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## Legitimizing the Artist: Avant-Garde Utopianism and Relational Aesthetics

Modernity puts the artist in the peculiar position of having to justify him or herself in a social and economic environment whose values privilege logic and reason in an efficient and calculable space. The appropriation of religious asceticism by capitalist culture perpetuates a social scene in which all individuals are expected to live according to a pious value system that emphasizes submission to God or the controlling institutions and the denial of pleasures and frivolities.<sup>1</sup> The logic of this social scene pushes for a routine, an ordering of human behavior to maintain only its purposeful, necessary, and true components. It is in this pragmatic and ascetic space that the artist is forced to argue his or her usefulness and legitimize his or her existence to the community. In looking at this act of rationalization, let us take three concise steps to map the dual function of the rational and irrational elements of legitimizing art and what space art has occupied because of this act of legitimation. First we must examine the diminished position the artist has because of the marginalization of art, which the capitalist economy turns to commodity, and the skepticism science, which Nietzsche views as the successor of asceticism, holds towards art. Second, we will take the Futurist movement as a hyperbolic example of avant-garde attempts to legitimize the artist through an ideological stance perpetuated by manifestos. Their redefinition of the role of the artist as almost a facilitator for a spectator-driven art rationalizes the marginalized position the capitalist economy assigns them while conceptually undermining the bourgeois commoditization of art. Lastly, we will reflect on this renegotiated position of the artist removed from his or her singular, autonomous, and heroic role in an attempt to fulfill the avant-garde desire to collapse art and life that relational aesthetics has taken as its project. Has opening the boundaries of art to the social whole eradicated its unique and autonomous field

along with the authority of the artist? Has the institutionalization of the avant-garde tradition rationalized away art's potency in the political and social arena?

#### ART AS THE NEGLECTED ALTERNATIVE LOGIC

Before delving into the revolutionary rhetoric of the avant-garde, a conceptual understanding of why there was a need for this legitimizing move first must be established. Lucas Somigli opens his book, *Legitimizing the Artist*, with a discussion of the halo or aura that Karl Marx and Max Engels argue is stripped away due to regularization, especially wage-labor. This halo, or special trait, that is aligned with the artist (or any occupation for that matter) is a myth that tries to naturalize an historical and social position by making each individual role appear special and unique. Somigli argues that this halo effect then only allows the artist to be more easily integrated into the dominant class. If the artist accepts this role of the inspired individual producing original work, he or she becomes only part of bourgeois consumerism and commoditization.<sup>2</sup> Despite this double-edged sword of the modern environment, Somigli posits that the dimming of the artist's halo and the constant fear of its disappearance must be dealt with either by finding a new trait that justifies the artist's special role or by the artist learning to operate as an artist not distinguishable from the non-artist.<sup>3</sup> This loss of aura is not necessarily a tragedy, as the Futurists would agree, but rather a liberation. Walter Benjamin defines aura as evidence of, or a link to, uniqueness, tradition, and ritual,<sup>4</sup> all of these being clear enemies of the Futurist agenda of creating a new and modern Italy. For Benjamin, the reproduction lacks this aura but it also has enhanced capabilities that the original does not, such as ease in movement and exhibition, a clear convenience in an art world that is more interested in exhibition than ritual. In this model, the artist easily becomes not the original and auratic creator but a celebrity dependent on commodity culture itself. The push for exhibition spreads from the artwork to the artist as a figure explaining the reputation and reverence that artists like Filippo Marinetti, Andy Warhol, or Jackson Pollock receive from the art world and from a popular audience.

