high brow 'good taste' in the elite, and in the middle class an awe for and hopeless striving to achieve the very same taste. Instead Michaud sees a public asking for explanations, justifications or – more often – being deliberately ignorant by simply turning elsewhere in search of other activities.

It is debatable whether Michaud is right in his diagnosis of a general dismissal of the reverence for art. Some of the surveys mentioned above indicate that this tendency, while strong, is not the only one. But in any case it seems highly relevant to ask what will happen, if art loses its legitimacy in sustaining communication and communities.

One possibility is that not only will the public turn elsewhere – e.g. to popular culture – but the same may happen to communication and communities that are now sustained in the realm popular culture. As all internet-based fan sites, web logs etc. show, many people partake in consuming, discussing, celebrating and criticizing the artefacts of popular culture. These practices, on- and offline, are based on the fundamental inclusiveness of popular culture – and according to Joke Hermes and other cultural theorists, its ability to offer belonging, bonding, cultural citizenship and 'much of the wool from which the social tapestry is knit' (Hermes 2005: 11). It is, however, still not clear how engagement in e.g. sports or celebrity culture is linked to an engagement in public and political issues, including the responsibilities and duties of citizenship – although this does not mean that this was much clearer with regard to engagement in 'high art' (cf. Eriksson 2008).

Another possibility, which Michaud seems to hint at but does not unfold, is that art may become linked to his third utopia of modernity: the utopia of labour.[5] Such a link would not primarily seek its origin in Kant but rather in the tradition of the German romanticists and Friedrich Nietzsche – in the creative genius, in novelty, in art's ability to transgress mainstream rationality, to give room for uncontrolled creative plurality, and to point towards the future. Looking at contemporary culture it seems obvious that new links and new strategies of legitimacy rise in between, on the one hand, the utopia of art and its inherent creativity and novelty and on the other, the utopia of labour and its promise of social change. This happens in artistic production collectives, in artistic practices directed towards solving social and/or economic problems in 'the real world', in new crea-

tive alliances between trade, industry and the arts, and most of all in the tendency to see creativity as the new solution to almost everything: from economic problems of the nation state over 'life politics' of the individual to problems of handling cultural differences and conflicts in a globalized world. In a wide variety of discourses, creativity (and its promise of novelty) is represented not only as the most important dimension of art but also as a useful and sometimes the only tool for economic development and social change.

The Function of Art in a Liquid Modern World

In his *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011) Bauman distinguishes between three stages in the development of the concept of culture (including its artistic sphere). The first stage is similar to Michaud's utopia of art. According to its original concept in the late 18th century, culture was an agent of change in the specific sense of steering social evolution towards a universal human condition. The aim was 'to educate the masses and refine their customs, and through these to improve society and advance "the people"' (Bauman 2011: 7). Culture was thought to be for everybody and its function was to civilize and democratize.

This concept was turned upside down by Bourdieu, who registered and analysed culture not as an agent of change but as a tranquilizer. This was 'culture at its homeostatic stage: culture at the service of the status quo, of the monotonous reproduction of society and maintenance of system equilibrium' (ibid. 11). Bourdieu's analysis was however also, according to Bauman, a snapshot of culture just before the 'inevitable and fast approaching loss of its position' (ibid.), caused by modernity's transformation from its 'solid' to its 'liquid' phase – to the self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive modernization, making it impossible for any form of social life to maintain its shape for long (ibid.). In this phase, culture – released from the obligations of its initially missionary and later homeostatic role in society – is 'able to focus on fulfilling individual needs, solving individual problems and struggles with the challenges and troubles of personal lives' (ibid. 12). Culture and especially its artistic sphere 'is fashioned to fit individual freedom of choice and individual responsibility for that choice; and (…) its function is to ensure that the choice should be and will always remain a necessity and unavoidable duty of life…' (ibid.).

