

Chiapello E., 2004 Evolution and Co-Optation. The 'artist critique' of management and capitalism : evolution and co-optation, in *Third Text*, vol. 18, n°6, 2004, 585-594 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0952882042000284998>

## **The “artist critique” of management and capitalism: evolution and co-optation**

“Artist critique” is an umbrella term, synthesising the many forms of critique first levelled against the new industrial, capitalist and bourgeois society of the nineteenth century, largely by artists in the name of freedom and individual fulfilment. Though many artists gave voice to this form of critique, they were neither the only ones to do so, nor did all artists participate in this movement. As a current of critical thought which has spanned modern society for almost two centuries, the social role of “artist critique” is essential if the aspiration for a freer life – freed, that is, from the constraints of commodities – is to prosper. It is at the root of the intuitive opposition that can be made between art worlds and business worlds, between profit imperatives and those of artistic creation. Yet it must be acknowledged that over the past two decades this form of critique has fallen into unprecedented crisis.<sup>1</sup> After first presenting what I understand by “artist critique” and specifying its conditions of emergence, I will attempt to analyse some of the root causes of this crisis in the critique of capitalism. One of the key aspects to be analysed is neo-management’s adoption of practices similar to those found in the art world. In many respects, one might say that neo-management practices are the result of paying careful attention to the complaints articulated by “artist critique”. In short, it is precisely the success of “artist critique” that has led to its being co-opted by its adversary and losing so much of its poignancy.

### ***1. “Artist critique” and its conditions of emergence***

“Artist critique” implies viewing – and positioning oneself within – modern society in a way that takes its inspiration from those values, which, over the past two centuries, have converged into a peculiar but now dominant conception of the artist. Whereas many artists expressed this critique forcefully, they were not alone in doing so, which is why I prefer to speak of “artist critique” rather than “*artistic* critique” – especially since the latter is an ambiguous term liable to mean either that artists are the subject of the critique or its target. In addition, it is a term that is often applied to

---

<sup>1</sup> Eve Chiapello, *Artistes versus Managers* (Paris: Métailié, 1998).

works of art.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other terms people have suggested (such as “cultural critique”, “societal critique” or “moral critique”), “artist critique” has the advantage of maintaining its reference to artists themselves. There are two reasons why I consider this to be essential. The first is historical in nature: emphasis is placed on the leading role that artists (and the romantic conception of their activities) have played in the emergence of this critical position. The second is sociological: many partisans of “artist critique” feel that artists, as a group, constitute an exemplary illustration of the alternative they advocate – that is, a life unfettered by conventionality and uncompromisingly committed to the quest for the highest forms of human existence.

The concept of “artist critique” has allowed me first to redefine the apparent opposition between art and business as one manifestation of a long tradition of protest against the very bourgeois capitalist society which gave rise to management. As such, the issue that lies at the heart of this critique is not artists’ autonomy alone (or their ability to avoid falling prey to the precepts of profit-seeking); instead, it is the active existence, within capitalist society, of a critical view of this same society.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside “artist critique” one can identify what César Graña has called “social critique”.<sup>4</sup> The lines of force underlying both these forms of critique of capitalism have remained more or less constant since the emergence of critical anti-capitalist activities in the nineteenth century. They have been constantly nurtured by four sources of indignation: the first two are expressed through “artist critique”, the latter two through “social critique.” Capitalism is criticised: a) as a source of disenchantment and of inauthentic goods, persons and lifestyles; b) as a source of oppression that is opposed to freedom, autonomy and creativity; c) as a source of misery and inequality; and d) as a source of egotism entailing the destruction of forms of solidarity. “Artist critique” has primarily developed through its exposure to bourgeois individuals and their lifestyles, whereas “social critique” has developed as an outcome of the misery brought on by new types of industrial complexes. In actual fact, these two critiques are usually embodied and articulated by groups that are highly distinct from one another, even if they are sometimes capable of agreeing to temporary

---

<sup>2</sup> I have opted for a slightly startling formulation that is intended to be grammatically more cognate with French language expressions such as “*peuple artiste*” or “*style artiste*”: in French, a noun can sometimes be used as an adjective following a noun; the first describes a society whose members are gifted artistically, the second an aesthetic style.

