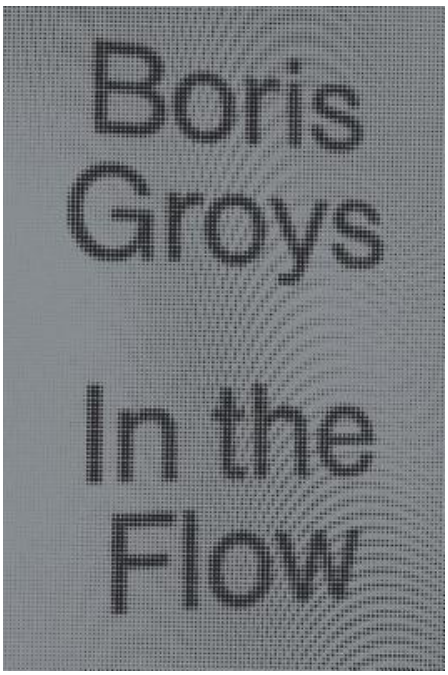

In the Flow

Boris Groys

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The leading art theorist takes on art in the age of the Internet

In the early twentieth century, art and its institutions came under critique from a new democratic and egalitarian spirit. The notion of works of art as sacred objects was decried and subsequently they would be understood merely as things. This meant an attack on realism, as well as on the traditional preservative mission of the museum. Acclaimed art theorist Boris Groys argues this led to the development of “direct realism”: an art that would not produce objects, but practices (from performance art to relational aesthetics) that would not survive. But for more than a century now, every advance in this direction has been quickly followed by new means of preserving art’s distinction.

In this major new work, Groys charts the paradoxes produced by this tension, and explores art in the age of the thingless medium, the Internet. Groys claims that if the techniques of mechanical reproduction gave us objects without aura, digital production generates aura without objects, transforming all its materials into vanishing markers of the transitory present.

In the Flow Details

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From Reader Review In the Flow for online ebook

Vika Kirchenbauer says

Groys is very clear in his arguments and knowledgable around the Russian avant-garde and in his thinking around museums and institutions. I'm not convinced though that he's the philosopher most apt when it comes to computers and the internet. He, for instance, asserts computer work to be manual rather than immaterial through the use of the keyboard (and of course rightfully points out the material infrastructure of the internet). He writes: "We give digital data its presence by our manual work on a computer keyboard. This act involves nature, because it involves our natural body; the mechanical copy, on the contrary, is not produced manually. By clicking on the names of different files and links one calls up data that is per se invisible and gives to this data a certain form and a certain place on one's screen." So, when using a keyboard to type it is linked to the natural body and thus classified as manual labour, but when clicking on a mouse or using a keyboard shortcut in order to copy a file it suddenly no longer is? Say what? The book also includes an essay in which he celebrates WikiLeaks as a "highly significant" universalist project that "serves no specific interests or ideologies". How would that be possible? He also states that "it immunizes itself against any options or meanings that it perceives as signs of corruption." He might regret that in retrospect, but even at the time, this assertion seems like a strangely optimistic judgment.

Attentive says

Very interesting book, organised as a series of essays some of which are more compelling than others. The survey of Malevich and the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde is really cool.

Some of Groys' discussions of the use of the internet as a digital archive for visual arts felt antiquated, as he continually referred to the internet supplanting and transforming the traditional public art gallery, making claims premised on a false dualism in some cases, or on a false emphasis on the continued relevance of traditional art consumption in others.

Two writers on art to whom Groys refers repeatedly in his wide-ranging expeditions are Kazimir Malevich and Clement Greenberg. He also refers often to Marx and Engels, and makes more glancing references to Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger and other philosophers.

Peter Harrison says

This book is a set of essays by the art critic and theorist Boris Groys. Although each takes a slightly different slight, the overall theme is the nature of modernity and how the arrival of the internet brings changes to art and artists alike.

The underlying theme is that in the past art relied on the creation of static objects placed in the museum to be viewed by passive observers. Art in the modern age is instead about the 'event', something in which the observer is an active participant and which is recorded and recalled later.

