

THE SUBLIME, THE EVENT AND GRAFFITI

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I. THE SUBLIME

Through the idea of the sublime, Kant articulated a type of aesthetic judgement whereby one experiences the limits of cognition and representation. The result of this, for Kant, is the demonstration and cultivation of our moral nature. Lyotard reframes the idea of the sublime in terms of post-modernity through his development of the idea of the event. The experience of the event is roughly equivalent to the experience of the sublime. Crucially though, the experience of the event, unlike the sublime, does not foster individual morality; rather, it points to injustices.

In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant refers to two types of aesthetic judgement. These are the beautiful and the sublime. For Kant the beautiful is that experience of appreciation devoid of concern for function that reveals our ‘supersensible’ capacities of cognition. Here the Kantian emphasis on disinterestedness forces a split between the spectator and the artist. In this split the spectator is the passive passenger freed from desire, where the experience of art is the analysis of the work. In terms of the beautiful, the work of art is merely an occasion to practice one’s critical judgement.

The sublime, however, is a greater experience. It is an experience that hints at that which is beyond the powers of our cognition and offers us the chance to develop our critical faculties. As such, the sublime refers to the experience of the “presentation of the infinite”, or the impossibility of presentation. This experience could be described as the experience of the beautiful at the limits of the possibilities of our cognition. In the case of the sublime, Kant writes that, it is “...precisely because there is a striving

in our imagination towards progress *ad infinitum*, while reason demands absolute totality, ...[that there] is the awakening of a feeling of a supersensible faculty within us...’’¹), namely the sublime.

Whereas the beautiful typically occurs in the consideration of the form of an artefact, the sublime is experience of the limit of the faculty of cognition itself. Furthermore, where there is a feeling of pleasure in the beautiful there is a hue of terror in the sublime as we face the infinite. Accordingly, the experience of the sublime for Kant is one of frustration as there is an impossibility involved in grasping it. Lyotard captures this when he writes; “In the sublime ‘situation,’ something like an Absolute...is made quasiperceivable, thanks to the failure of the power of presentation.”²

Once we are assured that we are not in mortal danger; a certain pleasure can be taken from the experience. For Kant, this pleasure is the demonstration of our moral nature. Thus our experience of the sublime is seen to direct us to a common experience of the realisation of our freedom and reason.

As such, the Kantian sublime has little, if anything, to do with the art world and its products, even if it is still central to the operation of the aesthetic and the power of judgement. Instead, this concept is better understood as fitting within the overall critical project of Kant’s philosophy. Nonetheless, the Kantian sublime, as a concept that outlines a failure of the imagination to represent and frame understanding, albeit at the service of a greater moral and epistemological project, is useful to contemporary aesthetic practice and theory. In pointing to aesthetic experience beyond the merely functionally beautiful, the sublime provides the basis for a particularly presently prevalent approach to art, namely the “evental”.³

II. THE EVENT

While Lyotard accurately describes the sublime in Kant, he then goes on to propose a particular interpretation of the Kantian sublime. For Kant the sublime is subject to a teleological end insofar as it ought to lead to a realisation of the moral law. This is not the case in Lyotard’s writings. For Lyotard the sublime needs to be understood in terms of the postmodern condition.

¹ Kant (2007), p. 81, §25.

² Lyotard (1990), p. 298.

³ Lyotard (1990), p. 98.

This postmodern condition is a feature of the failed attempt to create grand, rationalised narratives. It is a disillusionment with the project of modernity itself. Postmodernism is the coming to terms with the singularity (and thus unrepresentability) of events. The enlightenment project of modernity is built on Kantian foundations and Lyotard returns to the Kantian account of judgement to understand the postmodern. He focuses on the area of the sublime. Lyotard reframes the sublime as an example of an indeterminate and irreconcilable event. Postmodernity here is the rethinking of the event that is modernity. The sublime in Lyotard is akin to the Kantian sublime in terms of being the limit of the capacity of human reason, but it is different in the sense of omitting the teleological goal of the realisation of the moral law.

For Lyotard, opposition to the aspirations of modernity is what marks the dissolution of grand narratives in the postmodern age. The grand narrative that is modernism is characterised by the historical progression of freedom and rationality of the human subject. The Kantian sublime is a case of such high goals of a unifying theory of judgement, rationality and morality, while at the same time it marks that moment of crisis, that moment of terrible awe. “The aesthetics of the sublime is still more indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain.”⁴⁴

For Lyotard, no moral instruction is to be found in the sublime. Lyotard rejects not the sublime per se, but the accompanying moral project. Rather the sublime experience, as the edge of human reason, is “an event of a passion, of a suffering for which the mind won’t be prepared, which will have left it at a loss, and for which it retains only the feeling - anxiety and jubilation - of an obscure thought.”⁵⁵ The difference between this approach and Kant’s is clear; the sublime is no longer seen to provide moral instruction but is also historically situated and as such can speak to the contemporary institutional configuration of the art world.