This precarious position of having to redefine the role and function of the artist comes from art's place as a second-class logic in the rational and scientific thought of the Enlightenment. According to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the Enlightenment was based on a desire to demystify the human experience in order to forward understanding through regularization, method, and subsequently, the exploitation of the individuals that submit to this idea of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Scientific reason best exemplified these values of method and measurement and thus has taken the privileged seat of the dominant logic of enlightened thought. However, it does neglect certain phenomena such as pleasure, particularity, and representation when it emphasizes method, measurement, categorization, and especially objectivity. This becomes clear with Horkheimer and Adorno's example of the varying views of life that enlightened or scientific thought has compared to that of mythical or humanist thought. Science sees the individual creature as arbitrary and unimportant in the scheme of an experiment. The creature's uniqueness is eradicated in rational thought where "a rabbit suffering the torment of the laboratory is seen not as a representative but, mistakenly, as a mere exemplar".<sup>6</sup> With this mindset, scientific reason fuels the technical and material take-over in the culture industry and defines the dominant rationality as one of mechanization, production, and strict pragmatism.<sup>7</sup>

It appears to be in this numbed, unconscious, and uncritical space of the culture industry or the spectacle that the modern artist tries to regain the individual, though not particularly the artist's individuality. The call to arms of early avant-garde movements posits the artist's role as one which brings a consciousness necessary to revolution.<sup>8</sup> This new consciousness is directed particularly to the worker, the cog of mechanized industry who has been estranged from him or herself by rationality and production. While Mark Antliff does point out that much revolutionary rhetoric and artwork turns to the anesthetization of the political and increasing the market value of art in the gallery system, art's tradition is based on revolution and radical gestures that challenge society and its values in a way that will affect the public, raise consciousness, and allow entry of critical thought. This is

the avant-garde ideal that contemporary art must renegotiate because of its failure to manifest such positive social results, a feat crippled, if not doomed, by the functions of the culture industry. The rising interest in anarchy, annihilation, multiplicity, and resistance in such groups as the Aristocrats, Futurists, Cubists, and Neo-Symbolists did, however, exemplify the potential of uprooting the dominant logic of reason and its resulting unconsciousness even if their overly romanticized aims were not accomplished.<sup>9</sup> While it is fair to say that avant-garde work has not gotten society to utopia, its failure to do so has not eliminated continued utopian thought.

The basis of this enhanced potential of art in a science-driven rational society lies in its completely contrary logic to asceticism and its successor, science. Nietzsche rejects the idea that science could oppose ascetic values because the two fields share the same will and ideals. Both science and asceticism rest on the foundation of a glorification of a truth that cannot be questioned or challenged. In order to forward this trust in truth, science and asceticism had to marginalize desire. Nietzsche clearly states: "science rests on the same foundation as the ascetic ideal: a certain *impoverishment of life* is a presupposition of both of them".<sup>10</sup> Science, in fact, becomes a modernization of the ascetic for enlightened thought as its methods belittle the importance of humanity and slip into explaining natural phenomena farther and farther away into nothingness. When science can move no further the default is to credit these mysteries to God, only supporting the continued power of the ascetic, which holds the answers to any question that our most rational field of knowledge cannot conquer.<sup>11</sup>

As science and asceticism can only circularly support one another, Nietzsche argues for an external force to oppose and antagonize the supposed rationality and privileged position of asceticism and its modern equivalent, science. Art becomes this field of opposition because its sanctification of the lie and its will to deceive are contrary to asceticism and science's emphasis on truth and knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Art allows for the blurring of truth and lie, of reality and fantasy in a model that does not attempt an objective understanding of nature nor push for the diminishment of the individual. What is important in challenging the ascetic is not the artist as

an individual or a social role, but the potential of questioning reason and reality in a social space that the field of art affords. In an artistic model that is not corrupted by asceticism the interest lies in the process of creation and not the final product, avoiding the commoditization of art objects.