Groys argues that the internet and the various associated technologies facilitate this shift, allowing art to be both decontextualised and placed within the flow of time. It allows these events to be recorded, made available, and also recalled and rewound. The observer becomes part of the art itself.

In this way the internet also therefore delivers on some of the manifesto of the original avant garde movement, which argued for the art of the past to be allowed to decay and disappear (or even for it to be actively destroyed). Groys picks out a number of examples of how the work of artists such as Kazimir Malevich can be fitted into this development and in many ways prefigures the arrival of the new technology.

If I have a criticism it is that this is very obviously a set of essays and often risks not feeling like a cohesive whole. It is not always clear how the discussion of the avant garde fits with the chapters which focus on the internet. But it is a fascinating and thought provoking read, and brings a new perspective to walking around a modern gallery.

Eric says

Groys siempre trata de meter a la vanguardia rusa en todos lados, pero en general tiene muy buenas ideas. Ahora, creo que la forma de entender Internet como un espacio en el que sólo existe información sobre arte y no arte en sí es un poco vieja y se podría actualizar.

Trevor Wilson says

I would be exaggerating if I said there was nothing new from Groys in this book. Here he presents the conceptual idea of spatial and temporal "flow," the kind of ongoing lived chaos which modern and contemporary art have attempted to infiltrate since at least Richard Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk and the Russian avant-garde. I would say this is not new merely if one has followed any of Groys' work since his major Total Art of Stalinism, because he is merely redeveloping and fine-tuning the same themes that have always been there, namely, the particular aesthetic practices of the avant-garde which lend themselves to political radicalism. If you know anything about his famous claim for complicity between the Russian avant-garde and the Stalinist state project, described through the lens of late-German idealist philosophy and its expression through Wagner, then you should only read this book for the clarity by which he makes this case. It was succinctly put but more of a reaffirmation than any sort of new revelation.

Torchcountry says

Across 12 essays Groys meditates on contemporary culture, practicing the intellectual tradition which he believes defines our current epoch. Where the Renaissance was concerned with the past and Modernism the future, our cultural efforts are put towards understanding and defining the era in which we live. Throughout the book, the analytical descriptions of our conditions and preceding historical factors are integrated into a thesis of "the flow" - which is essentially the well trod point that change is our status quo, our only reality. Groys deepens this concept however by stringing ideas across centuries, bouncing off them in rapid succession. He manages to penetrate some of the confusion in contemporary art, laying bare the flow of cultural production and the forces consistently shaping it. Without obviously leaning on Marxist theory Groys avoids the verbosity of IAE by quickly getting to the thick of each issue he tackles. Coming across like a grounded Baudrillard, his writing contributes a profound rhizome of cultural concepts by pressing big ideas together. Some may find his prose too sweeping to trust, with passages like: "Modern and contemporary art wants to make things not better but worse, and not relatively worse, but radically worse - to make dysfunctional things out of functional things, to betray expectations, to demonstrate the invisible presence of death where we tend to see only life." Despite some unsubstantiated claims, his subjective, at

times controversial opinions flow together with lucid insights to create a descriptive tableau of contemporary culture.

Fav. Essays: Under the Gaze of Theory, Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich, Art on the Internet

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Kerry says

As a history of art student, I was assigned *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* by the same author. I didn't read it then and haven't picked it up since. I thought, as a more wise, mature, and patient reader, that I would give him another chance. But maybe I need another couple of decades.

John Pistelli says

For a long time, God was our anchor: the gaze of the deity secured our place in the universe, and the goal of art was to illustrate the works of God and to bring us closer to Him. With the displacement of God by reason in western thought at the advent of early modernity, we may have lost our divine sponsor, but we were at least upheld in our being and identity by our rational faculty's capacity to comprehend the totality of the world. Art in this context aided reason by disclosing phenomena as religious allegory gave way to realism, or mimesis. In the middle nineteenth century, though, reason met the fate of God when Marx and Nietzsche discovered that nothing whatsoever transcends our material condition, that life is nothing other than an infinite flow of the transient existent. Under this intellectual regime, the goal of art is to become one with the flow, to join the stream of spacetime, which is why the art of the avant-garde destroyed both signification and representation, allegory and mimesis—anything that would secure artist, spectator, or artwork from the flood of reality. In a final twist, the Internet has delivered us over again to metaphysics, because we are all now personae crafted online for the gaze of whatever agency is large enough to behold the entire datastream, possibly God Himself, or at the very least the protagonists/antagonists of conspiracy theory. The role of artists now is not to create aesthetic objects for archives nor even, as in installation art and curatorial activity, to manipulate the grammar of those archives themselves, but rather to stage their artistic process for this neo-divine gaze and to enjoy the digital dehistoricization that liberates all art from history and allows it to realize its utopian intention of escaping time.

