An Aesthetics of Negativity: On the Instrumental Evaluation of Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The contextual interpretation of conceptual art under politically oppressive regimes as a politicized art practice seems dominant in the current revisionist discourse of art history. At a closer inspection, this discourse seems to illustrate Rainer Rochlitz's comments on the use of political criteria for instrumentally evaluating contemporary art, favoring political engagement as a relational artistic value instead of a set of (inherent) aesthetic values. Using art historical analysis of the context of artistic production and reception as well as case studies, I intend to show that what we may praise as being critically efficient conceptual artworks are also aesthetically relevant in a particular sense. The political character they may acquire and the instrumental value attached to it depends on the production of artistic autonomy as a field of semiotic experiments with language and social communication. It is the aesthetic function of that part of conceptual art engaged in useless artistic labor and pointless communication, criticizing the inherent rationality of the modernist project, which obliquely acquires political overtones in times of straightforward ideological engagement of art.

Keywords: Conceptual Art, Eastern Europe, Instrumental Evaluation, Aesthetic Functionalism, Aesthetic Autonomy, Negativity, Ideology

Art Historical Revisionism and the Political Evaluation of Conceptual Art

It has become customary to treat the practices of conceptual art developed in former Eastern Europe[1] and Latin America as "subversive" (Dressler 2010) or at least as tactical engagements with social and political life of the time, having

proposed a "didactics of liberation" (Camnitzer 2007). This tendency has also extended to what we could label today as "neo-avant-garde" art practices, or, in other words, the corpus of art produced roughly between 1960 and 1980 that critically expanded the language of modernism while undermining some of its basic presuppositions.

Nevertheless, even if many of these art practices were developed under oppressive political regimes and addressed directly the contemporary social life of the time, it is not obvious what makes a politicized artistic gesture, what artworks may be treated as being "political" and why, and what may differentiate politically engaged from apolitical art. There are several reasons to question this simplistic characterization. First, using an intentional criterion to differentiate among what can be called "political" and "apolitical art", it may be observed that some artworks may be intended structurally to have a political significance or create a political effect, while others may only acquire these attributes contingently. In accordance with Piotrowski, I will even go on to suggest that, in certain circumstances, apolitical art may be regarded as a politically engaged or significant attitude (Piotrowski 2012, 82-83). Second, there are degrees of intentionality: there may be artworks that were not primarily intended to have a political bearing, but only in a secondary and hence, contingent manner. Third, "political" and "politicized" are different terms, which may be related to the problem of the explicit and the implicit in the reception and interpretation of the artwork. Some politicized artworks may not be political in the intentional sense, but they may contextually be proved to have had a significant impact on social or cultural life, or at least to present political interest in (critically or unproblematically) depicting social life at the time of their production. Thus, the class of the "politicized" artworks is larger than the one embodying properly political gestures or iconography, including those pieces that acquire a political feature or impact under a specific interpretation. The politicized character of an artwork is thus a relational attribute. According to such a perspective, the work acquires such a property in relation to its social and political context of production. The political character may be

pragmatically inferred from the contextual production and reception of the work. Using an analogy with the theory of communication, we might state that the property of being a politicized artwork depends on the context of the "utterance" of the artwork and not on its propositional semantics. The relevant questions would be then when, how and where is the artwork produced and exhibited and for whom?

For instance, some artworks explicitly refer to political motives, including linguistic structures and slogans, or consciously use politicized symbols or mimic ritualistic practices of the Party, especially in Eastern European conceptual art. Mladen Stilinović's conscious construction of slogans such as the fake quote "Work is a Disease. Karl Marx", or the production of self-referential political statements such as "Any attack on my work is an attack on the Party" as autonomous artistic pieces are a good example for the first situation. A good example for the latter would be the work entitled "Sing!", consisting in a photograph of the artist, facing the camera, with a bill on his forehead on which this imperative is handwritten. The urge to sing is associated with the practice of amateur entertainers in the Balkans and around this region, paid by the folks to perform by sticking money on their foreheads. The image also suggest the idea of the artist as an underpaid worker for the State system, alluding to the official songs for the Party more or less unwillingly performed by crowds of workers at a time when communist ideas of solidarity were already bankrupt. Thus, the work may be referring to the opportunistic career of those successful artists in the official system of artistic production and, at the same time, to the exploitation of artistic labor, suggested here by the possibility of supplementing the meaning of the artwork by switching between the equally plausible popular and propaganda songs. Others artworks are only indirectly acquiring a political overtone in relation to certain publicly shared codes, tactic assumptions or set of beliefs which use to regulate the context of its production and reception. This seems to be the situation of many artworks that are reevaluated and given much praise today by the art historians and critics under such an interpretation. For instance, the exposure of the naked body in

the public space acquires such a political overtone. Although not explicit, Croatian artist Tomislav Gotovac's inexplicable outburst of joy in his action from 1978 Zagreb entitled "I love you", in which the artist runs naked on the streets of Zagreb, mimicking on his own the collective behavior of supporters that invade the football arenas after a game that was won by their favorite team, is interpreted as a form of anarchic behavior subverting the socialist and modernist codes regulating public space (Badovinac 1998, 16). Equally telling is the case of Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu whose sequence of photographically documented actions from the 1970's such as "Washing with Light" become obliquely instances of subversive affirmation in relation to the totalitarian political context of the time (Badovinac 1998; Piotrowski 2009) – in this case, relating to the ghostly figure of the artist underlining precarious conditions of living in communism and suggesting the ascetic spirituality denied by the atheist official regime.

Last, but not least, it is problematic what can be recognized as art at a certain moment and by what artworld in the social sense of the term. Not only that our evaluations are historically changing, but the very constitution of the artworld in this case is changing in time. When discussing politicized practices of conceptual art we are usually referring not to those works that explicitly relate to political situations being supported by the official state apparatus, but rather and most often to the unofficial artistic production working explicitly or implicitly to disturb the ideological status quo. It is equally telling that many of the conceptual art pieces in Eastern Europe (or Latin America) were not produced inside the official artistic system, but were creating a parallel artworld and were completely marginal to the official art system. This is one reason why I would be reluctant to call these practices "ideological conceptualism" (Fiz 1972), since they are the very opposite of the ideologically engaged practices serving as illustrations of official state ideology. The other, would be that, according to Piotrowski, it is less ideology than the Ideological State Apparatuses, in Althusser's terminology, that are targeted by the critical lens of conceptual art (Piotrowski 2012, 80-81).

