WHAT DEFINES A GOOD WORK OF ART WITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD? THEORIES, PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONS

by

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I declare that '**What defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world? Theories, practices and institutions**' is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Delia Vekony 11/03/2010

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Theories, practices and institutions

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SUMMARY

The dissertation explores how quality-judgments on works of art are created within the contemporary art world. The research starts with the examination of modernist art theories supported by the museum, and continues with the exploration of the impact of the art market on quality-judgments. Although the art market had already distorted the idea of quality, further contradictions and difficulties have risen within judgment-making after the 1960s due to the dematerialisation of the work of art. Art criticism should have been able to deal with this complexity, but it is demonstrated that art criticism is a subjective field and even if there is a universal theory on quality, it often fails when applied to the particular work of art. Throughout the dissertation it is demonstrated that although 'good art' is a subjective, power- and discourse-dependent concept, all art professionals seek something that is an inherent quality of the artwork. However, regardless of the existence of such inherent value, judgments on quality are constructed by and subjected to power-struggle.

Key terms:

Messiah, Formalism; Jena Group; museum; art market; Damien Hirst, art criticism, taste, Marxist criticism, quality-judgment

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PREFACE

What defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world?
When we look at the variety of theories, practices and institutions, it seems as if art professionals have a straightforward answer to this question. Biennales, museum exhibitions, art criticism, art fairs and all the other art forums make a statement on what they think good art represents and quietly or openly exclude what they do not agree with. Throughout the globe we come across recurring names of artists and works of art that are claimed to be good, iconic to contemporary culture. We often hear signifiers stuck onto artists and artworks such as ‘brilliant’, a ‘true talent’, ‘outstanding’, ‘cutting edge’ and so on.
But what do these terms mean? Is there such a phenomenon as a universally good contemporary work of art? Is art not subjective? Does the concept of pure, true talent really exist? Why is the work of an artist a real breakthrough for one art critic and a bore for another? Why do the works of one artist cost ten times more than the works of an equally interesting artist? There are hundreds of questions that can be added to this list. All of them point towards the necessity to examine what defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world.

The reason why this exploration seems to be difficult at first is that after modernism, with the birth of the pluralist and diverse scene of contemporary art, it is no longer possible to come up with steady unitary judgments on art

As Arthur C. Danto (1997:xiii) argues: "… great master narratives which first defined traditional art, and then modernist art, have not only come to an end, but… contemporary art no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives at all."

If it is impossible to set up a master-narrative, it is also impossible to find a universal category for quality-judgments. In this case, how can we define what good art might be? And yet, practice shows that there are some artists who become world famous, works of art are canonised and in spite of the current economic crisis, billions are spent on so called good works of art. But on what basis are the judgments of quality made?

If we wanted to determine what a good work of art represents, we should look at what defines a good work of art, consequently we should explore the different forums that play a role in the making of this category. The three main forums are modernist and contemporary art theory, the art market and the museum.

The exploration of these forums is quite complex, since they all interact and influence each other, moreover they are also controversial within themselves. There is diversity and complexity within art theory itself, namely the market influences theory and the museum is subjected to the mercy of the market but it is also dependent on theory. The market looks at art as a commodity, treats the work of art as an object that is to be marketed, promoted and sold, whereas

the museum and the canon's aim is to raise art above commodity level and eternalise it in the elevated sphere of high culture.

There are such and many similar contradictory factors that influence quality-judgments. The work of art gets lost in the battle of the practices and institutions that handle it, since it is not only the pluralist art scene and the dematerialised aspect of contemporary art that prevents objective judgments, it is also the subjectivity of art criticism, the weak position of the museum and the strong influence and manipulative position of the market that make such questions difficult to answer.

If there is not one answer, if there is not one master-narrative, does it mean we also have to say farewell to the quest of looking for inherent quality within the work of art? Even if there is an inherent quality, does it not get lost in the power-struggle over art? These and similar ideas are explored in this dissertation.

As indicated in the title, this dissertation focuses on theories, practices and institutions. Therefore, the philosophical and psychological sides of the question are not going to be explored. The examination of the concept of 'good' would take the dissertation onto an ethical path, since 'good' also evokes debates on morality. The psychological direction would deal with issues such as 'what do people enjoy and why', 'what makes an impact and how', 'what causes catharsis'. The examination of these concepts is not the purpose of this dissertation.

Nor – regardless of its existence - does the dissertation aim to create a new master-narrative of inherent quality. All I am aiming to do, is explore how and on what grounds decisions are made on quality. Such explorations might help generate critical thinking on quality judgments.

I would like to thank Zoltán Somhegyi, freelance art critic, Dianne C. Brown art dealer, Krisztina Szipőcs, senior curator of the Ludwig Museum, Contemporary Museum, Budapest, and Jeff Taylor, the owner of Taylor Art Advisors, Budapest for contributing to this dissertation with interviews and for thinking together with me about this rather complicated topic. I would also like to thank Caroline Bodoczky and Dr Phil Lewis for helping me with the language of the dissertation. I am utterly grateful to my supervisor, Dr EL Basson who has been guiding me with painstaking effort not only through this dissertation, but also through my professional life in general.
As for personal support, I would like to thank Eric Harper for making me go to university, and last, but not least, I would like to thank my mother for her support throughout the years and for not losing hope in me.

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Fig 3. Damien Hirst, *Mother and child, divided* (1993). Steel, GRP composites, glass, silicone sealants, cow, calf, formaldehyde solution, 208.6 x 332.5 x 109cm (x2), 113.6 x 169 x 62cm (x2). Tate Collection, London. (Illustration available at: http://arts.guardian.co.uk/pictures/image/0,8543,-17404774275,00.html)

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

YBA – Young British Artists

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary art world has become so diverse and complex that it is almost impossible to know what exactly is going on globally. Certainly, there are trends, influential artists and theories that shape the global artistic map, but the diversity continues to create confusion.

If there is such a diversity within the art world, how can we make any statement about art that would remain viable long after a certain trend? Most importantly, in this ever-changing scene, how can we judge what a good work of art is? What determines quality, what is a good work of art?

Throughout western art history, we come across different answers. However, according to my research, after the 1960s, with the emergence of contemporary art, many contradictory theories have been bandied about, which deal with what a good work of art should be. Celebrity artists and art fairs make increasing amounts of money and attract an increasing number of people. The art world makes billions of dollars, where artists emerge and become world famous while others never get any recognition. Who are the judges and what are judgments of quality based on? Who becomes famous and who does not? What sells and what does not and why? In answering these questions the art world hides behind the concept of ‘good works of art’, and it seems as if this category is a given. A work sells well because it is good, an artist becomes famous because s/he is good, a work is exhibited because it is good. But what constitutes a good work of art within the contemporary art world?

The aim of this dissertation is to show that since the end of modernism and the emergence of the contemporary art scene, it seems to be impossible to come up with a unified set of theory and practices that determine what a good contemporary work of art should be. Because of the large diversity of the contemporary art scene, the interactions of different theories and institutions, the presence of the art market and the subjective nature of art itself, it is very difficult to find common ground. Even if there are theoretical or institutional quality judgments we could build on, they are compromised and manipulated by the market. At the same time, since quality judgments are constantly being made and the fact that the art world builds on the concept of 'good art', there is a need at least to explore the motivations behind adjudication, to identify certain points we can rely on when making judgments or when making art.

In this dissertation, I focus on three aspects of the art world that are active as well as influential agents in their quality-making spheres, namely modern and contemporary art theory, the exploration of the art market and its effect on quality judgment, and the role of the museum.

Since the focus is on the contemporary art scene where contemporary art and theory either builds on or critiques modernism, the first chapter examines modernist theories regarding the ideal status of the work of art with a focus on the concept of the genius, the artist-messiah and formalism.

The chapter starts with the exploration of the concept of our Greco-Roman legacy and the concept of the genius, which forms the root of the idea of the modernist artistic genius. The genius lives on in the ideas of the Jena Group who were writers and philosophers of the Weimar Republic around 1790. For

them, it was the genius, this supernatural force that was able to create works of art that would lead people to enlightenment. Art was to replace religion with the help of the genius. The concept of the genius recurs in the art theory of Diderot and Rousseau who were active critics at the same time but in different countries. Although the Jena Group saw the birth of the artistic messiah and the emergence of an artform that would be able to replace religion in the works of, for instance, Caspar David Friedrich, for Diderot and Rousseau that genius, often associated with the artist-messiah, was identified with the lost ideals of the Renaissance past. The genius, however, became a core concept of formalist criticism which emerged around the same time as the publication of the *Critique of judgment* (1790) by Immanuel Kant. Formalism determined the modernist discourse on judgments of quality throughout the later centuries until about 1950. The approach and judgment-making of Heinrich Wölfflin, Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg will be discussed. The examination of these ideas is important as they have created the modernist western high art definition and it should be noted also that formalists have very specific criteria for deciding what a good work of art is. Although the ideas of the above mentioned great theoreticians show a wide diversity, I will be demonstrating that there is an underlying assumption behind all the theories, namely that quality judgments about the work of art can be performed by set formal principles regardless of space, time and context.

Modernist art theory is juxtaposed by the modernist museum, the institution that legitimised modernist formalist principles. The modernist museum does not question what a good work of art should be, as it takes formalist ideas for

granted, by examining and appreciating every kind of work or object for its formal aspects only, ignoring meaning and the context in which it was created. Through displacement, works are removed from their original context as the museum environment forces works of art into a formalist quality-system. If meaning is suffocated in formalism, if context is ignored, valid judgment on quality cannot be made. Therefore, the modernist museum confuses what good art might possibly be (Maleuvre 1999:30-39).

Modernist museum practices are still present and postmodernist museum practices interrogate them, but since it has such a long legacy, it has become an institution, which dictates, and which is responsible for the protection of the modernist concept of high art. Even if artists know that the museum makes a negative impact on the works displayed, they long to be part of the museum environment since it means that they become part of the timeless, prestigeous artistic canon.

The exploration of modernist concepts such as taste is introduced in Chapter two. Following on formalism and the museum as institution, it was the modernist construct of high taste, which determined what was considered to be a good work of art.

By focusing on the concept of good and bad taste, this chapter examines how high taste developed and who the people are who, by following their high taste, determine what a good work of art should be. I use Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as well as the Kantian idea of pure aesthetic experience in order to

demonstrate that it is the educated elite who decide what good and or bad art is. These decisions are not only exclusivist within the art world, but they also exclude social classes other than the elite from the art world (Mattick 2003: 172-178).

Moreover, subjectivity cannot be excluded. The subjective taste of decision-makers constitutes quality judgments, giving rise to trends, which are rarely viable for longer than a season. This means that even within the boundaries of the decision-making elite, unitary qualitative judgments do not exist, moreover, some artists compromise their art according to the dictating trends of the elite.

In order to try to find a way out of the grip of the elite who operate both in non-profit and in profit making institutions, Marxist theory comes to the rescue. Although, as history proved, Marxism does not work in practice, it is still a very useful critical theoretical direction. I will also demonstrate how Marxists want to break away from the modernist institution of the museum, high taste and formalist attitude. Theorists such as Ernst Fischer, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin will be examined. In *The Necessity of Art: a Marxist approach* (1963) Fischer argues that good art can only be made under Communist circumstances. For him good art is the coming together of form and content, the representation of the Communist ideology; art is messianic. Other theorists such as Adorno or Benjamin are more pessimistic, but come to the same messianic conclusions (Benjamin 1936). Both argue that art has to be taken back to its original place and function and should fulfill its original role, namely ritual. Good art, meaning

art for the betterment of humankind, can only happen within the confines of ritual, when it is liberated from the institutions.

Not only theoreticians, but also artists felt the need for a different kind of art world. Chapter three examines the changes during the 1960s. The decade of the sixties saw a huge turnabout in the western art world, as art broke away from the modernist narrative and veered towards either becoming openly socially critical or self-reflective. During this time contemporary art emerged (Wood 2004:5-8).

The path was open to all kinds of artistic expression such as social commentary, and a large diversity of artistic directions appeared within the art world. With the advent of the 1960s, the arena of 'post-historical' art emerged where every artistic product could be seen as art, as one could no longer differentiate visually between art and non-art (Danto 1997:85).

For this new art world, formalist principles could no longer apply, art had become an idea, it was dematerialised. Artists started to consciously focus on meaning and content; art had either become critical of art itself or socially critical. However, in this great diversity, where the two extreme directions are illustrated through an analysis of Conceptual Art and awareness raising art installations, there was a need to come up with quality judgments. This was when the institutional theory of art and the ideal theory of art were created. However, the challenge does not end with the establishment of these two theories, since collaborative artistic practices, projects without an outcome, very popular in the art world since the 1990s, are difficult to fit into these theories. In order to solve this problem, Claire Bishop comes up with a very thought

provoking answer by relying on Ranciere's theory, namely that an art project is good if, in the realm of the aesthetic, it creates space for questions and generates change and hope for a better future (Bishop 2006:179-183).

Even if we devised a unified theory that seemingly would be inclusive enough to embrace most works of art, the art market interferes. In Chapter four which is devoted to the art market, I explore how the market affects artistic creativity and quality-judgments and how it is able to raise or create 'artistic superstars' like the Hungarian artist Zsolt Bodoni and British artist, Damien Hirst. Although the market encourages artistic creativity since it funds the arts, when the work of art is forced to play a role in the market in a consumerist context, it becomes nothing more than a product, determined by trends, fashion, promotion and the laws of investment. Along with critics of the art market such as Jane Kallir, I will demonstrate how prices do not reflect quality, as prices are created and established through promotion and marketing (Kallir 2007).

In the art market quality is distorted, the concept of inherent artistic value is used to camouflage the crude nature of capitalist investments. It is sad to see that due to the mechanisms of the art market, issues such as reproducibility, high show-value, and the satisfaction of certain trends are just as important, if not more important than quality (Kallir 2007). Therefore, the art market cannot be taken as a reliable agency of adjudication. Today, because of the economic crisis, the situation is even more complex since all financial values within the world are subjected to change. The author also dedicates some thoughts to the current economic recession and its effect on art, moreover, it is argued that the

recession might even be good for the art world since by detaching art from money, by withdrawing it from the circles of consumption, it might give rise to high and good quality art production.

The exploration of the influence of the market on quality-judgments continues with the examination of the effect of the market on the museum. The contemporary museum has an ambivalent relationship with the art market. Quality judgments are made by the museum, the museum is still looked upon as the top quality judge. Moreover, if a work of art is bought by a museum, it withdraws from the market and steps into eternity, becoming part of the canon (Pill 2007:1).

The contemporary art museum is an active cultural agent. It stands at the centre of high culture but it is also part of the art market since it ensures and entrenches the quality of the works, which it displays. However, museums themselves are in a difficult position. As they rely less and less on state funding and, more and more on the private support of collectors and auction-houses, there is the danger of the museum prostituting itself should it fuse too closely with the private sector. The impartiality and the theoretical superiority of the museum is hereby affected and due to the interference of the market, it is no longer able to stand as an independent, canon-creating institution. The museum is forced to survive, it has to compromise what it displays, therefore in many cases it has to compromise quality (Dossi 2007: 82).

The basic pillars of theory is art criticism. Chapter five examines the role of art criticism in making quality judgments. It will be demonstrated how art criticism is a diverse practice with different approaches to criticism in practice today. We can identify two large branches, art criticism that still follows formalist assumptions and art criticism that values art that is socially relevant. In this chapter the works of Zsolt Bodoni and Damien Hirst are examined from an art critical point of view. It will be demonstrated how, although we might have particular theoretical criteria that we could apply to works of art, when it comes to the actual application to given works of art, the same, or similar criteria used, can result in radically different quality judgments.

Let us start the exploration now with modernist theories.

CHAPTER 1

MODERNIST THEORIES ON THE IDEAL STATUS OF THE WORK OF ART, THE MODERNIST MUSEUM

In this chapter I will be concentrating on different modernist critical theories that occured from the 18th century onwards. Even though a thorough historical survey on the quality of the work of art is not the focus of this dissertation, my research indicates that these theories constructed the foundations of modernist art criticism. Moreover, these critical theories are still very influential today and contemporary ideas either follow the modernist legacy or they desperately try to fight them in an effort to establish a pluralist attitude that goes against the modernist approach.

The emphasis on formalist theorists is important, as despite the diversity of their ideas, there is an underlying assumption - a commonality - behind all their theories, namely that there are set formal standards that we can apply to works of art regardless of the context and the content of the work and that quality judgments can be made according to formalist standards. The good work of art that is the creation of the detached artistic genius evokes the Kantian pure aesthetic experience which is then given access to and honoured within the cultural morays which define high culture.

The first concept that is to be examined is the idea of the genius. I will then explore the idea of the artist messiah, the diverse field of formalism and the role of the modernist museum.

1.1. The Genius

The genius was nurtured and protected throughout hundreds of years of art history, its legacy is still carried on by the art world today and still plays a major role in making judgments about art. When we are unable to articulate the effect of a good work of art on us as spectator or viewer, or when we stand in awe in front of a work totally mesmarized, we feel as if we are embracing the creation of a great talent, a genius. Is the good work of art, as canonised by museum practice, truly the creation of the great artistic genius? What is a genius?

The importance of the role of the genius has played a crucial part both in society as well as in the arts since the High Renaissance (1500). The genius was almost equal to the divine creator, with outstanding artists being described as geniuses close to divinity. The concept of the genius is a recurring idea within classical and modern art criticism, from Vasari through Kant and the formalists, the concept of the genius is present. The reason why the genius has been elevated to such heights is not only a social construct in order to support the hierarchy of western culture as the post-structuralists would say, but the concept was also introduced in order to find a place for art in society. The concept of the genius is an acknowledgement that we as viewers or lay public cannot understand what art is. The lay public or spectator is not able to verbalise the deeds of the genius. If we could give free reign to the genius to create, if we could identify artistic genius, we would be free from the responsiblity of trying to articulate that which cannot be uttered anyway.

