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The Artist as Troublemaker: Do We Still Need Them Today?

*But art that thinks  
only in terms of art  
is purgatorial stench.  
True art is both hell  
and heaven.  
Günter Brus,  
early 1980s*

A radical Left aided by a  
cultural elite that detests  
Christianity and finds  
Christian moral tenets  
reactionary and repressive is  
hell-bent on pushing its  
amoral values and imposing  
its ideology on our nation.  
*Pat Buchanan, 2004*

It is a truism that art requires at least a modicum of outrage or scandal to be a public and commercial success these days. Almost all important prizewinners and laureates praised for artistic achievements in the USA and Europe were once themselves provocateurs of some controversial debate in which they stood alone against a majority of the status quo as troublemakers. *But why do we – the world of art – love these troublemakers more now than ever before?*

Just last year, Mark Wallinger (born in 1959) received the prestigious Turner Prize, perhaps the most significant award of its kind in the international world of art, for his work *State Britain*, in which he offered longstanding peace activist Brian Haw a special platform for expression at the Tate Britain. A year earlier, the die-hard demonstrator had been forced to abandon his post in the immediate area of the British Parliament due to a new law.

The USA has its fair share of troublemakers as well. Take the Guerilla Girls, who since the 1980s have been resorting to unconventional means to draw attention to the male-dominated and male-defined world of art. Or take Andres Serrano (born in 1950), who among other things triggered heated debates with *Piss Christ* and his works on the Ku-Klux Klan. But troublemakers have been perhaps even more prevalent in music than in the visual arts. From Elvis Presley's gyrating hips to Jim Morrison's obscenity and indecent exposure and the recent protests against Marilyn Manson, we are all familiar with the phenomenon of troublemaking artists who ultimately make important contributions to the cultural history of humanity.

Because of the traumatic changes it underwent in the 20th century, Austria had an especially radical art scene. Among other things, this tradition was established by today's big stars of Classic Modernism, Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) and Egon Schiele

(1890-1918), who were both repeatedly treated as troublemakers and experienced plenty of public rejection. Another fairly well-known representative of the same era, Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980), was like many others included in the Nazi's black list of "degenerate artists" and was forced to leave Austria.

After World War II, the next generation of artists battled against cultural conservatism so vehemently that some went as far as their self-destruction. After all, they had to deal with nothing less than the loss of a multiethnic empire and the inheritance of the National Socialist legacy.

One of the most striking examples is the scandal surrounding the *Kunst und Revolution* event in 1968, where Otto Mühl (born 1925), Peter Weibel (born 1944), Oswald Wiener (born 1935), and Günter Brus (born 1938) performed multiple so called "actions" at the same time. As part of his 33rd "body analysis action," Brus undressed, sliced his chest and thighs with a razor blade, and urinated in a glass and drank from it. He defecated, smeared the excrement on his body, and then laid on a table and started to masturbate, singing the Austrian national anthem throughout the performance.

Günter Brus was sentenced to six months of severe imprisonment for degrading Austrian symbols and committing indecent and immoral acts. Afterwards, he went to Germany for some time, but continued his artistic work. In 1996 he received the Grand Austrian State Prize for Fine Art. The action itself is today an icon of Actionism and is cited in almost every treatise on Austrian art history or the postwar era.

This trend is exemplary for a positive and democratic relationship between art and politics. Even though there are many contrary examples documenting the rejection or even destruction of art and artists, art has asserted itself here as an autonomous system against politics in society.

The process may well have started as early as the age of Enlightenment in the late 18th century, when the arts were given an especially active role in the development of civilization and culture. A case in point is Emperor Joseph II (1741-1790), who had commissioned W.A. Mozart (1756-1791) to compose the opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782) to promote "national *singspiel*," German-language opera with spoken dialogue, in the days when Italian works dominated the Court Opera. His remark to Mozart that the music had "too many notes" has been quoted for generations to illustrate the tension between politics and art.

But while in the 18th century the artist was still an artisan whose task was to serve God and the Emperor for some special end (such as enlightenment), in the 19th century the Romantic idea of the genius artist created much more room for freedom and autonomy. Above all, the artist could also serve art itself, and art, in turn, acquired its own place in society. Society – in this case European society – began to love its troublemakers as harbingers of democratization. Their battle for autonomy was also viewed as a battle for freedom *pars pro toto*, for all. This was as true for Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) in German lands as for Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), who praised the Paris Commune.

With the rise of Nationalism everywhere in Europe, however, many artists became important creators of national identities. Rather than troublemakers, they were

allocated the role of apologist. In the realm of language, this applied first and foremost to the writers, but also to composers, including Richard Wagner (1813-1883).

Artists took on an especially precarious position in the 20th century as a result of the totalitarian regimes of Communism and Fascism. There was no room for troublemakers, half of several generations of artists disappeared in concentration camps, prisons, and gulags for their artistic differentness.

With his concept of “cultural hegemony,” Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), although himself a Communist or Marxist thinker, established a theoretical platform where artists or intellectuals could criticize, attack, and thereby help to overcome prevalent conditions. Karl Marx (1818-1883), one of Gramsci’s most influential role models, had only given culture the secondary function of a superstructure – dependent on the socio-economic base. Gramsci’s understanding of the “organic intellectual” or artist – a very democratic idea in the interwar years – called upon them to articulate the feelings and experiences that the broad masses cannot identify and communicate themselves. This gave the troublemaker an ideological basis.

In so doing, Gramsci also carried on the newly emerging notion of the *avant-garde*, another offshoot of Marxism. Most artists making history in the 20th century followed this important concept of Modernism. Their view of themselves always being ahead of their time certainly gave them strength, even in difficult circumstances, but it is also problematic in that it can lead to a complete dissociation from every social and cultural reality.

The liberal climate in the international arena in the late 1960s and 70s created more freedom. In Austria, too, troublemaker artists were offered platforms by politicians as the representatives of society. For instance, in 1970 the Austrian Federal Government suddenly and very officially wished for “a youth with a healthy irreverence for the status quo” (government declaration by Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, 1911-1990) and a “socially critical cultural radicalism” (Kreisky, 1977). In Styria, Hanns Koren (1906-1985) deserves special mention here. Starting in 1968, he was an instrumental force in the Steirischer Herbst, an avant-garde festival that offered refuge to many a troublemaker.

It is true that time and again troublemakers transgress boundaries, damage institutions, and create problems in general. But still, they raise questions that can benefit a democratic society. They also change institutions.

I am grateful to Peter Pakesch, the Artistic Director of the Joanneum and the Kunsthaus Graz, for putting together an exhibition together with the Austrian Cultural Forum that sheds valuable light on the relationship between artists as troublemakers and museums.

Graz and the Austrian Cultural Forum have a very special common bond – both the Kunsthaus and the Austrian Cultural Forum building in New York are viewed as “friendly aliens” of sorts.

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