As such, Lyotard is an evental thinker. The event refers to a historical occurrence which changes all that follows it; the standard examples include the French Revolution and the death camps of Auschwitz. In the words of Lyotard: “...there are events: something happens which is not tautological with what has happened”⁶⁶.

⁴⁴ Lyotard (1991), p. 98.

⁵⁵ Lyotard (1990), p. 302.

⁶⁶ Lyotard (1988), p. 79.

Specifically, Lyotard “...strives to respect the event in its singularity...”⁷⁷ To even speak of events in representational terms as we are bound to do is to betray their singularity. That is the unique historical context to which they are bound. Like the sublime in Kant, the event exists at the threshold of representation and operates according to its own logic. As such, it can never be fully rendered by representation.

In this way the event is akin to ‘the supplement’ in Derrida and ‘that which is not counted’ in Rancière. To speak of the event is to speak of occurrences in a particular way, a way that admits unrepresentability. In Lyotard’s case it is used to show that occurrences cannot be easily represented as they are singular, unrepresentable and inhabitants of the figural as opposed to the discursive. The impossibility of representation is developed in *The Differend; Phrases in Dispute* (1988 [1983]). For Lyotard this impossibility extends to all forms of representation: aesthetic, political etc. The differend is an example of incommensurability beyond the possibilities of representation. A case is referred to as an example of the differend when two or more sides use different languages that cannot be translated into each other without doing injustice to at least one of the sides. In such cases the operational representational regime cannot account for the differences because the singularity of each case (event) is lost in translation.

The task of aesthetics is to realise the incommensurable beyond what can be represented, and, to testify to that which cannot be represented. In a sense the task of the aesthetics of the sublime remains a task of justice in the aesthetics of the event.

Schiller, following Kant, had used the idea of the experience of the sublime as a foundation for moral education. For Schiller, it is through aesthetic experience that social justice will be achieved. His reasoning is that in experiencing the sublime one is made freer and thus will act more morally. Schiller can be seen, thus, to affirm the Kantian project in his application of the idea of moral education through aesthetic experience to modernity. In short, the sublime is a means to social justice insofar as it makes man more moral. The event, on the other hand, is not heuristic in this sense. The event, as we have seen, is a means to social justice insofar as it highlights the existence of gross inequalities and injustice. Implied here is the thought that armed with such knowledge we will be better able to tackle injustice.

⁷⁷ Bennington (1988), p. 9.

There is a further affinity with the Kantian reflection on the sublime here in the opposition to the production of concepts. Lyotard, like Schiller, is not simply critiquing the Kantian project but explicitly moving it (or at least the element of the sublime in Kant) into the realm of the political. For Lyotard, to operate in terms of the event is not to account for the context of aesthetic experience, but to recognise the singularity of the event of experience itself. Each reading is an event. It is a reflection where the judgment always occurs anew. Forcing a final concept on the reading/reflection is akin to the grossest injustice, not only because it denies the experience of the sublime, but because it denies the singularity of experience itself.

Bill Readings outlines the politics of Lyotard's approach to the aesthetic in this way: "The aesthetic of incommensurability is the attempt to set to work, within and against the system, an otherness that cannot be exchanged. Obviously, this otherness cannot itself be the object of a representation, lest it become another commodity rather than an other to the rule of the commodity."⁸ Politics and aesthetics are thus conjoined, insofar as each is a site of contested representation. Taking Lyotard's approach (the event informed by the sublime) we can see that the accepted operative distinctions of the art world (genres, styles, modes of presentation) are to be considered as limiting meta-narratives barring the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Furthermore, in the politics of the contemporary art world the reception of new art practices as art will demonstrate a negotiation of the sublime.

By focusing on the institutional reception of new art practices, specifically the acceptance of graffiti as street art, we will be able to see how Lyotard's idea of the event applies to contemporary art practice. For it is in such institutional re-evaluation that alternative art practices are conceptualised.

III. THE INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF ART

Initially defined by Arthur Danto, the concept of the "art world" is characterized in this way: "to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld"⁹. The institutional theory of art can be seen as an attempt to approach aesthetics in terms of social and historical frames of reference. "What makes the piece art?"¹⁰ asks Danto,

⁸⁸ Readings (2009), p. xx.

⁹⁹ Danto (1964), p. 580.

¹⁰¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and the answer, crudely put, is that the piece is in the gallery and not the stockroom. In other words, something is art by virtue of its location in the artworld.

