How to Change the World by Art?

Boris Groys
New York University, New York, NY, USA
bg57@nyu.edu

At least since the era of Romanticism one asked the question: How can art influence an individual and the whole society. Or, in other words, how to change the world by art? Shelling (in his Philosophy of Art) believed in the ability—and even duty—of art to create a new mythology, a new faith that would define the social life. Hegel, on the contrary, contended that mankind entered a new era in which art has lost its organizing, life-building function. According to Hegel’s Aesthetics, the modern world is subjected to the (invisible) rule of law in which “picture thinking” has no place and, thus, it is a world in which art becomes a thing of the past. One can describe the avant-garde as an attempt to combine these two opposing positions. Indeed, the artists of the avant-garde believed that the influence of the artworks on the spectator is, in a certain way, invisible—or, at least, necessarily overlooked.

Thus, in his book, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky states that “pictures” lost their attractiveness and their meaning for the exhibition audience: people are not really interested in the contents depicted in these pictures. However, at the same time people—being too much concentrated on the topics of the pictures—overlook the hidden influence that is exerted on them by colours and forms of these pictures. Thus, according to Kandinsky, the artists are still able to influence their public—but this influence remains hidden, subconscious, overlooked by the same public. Characteristically, Kandinsky vehemently rejected the understanding of his own paintings in terms of style: he believed that they are, rather, a teaching material for the artists and even thought about a machine that can use his method to influence the public.

The same can be said in general about the art of the avant-garde. From Mondrian to Bauhaus the artists and architects believed that the artistic use of elementary geometrical forms will produce in the people a desire for equality, transparency, simplicity and social harmony. On the contrary, Marinetti hoped that the Italian futurism will ignite in its public enthusiasm and readiness for sacrifice in the name of the Italian nation. In other words: the avant-garde artists did not only recognise that the medium is the message but wanted to
appropriate and control this message, to use the structurally overlooked message of the medium to influence the society in which they lived.

Thus, the question “Is a new avant-garde possible today?” is connected to the question to what degree—in our era of the Internet—art is still able to become a messenger or even a master of its medium. In the framework of the Internet itself it seems improbable. On the Internet the artist remains a content provider. The form and the medium are dictated by the software and hardware that are not and cannot be controlled by the artists. So it seems that the only way to thematise the medium is an artistic installation/exhibition. The space of the exhibition is empty, neutral—and, thus, it allows the artists to design it according to their intents. Such an installation/exhibition can also include software and hardware—and allow for their explicit thematisation. So it seems that a new avant-garde can only work—and, actually, works—not with images and objects but with spaces and the laws that control them. In this respect it continues the paradoxical combination between Shelling’s and Hegel’s aesthetics which the historical avant-garde has already attempted.