Returning now to the research in contemporary cultural taste and consumption, this might cast light on the omnivore lifestyle. In line with Bauman's diagnosis I think that what is at stake in omnivorousness is not mainly cosmopolitan and social openness, tolerance and inclusion. If aesthetic judgments are characterized by 'subjective universality', the omnivores – in their appropriation of (high) art as well as (popular) culture – seem to tend much more to the subjective pole than to the universal. What they appreciate in art and culture is not sociality and commonality, but rather individuality, creativity, novelty and flexibility. They have a

preference for innovative experiments and hybrids instead of perfection in well-defined genres (van Eijck 2000: 216). They are committed neither to 'their own' cultural roots or community nor to specific foreign cultural forms and expressions but partake in loose and shifting networks. They make their own mix of what is interesting for them and use it in more or less creative ways in their own self-realization. Their rapidly shifting cultural preferences make them voracious consumers and give them a strong ally in the market. And more in general they are fit to a late modern world in which flexibility, mobility and the ability to choose and make judgements without given rules or fixed goals are highly appreciated if not downright necessary.[6]

If omnivorousness represents a new openness it is thus only in the sense of not prescribing a certain mono-cultural canon of aesthetic forms and artworks. But at the same time it can be seen as a sign of the dissemination of a new utopia of art: a utopia relating art to the individuality and flexibility of the realm of work, instead of the commonality and communication of democratic citizenship. One can prefer one or the other. One can agree with Michaud, Bourdieu and Bauman that the old communicational and civilizational utopia was far from being realized as beautifully as it was meant to by Kant and his followers. But I think it is both ethically and politically risky to put too much faith in the new utopia. Just as the old equality and commonality in theory was open to everyone but only became true for the elite, the new ideal of individual flexibility and freedom of choice is in reality open to an elite that is very similar to the old one. Both utopias run the risk of turning the idea of art as an agent for social change into a reality of individual change – in the communicative utopia in the form of aesthetic refinement, and in the new one in the celebration of creative self-realization. Which one is less promising, is debatable, but I fear that the new utopia might turn out to be even more exclusive and mono-cultural than the old one. If the old one took part in social and symbolic power struggles, then the new one makes any antagonism invisible. It is currently very hard to stand up against individuality, flexibility and creativity. How could we? But a blind accept or celebration of these values also makes it far too easy to ignore all those who face more borders than mobility, more risks than possibilities. In other words: putting all our trust in the individual does not make inequality and antagonisms go away. But it might make it harder to do something about them than if we at least have an idea of commonality.

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Notes

[1]   In a historical survey of snobbery in the US, Peterson argues that high- and lowbrow stem from the 1880s when the importance of cultural capital and the stigmatization of the popular emerged. It was not until the 1930s that middlebrow began to be used for the many "who were too respectable to be called lowbrows and were too Philistine to be called highs" (Peterson 1997: 84). The development was not unidirectional, however; snobbery had been attacked at least since the 1920s when the interest in jazz was one among several highbrow fascinations with lowbrow culture. For a presentation of the evolving conceptualization of the omnivore 1992-2005, see Peterson 2005.

[2]   The essay is a translation of the final chapter in Yves Michaud: *La crise de l'art contemporain* (1997).

[3]   Any search in Google, Web of Science databases or the like will show how citations of the term "cultural diversity" have increased tremendously over the last 20 years.

[4]   Schulze distinguishes between the lifestyle segments of the experience community. Frith distinguishes between the art, folk and pop discourses of music, which highlight the experience of transcendence, of fun or of integration and belonging respectively.

[5]   The idea that we have to look for the conditions and the hope of social transformation in the realm of labour (labor in Michaud) can according to Michaud be found from Marx to Weber, from classical economists to the theoreticians of the welfare state, from the sociologists of industrial societies to the theoreticians of fascism (Michaud 1998: 135).

[6]   Cf. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's investigation in management literature showing how a new and increasingly influential justificatory logic has cropped up since the 1990s: one that conceives of life as a series of necessarily different projects and whose "great ones" are adaptable, flexible, polyvalent, mobile, active and autonomous – able and willing to "take risks, make contact with new people, open up new possibilities, seek out useful sources of information, and thus avoid repetition" (Boltansk & Chiapello 2005: 169).

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