The heights of the creative genius cannot be approached through words as the creativity of the artist/genius is above the realm of rational thought, - it is on higher spiritual level - which makes the verbalisation of what a good work of art is, impossible. But since we are discussing the art world, the genius and his creations has to be positioned. Therefore structure and politics are created around the persona or the work of art. The contradiction is obvious as institutions and politics force a concept that was made to be above structure, into structure in order to control it.

The concept of the genius is a term that is still used in the art world today and it has been one of the foundations of modernist art theory as will be demonstrated in the discussion on formalism. According to Agamben, the term has its etimological origins in the latin *genialis lectus*, which refers to the bed of the newly married couple, where the marriage is consummated. It can also be connected to the term to 'generate' meaning to create from a masculine point of view. *Genethliacum* is the term used for birthday, the day in which the genius is born (Agamben 2008:7).

Agamben argues that for the Romans, every man had the *genius*: the energy to be able to give life, whereas the woman had Juno[1], who was responsible for and had the ability to conceive and to maintain life in an endless cycle. After birth, the genius becomes associated with the mentally creative abilities of the individual, therefore the true genius is associated with the intellect or the mind and not with the physically (creative) reproductive organs (Agamben 2008:8).

It is interesting to note that what we would associate with the impartial, genderless creative force, is already introduced into the politics of the Romans and continues to be the case until the end of modernism. The genius is masculine as it cannot be feminine. It is situated in the head or intellect, and not contained in the body, which would be feminine, therefore it seems to be legitimate to exclude women from creative industries or pursuits.

However, the genius within a male refers to an impersonal quality, which the male has to submit to. Genius is an attribute of a man, but according to Roman ideals it is looked upon as an independent godlike quality. The genius is the impersonal force of creativity. In order to give free reign to the genius, the self must be repressed. Our interaction or relationship with the genius is ever changing: it can be clear and creative, or dark and confusing. It is not always desired to live for our genius, as in many cases, it becomes a sacrifice (Agamben 2008:11).

Returning to the discussion on art and the artist, the genius, be it a quality or a person, is treated as something supernatural, divine, and above the ordinary creative or mental abilities. As we can see from the above argument, the concept of the genius is not associated with the subject, it is something above the subject. The idea of the genius becomes the basis of Kant's theory of the artist creator, the academically educated genius, the 'artist messiah' behind the great works of art for the Jena Group or for the formalists. In the subsequent sub-chapters their ideas will be closely examined.

1.2 The Jena Group, Weimar

The longing for the genius who could save the world from a corrupted religion is expressed by one of the most influential group of theorists in 18th century northern-Europe. Emerging parallel with Romanticism, the Jena Group in Weimar, considered to be the first avant-garde group, introduced the new artistic *persona*, namely the (pure) 'artist messiah' who was seen as another face of the genius (Taylor 1992:32).[2]

The members of the group, such as Hölderlin, Schleiermacher, Schelling and Goethe, called for the establishment of a new religion, arguing that Christianity has exhausted itself and that people lost faith in its institutions. They argued that a new spiritual direction had to be established, where artists, who were placed in a realm above society, were going to show the path to the spiritual or transcendental. The Jena Group followed a holistic approach, whereby God could be perceived in the particular as well as in the universal. They also made the connection between nature and the arts, by arguing that artistic creativity was aiming towards the perfect order which was already present in nature, but that we fail to see it as we are corrupted by industrialisation and urbanisation (Taylor 1992:32).

In order to reconnect with the spiritual or the transcendental, the role of the artist is transformed into that of a messiah, his task being to guide people towards the supernatural. Could this messiah figure be identified with the genius explored above as both characters who guide people toward some kind of enlightenment through their abilities derived from divine intervention?

The ‘good work of art’ is therefore the product of the ‘artist-messiah’, as the work shows a path towards enlightenment. The style and personality of the ‘artist-messiah’ is best represented by Caspar David Friedrich who mostly worked for his own pleasure without taking the needs of the public and the market into consideration. Friedrich focused on the representation of ‘the holy’ in nature, the solitude of humankind in society and a desire to reconnect with the perfect transcendental order which is also present in nature (Taylor 1992:19).

As stated above, good works of art are therefore created to represent the truth and to lead humankind to happiness and ultimately to enlightenment. Although this does sound like a Romantic ideal, the same attitude was adopted by modernist artists as well. The significant influence of the messiah-attitude also made its mark on modern art, and the avant-garde of the late 19th, early 20th century adopted this view as well.

Cubism, for example, wanted to show the abstract geometric reality behind the reality of appearances, Futurism, with its spiritual cleansing and industrial enlightenment theories became almost the state art of fascist Italy. Malevich stated that God was the end, the source and end of all light and depicted it in his *Black Square* (1915)[3]. Similarly, Kandinsky with his geometric abstract work wanted to show the path to a new spiritual kingdom, which was to come to Moscow. And finally in architecture Le Corbusier was designing his buildings in the name of the White World where pure forms guide us to a better, spiritually clean society (Taylor 1992:83,113).

Hans Belting also points out that the group known as De Stijl, illustrated similar ideas in their art and architecture. Mondrian painted his works in order to map the transcendental reality through basic geometric shapes and colours as it is also seen in De Stijl architecture where pure shapes and forms are used to achieve the same effect (2006:55).

If we look at the theories demonstrated above, it becomes clear that the point where they connect with each other is at the saviour-role of the artist and the superiority of the work of art, created by the genius, or by the 'artist-messiah'. The good work of art is the work that guides people towards God, as it becomes the tool of the new religion.

The ideal of the genius was re-introduced during the Renaissance[4], and became a focal point of 18th century art criticism. However, critics of the day did not detect the genius in the works of 18th century artists but rather, expressed a longing for the pursuit of the genius by constantly comparing contemporary works of art with Renaissance masterpieces (Mattick 2003:27).

Classical western European art history tends to base its principles on the art and culture of ancient Greece and the Renaissance as these two eras are associated with the absolute ideal of the true genius. For critics such as Rousseau, the emergence of new styles such as the Baroque, Mannerism and Rococo, the growing need for genre works and the increasing presence of Dutch and Flemish painting flooding the western European art scene, were seen as a decline of the ideals of the Renaissance, where the artist was acknowledged as a person of

many talents and who was working from the pure inspiration dictated through his sheer genius (Mattick 2003:33).

Although from their point of view it is understandable that they were longing for the age the where the artist-messiah was given space and support, Rousseau and Diderot romanticised the ideal of the Renaissance artist. The Renaissance only theoretically nurtured the idea of the free creative artistic genius. Practically, making art was often a struggle because of the dependence on patronage and the financial hardships of the everyday reality. Both the artists of the Renaissance and artists of the following eras had to satisfy the taste of the ruling class, artistic liberty was limited by the taste of the commissioner (Mattick 2003:31).

However, Rousseau and Diderot both recognised that for the change in the art scene, the change in culture was to blame. They argued that true values, both social and artistic, had evaporated from 18th century culture due to the emergence of luxury states. The art of the 17th and 18th centuries repulsed these philosophers who were convinced that the role of art was to portray true human qualities, therefore they argued heavily against the art market and luxury states which favoured 'kitsch' as opposed to true or intrinsic quality pictured by the artist-messiah (Mattick 2003:32,33).

As Mattick argues:

> In the eighteenth century it was commonly accepted that there had been but four great periods in the history of the arts: ancient Athens, Rome under Augustus, the Italian Renaissance (associated particularly with the reigns of Julius II and Leo X), and the age of Louis XIV. As that century approached its close, Sir Joshua Reynolds declared in his lectures to the Royal Academy not only that the work of the ancients is the foundation of all later painting and sculpture, but "that the Art has been in a gradual state of decline, from the Age of Michael Angelo to the present, must be acknowledged" (Mattick quotes Reynolds 2003:27).

The influence of the art market started to play a role in the art theories of Diderot and Rousseau and this relationship will be further explored in the chapter dealing with the art market.

The genius which could be either seen as the 'artist messiah', or simply as an exceptional talent soaring above the constraints of the human mind and language, creates the foundations of the theories of formalism. Formalism was, and still is a very popular and powerful discourse in modern and contemporary art criticism.

1.3 Formalism

Formalism arose out of the modernist context and, as the name suggests, it was a way of thinking, which focuses strictly on the formal elements of the work of art. When looking at a work of art, formalist thinkers take the form of the work as *a priori* to all the other aspects. Subject matter, reference to external form, context, the personality of the artist et cetera, played no role. The work of art is divorced from history. By ignoring everything besides form, the early followers of formalism believed in the eternal nature and relevance of a work of art, claiming that the only aspect which mattered, was that art was made for art's

sake, the work was always self-referential, as it was seen as a unique entity in the world, detached from all other objects and thought (http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-6062613/Formalist-art-criticism-and-the.html).

Formalists argued that the work of art is independent even from its maker, but not from the genius of the maker thus seperating the person from his/her intelligence. Art is also independent from society; there was no need for special training to understand a work of art, or trained eyes with specialised schooling. In this sense, formalism destroys the bourgeois privilege of art enjoyment and in the case of Clement Greenberg it even took on a distinct Marxist view. At the same time, formalism had put high art up on the pedestal, made it universal, unique and detached it from the practical or other theoretical aspects of life.

As the different branches of formalism rose out of the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant, a few lines on his ideas and principles are warranted.

1.3.1 Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Due to limited space to conduct a full exploration of the Kantian ideals of aesthetic judgment, I will only give a brief overview of his systematic philosophical treatment of the problem of aesthetics. However, his ideas on taste will be explored further on in Chapter 2.

Kant's idea of aesthetics focuses on the concept of beauty. He argues that aesthetic judgments are subjective due to the difference in individual taste, but at the same time taste commands universal agreement, as a beautiful object gives pleasure to everyone. Beauty, therefore, has to be universal somehow. However, aesthetic judgments are concerned with the subject, not the object and the question arises regarding the universality of aesthetic judgment Kant divides aesthetic judgment into two categories. Firstly, he identifies impure aesthetic judgments, which depend on likes and dislikes, therefore they are seen as completely subjective. Secondly, he points to pure aesthetic judgments which are also based on feelings but they claim universal validity. The question that is posed is how can feelings claim universal validity if they are embedded in the subject and not in the object? The only possible answer according to Kant is that pure aesthetic judgments are disinterested, meaning they can be objective and subjective at the same time (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/).

By disinterested, Kant means that aesthetic judgments are not comparative, meaning that we cannot have expectations towards how the object should be or look like. There is no concept of the beautiful Mona Lisa in my mind, or there is no such thing as an ugly seascape or sunset, since Kant also identifies art with nature. So one takes Mona Lisa or the sea for what it is, unlike looking at a horse, which I can judge whether it is beautiful or not by having the concept of the beautiful horse in my mind (Wilkinson 2004:78).

Furthermore, Kant also argues that the ontological nature of the aesthetic object is not relevant: "… the only truly disinterested judgment is the judgment "X is beautiful" where the nature of X is not considered at all. Kant excludes all other

considerations such as practical, moral or personal gratification from the aesthetic" (Wilkinson 2004:80).

Thus, art for Kant, has no functional or moral value. Kant's aesthetics is not interested in functional works of art; it ignores the artist and the concept, or, to be precise, it ignores the personality of the artist, but argues that works of art are born through the artistic genius, the same artistic genius as explained by Agamben. The artistic genius is able to grasp the pure universal aesthetic experience in order to channel universal beauty.

Since such experiences cannot be put into the pragmatic side of life, they should be treated as independent from society, independent from the monetary system, distanced from objects in use. The work of art is therefore an end in itself. Taking the ideas of Kant further, I argue that for him the good work of art was associated with the work of art *per se*, meaning that if we identify a work of art, it should carry the universal pure aesthetic experience, and it therefore cannot be good or bad as it is an entity in itself above quality judgments. If the work is created by the detached genius, it is accepted that it is already a good work of art. If it does not create pure aesthetic experience, we cannot call it a work of art.

Kant's theory was the ideal starting point for formalism, which promoted the concept of art for art's sake. The creation of the work of art is purposive art without a purpose, meaning that art is self-referential. The artist makes art with the intention of making art only, she/he does not make art in order to, for

example, express a message or evoke social change, but art-making for the sake of art itself.

Formalists adopted parts of the Kantian aesthetics, but developed different critical voices according to a variety of models. A brief exploration of the theories of a few selected formalists are discussed in order to see what they considered a good work of art.

1.3.2 Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945)

Wölfflin was an art historian who set up a strict methodological framework for the understanding of artworks and the identification of what a good work of art should be or look like. Many contemporary art historians would be grateful to work within such a framework, but unfortunately art has changed so much that the application of such methodologies have become problematic.

Wölfflin's categories of linear versus painterly, plane versus recession, closed versus open, multiplicity versus unity, absolute versus relative clarity, provide a very detailed and rational analysis of works of art within different periods. Wölfflin, like Riegl, followed a Hegelian model in which he argued that the spirit of each period or time frame determines artistic creation. The artwork is determined by the temperament of the individual, the nation and the period. For Wölfflin the role of the individual artistic genius was secondary, or seen as just one aspect in the creation of the work of art (Fernie 1995:140-142).

Wölfflin was not only able to create a thorough analysis of the works through his categorization, but he was also able to make quality judgments through this methodological framework. Besides his five categories, he differentiated between classical and baroque methods of art-making. In his examination of the High Renaissance, Wölfflin noted the independent forms in the picture plane that create a unity, although, he insisted, they could still be taken apart. This visual language, and the coming together of independent parts, which are complete in themselves, he called 'classical'. However, among the forms of the Baroque there was a detectable change. Forms were no longer complete; they became restless, limitless and colossal, expressing infinitude. This turmoil of incomplete forms, dependent on each other without forming a centre, Wölfflin called 'baroque' (Fernie 1995:142-145).

Wölfflin's use of classical and baroque refers to the characteristics of the style. This would mean that Gothic art is classical, Michelangelo is classical, so are the Dutch painters of the 17th, 18th century. The Baroque art of the 17th and 18th century matches Wölfflin's characteristics of baroque, but following this framework, Wölfflin could have called the Impressionists', let us say Monet's art, baroque as well, pointing to the open, incomplete forms in turmoil, clarity, and depth. Compared to Cubism, where the focus is on volumes, lines, broken spaces with forms which stand independently in space, looking at the works of Degas is truly a different experience. Therefore, for Wölfflin, after its characteristics Cubism would be categorised as classical, whereas Degas' art would be baroque.

Although Wölfflin's framework seemingly covered art history and put the artworks in a different light, he remained a formalist, as he treated contextual and cultural influences as secondary. The artwork remained the primary focus. He also attached value judgments to the categories of classical and baroque, arguing that 'classical' illustrated a sense of unity, harmony and completion, therefore it was superior, whereas baroque was more emotive and dramatic, relegating it as inferior.

Unfortunately, Wölfflin's methodological framework can no longer stand as a foundation for judgments regarding contemporary pieces as the tools he applied would be very difficult to be relevant to, for example Conceptual or Performance Art. Moreover, according to the contemporary pluralist approach, the cultural and contextual influence cannot be neglected when judging contemporary works of art.

1.3.3 Clive Bell (1881-1964)

Clive Bell, who was part of the British Bloomsbury Group, followed on the Kantian ideas of aesthetic experience and introduced the idea of significant form. Bell argued that works of art provoke different emotions yet they belong to a certain group of emotions, which he identified as (the Kantian) aesthetic emotion. Should we find a common quality in the works of art, which provokes this emotion, the central problem of aesthetics would be solved. According to Bell there should be some quality within a work of art with its combinations of line and colour, which is aesthetically moving. This quality and the fusion of

line and colour into a specific form, Bell identified as the ‘significant form’ which is common to all visual art. These significant forms are the carriers of the aesthetic experience. In this sense, and here he steps away from Kant, the aesthetic emotion only belongs to the work of art, it is not subjective, and everybody can experience it in the same way. Bell would argue that great art was independent from time and space, as the feeling it evoked was independent from the context (Bell 1913).

For Bell the good work of art was that piece which carried significant form. But finding significant form within contemporary works is just as difficult as it is to follow Wölfflin’s ideas. Moreover, Bell never explained clearly what significant form really was and neither did Roger Fry, who resorted to mysticism when there was a need for explanation. They both commenced with empiricism, but when concepts such as subjectivity and feeling needed explanation, we are left with controversial answers such as taking art to spiritual heights (Lang 1962:169-171).

1.3.4 Roger Fry (1866-1934)

Roger Fry, the British art critic who, just like Bell was part of the Bloomsbury Group, is also looked upon as one of the outstanding champions of formalism. Moreover, he is also famous for introducing the Post-Impressionists to Britain and Europe. His formalist theory is closely linked to Clive Bell’s in a way that they both believed in the power of the ‘significant form’ being connected to aesthetic experience (Lang 1962:171).

Fry followed Wölfflin's ideas of formal analysis. While reading through his works we frequently encounter quality judgments instead of impartial analysis. When, talking about multiplicity and unity, Fry identified a work of art, which emerged from the unity of forms, a good work of art, whereas he belittled those works where forms were independent of each other, as is the case with royal Egyptian art (Fry 1939:56).

According to Fry a good artwork consisted of the playful coming together of the rhythm of lines, mass of bodies, space, light, shade and colour. However, it must be noted that forms for him were *a priori* to colour, as can be seen in his critical thinking on Impressionism, where he missed structure in the picture plane to support the 'floating of colours'. When he discovered the work of Gauguin and Van Gogh, Fry found the ideal movement in art to fit into his theories. By focusing strictly on formal qualities, ignoring any contextual approach and subject matter, Post-Impressionism, just like Cubism, welcomed formalist criticism.