So art theorist Boris Groys retells the now venerable story of the modern, the postmodern, and the-whenever-we-are-now in this superb, if sometimes highly questionable, collection of essays. Many of these pieces were written for prior publications, so the book's contents are both heterogenous and sometimes repetitive. Groys's historical narrative is as persuasive as any in this vein; specializing in the historical avant-garde—his constant reference points are Malevich and Marinetti, along with Benjamin and Heidegger—he looks out from their zero-point perspective on all of western cultural history.

With another canon, Groys would have arrived at different conclusions, it perhaps does not need to be said; thinkers no less modern and no less intelligent than the theorists of revolution and the avant-garde devised different solutions when contemplating the same problems, and I kept imagining how this book would have looked had it attended to Emerson as much as Marx and Nietzsche, Woolf as much as Malevich and Marinetti. The established canon of Continental high theory and its associated aesthetic corpus is not the only available account of modernity; rival accounts may be, even if only from within their particular historical and political horizons, equally persuasive, such as my own tradition of the Anglophone post-Romantic, to which

in my experience the Continental theorists tend to condescend if they deign to notice it at all. I know I am close to the tiresome objection that Groys has not written the book I would have (or in fact did, twice over, once as non-fiction and once as fiction), but let me assure you that Groys is a writer of enviable precision and grace, and *In the Flow* contains much to consider. His ability to compress complex thoughts into concise paragraphs makes this a work of almost blinding clarity, and there is a book's worth of thought on almost every page.

The epigraph of *In the Flow* might be this eloquent defense of theory as such in the essay, "Under the Gaze of Theory":

> And yet theory was never so central to art as it is now. So the question arises: Why is this the case? I would suggest that today artists need theory to explain what they are doing—not to others, but to themselves. In this respect they are not alone. Every contemporary person constantly asks these two questions: What has to be done? And even more importantly, How can I explain to myself what I am already doing? The urgency of these questions results from the collapse of tradition that we are experiencing today. Let us again take art as an example. In earlier times, to make art meant to practice—in ever-modified form—what previous generations of artists had done. In the modern period, to make art has meant to protest against what these previous generations did. But in both cases, it was more or less clear what that tradition looked like—and, accordingly, what form protest against that tradition could take. Today, we are confronted with thousands of traditions floating around the globe—and with thousands of different forms of protest against them. Thus, if somebody now wants to become and artist and to make art, it is not immediately clear to him or her what art actually is, or what the artist is supposed to do. In order to start making art, one needs a theory that explains what art is. Such a theory makes it possible for artists to universalize, to globalize their art. A recourse to theory liberates them from their cultural identities—from the danger that their art will be perceived only as a local curiosity. That is the main reason for the rise of theory in our globalized world. Here, the theory—the theoretical, explanatory discourse—precedes are instead of coming after it.

As noted above, *In the Flow* is more of a miscellany than its packaging suggests, and different readers will be interested in different pieces. Malevich and Clement Greenberg each get an essay of their own, as do Google and WikiLeaks. Other topics include the role of theory in art, "Art and Activism," and "Art on the Internet," as well as essays on the relation between communism and conceptual art and on "global conceptualism" itself.