The institutional conditions of these practices are highly relevant, for they explain, first of all, that the political and the artistic system were not autonomous. The artistic system was itself politicized according to the dominant (socialist or communist) ideology, but also to its own internal, aesthetic and representational conventions, as well as by means of different, but inter-related institutional practices. Second, most of the artworks we may label today "conceptualist" are lacking the normal institutional system of production, promotion, distribution and reception that conceptual art practices in the United States and Western Europe benefited from, as well as the art market and even the public of the former (Groys 2008, 29-30; Badovinac 1998, 15-16; Piotrowski 2009, 295; 316-17). Instead, they appear as "non-aligned", "anti-art" or even as non-artistic practices in relation to the official artworld of the time. Most of them appear in alternative art circuits of "experimental" art such as the "tolerated" practices of conceptual art in Yugoslavia or Poland. In some cases, they are even exhibited in depoliticized public spaces belonging to no cultural realm, such as the artistic activities of the Collective Actions Group performed in the natural fields and forests around Moscow, far both from the eyes of the public and of the censorship.

Therefore, by "politicized" artistic practices I understand, in the large sense that will be used here, not only to the artworks actually or hypothetically intended as political actions or representations by their authors and sanctioned or approved as such by the political system of the time, but also artworks that were not explicitly referring to political motives and were not even appreciated as art at the time, but which, given their marginal position, appear to acquire a political significance if interpreted against a proper socio-political background. That is why, as I will suggest, it is most likely to treat Conceptual Art produced under oppressive political governance as a semiotic activity touching the beaurocratic structures that materialize ideology both in the artistic and the social field at large. Many of these artistic practices were living on the fringes of the official art system and were presenting a subversive potentiality to the current artistic and political

status quo at the time.

One specific reason to relate to those artworks that may appear to bear a political impact under a proper art-historical interpretive framing and to question the evaluative criteria used in their case is the pressing importance of such an entanglement of evaluation and interpretation in the reconstruction and challenge of the artistic canon in rewriting recent art history. In fact, the problem of the evaluation of artworks on political grounds becomes of major importance when confronted with the problem of the reconsideration of the artistic canon of art produced in the former Eastern Europe. While most ideologically laden artworks that used to praise the system such as many instances of socialist realism and many examples of modernist abstract sculpture formerly evaluated under a strict formalist (hence, apolitical) framework of interpretation and appreciation are being entirely discredited under revisionist tendencies in recent art history, subversive or "unofficial" practices become paramount and tend to challenge the canon of modernist art relevant from 1945 to 1989 (Piotrowski 2009; Badovinac 2011). This discourse was shaped in the light of a supposedly synchronic, or at least parallel (Badovinac) development of artistic language on a global scale, which transforms the dominant language of modernist abstraction or social realism in some countries of the former Eastern bloc into a persistence of obsolete forms of artistic communication, hence to of minor artistic value.

This situation seems to echo what Rainer Rochlitz considered to represent a major trend in twentieth century art after the avant-gardes at least from the perspective of its institutionalized appreciation, where political criteria and critical engagement seems to be used as a guarantee of quality in the absence (or the pulverization) of any relevant and universal set of aesthetic criteria (Rochlitz 2008). Often, this can also be translated as a straightforward moral evaluation: official art that illustrated or otherwise supported the communist ideology is morally corrupted, hence, bad art, while oppositional, critical art is morally appropriate, hence, good art.

Nevertheless, reconsidering the cannon of art solely on political (and moral) grounds is in itself a contestable activity.

If rewriting the canon means only the reversal of the official with the non-official, then art becomes nothing but the exemplification of the dominant political ideology – in this case, the ideology of the neo-liberal democracy without challenging its essentially heteronomous condition. Historical revisionism may be criticized as only replacing a dominant ideology with another – in this case, the socialist or communist doctrines with the neo-liberal democracy. For instance, artists and artworks may be praised for their "freedom" of speech, for producing "democratic responses" or for allowing for a democratic participation to the public sphere, that is, for promoting values belonging to the dominant political status quo.

This problem is repeated at the level of the construction of the art historical narrative. According to a politicized historical meta-narrative, some works are praised for their inherent negativity or anarchic character, for their opposition or contesting struggle against dominant political values of the socialist and communist past. In this case, they are being evaluating within a narrative structure of art historical development which superposes on another meta-narrative, that of the victory of the emancipated capitalist West over the tyranny of the communist East. Such artworks become examples of heroic or mythical figures in the new narrative of contemporary art, as instances of negativity or struggle against the dominant narrative, niches or breaches that may offer a glimpse of change and alternative possibilities.

In order to gain recognition, unofficial artworks that appear challenging to the dominant formal structure may also be retrospectively related to previously recognized instances of artworks. In this case, they may be related to the "aura" of the historical avant-gardes and their critical stance. The prevailing logic here is that of discontinuity and "interruption" (Badovinac 2011). Historical avant-gardes are being interrupted by communist or socialist official art in order to be recuperated by what Peter Bürger calls the "neo-avant-gardes" (Bürger 1984, 55-67) of the sixties and seventies, hence, by conceptual art as an illustrious exponent of the neo-avant-gardes. The "anti-art" gestures of many conceptualists from both Western world and Eastern Europe are thus often related back to familiar anti-art

gestures such as Duchamp's famous ready-mades. This historical reference does not actually counter the parallel narrative of political engagement, for it is noticeable that the so-called historical avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century had a marked political program too. For instance, the anarchism of Dada, to which the subversive practices of Marcel Duchamp may be closely related, was channeled against the decadent bourgeois constitution of the artworld at that time (Bürger 1984, 15-30). Such historical connections may also explain the anti-establishment character of the anti-art tendencies of "non-official" conceptual art as a repetition of the anti-establishment tendencies of the avant-gardes. However, according to Hal Foster, the neo-avant-gardes are not only an aesthetical reinterpretation of the previously engaged practices. They may be equally considered repetitions of the suppressed facets of the avant-gardes, which belatedly come back from the collective artistic unconscious in the guise of the anarchic gestures of the anti-modernist, anti-establishment "second" avant-gardes of the late sixties and seventies. If so, we may consider negativity, and, particularly, the pretense of irrationality to be found in Conceptual Art from the former Eastern Europe as an actualization of several avant-garde attitudes and principles that intended to undermine the very foundations of modernism.