Kenneth Clark (1939: xiii) writes in the introduction of *Last Lectures* as follows:

"Post-Impressionism brought to a point Fry's growing conviction that the literary element in painting, its dramatic or associative content, was aesthetically insignificant. It led him for the first time to entertain the idea of an art depending for its effect solely on the relations of forms and colours, irrespective of what those forms or colours might represent."

Fry was said to be a remarkable teacher, however his explanation and interpretation of the object does not go beyond the 'looking at it and feeling it' phase, it is as if he had said, 'look, can you feel how alive it is?' But when we, as viewers, want to know why we feel this way, he would refer to the harmony and unity of the forms. This is not a satisfactory explanation.

However, the person, who made formalism one of the leading forms of criticism at the time, was Clement Greenberg.

1.3.5 Clement Greenberg (1909 – 1994)

Greenberg is considered one of the most influential in art history and criticism. His formalist critique of the arts was vociferously debated but his arguments were strong enough in nature and, supported by his predecessors, to stand their ground at least until the 1960s.
Greenberg introduced Abstract Expressionism to the art world. This movement would not have been recognised without Greenberg's influence and Jackson Pollock would probably have remained an unknown artist without Greenberg's intervention.

In many ways Greenberg was a true modernist. He believed in the hierarchy and domination of superior art, rejected popular art movements, and looked upon the artistic tradition as a change of styles which manifest the works of the artistic genius. As he expressed in his lecture and article entitled *Avant garde attitudes*

(1968) even contemporary art was the continuation of the artistic tradition set up by the Old Masters.

Greenberg had a very clear view on what good and bad art represented and he attributed a messianic, almost supernatural sense to high art. In his early essay on *Avant-garde and kitsch* (1939), Greenberg compared Picasso with Ilya Repin, arguing that Picasso painted forms and shapes which generated aesthetic experience through their plasticity, therefore Picasso painted 'the cause', whereas Repin's work only narrated and did not provoke thoughts or aesthetic heights, he painted 'the effect'. Picasso's work therefore represented high art, whereas Repin's was regarded as kitsch (Greenberg 1939).

Greenberg held onto these radical ideas throughout his life. In his essay on *Avant -garde attitudes* (1968) he writes: "Superior art continues to be something more or less exceptional. And this, this rather stable quantitative relation between the superior and inferior, offers as fundamentally relevant a kind of artistic order as you could wish."

Greenberg talks about heroes of painting, lasting styles and styles with ephemeral values. The one artistic style which he put on a pedestal was Abstract Expressionism. Its timeless quality, the ignorance of subject matter, lack of figuration, the focus on only two dimensions and its self-referential aspect, were the ideal points for formalist critique. Abstract Expressionism was also seen as the allegory of high art, which was understood and accessed only by art professionals. Greenberg vigorously protected superior art against bad art, fighting mediocrity: "He said that Pop Art was no good. He wrote that Joseph

Beuys and Andy Warhol were bad artists. He had no time for conceptual art. Greenberg claimed that all types of 'novelty art', to use his phrase, were more threatening to culture than the middlebrow art he had criticized in the years after the war" (Hilton 2000).

Besides being a critic and acknowledged as the man who could make the best qualitative judgments about art in an instant, Greenberg also made a huge impact on art history globally. Greenberg, along with Michael Fried, are considered to be the last great modernist critics, the last heroic protectors of high art and formalism. Until the questioning of formalism and Greenberg, who led the discourse within the art world, the answers regarding what defined good art were straighforward: the artist was identified as the genius, who created an eternal masterpiece, independent from content and context, the quality of the work was foremost in the work. The work itself could be mapped and uncovered by the practiced eye which was open to the ideal (significant) form.

1.4 The modernist museum – its role and criticism

The idea of the artist messiah, the elevated status of the work of art supported by formalist criticism and the concept of the genius, was put into practice by the institution of the modernist museum. Even today, most museums still operate as modernist museums and although there are postmodernist museum practices incorporated in their structure, the paradigm which dominated the moderist museum still plays a crucial role in making qualitative judgments about art.

Therefore, it is essential to examine how they operate, what their shortcomings are and how they effect judgments on quality.

When it comes to the visual arts, the museum performs quality monitoring. When collections were created which were guided by academies - such as the Royal Academy of Art, England, or the Academy of Fine Arts, Paris which were responsible for the creation of the National Gallery collection or that of the Louvre - only those works which were worthy of protection found their place into museums. In terms of fine art, the museum legitimised the underlying rules of formalist criticism. The pieces, which were displayed in the museum were considered by theoreticians to be masterpieces, and in return, the museum ensured the masterpiece status of the work through museum practices.

Built to be a temple of culture, the modernist museum colluded with the Kantian theory of aesthetics. Its goal was to legitimise the detached superior status of the artist and to save the arts from the lowly art market by ensuring their display within this structure of high culture. Moreover, the museum within the capacity of this status became an active agent. Firstly, the ultimate goal of an artist was to be displayed in a museum (in most cases it is still the ultimate goal today). Secondly, it was proclaimed by the cultural elite (and touted by the museum itself) as an institution for the preservation and protection of high culture. Thirdly, it advertised and promoted national cultural wealth as well as a nation's enriched cultural heritage (Maleuvre 1999:33-39).

Although it might seem as if museum practices are good for both art, artist and the public, it is unfortunately not entirely the case. When we look around in a museum, we discover that a large percentage of the works exhibitied were not made to be housed in a museum. Only a small percentage of the artworks can be qualified as having been made for the purpose of museum displayas most objects were made for a different, often utilitarian context. But even here, formalist museum practices make an impact on their meaning. When all kinds of objects or works of art are exhibited in the same manner and we are forced to look at them through the same eye, confusion arises as to what we consider a work of art to be or stand for. All objects displayed in a museum are treated with a specific attitude. They are appreciated according to western formalist standards as works made by creative artistic geniuses.

As Svetlana Alpers points out, an old broken seashell, a painting by Mark Rothko, an Egyptian statue made for ritual or a conceptual installation by Kosuth, can all be found in the very same museum, displayed in a very similar manner where, there is no differentiation (1990:28).

When we walk into a museum, we can choose whether we want to see Ancient Egyptian sculpture in one room, Italian painting in the other, or the art of the Expressionists in the third. All these displays, create confusion in the mind of the viewer. We do not have access to the works as their context and content remain hidden from us, and since we now only have the visual object to deal with, we can only appreciate the works for their visual attributes. This is where the viewer falls into the trap of formalism. By displaying the art of different eras

in neighbouring rooms, the assumption is made that everything can be viewed through the same eye and value-system dominated by formalism. As Arthur C. Danto (1997:111) also points out: "All museums … are museums of modern art, to the extent that the judgment of what is art is based on an aesthetic of formalism. The aesthete is at home everywhere, and the Baule mask or the Asanti figure hangs beneath the Pollock and the Morandi is the libraries of discriminating collectors the world around."

If all objects are forced into the same system of judgment, namely formalism, they lose their original meaning. Objects also lose their ability to make a proper impact when displayed in a museum, therefore qualitative judgments lose their credibility. By putting an ancient Greek *Athena* statue into the British Museum, the statue loses its original message and meaning, it loses its *raison d'etre*. In the museum the *Athena* is only appreciated for its aesthetic, formal qualities. The ritual it was made for as well as the cultural atmosphere in which it was created, is eliminated (Maleuvre 1999:32).

It is not only Maleuvre, but also early critics raised concerns about displacement. Quatremere de Quincy raised concerns as early as the late 18th century:

> One destroys the vital example of art by taking it out of the public sphere and dissembling the works… . To what wretched destiny do you condemn Art if its products are no longer tied to the immediate needs of society and its religious and socializing uses are curtailed. … Their [the artworks] essential merit depended on the beliefs that created them, on the ideas to which they were tied… to the community of thoughts which gave them their unity (Quatremere de Qincy quoted by Maleuvre 1999:15).

When the museum functions according to modernist and formalist standards, it changes meaning, destroys the original message and manipulates the quality of the work of art by withdrawing it from one value system, and placing it into another. When it comes to displaced objects of non-western cultures, formalist judgments cannot be applied without violating the integrity of the work of art.

At the same time, we do not need to go out of Europe in order to see the damaging effects of displacement practices of museums. The emergence of national collections placed into museums through the changing concept of private ownership also changes the meaning of works of art. In France, for example, as an after effect of the French Revolution, aristocratic family collections were taken away from the aristocracy and the works found their way into museums. In this case the same displacement took place as the work of art was taken out of its original context for which it was commissioned. It was also removed from the homes and family collections (Maleuvre 1999:59).

This modernist legacy is still present in the contemporary museum today. Interestingly, current exhibition practices still fail to see how much damage museum displays can cause to a work or an object. Large museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York display objects from Ancient Egypt in very similar ways as they display art from the 1970s United States. Or after we walk out of the contemporary art exhibition of the museum, we can immediatelly have the chance to examine codexes form the 12th century. As stated above, this method of unitary display leaves the viewer confused and distant from the objects displayed.

A recent trend within the art world has been seen where museum-practitioners have been gathering street art and displaying graffiti in the museum environment. Such exhibitions took place in London at the Tate Modern in 2008 as well as at the Millenáris Centre in Budapest in 2008. Private galleries are also dealing with this issue throughout Europe.[5]

The good intentions can be seen behind these practices, as the practitioners are trying to legitimise street art and include it in the canon as opposed to exclude it from institutions and naming it 'visual junk', which destroys the urban landscape. But, by putting street art into the gallery, the very essence of the work gets lost. Street art is made in and for the street, for the very purpose of changing the urban landscape and it is made through a creative process which involves an adrenalin-rush, being terrified of the police and the possibility of being caught.

As the above example demonstrates, judging all works of art for their formal attributes destroys the intrinsic meaning of the work of art. Especially when it comes to works that are consciously socially referential and were made to be active social agents outside the museum walls, we cannot judge them for their formal aspects only. If meaning is destroyed, how are we able to make proper judgements about the quality of a piece of art?

At the same time, the museum, as institution, refuses to be questioned. The objects and works of art are locked into the museum by way of enforced

museum policies. The museum functions as a school because it educates, as a prison because it isolates objects within rooms under certain categories, and as a hospital as the works have been restored, sanitized and protected. It is a strange experience to encounter objects which were made for specific reasons or rituals by and for a specific society, which are now almost under 'military surveillance'. Due to the enfoced behavioural practices the museum becomes an unnatural environment. Moreover, to contemplate objects or works of art privately or in a public space together with the required religious silence and the short cryptic descriptions of the objects without adequate socio-cultural explanations, all contribute towards a feeling of being uneducated and intimidated (Maleuvre 1999:39,40).

Although postmodern museum practices exist in many institutions creating exhibitions that consciously deconstruct the modernist museum, the museum still remains a temple of high art and culture that artists also want to be part of. Danto (1997:146) also points to the fact that no alternative has been invented so far to show large amounts of works with great diversity to large amount of people: "But in fact no good clear alternative to the museum has as yet been conceived. And a good many artists who fall under the official deconstructionist category as oppressed sometimes view exclusion from the museum as one form of oppression… ."

Moreover, even artists who have an ambivalent relationship with the museum ironically want to be part of the system. Danto uses the example of the Guerilla Girls who are a group of feminist artists, fighting againts the hegemony of

patriotic culture which clearly makes an impact on the arts. The Guerilla Girls make their statements regarding art and the art world through the use of posters by hiding behind gorilla masks to guard their anonimity. However, the message of the works is directed towards the museum and therefore towards traditional recognition. They criticise the masculine, modernist canon, but at the same time they desperately want to be part of it with their message being that there are not enough women artists represented in museums and this aspect needs to change. In a sense they do not question the basic structure of the museum itself. Consequentially, their means are radical, but their goals remain conservative (1997:147). This dichotomy illustrates the power that the museum paradigm has on even the most critical of artists.

Since the museum is not able to step out of its historical legacy of modernist judgments, it enforces its formalist attitude onto all kinds of art, it expands the theory onto all kinds of objects, suffocates them in formalism, ignores their context and meaning, and therefore it does not give leeway for other possible judgments on quality.

Endnotes:

1 Juno (Hera) is Zeus' wife and sister. She is one of the central female figures in Greek mythology and in Ancient Roman pantheism (http://www.classicsunveiled.com/mythnet/html/olympian.html).

2. By artist-messiah the writers and theoreticians of the Jena-group meant an artist who would be able to lead people to a higher spiritual reality through his art. In this case art would replace religion, ritual would be overtaken by art-making. Therefore art would become a spiritual exercise, the means of connecting with the supernatural (Taylor 1992:19, 32, 113).

3 Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1915). Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. (Illustration available at: http://www.russianavantgard.com/Artists/malevich/malevich_black_square_tg.jpg)

4 During the Renaissance the attitude towards artists have changed. From the disrespected craftsman of the Middle Ages the artist was elevated to the status of the artistic genius and by the High Renaissane (1500s) most artists enjoyed a respected status in society (www.huntfor.com/arthistory/renaissance/highren.htm).

5 For further information on the exhibitions visit:
http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/streetart/default.shtm
http://graffiti-art.hu/msg/graffiti.php

CHAPTER 2

FROM KANTIAN HIGH TASTE TO MARXIST CRITICISM

Who decides the difference between good and bad art?
Who are those individuals who have the power to declare that a specific work is going to be treated as an exemplary, eternal masterpiece, and dismiss another as inferior? Before looking at how and by whom judgments about contemporary pieces are made, it is essential to look at the theoretical base for 'taste' and who those individuals are who have a taste for art, what social position they hold and what motivates them to become judges and judgemental.

Ever since the 18th century the concept of taste in relation to art has been explored by theoreticians. This chapter will outline two contradictory directions. One direction is the development of the high and low taste concept, based on the Kantian pure aesthetic experience. This is an elitist view that can also be connected to the modernist museum. The other direction is taken by Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) who was a Marxist theorist who argued that high taste was constructed by the ruling aristocratic elite, that it was nothing else but a social construct which had to be deconstructed (Mattick 2003:175). After the exploration of the ideas of Bourdieu, Marxist criticism will be explored.

2.1 Disinterested high taste

The theorist who is associated with the foundations of the high and low art concept and of the art and craft distinction was, of course, Immanuel Kant. In

his *Critique of judgment* (1790), Kant clarifies this difference by arguing that pure art and aesthetic experience, which can be created exclusively by the academically educated artistic genius, leads to the realisation of the pure rational self. As already argued in the section on formalism, pure aesthetic experience can be experienced when looking at a work of art. The work in itself creates this experience and the human mind should receive it passively in order to keep it pure and disinterested, not emotive nor subjective. For Kant, everything that falls outside of the pure aesthetic experience is considered to be secondary, subjective, and therefore derogatory. Art should be kept at this elevated aesthetic height, it should be excluded from that which is mercenary, and from all the activities that involves labour. Art should be associated with free play without any other purpose. Within the art making process, the everyday issues regarding making a living should not exist, and artistic creativity should be disinterested (Mattick 2003:42).

It is not only in Kantian theory where we come across the distinction between high and low taste, or, in other words: good art and bad art. 18th century French criticism by Diderot and Rousseau also deals with the same problem. As it was already indicated above and it will be explored further on throughout the dissertation, the issue of low taste, as opposed to high standards becomes a problem in practice when the market interferes with artistic creativity.

During the 18 th century the market started to expand and transform itself to an open market. This model was adopted from the Dutch and Flemish examples where artists mostly worked for a free market as the number of commissions

were much less than in Italy or in other Catholic states. With the expansion of the market, public taste started to influence artistic production. In order to make a living, the artist was forced to satisfy the low taste, *petit gout* of the public. At the same time, academic standards were still very influential throughout Europe, as they represented true quality. Should the artist want recognition in academic circles, s/he had to follow the *grand gout* themes (Mattick 2003:37).

There were certain styles and subject-matters which were associated with high art, whereas other themes fell into the category of low art. The Northern Renaissance and later on the Dutch Golden Age, for example, served as models which should not be followed if the artist wanted to create high art. History painting and works depicting Biblical subject-matter were seen as the highest form of art. Artists who wanted the recognition of the critical elite, but at the same time needed to satisfy patrons, tried to combine the subject matter of both high and low taste. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779) and Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) were two artists who became popular and recognized for their family scenes which were originally seen as a lowly theme. However, as the following example illustrates, the artists managed to place the families within the context of the grand themes in order to flatter the commissioner (Duncan 1993:32-37).

Greuze placed his families in Biblical or historical settings. He painted family portaits with a Biblical message and moral meaning. Besides, he was reflecting on current historical issues as well: this was the way he could satisfly aristocratic patronage as well as embrace the spirit of the French Revolution. In *The Punished Son* (1778)[1] the picture does satisfy the needs of the

commissioner, as we see the portrayal of a family scene, but the artist also places the family within the Biblical story of the son punished, therefore the image elevates the family into Biblical heights. At the same time, the picture also reflects on current political issues and the sentiments behind these issues. The concepts of patriotism and fidelity, the questioning of male authority and the insecurity generated by the approaching revolution are present in the work. The old, fatherly order is about to be replaced by the rules of the son. Greuze managed to make a name for himself in both traditional aristocratic as well as revolutionary circles where even Diderot spoke highly of his works (Duncan 1993:32-37).

2.2 The elite and the formation of taste

The question of taste is even more influential when we are dealing with a free market which functions according to certain trends. There are many examples in history illustrating how taste made certain artists world famous while it destroyed others. These trends in taste come and go, or they can last for a very long time. For example, the hayday of Abstract Expressionism in the USA continues to have its impact in Hungary today. There are Hungarian artists - whom for the sake of discretion I would not name - painting abstract expressionist-style works (not necessarily very good ones), which are sold to American clients. Needless to say that these artists make a very good living by following the taste of the American clients. Diderot would probably categorise these artists under the *petit gout* concept as they are also suspicious of current art professionals.

