

# From avant-garde aesthetics to everyday aesthetics: two ways to resist through art

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## Abstract

Resistance and avant-garde are the focus of this essay's analysis, to investigate the problematic and elusive meaning of art. This singular phenomenon always appears in an evasive way, resistant to being classified in a categorical manner. It may be suggested that *'the artistic'* swings between social customs and certain emancipatory tendencies, which reconfigures the entire human experience. Following several clues to classify these divided results in a revision of art as a critical exercise in society and expanding its forces to non-artistic territories. Without doubt, avant-garde leads to expressive dynamics that emerge in everyday environments in the midst of contemporary life. In other words, it's a question of thinking about how aesthetics operates in everyday life, beyond Art?

**Keywords:** aesthetics, art, devices of resistance, daily practices.

What is the space and function of art in our day? Should there be a compromised art? Committed to what, with the society in which it operates, with its autonomy? Should art perform a function? Trying to solve these questions is not an easy task, firstly because defining art categorically has not been possible, and secondly because in contemporary times it is submerged as never before in dynamics that free it from being typecast in rigid or unalterable structures. We could say with Gadamer (1977) that art configures, based on the playful component of human culture, a game. A continuous movement that becomes a riddle on its own ontology. And I would add that, as in the image of the Uróboros, of that serpent that bites its tail and tells us about the eternal return and the cyclical nature of things, art also devours itself as part of a strategic move with The one that seeks to escape from irrevocable explanations. He wants to refuse to be explained in definitive and conclusive terms, since his immanence is revealed, he seeks ways to escape, to avoid being understood in its totality. This is often the case when we attend an exhibition of contemporary art. There arise questions like: is that art? What does the author mean? Is it useful? And this is how we suddenly find ourselves immersed in a back and forth between understanding and imagination, between the construction and continuous reconstruction of meanings while the work of art challenges us, questions us, punctures us.

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But what does this resistance consist of and what is it for? What's its purpose? Does it obey a formal component of some works of art or do you want to go beyond the merely artistic arena? Is it only about resisting to be understood in its totality or that resistance keeps other purposes? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to investigate and project that force outside the sphere of art without losing sight of it.

## Resistance and avant-garde

Historically the term resistance was popularized in World War II, particularly in France "(...) in designating the movement of citizens who spontaneously and outside the official army fought against Nazi occupation" (Raquejo, 2002, p. 28). The foregoing tells us that the concept since its origin has been linked to political and social activism, which also happens with the avant-garde expression, typical of bellicose jargon, and adopted by modernity and the artistic field to define novel movements that generated ruptures in the dominant trends of twentieth-century in Europe. Could we say then, that resistance and avant-garde are concepts with political dyes applied to art necessarily politicize it? Cornago suggests:

A movement becomes a force of resistance insofar as it opposes an opposing tendency. It can only be resisted in the face of a system that exercises some kind of power ... and a power is practiced from a majority, not necessarily in the quantitative sense, but above all qualitative. (...) Resisting would be, therefore, to oppose some form of majority (2005, p. 10).

In that sense we could answer yes, and it would be easy to recognize the intrinsic relation between the two terms when remembering that the avant-gardes, as artistic movements sought to resist the established, marched against the dogmatic styles of the time to configure ways to evade ideologies imposed. And although these days are marked with violence, today there is no mention of avant-gardes to refer to current artistic movements. For Cornago (2005), art in our current society should be able to determine the most effective forms of resistance against the hegemonic mechanisms that regulate the aesthetic and social systems. That is, art can be a device of resistance to the discourses that impose and shape our relationship with the world to precisely expand our perspective.

(...) a force of resistance against dominant models, not only in the aesthetic field, in terms of artistic conception, but above all in the face of the ways of understanding reality and understanding history, in relation to forms of knowledge and relationship of the subject with the world, reacting to their systems of representation, and thus of hierarchy, that legitimize and sustain the strategies of power (Cornago, 2005, p. 11).

This view inevitably brings us closer to the postulates of Adorno, who at the time came to affirm that "... the mission of art today is to introduce chaos into order" (cited in Bozal, 1999, p. 209). Central idea of what Gerard Vilar will call a negative aesthetic to refer to the pessimistic look of the Adornian aesthetic vis-a-vis modernity and the development of the

illustration which, for Adorno, meant the liquidation of individuality while finding in art the only hope of Resistance to alienation.