Extra-Aesthetic Grounds for Appreciating Conceptual Art: Instrumental and Moral Appreciation

I hope that it has already become obvious by now that the revisionist art historical discourse requires at least a more attentive consideration. For the search for and the use of extra-aesthetic criteria in evaluating conceptual art seems to be the only reasonable possibility when dealing with conceptual art given the very structure and appearance of conceptual artworks, that is, given its marked non-aesthetic character. First of all, it is obvious that the value attributed to these works cannot be only formal (or aesthetic in a larger sense), since conceptual art pretends to give up aesthetic

considerations for the sake of an intellectualized approach valuing information over sensuous pleasure or formal artistic qualities. This pretense is supported by explicit affirmations of landmark American conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, stating that "aesthetics, as we have pointed out, are conceptually irrelevant to art" (Kosuth 2002, 164). As Sol Le Witt also puts it "what the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned" (Le Witt 1999, 12).

The anti-aesthetic character of conceptual art also seems to be supported by a number of art critics, historians and aestheticians alike. For instance, Peter Osborne notices that „conceptual art is not just another particular kind of art, in the sense of a further specification of an existing genus, but an attempt at a fundamental redefinition of art as such, a transformation of its genus: a transformation in the relationship of sensuousness to conceptuality within the ontology of the artwork which challenges its definition as the object of a specifically ‚aesthetic', that is, ‚non-conceptual' or quintessentially ‚visual' experience" (Osborne 1999, 48).

Other authors have also pointed out that conceptual art developed in America may be regarded as a critical reaction to the dominant understanding of the aesthetic in the field of art aesthetic formalism (relevantly exemplified by Clement Greenberg's type of criticism and evaluative criteria). This reaction is most often characterized by a complete rejection of formal qualities of the art object and of the sensuous alike in favor of a cool, intellectual experience (Morgan 1996, 31-38, Wood 2002), based on the analysis of the functions, nature and limits of art. This may be read ultimately as the complete reversal of aesthetic formalism in search of the same purity of art: the elimination of unnecessary conventions, leads, in this case, not to discover color and the flatness of the canvas as essential elements of artistic representation, but to take the problem of representation beyond its purely visual boundaries and to assert the irreducibility of the idea" as the essence of "art" (Colpitt 2004, 36).

It is therefore obvious that we need extra-aesthetic reasons for appreciating conceptual art. If we take a short glimpse at analytical aesthetics, we find out that art may equally be appreciated on moral or cognitive grounds, while conceptual art may be considered to offer valuable moral insights or expand our knowledge in unforeseen ways (Shelleckens 2007). Related to the question of the art historical discourse, one can easily notice that the major evaluative assumption concerning politicized practices in Eastern Europe which is at stake in recent revisionist art historical discourses is actually a moral one: artworks that illustrate the dominant ideology of the party are considered morally repugnant (due to an allegedly opportunistic motivation of their actions), while artworks that challenge the system are morally, hence, artistically worthy. We may thus reduce the political evaluation of conceptual art under oppressive political regimes to a moral problem.

At this point, we may wonder again if the process or art historical re-evaluation is not underpinned and to a certain extent even determined by historically contingent political terms. Nevertheless, there seems to be at least several terms, borrowed from the ethical regime that would seem relevant for many artistic gestures in times of political oppression irrespective of their political affiliation. They relate to norms borrowed from the tradition of humanism that we consider to have a somehow transcendental or at least universal status. For instance, one important evaluative criteria used in explaining the fact that the activity of Moscow Conceptualism was considered to reflect upon and offer a practical response to an existential problem, namely that of "intellectual survival" (Backstein 2005). This problem may be defined as both a moral and practical dilemma, namely, "the survival of the individual in circumstances where it was impossible to do so without losing one's individual human and predominantly moral character" (Backstein 2005). Conceptual art seems to represent a practical solution to this problem, and it is praised for offering a sort of set of creative solutions in response to a particular historical situation. However, what is at stake here is more or less the Adornian question of an aesthetic negativity proper, in

a larger sense, to all experimental art under socialism.

We may also answer the question of the relevance of conceptual art as a politicized social practice in a functionalist manner: given the previously mentioned considerations of the politicized context of production and reception, it seems logical that conceptual art produced in Eastern Europe, which is also bearing the anti-aesthetic characters pointed out by Kosuth or LeWitt, should be regarded as giving up the function of producing aesthetic pleasure and undertaking the function of creating a sphere of artistic autonomy.

As such, conceptual art is fulfilling at the same time a political and moral function: it is often considered as prompting moral evaluations from its public by disclosing social inequities and instigating political changes. It also offers a guide of moral conduct by inventing possibilities of criticality and resistance to ideological heteronomy. In short, given the pertinence of the idea of freedom and individual autonomy in the beliefs currently shared by the democratic world, politicized conceptual art may be praised for teaching us how to preserve our (individual) autonomy even in conditions of political repression. However, conceptual art in the former Eastern Europe often played a role restricted to the sphere of art itself, in a manner similar to that of its Western counterparts, such as Lawrence Weiner, Sol Le Witt, Joseph Kosuth or Art and Language group. Such names are often regarded as artists who philosophically questioned the nature, meaning and functions of art (Osborne 1999), as well as the limits, the grammar and the possibilities of artistic language in the expanded field of contemporary culture. It is not my interest here to explore this meaning of aesthetic autonomy. I will nevertheless restrict my examination to a line of conceptual art that I consider to be the critique of the inherent rationality of the modernist project – and in extension, the failed practice of modernism due to the misguided (and in some cases, infamous) application or materialization of the communist ideology.

