

Boris Groys
**Towards a New
Universalism**

01/05

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Towards a New Universalism

The politicization of art mostly happens as a reaction against the aestheticization of politics practiced by political power. That was the case in the 1930s and it is the case now. For some time after the end of the Cold War, the political process seemed to be reduced to the tedious, boring work of administration. This bureaucratic work did not need art – and art was not especially interested in it. However, today politics has become a spectacle again. On its stage we see individuals who seem to have an artistic charisma of a certain kind. These individuals are celebrated but also passionately opposed. It is obvious that in this situation art cannot remain neutral, because politics has now entered the territory of art. It is also obvious that the contemporary art scene almost unanimously rejects the new populist movements and their leaders. This rejection has political reasons – but it has even deeper aesthetic reasons.

Even if art museums proudly remain in the centers of contemporary cities, the artistic community is, politically speaking, a minority inside every particular national culture. So it is not surprising that artists feel solidarity with segments of the population that are socially, economically, and politically underrepresented, such that art becomes one of the venues for expressing their grievances and aspirations. Art offers a public platform that allows the formulation of positions and the expression of attitudes that have no chance of attaining majority status in our current societies or of even being represented in the mainstream media. A good example of this solidarity is the exhibition “An Incomplete History of Protest” (currently on view at the Whitney Museum). It explores a long history (from 1940 to 2017) of political engagement by American artists in the struggles of black people for their rights, in struggles for women’s rights, in protests against the Vietnam War, and in campaigns against the stigmatization and neglect of AIDS patients. The retrospective culminates with *New No’s* (2016), a poster by Paul Chan and Badlands Unlimited that begins with the words “No to racists, No to fascists,” and that powerfully summarizes the message of the show. The vast majority of the works in the exhibition reflect on the situation of minorities and their political struggles in the US. And this is totally legitimate because in the current political situation it becomes urgent, indeed, to revisit the history of artistic resistance and protest. However, in the context of the Whitney exhibition there is one artwork that is related to the universalist, internationalist origins of contemporary art. Annette Lemieux’s *Black Mass* (1991) shows a demonstration that looks like an early Soviet demonstration, as we know them from films by Eisenstein and Vertov. However,

instead of revolutionary propaganda posters, the demonstrators carry copies of Malevich's *Black Square*. This produces a certain ironic effect. There is, indeed, an analogy between the October Revolution and Malevich's *Black Square*: both were internationalist and universalist. Even if the masses have never demonstrated for avant-garde art, the image of Malevich is aesthetically compatible with the left-wing politics of his time. But this image is incompatible with any return to nationalism and "traditional cultural values." Indeed, it proclaims the nullification of these values.

Contemporary art has its origin in this break with national cultural and pictorial traditions – the break that the artistic avant-garde effectuated at the beginning of the twentieth century. The artists of the avant-garde wanted their art to become universalist, to develop a visual language that would be accessible to everyone, beyond traditional cultural borders. Often this universalist project was subjected to the criticism that modern and contemporary art was elitist. In our time the universalist claim of contemporary art has begun to be associated with the global art market and Sotheby's auctions. In recent decades hundreds and thousands of words have been written against contemporary art, describing it as a manifestation and celebration of neoliberal globalism. The cosmopolitan, internationalist character of art has been seen as a sign of its complicity with the interests of globalized,

Americanized capitalism – directed against the diversity of national and regional cultures.

Indeed globalism, and later neoliberalism, were seen in many places, including the countries of continental Europe, as serving primarily the interests of the US and Britain. The opposition to globalism was almost indistinguishable from a certain kind of anti-Americanism. That is why recent cultural and political trends in Britain and the US have been met with surprise and disbelief in European cultural circles. Suddenly, the cultural fronts have been completely reversed. Brexit and the election of Trump confronted the outside world with a new wave of nationalist and isolationist rhetoric coming from the places that have always been regarded as the sources and centers of neoliberal programs of globalization. The reemergence of nationalism that had earlier been witnessed in such countries as China, Russia, and Turkey now reached the US. At the same time, globalized systems of exchange and information flow began to dissolve before our eyes. Not so long ago the internet served as the main symbol and medium of globalization. Today, one is regularly reminded that the corporations and organizations that operate the internet have real, physical, off-line addresses in territories that are controlled by certain states. As such, they are increasingly used as instruments of surveillance, propaganda, and fake news. Instead of constituting a virtual space beyond state borders, the internet is increasingly

02/05



Annette Lemieux, *Black Mass*, 1991. Latex, acrylic, and oil on canvas, 95 13/16 × 105 × 1 13/16 in. (243.4 × 266.7 × 4.6 cm.). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Emily Fisher Landau P.2010.173. © Annette Lemieux

understood as a scene of struggle for interstate information wars.