While pure art may aim for these ideals, the mechanisms of the art world and the process of reaching outside the art world to a wider audience require a corruption. The manifesto is one obvious attempt to bridge the gap between artistic irrationality and enlightened rationality. The manifesto first allows an art movement to invest in a capitalist model by chartering a group with a certain ideology and gathering symbolic capital through the influence of the group's constituents.<sup>13</sup> The manifesto also creates functional roles by defining the objectives of a movement to which the artist holds and against which the critic measures. Equally, the manifesto functions as an advertisement for both potential members and an audience interested in consuming the products of the group.<sup>14</sup> Beyond advertisement, the manifesto is used to train the potential audience in the aesthetic values of the group. Lastly, a key factor regarding the genre of manifestos is its aggressive and strident tone. Artistic manifestos of the early avant-garde were meant to be declarations rather than discussions and were purposely antagonistic and direct.<sup>15</sup> Often the goal of an avant-garde manifesto is to create a rupture between a piece of art and society's value system, though many avant-garde groups failed at this, simply destroying traditional or established conventions only to replace them with another set of rules.<sup>16</sup> If the field of art is to challenge ascetic and scientific values of reason, then clearly an alternate logic, view, or structure need be erected. Maintaining the assumptions and functions of a rational value system compromises too much of art's potential, as Nietzsche adamantly warned.

However, we must remember that the avant-garde was breaking new ground in many ways and the art world is still wrestling with renegotiating the goals of the historical avant-garde and its often idealistic understanding of the social and political implications of their work. An attempt to democratize the elitist structure of the museum, gallery, and art critic and historian by widening the art audience

and working with non-traditional media is a primary step towards reorganizing the value system of a calculable, predictable, and rational space that imposes itself on art-making. While some avant-garde art journals and movements were still elitist and wanted to limit criticism and input from the general public, other groups, like the Futurists, were interested in centralizing the audience as the seat of the art experience.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most significant goal of the avant-garde was to blur the boundary between art and life in a way that de-commodifies art and removes it from a position of privilege and elitism. The art world needs an art object that is easy to exhibit and sell, while avant-garde work slowly moved away from object-based art, making for less desirable consumer objects and increased difficulty in exhibition. This gap only increases with contemporary installation and sculpture, though contemporary art's relationship to the avant-garde is troubled and confused. While the complete release of art from elitism is yet to be accomplished, the avant-garde did open the door to the possibility of bringing an alternate logic to the general public by first embracing such mechanisms as advertising and publishing manifestos in mainstream periodicals. While this does introduce rather early on the problem of blending art and spectacle rather than art and life, it is still important to turn to the early avant-garde as the birth of many conflicts such as a continued naïve attempt at democratization and the repetition of styles divorced from ideology that contemporary art struggles with today; a struggle that persists because an alternate logic has not yet been fully developed by the field of art that is still compromised by enlightened rationality and its values.

#### **FUTURISM: THE PEAK OF AVANT-GARDE IDEALISM**

Futurism is an appropriate movement to examine in looking at this renegotiation of the artist and the field of art as a protagonistic blending of art and life largely because Futurism saddles the political and artistic, the autonomous art object and the free subject arising from audience interpretation, and the employment of popular culture while maintaining its anti-establishment ideology. Announcing itself with its first manifesto published in *Figaro* in 1912, the Futurist

movement took interest in making art relevant to modern life by glorifying the urban environment and the machine while rejecting convention and the institutionalism of art. Led by Filippo Marinetti, Futurism's flamboyancy and pointed desire to infiltrate social and political life repositions the artist from the margins of bourgeois leisure to the facilitator of a proletariat reappropriation of political space. However, Futurism is critiqued for being a confused and unclear call to arms for artists to revolutionize the political and social sphere<sup>18</sup> and, in fact, for falling victim to a commodity-driven economy and suppression of influence by an increasingly powerful Italian Fascist party. While past foci of research regarding the Futurist movement are diverse and expansive, of particular interest is the revolutionary rhetoric of the movement's extensive use of manifestos to forward artistic ideals that were and continue to be problematic in the field of art and in imagining the purpose art should serve alongside politics, economics, and entertainment. Outlining the artistic ideals of the Futurists results in four major traits that remain relevant to the challenges facing contemporary art and Relational Aesthetics in particular.