As the examples above demonstrate, artists – even if they wanted to – cannot live up to the Kantian idea of high taste where art is only about the pure aesthetic experience. Instead, artists are made to follow given trends. Necessarily, within a trend good and bad works could be executed. Who are the people who decide which trend to favour and what is good within that trend?

Hunting down particular individuals would not make much sense, but it is interesting to see that the majority of the art world professionals come from educated, middle-class or aristocratic circles. Even during the Renaissance, those who claimed to be art professionals were from the educated circles of society. The ability to see and judge via the *grand gout* was practiced by the privileged as it was seen to belong to the ruling class. In this sense, judgements of taste did not only classify the work of art, but also classified the people who were capable of making these judgments (Mattick 2003:174).

Taste also drew and still draws distinct social practices and behaviour which Bourdieu calls *habitus.* People of 'high taste' are usually involved in fine dining, travelling, listening to classical music, going to museums, exhibitions, and upper-class social gatherings. The working class has a completely different social life. In his analysis on the ideas of Bourdieu, Mattick (2003:175) point out that these practices, inspired by *habitus* create a unified class identity: "Habitus creates a class identity in the form of a unified practice of classification, as choices are made. Because these choices exist within a social space of different possible choices they necessarily have meaning as the rejection of different choices. This is how taste classifies the classifier; because in a class society all distinction has status implications… ."

Regarding art, the love of art is also the *habitus* of people who aspire to *grand gout*. Culture also becomes the practice of those who can practice *grand gout*. As art, following the formalist direction and Kantian philosophy, is not about function but about form, not about work but about play, it is for the privileged. It is for those who do not want to dirty their hands. So the circle closes and the idea behind art creates certain social practices and in return these practices keep the idea alive. From this social class the artistic elite is born; ones who are seemingly under the spell of the work of art but in reality they control the art market and the artist. In the case of contemporary art the situation is even more complex because of the diverse arenas of art, where the artist is subjected to the personal taste of judgment-makers and to the trends and fashions of the artistic elite.[2]

Necessarily there is always tension between the trends, as there is tension within the ruling aristocracy. There are many examples in the art world regarding the power of trends and fashion. The emergence of Rococo, as criticised by Rousseau, was the outcome of such a trend. Another example is the 2007 Venice Biennale with its overload of political art and criticism of the American generated capitalism. These are examples where impartial judgment-making according to set formalist standards can no longer apply.

Still, within and among these trends, there is the underlying phenomenon of culture-making. According to Bourdieu culture-making is specific to the ruling class. The ruling class enforces its superiority and its detachment from popular culture through the alienation of the arts from the people. The reason why people cannot, generally speaking, relate to contemporary art, is not because it is

so far removed from their reality, but because it is not in the interest of the ruling elite to bring people closer to the ivory tower of high culture. Therefore, people simply reject art and high culture, they look at it with a sense of hostility, as if it was not in their vocabulary (Mattick 2003:176).

Should the artists know that they need to satisfy the taste and the trends of the ruling elite, there is the danger that the works of art might be altered according to the current trends. For example many young Hungarian painters create oil on canvas figurative works since these works are both popular in for-profit an non-profit circles. Since painting communist topics is popular abroad, some artists decided to change the themes they were following to painting Communism.

The initial artistic creativity and the meaning of the works are manipulated according to the expectations. Therefore the work is not only distanced from the public, from the everyday people who might even have inspired the work itself, but starts referring to and playing within the circles of the ruling elite. Hence, art becomes segregated, where quality judgments are shaped according to a variety of subjective influences within the art world.

In order to break the cycle of culture-making and to make the arts truly democratic, which was originally the goal of the museum, to widen the circle of decision-makers, as opposed to letting only an exclusive elite decide, Bourdieu calls for a change in social structures according to Marxist standards.

Marxist art theory and criticism are both relevant for this dissertation as these protagonists are the theoreticians who try to think out of the institutionalised, capitalist box. Marxist thinkers present different art theories but they all call for

the cleansing of the arts, for the sake of its own judgment and for itself as opposed to judging the role it plays in art institutions.

2.3 Art in a social context – Marxist criticism

Although in history, the outcome of Marxism was Communism as implemented in the states of the former USSR, the theoretical base is still founded on reason and is pertinent to this discussion. The political practice did not follow the details of the theory therefore it created an abusive, dictatorial regime. However Marxism still provides a deep critical analysis on how capitalism, the art market, the artistic elite and politics influence art production, artistic creativity and judgments about art. Even today, Marxism continues to be a popular critical approach to art and art criticism.

The original theories of Karl Marx, who was an art lover himself, gave rise to an arena for different Marxist theories. It is a wide body of work, but generally speaking, we could say that according to Marxists, art and culture production are always related to current economic situations. Briefly, Marx, according to a structuralist model, argued that society consisted of two main structures: the base and the superstructure. The base structure is the economic and financial structure, the superstructure concerns customs, entertainment, culture production and art. In all societies art expresses the current social situations, in all cases art will be a reflection on the current economic situation (Minor 2001:142).

Examining western art, especially western modernism, Marxists argue that

artists adequately reflect the miseries of the western capitalist society. However, art does not have the privilege to stand independently, outside of society as an independent critic. Art also suffers the consequences of the capitalist art market (Fischer 1963:30-48).

If art is forced into a monetary system, it is not only identified with useless and valueless pieces of paper (money), but is also forced into a changing symbolic system of values, which is the art market, where the real value is never the case since everything depends on the current economic situation and trends (Eagleton 1990:208).

In order for art not having to deal with the issues of oppression, misery and instability or for the liberation of the artist from the contradictory dualism of the artistic genius and the producer, the base structure needs to be changed where society has to follow a Communist model. In this case art will unite with social theory and it will work for the well-being of the people.

For Marxists the answer to what good art might be is easy: art is identified as that which elevates and serves the well-being of humankind - art which elevates us to spiritual heights. Interestingly, there are connections between this ideology and the messianic approach of the Jena Group or the early avant-garde.

2.3.1 Ernst Fischer (1899-1972)

This ideal for good art that fights for a better future is present in the ideas of the Marxist thinker Ernst Fischer as well, who was known as a theoretician and an activist during the 1960s and 70s. In his book entitled *The Necessity of Art: a Marxist approach* (1963), Fischer gives an extensive analysis on the modern history of art from a Marxist point of view. Fischer starts his analysis by referring to the times when art was still used for magical purposes, when mankind was still one with nature and art was part of the magical ritual. In this type of community the role of the individual depended on the other members of the community as people lived in communes. With the emergence of private property, individualism developed which led to isolation and the loss of myths, the falling apart of the collective. Followed by the emergence of wealthy western states and countries during the Renaissance, the rise of the industrial revolution and of the ruling bourgeoisie, artists started to express a longing for this ideal communal life and severely criticised their contemporary culture (1963:49-55).

Fischer, as a Marxist proper, acknowledges the emergence of art movements in relation to current economic situations and detects a longing in artists to get away from the schizophrenic situation that they are forced into in the west. For him Romanticism was one of the first protests against bourgeois oppression,

followed by Impressionism which to him signals a sense of the alienation of humankind and a longing for natural harmony (1963:55-80).

Fischer even perceives the emergence and practice of the *l'art pour l'art* concept as a protest against capitalism. Along with Clement Greenberg, Fischer argues that artists developed a detached concept of art. They did not want to serve the needs and the taste of the commissioning public, they wanted art removed from the realm of commodity. By losing the aristocratic public as potential commissioners, due to their socially critical message, artists started to work for themselves, art turned into itself, and was made for its own sake (1963:55-80).

Fischer finds the ultimate solution for art by examining the relationship of art, artists and society in the former USSR. He argues that art and society become one within the execution of Socialist Realism. Art would always exist as an innate part of humankind, but artists had to be liberated from the social critique for art to better serve the lives of people. Fischer sees this shift as the coming together of form and content (1963:180-182).

Fischer is an optimistic and straightforward Marxist. By drawing art out of the market, by actually eliminating the art market, art would be liberated and it would serve the goal of the working-class. This is how art could bring joy,

illuminate and make people grow. According to Fischer, a Communist society solves all the problems (1963:220-227).

Ironically, Socialist Realism was not the artistic direction which most artists voluntarily supported and believed in as it was a style enforced onto the practice of art under the regime of Stalin. Socialist Realism adhered to certain prescribed stylistic rules and, should the artist follow these rules, he was celebrated all over the USSR.

The artistic trend, which was internationally recognised and looked upon as one of the most influential avant-garde directions, developed in Russia which was also associated with Socialism and Communism, was called Constructivism. Constructivist artists were consciously working for the well being of the people as so-called good art was also associated with the happiness of the people. The same messianic attitude is seen here as was the case a hundred years ago in Weimar. The works of Tatlin for example, *Tower for the Third International* (1919)[3], the posters of Rodchenko, or the Suprematist paintings of Malevich, all celebrated Communism. These artists believed that a spiritual empire was about to emerge in Russia where the people, the proletariat, would run the spiritual kingdom. For these artists Communism embodied a holy rebirth of the people (Clark 1997:80).

As Toby Clark argues in *Art and propaganda*:

> Malevich's ideas drew on apocalyptic beliefs predicting the revelation of God's will to humanity along with the end of the material world and the creation of a celestial realm of pure spirit. A feature of this belief is the idea that divine knowledge will be revealed in the abstract form, unmediated by language… . A 'Third Text' will communicate directly to the human soul. Malevich saw this as a model for the imminent illumination of the consciousness of the proletariat (1997:76).

2.3.2 Theodor Adorno (1903-1969)

Other Marxist thinkers were not as optimistic as Fischer or the Constructivists. Theodor Adorno takes a more pessimistic approach but nevertheless presents a thorough analysis of the role of the work of art within the capitalist world. In this world art does not have a choice but to be parasitic on society, as it always needs to stand as a reference to society and to play a role according to the standards of that particular society within a broader consumerist circle (Eagleton 1999:342-345).

Adorno who departs from a Marxist base, identifies the art-related problems within the realm of society and economy. First of all, Adorno presents the problematic relationship between art and language. By breaking it down to the relationship between the object and the word, he argued that the true essence of the object was lost as soon as it was signified by a word - as the particularity of the object or abstract 'thing' was lost in the universalising aspect of language. Through language the 'thing', in our case the work of art, starts playing a role in

social practices as opposed to just standing for itself. As the object is forced into universal concepts created by language, it is the particularity and freedom of it that gets lost (Eagleton 1999:352).

This theory is very relevant when looking at the original question namely ‘what defines a good work of art’. By guiding this theory into the arts, one could say that art theory dissolves the art object in a similar way language dissolves the particular thing or object. How can we talk about good or bad works of art if discourse eliminates the effect of the artwork? We are facing the very same problem Wittgenstein identified as ‘a problem of metaphysics,’ namely if language was re-invented, we would not need metaphysics. We need to invent, or rather go back to a language which is fit enough to signify a chair, a thought or God. Different discourses or language-games need to be introduced (Wittgenstein 1960:17).

According to Adorno, the art object, if forced into an art discourse, loses its original meaning, its *raison d'être*. Many artists tend to agree with Adorno. David Smith, the Abstract Expressionist sculptor, was notorious for rejecting articles written about his works and for not wanting to read or talk about his works. The majority of the artists I know are all very skeptical towards art historians as they feel that interpretations and art-talk violate their works. And yet, we need to talk about art. As suggested by a friend, we need to leave

analysis and interpretation behind and rather develop a visual literacy. A sort of narrative, probably something similar to the mini-narrative Lyotard had in mind namely, instead of enforcing artworks into the grand-narrative of art theory, we should look at them with all their particularities (1979:81).

Adorno also argues that it was Modernism and the Enlightenment that forced art into self-contradiction as it locked art into commodity production. Interestingly, this is also the period that Diderot dealt with in his criticism as discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. At the same time, Adorno remains a pessimist by pointing out that the situation of art is pretty hopeless due to its parasitic relationship with ideology and society. Art is only valid because of the critical conditions which produce it. Art can only be valid when it acknowledges the compromises it opposes such as the examples of Pop Art and Dada or even the classicisation of avant-garde masters.

Although Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917)[4] was made to draw attention to the issues of authenticity, it questioned the concept of the artistic genius and ridiculed art interpretations and the glorification of works of art as the object itself can only make sense or make a statement once it is placed in a gallery setting. Thus, according to Adorno, it is a given that the work of art will never be able to return to its original state as it will always be bound by concepts and institutions. It is sentenced to lose its identity whilst the artist remains in the

schizophrenic position between elitism, consumerism and the desire to break out - to be revolutionary (Eagleton 1999:360).

According to Adorno, the only way to save art is by returning it to the practice of the ritual. Here again, we see a similarity with the messianic approach which has been explored elsewhere in this text. This very same nostalgia occurs in the ideas of Rousseau and Diderot who saw this ritual not within mythical times, but rather in the Renaissance, when people still prayed in front of the altar-pieces painted by Renaissance artists, and churches were not renovated for touristic reasons but were built to house God.

2.3.3 Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

Walter Benjamin also shares the concerns of Adorno and comes to similar conclusions in his essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (1936), namely that a work of art only makes sense if it finds its original function in ritual and in the cult. Due to the capitalist art market, historical exploitations and mechanical reproduction, the work of art 'loses its original aura' (Benjamin 1936). This essay by Benjamin is extremely complex and to project it towards my original question might seem to be a little far-fetched. But taking Benjamin's ideas further, it can be argued that his concern with the 'loss of the aura of the work' also means that if the work loses its aura, it becomes a

floating image only, a signifier without a signified, an image which can only be judged for its appearance. In this case, talking about good or bad works of art, does not make sense as the work can only be approached from a formalist point of view that has nothing to do with the work itself (Benjamin 1936).

This is the point where the shortcomings of formalism and the institutionalisation of art are really apparent. After it is displaced the artwork becomes an image only, it becomes its own image and the content and the message are ignored.

Both Adorno and Benjamin endeavored to take art out of the quality discourse. The work of art for them was the object of ritual. Forcing it into the context of judgment-making meant that the work was already forced into a context where it was not supposed to be. The work, that was originally good since it performed its ritualistic function, lost its *raison d'être* and was forced into an institution – the problems of which are presented in the sub-chapter reflecting on the modernist museum.

Endnotes:

1 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The punished son* (1778). Tempera on canvas, 130 x 163 cm. Musee de Louvre, Paris. (Illustration available at: http://www.brynmawr.edu/hart/Syllabi/levine/HART%20107%202006/1778%20Greuze%20Punished%20son.jpg)

2 One of the examples for the subjectivity of quality-judgments appears in the book *Seven days in the art world* (2008) by Sarah Thornton. Thornton visits the major forums of the art world, one of them is the auction house. She takes the case study of Christie's as an example and interviews Philippe Segalot who used to be one of the key figures of Christie's and now owns his own art consultancy. When she asks Segalot how he knows when he has encountered the right work (a good work of art) Segalot answers:

"You feel something… . I never read about art. I'm not interested in the literature about art, I get all the magazines but I don't read them… . I look. I am convinced that a great work speaks for itself" (Thornton 2008:10).

Stating openly that he never reads about art is a brave and honest act, at the same time it also means that Segalot fully trusts his own eye and also assumes that there is an inherent quality in works of art that are able to evoke some sort of pure aesthetic experience. Still, is it not strange that an art consultant refuses to be informed about art, refuses to rely on criticism and does not engage with the theoretical framework of the art world? When making a decision, he has nothing else to rely on but his own taste and the inherent artistic quality within the work that apparently he can always recognise.

3 Vladimir Tatlin, *Tower for the third international* (1919). Iron, glass and steel. Twin helix up to 400 m high. Structure itself never built (Illustration available at: http://purplemotes.net/extras/tatlin.jpg&imgrefurl)

4 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917). Ready-made: porcelain urinal. 23.5 x 18 x 60 cm. Private collection. (Illustration available at: http://www.marcelduchamp.net/images/Fountain.jpg&imgrefurl)

CHAPTER 3

THE SHIFT FROM MODERNISM TO CONTEMPORARY ART

Supported also by Marxists, there was a need for change. Not only theoreticians such as the above mentioned Benjamin and Adorno, but the mostly young artists who were going to become the forerunners of, for example Pop or Conceptual Art felt that with all the turbulent social changes, such as the ending of the World War II, the introduction of television, the emergence of the United States as a world power as well as the western European-centred consumerist society, there was a need for art to re-invent itself as well and to break away from the modernist legacy. As Clement Greenberg was one of the most significant modernist formalist theorists, I would like to recap briefly on his ideas and explore how the art world reacted against this truly powerful formalist direction by taking a conceptual route, thereby introducing a variety of artistic styles that would define the contemporary arena of art and criticism that we are familiar with today.

In this chapter I will be referring to given artistic directions within contemporary art. Due to its extreme diversity of contemporary styles, general judgments of quality can only be made, if they can be made at all, after an exploration of the major artistic directions and their set standards of judgment-making.

3.1 Clement Greenberg

In the case of Greenberg, we do not need to examine particular works representing particular styles in order to understand what he meant by good works of art, since Greenberg, as a true formalist, had particular categories that he could apply to all works in order to make his qualitative judgments.

There were styles, such as Abstract Expessionism and artists, such as Pollock or Picasso, that Greenberg considered good and interesting, whereas he entirely rejected other styles, such as Pop Art or Conceptual Art, arguing that they were useless and decadent and that they had nothing to do with art *per se*.

In order to demonstrate what Greenberg considered good art and how he rejected styles and works that he viewed as bad or unacceptable, I turn to his essay *Avant-garde and kitsch* which was published in 1939.