The liquidation of the difference and the individual, and especially of the autonomous individuals, is the sign of the process of rationalization and reification that characterizes history up to the present. Only art or, more accurately, certain forms of art have withstood the pressure of the principle of identification (Vilar, 1999, p. 209).

And that art that manages to resist the identifying reason, it will tell us, is authentic art.

## Art from avant-garde trenches: art as a prisoner of war

Some of the first signs of resistance in the art, against the status quo, occurred with the romantic movements. From the hand of the English poet William Wordsworth and his Lyrical ballads, where he affirmed that the committed artist of 1800 should aspire to be a "(...) criminal violator of the present state of things" (quoted in Bermúdez de Castro, p. 14), a series of aesthetic manifestations that seek to violate the established and to transgress the limits. But it is until the twentieth century, with the emergence of the avant-garde, when the tendency to violate and resist through art is evident. Movements such as Cubism, Futurism, German Expressionism, Constructivism or Dadaism could be considered as forts from which the establishment was resisted and attacked: "On the whole, all the avant-garde had a goal apart from imposing their aesthetic idea: they sought to conquer the World, that is to say, to break the frontier between art and life, and for this, they used their artistic works as weapons" (Rielo, 2014, p. 34).

The work of art, then, is a synthesis of mimesis and instrumental rationality. Thus participates in the world against which he resists. And this resistance, insofar as art appears as something nonfunctional, free of intentions, alien to the order of the dominant reason, is translated into subversion (Vilar, 1999, p. 209).

That is, as long as art remains indecipherable and unclassifiable for the dominant categories, it will remain free. And in this lies its power. By not having a clear function it resists to enter into the order imposed and necessary for the systematic operation of the world. And there would be its strength. However, as we look back at the avant-garde trenches, we see that the ideals they were fighting for have been tarnished and the frontier that divides art and life continues, as well as the power exercised by dominant ideologies.

At present only remains of that battle remain, the ruins that left those fights. The police (collectors) locked in the prisons of bourgeois society (museums) the weapons (works) confiscated to the artistic revolutionaries. There they are in those prisons, totally decontextualized, without fulfilling the objective for which they were created. Those weapons no longer fire. Their meaning has been diluted and they have entered through the big door into the market of speculation. Collectors proudly show the humiliated losers (Rielo, 2014, p. 35).

But did it lose art, its force of resistance, its emancipatory and contestatory potential? What was the reason for the avant-garde to fall one after the other? If we review the dynamics of the avant-garde movements we will find that, as a rule, their disappearance invariably coincides with their institutionalization. In other words, they ended up being part of what they sought to destroy, absorbed by the system they were attacking. Almela tells us:

(...) The transgressive orientation was assimilated by the structure of the Institution-Art and incorporated into production as one more sector of the emporium of Fairs, Biennials and Museums that convert the transgression into propaganda, within the domain of advertising and the means of Communication, turned into a functional expression of the system itself integrated with the logic of the dominant market (Almela, p. 2).

Thus, the force of resistance as an undeniable condition of art must find ways more effective than those used by the avant-garde to manifest, for it is now seen as a formal aspect of a discourse opposed to prevailing concepts, which prevents any challenge or Provocation (Almela, 2011). In this regard, Raquejo states:

(...) the postmodern revision of modernity, noticed the nineteenth-century features that the avant-garde inherited from the incipient artistic-political marginality derived from romanticism. Moreover, postmodernity has challenged this alleged transgression of the avant-garde, while its manifestos rather than 'transgressing' legislated 'new' formulas of resistance (2002, p. 29).

And it is that the avant-garde manifestos constituted a copy of the political manifestos where the postulates of the dominant ideologies of the moment were consigned. In that sense, photographer Jeff Wall asserts that what characterizes and defines the artistic in modernity is not so much the mythical transgression, but its "(...) legislative activity, while the vanguard was dedicated to writing the new laws so fast As it was violating the old ones and, therefore, emulating in this way the constitutional State "(quoted in Raquejo, 2002, 29).

