# A Higher Ground? Ethical Demands and Epistemic Politics in Contemporary Art

Autor
Tom Holert

Abstrakt

The co-articulation of art and research, as increasingly performed within institutional and para-institutional environments of contemporary art, has entailed awareness of the ethical dimensions of art production and appreciation. A certain modernist conception of art as an autonomous and thus essentially irresponsible endeavour is being challenged by rules and regulations pertaining to research ethics. Further enhanced by an impending urge to question and unlearn codes of subjection inherited by colonialism, nationalism, capitalism and patriarchy, the ethical frameworks of artistic practice/research become a site of contestation and negotiation.

The more knowledge (production) is understood as a key competence of contemporary art practitioners and institutions, the greater is the need to attend to the intersection of epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and politics and their vicissitudes. The paper focuses on art's alleged responsibility as a site of knowledge generation and inquiry in the context of today's predicament of endless and multiple crises—ending up with the question whether art is to be considered part of the problem or the solution.

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

**Prelude**

*In their announcement of the November 2021 online symposium, the organisers proposed 'to critically examine the interface between artistic research and educational practices in Poland and ask questions about relevance and responsibility in connection with artistic research, understood as a working method, an educational strategy, and a mode of production of art.'[1]*
*The call for papers for the present issue of the journal then specified this brief, inquiring about 'the context of the relationship between civic interest and artistic research' and the very sites and situations of arts-based research practices and their respective pedagogies, within and without institutional settings and pertaining to the social fabric of civil society at large. The question has become one of social responsibility and the potential political and ethical benefits (and downsides) of a research-orientation in contemporary art.[2]*

*Since the symposium and the call for papers, which were both clearly driven by an urgency to speak to the crisis of civil societies and the often problematic role that art and cultural institutions*

*play in the face of the increasing pervasiveness of nationalist, populist, anti-feminist, queer- and transphobic, anti-Semitic, anti-migrant tendencies and violence in East and Central European countries, the attack of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022, arguably made necessary the reconsideration, if not radical revision of this set of questions and urgencies. The immediacy of war, the military turn of entire societies entailed by it (Zeitenwende), the necropolitical and colonialist attitudes undergirding the attack, the weaponisation of vulnerable populations and the total destruction of livelihoods, the barrage of propaganda and disinformation that accompanies the violence and ruination seem to leave not much space for aesthetic theorisation and the reflection on the utility function of artistic research. Other than forensic investigations and OSINT type fact checking, mapping and visualisation doesn't appear to be of much help on the way to peace and justice.*

*In many respects, the remainders of the talk that form the basis of the following essay are to be read as a document of a pre-war condition – they are therefore not only somewhat (and problematically) detached from the current predicament in East and Central Europe, as well as in Western Europe and the Global South, they also lack any discussion of the geopolitical, social and ideological predicaments that yielded the current multiplication of crises. Admittedly, the following is therefore highly insufficient, if not irresponsible, even though maintaining it has responsibility as its presumed subject.*

**Distributive injustice and the labour of artistic research**

How are we to address the intersection of ethics, aesthetics, politics and epistemology in relation to art, art education and artistic research? The question begs an answer that acknowledges the intricate contextual architecture in which everything that is practiced and theorised, treated and traded as art is placed, or rather *situated*. The crisis of art's autonomy and freedom is ongoing, albeit remaining to be the fundamental fiction on which most institutional and sometimes constitutional-legalistic notions of art rely. The 'art' referred to in this essay primarily pertains to the odd entity of 'contemporary art', which is expansive and voluminous, often dubbed 'global', while its various departments, branches and niches are subjected to constant rescaling and adaptation.

In many places, particularly in the institutional realms of art education and the museum, but also beyond, i.e. in the spaces and networks of self-sustained or state-subsidised practices and discourses, contemporary art by 2021/22 had developed from being a once revered mode of individual expression and creativity into something quite different. Although mystifications concerning autonomy and genius still hold strong, and continue to appeal to many people who consider art as their vocation, or object of veneration, on another level contemporary art has fundamentally and increasingly palpably become what art has always been, albeit in carefully crafted ideological disguises: a mode of labour, a profession, a workplace, a social factory, in other words, a site of the realisation of the Capitalist value, from which work is produced according to certain market- or funding-related criteria and lives, 'biographies', careers are put on display, pitted

against each other and thus commodified, under conditions that for the most part are to be called precarious.

This dimension of labour and exploitation needs emphasising, for discussions around ethics and responsibility with regard to artistic research often tend to leave aside conditions, ideologies and power structures that determine every given research practice, 'artistic' or other. Practitioners find themselves in situations of differing degrees of inclusion or exclusion, accessibility or inaccessibility, entitlement or withdrawal of legitimacy (while frequently facing economic precarity).

Any discussion of the political and ethical dimension of arts-based research should therefore involve a thorough consideration of labour, rather than primarily attending to the outcomes (the actual art works and practices, as objects to be assessed, displayed, published and otherwise put into circulation).

