

Art is a luxury

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1 Song 1

ART IS A LUXURY
art is a luxury
starving people don't paint
maybe they scream a lot
art is a luxury
but as far as expression is concerned
that's very meagre
art is a luxury
throw the poopshoot on the canvas
colourfull society you can't put them in a square
1x Refrein(DARKBROWN)
when you talk to me
you talk to yourself

2 Lecture 1

Let's begin with just the title of this song: art is a luxury. Above all, it reflects a historically fairly recent notion of art. In the middle ages and roughly until the 18th century, the Latin word "ars" most generally referred to crafts and science. Agriculture, for example, was called a mechanic art, astronomy a free art ("ars liberalis"). When the visual arts – painting and sculpture – were only one of many mechanic arts, nobody would have called art in this sense a luxury since even most basic life-sustaining hunting and collecting would have counted as a art.

The line:

starving people don't paint

would only have made sense roughly with the Renaissance when painters and sculptors like Leonardo and Michelangelo attempted to elevate their craft from the low mechanical arts to the high scientific arts. From that point on, artists were no longer proletarians.

maybe they scream a lot

This line reminds of the campaign "Give Up Art, Save the Starving" by the Irish artist Tony Lowes from the late 1980s. Lowes and, at least nominally, Coolhaven continue a tradition of an ethical critique of art that can be traced back at least as far as to Calvinist iconoclasm. The line:

art is a luxury

also describes the factual failure of the Renaissance project of making visual art as a scientific discipline, an idea that has gained new virulence today with the abounding notion of artistic research. What happened instead, though, is that the visual arts became dependent on commissions by either the church or the aristocracy or, in the case of Dutch golden age painting, wealthy middle classes. This has remained the business model of visual art today: It is, in most cases, about producing expensive collector's items, in sharp contrast to other contemporary arts like literature, music and film whose core business models are based on mass-reproduced media.

This exclusive status of visual art works is a product of its emancipation from the crafts to the status and notion of fine art. This status has also been the reason why art, as a whole, has been fiercely attacked by activists and critics such as Henry Flynt – who coined the slogans "Down with Art" and "Demolish Serious Culture" in the context of the 1960s Fluxus movement – and the Marxist Roger Taylor, author of the book "Art, an Enemy of the People".

When Coolhaven sing:

but as far as expression is concerned
that's very meagre

...they echo a 20th century notion of art that blurs the line between art and expression, or more generally between art and communication. It has led to the endless debates – from the early 20th century avant-gardes to the more recent "relational aesthetics" – about what qualifies as art and non-art. Here, Coolhaven supply a concrete example:

throw the poopshoot on the canvas
colourful society you can't put them in a square 1x Refrein
when you talk to me
you talk to yourself

...which of course reminds of Piero Manzoni who bottled his excrement and sold it as art, of action painting, of the Vienna actionists, and of outsider performance artists like Robert Delford Brown, Istvan Kantor and Alexander Brener. All these examples work with a contrast of high and low, beauty and disgust, that by this very dialectics marks the territory of art as what it still is: the beaux-arts, beautiful or fine arts, based on a hidden consensus that an artwork is something elevated, standing out or detached from everyday life, even if – in the case of Duchamp and others – it is only the white cube of the exhibition space that marks this difference. It is what the philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto programmatically called the “transfiguration of the commonplace”.

If this is true, then it’s also true what Coolhaven sing: art is a luxury indeed.

3 Song 2

art is a luxury
but organics are it’s muscles
paint will never dry
fingers will be sticky
get your hands dirty
washing washing washing
2x Refrein
when you talk to me
you talk to yourself

If art is, in its core, about the production of luxury items, then this throws fine art paradoxically behind its own emancipation from the crafts. Hand-crafting luxury items, after all, is the same business model as that of luxury craftspeople such as hairdressers, tailors, goldsmiths. While art based on mechanical reproduction has been practiced since woodcuts and theorized since Walter Benjamin, it is still in most cases restricted to the notion of an inferior reproduction – typically in a catalogue – of a unique original work; even multiple artworks are artificially restrained in their numbers copies and validated through individual signatures. Electronic media art has either resorted to similar strategies or resorted to its own festival-based media art system.

In most cases, immateriality of art works are the precondition of their reproducibility. This is the Hegelian, idealist 19th century legacy both of Walter Benjamin and conceptual art; an idealist legacy that links the most contemporary with the most classical Renaissance concepts of art. When Coolhaven sing of “getting one’s hands dirty”, “organics” and “fingers [that] will be sticky”

they side with an aesthetic current that has always been present in the modern arts and run contrary to the idealist conceptualism: It is rooted in the various expressionist currents from the early 20th century to de Kooning, Pollock and Cobra, 1980s neo-expressionism, punk culture, contemporary street art. Beyond mere expression, this vision of art is one of lived practice, and construction of being, close to Heidegger's idea of the art work as an epistemological object.

4 Song + lecture

tussenstukje HAJO
art is unnecessary

Isn't saying that art is unnecessary and a luxury a pre-20th century salon art concept? Haven't the avant-gardes from Futurism to Bauhaus, Fluxus and relational aesthetics tried to overcome this notion? If, for example, basic cooking and socializing can be a contemporary art practice – through Beuys, Daniel Spoerri, Gordon Matta-Clark or Christine Hill –, how can that be a luxury? Cooking is necessary, so isn't art, too, one could ask? But on the other hand: why do we still need the notion of art? And perhaps, cooking art and club art is neither about rethinking or democratizing the notion of art, nor about redefining the aesthetic status of cooking, but in the end only a hegemonial move to secure the art system and expand its territory?

it's active lethargy

...when it sanctions lazy lifestyle as art. And perhaps art is active lethargy also in the sense that, despite all discussions of postcolonial aesthetics, the notion of art used in contemporary art is purely Western and has no equivalent in in Asia and Africa, for example, where the division between arts and crafts, in other words: the whole concept of autonomous art, does not exist except as a Western cultural import.

inspiration is an opinion

...and notion like creativity and inspiration are a romanticist legacy that has nowadays been taken over by the so-called creative industries.

lezing

time is a black hole

Whereas the traditional notion of art is that it outlasts time.

lezing

art is a black hole

So if art is like time, what remains of art? If Coolhaven suggest that we read it as an expression of temporality and ephemerality, isn't that just echoing popular positions on contemporary art.

lezing

it's only about itself

We haven't talked about this central line of the song yet. Next to the elements of Calvinist, idealist, existentialist and materialist art critique in the song, we now deal with what could be called a systemic or system theoretical perspective: art as a system defined, like other social systems, through its self-sustainment. Or, in idealist terminology, as transcendence and reflexivity. That art is only about itself, an infinite self-reflexive regress, was exactly the aesthetic postulate of the early romanticist aesthetics of Schlegel, Fichte and Schelling. It is, in other words, the radical and ultimate fulfillment of aesthetic autonomy, no longer just as autonomy from commissioning parties, applied use and pictorial representation, but even social and epistemological autonomy.

lezing

1x Refrein
when you talk to me
you talk to yourself

But that of course is the irony of Coolhaven: Being artists themselves, and performing at an art event, they ultimately are part of this talking to oneself. They thus embody an even more sinister turn: Namely, the integration of the critique of art as being only about itself into the way art talks about itself.