

Revolution solves art's political problem.

Reflections on the open and the dangerous.

by Carsten Juhl

“Wir suchen den lieben Gott im Detail und schlagen ihn mit Hilfe unserer Ignoranz, wo wir ihn finden.”

[We're looking for dear God in the details, and seeking to knock him out with the help of our ignorance, wherever we may find him.]

Max Adolf Warburg to his father, Aby Warburg, 1926.

We cannot, in advance, assign a higher priority to details than we can to theory. Nor can we claim that, when grappling with questions where there are no cogent analytical categories to resort to, we have to choose between description of detail and a theoretically facilitated synthesis. The considerations that follow are specifically aimed at redressing the “ignorance” that Warburg junior mentioned in his birthday greeting to his father.

Revolution and art do not belong to any of the analytical categories by means of which we can place a specific revolution or a specific work of art as confirmation of the particular category's tenability. Tenable in relation to what, for that matter? Nevertheless, revolution is valid within politics in the sense of power struggle, and artwork possesses a validity within culture in the sense of taste. Both can change the ways in which,

respectively, power and taste become organized and exercised before the revolution or the artwork arrived.

But it is true enough that “Is this supposed to be art?” is something that anybody can ask of any work. And the answer will either issue from above “downward”, that the work in question has been judged suitable for exhibition by a quality-certified censor committee or by this or that quality-ensured head of a gallery, or it will be that the artist in question has been educated as a visual artist at a prestigious art school, or has completed an apprenticeship under another highly esteemed artist’s, i.e. a “master’s”, guidance.

Alongside an authoritarian reply like the foregoing one, there is the intrinsic answer issuing from the work itself and “outward”: this is the conceptual or technical description, which takes the work’s plastic dimensions into account – the composition of the motive in the block or on the picture, the presentation of the work, the exploration of intention and gesture, etc. However, any discussion of concept and execution already requires that the parties to the discussion are in agreement on a definition of art, i.e. that they have established a convention around a sensible line of inquiry that takes the place of the missing category.

There is also the spiritualistic or religious interpretation, which moves its way from the heavens or from the spirit and “downward”, that is to say, which follows the mechanics of revelation; this is, however, a question of whether or not revelation is already a category, since, by definition, it is true and essential and therefore un-derived, un-simulated, etc. but instead simply reveals, enacting something that was previously absent or unclear. Whatever might grow forth or might obtain greater clarity by such

means does not need to appear as the effect of an uncovering; it can be altogether industrious and probing, for example, a critical re-inscribing of art into metaphysics but with a “low” philosophical ambition (à la Mondrian), or can be heaven-defying and avant-garde, like an apologetic inscribing of art into metaphysics, which is religiously or spiritualistically inclined and hence “high” (à la Malevich).

Whereas metaphysics ensures a possibility of drawing near to certain problems surrounding creation and annihilation that bear on art, inasmuch as metaphysics constitutes the field where boundaries and boundaries’ closing or opening can be discussed, it is the family, private property and the state that are utterly uncondusive for any investigation into the question of art, which has to do with the work’s plastic genesis. The three aforementioned categories, which have constituted the anthropological bearing elements in the establishment of power and sovereignty, to wit, *inheritance law*, *territorial control* and *the monopoly on violence*, form obviously strong categories in the institutionalization of the political as society, but they are utterly beyond investigations of aesthetic and ethical character, on which an understanding of art must build.

The problem will, therefore, always be that “social” or “political” art must be defined without inheritance law, territorial control and the monopoly on violence. For these three strong categories constitute, in turn, the foundations for, respectively, the accumulation of wealth, the nation and oppression, that is to say, for the ethically reprehensible consequences of the three aforementioned strong categories. Any art that aspires to address the social or the political must either affirm or disavow, must either praise or attack wealth, the nation and subjugation. And this is not an operation that bears on art’s plastic genesis, but rather one which, on the contrary, calls for an

instrumentalisation, for an import from outside and “inward”, in order to direct attention to something that is not intrinsic to art, but rather constitutes its surroundings, context or – more relevant – problems of connotation.