As the artist, filmmaker, publisher and entrepreneur Anton Vidokle put it almost ten years ago, the political economy of art is based on an autosuggestion or an outright disavowal. In an essay published in the journal he had co-founded (*e-flux journal*), on the actual commercial platform/art project that he had co-founded (e-flux), Vidokle wrote in 2013: 'We must find the terms for articulating what kind of economy artists really want. This can be quite complicated, since not addressing this question implicitly reinforces the simplistic myth of the artist as an isolated and alienated genius. Without a captivating alternative, artists will always defer to this myth out of habit, in spite of how complex and interesting their real household economy may be.'[3]

In a similar vein, emphasising the ideological stronghold of the very mythology that detaches an alleged core of artistic creativity and existence from the realms of the social and the economic, Slovenian art historian Katja Praznik argues in her excellent book *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism* that the 'paradox of art' which lies at the base of the social contract of art is to be recognised, criticised and ultimately abolished: 'At once idealised as the opposite of work and used as a blueprint for contemporary capitalist work ethics, the lofty status of artists and the rampant economic exploitation of their labour is at the core of the paradox of art. The contradiction powering this enduring paradox lies in the perceived exceptionality and elevated status of artist's labour, and the uncertain, poorly compensated, and socially unprotected working conditions of artists and creative workers.'[4]

Vidokle's and Praznik's sobering clarifications are vital to keep in mind once we turn to the questions of responsibility and response-ability. Both Vidokle's and Praznik's emphases on the economic dimension and labour condition in relation to the logic of valorisation and symbolic capital characteristic of the art field may benefit from discussions of cultural and creative justice as have been held in Anglo-American cultural studies and cultural sociology for some while now. Scholars such as Andrew Ross or Mark Banks have focused – in the words of the latter – 'on the idea of cultural work as a socially embedded and ethical *practice*' in an 'effort to do justice to the

fullest qualities of cultural work itself – and the native reasons why anyone might choose to partake in it.'[5]

In a perspective primarily informed by the praxeological work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his critics, Banks sees the production of art and culture 'principally [as] an exercise in social competition, status seeking and self-interest (however consciously or unconsciously this is deemed to proceed).'[6] However, as he points out, 'it's also an activity driven by intrinsic rewards, objective standards and ethical concerns for the community.'[7] Cultural work, in particular the work that has been moved to the centre of attention by feminist-materialist theories of social reproduction, care work, 'labours of love' in contemporary art discourse, can thus be 'presented as an undertaking that produces both 'internal' and 'external' goods – the former being specific rewards that can derive only from immersion in the demands of the practice in question; the latter being rewards such as money, prestige and power that stand in a contingent, rather than dependent, relation to the practice.'[8]

Scholarship in 'creative justice' is usually partisan in its interest to analyse, critique and abolish the reasons for structural inequities and exclusions pertaining to distributive justice and the accessibility of opportunities in culture and the arts. The notional egalitarianism of cultural institutions is constantly being undercut by a discourse on meritocracy which, based on the imperatives of access and opportunity, began to achieve social currency from the mid-twentieth century onwards, particularly in the UK, on which Banks' research focuses. The inequity and inequality in cultural work that resulted from the neoliberal version of meritocracy, combined with a relative lack of data, 'may also have helped to negate serious discussion of some of the problems of the contemporary cultural workplace.'[9] Discussing distributive injustice, Banks further looks into the causes of 'the endemic problem of low pay across all arts and cultural work'. One of the main arguments made to explain such prevalence of low wages is that it reflects 'an 'oversupply' of workers', while the 'widespread collapse of established cultural industry business models and income streams' is 'additionally undermined by the public's increased expectations that they should pay less (or sometimes nothing) for access to art and cultural goods.'[10]

Even though 'cultural work' and its critical outlook in the UK only partly overlap with the ecologies and economies of globalised (that is, globally fractured and segmented) contemporary art, some of the latter's characteristics resemble the issues mapped in Banks's account. The hegemony of Western notions of contemporary art practice, styles, discursivities, modes of communication and politics of display clearly affect the realms that linger beneath the radar of established and often – overtly or tacitly – suprematist attitudes towards art's production and consumption. The hierarchies operating within the art world cause a systematic, often neocolonial silencing and invisibilisation of practices considered backward, out of tune, misplaced in socio-aesthetic environments governed by a pernicious consensus concerning 'relevance' or 'topicality' (not to mention 'marketability' or 'professionalism'). Frequently, this results in an uncanny homogeneity, cloaked in rhetorics of diversity.

The distributive injustice engendered by mutations of the economic infrastructure due to the internal and external structural crises inflicting the art system has forced many art schools, museums, self-organised spaces of cultural production, artists, curators and administrators to seek new sources of funding and legitimacy. In the wake of such reorientations, the increasing equation and conflation of contemporary art and knowledge production, usually codified as *research* or *education*, has come to feature prominently in a veritable process of 'epistemisation'[11]. With knowledge, and academic knowledge in particular, increasingly counted among the requisites of artistic practice recognized as advanced, this epistemisation needs to be discussed in relation to terms such as social (in)equality. Otherwise the important political and ethical dimension of any discussion of art will be missed.