Although Greenberg argued that good quality in works of art were not connected to style, he had a natural preference towards abstraction which he saw as the pinnacle of the evolutionary pyramid within the art world. In *Avant-garde and kitsch*, Greenberg presented a short historical survey, demonstrating how abstraction emerged. He argued that in the past, artists did not have a critical voice, all art-making was ruled by conventions. Working according to conventions was the norm until the avant-garde emerged, with its radical attitude. Avant-garde artists were not going to satisfy the aesthetic needs of the bourgeois elite any further or work according to given standards of taste.

Moreover, artists started to feel that it was their duty to reflect on society, on the injustices and the realities of life. Artists moved away from serving aristocratic needs towards a more realistic bohemian world, which meant that they lost artistic patronage. As the avant-garde retired from the public eye, it also lost its audience. Art became more isolated as it turned towards self-reflection, with the concept of art for art's sake, *l'art pour l'art*, being strongly developed. This tendency was already anticipated by 18th century thinkers as I have discussed elsewhere (Greenberg 1939).

According to Greenberg, the emergence of abstraction was also a consequence of the avant-garde. When art turns to itself, it no longer has the need to be representational; it steps out of *mimesis*, where form and content are free to merge. For Greenberg, this coming together of form and content within painterly flatness was the highest form of art. These principles served as a foundation when he propagated Abstract Expressionism (Greenberg 1939).

In order to explain what he meant by good art, Greenberg compared the works of Ilya Repin, a Social Realist artist from the Russian Wanderer's movement, with the works of Pablo Picasso. Repin's works are figurative, easy to understand as there is continuity in his works and a dramatisation of life. In order to understand Repin's works we do not have to make a particular effort as we can see that the artist wanted to express the realities and struggles of the oppressed, the extent of the miseries of the human condition during the regime of the tsars in Russia. Repin's works could be compared to a soap opera, where

the drama is related to real life where there is no need to make a particular intellecual effort to identify with the works (Greenberg 1939).

In the case of Picasso's works from his Cubist period, we encounter a totally different kind of art-making which Greenberg identifies with high art. In front of Picasso's art, the viewer has to contemplate, and make an effort to understand the works, as form and content merge within abstraction re-creating its own presence and statement. Greenberg compared Picasso to Shakespeare where training is needed in both instances in order to understand these works, as their work refer to problems within the process of art making. Greenberg also argued that if we wanted to save high art, we had to separate it from the masses as the masses corrupt. This was clearly illustrated by the example of Socialist Realism during the Stalinist regime. Greenberg returned to the idea of *l'art pour l'art* where art only revealed itself to a high elite, where good art could only be created in an atmosphere of high culture (Greenberg 1939).

For Greenberg, who in a sense was a faithful follower of Kant, only high art was able to create a pure aesthetic experience in the viewer. Since pure aesthetic experience was not subjective but universal, art should not have anything to do with interest or utility as aesthetics and practicality need to be separated. Utility and practicality do not only imply that art should not be used for mundane actions, it also implies that art should not have anything to do with politics or society (Danto 1997:86).

For Greenberg, and in this sense he was the follower of Bell and Fry, pure aesthetic experience is present regardless of style, culture or time. It can be found in good abstract as well as figurative works, in painting or in sculpture as those who know what good art is, would also be able to see the good quality in any kind of work. According to Greenberg, everybody was able to develop good taste and be able to identify good art. To develop a sense of taste takes a lot of practice and looking, but in the end the viewer will be able to see and sense good quality in the good works (Danto 1997:87).

Interestingly, as stated earlier, this approach is still present in the contemporary art world of today as stated by Danto (1997:88): "The owner of the practiced eye is aesthetically everywhere at home. Recently a well-known curator boasted that without knowing anything about African art, he could, by means of his good eye alone, distinguish the good, the better and the best."

With the emergence of the art scene of the 1960s, Greenberg became desperate, although he still managed to find new heroes. After the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, Greenberg started to promote Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, David Smith and Anthony Caro. They continued the formalist tradition within the language of pure abstraction. Apart from the works of these artists, Greenberg was devastated and in 1992 he stated in a public lecture, that since the 1960s, nothing interesting other then the works of the above-mentioned artists had occurred in art (Danto 1997:105).

Greenberg's ideas and critique were highly influential during the 1950s. However, the world and art took a turn that Greenberg could no longer identify with. Artists broke away from the modernist tradition and took art on a socially conscious and self-critical route.

3.2 The turning point

3.2.1. Leaving formalism

Breaking with traditional modernist history happened in different ways within the newly emerging artistic directions. It is not the focus of this dissertation to explore the wide variety of movements which developed during the 1960s and 70s, but rather, to deal with the issues of quality within this very diverse arena of art since the 1960s. However, since the universal formalist discourse was broken down by specific newly emerging artistic directions, I will endeavour to highlight those that made a special impact on judgments regarding quality.

Rebelling against set standards has been an ongoing practice within the art world since the emergence of the avant-garde, with artists reacting consciously against the mainstream, exclusivist standards. Although we come across a great diversity of styles within western art history, the aesthetic discourse that was applied to these different styles and movements, was not forced to change during the 1960s. This meant that first the representational approach of Vasari and later, the modernist conservative formalism was able to embrace these variety of styles (Danto 1997:85).

As Danto (1997:85) explains: “Modernism began insidiously in the 1880s, but it did not especially force aestheticians to rethink their distinctions, which fit fairly readily with Cézanne and Kandinsky and could even … be made to fit with Duchamp. Aesthetics seems increasingly inadequate to deal with art after the 1960s… .”

The 1960s came up with ideas the art world had not seen before, therefore the formalist criticism of Greenberg could no longer be applied to these new artistic developments. The change within the art world that theory also had to follow could be defined in the following two points. On the one hand, art had become openly socially conscious, and started to voice the large variety of issues present within modern society. On the other hand, artists started to move away from the traditional concept of the art object taking art to the level of ideas (Danto 1997:11).

In his book entitled *After the end of art. Contemporary art and the pale of history* (1997), Danto explained this shift by refering to Greenberg and his legacy regarding making decisions about art. The criteria set by Greenberg on what good art was, could no longer be applied to art created after the 1960s, since, for Greenberg, everything that lacked aesthetic quality was bad art. The followers of Duchamp, and the revival of his attitude and philosophy did not acknowledge a unified theory of aesthetic goodness (1997:85).

Greenberg and the formalist discourse were no longer powerful enough to exclude entire art movements from art criticism and art history by labelling it as bad art. Earlier, Greenberg viciously attacked Surrealism and his voice was heard.

As Danto explains:

> For him [Greenberg], maturity means purity, in a sense of the term that connects exactly to what Kant means by the term in the title of his *Critique of Pure Reason.* … pure art was correspondingly art applied to art. And surrealism was almost the embodiment of impurity, concerned as it was with dreams, the unconscious, eroticism… But so, by Greenbergian criteria, is contemporary art impure… (1997:9).

The end of modernism meant the end of the tyranny of taste, and the space opened up precisely for that which Greenberg found so unacceptable in Surrealism namely its antiformal, anti-aesthetic side (Danto 1997:112).

The theory behind the works of art by Pop artists, for example, had nothing to do with aesthetics, beauty or pure aesthetic experience. Making judgments about whether a Pop work of art was good or bad could not be judged by the eye only. The Kantian art critic had nothing to do with the works of Warhol or the performances of Beuys. Thus it was not surprising that when the philosophy of the 1960s and 70s along with postmodernism became the mainstream theory, Greenberg's concept of quality became chauvinist and exclusivist (Danto 1997:94).

The art world also started questioning the idea that absolute quality in works of art was present regardless of time and context. Postmodernist theorist such as

Foster, Clark, Lyotard and many others rejected the idea that there was an essence in art that formed works into art regardless of time and space and they started looking at works of art within their immediate context. However, there were, and still are theorists, who argue that thinking or writing about art would not be possible without the assumption that there is an essence in the different kinds of art that occur in history. Danto also believed that there was an essence in art, but he stated that this essence disclosed itself in different forms due to the changes in history (1997:28).

Danto's idea of essence in art must not be confused with what Greenberg had in mind. Essence does not appear in a manner of development or evolution, identifying certain styles as bad, others as better, or one or two styles that are the best. This would give us an a-historical reading of art and we would be following Greenberg who sentenced entire art movements to death by arguing that they were altogether bad (1997:28).

And yet, a tribute should be paid to Greenberg as Danto reaffirmed, that it would have been, and would still be wonderful, to be able to stick to principles as Greenberg did for finding a way out of the chaos. Greenberg stopped writing after the 1960s as he considered the art of the 60s decadent, not serious and dangerous. It was an art world where his voice could no longer be heard (Danto 1997:92).

However, Greenberg's legacy lives on to this day as many art critics, in Hungary the prominent art critic, István Hajdú or artists, such as Hungarian

sculptor Gyula Baditz believe that there is such a thing as perfect form and pure aesthetic experience regardless of place, time or culture. In a sense, even Danto shared Greenberg's theory of essence. But Danto is also a philosopher who takes the course of history into consideration. He argued that history transformed society, therefore it also transformed art, which meant that what was considered a work of art at one point in history, could not be seen as art in other times. The same could be applied to artistic judgments (1997:97).

3.2.2 The changing art scene

What did exactly happen in the 1960s and 70s and what is happening now? The 1960s heralded a new era, in which the great narrative of modernism, the artist messiah, the genius, high art, and all the modernist concepts which were created, became fragmented as contemporary art broke with history. Danto referred to this break as the end of art as he welcomed "post-historical art" (1997:12).

For Danto, the term postmodern did not cover the diversity of the new art world sufficiently, therefore he introduced the term: post-historical. He explained the shift from historical to post-historical art by means of tangible examples by saying that before the 1960s we could look at an art object, such as a painting or a sculpture, and identify it as a work of art by just looking at it. In the contemporary world however, we no longer have the privilege to do that as art objects have become identical to everyday objects. The soup cans in the supermarket look just like the cans Warhol exhibited, whilst Lichenstein painted

cartoon figures we could buy at the local newspaper stand. As a matter of fact, there was not an art object we could point to and say that it was art. Art shifted from the perceptual and the empirical to a thought, as art had become and idea (Danto 1997:13).

As Danto (1997:113) writes: "In my sense, once art itself raised the true form of the philosophical question – that is, the question of the difference between artworks and real things – history was over."

For Danto, the cause of this change in the art scene was instrumental in the emergence of Pop Art which developed slowly and it was not a big immediate hit as Abstract Expressionism was. Moreover, many Pop artists, such as Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg initially started out as abstract painters. The year 1964 was a year of important social changes and we know full well that changes within the art world would follow or anticipate changes in society. In 1964 the American version of racial apartheid came to an end as that was the year in which the Civil Rights Act was put into practice that outlawed racial segregation in schools, in employment and in public places. It was also an important time for the Feminist Movement, with Betty Freidan's *Feminine Mystique* which was released just a year earlier. Moreover, the Beatles came to the US for the first time in 1964. It was also the year in which Warhol exhibited his *Brillo boxes* (1964)[1] at the Stable Gallery, New York, with Pop now in full swing (Danto 1997:126).

Pop Art was accused of being superficial, and it was superficial indeed. But since it wanted to comment on everyday reality, that was/is superficial, it showed an adequate image of our world. Food, celebrities and cars constitute our reality, we live within the terminology of Baudrillard, in a simulated world where nothing is real and nothing is false, everything is hyperreal, we live in Disneyland (Baudrillard 1988).

Film stars had become the icons of Pop Art. The artists embraced superficiality just like these stars did, they felt that it was a terrible, sad and empty world we live in, however, they did not look for other alternatives, but rather, turned to cynical irony. At the same time, they needed this reality as inspiration for their art as they were parasitic on society. Although Pop Art was extremely diverse, some of its quality was present in its wit and the ability to be able to criticise and also celebrate consumerism as well as our mirage-reality. Pop artists felt that the truly revolutionary direction, the real break with the modernist meta-narratives and with artistic myths, would be to place art back into society and to create art that was consciously socially referential. Turning away from the formalism of Greenberg, Pop Art, with its strong figuration, came up with a highly critical message that attacked contemporary consumerism, highlighted the emptiness of the commodity-obsessed culture of the west and at the same time, questioned set standards of traditional art-making (Sebők http://artportal.hu/lexikon/fogalmi_szocikkek/pop_art).

For Danto(1997:123), Pop was revolutionary: "… I understood immediately that if it was possible to paint something like this [Warhol's cans] – and have it

taken seriously enough by a leading art publication to be reviewed – then everything was possible."

Although he praises Pop Art, Andy Warhol and Joseph Kosuth and the conceptual turnabout, Danto does not identify contemporary art with one particular style, but claims that the contemporary world welcomes an arena of diversity, of new styles as well as the reinterpretation of old ones. Necessarily, if art breaks with tradition, art history and art theory also has to break with tradition (1997:15).
As Belting observes, for Danto art performed the expected Hegelian turnabout; it had dematerialised itself and it had become philosophy (2006:32).

This argumentation also underlies the hypothesis in Belting's *The end of the history of art* (2006). Belting points out that after Pop Art, which was originally named *New Realism,* as a reference to a newly emerging reality that would necessarily require a new approach in understanding, the foundations were laid down for a new art scene; those walls that were thought to be indestructable between art and non-art finally collapsed. At the same time, painting and sculpture did not disappear, in fact there was a very strong revival of painting during the 1980s, especially in Europe. However, even this revival could not re-establish the set standards dictated by formalism, a unified art history had disappeared (2006:70).

It was not only Pop Art and the theorists who called for a break with history who saw the start of something new, the birth of newly emerging, multiple

discourses, but movements such as feminism also made an impact on issues in art regarding judgment and quality. As one of the most powerful discourses, within society, feminism called for the demolition of the superior, masculine, white, rational thinker or the artistic genius by either introducing the female goddess to contemporary art in order to create a female mythology, or by highlighting the power-structure behind the hierarchical construct of male superiority to seek out a female identity that is independent of masculine oppression. In feminist art, the deconstruction of the traditional art object took place by introducing new tools or media. Materials associated with femininity were used in installations, the use of the body (body art) and performance in order to express the female condition and to deconstruct the superiority of masculine ways of art making that was associated with painting and sculpture were introduced to the art scene. Feminist art rejected modernist quality judgments which were created by an art world ruled by male thinkers and built on male European Old Masters (www.lilithgallery.com/arthistory/feminist/).

New technological developments, such as photography and video-art also served to interrogate the modernist discourse. Some artists of the first generations who grew up with television, such as Nam June Paik, turned to the criticism regarding the hierarchy which was established within the art world. Video-installations questioned the role of the creative artistic genius which was a given during modernism. The role of the creative artistic hand, the tool of the divine maker, was also put into question by making installations that did not need particularly trained artistic skills. Art had indeed become an idea. Moreover, in the case of video and television art, it had become critical of the image based,

media-manipulated, consumerist society

(http://artportal.hu/lexikon/fogalmi_szocikkek/video_art).

Besides Pop Art, feminism, performance, and video-art, there was also Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Land Art, Mail Art as well as different branches of styles to contend with that emerged from these artistic styles. As it was argued earlier, all these different artistic directions could be characterized and simplified by two factors, namely that they were socially critical and that they were critical of art itself. Both these factors caused a huge problem for modernist thinkers, but before I continue to try to find answers regarding the question of quality, I would like to dedicate some thoughts to Conceptual Art since it was the art direction that consciously and most radically called for the dematerialisation of art as it took art to the realm of ideas, therefore making modernist criticism impossible.

3.2.3. Conceptual Art

Conceptual Art operated within the art world where its goal was to become self-reflective and create art that questioned and criticised art itself. Conceptual Art did not only call for a socially conscious art and the demolition of the art object, it also took art explicitly to the realm of ideas, made references to language as well as to the destructive aspect of art-talk. It also criticised the art market and sought a way out of consumerism. Conceptual Art wanted to liberate art and to save it from quality judgments ((a)Harrison 2004:62).

Conceptual Art came about as the legacy of Dada and Duchamp. The term was first used by Sol LeWitt in 1967, who decribed an abstract, minimalist art form in terms of its stylistic characteristics. Conceptual Art gave little leeway for emotions, gestures or creativity born from result of intuition. For Conceptual artists the work of art was mostly an idea. The execution of a unique material object of high value, the mark of the skilled hand of the creative artistic genius was no longer as important as it had been during the modernist tradition, moreover analytical conceptual artists rebeled against these modernist concepts. The emphasis was often on the text. In Conceptual Art there was tension between the visual and the verbal/ textual and it was crucial that the artist planed everything before s/he executed it. The work of art became valid only if the idea behind it was good. Conceptual Art took on a large variety of media, such as installation, performance, text, diagrammes and so on. Many Conceptual artworks lack the traditional physical artistic materiality, such as expressive brushstrokes, since language and words are usually used ((a) Harrison 2004:67-69).

Conceptual Art was heavily criticised by theoreticians such as Michael Fried who felt betrayed by the new artistic trend. Fried criticised, what he called 'literal art' for its absence, for its flux and for its reference to language and dialogue. He called this aspect 'theatricality', meaning that works were no longer objects with one presence, they made no statement, but they required the beholder to be part of the work. Fried believed that the work becomes a situation, a dialogue without a statement, without presence (Fried 1998:157).

What Fried was against, was exactly what Conceptual artists wanted.
Let me demonstrate one of the main ideas behind the movement by way of an example. Joseph Kosuth's *One and three chairs* (1965)[2] is a ready-made installation, featuring a chair, a photograph of the chair and the dictionary definition of a chair. The installation not only draws attention to the complex relationship of object, image and language, it also highlights the difference between particulars and universals. What it illustrates is that universal truths do not exist, everything is a mental construct, that our entire world is embedded in language. Language creates and manipulates our sense of reality, but it also draws attention to how we understand art objects when they take part in a discourse, and how the discourse changes the work.