<sup>3</sup> Eve Chiapello, *ibid.*

alliances.<sup>5</sup> In France, the historical development of “artist critique” can be traced back to the situation of the July Monarchy (1830-48). A certain number of conditions came together to enable artist critique to take shape.

a) Clearly indispensable to the emergence of critique is the existence of an *experience that leads to a complaint being made in the first place* – one that stems from either directly shared experience or from empathy with the pain of others, i.e., those who are the bearers of this critique. The first move in a critical direction involves indignation, a vigorously but superficially argued rejection of a situation deemed unacceptable. Then and only then do people develop arguments capable of holding up against criticism. In other words, the evidence that justifies the critique’s existence is collected *ex post facto*.

The emergence of “artist critique” in modern society should by no means be taken for granted. In many respects, the nineteenth century was an era when art and literature flourished. At the same time, new problems were arising. Artists were reaching the peak of their economic status, and the philosophic conception of their activity was at its zenith, yet the world in which they found themselves by no means shared their values. The power elite placed great value on material goods, utilitarian activities and money. Though it did create some space for artists, they were never a prime concern. Artists were seen as nothing more than the providers of skin-deep decoration and entertainment. Writers, who were supposed to be able to survive thanks to the new market mechanisms, discovered the existence – as Graña put it – of a “democratic betrayal”. Only certain authors got rich, while many others more or less failed to satisfy the new public’s needs. For the most part, potential buyers came from the ranks of the rich bourgeois, who did not necessarily possess much competency in artistic matters. In and of itself, the quality of a given artist’s work did not always explain the highly unequal distribution of income amongst artists as a whole. This state of affairs gave birth to a certain state of mind – as did the well-known gap between supply and demand, which some considered to be a reflection of the general public’s lack of understanding of contemporary artists (many of whom were only recognised much later). Unrecognised artists of great quality, particularly those who had no other sources of income, were forced to carry out other

---

<sup>4</sup> César Graña, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois. French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Basic books, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> The work of the Frankfurt School is an exemplary alliance of artist critique and social critique.

activities or to compromise their talent by producing works simply to put food on the table. This took away artists' freedom to follow their inclinations alone, and to follow only those rules they deemed appropriate.

Thus, the core of "artist critique" stems from what artists interpreted as society's refusal to grant them the *freedom* to live the only life deemed to be worthy of living – a life of *authenticity*. Economic inequality upset artists, not because they were being exploited (a crucial element of "social critique") but because it prevented those who had no other sources of income from living and from creating with unfettered freedom. This is reminiscent of the standard imagery of artists being faced with an alternative of either starving to death or else of giving up on an entire life's work.

In actual fact, artists are not so much *exploited* (though this does occur on occasion) as they are *alienated*, a word that is commonly associated with the connotation of being "deprived of freedom" and therefore, much like a patient in a mental hospital, with "being a foreigner to one's self and to the core of one's humanity". Thus there is an estrangement from the artist's own creative being, but also – using the English connotation of the word "alienation" – the notion that the artist is a "foreigner within society" that rejects him/her, a person who has been "isolated" and marginalised. The artist is the positive figure of a person who has been excluded: rejected, but not exploited. The artist is a grandiose kind of pariah, one who is full of talent and rich with the fruits whose promises s/he embodies. The term "excluded" is customarily applied to negative images alone, that is, to people who are only defined by what they lack – such as residency permits, housing, employment and so on.