Through the privileging of certain types of knowledge, the field of contemporary art becomes ever so difficult to access without the respective prerequisites and attributes of cultural and economic capital that is related to class, race, and gender. Particular attention should be paid to the *infrastructural* dimension of art practices referred to as artistic research, to their material and institutional affordances and conditions, as well as to the practical and theoretical consequences of such infrastructural reasoning.[12]

Before turning to the epistemology and etymology of responsibility, I would therefore like to place some emphasis on the current (and, arguably, future) ideological apparatuses of contemporary art, the particular institutional and disciplinary architecture in which it is supposed to be taking place, particularly in the realm of education and research.

**Academic credentials**

A quick stop at the job market/employment side of contemporary art (and art education more specifically) – and again, the example comes from a Western context – may illustrate how deeply the understanding (and professionalization) of art today is based on the integration of artistic practice in a complex assemblage of codified, normative forms of doing and knowing. This is how a job advertisement published in November 2021 for a position at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano in Italy reads: 'We are looking for a post-conceptual artist working in the field of socially engaged art. You have an artistic education (diploma, master) from an art university or similar. Your background is conceptual and post-conceptual. Ideally you acquired additional expertise in political theory, cultural-, pop- or gender studies or similar. You follow a critical and process-oriented approach, using contemporary media. We expect you to have/be part of a wide international network, having contacts with a wide scope of players in an expanded art context. Important: your current position must be tenured at a recognised university or an equivalent institution.'[13]

The range of knowledges, expertises, experiences, contacts, media and disciplinary affiliations expected from the applicants for this position, a 'post-conceptual artist working in the field of

socially engaged art', is enormous, yet it befits the said 'expanded art context'. The person that is going to teach here is expected to master the ecologies, economies and vicissitudes not only of art education but of the very context of contemporary art and its discursive trappings, coping with their volatility, their incalculable shifts of structures of relevance and the ensuing demands. Most remarkable, as it concerns the employment and institutional level, is the expectation of a 'tenured' position already held by the candidate at a 'recognised university or an equivalent institution'. It is therefore a background in academia and a qualification –evidenced by having been appointed professor before – which preconditions an application.

If any proof for the often suspected 'academisation' of art education and the institution of art in its entirety was needed, a job announcement such as this amply delivers it. The times when art schools hired artists from outside the educational or academic realm to become professors seem long gone. Now, prospects for a career in art education seem to improve relatively to the length of your stay within the institution, climbing up the ladder from being a student, to working as a tutor, becoming employed as an assistant, a lecturer, and maybe, if lucky, by ending up on a tenure-track and later a tenured position.

In many ways, the Bolzano job advertisement also resonates with a changing conceptualisation of what contemporary art is supposed to be, what function it is deemed to fulfil in academia and society at large, and what kind of competencies it is expected to have – particularly in a present conceived and perceived as marked by a multiplicity of synchronous crises and catastrophes, a 'polycrisis' (Edgar Morin/Adam Tooze).

A peculiar, and ongoing, shift of priorities can be gleaned from the syllabi and lexicons offered to students of contemporary art, be they practitioners and/or theorists, critics and historians. Such canons (of themes, concerns, keywords) are promulgated by a book series such as 'Documents of Contemporary Art' which by each newly published edited volume seems to expand the scope of potential interests, modalities, genealogies and knowledges of producing and receiving art. In a way, a publishing endeavour such as this could only flourish due to developments in art education and the study of contemporary art which these textbooks in turn fed/informed new themes to be taught in class. The subjects of these anthologies, published since 2006 in cooperation between the Whitechapel Gallery in London and MIT Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts are kept deliberately plain and simple, but reading them in sequence can make your head swirl. Starting with readers on *The Archive* and *Participation*, the following volumes however seem to stick more or less to the field of aesthetic categories proper: *Colour*, *The Cinematic*, *The Gothic*, etc. It continues like this, although *The Everyday* or *Utopia* wouldn't be considered aesthetic concepts in a more traditional understanding. In the volumes published in the 2010s and 2020s however, the range of themes and subjects widened considerably: *Queer*, *Systems*, *Ethics*, *Sexuality*, *Networks*, *The Market*, *Animals*, *Information*, *Boredom*, *Work*, *Destruction*, *Practice*, *Craft*, *The Rural*, *Translation*, *Science Fiction*, *Health* and most recently *Magic* and *Speculation*.

