Boris Groys

Art, Technology, and Humanism

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In the public imagination, technology is mostly associated with technological revolutions and the acceleration of technological change. But, actually, the goal of technology is completely the opposite. Thus, in his famous essay on the question of technology, Heidegger rightly says that the primary goal of technology is to secure the storage and availability of resources and commodities.[1] He shows that historically, the development of technology has been directed towards the decreasing of man's dependence on the accidents to which the natural supply of resources is inevitably prone. One becomes increasingly independent from the sun by storing energy in its different forms – and in general one becomes independent of the annual seasons and the instability of weather. Heidegger does not say this explicitly, but technology is for him primarily the interruption of the flow of time, the production of reservoirs of time in which time ceases to flow towards the future – so that a return to previous moments of time becomes possible. Thus, one can return to a museum and find there the same artwork that one contemplated during a previous visit. According to Heidegger, the goal of technology is precisely to immunize man against change, to liberate man from his dependency on *physis*, on fate, on accident. Heidegger obviously sees this development as extremely dangerous. But why?

Heidegger explains this in the following way: If everything becomes a resource that is stored and made available, then the human being also begins to be regarded as a resource – as human capital, we would now say, as a collection of energies, capabilities, and skills. In this way, man becomes degraded; through a search for stability and security, man turns himself into a thing. Heidegger believes that only art can save man from this denigration. He believes this because, as he explains in his earlier text "The Origin of the Work of Art," art is nothing other than the revelation of the way we use things – and, if one wants, of the way we are used by things.[2] Here it is important to note that for Heidegger, the artwork is not a thing but a vision that opens to the artist in the clearing of Being. At the moment when the artwork enters the art system as a particular thing, it ceases to be an artwork – becoming simply an object available for selling, buying, transporting, exhibiting, etc. The clearing of Being closes. In other words, Heidegger does not like the transformation of artistic vision into a thing. And, accordingly, he does not like the transformation of the human being into a thing. The reason for Heidegger's aversion to the transformation of man into a thing is clear: in both of the texts cited above, Heidegger asserts that in our world, things exist as tools. For Heidegger, becoming

Man Ray, *Méret Oppenheim, Louis Marcoussis,* 1933. Ferrotyped gelatin silver print. 12.8 x 17.2 cm

objectified, commodified, etc., means becoming used. But is this equation between a thing and a tool actually valid?

I would argue that in the case of artworks, it is not. Of course, it is true that an artwork can function as a commodity and a tool. But as a commodity, an artwork is different from other types of commodities. The basic difference is this: as a rule, when we consume commodities, we destroy them through the act of consumption. If bread is consumed – i.e., eaten – it disappears, ceases to exist. If water is drunk, it also disappears (consumption is destruction – hence the phase "the house was *consumed* by fire"). Clothes, cars, etc., get worn out and finally destroyed in the process of their use. However, artworks do not get consumed in this way: they are not used and destroyed, but merely exhibited or looked at. And they are kept in good condition, restored, etc. So our behavior towards artworks is different from the normal practice of consumption/destruction. The consumption of artworks is just the contemplation of them – and contemplation leaves the artworks undamaged.

This status of the artwork as an object of contemplation is actually relatively new. The classical contemplative attitude was directed towards immortal, eternal objects like the laws of logic (Plato, Aristotle) or God (medieval theology). The changing material world in which everything is temporary, finite, and mortal was understood not as a place of *vita contemplativa* but of *vita activa*. Accordingly, the contemplation of artworks is not ontologically legitimized in the same way that the contemplation of the truths of reason and of God are. Rather, this contemplation is made possible by the technology of storage and preservation. In this sense the art museum is just another instance of technology that, according to Heidegger, endangers man by turning him into an object.