b) The formulation of critique also presupposes the existence of a speaker *whose status is such that other people feel they have to listen to what s/he has to say*. Artists in bourgeois society find themselves in this situation even though they are marginalised into roles they consider secondary. By viewing artists as a new spiritual elite somehow able to gain access to transcendental truths that lie beyond the scope of common mortals, the philosophical conception of art and the artist that began to take shape in the late eighteenth century provided "artist critique" with the authority it needed to deliver its anathemas. This conception began to pervade society, accompanying

deep-seated changes in the status of the artist. The artist, in the modern sense of the term, emerged already in the early nineteenth century. The creation of this category resulted from its progressive divorce from craft work – underway since the Renaissance – due to the general acknowledgement of the art's intellectual aspects (these being attributes that increase its value and differentiate artists from crafts persons). This new dignity strengthened “artist critique,” providing it with a new and valorised status which worked to greater effect, than the critiques of other groups who did not have the good fortune to be given a platform to air their views, and who were therefore treated as whining and gossiping complainers.<sup>6</sup>

c) It is also necessary to have a *body of doctrine that is both coherent and generally recognised as something acceptable and which provides a sound basis for argumentation*. These conditions are satisfied by the existence of the modern doctrine of art, inasmuch as it enjoys broad social consensus. To start with, the doctrine emphasises the grandeur that is associated with artistic activities (and with those who carry out such pursuits). Secondly, it sees creation as an activity which must be, and which can only be, fundamentally free – which must be emancipated from all forms of constraint (especially economic) and conventions (especially those of the bourgeois variety). If there is no consensus that art constitutes a free activity, what leverage do artists use to advance their demands?

This conception also conveys judgmental norms that raise questions about some of the attributes of modernity: its capitalism, materialism and rationalism; its cult of the useful and the profitable; and the circumspect caution thought to characterise bourgeois individuals who are measured and calculating in everything they do in their industrial, routine-laden and austere lives. Conversely, this conception gives people a chance to demand that they be granted certain rights: the right to commit themselves to activities that are free (whose only purpose, in other words, is their self-realisation); the right not to be forced into a job that requires being at someone else's beck and call; the right to produce works that are unique and singular, and therefore very different from the mass reproductions that a purely industrial logic caters to. This is a conception that places high value on creative urges and inspiration. It includes the idea that a person can be inventive each and every day of his/her life; and that s/he can be detached from any of the material and temporal

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael Walzer, *The company of critics. Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York:

powers that undermine the holiness of freedom. It is an escape from the prison of reason and reasonableness.

There is, however, one dimension of the new society that cannot be criticised with this modern conception of art: individualism. The signature characteristic of genius is the single-mindedness with which certain artists engage in their activity (and even their life as a whole, in the case of dandies). This radicalises the search for singularity and autonomy – a quest that constitutes the very basis of individualism. Arguments are made in favour of ensuring the primacy of particular individual activities over the imperative of rendering service to society at large (or of membership in a community). Ipso facto, this conception does not allow for any critique of the new society in the name of solidarity. In this domain, it yields its prerogative to “social critique,” much as it does regarding the democratic promotion of equal freedoms. Basically, since artists aspire to a freedom that is exceptional in nature, “artist critique” does not entail the idea that this freedom should be extended to all of humanity. “Artist critique” is in effect quite aristocratic in nature.

Thus, “artist critique”, which started out as the product of extremely specific historical conditions and the rallying cry of a very small band of artists and writers marked by the peculiar nature of their position in the field of cultural production, came to be copied by other types of actors – that is, by people who think of themselves as having a lifestyle similar to that of artists. Examples have included intellectuals, journalists and many other media professionals – as well as anyone who has demanded for him or herself the freedom and supposedly fulfilling lifestyle of an artist (i.e., the May 1968 French student protestors).

## ***2. The historical weakening of “artist critique”***

Our argument is that artist critique has fallen into a severe crisis over the past twenty years, becoming not only less virulent but also – and this is probably no less worrisome – fulfilling less and less its social function, which is to maintain an active critique within our capitalist modernity in the name of such values as freedom or the refusal of commodification. The reasons for this crisis

can be found as much within the art worlds as within the business world. More broadly, the morphological transformations that capitalism has undergone in this same period also shed light on artist critique's current difficulties.