Such terms constitute a glossary of a transdisciplinary, multi-topic, polysemic discourse that not too long ago wouldn't necessarily have been associated with art. However, since the advent of the stage in the history of contemporary art that philosopher Peter Osborne has dubbed 'post-conceptual', the scope of subjects and issues that may be considered constitutive of the ontology and epistemology of art alike has become de-limited, or un-bordered, almost as a matter of principle, though never categorised as such. The Whitechapel/MIT publishing endeavour is an educational-epistemological enterprise dedicated to reconfigure the terrain of (Western) contemporary art and education. It is however only a first step in an ongoing reconfiguration of contemporary art, of its integration in an ostentatiously transdisciplinary space of knowledge practices.[14]

The frantic quest to determine contemporary art's new roles, agendas and tasks, however is limited to the rebuilding of the educational and exhibitionary complexes of a Western, relatively wealthy cultural market. Many artists and scholars based in CEE countries– and many other semi-periphery and periphery actors – are finding it problematic to engage solely as consumers in this educational-epistemological enterprise, due to the heavily underfunded institutions of higher art education and the generally more precarious situation cultural producers find themselves in. Thus, depending on the particular institutional situations in which these books are being read and taught, their effect on the readers, students, researchers and teachers may vary and be tangible on various levels. You may believe you're simply interested in learning more about this or that subject and therefore consult one of these books; or you may be expected to read one, or several of them because they feature in a class's syllabus. However, I would argue, that by turning to one or several of these titles, for whatever reason, you're also entering an entire, networked discourse that is engendered and funded by the said shifts in the spheres of the humanities and the arts, i.e. shifts towards an increasingly deeper entanglement of academic ways of knowing and artistic ways of doing. Moreover, the very subjects under consideration, from 'decolonising participatory research' to 'ecocriticism', have a palatable ethical bearing on the reader; for these are subjects that more or less intensely demand taking a position, for engaging with the social and moral questions they bring to the table.

**Epistemology, ethicised**

Cases such as the Bolzano job advertisement and the profusion of subjects to be potentially taken into account and cared for by practitioners of contemporary art are relevant for the consideration of the role that ethics play in and for the field of contemporary art education and artistic research. Why is that? I'd venture that the way in which knowledge is conceived, organised and administrated in the institution (as well as outside of it) always already bears the mark of an ethics. In other words, I don't see ethics and epistemology as to be kept apart, but as being deeply interrelated, in particular where issues of the organisation or disorganisation of knowledge-based work are concerned. I'd further argue that such ethics, as put in relation to knowledge, are not limited to those instances of so-called research ethics that may become relevant in an artist-

researcher's practices pertaining to questions of coloniality, human and animal rights, the environment, disability or other fields of investigation.[15] Rather, I'd argue, that there is an ethical dimension to be considered and critically reflected upon in the knowledge economy generally.

In an article on the place of ethics in the knowledge economy that was published in 2009 in a journal on 'critical accounting', author Ken McPhail runs the reader through the gamut of literature on this intersection as it emerged throughout the 1990s and 2000s in economic and management theories. He points to the importance that 'values work' by management gained in the discourse, although he detected a discrepancy between such emphasis on values and the lack of any ethical categories in the discussion about intellectual capital, for instance. McPhail found in the literature an 'appreciation of the 'increased importance of the moral fabric' in facilitating knowledge networks and securing economic growth, the discussion' as well as 'some recognition of the 'values work' views on the importance of moral norms required by management in this new knowledge era', but he bemoaned 'the little theoretical engagement with how we might conceptualise this work and little analysis of the kinds of work that is going on within organisational contexts in order to generate, sustain and manage 'values' […]' [16]
What's more, McPhail complained that 'what ethical analysis there is does not engage with the broader moral philosophy literature and remains stuck within a fairly conventional neo-classical market orientated view of value creation. For example, we need to distinguish between trust as a relational characteristic that facilitates economic growth and the promotion of civic trust in organisations more generally, or an awareness of corporate culture and values, and a more fundamental ethical capacity to recognise and resolve ethical dilemmas. In other words, […], it is important to distinguish between ethical capital in a way that might serve exclusively business ends and the kind of ethical capital that might serve broader civic and democratic purposes.'[17]

Distinguishing between different kinds of 'ethical capital' thus becomes a critical-ethical endeavour in itself. And, coming back to questions of ethical reasoning in the field of contemporary art, it may indeed be one of the more crucial tasks of practitioners to critically discern the ubiquitous ethical claims to be heard and read in the self-descriptions of artists, curators and institutions. It may even be argued that this capacity of discernment in ethical questions has become a significant feature of the neoliberal figure of the responsible self in the art world, leading to its reconstruction and redesign by adding to its knowledge, skills and personal attributes (such as flexibility, adaptability, and self-reliance). If it is a precondition to be seen as such a self-responsible, self-reliant figure that displays a broad understanding of the dynamics of the contemporary art environment, multiple project capacity, relationship building, negotiation and team working skills, this model of the entrepreneurial, self-reliant artist-self, has been refurbished over the past years into a figure that claims herself/himself to be ethically grounded in the community or commonality of a certain cause, concern, or urgency, be it a particular political – that is, racialised, classed and/or gendered – identity, the climate crisis, social inequality, reproductive rights, rights to health and more. And this real or phantasmagoric groundedness in an ethical whole is both transported, by individuals

and groups, into the realm of art education, arts-based research and other institutions or para-institutions of contemporary art, as is demanded and designed by the institutions and para-institutions of artistic-capitalist subjectivation.