As the reader will have understood, then, a spiritual as much as a political dimension are foreign bodies in relation to *the open* in art, to the work’s plastic genesis. And the two aforementioned dimensions’ categorial impact immediately raises the question of whether art can derive any joy from having to address the alienating effects of the adoration of the spirit or political propaganda, or whether these can be avoided. It is here that revolution comes to the rescue.

For a revolution to succeed, it has to be comprised of a chain of beneficial and independent details. Here, much like in art, lies revolution’s problem of autonomy: for in neither art nor in revolution can the ends *justify* the means, the detail. This would amount to spiritualizing revolution’s validity in relation to power, as though revolutionary acts were more inspired than other actions. And from art-generating actions we know that the successful work is based on exploration and trying things out, on technical mastery and ideas, not on spirit or religion.

The revolution’s details, however, are not always beyond reproach, for hasty decisions made in the heat of battle can contain errors. Military tribunals held on the barricade will, for example, often be sources of errors stemming from incomplete information, which can be blamed on informing. Informing grows less important as the numbers taking part increase. But when, say, 10% of the population are revolutionary and

another 10% of the population are counterrevolutionary, while the rest are waiting to see what happens, the revolution will be hard-pressed. This is the situation in Egypt, in Tunisia and in Syria today. The revolutions here have not spilled into revolutionary politics; on the contrary, politics are entirely in the hands of the counterrevolution, no matter whether it's the army, the mosque, terrorist groups, intelligence services or a political mafia that happen to be dominating the political game. For they are *in* the state, whether we are talking about a democratic or dictatorial monopoly of violence, while, for now, revolution waits outside.

Revolutionary politics calls, then, for a shift: from the barricade to the reins of power, from the struggle to taking control of the state. And even though the revolution's program is utterly impartial, and only abolitions can be expedited, namely of money, of the nation and the state, initiating this process, which serves to dissolve the money economy, passport controls and the police, demands that the revolution *moves into* the strong categories mentioned above. Revolution must be conversant in inheritance law, must know about territorial control and the monopoly of violence in order to set about dissolving them. The transition from revolution as event to revolution as politics involves a transition from the open in the revolutionary situation to an opening of the political and economic order that has prevailed since the abolition of slavery: an order that is based on the generalization of wage labour to all genders, all nations and peoples, all ages, all areas. This was the money economy's triumph and, as we know, it has come to be called the "free market".

Both revolution and art stand outside the "free market". They can both be adjusted to become state-bearing or commercial, but, in their origins, they are without price and

monetary forms: they are incalculable.

This is because they both belong to *the open* in an absolute sense. And they do so together. Art says something about creation that revolution aspires to force through. The creative impulse, becoming, is namely always open at its inception, and moves its way from a more or less clear idea about a plausible ideal for the idea's realization toward a projection of the time and place for the presentation of its realization. The category of *realization* is difficult, but it is presumably the place *and* the conception, in which and by which passage is envisioned: the passage *from the open* in creation *to the opening up* of the order where the work is going to be placed and has to be able to connote, i.e. where it must carry some of the problematics of its making over into the prevailing order. Into the institutional situation. Into the established world.

Revolution and art can and must help each other in these passages. All "good" art is revolutionary art because it rethinks or re-tests this passage. It cannot be propaganda, but might very well ask whether art can come into being with propaganda in mind. This means to say that art can sustain a tension between scepticism and commitment while accepting, at the same time, a political instrumentalisation of its "statements". What is crucial in this connection is the maintenance of the plastic process's own inner necessity. For it is this necessity that ensures the open in the process of becoming and thereby also in the interpretation and experience of the work in question.

 "Good" revolutions leave the exploration of the open to art. They do not expect that propaganda will enter into art, only that art will not be alien to anything, not even to questions involving the abolition of money, of passports and of the police force. Both revolution and art have to be ready and willing, which is to say, prepared to move from

the open in struggle and creation to the opening up of the prevailing order. This also constitutes, however, the dangerous point for both of them.

There are, accordingly, dangers that are connected with art. And it is danger that ties revolution to art, much in the way that the open tied art to revolution.

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