Formalist Underpinnings of Moral Appreciations: Aesthetic and Political Autonomy

As I have already stated, the major evaluative assumption concerning politicized practices in Eastern Europe at stake in the discourse of recent revisionist art history is a (covertly) moral one. Artworks that illustrate the dominant ideology of the party are morally suspect (due to an allegedly opportunistic motivation of their actions), while artworks that challenge the system are morally, hence, artistically worthy. We may restate this evaluative framework as follows: there are artists that behave according to their personal interest and other that perform according to their public duty, even though this would be contrary to their personal interest.

I will not try to defend in the present text neither the relevance nor the irrelevance of such reasoning, although there are plenty of factual reasons for which such a simplistic dichotomy may be proved as being untenable[2]. Neither will I try to defend or refute the moral or the cognitive value of politicized conceptual art, although I agree that its value may be supported on both grounds and that many instances of such works are both morally and cognitively relevant. What I am actually trying to show is that even if we embrace such a moralist evaluation of (retrospectively) politicized practices of Conceptual Art, what we consider to represent the moral probity of an artwork is most of the time dependent on a formal quality of the artworks related to its aesthetic function. The aesthetic regime of communication is a key element for the political success of an artwork. But it is obvious that formalism for its own sake is not to be taken into account in the definition of the aesthetic regime of conceptual art, given the programmatic aesthetically non-interesting appearance of conceptual artworks. It is therefore more difficult to accept without argumentation how exactly the evaluation of the political impact and nature of the artworks is somehow dependent on formal considerations. In other words, it is harder to accept the fact that most of the politically relevant works in terms of their implications are at the same time artistically and

aesthetically challenging to the aesthetic status quo.

The aesthetic quality of the works I refer to is not visual and not related to the pleasure produced to its viewer. These are neither material qualities nor qualities of the experience of reception. Nevertheless, they may be considered to belong to the internal articulation of the artwork, that is, to be artistic properties in the first place. More precisely, the formal quality I am talking about relates to the articulation of the artwork as a linguistic proposition, that is, it belongs to the rhetorical use of the elements of communication composing a conceptual artwork, be them visual or textual. The rhetorical use of the communicative elements transform the ideological function of the normal communicational structures into a mere aesthetic functioning, understood here in the precise sense of useless or dysfunctional objects of pointless contemplation. The performative functioning of conceptual artworks as linguistic propositions is distorting ideological communication in order to produce empty signifiers presented as mere objects of contemplation Thus expressed autonomy of the aesthetic regime in relation to social utility acquires a second-order political significance. Loosely following Adorno, it is precisely this capacity of the artwork to serve as an instrument of social critique precisely by its non-instrumentalization and differentiation by means of aesthetic pleasure, and to expose the inherent contradictions of the society in which it is embedded (Menke 1999) that I will consider to be the aesthetic quality of at least a significant part of conceptual art in the former Eastern Europe.

The fact that most of the politically relevant works are at the same time artistically challenging to the aesthetic status quo is perhaps easier to prove on mere empirical grounds. It suffices to think that the formal or stylistic components of conceptual art, interested in pointing out relations instead of favoring aesthetic qualities, represents in itself a formal alteration of the official figurative or abstract aesthetic status quo. In this sense, politicized conceptual art represents in itself a radical formal innovation in the use of artistic language. What is perhaps not clear without further argumentation is how the alterations of the dominant aesthetic formats of visual

and communication realized in some instances of conceptual art may be considered as inherently political gestures. This perhaps unusual dependency of the political on the aesthetic (and, as I will try to show, on the particular pointless and useless character of the aesthetic object as marks of artistic autonomy) is actually constituted by two particular conditions of conceptual art in Eastern Europe.

The first condition is the communicative character of conceptual art, inscribed in the linguistic structures of social life. But these structures are at the same time infused with political strategies of exerting control and channeling power. Therefore, under the communist regime, the forms of linguistic communication (hence, of artistic communication) were inherently political. Second, it is also a particular feature of the concept of political autonomy in a completely politicized artistic system which defines art as having a marked social utility. Under such an interpretation, artistic communication offers new possibilities of communication that are impossible in normal circumstances, which makes them politically relevant as critical and emancipating tools. This also supposes that the most efficient artworks as political tools are the ones able to create zones of formal expressive autonomy within the normal communicative structures, even though this does not mean to produce aesthetically pleasant objects of contemplation.

We may restate this relationship in functionalist terms as follows. From a functionalist perspective, artworks may either support the dominant ideology of the Party (which is morally repugnant) or oppose it (which is morally sound), that is, they may work against it in order to subvert and de-structure it, or to circumvent it (by creating an alternative, an outside). In this respect, I plead for a co-alteration of form and social function concerning politicized practices of conceptual art. According to this position, a change in form entails a change in function. Conversely, any change in social function supposes a change in form.

The argument for this thesis could be summarized and re-stated as follows: being "an art of language", conceptual art is embedded in the ordinary structures of communication. But under the communist regime, the ordinary structures of

communication are themselves infused with ideology. Thus, conceptual art is also inherently inscribed into the linguistic structures of the dominant ideology that serve as instruments of social control by means of their various material structures, representational conventions and institutions. Consequently, the alterations in the forms of communication from the purely rhetorical to the aesthetic entail micro-political transformations in the status and function of the art object. However, as I will try to show, it is rather the inherent anti-rationalism as part of an anti-modernist stance that conceptual art shares with other neo-avant-garde practices (Šuvaković 2003 a) that may contextually justify its often absurd, pointless, or failed communicational structures.