## Responsibility, *Verantwortung*, ethicisation

Responsibility is a relatively young concept, a fact often obscured by reverse projections, for example, onto Kant's concept of duty, or to corresponding moral categories in Aristotle. In philosophy, responsibility has been used more systematically only since the early 19th century. The concept experienced its actual flowering much later, namely the 1970s, arguably culminating in Hans Jonas's bestseller *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (*The Imperative of Responsibility*) from 1979, an 'ethics for the technological civilisation', marked by the avoidance of incalculable risks in order not to endanger the existence of mankind as a whole: furthermore, this ethics is based on the recognition of the inherent rights of nature, for which man is responsible due to his agency.

The etymological origin of responsibility, however, stems further back. The German noun *Verantwortung* is linked to the verb *antworten*. In combination with the prefix *ver-* it is considered to have been derived from the Latin *respondere* (to answer, to give an answer), which in turn persists in English (*responsibility*), French (*responsabilité*), Italian (*responsabilità*) or Spanish (*responsabilidad*). In particular, *responsibility* refers back to the context of Roman law, the *litis contestatio*, and thus to the – strictly regulated – mechanisms of responding in court. The Middle High German verb *verantwürten* also means to defend oneself as a defendant in court. However, until the 18th century, the legal meaning of the word could not be reduced to the now common fact of justification – *to answer* in the sense of *to defend oneself* in court encompassed much more.

In his study *The Spell of Responsibility*, philosopher and political scientist Frieder Vogelmann admonishes the violent nature of the concept of responsibility which he calls a 'discursive operator'. Responsibility, he contends, exerts a 'spell' on large parts of philosophy that 'either miss or deny the the theoretical, as well as the practical, violence exercised by 'responsibility.'' 'Philosophy', Vogelmann continues, 'is fascinated by a self-explication based on a deeply rooted 'concept of responsibility,' and thus goes on to discover everywhere this 'responsibility' with which it has furnished every corner of itself, without ever noticing the consequences of its own devotion to this discursive operator. The blind fury with which philosophy labours to legitimise the concept of 'responsibility' conceals both what 'responsibility' inflicts on the individuals to whom it is ascribed, and the very walls of the theoretical cell in which a philosophy under the spell of responsibility imprisons itself.'[18]

Even without recourse to psychoanalytic terminology, it is obvious that Vogelmann identifies a mythical and ultimately phantasmagoric force at work in philosophy's (and not only philosophy's) treatment of 'responsibility', which manifests itself not as a universal, ahistorical effect but in the particularity of institutional micropolitics and discourses. Drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of

discourse and power, Vogelmann describes how the normative impact of the concept of 'responsibility' transforms the practices, power relations, knowledge formations, and subjectivisations in which it is used. 'Responsibility' is rendered as a mode of subjection of individuals and collectives, in which active subjection (of oneself or others) and passive subjection are continually intertwined in responsible self-relationship. Into the place of 'duty', 'guilt' or 'imputation' of past times has moved 'responsibility', which includes, and at the same time denies, the social exercise of power at the core of the subjects.

Foucault regarded this individual-collective internalisation of the exercise of power coded as self-responsibility to be one of the key governmental technologies of neoliberalism. The organs of state and politics in charge of the provision of welfare have withdrawn or been compromised, which has caused trust in democracy to wane in large parts of the world. In this situation it may be concluded that there is nothing left but to take the rescue of society (and other macro entities up to and including the planet) into one's own hands. And in the best case, such responsible individual initiative also pays off economically.

Individuals in contemporary neoliberal societies are trained to be responsible consumers and sometimes proud volunteers, while at the same time the singularising government of the self is elevated to the model of the government of society. Transnational corporations refer to their corporate social responsibility, humanitarian non-governmental organisations are regarded as models of ethical initiative, while self-organised vigilantes can also serve as a benchmark for (self-)responsible action. There is talk of a process of *responsibilisation* of subjects in the course of their social activation through offers of participation, through their identity of responsible consumers, or through appeals to social surveillance, and this diagnosis is closely linked to individualisation of society that goes hand in hand with the abolition of the social and the values associated with precisely this social, such as solidarity or communality.

A critique of responsibilisation that discovers its utopia in the restoration of the supposedly lost social would, however, simply displace, not solve the problem of responsibility. Rather than disrupting the phantasmagoric-ideological fascination of responsibility it might move it into the horizon of a social-democratic ethics of responsibility, what Vogelmann calls 'sovereignty through self-objectification': the elementary characteristic of the 'structure of the responsible self-relationship' that does not stop at the boundary between individual and society.