#### **FASCIST AND FUTURIST PERFORMANCE**

While the Futurist involvement in Fascist Italy often causes Futurism to be dismissed as an aesthetic pawn of Fascism, the two movements did have major ideological differences that pushed the Fascist government to try to corner Futurism as an art movement alone, despite the fact that the Futurists also had a small active political party. On the surface, Futurism and Fascism were both interested in building a new national identity for Italy through militant means.<sup>19</sup> However a closer look at each movement's interest in war as a means to forward a nation shows a fundamental difference of opinion. The Fascists saw war as a morally and spiritually purifying act that would come to show Italy as a superior power in the international sector.<sup>20</sup> Futurism, on the other hand, was interested in war as pure action without contemplation, as a spectacle rather than a tool for developing a national identity.<sup>21</sup> Benito Mussolini was not interested in Futurism and saw little

potential in its chaotic and anarchistic nature, which excluded his emphasis on spiritual development, an idealization of Italy's past, and rebuilding a new elite.<sup>22</sup> Italian Fascism was invested in maintaining older institutions that Futurism was eager to destroy as markers of the past, such as the church and monarchy.<sup>23</sup>

Mussolini and the Italian Fascists did, however, borrow the sloganizing performance quality of Futurist rhetoric. The Futurists stressed ideology before the actual art object and their prolific production of countless manifestos attests to this phenomenon. Curiously, the manifesto as a genre comes out of a socialist political tradition, with the *Communist Manifesto* as the most well-known modern political manifesto. The manifesto then becomes a bridge through which art and politics may speak to one another while simultaneously questioning the divide between the two discourses.<sup>24</sup> Futurist manifestos did change the rhetoric of the socialist political manifesto by moving away from theory and contemplation into pure action and theatricality, pushing the manifesto to be both word and deed.<sup>25</sup> Even the distribution of Futurist manifestos was a performance: they would be delivered in town squares or thrown from airplanes onto the potential readers below. Italian Fascism adopted this active and performative rhetoric in order to rally supporters and create a united national front. In order for the Fascists to be successful at monopolizing political thought, they strongly suppressed attempts by art groups like the Futurists to write revolutionary or militant manifestos that in any way veered from the field of art.<sup>26</sup> While the rallying power of Futurism could be salvaged, the Futurist ideal of blending art and politics would have to be abolished or it would be a threat to a totalitarian government that would crumble under an empowerment of the proletariat that Futurism envisioned with the opening of art and politics to the everyman.

#### **ACTION OVER PASSÉISM AND THE BLENDING OF ART AND LIFE.**

Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli write in their 1914 manifesto "Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius – Futurist Manifesto" that by breaking from the past, art moves away from being a sublime ideal, allowing the artist to "find his

place in life, along with the butcher and the tyre-manufacturer, the grave-digger and the speculator, the engineer and the farmer".<sup>27</sup> The ultimate goal of Futurism was to break from the past, creating an enlivened future and a modern Italy that did not lean on its past accomplishments. In order to create a new national identity for a floundering Italy, Marinetti thought it was necessary that the country be shaken to its core and shed the past ideals and institutions that were holding Italy back from industrial progression. What Futurism, and the avant-garde in general, was trying to accomplish was an overthrow of bourgeois ideals, one of which was an elitist and autonomous art divided from other discourses. The Futurist push for the destruction of the past then goes hand in hand with eradicating the divide between art and life.<sup>28</sup> The Futurist response to a marginalized space for the artist and an art that is losing its aura is to turn around and embrace the freedom from originality, tradition, and the surrounding aura as the very condition of modernity.<sup>29</sup> As Benjamin has argued, this turn from the past and tradition pushes the practice of art into a political rather than ritualistic practice.<sup>30</sup>

Futurism, from its inception, envisioned and modeled itself as a political party and was interested in social activism, especially unionization.<sup>31</sup> Rather than weighing itself down with theoretical contemplation and philosophical ideology, Futurism advocated action without reflection to create an uprising that, despite its chaos, would somehow intervene in the social and political sphere to enact change in what Futurism imagined as an increasingly classless society. Taking on a new political role, the artist becomes a "social entrepreneur, a revolutionary agitator, a protagonist of the political and social change of his own time" rather than a specialist confined to his or her discipline as bourgeois art and its concern in maintaining its autonomy would advocate.<sup>32</sup> Futurism defines art as an integrated part of life rather than an autonomous and separate discourse dependent on aura, or an art-for-art's-sake nostalgia for the auratic, thus positing Futurism as a radical break from bourgeois ideals despite the trouble Futurism and other avant-garde groups run into with commodity culture.