Meaning and Embodiment: Conceptual Art as a Semiotic Practice

These claims about the relevance of aesthetic formalism in the appreciation of politicized art under oppressive political regimes may seem shocking particularly when dealing with conceptual art. At least for the reasons presented when discussing the non-aesthetic character of conceptual artworks, it is obvious that conceptual art cannot be reduced to a mere matter of aesthetic, that is, sensuous or visual appreciation. Moreover, conceptual art seems to be altogether not interested by the material construction of the artwork, favoring instead the ideal processes of thinking and mental entities. Accordingly, the idea of the "dematerialization" of the art object has been proposed as a definition for conceptual art practices of the late sixties taking into account the absence or irrelevance of the art object in the construction and appreciation of the artwork (Lippard and Chandler 1999, 46-52).

In order to explain the implicit relevance of artistic form in the extra-aesthetic appreciation of conceptual art, let me remind at this point the notion of the artistic "embodiment" of meaning used by Arthur Danto in the wake of Hegel (Danto 1998, 195; Danto 2001) in order to distinguish between artworks and the expression of philosophical or other type of ideas (for instance, the political ones) in a non-artistic form. For

Danto, an artwork is something which has the property of being about something (that is, the semantic property of having a meaning) and the one of embodying this meaning or the message it conveys about the world (or a particular aspect of it) (Danto 1998; 195; Danto 2001, xviii). Therefore, even for an obvious cognitivist like Danto, there is an important ontological difference to be made between the material "vehicle" that conveys the meaning (be it an object or the textual statement, the photograph etc.) and the artwork as such. And indeed, as dematerialized as it may seem, conceptual art still has to materially "embody" its meanings. This means that, unlike non-artistic forms and practices of communication, the meaning of an artwork cannot be separated from its sensuous form of presentation.

But what is the particular form of embodiment in conceptual art, which presents itself as an art entirely devoted to meaning? Indeed, the historical peculiarity of conceptual art is the strange artistic articulation of the Hegelian pretense of surpassing altogether the realm of the sensuous in order to place itself in the proper medium of language as the most suitable medium for conceptual matters, that is, for thinking. Art becomes itself philosophy. But even philosophy needs a medium for expressing meanings, which is language. As many noticed, conceptual art may itself be described as the "art of language" (Wood 2002, 6). It may be characterized by taking into account the paramount role language plays in the material articulation of the artworks, which often tend to be reduced to linguistic statements or propositions. The linguistic element may explain the dematerialization of the artistic object in favor of a new semantic structure whose signifiers are conventional and often volatile (Morley 2003, 142) The fact that language tends to favor pure significance and to get reed of the signifier at all may also explain the idea of „dematerialization" supporting the misconception about conceptual art's physical irrelevance, hence, non-aesthetic quality. In Lucy Lippard's account, conceptual art "emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively" which may "be provoking a dematerialization of art, especially of art as object" (Lippard and Chandler 1999, 48).

The linguistic character of conceptual art is supported by empirical traits of most conceptual art practices given their intensive use of written language in their artistic structures. Commenting about this peculiarity in Western conceptualism, Lippard and Chandler note: "When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves but symbols or representatives of things. Such a work is a medium rather than an end in itself. The medium need not be the message" (Lippard and Chandler 1999, 49). Language may be used in several different ways: it may be used in order to turn it into an object of visual contemplation; it may replace a visual image by its description; or it may accompany an image in many different ways as a caption, that is, in order to specify, overdetermine, diverge, deflect or complexify its meanings and create a complex relation of multiple meanings (Morley 2003, 144). However, we may consider that it is the semiotic activity rather than the strictly linguistic character of conceptual art procedures which may determine its specificity. The analysis and transformation of signs, codes, fragments of visual culture and their articulation undertaken by the artists seems to become a main interest for what we may retrospectively associate with conceptual art. Thus, conceptual art may include other forms of non-linguistic communication such as gestures, photographs and visual codes without losing its "conceptual" character.

What remains to be noted is the formal articulation of conceptual artworks as linguistic propositions. On a different account, Boris Groys noticed that conceptual art transformed the exhibition space into an installation composed of related elements that may be linked according to political, spatial or social logic of relationships, elements that nevertheless tend to be articulated in a way similar to the linguistic structures presiding normal communication (Groys 2011, 1-3). Visual art presents meanings in a way analogous to verbal propositions. To sum up, conceptual art presents itself less as a material and more like an ideal entity, a mental compound formed from various relations, thus, an essentially relational entity. As it happens in our case, the relation may also be specified as the relation between a sign and its political context of use. The

linguistic structure of conceptual artworks does not explain how they may acquire aesthetic significance. Nevertheless, we may explain this possibility if we distinguish between aesthetic function and aesthetic qualities. Taking into account the anti-aesthetic orientation of conceptual art, Groys also notices a shift from aesthetics to poetics and rhetoric in the use of both visual and textual language (Groys 2011, 3). This means that the anti-aesthetic character of conceptual art should also be understood less as a matter of nature but as a matter of use and functional priorities. Although it may remain aesthetic in some of its features, the aesthetic qualities (where they exist at all) are not primarily intended for their own sake, that is, artworks are not produced in order to be aesthetically appreciated. This interpretation does not preclude that aesthetic qualities may play a rhetorical function in the articulation of the work, or be subsumed to other extra-aesthetic purposes.

Last, but not least, we should also pay attention to the fact that, by its insistence on "ideas" and language, conceptual art is embedded in the everyday-life structures of ordinary, that is, it uses non-artistic communication as a proper artistic language, given the "indifference" of conceptual art towards the (purely) visual and generally, formal aspects of the artworks in a normative and restrictive art historical sense. This assumption may be proved by taking a closer look on the abundant historical and empirical data we dispose of. As far as Western Conceptualism is concerned, Alexander Alberro notices that conceptual art starts using secondary information (the art-critical discourse surrounding art) as primary artistic information, that is, as artistic medium or technique (Alberro 2003, 101-103). Magazines, advertising images (posters) that are usually considered means of distributing information about an artwork, start to become the medium for producing the work, a given form that may support artistic communication. It is also remarkable the obsession with other media of communication such as postcards and telegrams, the telephone or with the media recording information (such as Christine Kozlov's tape recordings), which may point to the importance ordinary channels of communication play for the articulation of

conceptual artworks in the wake of a new informational paradigm of a technologized communicational society (Shanken 2004).