What about a critique of the concept of responsibility that is thinking less from Foucault than from Jacques Derrida? In his discussion of Platonic and Christian – and thus decidedly European – conceptions of responsibility, Derrida around 1990 insisted on keeping the concept open, on considering its aporetic or paradoxical character. For one should never be too sure of the concept of responsibility. Ultimately, Derrida argues, responsibility is a matter of religious mystery, which is why the exercise of responsibility leaves no choice but that of heresy and mystery. In this respect, for him, responsibility exists only as a 'dissident and inventive rupture with tradition, authority,

orthodoxy, rule, or doctrine.' [19]

For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the postcolonial theorist (and student of Derrida), the case is still somewhat different, although she too rejects any conventional claim to responsibility. The first sentence of her 1994 essay, titled 'Responsibility', is as simple as it is complicated: 'Responsibility annuls the call to which it seeks to respond.[20] For Spivak, the concepts of 'responsibility' and 'representation' are closely related. Assuming and exercising responsibility, for instance as delegates in a parliament who have to 'answer' to the constituency they represent, can already lead to a loss of friction, to a distance between representative and represented in the political process.

Even more: the arrogation of responsibility, especially a responsibility that calls itself enlightened and reasonable in a Western, occidental understanding of these terms, the very European responsibility Derrida speaks of, for Spivak embodies the full imperial violence of the discursive operator responsibility: '[…] those who act out the reasoned responsibility of Europe to the people of the rest of world in the interest of the self-determination of international capital.'[21] Thus, one cannot avoid examining very carefully from which standpoint responsibility is attributed or assumed in each case and in which scenes, situations, settings this takes place, whether as a court hearing, a parliamentary session, an academic conference, or in the new mixed forms of representation as one finds them in the discursive framework of contemporary art and artistic research.

The exodus from the art world has become a much-used topos in discourse. In practice, the temporary or complete turning away from the theoretical premises, social realities, and economic framework of art is also increasingly being considered or immediately carried out as the better, ultimately more 'responsible' reaction to political and social conditions in general, and the entanglements of art at the time of its probably historically greatest economic significance in particular. But even where this movement of turning away does not completely sever the connection to the categories and milieus of art and the aesthetic, the arts of the present, in attempting to be truly contemporary, are moving more and more frequently, and more and more naturally into the fields of political action, journalistic inquiry, humanitarian intervention, social work, didactic event, ecological investigation.

In these contexts, artistic forms are judged (curated, promoted, institutionalised) according to the extent to which they have something to contribute to the solution of conditions declared to be 'problems'. The moralism and ameliorism of this discourse is unmistakable. Art that submits to the imperatives of the much-invoked urgency reacts by exhibiting, by creating visibility. It does not remain silent on misguided refugee policies, on gentrification, racism, homophobia, austerity, poverty or climate change. Instead, it intervenes, makes proposals, shows solidarity, organises knowledge production, provides connections, bears witness, and invites participation. Insofar as it achieves the invocation of urgency, the contemporary art becomes an ethical undertaking and the actors of the respective sub-systems of contemporary art become subjects of an ethical turn.

What can be said about the relationship of this ethical turn in art to the ethical turn of politics? In the mid 2000s, philosopher Jacques Rancière proposed a reading of the 'ethical' and the 'ethical turn' by strictly separating ethics and morality; in Rancière's view, an increasing *ethicisation* would make any moral judgment impossible in favour of the indistinguishability of good and evil, right and wrong; thus politics would ultimately disappear in the consensus of grand coalitions and the moderating softening of any dissent; or it would dissolve in the generalisation of the state of exception created by the global 'war on terror'[22]

At the same time, according to Rancière, art and aesthetic reflection redistribute themselves between being used for the production of social cohesion and being assigned the role of a vigilant witness to the boundless catastrophe. Rancière sees this history as spanned between a justifying catastrophe (such as the Holocaust) and a future whose foreseeable apocalyptic character is to be averted by the use of all means, and not least those of art. Art thus becomes the accomplice of a strange teleology, which also has references to theology, to messianism and redemption.

Much of contemporary art is, in one way or the other, based on the category of responsibility, eerily reminiscent of a dogmatism of the social responsibility of artists and intellectuals from the times of existentialist humanism. This obligation to intervene from a relatively privileged position recently has gained traction. For example, the radical responsibility for the other in the face of the other, as justified in the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, developed some appeal. Another celebrity philosopher, such as Alain Badiou, even sees art as having the responsibility to open up to humanity 'the new paradigm of subjectivity' of infinite creation and development. [23]

**Towards research beyond responsibilism**

That said, in most cases, the ethical turn in art ends such radicalisations long in advance. In most cases, the call for responsibility and accountability is the expression of an ideology that revolves around the normative notion of the self-responsible market individual. This responsibilism differs from corresponding demands for an 'engaged' or 'serious' art, as they were widespread around the middle of the 20th century. Their point of reference may have been a certain notion of political or social responsibility, but it obliged the audience to participate in a productive way in the respective work of enlightenment and revelation, and in this way to 'compromise' themselves, so that all those involved in art participate in the ethical project of bearing 'responsibility for the universe,' as Jean-Paul Sartre put it. [24]

In contrast, in the present, in an increasingly heterogeneous, even contradictorily structured landscape of global contemporary art, many actors, institutions, producers, viewers, and critics committed themselves to an understanding of art that deserves to be called responsive rather than engaged. In artistic projects that deal with urban development, the capitalocene, tenant struggles, gender issues, memory politics, migration, or decoloniality with ever greater self-evidence and growing self-confidence – supported, enabled, and formatted by public and private cultural funding instruments – the values of community are emphasised, the activation of neighbourhoods, the

empowerment of the vulnerable, a pedagogy of social creativity, and the critique of official narratives. All of this is done, explicitly or implicitly, in the name of a responsibility to preserve or save social conditions deemed worth living in and just, and to navigate a morally higher ground.