A first group of reasons for the historical weakening of "artist critique" can be seen in the cultural domain itself. Returning to the different conditions I identified as driving the emergence of critique in general, it is clear that they are much less prevalent today:

a) As regards the existence of an *experience that leads to a complaint being made*, note that thanks to the general increase in incomes from the culture industry and due to greater state protection, artists can no longer be considered destitute. As for the famous gap between supply and demand – a source of much pain for artists since it attests to the general public's lack of understanding – though still topical, it is no longer so crucial as it was, given the continuous rise in levels of instruction, the educational efforts taking place as part of state-run cultural policies and the (French) state's massive intervention in favour of contemporary creation.

b) The *body of doctrine behind this type of argumentation* no longer has the same impact. The doctrine of romanticism has come under considerable fire, weakening its ability to become the basis for a strong type of critique. At one time, it seemed that the best way to substantiate the notion of management's dangerousness was to stress the coexistence of ostensibly bourgeois and philistine managers (i.e., actors allegedly incapable of understanding artistic activities and solely concerned with financial calculation) and a system of management based on Fordist factory types of organisational practices. However, the transformation of managers and management has deprived these stereotypes of the reality that the art world once ascribed to them.

Romanticism's worldview was called into question particularly in the second half of the twentieth century by a number of theorists and philosophers, which, though not necessarily targeting art, nevertheless led to repercussions as to how it was construed, notably by artists themselves, both in their works and in their theoretical understanding of their practice – though there is no reason to either identify or discount altogether a causal relationship in this convergence. A certain number of

founding elements of the artist critique of management and capitalism have thus been revisited or subjected to renewed scrutiny.

To begin with, the notion of creation has been the object of thoroughgoing critique. The mystifying and highly theologically connoted use, making of the author a sort of demigod creating works “*ex nihilo*”, lending his role and his works a sacred aura where Being was alleged to be disclosed; the obscure and blurry character of corollary concepts (inspiration, creativity amongst others) has also been critiqued. The Marxist tradition has preferred the notion of production over that of creation, underscoring the labour that goes into producing artwork at the expense of inspiration.<sup>7</sup> Cognitive theories, amongst the variety of theories of creativity currently available, stands opposed to more “inspired” conceptions of creation. Many contemporary artists also share this vision of art, stressing the pain and suffering of creation and refusing to characterise their work as the spontaneous welling up of inspiration.

Others have drawn attention to the implementation of social processes of production within creation. The sociologists interested in the arts and culture who have developed this perspective have ended up denying the artist his or her “centrality” and showing that even the most individual artistic activity necessitates the intervention and the influence of a whole multitude of actors. They have insisted on the collective dimension of creation and on the social interaction which is at play.<sup>8</sup> Certain artists themselves would be happy to see the dissolution of the creative subject, the depersonalisation of the artistic gesture and tackle head-on the “myth of the lone and genius artist.” One need only think, for instance, of the collective works of BMTP or the attempts to have everyone take part in the production of a work, as in the Fine-Arts Workshop of 1968.

Nor has the notion of the artwork escaped unscathed, for one speaks of a work only there where one presupposes an author, and the very idea of the work’s value being linked to the singularity of a personality has also vacillated.<sup>9</sup> The importance given to the originality and unicity of the work came to be contested by artists themselves with the emergence of multiple or series-produced

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Howard Becker, *Art Worlds*. (London, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1982); Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” in: *Dits et écrits. 1954-1969* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque des sciences humaines), pp. 789-821 (conference given in Buffalo in 1969).

works and the recuperation of manufactured objects for artistic purposes. The work is also affected in the desire for durability which is deeply inscribed at the very heart of the artistic enterprise. Artists create ephemeral works, linked to the use of fragile and perishable materials, or reduced to events, fleeting interventions of temporary installations, of which only traces or sketches (films, drawings, tissue samples, photographs and so on) can be conserved. With conceptual art, all presentation of an object or a performance of any kind is abolished to the benefit of the idea: the very materiality of the work itself is abolished.