Indeed, the desire for protection and self-protection makes one dependent on the gaze of the other. And the gaze of the other is not necessarily the loving gaze of God. The other cannot see our soul, our thoughts, aspirations, plans. That is why Jean-Paul Sartre argued that the gaze of the other always produces in us the feeling of being endangered and ashamed. The gaze of the other neglects our possible future activity, including new, unexpected actions – it sees us as an already finished object. That is why for Sartre, "hell is other people." In his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes the ontological struggle between oneself and the other – I try to objectify the other and the other tries to objectify me. This idea of permanent struggle against objectification through the gaze of the other permeates our culture. The goal of art becomes not to attract but rather to escape the gaze of the other – to deactivate this gaze, to convert it to a contemplative, passive gaze. Then one is liberated from the control of the other – but liberated into what? The standard answer is: into true life. According to a certain vitalistic tradition, one lives truly only when one encounters the unpredictable and uncanny, when one is in danger, when one is on the verge of death.

Being alive is not something that can be measured in time and protected. Life announces itself only through the intensity of feeling, the immediacy of passion, the direct experience of the present. Not coincidentally, the Italian and Russian Futurists like Marinetti and Malevich called for the destruction of museums and historical monuments. Their point was not so much to struggle against the art system itself but rather to reject the contemplative attitude in the name of *vita activa*. As Russian avant-garde theoreticians and artists said at that time: art should be not a mirror but a hammer. Nietzsche had already sought to "philosophize with a hammer." (Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution*: "Even the handling of a hammer is taught with the help of a mirror.") The classical avant-garde wanted to abolish the aesthetic protection of the past and of the status quo, with the goal of changing the world. However, this implied the rejection of self-protection, since this change was projected as permanent. Thus, time and again the artists of the avant-garde insisted on their acceptance of the coming destruction of their own art by the generations that would follow them, who would build a new world in which there would be no place for the past. This struggle against the past was understood by the artistic avant-gardes as also a struggle against art. However, from its beginning art itself has been a form of struggle against the past – aestheticization being a form of annihilation.

It was actually the French Revolution that turned things that were earlier used by the Church and the aristocracy into artworks, i.e., into objects that were exhibited in museums (originally the Louvre) – objects only to be looked at. The secularism of the French Revolution abolished the contemplation of God as the highest goal of life – and replaced it with the contemplation of "beautiful" material objects. In other words, art itself was produced by revolutionary violence – and was, from its beginning, a modern form of iconoclasm. Indeed, in premodern history a change of cultural regimes and conventions, including religions and political systems, would lead to radical iconoclasm – the physical destruction of objects related to previous cultural forms and beliefs. But the French Revolution offered a new way to deal with the valuable things of the past. Instead

Hubert Robert, *The Grande Galerie,* between 1801 and 1805. Oil on canvas, 37 x 43 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais/Jean-Gilles Berizzi.

of being destroyed, these things were defunctionalized and presented as art. It is this revolutionary transformation of the Louvre that Kant has in mind when he writes in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*:

> If someone asks me whether I find the palace that I see before me beautiful, I may well say that I do not like that sort of thing … ; in true Rousseauesque style I might even vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous things … All of this might be conceded to me and approved; but that is not what is at issue here … One must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in the matter of taste.[3]

