

Jela Krečič

Cancelling Art: From Populists to Progressives

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According to the Slovene philosopher Mladen Dolar, the Covid pandemic acts like a magnifying glass that exposes and magnifies the more dire antagonisms in contemporary societies, from rising social inequality and the increased exploitation of women to contemporary forms of racism. It's hard to judge if Covid-19 also amplified latent and already visible antagonisms within the art system all around the world. One could argue that the lockdown and the standstill brought to light certain vulnerabilities of the art system, especially the precarious positions of artists and other workers in art institutions – many of whom were laid off and denied compensation or left without labor protections because they were in flexible or freelance positions. On the other hand, without the audience and global events that usually invigorate the art world, the pandemic enabled the possibility for many cultural workers, including artists, critics, writers, and all who engage in art discourse, to take a step back and analyze some intriguing conditions in the art sphere that point to broader sociopolitical phenomena.

Art for Populists

In January 2021, the Slovene ambassador to Rome, Matjaž Kunstelj, revoked the embassy's endorsement of the upcoming exhibition "Bigger than Myself: Heroic Voices from ex-Yugoslavia," curated by Zdenka Badovinac at the National Museum of 21st-Century Arts (MAXXI) in the Italian capital. He retracted his support because the exhibition didn't agree with the ambassador's notion of an appropriate celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Republic of Slovenia. The ridiculous part of the story is that the exhibition never intended to address either Slovenia or its historic accomplishments; in fact, it was planned years before, delayed only because of the pandemic, and meant to historicize and document the art scene of the former Yugoslavia, expressed through its relations in a wider Mediterranean region. The other ridiculous detail to this story is that neither the embassy nor the ambassador were asked to endorse the exhibition in the first place. Thus, it seems that there was a certain urgency on the ambassador's part to publicly share his (artistic) sentiments, not realizing that his take on the role of art would jeopardize his stance in the diplomatic community. The whole situation is best described as embarrassing: embarrassing for the ambassador and therefore for Slovenia itself, which appeared as tone-deaf to the functioning of art as well as to foreign politics, especially given that the Slovene foreign ministry and the ministry of culture endorsed the ambassador's decision.

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The whole event unveiled the pitiful conditions of Slovene domestic and foreign affairs today, but more importantly, it also disclosed a specific right-wing populist stance towards art – namely, that it should function as nationalist propaganda. It therefore came as no surprise that on Prešeren Day, the Slovene national holiday on the eighth of February dedicated to celebrating art and culture, the Slovene prime minister Janez Janša reprimanded all artists in the country who, as he put it, were enhancing divisions and hatred in Slovenia during the pandemic. “From culture, which is the key to nation’s spiritual existence and as such a source of people’s power when faced with dire challenges, I would expect a different, more state-building attitude.”¹

And there we have it: the times are crucial and difficult, so artists should not take advantage of their freedom; they should not contemplate their precarious situation, but rather try to help the state prop up its image. That is the position of today’s right-wing populists. Moreover, one can see that challenging and antagonistic art – art that does not actively serve state-building purposes – is not welcome in Slovenia, or at least not eligible for state funding.

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This is just one case of a right-wing, populist government in Europe executing its power in the domain of art. By prescribing the roles of art and artists, it has joined frightening nationalist tendencies in several countries in Eastern and Central European, from Hungary and Poland to Serbia to Slovenia.

The strains of populism coming from the above-mentioned countries are explicitly critical of former authoritarian communist regimes and former communists, while their strategies – although in the service of a different ideology – are almost identical to those of past totalitarian rulers. That said, one must realize that in the former Yugoslavia, at least in the eighties, many forms of dissidence, including controversial art, were more or less tolerated or even endorsed by the Communist Party. So one has to conclude that the right-wing populists in Eastern Europe are adopting even more hardline maneuvers than their authoritarian communist predecessors. Like the former ruling authoritarian Communist Party, today’s right-wing populists think that art should empower the state and celebrate the nation or the regime. In both cases, art has a clear task provided by the governing party, and the art community must adhere to it. Those in power today believe that the art sphere should



Bigger than Myself: Heroic Voices from ex-Yugoslavia, 2021, curated by Zdenka Badovinac. Installation view, MAXII, Rome, Italy.

not have autonomy because it is largely subsidized by public money (at least in Slovenia); art must serve the rulers' agendas. It shouldn't surprise us that these populists so often rail against disciplines that challenge such an understanding of power. The political agenda overrides any professional objection. And, of course, if you are not satisfied by the rulers' decisions, you can always try out your artistic or other ideas on the open marketplace. To emphasize how much this political line has strayed from the most modest democratic standards would be to state the obvious. However, at least in Slovenia, one should take notice of how quickly the transition from a relatively normal-functioning art system to a populist one took place over the course of the last year or so since the current government came to power.

