

What is art for?

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Art for art's sake, or to better the human condition — or at least acknowledge its struggles? The old conflict, which really only emerged in the 19th century, is returning to public debate

Politicians in our enlightened democracies don't talk about the arts any more: President François Hollande's 60 election promises in 2012 made just one reference to a "national plan for arts education"; Nicolas Sarkozy's manifesto didn't mention the arts at all. This is no surprise: politicians now talk about "culture" rather than the arts. But culture is a hazy concept, indefinable, covering almost anything. The governments of the last few decades have, however, all agreed on the importance of democratising access to "culture", claiming it will strengthen the fabric of society — which means the arts will be just another agent for integration.

While the social question was dominant over two centuries, there were conflicting views of the role of art. Was it food for the soul or a tool for transforming the concrete situation of humanity? Art for the enlightened, or art for the people? This is a serious debate that cannot be brushed aside with glib talk of "a duty of culture" and "a right to culture". It is a fundamental issue, now attracting renewed attention because of the revival of political and social conflict.

In the much-viewed video clip *Ça ne peut plus durer* (It can't go on), a rap combined with a news report, Peugeot worker Franck Jautee (aka Kash Leone) expressed anger at the closure of the carmaker's Aulnay plant. In the stage play *Notre Terreur*, the D'Ores et Déjà collective explored the meaning of the French Revolution. In *Urgent Crier*, Philippe Caubère paid tribute to André Benedetto, advocate of lyrically committed theatre. Iranian singer Arya Aramnejad spent time in prison for dedicating songs, including *Deltangi* (Nostalgia), to the Green Movement of demonstrations against fraud during the 2009 presidential election. And Chinese dissident and artist Ai Weiwei recently posted a rock-based clip about his imprisonment in 2011, insulting the "harmony" so dear to official propaganda, and has reoffended with an album of hard rock, which also has no time for social harmony.

These random examples show the growing importance of art explicitly linked to politics. Despite the tepidity of the debate and the low level of the risks in France, it is useful to remember the issues at stake. Politically motivated art has long been suspected of being less creative than non-committed art. Is a declaration of commitment enough to make art artistically committed? What is art committed to when the artist is committed? Isn't art sufficient to itself?

These divergent views of the role of art have not always existed. They emerged from a particular social and political situation, with a revolutionary background, of which the poet Charles Baudelaire is representative. With his hair dyed green, his pale pink gloves and his powdered face, he was obviously an artist. Yet it was Baudelaire who mocked the “puerile utopia of the school of art for art’s sake” in his preface of 1851 to *Chants et Chansons*, a collection of songs by popular republican poet and socialist Pierre Dupont, whose *Le Chant des Ouvriers* (Song of the Workers) he called an “admirable cry of pain and melancholy”. That year Baudelaire also wrote: “Great and terrible words run through all literary polemics: art, the beautiful, the useful, morality. A great battle is being fought; and, because of a lack of philosophical wisdom, every man takes half of the flag, asserting that the other is worthless. ... It is painful to observe that similar errors are to be found in two opposing schools: the bourgeois school and the socialist school. ‘Let us moralise! Let us moralise!’ both sides cry with missionary fervour. Naturally, one preaches a bourgeois morality, the other a socialist morality. And so, art is reduced to mere propaganda”.

Modernity gave Baudelaire spleen

In February 1848 Baudelaire took part in the revolution that led to the fall of Louis-Philippe and the proclamation of the Second Republic. In June popular insurrections were violently put down, and in December Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was elected president by universal (male) suffrage. In 1851 he staged a coup and proclaimed himself emperor. The idea of progress had already been linked to money, and savings banks flourished: Louis-Philippe’s prime minister François Guizot had offered the French a new ideal — “enrich yourselves”. Baudelaire’s friend Nadar, the portrait photographer, said that Baudelaire walked in the “solitude of the self” and found progress depressing. “What is more absurd than Progress, since man, as is proved by daily events, is always the same and equal to man, that is to say, to his savage state?” Baudelaire wrote. “Modernity” gave Baudelaire “spleen” — he introduced the words to the French language — though he knew he could have hailed modernity’s “epic side” and made others see “how great and poetic we are in our cravats and patent leather boots”. But that was before the political betrayals of 1848-1851 and the triumph of the virtuous bourgeoisie.

Baudelaire’s pain and contradictions were tied to modernity — and symbolic of it. He set himself against those opposing positions (“Let us moralise!”) and, as Pierre Bourdieu emphasises, tried to “bring together properties and projects that were profoundly opposed and socially incompatible, without conciliatory concessions”. He rejected extant possibilities and so was left with only the “possibility yet to be realised”, a solitary, tormented output in a world where “action is not the sister of dream” (*Les Fleurs du Mal*; *The Flowers of Evil*).

This tension between commitment and aestheticism, between useful art and art that claims autonomy, between work tied to current concerns and the quest for timeless beauty, did not emerge until the 19th century, when the practice of signing paintings first became widespread, and paintings began to be considered “works”. The word “Art”, in its modern sense and with a capital letter, seems not

to have appeared until the 18th century, when a distinction began to be made between the mechanical arts and the noble arts of poetry, music, painting — and war. The artist was gradually able to differentiate himself from the artisan in a scale of values which emphasised that “need did not give birth to painting and poetry” (Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*). *Otium* was now opposed to *negotium*: leisure, the luxury of the useless, to work and making money.

These oppositions hardened in the 19th century. The state had lost its monopoly on exposure and recognition, and the 1789 Revolution, by abolishing privileges and promoting the astonishing idea of equality, had raised the issue of internal differences, of uniqueness. The 19th century was also tormented by the industrial revolution, which made visible the people, the crowd, the masses. Political revolution failed several times but the issues it raised, its achievements and its ideals, continued to trouble minds, and the social question livened and sharpened them.