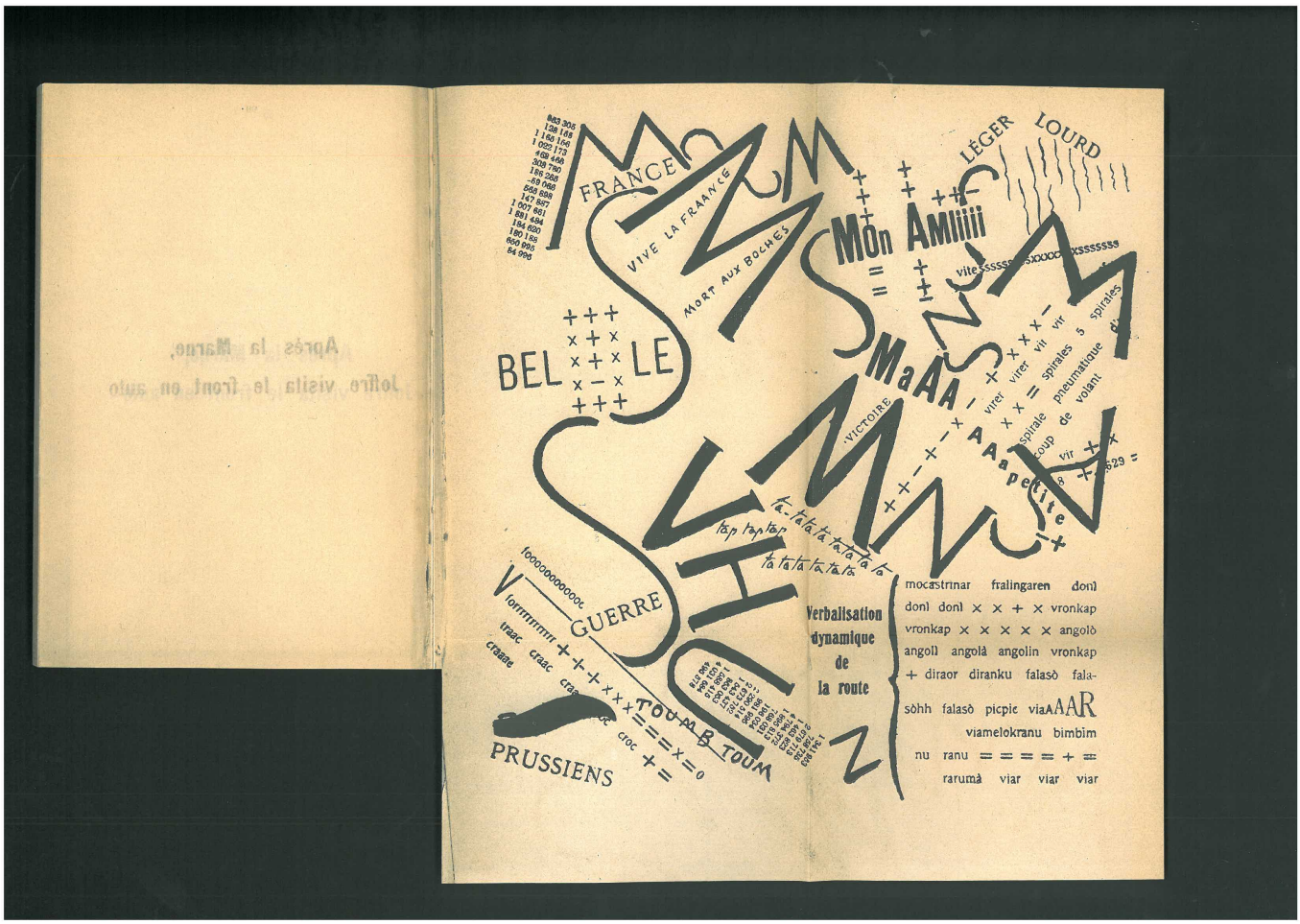
In other words, the French Revolution introduced a new type of thing: defunctionalized tools. Accordingly, for human beings, becoming a thing no longer meant becoming a tool. On the contrary, becoming a thing could now mean *becoming an artwork*. And for human beings, becoming an artwork means precisely this: coming out of slavery, being immunized against violence.

Indeed, the protection of art objects can be compared to the sociopolitical protection of the human body – that is, the protection afforded by human rights, which were also introduced by the French Revolution. There is a close relationship between art and humanism. According to the principles of humanism, human beings can only be contemplated, not actively used – not killed, violated, enslaved, etc. The humanist program was summarized by Kant in his famous assertion that in an enlightened, secular society, man should never be treated as a means, but only an end. That is why we regard slavery as barbaric. But to use an artwork in the same way that we use other things and commodities also means to act in a barbaric way. What is most important here is that the secular gaze defines humans as objects having a certain form – namely, human form. The human gaze does not see the human soul – that is the privilege of God. The human gaze sees only the human body. Thus, our rights are related to the image that we offer to the gaze of others. That is why we are so interested in this image. And that is also why we are interested in the protection of art and by art. Humans are protected only insofar as they are perceived by others as artworks produced by the greatest of artists – Nature itself. Not coincidentally, in the nineteenth century – the century of humanism par excellence – the form of the human body was regarded as the most beautiful of all forms, more beautiful than trees, fruits, and waterfalls. And of course, humans are well aware of their status as artworks – and try to improve upon and stabilize this status. Human beings traditionally want to be desired, admired, looked at – to feel like an especially precious artwork.