The linguistic, or rather, semiotic character of conceptual art may also be observed concerning conceptual art in the former Eastern Europe (Beke 1999, 41-42). In this case, the slogan, the poster, the social-realist painting and the illustrated book, not to mention other formats of recording information specific for the work of the beaurocratic language such as the certificate and the planning graphics (visible in the works of the Collective Actions Group and in IIlya Kabakov's dysfunctional archives) become paramount aesthetic forms and proper mediums of artistic communication. On the other hand, there are many artworks that chose to comment upon the very failure to communicate (as in some of Jiri Kovanda's performative actions that were photographically documented), or simply to question the logic of the medium, for instance, of painting (as in Horia Bernea's series of paintings).

Ideology as a Linguistic Mechanism of Social Control

If we may concede that conceptual art may be considered to be formally embedded in the linguistic structures presiding social life and ordinary communication, understood here as minimal conditions in which art can take place (Smith 2011), it is still not obvious how these very structures acquire an inherent political significance without a closer inspection of the socio- political context of production (and reception, where it existed). Thus, it is time to explain at this point the second premise of our argument, that is, the idea of the influence of language as an instrument of social control under totalitarian political regimes. For the sake of a clearer argument, let me define ideology as the naturalization of the linguistic production, where cultural products and "ideas" are proposed as natural objects. As Terry Eagleton puts it, ideology may be understood as "the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality", leading to "the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality" (Eagleton 1991, 2).

As far as the ideological, hence, linguistic character of social life under communism is concerned I would relate to the poignant observation of Boris Groys that, unlike the capitalist regime, communist ideology relied on the productive power of language (Groys 2010, 1-32, Groys 2005, 96-125). It is the linguistic reality that determines social transformations and effects and not the power of money or economic interest (Groys 2010, 22-28). Moreover, in communism, language shapes reality: reality is made to comply with the political utopia that needs to be realized, that is, constructed (Groys 2010, 4-14). It is enough to think about the power of political decisions taken in the name of political ideas, such as the construction of gigantic institutions like the infamous Palace of Parliament in Bucharest, which in turn mobilized huge amounts of money and energy in order to be realized. The total planification of social life as an enormous artwork according to a master plan may also explain how communist politics used to infuse all areas of social life and to transform them according to a rationalized plan. Politics becomes itself art, more precisely, the total artwork (Groys 1992). Thus, politics enacts a complete and lethal aestheticization of everyday life (Groys 1992, 33-47), not unlike the one taking place in the West. The particularity of this aesthetics is that rationality, geometrical order – planning - and usefulness become primary aesthetic values.

What is not obvious at first sight is perhaps the subtle way common language and communist aesthetic forms functioned as constraints able to discipline and control social life. First of all, it is enough to think about phenomena like censorship in order to grasp the importance of language for the construction of the communist social reality. Secondly, we may add to Boris Groys's thesis of the linguistification of the society" the idea of the isomorphic relation between language and society, supported by Ekaterina Bobrinskaya "people's relationships with language are understood to be a model of their relationships with society" (Bobrinskaya 2008, 58). Consequently, to show the contradictions inside the structure of language means to show the contradictions of society itself.

Perhaps it should also be stressed at this point the politically engaged aspect of official art under communism and

the precise control of its aesthetic forms. All official art under communism could be considered to inherit the constructivist impulse of this particular Soviet avant-garde artistic doctrine, praising the importance of applied art in engineering a new society by using design and architecture (Groys 1992). During the (shorter or longer) period of socialist realism, the doctrine of an art serving the realities of the socialist world and the processes of social transformation was considered as the only officially accepted stylistic and aesthetic doctrine. Abstract art was at the time considered a decadent example of the bourgeois, capitalist society. After a period of relaxation, abstract art was tolerated because it did not present any political challenges and because it sometimes served to illustrate the ideals of modernism (Piotrowski 2009).

Last, but not least, the relevance of language as the bearer of state ideology for the control of aesthetic forms of expression may be induced in the predominant use of some forms of expression such as the slogan in verbal language and visually in the form of the propaganda poster, and their frequent use in politicized conceptual art. It is by no means an accident that some key conceptual artists such as Mladen Stilinović or Alexander Kosolapov chose these two forms of expression as favorite aesthetic regimes of artistic communication.

Using and Abusing the System: The Rhetorical Production of Aesthetic Autonomy

The idea of the rhetorical use of language in conceptual art in relation to the language of State beaurocracy, highlighted by Boris Groys (2011, 3), also suggests another important aspect of what we may today label as conceptual art: the possibility that the play with language may be interpreted both at the level of the propositional content and on the level of its pragmatics, that is, of its utterance and contextual meanings. We may also take into account the performative character of many such artistic utterances which are accompanied by gestures and other forms of visual support or documentation, that is, the difference between what an artwork does and what

an artwork says. The contextual interpretation of artworks is favored in the discourse of revisionist art history that considers the political significance of an artwork in the political context of its exhibition and reception. It is the same rhetorical quality of the artworks, that is, the way structures of ordinary communication are subverted and rephrased, that I take to be decisive in the formal or aesthetic appreciation of politicized conceptual art.

What is, then, the purpose of such rhetorical communication? Such a reading of the formal element in conceptual art as a rhetorical articulation of ideologically infused patterns and forms of communication, as well as of signs and quotes contextually infused with ideological meanings, opens up a different understanding of the very concept of "artistic autonomy". Under this reading, the question of the autonomy of art is essentially a pragmatic and performative question, that is, a question related to the function of art in society. It is obvious that, according to Adorno, artistic autonomy means both social engagement and reflexive capacities which should be concentrated in the form of the artwork, resulting in an intensification of ordinary aesthetic experience (Adorno 1997). According to Adorno, an artwork should remain a part of the social fabric and should never occlude or otherwise mystify its imbrication in the social life, while, at the same time, remaining free to criticize it as a mere representation of it. Facing the pervasiveness of cultural industry and the commodification of the artwork, Adorno was entitled to plead for such a radical engagement of a higher aesthetic autonomy in relation to the aestheticization of everyday life and the commodification of intellectual pleasure.