Preemptive Cancellation

At the end of last year, another story came out that raises parallel concerns while demonstrating a different form of (self-)censorship. The National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, and the Tate Modern decided to postpone an exhibition of Philip Guston's work titled "Phillip Guston Now." Guston needs no introduction as he is considered one of the greatest American painters of the twentieth century. From very early on in his adult life, in the early 1930s, he was an avid civil rights activist, when such engagement was not yet fashionable but highly risky. Later, in the sixties, he produced paintings that depicted members of the Ku Klux Klan. These works can be understood as a critical reaction to white supremacy based on Guston's firsthand experiences of extreme American racism, which he endured as a Jew. The leaders of the four acclaimed institutions expressed concern that, in a time of the Black Lives Matter movement, Guston's images could trigger people of color and activists for black liberation. Kaywin Feldman of the NGA, Matthew Teitelbaum of the MFA Boston, Gary Tinterow of the MFA Houston, and Frances Morris of the Tate Modern explained that they decided to postpone the exhibition "until a time at which we think that the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the center of Philip Guston's work can be more clearly interpreted."²

It has become abundantly clear how "politically correct" discourse and the sensibilities of so-called "cancel culture" have become tools of the art-system hierarchy, enhancing an image of museums' self-doubt and self-reflection. As much writing by contemporary activists and theorists of black liberation show, this is only a cosmetic reaction. The new social

climate demands that the artistic sphere recognize its blind spots and start accepting those who were systematically excluded from museum collections, exhibitions, and canons. To a certain extent, one can only commend the few art institutions that admitted that the art system was almost always a willing accomplice to dominant social power structures and their accompanying ideology. Now some have started to rethink and rebuild their collections and exhibitions more and more from the point of view of those without power, though many have opted for cosmetic rather than structural changes, as seen in the Guston fiasco.³

I believe it is important for art institutions to contemplate their role in the (re)production of social antagonisms, though I don't believe "political correctness" can contribute to any relevant systemic change. The main goal of this type of liberal, representational politics is to satisfy the prescribed demands of the enlightened liberal elite while the power structure of the museums, including the art market and capitalism, remain unscathed. One could also speculate whether and to what extent the museums' new politics further enrich the elite – under the umbrella of diversity.⁴

But my dispute with the four museums does not concern their sensitivity to what has become known as "cancel culture." I can accept that institutions, especially if they want to flourish in a wider social environment, have to communicate with their audiences. However, in the case of Philip Guston, I was alarmed by the preemptive withdrawal of the exhibition. Before there was any protest, before there were any offended individuals on the horizon, the museums already decided to wait for a more suitable time, which will allegedly secure "a clearer interpretation" of Guston's work. In this respect, the four eminent institutions de facto subordinated themselves and their programs to a standard that has very little to do with art (or social justice), and that they themselves remain the progenitors of. And not only that: they are subordinating art to a standard that cannot stand as a standard. It is more a subjective whim that can come from anyone in any given moment without any reason or argumentation, based solely on a the kind of feeling usually formulated in a Twitter rant. Furthermore, does any work of art, even the oldest of masterpieces, have "a clear interpretation"? The only art that has a clear interpretation is either art conceived and promoted by totalitarian regimes (Hitler's and Stalin's come to mind) or commercial art: graphic design and advertising. With these two examples in mind, there are connections to be drawn between the way liberal forms of museum self-censorship operate and the way several

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countries in Eastern and Central European have begun to troll and withdraw funding for non-nationalist art.

The Politics of a Cemetery

I have always considered museums as essential to any society because they present very specific types of artifacts and knowledge to the public. The workforces in museums – the curators and all of those who take care of and preserve collections, who create and design catalogs, the writers and the critics, the cleaners, programmers, educators, and guards – are the backbone of art. They guarantee (at least ideally) that the works on display or in the collection are carefully chosen and studied for the benefit of public. The institution stands for these choices, investigations, and explorations of art.