There is one final founding element of artist critique which the twentieth century abundantly descried: the opposition between the artist and the bourgeois. The artist drew part of his grandeur from the realisation of an art which did not correspond to the taste for economic and political power and which bore witness at once to his (avant-garde-like) “advance” over the dominant taste which would supposedly end up recognising him and his freedom with respect to the powerful. His spiritual power, which enabled him to contest material powers, particularly in artist critique, also came to the fore in the works themselves. However, in a reversal of roles, worthy of a tragedy, avant-garde art, which had been construed in opposition to the bourgeois art of the nineteenth century, found itself accused in the twentieth century, in the name of the people, of being “bourgeois” inasmuch as it was elitist and inaccessible to the vast majority, and persecuted by all variety of totalitarian regimes who sought to revive the craftsmanship of the previous bourgeois art (academic, figurative, realist...). Some artists themselves were sensitive to this critique and wanted to move closer to the masses. And today, the recognition of the avant-garde movements by the state and the large public museums constitutes an historical novelty, which makes of today’s avant-garde movements the new form of official art, taking – albeit in entirely new forms – the place of the traditional academic system that had been swept aside once and for all in 1968. Opposition to the “bourgeois” (to those holding economic and political power) is now complete, and the critique of the power of money now often has more to do with the refusal of “lowbrow” or “commercial” art, alleged to feed the capitalist machine, but above all considered vulgar, facile, lacking “distinction”, while elitist art has taken on the task of a bourgeois critique of popular values.

In the wake of these artistic experiments, shifts of meaning and the theoretical questioning of the charismatic conception of art and artists, it has become very difficult to talk about any spiritual “superiority” in the name of which critique could be put forward. More humble, commitment is expressed in the form of an involved spectator, witness and sign of the cuts and bruises of an era. The works are more easily conceived as so many traces, signs and subjective points of view on the world, than as access routes to some transcendent truth. The artist is a person like any other; his creation like his critique, like the actions of humanity at large, are caught up in the play of determinisms, from which, by nature, he is no more able to escape than anyone else. At that point, doubt worms its way into the authority of his critique and the fact that he could express himself in the name of some eternal truths that he had allegedly understood better than others. The community of artists and men of letters that took the place of the church in the exercise of spiritual power in the course of the nineteenth century<sup>10</sup> has in turn been largely stripped of its prerogatives.

c) Finally, *the status of the artist* has changed. People used to stop and listen to what artists had to say. Artists have now lost much of their aura, even though their image remains relatively positive (i.e., public opinion continues to have respect for it). Artists have lost many of the attributes that were once the source of their grandeur. Due to the democratisation of knowledge and society, they are now little more than mere citizens, one amongst many - simple professionals or workers who are active in a specific line of work. Moreover, because of the way in which the cultural industry has developed, the artistic community has also had to cope with the rise of a vast range of new professions that have trivialised and destroyed previous representations of the artist.

As far as the business world is concerned, the convergence between the two worlds and the reduction of the tension between Art and Business can be attributed to the increased influence of service activities in the economy. This means that it has become imperative to have highly autonomous people working at the customer “interface”. It is also linked to a rise in entertainment, fashion and information management-related activities that are *a priori* more similar to artistic organisations than is, for instance, the metalwork industry. One can also highlight the fact that product renewal rates have begun to accelerate in almost every market, regardless of whether this involves real innovations, cosmetic changes or promotional offers – all alterations that require an

---

<sup>10</sup> P. Benichou *Le sacre de l'écrivain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973)

operational mode closer to what we can find in art worlds. It can be concluded that this convergence dramatically decreases the possibility of declaiming an artist type of critique. This is because management has changed in so many ways, showing itself to be capable of greater respect for creative modes of functioning. More broadly, it can be demonstrated that one of the reasons why neo-management has adopted practices that are similar to those found in the art world is that it has listened to the complaints that emanate from “artist critique”. This means that in addition to all of the aforementioned causes of the weakening of “artist critique”, we should add its co-optation by its adversary. “Artist critique” has lost much of poignancy precisely because it has been successful.