Nevertheless, in the late sixties, it has seemed impossible to claim in the West that the autonomy of art may still be preserved under the aesthetic regime. On the contrary, as Peter Osborne notices, conceptual artists claim to effect a "separation of two elements hitherto conjoined in the founding conflation of formalist modernism: aestheticism and autonomy" (Osborne 1999, 57). It is thus, obvious, that for many conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth the idea of non-aesthetic autonomy of art may lead to the rejection of the visual and

formal qualities that may support its commodification, the reduction of the work to "a mere idea" that (allegedly) cannot be sold. As a historical note, for some art historians and theorists, this has soon proved to be a fiction, perhaps, constitutive for the Western conceptual art's political failure and ultimate reduction to another – rather dull- aesthetic style (Alberro 2003; Lippard 2001; Osborne 1999, 48). Even more drastically, it may have collapsed into an "aesthetics of administration" (Buchloh 1997, 117-120) or to an "aestheticization of logical positivism" (Osborne 1999, 62).

However, the instrumental rationality of administration will play an important part in the articulation of aesthetic autonomy as a critique of this rationality in the former Eastern Europe (including the Soviet Union). Major differences between the cultural policy of conceptual artists living in the West for preserving the autonomy of art and the concept of autonomy developed by the artists living and working in the totalitarian (or at least authoritarian) political regimes of Eastern Europe (and the Soviet World) lie in the very conditions of the market and the "cultural industry". More precisely, as I have stated at the very beginning, the difference lies in the very absence of the market, and its replacement with a State centralized system of artistic production. As I have tried to suggest, the power of the ideology is expressed by the complete instrumentalization of social life by means of linguistic superstructures. It is also dependent on the criteria of a complete instrumentalization of art as a socially and politically engaged constructivist practice, in relation to which practices producing useless objects of purely aesthetic kind appear as "anti-art". This leads to a paradox. In times of declared political engagement, artworks that appear as absurd instances of "anti-art" become politically engaged in a critical sense by appearing as aesthetically autonomous, non-functional objects of no particular meaning and importance, a quality which is paradoxically achieved as a result of a rhetorical artistic activity.

In this case, autonomy may mean the performative production of anarchic gestures or linguistic deviations in the very structure of everyday life and political communication, which are aesthetically significant in themselves. Thus,

conceptual artists in the East borrow the ideological forms of communication in order to deflate their power and annihilate their meanings. In both situations, deviations of these doctrines, alteration of their visual or verbal language or interruptions of the official logic by producing non-sense communication or aesthetic alterations become politically significant. The political significance of aesthetic autonomy can be summarized as follows: artists create a zone of individual expressive autonomy, which, given the opposition between individualism and commonality or public reason which prevails in the communist regime, becomes politically significant in itself (Badovinac 1998, 16).

Some Practices of Negation: Destructuring the Language of Ideology

I will consider briefly several examples of artworks that did not address artistic autonomy stricto sensu, related to the representational conventions of the artworld, thus maintaining a decidedly apolitical stance, but in an indirect way, by means of a series of semiotic operations on the fabric of ideological codes or social conventions active at a certain moment. In strict art historical terms, some of these artworks may be considered, largely, „post-avant-garde" or „post-modern", having been conceived in a time when ideological language was already delegitimated, but formally preserved by the dominant structures of power and replicated by other social classes (Šuvaković 2003 b, 94-96). In other words, ideology already became, on a social scale, a collection of empty signifiers.

Work with slogans and the form of the slogan are of particular importance here, given the gap between language and reality this form of communication introduces. For the slogan is true according to the beliefs of the Party and not in relation to any reality. It is a pure performative, meant to produce social reality, and not to adapt to an existing one. In the hands of some artists, it also becomes an aesthetic form in the sense of being turned into disfunctionalized linguistic machinery, reduced to a visual object of contemplation of no particular interest by losing its meaning. The loss of

performative function and meaning means turning a slogan into a collection of empty signifiers. For instance, when Mladen Stilinović uses the declarative forms of the Party ideology to promote his art, he is actually subverting the very logic he pretends to represent by means of tautological statements that require no further empirical confirmation. A similar strategy of annihilation functions in the case of Hungarian artist Endre Tot, who is applying a nihilistic strategy of programmatically emptying any linguistic structure reduced to a mathematical zero, especially when dealing with the logic of the political slogan by carrying signs of (thus futile) protest marked with a series of zeros. Tot's minimal linguistic interventions oppose the overproduction of ideological claims in public space especially by means of slogans, "the chatter of the official discourse in the Communist countries" (Piotrowski 2009, 323). His series of nihilistic affirmations by means of counter-slogans like "I'm doing nothing" or "I'm going nowhere" produced in the 1980's also work to contradict the "productive" activity he mimics, declaring it meaningless and useless.

The alterations introduced by conceptual art inside these very forms, for instance, inside the rules of the figurative language may be best expressed by Sot Art representatives Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid. Relating to the aesthetic style and visual language of both socialist realist painting (Groys 1992, 68-72) and of the propaganda poster (Backstein 2005, 19), Komar and Melamid reclaim a different use of the symbols, thus liberating an empty space for a different functioning of the visual and verbal signs. For instance, they mix the landmark of the utopian space and a-historical time of (always progressive) communism, the effigy of Lenin pointing to the glorious future with the prosaic gesture of calling a cab near a Mc Donald's in Manhattan, a gesture that leads to the collapse of both ideologies into a prosaic statement with explicit inherent contradictions. The image looks both like a realist socialist paining and a propaganda poster but cannot function as neither of them, or rather, resembles an essentially futile and counter-utopian ideological gesture. One favorite artistic strategy of Komar and Melamid or Alexander Kosolapov, which consists in borrowing and conflating visual and linguistic signs

and meanings into new enunciations that preserve the ideological form of expression, resulting in the subversion of the very form it embraces, may be best exemplified by taking into account the ideological overproduction of meaning in the Soviet world as the main difference among the Soviet and the American social context. Where Pop Art appeared in a society favoring a hyper-abundance of material goods, Sot Art appeared in a society dominated by "overproduction of Ideological Content in any, but especially public statements" (Backstein 2005, 19).