**TURNING AWAY FROM OBJECT-BASED ART**

In Futurism's turn away from tradition, it had to reject the autonomous standing of art pieces and the status of genius that was given to the artist. In order to accomplish this with some daring, the Futurist painters perceived their work as spaces or environments rather than as objects, allowing for a non-hierarchical relationship between the work and its subject or viewer. While the Futurists created work in many media such as music, poetry, and theatre, it is appropriate to turn to painting in particular for a moment as it is an oxymoronic space for a Futurism that wants to defy tradition but continues to use oil painting, the medium par excellence of the salon and the gallery. Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini's "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto" of 1910 posits Futurist painting as the interaction between the viewer and the painting, not as objects to be consumed.<sup>33</sup> Rather than construct the painting as an autonomous object, the Futurist painter only initiates an exchange that the audience completes. Instead of being an object of personal pleasure, the painting becomes potential energy in a social and political exchange.<sup>34</sup> This is an early precursor to relational aesthetics that still problematizes the purpose of art and its relationship to the art world.

While Futurism was an early attempt at escaping art as an autonomous object, Futurist painting was still very object-based, though it did try to escape the thematic by accentuating not the subject of the painting but the relationships between objects and their surroundings within the space of the canvas. The interest in these paintings became one of process and movement rather than of the object itself, which Giacomo Balla's 1912 painting *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* exemplifies. Rather than being about the dog or about the woman walking the dog, the painting superimposes views over time to depict the movement of the dog and the woman's legs as well as the leash to showcase the simultaneous and dynamic state, not the object itself.<sup>35</sup> Not only did Futurists rethink the subject of more traditional art objects; they also adopted objects that are not usually thought of as an art medium. Futurism refused to be limited to traditional media, advocating the blending of

existing media and the creation of new media.<sup>36</sup> Balla, along with other Futurists, took up clothing design as an outlet through which to act upon their environment to liberate the masses from bourgeois conventions of dress. Futurist clothing was meant to be progressive and display technological advancement which, despite the misogynistic rhetoric of Futurism as a whole, allowed for an empowering of the female form that Fascist Italy quickly tried to suppress.<sup>37</sup> Futurist work was never successful on the art market as even the more object-like pieces, such as paintings, were seen as inferior work. By nature many Futurist pieces, whether they be clothing, poems, or theatre pieces, was also not easy to exhibit in the traditional gallery space. In this way, Futurist flaunted their escape from conventional art practice.

#### **FUTURISM BECOMING COMMODITY**

Despite Futurism's claim to function outside the traditional space of art, there are crucial contradictions within its philosophy. Futurism claimed that rather than contemplating the art object in a gallery setting, their art encouraged distraction, chaos and the unknown of the site of reception and interpretation in the centralized spectator. Benjamin problematizes this claim by arguing that contemplation allows the art object to absorb the viewer while distraction allows the viewer to absorb the art object unconsciously and without purpose.<sup>38</sup> What the Futurist model seems to do, then, is support the blind act of consumption that is characteristic of consumer culture or of Adorno's culture industry. Marinetti himself champions the role of the celebrity or icon in his flamboyant self-promotion and self-performance. Some critics even argue that Marinetti only used the discourse of politics as a good stage for advertising the self.<sup>39</sup> Marinetti's vision of the artist replacing the lawyer as representative of the order of social life would aestheticize the social and political to the point where life is a work of art in itself.<sup>40</sup> Marinetti and the Futurists obviously saw potential in mass culture and played with the role of celebrity but their radical position on the positives of popular culture teeters dangerously close to spectacle and to falling victim to absorption into commercial culture.