Many of these responsibilist projects and initiatives seem to try to prove their moral integrity before an unnamed authority, an instance of a higher order. But it is precisely in the absence of unambiguous universal standards that one of the preconditions of ethical responsibility is found, which is all the more in demand the less actions in social reality appear to be attributable at all, and the more an economy of ethicisation, of a market-driven responsibilisation prevails – particularly in times of crisis, which very obviously cannot be solved by 'the market'. The meta-ethical question of responsibility is voiced increasingly louder the more inclusion and exclusion are decided on the borderline between supposed responsibility and supposed irresponsibility. However, especially where the individuals and institutions involved are convinced of the critical function, moral virtuousness, and subversive character of their actions and products, everything is done to prevent the 'operational logic at play' from becoming openly apparent – think of Praznik's 'paradox' mentioned earlier. The discursive and rhetorical strategies are therefore mostly based on the praise of indeterminacy and opacity in favour of the rejection of accountability and transparency. Writer and curator, Tirdad Zolghadr has therefore called for a curatorial ethic based on the traceability of artistic and curatorial decisions, on fair and disclosable financial conditions of exhibitions, and on clear definitions of goals and actual participation.

For contemporary art, this situation, in which the ethical appearance of artists and their works increasingly determines whether they are recognised and validated at all, may entail the replacement of any meta-ethical reflection for responsibilistic practices or self-important gestures of responsibility. This would inevitably change the social contract of art alluded to before. In doing so it should not be assumed that there is an Archimedean point outside the thinking of responsibility as inscribed in social, epistemological, institutional, and indeed aesthetic practices. Instead, the philosophical (and: artistic) work should be one on the fascinating and thus arresting power of 'responsibility', which also includes the ontologising invocation of an 'infinite' responsibility as in Simon Critchley.

By countering the ontological claims of responsibility a consequential meta-ethical reflection and the rearrangement of the concept of responsibility that follows from it may bear the chance to 'get out of the ethical configuration of today', as Rancière would put it. To leave the 'ethical configuration' would mean to give back to politics and art 'their distinctiveness,' their anti-consensualist power. Moreover, such a step would renew the 'always ambiguous, provisional and contentious incisions' in the inventions of politics and art.

However, such a position, which attempts to counter the integration of art into the contradictory ethical epistemic processes of the present by demanding incommensurability, is not automatically opposed to the ominous aesthetics of responsibility as outlined before. In other words: Conceived

as a meta-ethical category, responsibility is to be understood as enabling a responsive (not merely reactive) action *in* the aesthetic and *on* the aesthetic. Such responsiveness could result in forms of aesthetic practice that establish – again and again anew – reflective relations to the impositions made by a temporality of immediacy that defines current ethics. The 'urgency' so often invoked whenever contemporary cultural producers are being enlisted as actors within a field of governance determined by notions of responsibility is to be suspended or at least put in brackets – in order to become a subject of aesthetic reasoning. This doesn't rule out direct artistic action, nor does it preclude an aesthetic responsiveness (and response-ability) grounded in ethics. But it avoids being governed by the wrong imperatives.

Such reflexivity may also guide attention to the effects of the evolution of an epistemic configuration in which the knowledge functions of contemporary art have begun to determine its ethical predicament. Particularly since art's relationship with knowledge, science, technology and the like is commonly expected to be critically or poetically disruptive, the epistemic virtues of artistic research are believed to be uncontested. Thus, the art/knowledge compound is subjected to an ethical-aesthetic policing at the borders of the territories where the epistemological unruliness of knowledge production in art is supposed to be taking place. But how contradictory (or even dialectical) are such ethics which support the epistemic virtues of accountability, reliability and truth? Don't they continue to nurture their aesthetic counterparts of the unaccountable, the unreliable and the irrational? What is the ethical meaning of the current epistemisation of art? And does any ethical reasoning enable a critique of the ethical blind-spots concerning the distributive injustice of the system of contemporary art that continues to operate, in most places, according to the ideological premise of possessive-individualist liberalism's ideas of entitlement, freedom and autonomy? [25]

1. See 'Responsibility and Response-ability: On the Art of Sharing Research and Reshaping the Future', online conference, Department of Visual Culture & Artistic Research, Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw, November 16, 2021,<ahref="https://arthist.net/archive/35326/lang=en_US">https://arthist.net/archive/35326/lang=en_US and https://wzkw.asp.waw.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2021/11/ENG.pdf ↵