The use of texts is an important characteristic of Conceptual Art and it often refers to the text that is attached to the work by the canon of art history. If there is a text attached, the work is explained, therefore it becomes part of a system, part of politics. This inevitable politicisation of the work of art was discovered by Conceptual artists, who instead of trying to avoid the unavoidable, called for the exposure of politics. The text which determined the meaning and status of the work in the art historical canon went up the wall and became the work of art itself ((a)Harrison 2004:73).

An example, of the involvement of text in art, as protest against art-talk can be seen in John Baldessari's *I will not make any more boring art* (1971)[3], when students dutifully and repetitively wrote this very statement over and over again onto the gallery wall. On the one hand, it is a statement about the artist finding

art generally boring, where s/he sees a need for art to be progressive, forward looking with the ability to renew itself. On the other hand, this act in itself is repetitive and boring. At the same time, the piece is a complete break with the traditional art object, a call for looking at text as an aesthetic construct and it is also a mockery of the presence and statement of modernist art.

As the example above shows, since the breaking away from the making of objects, Conceptual Art also presented a critique regarding the commercialisation of the work of art. If a work of art has a physical existence, it necessarily has a market value. If the work of art is dematerialised, or at least it is not an expensive product of the masterful handwork of the artist, it slips out of the grip of the market. This way artists can reclaim art for themselves, and the art object is saved from its commodity status. If an artistic direction openly protests against all forums of the art world, how can we make any quality judgments about it, how can we know that the idea behind Kosuth's *One and three chairs,* is actually good? If we cannot make quality judgments, it means that every idea can be called art. Fortunately, it was the ideal-theory of art that came to the rescue.

3.2.4 The ideal theory of art

The ideal theory of art argues that art is a mental construct and the art object is simply the representation of this mental construct (Collingwood (2003:538). There are two problems regarding this statement. Firstly, how do we know what ideas represent art and what ideas do not? Secondly, this theory implies that what is in my mind is actually art, while what is represented is just a re-presentation (meaning a demonstration) of art. As we cannot have access to others' cognitive states, I cannot know for sure whether what I am seeing is a good re-presentation of the idea or not.

Thankfully, there are different ways of addressing this confusion. Collingwood (2003:538) argues that if one accepts that the work of art is an idea, it also means that the work of art is philosophy. In philosophy, thoughts are judged by how they are placed and voiced as we can talk about good or bad, valid or invalid thoughts. Therefore, in art, we have to judge by what we see.

The artist, with an idea in mind that s/he is going to make art, creates a piece. According to Collingwood (2003:538) art is good only if it is expressed properly. If the expression does not work, the work of art or rather the idea behind it is bad and therefore the artist is bad: "To express it [the idea], badly is not one way of expressing it … it is a failing to express it. A bad work of art is an activity in which the agent tries to express a given emotion, but fails."

Collingwood (2003:538) goes further by saying that the artist as well as the critic should have an uncorrupted consciousness in order to determine whether a particular idea or emotion is expressed properly. The artist should not deceive himself or the public with bad works of art, but should perform an honest action of expression. Bad art is therefore identified with corrupt consciousness.

Although Collingwood assumes that there is such a thing as pure consciousness, a term that sounds very Kantian, it is difficult to find a better method to determine what good art might be. Regarding thoughts and ideas, it was the director of the Budapest Kunsthalle, Zsolt Petranyi, who argued in an informal discussion that if a work is visually thought provoking, namely it generates a stream of ideas, it becomes a good work of art. [4] By refering to the works of Thomas Ruff, Petranyi claimed that if the artist was able to evoke thoughts and provoke debates then the artist is good and the work is good. In the case of Ruff the thoughts provoked are on censorship and authorship in a mechanical, digital age, while in the case of Conceptual Art, debates are raised concerning the sheer nature of art and the art object. If we accept Petranyi's definition of good art, then Conceptual works of art are good if they succeed to raise such debates.

Now I would like to turn to an activist artistic project where the idea behind the work of is just as important as in the case of Conceptual artworks. Moreover, activist artistic projects are not only critical of art itself, but they are also socially critical. Let us examine how quality judgments are made in their case.

3.2.5 Let the record show (1987)[5]

As a legacy of the 1960s and 70s, art activism continued through the 1980s and continues to this day. Artistic projects, sometimes with a tangible outcome in the form of a work of art or at other times without an art object, are made or created to raise awareness of crucial social issues. I would like to introduce an art project designed to raise awareness to the politics around HIV/AIDS.

Can art fight a lethal, physical disease? Hardly. But what artists can do, is fight to raise awareness of how the politics around HIV/AIDS works. Although we all know that working with an infected person can do us no harm, people still get fired from their workplaces once it is discovered that they have been diagnosed as positive. Most governments do not sufficiently fund HIV drugs and protection practices. Art projects were created for the purpose of drawing attention to these social and governmental issues and injustices.

Let the record show was an awareness raising installation created by the artist group known as ACT UP in 1987 and it was installed in the New York New Museum's arched window, facing the street. A glowing pink neon triangle was placed in the arch, below which was the text: 'SILENCE=DEATH'. A yellow and black photomontage of the accused war criminals of the Nuremberg trials, and six life-size silhouetted photographs of 'AIDS criminals' with the silhouette of President Ronald Reagan were placed beneath the text (Crimp 2007:145).

Below the installation, but still part of it, was an electronic information strip with a programmed running text that showed data such as:

> Let the record show… the Pentagon spends in one day more than the government spent in the last five years for AIDS research and education.
> Let the record show… . In June 1986, 47 million dollars was allocated for new drug trials to include 10.000 people with AIDS. One year later only 1.000 people are currently enrolled. In that time, over 9.000 Americans have died of AIDS (Crimp 2007:145).

Additionally, the silhouetted photographs and comments of people who were dubbed 'AIDS criminals' by the ACT UP group were displayed:

> Jerry Falwell, televangelist—"AIDS is God's judgment of a society that does not live by His rules."
>
> William F. Buckley, columnist—"Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm, to protect common needle users, and on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals."
>
> Jesse Helms, US Senator—"The logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected."
>
> Cory SerVaas, Presidential AIDS Commission—"It is patriotic to have the AIDS test and be negative."
>
> Anonymous surgeon—"We used to hate faggots on an emotional basis. Now we have a good reason"
> (http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1470625).

Although the project was placed in the window of the museum, it was facing the street, so people did not have to go through the museum experience in order to get the message. This project is directly socially critical, it refers to the criminalisation of AIDS and the attitude of society towards the AIDS problem by using strong, attention-drawing contemporary visual media.

Is this project any good? If we accepted Collingwood's and Petranyi's comments, than it surely is. It honestly channels very radical thoughts and it definitely makes people think.

The artworks as well as the artistic directions that were mentioned so far mostly occured within a gallery or museum setting as they formed part of the art world, within the institutions of the art world. Should we still have any doubts about how we can determine whether Kosuth's *Three chairs* is a good work of art, or why *Let the record show* was selected for display and not some other work, we should turn to Dickie's intitutional theory of art.

3.2.6 The institutional theory of art

Dickie looks at the institutions within the art world to determine what is art and what a good work of art should be. Since the art world is a cultural construct, it functions according to the rules made by its players. The art world operates like the world of law or medicine, as truth-claims only make sense within the framework of the particular institutions that belong to the art world. The same rules apply to the world of medicine. Medicine determines what health is and looks upon illness via the concept it has created within its own framework. In other words, outside the system of health-care there is no such thing as healthy or ill, or within a different health-care system completely different physical or mental conditions will be called healthy or ill.

The art world operates in a similar way. The institutional theory argues that a work of art becomes art because of the place it takes within the framework of the art institutions. This means that if something is placed into a museum or gallery, it becomes art.

Dickie identifies works of arts by way of artifacts, but he expands the term. Everything that is made by a person's hands or thoughts is identified as an artifact, it could be poems, dances, performances (2003:47).

The term artifact is usually understood as an object that was altered by a person's hand for a specific purpose. Identifying works of art with artifacts might sound a bit far-fetched, but Dickie explains that art can also be a purpose: art objects are made for a specific purpose, namely to be appreciated as art. Everyday objects such as the *Fountain* of Duchamp, or other ready-mades can also be used: they are used for the purpose of art. If the artist meant to use that particular object, say, a pissoir for the purpose of art, it becomes a work of art. This implies that, if the artist creates something for the purpose of creating a work of art, it is created for an art world. Therefore, the object becomes art as it was made for the art world. As Dickie (2003:50) puts it: "The claim is then that works of art are art as the result of the position or place they occupy within an established practice, namely the art world."

At the same time, we still have to face the problem of quality. Dickie argues that quality judgments can be made by way of selection. If the artist is not willing to show a particular piece, or if a curatorial board does not select a work for a show, it indicates that the work is inferior to other selected pieces, but is still a

work of art, as it was made for the purpose of being art, but was not found good enough. It simply did not fit the criteria of good art that had been outlined by the art world framework (Dickie 2003:52).

The selections are made by art professionals, there are different audiences and professionals operating within the different fields of art. Therefore, they also operate within different structures of knowledge. Within one particular public-artist relationship both the artist and the public have to be sure that what they see and experience is in fact art. What both the artist and the public considers art only depends on a conventional agreement (Dickie 2003:54).

Dickie admits that his definition of the (good) work of art is circular, but at the same time he argues that there are no other definitions to be found outside the art world, since the art world itself is the product of culture and civilisation. As it was pointed out earlier, within culture, institutions such as art or law or health-care all operate within the same circularity; they make their own laws, as there is no other truth outside these laws (2003:55).

If we accepted Dickie's theory, we find ourselves in an easy situation. We can just say that a work of art is good if it suits the criterion of the given art institution, meaning that good art depends on an agreement.

Dickie's theory has already given us the feeling that basically everything can be art, it depends on the agreement within the given artistic forum whether they call

it art or not. Display already means quality assurance: if the work is displayed, it means that it is good.

3.2.7 Quality and non-European art

The institutional theory of art helps us get closer to understanding quality-judgments, but institutions, especially museums often get into problematic situations. One of the cases when western museums had to acknowledge that their hegemony on deciding what is good and what is bad art has to be reinterpreted, was when the post-colonial discourse could no longer be excluded from the museums.

Michael Brenson, the art critic, curator and teacher currently working in the United States argues that the idea of quality, even the use of the word, was a concept that had become crucially questioned and problematic in the 1990s, not necessarily because of the diversity of the western art scene but because of the opening of the western art world to non-European art. Post-colonialist discourse rejects the idea that non-European art can be evaluated according to European standards, so our concept of western quality, whatever that might be, cannot be used when we set up exhibitions for example for African artists (Brenson 1990).

During the late 1970s and 80s postmodernist discourse, dominated by Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard and others, started to map the power-relations behind the decisions on what is accepted and what is rejected from the canon. In the postmodern discourse, quality has become a term associated with oppression, a

white masculine criteria that was created for exclusion so postmodernist art practitioners started to treat the idea of quality as a very sensitive terrain. However, this new attitude also had its shortcomings. Brenson (1990), refering to the controversial exhibition *Magicians of the Earth*, set up in Paris in 1989 and considered the first exhibition on African art that looked at African art from an African point of view, was confronted with the issues of quality. As curator in charge of the exhibition, he felt that the artists, both white and non-white were not well selected. He considered that better artists could have been chosen, and that the issue of selecting high quality works did not seem to be central to the exhibition.

The reason for this was precisely the adoptation of this new attitude which meant that art professionals called for the elimination of the concept of quality when it came to the encounter of different cultures.

As Jean-Hubert Martin, the director of the Pompidou Center, said:
"The term 'quality' has been eliminated from my vocabulary, since there is simply no convincing system to establish relative and binding critera of quality for such a project. We know very well that even the directors of the great Western museums do not have any reliable criteria to establish a consensus on this issue" (Brenson 1990).

Quality is also problematic not only because it is very difficult to determine what is good and what is bad, but it also raises the same power-structure issues it does, when we apply it to African art. Those who want to restore the idea of

quality belong to the conservative right wing and they are associated with the Greenbergian tradition. Those who look upon quality as a form of oppression, in the political meaning, but with no other set standards behind it are the leftists of the art world (Brenson 1990).

Brenson (1990) writes:

> Those comfortable with the word typically believe that the great tradition of Western art depends upon the notion of form - and on ideas of balance, coherence, order and beauty to which form is attached. If the word quality is repudiated, they fear that all judgments will become relative and chaos will prevail. And they believe that increasing pressure on galleries and museums to select artists on the basis not of quality but of color and sex will result not in social justice but in second- and third-rate art.

On the other hand, the leftist party as outlined by Brenson (1990) see the term of quality as the symbol of exclusion. For them what is good and what is bad is decided by existing institutional power-structures. It is no accident that good works are often associated with white, heterosexual, male, western artists.

Brenson (1990), along with Danto, argues that we cannot use the same standards of quality that were used by the formalists, since the 1960s artists started to consciously pay attention to the message and content of their work that was previously ignored by formalism. In the works of Mapplethorpe or Serrano, the message and content cannot be ignored, there is a tension between form and content.

Although many art professionals today are very careful about using the idea of quality, the criteria of quality shows up in action. Curators have to make choices according to criteria; museums have to select which works they buy; the state

funds artists through their works; quality is there in practice and it should be used so the artists can grow. As it was argued, Brenson also wishes for quality to be used in artistic discourse, we should not shy away from making judgments. Judgments need to be applied to all kinds of art. Collaborative artistic practices are even more difficult to judge.

3.2.8 Collaborative artistic practices

The 1990s came up with another challenge the art world had to deal with, namely collaborative artistic practices. Such practices are closest to happenings, but they are even more disembodied. Even in the case of projects such as *Let the record show* it is difficult to decide on quality. It is even more difficult to make judgments about artistic practices where the outcome is not an object. Collaborative projects such as art made to raise social awareness, are often questioned as art, moreover they cannot play a role in the commercial art world. These experimental practices go by different names, such as socially engaged art, experimental art, community-based art. During some projects, the traditional aesthetic is pushed into the background and replaced by collaborative activity, therefore necessarily requires a different form of aesthetic judgment.

Claire Bishop, art critic and curator argues that collaborative practices started to occur in the 1990s after the collapse of Communism, where society and art were treated as one. As a different take on the relationship of art and society, well-known artists such as Matthew Barney, Pierre Huyghe and Thomas Hirschhorn as well as other emerging artists and artistic collaborations started to experiment with such projects where the project itself can be the social collaboration or it

can be the extension of the work of art. All of these artists believe in the power of collective creativity and in interaction (Bishop 2006:179).

Before turning to Bishop's extensive analysis on collaborative artistic practices, I introduce a project that represents well the difficulties we face when we want to make judgments on collaborative artistic practices.

In the project *Over and over* (2008)[6] by the young Czech artist, Katerina Seda, the artist decided to do something to bring people together in a particular neighbourhood of Brno, the second largest town in the Czech Republic. The relationship among the neighbours was either lacking or quite tense and something had to be done to ease the frustration. Seda decided that she would ask forty neighbours in Brno to construct different sorts of ladders for her to climb into their gardens and then from that garden into someone elses'. The kind of 'ladders' people came up with was a reflection of themselves: one neighbour put buckets, one on top of another, and that was the ladder, while others made 'installations' from whatever they could find in the house. Seda just climbed from one garden to another, making a symbolic connection. The project brought the neighbours together and helped to create a friendly and comforting environment (Cuy 2008:66).

The project was a reference to crossing borders and creating new connections. It also highlighted the fact that we isolate ourselves from the supportive relationships we could have because we think that due to segregation we are protected (Cuy 2008:66).

During the Berlin Biennale 2008 the project was made to be an installation with the help of Seda's Brno collaborators. Refering to the Berlin Wall and to the difficulties of establishing relationships in general the installation was mounted where walls and fences were erected with improvised 'ladders' to climb over (Cuy 2008:66).

Although for the Biennale the project was made to be a sculptural installation which raises further critical issues, let me just stay on track and focus on the project itself that took place in the gardens with the artist climbing over the fences.[7] Obviously the project itself is not an art object, however it does involve objects both as tools and as symbols, - symbols of suburban life in a central-European country - but aesthetically surely the project itself and not the objects which are to be evaluated. The aim of the project was to create connections, generate communication. What kind of approach shall we adopt when making judgments about this project?

In the process of answering this question in her article *The social turn: collaboration and its discontents* (2006) Bishop offers thought-provoking case-studies and applies her judgments as she goes along. Bishop introduces the French philosopher Borriaud's ideas by saying that the creative energy of participation re-humanises, establishes bonds, and draws us away from television-based consumerism. There cannot be bad, unsuccessful works, as they have already had success in strenghtening social bonds. Bishop is absolutely sympathetic to this approach, but she also argues that there is a need to compare and critically discuss these pieces as art. There is a need for it, not only for the art world, but also for drawing the boundaries between socially conscious

activities and art projects. She argues that social and political art projects have been absent from art criticism as the works have always been perceived from the point of view of the moral message with the critic agreeing or disagreeing with it morally, rather than looking at it from an aesthetic point of view. However, we must not shy away from making aesthetic judgments (Bishop 2006:180).

Bishop cites a few collaborative practices in order to show how she differentiates between the artistic quality of these works. *Oda Projesi*[8], or *Room Project* (2000) in Istanbul by Turkish artists is in many ways similar to Seda's project. It is a community-based project for creating a unified community, encouraging people who otherwise would not do so, to talk to each other. Aesthetics is not in their vocabulary, they are based on collaboration. Three young artists opened up their studio space for the local community and other artist groups. Just by being together in the same group, different interactions emerged, bringing together the different social classes of the Galata district, getting to know each other, or simply, constructing a life together which would have been very different if these interactions had not taken place (Bishop 2006:180).