This reductivist account strives for the ideal, untranscendable, configuration of social and institutional structures. Bound up with this is the idea of the autonomy of the artwork and the artist. Here exhibition within an institutional frame, as opposed to a particular experience, is seen as the essence of art. In practice, this approach can be witnessed in the proliferation of the white cube as a neutral space for exhibiting. In the words of Bydler; “the institutional frames are fields where subject-positions are mapped out”¹¹. To put this practice in Kantian terms, we see that the roles of the curator and the artist are to search for instances of the sublime and then showcase them in the artworld setting. Such tasks are impossible. Where the institutional approach benefits in clarity it fails to account for the singularity of aesthetic experience central to the sublime. There is no perfect/ideal art world but rather a contested space/territory. The artwork is not immune from its context as the institutional theorists should well know; there is a politics of exhibition. Thus, to speak of the institution you need to account for this politics of change in relation to the traditional economy of the art world.

One way to do this is to treat of the practices that reform and expand the notion of what counts as an art gallery or art world. In using the example of graffiti as art I will maintain the incommensurable as central to the account of the art world. Significantly, we will see that, over time, the disruptive logic of the consideration of graffiti as art is incorporated into institutional practice undermining its force as something that could potentially provide aesthetic experiences similar to the sublime or the event.

IV. GRAFFITI AS ART

In proposing something traditionally called vandalism as art, the idea of graffiti as street art is a consideration that suggests something beyond our normal cognition of what art, at least in its institutional configuration, is. This idea is one that approaches the infinite insofar as it radically expands the location of art to every street. In this sense, graffiti art can be seen to stand for something like political dissent, insofar as it challenges the operative distinctions of the traditional art world.

¹¹¹ Bydler (2004), p. 21.

For example, unlike the traditional gallery, the street as gallery is without a central curator. The significance of this is that the traditional limitations of what can be represented within an artworld setting, for example painting, sculpture etc. need not apply. Instead, art on the street is chosen solely by graffiti artists. In fact, this approach to exhibition proposes a model of “collective curation”. By this term, I refer to both the fact of installation that accompanies the creation of street art, namely the curatorial decision made by the street artists about the location and timing of their art, and the collaborative nature of this decision. While street artists can ostensibly work as individuals, as well as being part of an explicit collective, they nonetheless collaborate with the physical setting of their work. This curatorial feature of street art ensures that the typical agency of the art world and clarity of institutional theory is disrupted.

This is achieved by the necessary engagement with the built and natural environment, the public, institutions, the work of other street artists’ etc. for the piece of street art to work. The greater significance of this situated approach is that the ideal of the individuated genius, the romantic myth of the aesthetic experience as an individual’s experience in both production and consumption, inherited from Kant, is overcome. In such collaborative art, Kester notes: “The participant’s engagement is actualized by immersion and participation in a process, rather than through visual contemplation (reading or decoding an image or object).”¹²

Crucially, in this nature of the work, is the core of what Lyotard called the event. And, in being evental, graffiti art retains a residue of the sublime. This is not to say that political otherness of graffiti exactly corresponds to the definition of the event that we see in Lyotard or the definition of the sublime that we see in Kant. Rather, it is to say that for the purposes of considering contemporary aesthetic practice, the ambiguous nature of the exhibition of graffiti challenges what we take to be the traditional exhibition of art. In this the consideration of graffiti as art can be seen to maintain a vital link to both the event and the sublime. That link is the ability of graffiti, and other such practices, to do justice to a greater scope of aesthetic experience than permitted by the traditional institutional structure.

As a site of ambiguity the collective exhibiting of graffiti disrupts the classical account of the art gallery in the way that an avant-garde would seek to do. It does this

¹²¹² Kester (2006), p. 10.

by showing us, both the degree to which the artworld can incorporate change, and, by demonstrating the nature of aesthetic and embodied engagement permitted in the contemporary conception of art. In this way graffiti art, in its current instantiation, is both subject to the classical distinctions of the artworld (insofar as it is considered vandalism) and event of political dissent (insofar as it is a new form for art, street art). Graffiti is both an event insofar as it is a significant departure from the traditional operation of the artworld, yet it is also institutional insofar as it proposes a new, more sophisticated, institutional model. In short, graffiti is an avant-garde.

As far back as Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" the notion of the avant-garde has been identified in relation to the economic and political conditions of the time. For Greenberg, it is this social and historical import that distinguishes the avant-garde from say bohemia. While creativity and originality are central to both, the avant-garde is in some way a focused social critique. As such, the theory of the avant-garde compliments the institutional theory of art.