I would like to further elaborate this point by referring to Boris Groys's essay "On Art Activism," in which he compares museums to cemeteries. Museums, he claims, mortify objects. A certain artifact loses its function the moment it enters the museum. However, he finds this function of the museum to be its most important. Contrary to our everyday reality, to our consumer culture, and to cutting-edge designs and new technological "breakthroughs" that profess to improve our daily lives, the museum gives up on ideals (of progress) in advance:

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The aim of design is to change reality, the status quo – to improve reality, to make it more attractive, better to use. Art seems to accept reality, the status quo, as it is. But art accepts the status quo as dysfunctional, as already failed, from the revolutionary or even postrevolutionary perspective ... By defunctionalizing the status quo, art prefigures its coming revolutionary overthrow. Or a new global world. Or a new global catastrophe.⁵

Art institutions, therefore, enable us to look at things critically; they make us see the status quo as already failed, and its every improvement as a sign of impending doom. In other words, they demand that viewers give up their many prejudices (about art and life) and look at the collected items from a different perspective. In the museum, visitors are not strictly reduced to consumers and they are not "to be consumed." Going to an art museum is a complete waste of time (and usually money), but this is its most important quality in an era where everything and everyone has to be accounted for. In museums, viewers confront times and spaces from the past; they can acknowledge corpses (artifacts) of our civilization in new ways, and maybe even realize that our global civilization is already a



Philip Guston, *Courtroom*, 1970. Oil on canvas. Copyright: The Estate of Philip Guston. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.

corpse, at least in some respects. In a museum's dedication to the defunctionalization of artifacts, one can indeed find its most political dimension: the museum engages people differently than supermarkets or any other consumerist institution.

To put it in another way, museums conform to different standards of exhibiting and engaging with audiences, so they should be given the benefit of the doubt. One has to assume that the works on display were selected by professionals who followed professional procedures and codes. And one has to assume that the artworks are not exhibited to hurt anyone's feelings, although they may (intentionally or not) provoke strong emotions.⁶

This does not mean that one has to agree with a museum's selection, its collection, or its exhibitions. A museum should challenge viewers, it should provoke polemics. However, these polemics should be articulated in a reasonable fashion: not through "cancelling." Self-censorship based on the presumption that someone might be offended by the professional work of an artist and of museum employees goes against the mission of both art and museums, and against public wellbeing too. Moreover, one could argue that cancel culture prevents real political change by trying to use cosmetic reforms to address deep social injustice, thereby sweeping that injustice under the rug. One can only imagine how the art world would look if all its constitutive elements were judged from the point of view of their possible offensiveness, potential harm, toxicity, etc. I am quite confident that there would hardly be any art left, historical or contemporary.

If one part of my argument against canceling Guston and cancel culture in general is based on the function of museums, the other part concerns the function of artworks. I would argue that in modern Western history, the prevailing function of art was to be offensive to dominant sensibilities. In the modern age, art was never created to make people feel good, to further their well-being, to reinforce their prejudices; on the contrary, it undermined established aesthetics and sometimes prevailing social values and orders through the function of the works' production and reception. To demand that art be non-offensive, polite, and all-inclusive, that it conform to fashionable social norms and sensibilities, is to deprive it of its main power: to challenge the constraints of our senses, our sensibilities, our minds, and our world. No one can prescribe in advance what a good piece of art is, or what its effect is going to be; no one can say what kind of art resonates with the challenges of our reality. This is exactly the reason why we should restrain ourselves

from imposing any such restrictions on art, and rather focus on allowing art to challenge dominant forms of power, aesthetics, and violence. Constraining it for the wrong reasons – for example, to fulfill liberal notions of self-censorship and to avoid controversy – is in some ways to do something very similar to what the populists are doing – the only difference being the criteria for cancellation: populists cancel art that isn't sufficiently nationalistic, while institutions that pretend to be "progressive" cancel art that they construe as potentially harmful to viewers, while inflicting actual harm on these viewers through their connections to systems of global violence. Instead of heeding and responding to the legitimate demands of liberation movements, such forms of cancel culture take the place of structural changes and produce a patina of progressiveness.