Bishop contrasts *Oda Projesi* with Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002)[9], created for the Kassel Documenta 2002. The piece was criticized by Maria Lind, who is an enthusiatic supporter of community and political projects. Lind felt that although Hirschhorn presented the work as a community project, it was actually an installation fully designed by the artist, with other people involved, namely the Turkish community of Kassel, who could only take part in the execution of the work. Therefore the builders, the community, did not contribute

in any way to the piece. Hirschhorn was the conductor and author of the project, while the community involved in the making of the project were not co-creators, but executors, paid to do the job. By contrast, *Oda Projesi* works with people and allows them to have an immediate impact on each other, on the society and on the surroundings (Bishop 2006:181).

We can see that there are great differences even among the cooperative art projects, but there is an even greater difference between traditional art-making and cooperative projects. Aesthetes usually look at such cooperative works as activist and marginal, irrelevant to the art world, whereas the activists treat art as old-fashioned, elitist and out of date. Today both exist. On the one hand there is painting and sculpture made for the market, for classical aesthetics, and on the other hand there are radical art practices, which Bishop calls the avant-garde of today, but it is so progressive that it necessarily generates a longing for old-school practices (2006:183).

These projects are necessarily the continuation of the conceptual turn and the reinterpretation of the aesthetic nature of art. But these works go even further from the classical definition of the aesthetic, as – especially in the case of projects such as *Oda Projesi*, which Bishop claims to be a much better work of art than the *Bataille Monument* of Hirschhorn – these works deny authorship and aesthetics. Instead, they give space for interaction and raise social awareness withouth artistic interference (2006:182).

For Bishop, it is this very creative force where the emphasis lies. Just like the French philosopher Jacque Ranciere, Bishop denounces the traditional aesthetic

regime of art, and calls for the replacement of the aesthetic by social interactions where the aesthetic becomes abstracted but is still there, however in a new form. The term aesthetic gets a different meaning, it manifests itself in these practices. The aesthetic for Ranciere is the ability to think in contradictions. Such art invites us to confront our dark and confused sides, it is not triumphant, searching for the aesthetic truth, but confusing and interactive (2006:183).

The emphasis is on the emerging new interactions, which come into being by themselves. Intersubjective connections in these projects are not an end in themselves, rather they open up spaces for further dialogue.

Bishop clarifies the ideas of Ranciere while responding to the critical insights of fellow colleague Grant Kester: "… we can no longer speak of old-fashioned autonomy versus radical engagement, since a dialectical pull between autonomy and heteronomy is itself constitutive of the aesthetic. Good art would therefore sustain this antinomy in the simultaneous impulse to preserve itself from instrumentality and to self-dissolve in social praxis" (Bishop 2006).

Good art happens in the space between social engagement and detached aesthetics. It is interesting that at first sight the two realms would seem to be completely incompatible, but if we take a closer look, we can realise that both strive for a change of order, for a new, better era to come. Aesthetics is therefore embedded in both the detached art object and collaborative artistic practices, the goal of both is to raise hope and generate change. Although the two are seemingly incompatible, they still have the same purpose. In order to be able to make quality-judgments on collaborative artistic practices and relate them to

traditional works of art and concept of aesthetics, Ranciere suggests the evolution and the abstraction of the concept of aesthetics (Bishop 2006:183).

If we think back to the 18th century Jena Group, great art was made in the name of bringing God's kingdom down to Earth. New art is made in a similar spirit: it wants change, it wants to raise awareness and make a difference. The desire is still the same, but the means of aesthetics is indeed abstracted. Probably this is the common ground where traditional artistic practices and contemporary art meet, maybe this is how we can connect the works of Caspar David Friedrich with *Oda Projesi*. Probably this is what Danto meant when he argued that there is an essence that makes art to be art and this essence is present, regardless of time or history, however it manifests in different forms.

Endnotes:

1 Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box (Soap pads)* (1964). Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on wood, 43.2 cm x 43.2 cm x 35.6 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. (Illustration available at: http://virginiamuseum.art.museum/collections/94_11.html)

2 Joseph Kosuth, *One and three chairs* (1965). Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and photographic enlargement of a dictionary definition of "chair", chair: 82 x 37.8 x 53 cm, photographic panel: 91.5 x 61.1 cm, text panel: 61 x 61.3 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art. (Illustration available at: http://media2.moma.org/collection_images/resized/024/w500h420/CRI_114024.jpg&imgrefurl)

3 John Baldessari. *I will not make any more boring art* (1971). Lithograph, composition: 56.8 x 75.1 cm; sheet: 57 x 76.4 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art. (Illustration available at: http://media2.moma.org/collection_images/resized/677/w500h420/CRI_69677.jpg&imgrefurl)

4 The discussion took place while Zsolt Petranyi was giving an informal tour at the Thomas Ruff exhibition in the Budapest Kunsthalle 12/12/2008-15/02/2009.

5 ACT UP, Gran Fury, *Let the record show* (1987) Installation, neon led, photographs, prints, 320 x 250 cm. New York, New Museum. (Illustration available at: http://www.penelopeironstone.com/322AIDSLetTheRecordShowGran.jpg&imgrefurl)

6 An article on the project and the artist:
Cuy, SHC. 2008. Introducing Katerina Seda. *Modern painters* October:64-66.

7 A harsh but thought provoking criticism about the installation is available at: http://artintelligence.net/review/?p=595

8 Özge Açıkkol, Güneş Savaş, Seçil Yersel. *Oda projesi* (2000). Collaborative artistic project in Istanbul, Turkey. (Available at: http://odaprojesi.org/lang-pref/en/)

9 Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument* (2002) Installation, size variable, Kassel, Documenta 11. (Illustration available at: http://www.installationart.net/Images/HirschhornBatailleMonument0.jpg&imgrefurl)

CHAPTER 4

THE WESTERN ART MARKET AND QUALITY

Although exploring the motivations behind the art market is a fascinating subject and it says a lot about how art is used and abused for the sake of making money, this chapter only focuses on the problematic association of the art and money relationship and it explores how the market influences and determines quality.

The relationship of art and money is seemingly straightforward: in a money-based civilisation if there is money, there is art, and without financial support culture has difficulties flourishing. With financial support the artist can make his/her dreams come true, but if the funds are limited, s/he can no longer allow him/herself to think big. Superstar artists such as Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, or less popular, but equally well-known and respected such as Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer also make a very good living from their art; they are not only appreciated in the theoretical spheres, but they are also very successful within the art market.

However, the relationship of art and money also raises deep concerns. Does the art market truly work for the advantage of the artist? Can a work of art become a commodity? Do works of art have a price? How can we pay for an abstract thing such as art? It can be compared to as wanting to pay for something like 'thinking'. Does the monetary value of a work of art reflect its quality adequately? If one work is more expensive than another, does it mean it is a better work? In order to examine the core of the problem, I explore the

development of the western art market and I turn to the mechanisms behind the contemporary market and its impact on quality. As the art market also makes an impact on the status of the museum, an exploration of their relationship will follow.

As mentioned above, in the 18th century critics such as Diderot and Rousseau already expressed their distress at the emergence of luxury states and works determined by *petit gout* streaming into the art world (Mattick 2003:33).

Before the 18th century, the European art market was mostly associated with a system where art making was enabled through a patron-patronized relationship. The patron of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance commissioned the artist to execute certain works and s/he was paid either an annual fee - if it was a long-term relationship - or s/he was paid by the pieces executed. The change in the western art market occurred with the introduction of the free market structure from the Dutch Republic (Dossi 2007:74).

The 17th century's Dutch Republic, after they gained their independence in 1581 from the Holy Roman Empire, plus the foundation of the Dutch East and West India companies generated an outburst of economic development that also made an impact on the art market. More than 70.000 paintings entered the market annually, many artworks found owners, it had become vogue to buy artworks (Dossi 2007:74).

The free market structure was already functioning in northern Europe and its introduction to the south and west gave rise to new artistic practices. Besides church commissions, artists started to work for the general public and

introduced prints and drawings to the market as they were easy to reproduce, could be sold in larger quantity and were much cheaper than paintings making them affordable to the average citizen (Dossi 2007:73).

Due to this large market, many artists found themselves in difficult positions and had to take on second jobs to make a living. For example Jan Steen was an innkeeper and Rembrandt was an art dealer dealing not only his, but other peoples' works as well (Dossi 2007:74).

Due to the excessive number of works, there was a need for quality monitoring. In the north it was the merchant who took on this role. He was the one who knew the market and could tell whether the piece was good and worth the price. Associating works with money as opposed to trade or life-long sponsorship, which was the case in the Italian Renaissance, enabled art to be traded globally (Dossi 2007:74).

Initially, works of art had a stable value and price. The prices were determined by their size, by the cost of materials, by skilful execution and by how much time it took to make them. However, this steady system of valuation had changed with the introduction of Flemish auctions. It was the initiative of the Haarlem artist, Jacob van Ruisdael to start public auctions in order to raise awareness to the arts and make the market grow. This is where the promotional aspect of the art market started - initially by the merchant, later by the dealer and gallerist. With all the promotions and auctions, people turned their preferences from the art of the south, based on the legacy of the Italian Renaissance, to the art of the Dutch and Flemish states. By 1770 the Flemish works became the

most expensive in the market and a large unified European art market emerged taking the place of smaller, separate local markets (Dossi 2007:145).

At the market, quality is signified by money. Creating value according to size, material, labour and skill seems to be a straightforward way of pricing and these standards of value making were also in use during the Renaissance. However, the straightforward price and quality relationship got out of control when auction-houses were introduced to the market. Auction houses created fictive values around works on the basis of 'If I can get more for a particular piece, why would not I ask for more?'

If speculation steps into the picture, we cannot rely on prices and money as an adequate reflection of quality. We can no longer say that if we pay more, we get a better work. Today, with the new contemporary artistic trends there is not one particular unified system of valuation that the market follows. However, it still creates value. Furthermore, it does not only create monetary value, but it is also able to create judgments of quality that necessarily stretch further than the boundaries of the market; the market can build the art history canon. One of the examples for the influence of the market on art history is the case of the Impressionists. Dossi points out that the Impressionist painters were not recognised by the theorists, but by the market. Being rejected from the Salon and the need to found the Salon of the Rejected shows how excluded they were from the mainstream academic art world. In time, it was the market that elevated the Impressionists as people started to long for something new; something related to a new vision and progress which refers better to the times of European modernism. The same power of decision-making is still as much in the hands of

the market as it is in the hands of theoreticians. Today, it is the dealer and the gallerist who fulfil the advisory position in the market and it should also be noted that seventy percent of the collectors buy works from gallerists without consulting other theoretical forums. This means that those, who are bound by the market make the quality judgments (Dossi 2007:75).

Needless to say that gallerists are also considered to be art professionals - connoisseurs in many cases - and the theoretical and financial aspect of the art world is almost inseparable today. Still, we are left with an uncomfortable feeling when we buy works from a forum which makes profit on that particular piece. We get the feeling that we might be the victims of marketing, promotion and trends. These trends also influence the gallery and the gallerist uses these trends to sell the works and promote the artists.

In the contemporary art world we can observe different trends, coming and going. Discovering painters from China and introducing them to prestigious New York and London galleries was one of the trends of 2007-2008. Afterwards Indian sculpture and photography became a popular trend for 2008-2009 (http://artradarasia.wordpress.com/2010/07/27/indian-art-market-hits-peak-2008-figures-modern-art-favoured/).

4.1 The art market and the artist's career – two case studies

The art market can lift an artist to the level of a superstar or it can keep the artist away from recognition. Artists who become famous are usually associated with certain trends, these trends are marketed and promoted. In order to demonstrate the power of the market, meaning that even if the academic art historical forums

do not stand by an artist, the market can create superstars, I explore the careers of a young painter Zsolt Bodoni from Hungary and the British artist Damien Hirst.

Within western Europe, one of the trends that is becoming very popular is a painterly direction that deals with the representation of the Communist past. Since it is a popular topic, artists who explore this theme are necessarily going to be more sought after than others. Artists from former Socialist/Communist countries such as Romania, Poland, former Yugoslavia and Hungary deal with such issues, and influential western curators and collectors exhibit their works in London and New York.

In London, the exhibition space Calvert 22 featured an exhibition *Show me a hero* from June 2009-October 2009 on the theme of Communism and its legacy on the people and on the new generation.[1] Artists from Romania, Moldova, Russia and Hungary were showing. One of the artists who was also part of this exhibition is a newly emerging talented painter, Zsolt Bodoni.

Born in Transylvania to a Transylvanian Hungarian family, Bodoni witnessed the difficulties and traumas of growing up in a country ruled by the dictatorial Socialist/Communist regime of Ceausescu. Belonging to the Hungarian minority in Romania already imposed difficulties on Bodoni's life, since the Romanians and the Communist regime were both very hostile towards Hungarians. For his studies Bodoni left for Budapest where he graduated at the Budapest Academy of Fine Art as a painter. Bodoni was always considered talented in the Budapest art circles. Although he had exhibitions in Budapest and he was also invited to

other European venues, Bodoni experienced difficulties as an artist in selling his works and starting a career. Although it was never put down officially in forums of art criticism, critics and curators felt that the talent was there, but Bodoni had difficulties concentrating on one subject or finding the track he was supposed to explore. It was assumed that Bodoni was working for effect in his works and that he was painting to sell, since most of his works deal with issues around death, love and blood painted in a gestural manner. The works are figurative, narrative and seek to shock while searching for catharsis.[2]

In 2004 Bodoni met Dianne C. Brown, an American art dealer and consultant who was working in Hungary. Brown was dealing in Hungarian art selling to foreign, mostly American, clients. Early in this endeavour she was working freelance, not wanting to commit herself to a gallery or to build a stable group of artists around her. However, after a short period she realised that without a gallery and without special efforts and commitments she would not be able to promote Hungarian art. She founded the Art Factory Galleries and took five artists and Bodoni under her management. Brown promoted Bodoni and the other artists with passion. In spite of its young age, the gallery managed to participate in important art fairs such as ArtBasel Miami, the New York Armoury Show, and with the help of British freelance curator and art critic Jane Neal, Bodoni and other Hungarian artists started to find their way to prestigious British and American galleries.

Interestingly, local criticism against Bodoni also calmed down when he became internationally recognised. Currently Bodoni is working with Dianne C. Brown, also shows in a Los Angeles Gallery called Mihai Nicodim and in the London-

based Calvert 22. He was also selected to participate in the 2009 Prague Biennale. Although still young, Bodoni's career has become strong and stable and, in spite of the economic recession, his works are selling extremely well.

The style and themes he has found for himself refer to the Communist past. He works mostly on large-scale canvases; uses dark colours and his themes are about memory and re-thinking history. He paints the tearing down of Communist memorials, old Communist warehouses, workers, statues, such as *Stalin* (2008) (fig 1), all of which bear the memory of the past. His choice of dark colours and gestural effects give a special dynamism to the works. His paintings are figurative, although the shapes emerge out of the chaos of the brushstrokes. He works fast, sometimes finishes a large painting in two or three days.

How Bodoni developed this theme is quite curious. Before he started dealing with Communism, he was painting nudes, hearts, brains, views from airplanes, portraits and urban landscapes. If I wanted to be vitriolic, I would say that we might get the impression that Bodoni - as well as his fellow painters - deals with this subject because it is popular. Communism is looked upon by the west as some sort of exotic, sadistic past that the west did not have access to and they appear to be very curious to experience the wretched souls of those artists and people who were brought up during the regime.

One thing is for sure, in spite of his young age, Bodoni is successful and it appears that he is going to be even more successful as time passes; not only

because he is a good artist and he paints the right themes in the right style, but also because there are people behind him who can make him well-known.

It is a given that if the artist wants to be successful, there must be an infrastructure behind him/her, otherwise the artist does not have any chance to develop a good reputation. Those who are well promoted become the artist superstars; those who are not, try to get by as well as they can. Dossi points out that only five percent of the artists currently working make a very good living, the rest manage to get by or try to survive (2007:25).

What makes those artists in the successful five percent unique? Are they absolute geniuses, or can they thank their fame to a powerful infrastructure, promotion and marketing? Is there real, outstanding quality behind promotion? It also often happens – as it was the case at the beginning of the career of Bodoni - that the market acknowledges artists but they are not recognised by theoreticians, critics and curators.[3]

In an ideal situation, if the work of art is good, all possible art forums should acknowledge its qualities, both for-profit and non-profit. If there is a mutual agreement, we can hope that the judgment of quality will be legitimate.

As Jane Kallir (2007) writes: "Over the long term, art-historical value is determined by consensus among all four art-world pillars (the art historian, dealer, collector, artist). When any one of the four entities assume disproportionate power, there is a danger that this entity's personal preferences will cloud everyone's short-term judgment."

Kallir (2007) argues that in a collector-driven art world, collectors should be just as knowledgeable as curators and dealers, but due to their lack of interest and time it is very rarely the case. Collecting in the current market is just as much about investment as it is about the love of art. Art is viewed as a way of making money, or keeping money safe.

The 'best' works of art are bought by/sold to the most prestigious people. As it was explored in the sub-chapter on taste, decisions classify the decision-maker and collectors also can be characterised by using this same paradigm.[4]

By the term 'best works of art', the market does not only mean artistic quality, promotion and marketing behind the work of art, but who the artist is counts the most. In many cases collectors do not buy works just because of the work itself, but because it was made by a certain artist. We rarely hear collectors saying that they bought a painting that looks like this or that, but they make sure that they say that they bought a Picasso, a Kippenberg, a Richter and so on. It appears that collectors buy names. Dossi points out that although there have always been sought after artists, this obsession with 'names only' emerged around the second half of the 18th century, when there was such an abundance of works in the market that the name of the artist served as some sort of trademark. These were also the times when individual ways of expression started to be truly appreciated. The name of the artist became a trademark, a guarantee for quality (2007:145).