2. *Call for Papers: Responsibility and Response-ability: On the Art of Sharing Research and Reshaping Futures in Central and Eastern Europe', Miejsce, February 2022, http://miejsce.asp.waw.pl/en/cfp/* ↵

3. Anton Vidokle, 'Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art', *e-flux journal*, no. 43, March 2013, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60205/art-without-market-art-without-education-political-economy-of-art/ ↵

4. Katja Praznik, *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, 4. ↵

5. Mark Banks, *Creative Justice*, London: Rowman & Littlefield 2017, 7. ↵

6. Ibid. ↵

7. Ibid. ↵

8. Ibid. ↵

9. Ibid., 8. ↵

10. Ibid., 9. ↵

11. See my *Knowledge Beside Itself. Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2020. ↵

12. For an argument positing a shift from institutional to infrastructural critique see Marina Vishmidt, 'Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural', Maria Hlavajova and Tom Holert eds., *Marion von Osten. Once We Were Artists*, eds., (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice), Utrecht and Amsterdam: BAK (basis voor actuele kunst) and Valiz, 2017, 218–235. ↵

13. Professorship at the Faculty of Design and Art. Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, *Art & Education*, November 11, 2021, https://www.artandeducation.net/announcements/430446/professorship-at-the-faculty-of-design-and-art ↵

14. Another book series, initiated in 2015 by the global academic publishing company Routledge (or, more exactly, Francis & Taylor), followed, and capitalised on the 'Documents of Contemporary Art' model. Named 'Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies', its individual titles make the field of contemporary art appear once again to resemble an infinite archipelago of knowledges and urgencies. Almost exceeding the Whitechapel/MIT series in scope and ambition, these volumes offer a vast, expansive mapping of contemporary art's subjects, interests, issues and concerns, or whatever you may call it. Among the titles, published already or announced, we find: *The Iconology of Abstraction: Non-figurative Images and the Modern World*, *Contemporary Art and Disability Studies*, *Dialogues Between Artistic Research and Science and Technology Studies*, *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture*, *Popularisation and Populism in the Visual Arts: Attraction Images*, *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetics*, *The Artist-Philosopher and Poetic Hermeneutics: On Trauma*, *The Arabesque from Kant to Comics*, *A History of Solar Power Art and Design*, *Mapping Paradigms in Modern and Contemporary Art: Poetic Cartography*, *Olfactory Art and the Political in an Age of Resistance*, *Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe: Sarmatia Europea to Post-Communist Bloc*, *Arts-Based Methods for Decolonising Participatory Research*, etc. ↵

15. See e.g. Farina Madita Dobrick, Jana Fischer Lutz, M. Hagen eds., *Research Ethics in the Digital Age. Ethics for the Social Sciences and Humanities in Times of Mediatization and Digitization*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018; Ron Iphoven and Martin Tolich eds., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics*, Los Angeles et al.: Sage, 2018; Catriona Ida Macleod, Jacqueline Marx, Phindezwa Mnyaka and Gareth J. Treharne eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethics in Critical Research*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018. ↵

16. Ken McPhail, 'Where is the Ethical Knowledge in the Knowledge Economy? Power and Potential in the Emergence of Ethical Knowledge as a Component of Intellectual Capital', *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 20 (2009), 804–822, 811 ↵

17. Ibid., 813. ↵

18. Frieder Vogelmann, *The Spell of Responsibility. Labor, Criminality, Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Steuer, London and New York: Littlefield & Rowman, 2018. ↵

19. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 27. ↩

20. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Responsibility', in: *boundary 2* 21, No. 3 (1994), 19–64, 19. ↩

21. Ibid., 59. ↩

22. See Jacques Rancière, 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics', trans. Jean-Philippe Deranty, *Critical Horizons* 7, No. 1 (2006), 1–20. ↩

23. Alain Badiou, 'The Subject of Art', transcribed by Lydia Kerr, *The Symptom. Online Journal for Lacan.com* 6, 2005, http://www.lacan.com/symptom6_articles/badiou.html ↩

24. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Why Write?', in *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York: Philosophical Library, 1949, 38–66, 61. ↩

25. For a radical project aimed at criticising these basic assumptions: *Illiberal Arts*, eds., Anselm Franke, Kerstin Stakemeier and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin: b_books, 2021. ↩

Tom Holert

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

Tom Holert is an independent scholar and curator. He is co-founder of the Harun Farocki Institut in Berlin. He curated several research exhibitions including *Neolithic Childhood. Art in a False Present, c. 1930* (with Anselm Franke) in 2018, and *Education Shock. Learning, Politics and Architecture in the 1960s and 1970s* in 2021, both at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin. His recent publications include *Knowledge Beside Itself. Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics*, (Sternberg Press, 2020) and *Politics of Learning, Politics of Space. Architecture and the Education Shock of the 1960s and 1970s* (De Gruyter, 2021).

## ISSN 2956-4158