Futurism relished popular culture as a tool to counter high culture and thus heavily employed advertisements, posters, and manifestos that diverged from art.<sup>41</sup> They saw popular culture as a celebration of the loss of aura and often performed in popular rather than institutional spaces.<sup>42</sup> This interest and use of the popular clashed with the anarchist ideal of the Futurist movement as the increased commercialization of the movement began to negate any anarchist political potential it may have had.<sup>43</sup> Critics, such as Robert Jensen, even posit Futurism as guilty of spreading an “abstract aestheticism” rather than opening access for masses to enact political and social change.<sup>44</sup> The Futurist ideals of liberation and freedom are compromised by the movement’s own duality of both employing and refuting the institution and convention. For instance, Marinetti’s own call to destroy traditional syntax in his 1913 manifesto, “Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in-Freedom” claims to offer a linguistic state in which images and analogies are free from connection and order.<sup>45</sup> The manifesto advocates no longer using “I” because it is a marker of the bourgeois subject as autonomous and calls for the use of the infinitive form to erase individuality itself to rally a collective whole.<sup>46</sup> The problem with all these claims is that in order to achieve this freedom that Marinetti offers, one must abide by the rules he outlines.<sup>47</sup> This move seems less revolutionary and more a replacement of a convention that fails to alter the logic of that convention’s institution. Even the manifesto’s insistence on the use of “we” is merely a collection of elite “I”s that dictates an ideology to the masses rather than negotiating an ideology with the general public.<sup>48</sup> All of these ideological contradictions that Futurism produces but does not address become both bane of and fodder for later art movements, which try to clarify them through the increased prevalence of installation work and the rise of relational aesthetics.

**CONTEMPORARY ART AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS:****CONTEMPLATION VERSUS DISTRACTION**

What effects do avant-garde work and rhetoric really have for the field of art and its place in society, and where does this leave contemporary art, especially the Neo-Avant-Garde and Relational art? First let us discuss the Neo-Avant-Garde as a symptom of the avant-garde. As a loose term for various individuals and larger idealist groups like the Situationist International, Neo-Avant-Gardism sprouted after the Second World War to contemplate the continued potential of Avant-Garde revolutionary rhetoric in the social and political sphere. The Neo-Avant-Garde must first cope with its relationship to the avant-garde before its project can really be understood. The first major realization that it must address is that art and life cannot be fully integrated, as the avant-garde failure to do this exemplifies. Despite this failure, the Neo-Avant-Garde idealizes the avant-garde to the point of canonizing its work, a complete contradiction to the avant-garde project of breaking down an autonomous art. In addition, the Neo-Avant-Garde functions mainly through repetition of avant-garde work in order to derive meaning. In this way, the Neo-Avant-Garde returns to the auratic model of an original and a copy.<sup>49</sup> Not only does this repetition return art to the auratic, but it also reinvests art into a space of contemplation rather than distraction, making it once again the object of bourgeois consumption. Benjamin Buchloh uses Yves Klein's copies of Rodchenko triptych *Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue* to highlight Klein's project of determining what difference there may be between a painter and a technician— in essence, whether or not originary genius is what separates the artist from the everyman. Klein asks his audience to contemplate the difference between his copy and Rodchenko's original, a far cry from liberating art from the art world or reinvesting art into the social body. Contrary to this, Rodchenko wanted to excise the mystery and exclusivity of bourgeois contemplation by removing poetic, atmospheric, and symbolic meaning through canvases of pure primary color.<sup>50</sup> The genius of the artist is nowhere to be found; the artist does not even have to mix paints. The Neo-Avant-Garde returns the avant-garde to bourgeois art by turning avant-garde work into fetishistic objects of contemplation.