Alexandre Kojève believed that the desire to be desired, the ambition to be socially recognized and admired, is precisely what makes us human, what distinguishes us from animals. Kojève speaks about this desire as a genuinely "anthropogenic" desire. This is desire not for particular things but for the desire of the other: "Thus, in the relationship between man and woman, for example, Desire is human only if one desires not the body but desire of the other."[4] It is this anthropogenic desire that initiates and moves history: "human history is history of desired Desires."[5] Kojève describes history as moved by the heroes that were pushed to self-sacrifice in the name of mankind by this specifically human desire – the desire for recognition, for becoming an object of society's admiration and love. The desire for desire is what produces self-consciousness, as well as, one can say, the "self" as such. But at the same time, this desire for desire is what turns the subject into an object – ultimately, a dead object. Kojève writes: "Without this fight to the death for pure prestige, there would never have been human beings on Earth."[6] The subject of the desire for desire is not "natural" because it is ready to sacrifice all its natural needs and even its "natural" existence for the abstract Idea of recognition.

Here man creates a *second body*, so to speak, a body that becomes potentially immortal – and protected by society, at least as long as art as such is publicly, legally protected. We can speak here about the extension of the human body by art – towards technically produced immortality. Indeed, after the death of important artists, their artworks remain collected and exhibited, so that when we go to a museum we say, "Let's see Rembrandt and Cezanne" rather than "Let's see *the works of* Rembrandt and Cezanne." In this sense, the protection of art extends the life of artists, turning them into artworks: in the process of self-aestheticization they create their own new artificial body as the valuable, precious object that can only be contemplated, not used.

Of course, Kojève believed that only great men – thinkers, revolutionary heroes, and artists – could become objects of recognition and admiration by subsequent generations. However, today almost everyone practices self-aestheticization, self-design. Almost everybody wants to turn themselves into an object of admiration. Contemporary artists work using the internet. This makes the shift in our



A page from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's book *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (1919).

contemporary experience of art obvious. Artworks by a particular artist can be found on the internet when I google the name of the artist – and they are shown to me in the context of other information that I find on the internet about this artist: biography, other works, political activities, critical reviews, details of the artist's personal life, and so forth. Here I mean not the fictional, authorial subject allegedly investing the artwork with his intentions and with meanings that should be hermeneutically deciphered and revealed. This authorial subject has already been deconstructed and proclaimed dead many times over. I mean the real person existing in the off-line reality to which the internet data refers. This author uses the internet not only to produce art, but also to buy tickets, make restaurant reservations, conduct business, and so forth. All these activities take place in the same integrated space of the internet – and all of them are potentially accessible to other internet users.

Here the artwork becomes "real" and profane because it becomes integrated into the information about its author as a real, profane person. Art is presented on the internet as a specific kind of activity: as documentation of a real working process taking place in the real, off-line world. Indeed, on the internet art operates in the same space as military planning, tourist business, capital flows, and so forth: Google shows, among other things, that there are no walls in internet space. A user of the internet does not switch from the everyday use of things to their disinterested contemplation – the internet user uses the information about art in the same way in which he or she uses information about all other things in the world. Here art activities finally become "normal," real activities – not different from any other useful or not-so-useful practices. The famous slogan "art into life" loses its meaning because art has already become a part of life – a practical activity among other activities. In a certain sense, art returns to its origin, to the time when the artist was a "normal human being" – a handiworker or an entertainer. At the same time, on the internet every normal human being becomes an artist – producing and sending selfies and other images and texts. Today, the practice of self-aestheticization involves hundreds of millions of people.