Under these conditions the art field is still one of the few public spaces where resistance to these fateful trends remains possible. The reemergence of nationalist and sovereigntist ideologies and their pseudo-charismatic leaders reminds the contemporary art world of its internationalist origins – of a time when internationalism was understood as a political project and not a marketing strategy. The early artistic avant-garde was not interested in producing images that could be bought and sold everywhere. The goal of the early avant-garde was to unify politics and aesthetics, creating a new space of universal politics and culture that would unite mankind across its cultural differences. Of course, throughout the twentieth century the relationship between the political avant-garde and the artistic avant-garde was torturous and tragic – especially in the case of Soviet communism. But the reemergence of nationalism and cultural isolationism today brings art back to the nineteenth century – to a time before the avant-garde arose. Indeed, when one reads newspapers or watches TV today one gets the feeling that an invisible hand has erased the whole of twentieth-century culture, with its universalist utopian aspirations, and put us back into a world in which national-cultural identities dominate. However, without the project of universalism, all forms of modern and contemporary art lose their meaning, their true message; they turn into empty formalist experiments, into mere design. And in general, without political engagement, art ceases to be contemporary because being contemporary means being involved in the politics of one's own time. It is, indeed, the only form of contemporaneity that is accessible to us under current cultural conditions. Now, it would be a great mistake to think that the universalist project contradicts the interests of minorities and local populations. It is precisely the universalist resistance against the alleged homogeneity of national cultures that opens the way for minorities to assert their heterogeneity, their diversity. But there is one aspect of the contemporary political situation that immediately concerns and involves contemporary art. It is the problem of migration.

Migration is the one truly universal, international phenomenon of our time. And it is also perhaps one of the only phenomena that radically differentiates our era from the nineteenth century. That is why migration has become the main political problem of our time. It is safe to say that it is primarily attitudes towards immigration that structure the contemporary political landscape – at least in

Western countries. The anti-immigration politics of contemporary New Right parties is an effect of what can be characterized as the territorialization of identity politics. The main presupposition of the ideology of these parties is this: every cultural identity has to have its own territory on which it can and should flourish – undisturbed by influences from other cultural identities. The world is diverse and should be diverse. But the world's diversity can be guaranteed only by territorial diversity. The mixture of different cultural identities on the same territory destroys these identities. In other words: today the New Right uses the language of identity politics that was developed by the New Left in the 1960s–80s. At that time, the defense of original cultures was directed against Western imperialism and colonialism, which tried to “civilize” these cultures by imposing on them certain allegedly universal social, economic, and political norms. This critique was understandable and legitimate – even if it was one-sided. But in our time this critique has changed its political direction and its cultural relevance.

Today, the critique of universalism is directed not against Western imperialism but against migrants – especially migrants coming to Western countries. The New Right sees in migration a movement of homogenization that erases the specific cultural traditions and inherited ways of life of the countries to which “the flows of migration” are directed. Some European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, prevent migration altogether. Some of them, like Germany and France, instruct immigrants to totally integrate and assimilate themselves by learning to behave and even feel like Germans and French people – obviously an impossible task. Even in the US, the decision to prevent immigration from the Middle East is explained by a stated desire not to become like Europe. The homogenization and internationalization of the world's national cultures through migration is mostly seen as a danger. But why? I remember a time when the adepts of the internet believed that it would bring about a new universal culture for the whole of humankind. This did not happen, because the internet makes information *about* the various cultures of the world universally available, *but not the cultures themselves*. In fact, only migration leads ultimately to the emergence of a universalist, international, global culture. It is what the radical avant-garde artists always wanted. And it should be what the left wants today, if it is to avoid intellectually capitulating when confronted with its own rhetoric of cultural identity – now directed not against Western expansionism but against migrants from the

03/05

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04/05



Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007. Installation view, Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

former colonies.

On the subject of art, I must say that recently I was very much impressed by the exhibition “The Restless Earth” (Triennale di Milano, 2017), which was dedicated to the history of forced or self-chosen migration from Africa to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea. Especially beautiful and poignant was a video installation by Isaac Julien entitled *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007). Its aesthetic revives the aesthetic of Italian Renaissance paintings that presented the torture and suffering of Christian martyrs in a perfect artistic manner: beautiful bodies in a beautiful setting. Today, we tend to see these paintings from a purely aesthetic point of view – ignoring what actually happened to their protagonists. However, when the same aesthetic is applied to the suffering of migrants here and now, we cannot keep a neutral, contemplative attitude anymore. Thus, our perspective on classical art also drastically changes. We begin to understand that the whole of art history confronts us with a history of suffering to which we remain immunized due to the conventional aesthetic forms in which this suffering is presented. However, looking at the works in this exhibition, I could not escape the question: Can such art change the attitude of Western societies to migration? It is, of course, a current version of an old question: Can art help us make the world a better place? I doubt it. But I still hope that it can prevent us from making it much worse.

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05/05

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