This hypothesis is substantiated by the fact that in May 1968 many of the demonstrators (especially students) had been demanding a professional life with greater similarity to an artist’s idealised life style, meaning a creative profession where they could use all the powers of their imagination; a job that was not routine-laden; and above all a job with minimal subordination, that is, without any boss who had to be obeyed even if one did not agree with him/her. They criticised the “commute-work-sleep” lifestyle (*Metro-Boulot-Dodo*) they were being offered and made fun of the seriousness of managers in three-piece suits who were as “uptight” as the bourgeois individuals whom artists had had such a great time ridiculing in the mid-nineteenth century as robots caught between a stupid job and a stifling home environment. As such, in our opinion, one of the main specificities of May 1968 is that “artist critique” for the first time echoed throughout all of society, moving well beyond the small circle of artists and intellectuals within which it had usually circulated until that point. Its themes were taken up by political movements, notably by the partisans of self-management, by the non-Marxist left and by labour unions such as France’s CFTD.

In general, the forms in which capitalist accumulation exists at a given time greatly depend on the type and virulence of the criticism levelled at it. More precisely, it is possible to analyse the development of Fordist capitalism as a reaction to the economic and fascist crisis of the 1930s and to the Second World War. It developed through the co-optation of proposals stemming from “social critique” (the welfare state, collective bargaining between employer organisations and unions, state control over the allocation of added value, planning, budgetary control, etc.). Symmetrically, the development of flexible neo-capitalism can be seen as the result of the

co-optation of proposals of artistic critique by business interests, such as the individualisation of performance evaluation and carriers, reduction of direct hierarchical control, and so on. This co-optation appeared as a realistic strategy to employers when they had to cope with the governability crisis of the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

The incorporation of the themes of artist critique into dominant capitalist discourse has now become obvious. Management literature has gone out of its way to explain that while wage labourers may have lost job security in the latest transformation of the world of work, they have gained more creative, more varied, more autonomous labour, closer to an artistic lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> The co-optation of artist critique by dominant economic discourse within the business world is thus one of the most noteworthy sources of the crisis of artist critique, which has been definitively weakened in every respect.

### ***Conclusion***

The agonising question at this point is to determine whether artist critique has definitively collapsed or if there is some way of reconstructing it on the basis of a core of resistance. For it remains obvious that it has not lost its reason for being but merely a large degree of its effectiveness and credibility. As Michael Walzer has pointed out, common moral sense remains operative and it is always possible to once again draw upon original indignation to reconstruct a critique applicable to the current forms of society.<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that artist critique continues to call attention to unresolved problems. It embodies a discussion as to the value of things and stands opposed to the commodification of other forms of values which money will never be able to take into account: artistic value, aesthetic value, intellectual value, and what Benjamin called “cultural” value.<sup>14</sup> It draws attentions to the existence of unprofitable activities, that cannot be sustained by market forces alone, but whose value must nonetheless be acknowledged. It safeguards in this respect the possibility of greatness and value for all those acts, things and people who are not valorised by the

---

<sup>11</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999; English translation, forthcoming, January 2005, London: Verso).

<sup>12</sup> Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Walzer, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, “L'oeuvre d'art à l'heure de sa reproductibilité technique”, in *Essais 2, 1935-1940*, Médiation, Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1983, pp. 87-126.

economic system. It makes it possible to question the commodification of all manifestations of humanity, and raises the question as to the authenticity of a world of widespread reproduction and distribution. From this point of view, the most recent developments in management warrant questioning. Of course it is no longer possible to do away with creativity by applying Taylorist procedures to everyone's labour; on the contrary, it needs to be studied and developed, as with relations of trust and friendship. But are there any limits to this will to codify, reproduce, establish and maintain control over the most singular manifestations of humanity? What dangers does it entail for society? Art per se stands opposed to this project of complete mastery by science, each individual artwork constructing an inexhaustible world which it is, however, able to question. Therein lies art's act of resistance against modern society, which has been the least harmed by the developments of the past few decades. No less than two centuries ago, artworks remain vested with the mission to manifest the desire for an enchanted and enchanting world, ultimately defying all analysis.

Translated from the French by Stephen Wright