And not only humans themselves, but also their living spaces have become increasingly aesthetically protected. Museums, monuments, even large areas of cities have become protected from change because they have been aestheticized as belonging to a given cultural heritage. This does not leave a lot of room for urban and social change. Indeed, art does not want change. Art is about storage and conservation – this is why art is deeply conservative. This is why art tends to resist the movement of capital and the dynamic of contemporary technology that permanently destroys old life-forms and art spaces. You can call it "turbo-capitalism" or "neoliberalism" – either way, contemporary economic and technological development is directed against any aesthetically motivated politics of protection. Here art becomes active – more specifically, politically active. We can speak about a politics of resistance – about artistic protection turning into a politics of resistance. The politics of resistance is the politics of protest. Here art moves from contemplation to action. But resistance is an action in the name of contemplation – a reaction to the flow of political and economic changes that make contemplation impossible. (In a seminar I taught on the history of the avant-garde, a Spanish student – she came from Catalonia, I think – wanted to write a paper based on her own participation in a protest movement in her native town. This movement tried to protect the traditional look of the town against the invasion of global commercial brands. She sincerely believed that this movement was an avant-garde movement because it was a protest movement. However, for Marinetti this would be a *passéist* movement – precisely the opposite of what he wanted.)

What is the meaning of this resistance? I would argue that it demonstrates that the coming utopia has already arrived. It shows that utopia is not something that we have to produce, that we have to achieve. Rather, utopia is already here – and should be defended. What is utopia then? It is aestheticized stagnation – or rather, stagnation as an effect of total aestheticization. Indeed, utopian time is time without change. Change is always brought about by violence and destruction. Thus, if change were possible in utopia, then it would be no utopia. When one speaks about utopia, one often speaks about change – but this is the final and ultimate change. It is the change from change to no change. Utopia is a total work of art in which exploitation, violence, and destruction become impossible. In this sense, utopia is already here – and it is permanently growing. One can say that utopia is the final state of technological development. At this stage, technology becomes self-reflective. Heidegger, like many other authors, was frightened by the prospect of this self-reflective turn because he believed that it would mean the total instrumentalization of human existence. But as I have tried to show, self-objectivation does not necessarily leads to self-utilitarianization. It can also lead to a self-

aestheticization that has no goal outside of itself, and is thus the opposite of instrumentalization. In this way, secular utopia truly triumphs – as the ultimate closure of technology in on itself. Life begins to coincide with its immortalization – the flow of time begins to coincide with its standing still.

However, the utopian reversal of the technological dynamic remains uncertain because of its lack of ontological guarantee. Indeed, one can say that the most interesting art of the twentieth century was directed towards the eschatological possibility of the world's total destruction. The art of the early avant-garde manifested time and again the explosion and destruction of the familiar world. So it was often accused of enjoying and celebrating world catastrophe. The most famous accusation of this type was formulated by Walter Benjamin at the end of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."[7] Benjamin believed that the celebration of world catastrophe – as it was practiced, for example, by Marinetti – was fascist. Here Benjamin defines fascism as the highest point of aestheticism – the aesthetic enjoyment of ultimate violence and death. Indeed, one can find a lot of texts by Marinetti that aestheticize and celebrate the destruction of the familiar world – and yes, Marinetti was close to Italian fascism. However, the aesthetic enjoyment of catastrophe and death was already discussed by Kant in his theory of the sublime. There Kant asked how it was possible to aesthetically enjoy the moment of mortal danger and the perspective of self-destruction. Kant says more or less the following: the subject of this enjoyment knows that this subject is reasonable – and infinite, immortal reason survives any catastrophe in which the material human body would perish. It is precisely this inner certainty – that reason survives any particular death – which gives the subject the ability to aestheticize the mortal danger and the coming catastrophe.

Modern, post-spiritual man no longer believes in the immortality of reason or the soul. However, contemporary art is still inclined to aestheticize catastrophe because it believes in the immortality of the material world. It believes, in other words, that even if the sun exploded it would only mean that elementary particles, atoms, and molecules would be liberated from their submission to the traditional cosmic order, and thus the materiality of the world would be revealed. Here the eschatology remains apocalyptic in the sense that the end of the world is understood not merely as the discontinuation of the cosmic process but also as the revelation of its true nature.