The explicit question governing the whole book is, "What to do now that we are all artists of ourselves for the Internet's gaze—and how has the avant-garde's desolation of tradition prepared us for this?" More implicit is the persistent question of how avant-garde art, unpopular and even despised by the public, can aid the grand old cause of The Revolution—humanity's total and collective emancipation from all necessity and exploitation. If Malevich and Marinetti are the heroes of this book, it is because their works suggest the answer to this latter, vexing question: avant-garde art lays waste to the past so that the future can be born, even if the art of the future is not itself anti-representational in the manner of the avant-garde:

> *Black Square* was like an open window through which the revolutionary spirits of radical destruction could enter the space of culture and reduce it to ashes.

The essay "Art and Activism" gives a more ambitious picture of the complicity between aesthetics and revolution. Art as a separate category of human endeavor does not pre-exist the modern, Groys says; before the modern period, "art" only illustrated religious dogma or served as elite ornament and so was merely what we would call "design." Then the French revolutionaries made a momentous choice: instead of hurling the expropriated design works—from painting to furniture to architecture—of *l'ancien régime* into one vast

bonfire of the vanities, they instead put them into museums, thus aestheticizing them by neutralizing their original ideological content and by reducing them to the function of providing material for perception and sensation.

> Instead of destroying the sacral and profane objects belonging to the old regime, they defunctionalized, or in other words, aestheticized them. The French revolution turned the designs of the old regime into what we now call art, that is, into objects not for use but for pure contemplation. This violent, revolutionary act of aestheticizing the old regime created art as we know it today. Before the French revolution, there was no art—only design. After the French revolution, art emerges as the death of design.

In a sense, then, art itself is activist insofar as it consigns whatever it aesetheticizes—necessarily including the present social, political, and economic status quo—to death. Art brings about the death of the present so that the future can be born, even when such art is not as astringent as Malevich's black canvas.

At the end of the essay, though, Groys goes further when he argues that art's purpose is to free us from the final metaphysical illusion of postmodernity, the neoliberal concept of "human capital," according to which we are each obligated to develop our own special gifts by exercising them in acts of unique creation. Modern art, by contrast, in emphasizing process rather than product and failures of representation rather than mimetic success, liberates us even from the gifts through which the labor market exploits us. This destruction of gifts is the aestheticization of everything—the ability to see the entirety of the status quo including the artist's own self as a corpse, and so to act to replace it with a living future. Groys seems to be some kind of communist, but we are here a long way from communism's utopian dream of limitless human capacity in the absence of socioeconomic constraint. These passages, while brilliant, are what made me think of those modern artists and thinkers who did not need to imagine the willed or violent death and destruction of every extant thing *before* they were able to imagine a life worth living.

From art to politics: Groys praises Google for liberating words from grammar, but derogates it—in the name of a utopian, which is to say non-corporate or non-capitalist, Google of the communist future—for its economic management of information, which should be limitless. His praise on the same grounds of WikiLeaks has either aged well or poorly, depending on how you read the ultimate meaning of Assange's complicity in the rise of Trump. WikiLeaks represents, for Groys, a new universal revolt, even after the age of universals had passed—a conspiracy of the administrators of information against information's suppression by states. Groys notes that this is a reversal of left-wing wisdom, as it sees states as repressing the potential of capital, rather than the reverse (which socialism traditionally posits). He ends the essay by commenting with dramatic understatement that "this innovation will have interesting consequences." So it has: but if you understand the new universal dream of infinite information as congruent with Stephen Bannon's "Leninist" intention to "deconstruct the administrative state," then the paradoxical revolutions of recent history may well make sense. Groys's aside in the final essay of this collection, "Art on the Internet," hints at his belief that these revolutions against the state may well round upon their devisers:

> The contemporary world looks very much like the nineteenth-century world—a world defined by the politics of open markets, growing capitalism, celebrity culture, the return of religion, terrorism, and counterterrorism. World War I destroyed this world and made the politics of open markets impossible. By its end, the geopolitical, military interests of individual nation states had been revealed as much more powerful than those states' economic interests. A long period of wars and revolutions followed.

