

in: Daniel Dewaele "Intermedia Art.
Art and Society Are there Solutions?"
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Is there a rupture between contemporary expressions of art, and society?

(For: "Art and society, are there solutions?", edited by Daniël Dewaele)

The question in the title of this paper concerns expressions. It concerns codes. It asks: "are the codes, in which artistic messages are published, decipherable by the public?". This is a good question. The answer depends, of course, on what we mean by "artistic message", and by "public". If, by "artistic message", we mean any model of experience, and if we mean by "public" every human being, then we shall have one sort of answer to our question. If, by "artistic message", we mean a very special kind of model of experience, and if we mean by "public" the intended receivers of that message, then we shall have a different sort of answer to our question. Let me consider both formulations of the question.

(1) The wider formulation: Artistic messages, in the sense of models of experience of any sort, are being at present coded in technical images like photographs, films and television programs. All other and more traditional codes, like texts, music, and gesture, and even that once upon a time dominant code of the spoken word, are at present subservient to the code of the technical images. The reason is that technical images are apparently very easy to decipher. Anybody able to get at their meaning. To read texts, one must learn the meaning of letters. To listen to a specific music, one must have some experience with its cultural context. Gestures have meanings which depend on some conventions which must be participated in by the receivers of their message.

To understand what is being said, we must learn the language. But

technical images do not seem to require any "initiation": their

meaning seem to be, quite obviously, a situation in the world.

The world reflects rays, those rays are captured by sensitive sur-

faces, and the result is a technical image. Thus the image is the ef-

fect of its meanings. It is not a true symbol, and needs not to be

deciphered. Anybody who looks at such an image, can see through it

and into the world. Thus, if we take the technical images at their

face value, the answer to our question is easy: Never before in histo-

ry have artistic messages had such a wide public. Or, to put it in

the terms of the question of the title: Never before in history have

artistic expressions reached society with such cosmopolitan impact

as they do at present. In fact, we can observe how, all over the world,

people are experiencing the world and their lives according to the

same models.

But of course, there is a problem. The technical images are not what

they seem to be. They are not "objective reflections" of the world.

They have been coded by some apparatus. They do not mean what they

seem to mean, but they mean what those who programmed them wanted them

to mean. To get at that true meaning of theirs, one must decipher them.

But that is extremely difficult, and it requires a sophisticated criti-

cal attitude. Very few of us are able to assume it. Those who can find

out that the technical images which claim to be models of experience,

"artistic", are in reality models of behavior, "political". Their real

purpose is not to provide their receivers with a new kind of experien-

ce, but to program them for a kind of behavior which suits the pro-

grammers. This leads to a reformulation of the answer to our question:

Never before in history have artistic messages better served hidden interests as they do at present, and never before have they succeeded better to program the behavior of such a wide public. Or, to put it in the terms of the question in the title: Never before in history have artistic expressions modelled the behavior of society so violently and so efficiently as they do at present.

(2) The stricter formulation: Artistic messages, in the stricter sense, are the result of an effort on the part of a person to communicate his experience, his "aistheton", to other people, so that it may serve as a model of experience for those people. The person who makes that effort, the "artist", does not have isolated experiences, but all his experiences have been modelled by previous "artists". He is part of the "history of art". What he is trying to do is add one more experience to the ones already articulated. There is a contradiction: On the one hand, the artist continues a discourse, on the other hand he wants to change it. He can overcome that contradiction, if he discovers, invents or proposes a new code for his message. Thus he will have "said" something that was "said" before, but he will have "said" it in a new way. Now new codes are very difficult to decipher. To do it, one must know the old code from which the new one originated, and one must find out what new elements or rules were introduced into the old code. Thus, every artistic messages in the strict sense of the term is, of necessity, hermetic. This was always the case, and it is so at present. The artist has always had a restricted public, and this is also true of the present. Or, to put it in the terms of the question of the title: artistic expressions have always reached a small part of society only, and the always was a rupture between the expression of art and society.

But this is, of course, not what the question means. In the past, before technical images were invented, this is how the artistic message reached society at large after all: A few people, (let us call them the "critics"), deciphered the message, and they transmitted it to an ever larger public. Thus, slowly, it became decipherable for an ever larger number of people, and some artistic messages ended up modelling the experience of entire societies. This is no longer possible at present, because society at large no longer needs such difficult models. It has easy models at its disposal. And this new fact poses the artist in an impossible situation. He must either content himself with a restricted public, without any hope to ever reach society at large. Or he must permit the programmers of the "mass media", of the technical images, to re-code his message, change its intended meaning, if he wants to reach society at large. This is what the question in the title of this paper means by "rupture". Here is, therefore, the answer to the question in a stricter formulation: Contemporary expressions of art are of necessity hermetic, and they can reach society only if they are recoded by the mass media. They become decipherable thus, but they gain a new meaning, not intended by the artist.

Let me resume this two answers: At present, society is being informed by powerful expressions of art, which are in reality models of behavior, and this is mass culture". "Artists" can hope to introduce their own expressions into that culture only if they permit the programmers of mass culture to re-code their message. Any other effort to reach society is doomed to failure.