Indeed, Marinetti does not only celebrate the explosion of the world; he also lets the syntax of his own poems explode, thus liberating the sonic material of traditional poetry. Malevich starts the radical phase of his artistic practice with his participation in a production of the opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913) in which all the leading figures of the early Russian avant-garde also participate. The opera celebrates the demise of the sun – and the reign of chaos. But for Malevich this only means that all the traditional art forms get destroyed and the material of art – in the first place, pure color – is revealed. That is why Malevich speaks about his own art as "Suprematist." This art demonstrates the ultimate supremacy of matter over all the naturally and artificially produced forms to which matter was previously enslaved. Malevich writes: "But I transformed myself into the zero of forms and came out of 0 as 1."[8] This means precisely that he survives the catastrophe of the world (point zero) and finds himself on the other side of death. Later, in 1915, Malevich organized the exhibition "0.10," presenting ten artists who also survived the end of the world and went through the point zero of all forms. Here it is not destruction and catastrophe that are aestheticized, but rather the material remainder that inevitably survives any such catastrophe.

The lack of any ontological guarantee was powerfully expressed by Jean-François Lyotard in his essay "Can Thought Go On Without a Body?" (1987). (This essay was included in a book by Lyotard with the fitting title *The Inhuman*.) Lyotard begins his essay with a reference to the scientific prediction that the sun will explode in 4.5 billion years. He writes further that this impending cataclysm is, in his view,

> the sole serious question to face humanity today. In comparison everything else seems insignificant. Wars, conflicts, political tensions, shifts in opinion, philosophical debates, even passions – everything's dead already if this infinite reserve from which you now draw your energy ... dies out with the sun.[9]

The perspective of the death of mankind seems to be distant – but it already poisons us and makes our efforts meaningless. So, according to Lyotard, the real problem is the creation of new hardware that can replace the human body – so that human software, i.e., thought, can be rewritten for this new media support structure. The possibility of such a rewriting is given by the fact that "technology wasn't invented by us humans."[10] The development of technology is a cosmic process in which humans are only episodically involved. In this way, Lyotard opened the way for thinking about the posthuman or the

transhuman in a way that shifts the focus from software (attitudes, opinions, ideologies) to hardware (organism, machine, their combinations, cosmic processes, and events).

Here Lyotard says that man has to be surpassed – not so that he can become the perfect animal (the Nietzschean *Übermenschen*) but rather so that a new unity between thinking and its inorganic, inhuman – because non-animal – support structure can be achieved. The natural reproduction of the human animal should be replaced by its mechanical reproduction. Here one can of course deplore the loss of the traditional humanist aura. However, Walter Benjamin already accepted the destruction of aura – as an alternative to the auratic moment of the total destruction of the world.

The artistic practices and discourses of the classical avant-garde were in a certain way prefigurations of the conditions under which our own second, self-produced, artificial bodies exist in the contemporary media world. The elements of these bodies – artworks, books, films, photos – circulate globally in a dispersed form. This dispersal is even more obvious in the case of the internet. If one searched the internet for a particular name, one finds thousands of references that do not add up to any unity. Thus, one has a feeling that these secondary, self-designed, artificial bodies are already in a state of slow-motion explosion, similar to the final scene of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. Or maybe they're in a state of permanent decomposition. The eternal struggle between Apollo and Dionysus, as described by Nietzsche, leads to a strange result here: the self-designed body is dismembered, dispersed, decentered, even exploded – but still keeps its virtual unity. However, this virtual unity is not accessible to the human gaze. Only surveillance and search programs like Google can analyze the internet in its entirety – and thus identify the second bodies of living and dead persons. Here a machine is recognized by a machine – and an algorithm is recognized by another algorithm. Maybe it is a prefiguration of the condition that Lyotard warned us about, in which mankind persists after the explosion of the sun.

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A version of this essay was originally presented at the Walker Art Center as part of Avant Museology, a two-day symposium copresented by the Walker Art Center, e-flux, and the University of Minnesota Press. Video documentation of the original lecture at the Walker can be found here.

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