The bourgeoisie and its values — work, thrift, respect for order — triumphed, and the artist was subjected to market forces, obliged to please the public, whose values the artist did not necessarily share. The artist could live in an ivory tower, looking down on those unable to elevate themselves to Beauty; or be at the service of the liberating values of those whom the dominant classes despised. The artist could work solely for himself or herself, or a peer group; or tell the truth about society. Art for art’s sake, or useful art. Art as an end in itself, or art to serve an end. “Art is gradually becoming the property of an elite in this age of democracy, the property of a bizarre, morbid and charming aristocracy,” wrote Catulle Mendès. Those who didn’t want to speak for the masses, or serve a privileged few, found it difficult. “In the end, art is perhaps no more serious than a game of skittles; perhaps it is all just a huge joke,” wrote Gustave Flaubert. What is it for?

With tears and pity

Victor Hugo knew what he thought it was for. Jules Barbey d’Aureville, the orthodox, Catholic monarchist dandy, saw that Hugo’s intention in *Les Misérables* was to “blow up all social institutions — with something more powerful than gunpowder, which destroys mountains — with tears and with pity”.

Political thinkers joined the debate. Pierre Joseph Proudhon wrote that the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the artist is “the product of universal intelligence and the accumulated wisdom of a host of masters, and relies on the support of a multitude of humbler industries,” and emphasised that the artist is “called to participate in the creation of the social world” by representing an idealised reality “with a view to the physical, intellectual and moral improvement of humanity, to its self-justification, and ultimately its glorification”. This “peak of socialist loutishness”, as Flaubert wrote, was modulated, enervated and further defined during the 20th century, when political and artistic avant-gardes did battle in the context of the great hopes raised by the Russian revolution, and the nightmares that followed.

It is possible to mediate between, and even reconcile, the positions. Bertolt Brecht, one of the greatest theorists and practitioners of political art, Marxist and founder of the Berliner Ensemble theatre group, pointed out that “from the first it has been the theatre’s business to entertain people, as it also has of all the other arts. ... [Theatre] needs no other passport than fun, but this it must have. We should not give it a higher status if we were to turn it into ... a purveyor of morality. ... Not even instruction should be demanded of it ... The theatre must remain entirely superfluous, though this means that it is the superfluous for which we live”.

Brecht claimed that a play is political not when it has a political theme, but when it “adopts a political attitude: the pleasure of transforming things, political as well as private”. Art acts through its intrinsic powers. Brecht thought we must “look for the real joys of our time”, inventing forms suited to contemporary issues. “If someone asks you if you are a communist, it is better to show him one of your paintings than your party card.”

There is no formal recipe, only new questions posed by society that have to be asked in some novel form, to allow us the pleasure of imagining answers different from those offered by the real world. This form must be playful; it must surprise us, prevent us from accepting things at face value, invite us to question the established order, and make us wish to free ourselves from anything that prevents us from living life more fully. This will give us joy.

Brecht was not alone in formulating this solution to the dilemma of elitist, solitary art versus propaganda art. The “revolutionary romantics”, the great inventors of the October revolution, like the surrealists, were able to find a “myth suited to the society that we believe is desirable”. There was no formalism, nor were there any “revolutionary gewgaws, made up only of good intentions,” as Anatoly Lunacharsky, commissar of education in the USSR from 1917 to 1929 put it. “Socialist realism” is as hollow as the aesthete’s technical prowess.

A complementary solution is to turn a luxury into a universal good. This is what the artists who supported the Front Populaire set out to do in 1936. They chose to be paid employees so as to be able to teach and spread their art: this was the start of the decentralisation of theatre in France. Franz Masereel, the great woodcut artist, led a painting academy funded by the Union des Syndicats de la Seine trade union federation: “I am not enough of an aesthete to be satisfied with simply being an artist.” Louis Aragon wrote in *Ce Soir* in 1938 that Jean Renoir’s *La Marseillaise* was a “great national, official and democratic film, financed by public subscription,” and that “the great miracle is that, in spite of the costumes, the sets and the theme ... he has produced a film that is so contemporary, so burning, so human that we are carried away, transported, as if it were our own life that were being played out before our eyes. And in fact, it is our own life.”

These are examples of refusal to resort, in the name of a leftwing ideal, to the simplification of means of expression, and the will to educate the public’s aesthetic judgment. The ultimate ambition is to contribute to an emancipated society where everyone can freely devote themselves, among other activities, to

creation — where “there are no painters but only people who engage in painting”, in the words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The poet Lautréamont echoes them: “Poetry must be made by all, and not by one” (*Poésies II*). Certain artists pursued this course, especially in the 1960s and 70s, attempting to exalt the collective and do away with author worship, to get the observer to play an active role, and to find alternatives in production and distribution.

Art that claims to be political reveals that humanity is incomplete; that there is much work to be done if it is to reach full potential; and that when an artist fulfils his or her proper role, that role is to be a saboteur of the prevailing representations, and a creator of desires for new horizons. So we learn to “covet the impossible: to covet what the power of established societies forbids us to desire, with the aim of preventing it from being born, to covet what has yet to be conquered”.

Art cannot change the world, but does make us feel that there is some room for manoeuvre in the established order, and in our minds and aspirations. This cannot be achieved by fine and progressive sentiments, nor by petty acts of provocation designed to shock the bourgeoisie, who are delighted to be shocked. Simply organising programmes of cultural events is not enough. They don't give the world back its magic: only the artist, by confronting us with our reality, creates the rich possibilities that represent our collective and individual potential.