From politics back to art: *In the Flow* ends with Groys's argument that the Internet has made artists themselves, rather than their works, the object of the spectatorial gaze. We are all online all the time, making our lives in view of the public, ourselves the art objects. Groys notes elsewhere in the book that with our social media lives, we are all artists now, and that the distinction between artist and spectator is increasingly

irrelevant as we render up our aestheticized lives for the eyes of whatever deity can behold the whole flow. This is an ambiguous development—is this the future for which Malevich wanted to destroy painting, Marinetti wanted to destroy Milan? Yet there is one utopian potential left for the Internet: unlike the museum, which binds every art object with explanatory tags to the very place in history it had wanted to transcend so as to rise to God or to enter the flow, the Internet frees art from history:

> To be sure, our archives are structured historically. And our use of these archives is still defined by the nineteenth century's tradition of historicism. Thus, we tend to posthumously reinscribe artists into the historical contexts from which they strove to escape. In this sense, the art collections that preceded the historicism of the nineteenth century—the collections that wanted to be collections of examples of pure beauty, for example—look naive only at a first glance. In fact, they are more faithful to the original utopian impulse than their more sophisticated historical counterparts. Now, it seems to me that today we are coming to be more and more interested in this nonhistoricist approach to our past. More interested in the decontextualization and re-enactment of individual phenomena from the past than in their historical recontextualization. More interested in the utopian aspirations that lead artists out of their historical contexts than in those contexts themselves. Maybe the most interesting aspect of the Internet as archive is precisely the possibility of decontextualization and recontextualization through the cut-and-paste operations that the Internet offers to its users. And it seems to me that this is a positive development, because it strengthens the archive's utopian potential and weakens its potential for betraying the utopian promise—a potential that is inherent in any archive, in whatever way it is structured.

Groys understands, as too few theorists do, that history, as well as sociology and psychology, are, however unavoidable they may be, the enemies of art, because each seeks to cage art in contingent identities or definitions and so prevent it from uniting itself with the stream in which all things equally flow. In this vein, here is the remarkable peroration from the essay, "Under the Gaze of Theory":

> Advanced contemporary art is basically art production without a product. It is an activity in which everyone can participate, one that is all-inclusive and truly egalitarian.
>
> In saying all this, I do not have something like relational aesthetics in mind. I also do not believe that art, if understood in this way, can be truly participatory or democratic. And now I will try to explain why. Our understanding of democracy is based on a conception of the national state. We do not have a framework of universal democracy transcending national borders, and we never had such a concept in the past. So we cannot say what a truly universal, egalitarian democracy would look like. In addition, democracy is traditionally understood as the rule of a majority, and of course we can imagine democracy as not excluding any minority, and as operating by consensus, but still, this concensus will necessarily include only 'normal, reasonable' people. It will never include 'mad' people, children, and so forth.
>
> It will also not include animals. It will not include birds, although, as we know, St. Francis preached sermons to animals and birds. It will also not include stones, although we know from Freud that there is a drive in us that compels us to become stones. It will also not include machines, even if many artists and theorists have wanted to become machines. In other words, an artist is someone who is not merely social, but supersocial, to use the term coined by Gabriel Tarde in the framework of his theory of imitation. The artist imitates and establishes himself or herself as similar and equal to too many organisms, figures, objects, and phenomena that will never become part of any democratic process. To use a very precise phrase of George Orwell's, some artists are, indeed, more equal than others. While contemporary art is often criticized for being too elitist, not social enough, actually the contrary is true: art and artists are supersocial. And, as Gabriel Tarde rightly remarks, to become truly supersocial, one has to isolate oneself

from society.

I would only amend Groys's sometimes strenuous artistic revolutionism—as if any artwork less iconoclastically exacting than an installation of the artist's empty apartment or a painting of sheer nothingness would be a capitulation to all the powers that be—with a very old piece of advice: don't push the river—it flows.

Faedyl says

El punto de vista del flujo permite una flexible valoración de las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas desde el punto de vista del desborde, de la pérdida de materialidad y de la conexión con la vida. Muy interesante sus ensayos. Provocador y evocador.

Andrés Quesada says

Excelente. Un manual que hecha mano de la teoría crítica y las vanguardias modernistas para acercarse a la práctica artística contemporánea. Como siempre, Groys presenta ideas interesantes y las explica de forma clara y concisa.