Early avant-garde movements like Futurism show the fine line between pure performance or spectacle and a productive union of art and life, while the Neo-Avant-Garde makes evident how easy it is for art to fall back into contemplation and the bourgeois model. Relational Aesthetics is one art project that tries to abate both problems by tempering the avant-garde utopian dream of full integration of art and life while continuing to avoid contemplation as a method of art production and reception. Though its success is debatable, the project is an important contribution to the avant-garde desire to resituate the field of art as a part of social and political reality. Relational Aesthetics is interested in collective and collaborative work that negates the artist as the sole producer, as well as the artist's role as genius, by blurring the distinction between the work artists do inside and outside of their studios. This collaborative work is meant to rehumanize an audience made numb by capitalism and increased mechanization.<sup>51</sup> Like the avant-garde, Relational Aesthetics is interested in exchange and negotiation between the audience and the art rather than in the properties of the art-object itself. Futurists began this project by stressing the centrality of the spectator over the art or the artist, but Relational Aesthetics takes this project a little further by making aesthetics, especially beauty, less of a consideration— to the point of obliteration in many cases. For instance, Jens Haaning's *Turkish Jokes* consists of a van touring Copenhagen while reciting Turkish jokes over a loud speaker to raise a sense of community within the Turkish population of the city.<sup>52</sup> By turning away from aesthetics, Relational Aesthetics emphasizes identity politics. While the avant-garde had also rejected the necessity of aesthetics, it did so in a defiant and often offensive way to snuff at the art world. Relational Aesthetics is not usually interested in insulting or making a hard break from the art world, but in performing the aesthetic and the social together.

Along with emphasizing the political over the aesthetic, Relational Aesthetics privileges creating relationships in the present over contemplating a future. Most Relational art takes the form of an installation or performance piece, but rather than transforming a space to one of contemplation, as standard installation aims to do, Relational Aesthetics is interested in highlighting the use-value of the space.<sup>53</sup> Liam

Gillick's art is a clear example of work that is constructed to merely provide a space for the audience to interact in with other audience members or to interact with the piece itself. Works like *Big Conference Centre Legislation Screen* serve to section off a space where people can converse or even hide. Gillick describes his work as a backdrop for activity rather than an object for consideration, stating: "My work is like the light in the fridge [...] it only works when there are people there to open the fridge door. Without people, it's not art—it's something else—stuff in a room".<sup>54</sup> What becomes crucial to Relational Aesthetics is the very presence and contribution of the audience. Nicholas Bourriaud argues that Relational Aesthetics refuses Utopia in order to look to the present and to building communities, neighbors, and relations, a clear ideological break from Futurism that invests in futurity and the chaos of the moment. Crucial to the success of relational art then is how the piece addresses the audience and what type of existence the piece permits them to experience. Bourriaud considers relational pieces that create interstices between relations with the audience more successful than those that work to manage the public, which maintains the central role of the artist.<sup>55</sup>

Both Gillick's art and Bourriaud's model for Relational Aesthetics advocate an open-ended art that can be interpreted or used in multiple ways. Each performance of the work then is individually fulfilling but never complete or exhausted, as there are an infinite number of versions of a single open-ended work. Even on an individual level, the artwork remains flexible as the spectator changes.<sup>56</sup> Because relational art is centered on the relationship between the spectator and the piece, the mood of the spectator affects the reception of the piece. While this may be liberating compared to the confines of bourgeois contemplation, it does run the risk of being purely relative and thus politically impotent. By being open-ended and concentrating emphasis on the viewer, Relational Aesthetics passes itself off as democratic, but this is not necessarily the case. Rirkrit Tiravanija's work is often critiqued for only giving the semblance of democracy in its open and welcoming form of a kitchen with cooking supplies, however, the space is used almost exclusively by the art elite and the typical gallery audience, creating a networking

space but not a socially democratic space.<sup>57</sup> Others like Santiago Sierra attempt to critique how exclusive the art world is despite its acceptance of open-ended work in pieces such as *The Wall of a Gallery Pulled Out, Inclined Sixty Degrees from the Ground and Sustained by Five People* where he limits who is allowed to participate in the exhibit or *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* where he bleaches street vendors' hair and allows them to sell their designer knock-offs in the museum. Both pieces highlight how exclusive and elitist the art world remains regardless of the ideals contemporary art has of an increasingly democratic art space.