In this way the spirit that characterized the avant-garde ended up being institutionalized and adopting structures of power similar to those it censured. Hence, artistic practices must rethink their transgressing potential to find less naive forms of resistance and struggle, away from pretensions to the destruction of power and perhaps concentrated on the disintegration of their models, as Raquejo says: "(...) Lesson learned from the modern project has been clear, and today we know that in any case we can de-structure the models, but not suppress the existence of power " (2002, p. 30). However, and although the idea of resistance may seem to follow Adorno's postulates that art must confront present reality, and even go against prevailing culture, this opposition need not be directly opposed, in the manner of the avant-garde, but can find more subtle and effective ways to re-write dominant discourses.

It is necessary to develop a strategy of subtle and penetrating resistance that, recognizing the difference, the existence of the other and the multifaceted nature of reality, try to unravel its traps, to investigate in hegemonic representations and to disarticulate codes of conduct or to rethink the identity. The resistance

must promote a critical art that takes care not to fall into the condition of spectacle that dominates in the culture industry, that questions the very condition of the plastic, symbolic work; Must act with acute satire, questioning political and social conditions with a participant distancing (Almela, 2011, p. 2).

A reflection close to critical theory and that is somewhat utopian for what has already been seen. That is, because the work of art can hardly escape the dynamics of the market. From this fact it is important to analyze other aesthetic practices as resistance devices.

## Resistance in the aesthetics of everyday life

When we speak of aesthetics we usually think of certain exclusionary categories that have been devoted to the study of art and the beautiful. However, this vision is limiting and restrictive insofar as it ignores the manifestations that occur within the daily life and imply a richness and complexity that analyzed from a wider perspective are vital for aesthetic theory. These are expressions, attitudes and behaviors that occur in the day to day life of man and are configured within the network of relationships and social interactions. These phenomena are what Katya Mandoki calls Prosaica or everyday aesthetics:

This survival of aesthetics is expressed in a thousand ways, from our way of living, in language and posture, the way to dress and eat, to worship the deities or personalities, to legitimize power, to show triumph Or remember the dead; But the primary role that aesthetics has in our daily lives is exercised in the construction and presentation of social identities (2006, p. 8).

In this sense, what Mandoki tells us is that the study of aesthetics need not remain limited to the fine arts or to immovable categories such as the beautiful and the sublime:

(...) it is no longer possible to speak of sensitivity with a capital and in the singular as a privileged patrimony of geniuses and artists, critics or connoisseurs, but of sensibilities in the plural, exposed and vulnerable to life, which are covered in different ways depending on the cultural context (2006, p. 5).

Thanks to this broader notion, we can identify genuine aesthetic practices that would surely not be of interest to the Art institution or would be inadvertent for this, but that constitute a force that opposes defeat, even institutionality, as was the case with avant-gardes, but of more subtle forms. Although the most important of this is that they are signs of resistance to the difficulties and tragedies of life itself. And I put several examples. A mother who fires the corpse of her son, wraps it in flowers and dismisses it in the midst of tears for the next day to go to work for the children who are still alive: a sign of dignity and integrity, sacrifice, aesthetics of the sacrifice that reflects a position in front of the world. Or the songs that are born of tragedies, chronicles of eyewitnesses who make music with suffering and injustice lived in their own flesh, music from and suffering, as recorded in the work *Bocas de Ceniza* by Juan Manuel Echavarría. Or houses painted with vivid colors in places where death and poverty prevail. Or the alien corpses that are adopted to be buried as their own, also evidenced by

Echavarría in the documentary *Requiem N.N.* And the case of the weavers of Mampuján who, between stitches and tears, found in this ancestral practice a way to heal the traumas of the war, to make catharsis, to forgive and to solve problems of coexistence that remained in their community after suffering the displacement by Part of the paramilitaries. The marches, such as the year 2000 in Granada, Antioquia, when the civilian population came out with white flags to demand peace in the midst of the debris left by a guerrilla attack. All of these are proofs of how aesthetics operates in everyday life. All are signs of resistance against adversity and oblivion. Expressions of resistance that allow us to continue living and conserve humanity despite the difficulties. Aesthetic practices, some more, others less everyday but that encompass a number of acts that make up life and make it more dignified and bearable. After all, the avant-garde emerged on the basis of utopias aspiring to demolish the state of things, while these practices of resistance in daily life, by nature aesthetic, arise without major pretensions from the real experience of the people, and it is there where its strength lies. If, for Adorno, “the social function of art is to have no function” (cited in Ranciere, 2011, p. 53), the function of aesthetic practices could be to transform everyday work without being aware of it.

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