Judging What's Cancelled

Here I would like to turn to Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment, i.e., judgment of taste. Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment is a useful tool for examining the destructive effects of so-called cancel culture. It also offers a way forward. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant writes:

If [someone] pronounces that something is beautiful, then he expects the very same satisfaction of others: he judges not merely for himself, but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Hence he says that the *thing* is beautiful, and does not count on the agreement of others with his judgment of satisfaction because he has frequently found them to be agreeable with his own, but rather *demand*s it from them. He rebukes them if they judge otherwise, and denies that they have taste, for he nevertheless requires that they ought to have it; and to this extent one cannot say, "Everyone has his special taste." This would be as much as to say that there is no taste at all, i.e. no aesthetic judgment that could make a rightful claim to the assent of everyone.⁷

Kant's argument about aesthetic judgment here seems contradictory. If judgments of taste are based on the pleasure or displeasure of the individual, then they are judgments based on subjective feelings. At the same time, these kinds of judgments demand the assent of others, meaning that aesthetic judgments are subjective but also seek universal acceptance. How does one understand this? I believe Kant's point is actually very coherent. The field of beauty (or ugliness) is a unique one. Viewers approach it

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with the subjective senses that they possess (feelings of pleasure or displeasure), but to debate these feelings they have to elaborate judgments in a way that can be endorsed by all reasonable people.

Kant implies that the *form* of aesthetic judgment has to be inclusive of everyone. (He stresses that acknowledging everyone's "taste" isn't possible, since if it were, we would not be able to talk of taste at all.) So in an aesthetic judgment, one has to mold one's immediate impulse (a feeling) into a form that can be understood by anyone. This doesn't mean that everyone has to agree, but it does mean that everyone should be able to understand and respond to it. Its (inclusive) form is agreeable to everyone, although some can passionately disagree with its content.

Although some things grouped under the label "cancel culture" are on the right side of liberation, too often they take an individual impulse (pleasure, displeasure) and express it in a form that destroys social bonds. Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment is rooted in the perspective of a social, communal, public good. You are allowed to disagree, but your disagreement must come in a form that does not diminish our common public domain.

At its worst, cancel culture can be a force of social disintegration. Anyone who feels offended can launch a violent verbal attack and demand that this or that problematic artifact be removed. The aggressiveness of cancel culture seems radical to liberal sensibilities, when in fact it is not radical enough. Instead of supporting real processes of radical change or heeding the demands of liberation movements, it covers up social problems with mandates for capitalist "diversity, equity, and inclusion." The problem is not just the violent single-mindedness of this sort of judgment, but also the presumption that the "I" is always right, and that this "I" has a right to claim its right. For the agents of cancel culture, their right, and being right, is the goal in itself. It doesn't matter to them if the form of their judgement is destructive. Kant argued the opposite: it is not important to be right (to have a correct judgment); what's important is to have the right form of judgment (a Universal form), regardless of the substance.

One can of course debate furiously with directors of major museums and demand that they respond. However, the form of criticizing museums cannot be just a slur or an angry complaint. If it is, the museums are not obliged to respond.

I find Kant's reasoning productive not only for the contemporary art field but also for the field of politics. It is not enough for a given political struggle to be "right"; the form of

struggle is crucial. Any progressive political project requires not just the "right" political agenda, but also on the "right" political form. If it is to be genuinely political, if it is to deliver meaningful systemic change, its form has to be an inclusive form. We might also say, in a further extension of Kant's argument on aesthetic judgment, that this inclusive form is the only way to fight the dangerous forces of contemporary right-wing populism.

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1

The prime minister's address is available here:
<https://www.gov.si/novice/2021-02-08-predsednik-vlade-janez-jansa-kultura-je-eden-kljucnih-temeljev-slovenske-nacijee-in-samostojne-slovenske-drzave/>.

2

The public statement is available here:
<https://www.nga.gov/press/exh/5235.html>.

3

Contemporary art institutions can simultaneously celebrate politically correct agendas and guarantee that the wider political power structure (along with its antagonisms) stays intact. Let us recall the reopening of MoMA in late 2019, when protesters pointed out that the \$450 million investment in renovation and expansion of the museum was endorsed by two very problematic board members. Steven Tanenbaum's company GoldenTree Asset Management controls over \$2.5 billion of Puerto Rico's debt. Board member Larry Fink, CEO of investment management company BlackRock, was scrutinized for his company's investments in private prison companies. For more information on MoMA's problematic sources of financing, see the website of a new coalition of activists targeting MoMA: Strikemoma.org.

4

Before the opening of the renewed and enlarged and diverse MoMA, the employees of the museum protested because of their precarious status within their institution. I believe this is a lovely illustration of how relations of capitalist exploitation can go hand in hand with absolute political correctness and museum diversity politics.

5

Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (Verso, 2017), 54.

6

I am, of course, fully aware that sponsors, donors, and board members of big art institutions dictate museums' programming as well. This is also something that needs to be addressed and taken into account.

7

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment (Kritik der Urteils kraft)* (1790; Cambridge University Press, 2000), 98.