This is precisely the problem avant-garde contradictions unearthed and contemporary art must juggle: the problem of trying to create a politically potent art that brings agency to the viewer rather than suppressing the viewer in a spectacle or façade of supposed open-ended democratic equality. The continued autonomy of the art world undermines much of the political impact art can actually make by confining it almost exclusively to the discourse of art. The desire of Relational Aesthetics to create a more critically aware audience that escapes spectacle is laudable but often not empowering. Many of the political art pieces created under the guise of open-ended democratic art are superficial because they can only show or perpetuate the problem rather than change the negative circumstances they critique.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary art, and Relational Aesthetics in particular, have maintained the tradition and desires of the avant-garde but have shed many of its ideological and teleological claims. What has crippled both the avant-garde and Relational Aesthetics, however, is their difficulty in arriving at the pure action that the Futurists marked as the answer to empowering art's potential in the social realm.

In the face of the avant-garde's failure to marry art and life and an art world that often supports spectacle, contemporary art has turned to a compromise that lays down the revolutionary rhetoric of the manifesto as outdated and unsuccessful and embraces any small victory of the present. The 2002 group exhibit in Venice titled *Utopian Station* provides an analogy for where art after the avant-garde has positioned itself. Here art has given up on thinking of a complete Utopia of a paradisaical future and has made for itself a way station or stepping stone to continue

thinking about utopian potential in the present without being dominated by a need to manifest utopia itself.<sup>59</sup> Utopia is no longer a goal but a catalyst allowing artists to “meet to pool together [their] efforts, motivated by a need to change the landscape outside and inside, a need to think, a need to integrate the work of the artist, the intellectual and manual labourers that we are into a larger kind of community, another kind of economy, a bigger conversation, another state of being”.<sup>60</sup> Contemporary art then sounds like a rhetorically toned-down avant-garde, considering that Marinetti and the Futurists argued for almost the same goal of blending art and life, increasing unionization, and making the everyman the audience for art. Relational Aesthetics, like Futurism before it, is critiqued for simply aestheticizing the political, social, and economic, as well as the very process of art itself, creating a glossy and rosy picture of a democratic art that is actually a spectacle obscuring existing power structures, resilient elitisms and the bourgeois autonomy of the art world.<sup>61</sup>

What say we then of our original question of whether breaking the boundaries between art and life has eradicated bourgeois autonomy and the authority of the artist, and if the avant-garde tradition has rationalized away art's potency in the political and social arena? It is safe to say that the boundary between art and life has been maintained even if that wall has thinned after a century of assault. The project to undermine bourgeois autonomy continues, though many have abandoned this work and turned to pure aesthetics and the return of the beautiful art-object, especially in traditional media like sculpture and painting. Perhaps it is the continued specialization various discourses uphold and the rarity of truly interdisciplinary work that make it difficult to see how art is applicable in the political and social arena, or maybe the bourgeois stronghold of art cannot be undermined by such modernist rhetoric as the manifesto and the revolutionary, blatant attempts to rationalize the irrational, chaotic, or anarchistic. Though problematic, the avant-garde opened discussion on rethinking modernist logic and bourgeois behaviour. While its products and ideologies may have failed to fulfill their utopian goals, and its contradictions often created spectacle rather than critical

art, historical significance of the avant-garde is undeniable. In the art world, at least, the avant-garde did cause a glimmer of a shift in art's potency and self-awareness, the seed of which continues to be nourished, critiqued, rejected, idealized, considered, or ignored. All the same, the avant-garde has shown us that art does have the potential to rethink political and social structures, though we have yet to construct a method of enacting that in practice or of divorcing it from spectacles that reinvest in bourgeois consumerism. In fact, the success of a relational art piece is determined by how effectively it manifests these negotiations. Viewing the avant-garde, like utopia, as a catalyst rather than a fallen star may be our first conceptual baby step toward making the avant-garde project approachable again.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 3 Ibid., 12.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," In *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-252.
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- 30 *Ibid.*, 224.
- 31 Giovanni Lista, "The Activist Model; or, the Avant-Garde as Italian Invention," trans. Scott Sheridan, *South Central Review* 13, no. 2/3 (1996): 24.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 33 Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrá, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto," 27-31.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 35 Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, trans. Robert Brain, R. W. Flint, J. C. Higgitt, and Caroline Tisdall (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 12; Bowler, "Politics as art," 779.
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