Last, but not least, we may also pay attention to the way language is used to formalize aspects of private life are relevant for the way they may acquire an active transformation of our perception. It is here that the Ideological State Apparatus regains its importance. Relevant conceptual art pieces present themselves by turning attention to the historicized regime of the mundane, the prosaic and the everyday life. But it is the humor and irony of such works that recommends them in the first place as rhetorically – and thus, artistically – exemplary. Ilya Kabakov's works from the late seventies mock the beaurocratization of ordinary life to its smallest details. The large enamel on masonite tables depict administrative structures regulating daily activities. By painting a schedule for taking out the garbage for the inhabitants of his block of flats, minutely conceived for each day, week and month so that everybody contributes to this routine activity, Kabakov points out the uselessness of this system of planning which pervades social life according to the communist rationalization of "common life" - Schedule for Slope Pail Dumping (1980). The same structure is repeated in his painting Sunday Evening (1979). The first work expresses a fictional five-year plan for the communal activities such as taking out the garbage meant for a certain block-of-flats, whose obvious symbolic associations (the rationalization of exclusion) humorously mark the absurdity of the task at the level of the society as a whole. Here, not only that language is annihilated by means of its spatialization in a painting, but semantic rationalization is performatively interrupted. As far as the second mentioned work is concerned, Kabakov paints a similar table which is

astutely recording analyzing and classifying the garments and behavior of all his guests in a private dinner in a highly bureaucratic form, evaluating it overall with the mark "satisfactory".

The conscious mimicry of the language of surveillance and administration and the alleged internalization of the disciplinary apparatus consisting in making notes and archiving any activity of the subjects, by means of its unaltered assumption, which simultaneously points out to the annihilation of subjectivity in the very act of repeating the "official" language. The strategic effects obtained by indexical self-erasure of the work's content in the work's very structure is complemented in this context by what may be called as a politics of nothingness, echoing the subsequent activity of voluntary "linguistic incomprehensibility" in Moscow Conceptualism (Weinhart 2008, 70-73). It happens in the actions of the artistic group Collective Actions, performing seemingly absurd activities with no determinate content or paradoxical actions in which nothing happens except for the event itself, which is prone to subsequent interpretations. Sometimes, the event becomes the interruption of a routine, the suspension of an established order of significant events. Often, written language serves to record these actions and comment upon the content of the accompanying documentary pictures. It serves as a framing device for a politically charged notion of "nothingness", challenging the dominant ideology of "work".

Among the practices that do not tackle directly beaurocracy, or the alienation of language, but rather the functional instrumentalization of art within the normative aesthetics of Socialist Realism (or Modernism, for that matter), the Fluxus-inspired activities of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde artistic group Gorgona may be featured as an interesting case study. The notion of "anti-art" describing aesthetically autonomous objects in the context of socio-political engagement helps understand the „assisted" ready-made objects created by Gorgona, in particular, the critique of instrumental rationality operated by one of their most important artists, Dimitri Basicević also known as Mangelos. According to Denegri (2003, 202), Gorgona implemented a radicalization of modernist

methods in art practices, to the extent that they become unnacceptable to the criteria of dominant values. Himself a trained art historian, Mangelos creates a poetic language that is at the same time useless and mimics the language of science, mixing theorems and "proofs", alphabetic system of classification and cartography. Despite their appearance, Mangelos's objects are emptied of any meaning, while the texts accompanying them are at best absurd or metaphorical. Nevertheless, the language of science that Mangelos mimics was by no means apolitical under the communist regime. On the contrary, it played an active part of the modernist imaginary of the socialist functionalist machine which turned the engineer and the scientist into exemplary figures of progressive and applied knowledge. In his „Manifesto of Manifesto", Mangelos states that mechanical labor characteristic for advanced modernity has replaced manual labor, thus resulting into an integrated social functionality instead of an emotionally structured one. That is why, according to Mangelos, function replaces meaning (Mangelos, 2003).

It should also be noted that, except for the Collective Actions Group, all other artworks exemplified were produced either under tolerant political regimes in relation to experimental culture (accompanied by the famous Yugoslav „Third Way" Economy and Politics), or chose criticized the system from the safe point of the West. Unlike those marginal practices, whose reception was often restricted to a narrow circle of artist-friends, they are, therefore, less prone to a moral evaluation as described at the beginning of this paper, and render such a justification of their value problematic. Nevertheless, they are no less significant in having radically questioned the postulated rationality of socialist ideology as materialized in various semiotic conventions and operations performed at the level of State beaurocracy, as well as the functional and instrumental evaluation of art which was still dominant at that time. By their inherent absurd or pointless character, they were, in other words, instrumental in having exposed the discrepancies between the reality and its ideological description, between the inherent rationality of

socialist modernism as an idea and its various materializations, while preserving, at the same time, their aesthetic autonomy.

NOTES

[1] I will speak about the former Eastern Europe despite the obvious heterogeneity of the cultures and institutions from the various countires that composed the politically and geographically defined "Eastern bloc". Although I will not claim that neo-avant-garde art in the region may be described homogeneously and specified according to distinct principles in relation to its Western counterpart, I think that there are various conditions which may mark their particularities.

[2] A body of empiric evidence will be featured in this paper – it deals with those artists that overtly ironized the system either at the time when ideology no longer served its purpose (and ceased to act as an instrument of censorship for that matter), especially in the eighties, either chose to emigrate in the West where they continued to implicitly advocate the superiority of the host socio-economical regime by exposing the flaws of the Communist Utopia.

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