Herein lies the dilemma for graffiti and street art: in succumbing to the institutional recognition it appears to forego the avant-garde aspiration of social critique and change, and, in so doing, any claims to being eventful or sublime are abdicated. The reason being that by this account the avant-garde institution is impossible. Yet, like all avant-gardes we find graffiti being subsumed into the artworld. Graffiti begins with the artist categorised as anonymous and autonomous. In fact this carries to the degree that street art is often regarded as a product of a group, be it the city, the youth, the disaffected. Thus, when we become able to name graffiti artists the work is in a different economy. That economy is the traditional economy of the artworld. Here too the graffiti artist begins to trade his/her work. The success in graffiti achieving such status is witnessed in the utter assimilation of graffiti in contemporary culture as a legitimate aesthetic practice. The popularity of figures such as Shepard Fairey and Banksy demonstrate that graffiti art, as a practice, is no longer beyond our normal cognition of what an aesthetic experience can be.

Furthermore, this change is marked by a change of name: the term graffiti is now replaced by the term street art. The acts of mimicking the economy of the artworld render the economy of the street art world but a functioning arm of the greater capitalist economy. The initial critique, if it has not now become impossible, has at the very least to be reconsidered. By this account the economy of street art is just the

latest in a series of inclusions into the economy of the artworld. The promise of a new distinct artworld economy has disappeared.

If we analyse the name “street art” we find that the two names are joined for mutual benefit. “Art” is used for and as a result of institutional validation. “Street” is used for validation within the graffiti and avant-garde communities. These benefits ensure the exclusion of other possible names; one could be “career graffiti”.

In the context of a gallery, graffiti present us with the spectacle of rubbish in the form of art. Once this re-evaluation occurs graffiti redefine the urban space as a potential institutional space. The relationship between the art institution and trash is a curious one. The 20th century showcased trash to the extent that the landfill became a staple venue of the artist’s experience. What is noticeable is that objects are not exhibited as garbage for such is impossible. To be deemed worthy enough to be exhibited is to be barred from being deemed trash. At first it would appear that to be exhibited within the institutional frame is to be automatically beyond the realm of valueless trash. However, it is also possible that once veritable trash is exhibited within the institutional frame the distinction between art and trash loses some of its currency if it has not been completely superseded.

The equating of art to trash can also be read as the trashing of art. One step further, it can be read as a critique of the distinctions of art and rubbish. This new critiquing of art activity then comes to stand for art. As Sylvère Lotringer notes “[C]riticising art, in fact, has become the royal way to an art career...”¹³ It is here that the introspection of the artworld is made clear. This re-evaluation is but criticism of the initial evaluation. It is not a different evaluation.

And, it is this commercial realisation on the part of art institutions that is a key driving force behind re-evaluation. The alternative means of distribution used in the graffiti artworld appeals to the artworld in the same way that new markets appeal to corporations. In short, new distribution channels mean new products can be sold (as art). The trash gallery thus operates as an outsourced tier of a greater institutional network. Significantly, the alternative gallery, as seen in the collective curation of graffiti, maintains the scope for building reputations. As such, the economic basis for the artist, the bedrock of the global artworld economy, is never undermined.

¹³¹³ Baudrillard (2005), p. 10.

V. CONCLUSION

The institutionalization of graffiti as gallery art, as objects to be considered like paintings, sees graffiti limited to what Kant would call the beautiful. The effect of the institutional showcasing of graffiti as art is to deny the inherent ambiguity central to the collective installation of graffiti. The cost of institutional clarity is the possibility of aesthetic experiences approaching the sublime or the event. Today graffiti is wedged between being purely radically evental unrepresentability and institutional representation and commercial co-option.

These contemporary developments in art practice reinforce an account of art that is still institutional. Subversion now cannot be separated from institutional subversion. Graffiti has been effective in this insofar as it effectively challenged what an exhibition can be, in other words it helps to expand the notion of the beautiful to include trash. As such it operates like an exemplary avant-garde whereby it offers both change to the artworld and increases the power of the artworld. It is the traditional embodiment of anti-tradition.

The sublime, the state of awe, the psychological consideration of incompleteness and obscurity is originally a literary concept (in Longinus for example) as well as an ethical concept. Only later does the sublime become a religious or transcendental concept linked to political emancipation. In the idea of the event the sublime returns to this literary origin accompanied by the goal of political emancipation. It is a concept devoid of rule or law insofar as there is no sure way to access the experience of the sublime.

The significance of graffiti achieving art status is that this experience demonstrates how and at what cost such ambiguity and obscurity is incorporated into the institutional framework and how art world theory and the sublime interact. Graffiti, thus, while achieving institutional status and the expansion of the aesthetic franchise, loses much of its force as a location for the experience of the sublime or the event. To put this in the language of both Kant and Lyotard, once graffiti is institutionally recognised, showcased and championed, it is firmly conceptualised. When this occurs it loses much of its ability to stand at the limits of our cognition and what we can represent. _

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