The artist superstars sell the best, the rest of the artists stay in the ‘also-ran’ category, auction results support this claim. Moreover, collectors go after trends which, just like in fashion, change. For example, Old Masters are no longer as popular to collect as late Modernism. However, the great names are always trendy to collect. Thus, the value and fame of a work or an artist is generated by the market, and by promotion. We buy a work by Damien Hirst for astronomical sums, only and just because it was made by Damien Hirst.

Damien Hirst is also the perfect example for how the art world can create artist superstars. We are used to such superstars in the domain of film or music and fashion but not really in the visual arts. At the same time, such superstars exist and in a sense they are on the top of the art world. In order to understand the promotional and marketing mechanisms that are present in the art world - the mechanisms that are responsible for confusing value with quality - I will explore the case of the British YBA focussing on Damien Hirst.

There are different factors that enabled Hirst to become a superstar. One of the key factors was the group called YBA or Young British Artists, which by now has become part of the canon of art history. The YBA showed a new, distinctive direction in the art world, refreshed the British art scene and consequently drew the attention of the international scene to British art. Most sources associate the birth of YBA with the exhibition called *Freeze*, organised in 1988 by Hirst and fellow students while still studying at the Goldsmith College in London. YBA originally consisted of the art students who were participating in the show *Freeze*, but soon enough other artists joined. There are still core members of the group, although not so young any more, they are Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin,

Sarah Lucas, Matt Collishaw, Angus Fairhurst, Michael Landy, Gary Hume, Marcus Harvey, Marc Quinn, Gavin Turk, Sam Taylor-Wood, and the Chapman brothers (Bush 2004:1).

Freeze, organised in the industrial setting of the Docklands in London, caught the attention of both for-profit and non-profit organizations. Norman Rosenthal of the Royal Academy of Art was at the show, so was Charles Saatchi, an advertising guru born in Iraq and now living in London (Bush 2004:2).

In the beginning, it was not the high art institutions but the market, namely Saatchi, who started to support the group. Saatchi was highly impressed with Hirst and fellow artists' works; actually, it was Saatchi who gave the name to the group before he hosted their exhibition in his gallery in 1992. Saatchi and the YBA represented something new. They adopted a common image that constantly drew the attention of art professionals, collectors and the public. Saatchi became the collector who loves progressive, outrageous shock art and YBA, the group, which was able to come up with such pieces in large diversity. This shock-art image became the brand both for Saatchi and the YBA (Thompson 2008:96).

Amongst all the YBA members, it was Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst who had learnt the best that not only their art, but also their personality needed to become a brand. Hirst learnt his artistic presentation skills from Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach and he created a cult personality for himself - using the media to help him. The image he built for himself also corresponded with his art: the

outrageous, provocative, millionaire drug-addict artist who suffers from the unbearable lightness of being was continuously in the news (Bush 2004:1,2).

As Bush (2004:2) puts it, the YBA was in constant press highlight: “Copious profiles, interviews, and articles on YBA's leading players have featured frequently in the quality papers, while both broadsheets and tabloids have engaged in feeding frenzies over the reliably regular trail of demolitions, vandalisms, defacements, profligacies, and delinquencies that YBA has left in its wake.”

YBA was not only spotlighted in the news but it was also highly recognised by art professionals. Many YBA members were Turner Prize winners and in the 1990s Hirst was celebrated as the new David Hockney - the person who made British art to be cutting edge and market-leading again (Bush 2004:2).

In order to satisfy both the public and the artistic elite, YBA connected high art with easy messages. Their secret for fame was also in their choice of subject matter: sex, death and religion. These three basic human drives that determine the human condition regardless of space and time were recurring themes in the works displayed. Moreover, the artists were aiming for the shock effect; they did not want to be depressing, melancholic or philosophical since these topics cannot gain sufficient popularity when attached to such emotions. Bush points out that Hirst and the YBA are always very carefully maintaining their image of the avant-garde artists, who are outrageous and still believe in the idea that honesty can make a difference. Moreover, in their works the message is not that

difficult to perceive, they present simple ideas and accessible concepts (2004:1-7).

Bush argues:

> In order to make that transition into both press and popular consciousness, Hirst and his contemporaries cleverly nurtured their artistic image as avant-garde while jettisoning anything that smacked of theory or intentionality or critique--in particular the forbidding vocabulary and deconstructive impulses of '80s art. Once their work was purged of inaccessible concept, they filled it with accessible imagery and approachable narratives (2004:3).

Satisfying both the high art circles and the public, yet presenting something new, honest and brave, YBA was just what Britain wanted. YBA got the very state-support that was also given to Abstract Expressionists after the Second World War. The YBA continued the legacy of Pop Art since it was popular, but it was appropriated from high art, succeeding in erasing the boundaries between high and low. Even if it was dealing with metaphysical heights, it did so in a way that its message remained clear and accessible (Bush 2004:3).

The YBA could also fit into the current economic structure; it was at hand during the wake from the economic recession of 1989-1990. England wanted to project a view to the world that Britain is a laid-back, fancy, creative, optimistic and talented place. Artists like Hirst and Emin added to this image. Hirst's products such as music videos, mass-produced dot-paintings, record covers, interior design and so on could tie very well into the developing consumerist scene (Bush 2004:3,4).

Today, the name Damien Hirst truly is a brand, and a very expensive brand. His prices started to rise when he started working with Charles Saatchi and later on with such prestigious galleries as the White Cube and the Gagosian. Today, Hirst has his own agent and he does not need to rely on dealers and gallerists any more.

Damien Hirst in the mind of the general public usually associated with money. Whenever in the news, there are always figures to his name, a Hirst-piece sold for this much and that much. His shark, entitled the *Physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (1991)[5], was purchased in 2005 by Steven Cohen, businessman and art collector for twelve million dollars in spite of the shark being in a deteriorating state as the formaldehyde did not seem to be good enough to maintain the shark in its original condition. His piece *For the love of God* (2005)[6] was sold for fifty million dollars and Hirst makes a constant income from his smaller 'spot, spin and butterfly' art works. He is thought to be earning one-hundred million dollars annually (Thompson 2008:77).

As we can see from the examples above, in the case of artists who become superstars and whose careers are driven and built mostly by the market, it is very easy to confuse market value with quality. According to many prominent art critics, Zsolt Bodoni and Damien Hirst are good artists. But they are not simply good - they are lucky, lucky to be well-promoted. Moreover, they are good at business. The point here is that the market value of their work does not necessarily correspond with the actual artistic quality of the work. Is Damien Hirst really that brilliant that even his rotting shark sells for twelwe million dollars?

Being a great artist in the art market means being greatly promoted and well marketed. It is enough to have a certain level of artistic quality in the works of the artist, for the artist to be made into a star.

At the same time, the market is entwined with the non-profit aspects of the art world. It does not operate within itself, but it is tightly connected to other, non-profit forums. Because of promotion and marketing, Damien Hirst does not only become a superstar in the market, but also in the canon as museums fight over his works. Expecting museums to be impartial, to fight against the fictive, value-creating aspect of the market, is not a realistic.

According to Kallir (2007), the canon is too busy with reinterpreting the past, and too afraid to create new history. Her words are painful but should be considered: “If it sometimes seems that the art-historical establishment is missing in action, this is in part because, while the market has been aggressively constructing a new canon, academia has been busy deconstructing the old one.”

Moreover, Kallir (2007) crudely points out that the deconstruction of the old canon discourages art historians from being critical in the present. I would also add that many art historians who I know are afraid to be critical as, in this arena in the immense variety of the contemporary world, they have a hard time to tell what is good and what is bad art. ‘Having an eye’, - whatever that might mean exactly - is something that puts theoreticians into leading positions. ‘Not having an eye’, or not having one which is trustworthy, also qualifies the professional and qualifies him/her as bad. Additionally, postmodernism does not help. Being critical and analytical at the same time is something which, in many cases,

people have a hard time with and, as it is part of human nature, as soon as we start to understand something, we start liking it.

But let us get back to the art market itself. When we associate art with money, we find ourselves in an absolutely schizophrenic situation. How can something immaterial be translated into the language of money, which is originally for buying and selling material things? On the one hand we can identify art with material goods, on the other hand we cannot. This is one of the reasons why we call the art market speculative. The prices are not only speculative - as they are based on marketing and promotion - there is nothing in the work of art which we can associate with or compare with a similar price in the market (Dossi 2007:44).

Looking at the contemporary art market, we can immediately recognise that it is not the art object that is paid for, but the artistic myth. There is something awkward in selling art for money; it feels as if we wanted to identify existence with possession. How much does existence cost? Or how can we possess existence? Is it something to possess? (Dossi 2007:155).

As it is demonstrated throughout the dissertation Dossi, along with Diderot, Kant, the Jena Group, Benjamin and Adorno argues that the market, the trends and fashion within the art world violate that particular phenomenon that we would call art, manipulate judgments on quality and we fall into the trap that just because something is expensive, we immediately think that it is outstandingly good. Moreover, the art market raises artist superstars by promotion and marketing where they become the selected few who determine

the art world; not necessarily because they are better than other artists, but they are easy to market and there is a powerful infrastructure behind them.

4. 2 The economic recession

The current economic recession is a threat to every market, including the art market and it makes a great impact on sales. The figures are going down, collectors are much more careful about what they buy simply because they lost money or they are afraid to spend as the financial world continues to be uncertain.

Although difficult financial situations always make an impact on arts and culture, the recession raises hopes from other perspectives. Restoring art to where it should be - meaning away from the mercy of the market - is a phenomenon many art professionals are hoping to see. Due to the recent economic recession, the mechanisms within the art market are also changing. Interestingly, most of the remarks are very positive about the current change. Firstly, collectors welcome the lower prices and they also feel they can finally get hold of really good works without having to pay a fortune for them (Esterow 2009).

Esterow (2009) points out that experts feel that due to the recession, better art will be created and the market will be cleansed from mediocre art. Artists will spend more time thinking about their art as they will be less stressed to work for a production oriented art world.

Whether there is a need to worry about low sales, Raymond J. Learsy, a prominent New York collector said: “I’ve always felt that the art market marches to a different drummer than financial markets. People who are really interested in art are a little bit like smokers. You just can’t give it up. It becomes intrinsic to your life and you go and delve into resources that you might not have thought you had to continue collecting” (Esterow quoting Learsy 2009).

Buying art for investment is also one of the reasons for collecting. In times when money and currencies are so uncertain, people secure their money by buying goods that maintain value. Although it takes courage to invest, collecting is still happening, but it is happening with caution and care. Apparently, one of the strategies is to buy works from very established or from very young artists, who have risen very quickly. However, this latter practice is to be avoided as even after the recession the value of their works might not be restored (Esterow 2009).

The recession has also affected museums. Some of them are required to cut back on the staff or go onto a tighter budget, but there are also good sides to the recession. Everett Fahy and John Pope-Hennessy, Chairman of the European Paintings Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, pointed out that some of the greatest paintings by great artists at the museum, for example by Andrea Mantegna or by Jacques-Louis David, were sold to the museum during the great depression of the 1930s. Museums expect similar benefits from the current situation (Esterow 2009).

The art world cannot exist without the market. It has to put up with false validity in a market which bases itself on marketing and promotion. The market practices distort quality, manipulate value, identify quality with price, and false values emerge. True, good quality might go unnoticed. Afterall we might agree with Diderot and Rousseau by saying that luxury and money do corrupt the arts and the times ahead of us will hopefully bear a little bit of the restoration of true artistic quality.

4.3 The art market and the museum

The market does not only work with artists but also with museums, therefore it is essential to explore how the market influences the quality-judgment making aspect of the museum. Among museums, the modern and contemporary art museums play a major role in the formation of the current art world. Theoretically, the museum stands as a protector of high culture, the maker and preserver of the past, present and future canon of art history. If an artist is accepted by a museum or if works by a certain artist are bought by a museum, the artist can be quite confident that his/her status as a good artist who creates good works is acknowledged. In the ideal situation, the qualified judges, art historians and curators who work in the museum, monitor and select great works by great artists, they protect quality and through their ongoing critical approach they create art history.

The museum also has great benefits for the artist. Artists are happy to exhibit in museums, not only because of the prestige, but also because of artistic liberty. In a museum venue the artist does not have to hold himself back in order to satisfy the buyer's needs. To create pieces for a museum exhibition means the artist can let his/her creativity float free without risk or outside pressure. Artists consciously produce works for these different venues and in many cases the pieces made for non-commercial purposes are not exhibited in a commercial venue. In a sense, we could say that the best pieces, the works which are not influenced by the need to serve consumer taste, can be found in museums, thus making the museum the true centre of high art.

Although this situation seems to be ideal, the museum's relationship to art and quality can be problematic. How can we know that museum professionals make the right decisions? Although museum practitioners wish to select works of art which are good, the diverse field and trends of contemporary art makes it more and more difficult to decide what is good and what is not. Formalists would argue that people who have an eye for the aesthetic can decide what is a good piece of art, and we can be sure that in many instances this good eye works well. However, there are many examples in art history where these decisions were far from straightforward. Not only artists, but trends were rejected as useless and a dead end only to be repositioned some fifty or hundred years later and accepted by the canon. For example the comments of Diderot and Rousseau on Baroque or the belittling of Mannerism by art professionals, until Max Dvorak finally showed that Mannerism was a truly important direction, the rejection of the avant-garde by official forums or Clement Greenberg's vicious fight against Pop

Art, are examples which most of us are familiar with. Therefore, how can we be sure that right decisions are being made today?

The other point where objective quality judgments made by the museum could be questioned, concerns the relationship between the art market and the museum. The influence of capitalism means that the museum cannot stand as an independent cultural agent, but can only fulfill its mission if it connects with the art market. The museum and the market meet at such basic spheres as the career of the artist. If an artist is accepted or invited to exhibit in a museum, the prestige of that artist grows. This also means that the prices of the artist's work grow and the more exhibitions s/he has in prestigeous venues, the more the value of his works increase. This is a two-way game, though: through the prestige of the artist the prestige of the museum grows enabling it to survive. So which artists is the museum going to select for shows? Obviously those who are recognised by the market. Exhibiting artist superstars is always a better deal for the museum than exhibiting unknown talents. Thus, we could question whether the museum truly fulfills its democratic function.

Museums cooperate with the market not only in the making of the artist's career but also on a larger scale. Due to decreasing state funds, museums have to rely more and more on private funds which usually come from collectors, galleries or auction houses. A good example of this situation is the 1992 Matisse exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art, which preceded the auction at Christie's where Matisse's work was sold at a record price

(http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/12/arts/a-matisse-sells-for-14.5-million.html). Was the museum used by Christie's for raising the level of sales?

The market also builds into the structure of the museum. Dossi points out that the boards of trustees of museums are also bankers, and people of finance. Close family ties within the members of the board is also often the case; in the Cleveland Art Museum, for instance, family relationships were detected among ten members of the board. Again, this fact raises questions about the impartiality of the museum-board (2007:57).

In order to raise funds, museums are also forced to put on shows which are far from their true profile. The Budapest Kunsthalle housed fashion shows for money, a Giorgio Armani exhibition was on display at the New York Guggenheim for which the museum received altogether fifteen million dollars. These are just a few of the many controversial cases. When the market interferes, the ideal status of the museum is subjected to danger. Collector Dieter Bock gave a museum a large sum of money to buy works, although the works were only stored and displayed by the museum, the museum could not own them, they belonged to Dieter Bock. After a temporary display, Bock took the works to an auction house where they were sold for a huge profit as the museum elevated their price and value in the market (Dossi 2007:67).

From the examples above, it is easy to see how the real function of the museum is abused. It cannot maintain its status as a guard of quality if it has to deal with issues of survival and dependence on the market.

Another problematic aspect regarding quality occurs between the museum and the market when museums want to buy works of art in order to create and update their permanent collection. Katherine Pill points out that the contemporary art museum is in an increasingly difficult situation because of the rising prices in the art market (2007:6).

It must be noted that now in 2010, the case is different and museums have high hopes in the economic recession. Although the museum budgets are cut because of the recession, museums can acquire works for less amount of money since generally the prices in the art market are lower. However, during stable economic times the museum cannot compete with collectors and auction houses in order to build a high standard permanent collection, as in many cases museums simply cannot afford to buy works. For example, the Pompidou cannot afford to buy a Damien Hirst piece. Although many French are not that upset about it, still, Hirst is becoming part of the contemporary canon so it would be important for the Pompidou to have one of his works (Pill 2007:6).

As shown at the beginning of this sub-chapter, it is very important for artists to be able to sell their works to museums as it recognises the status of the artist as a good professional. We tend to associate museums with large state funded institutions. However, in many cases wealthy collectors decide to open their own museums. These private institutions are a risk. Pill mentions the museums of Don and Mera Rubell, MaxMara or Charles Saatchi. These are often criticised for lacking the skills and theoretical background of the traditional state funded museums, there is a danger of dilettantism and an unprofessional attitude in such spaces (2007:8,9).

Such issues, although to a lesser extent, are also present in Hungary. The Budapest Kunsthalle provided space for exhibiting the most important pieces of the collections of the eleven most important collectors in Hungary. The exhibition called *Mecenas days - 11 contemporary private collections* was a three-day event in 2008 and it was the first initiative to make the museum and the market openly come together. The exhibition was severely criticised verbally in art history circles on the grounds that the Kunsthalle was selling itself out, as the exhibition was not monitored by the museum staff, no quality judgments were made and the collectors were using the Kunsthalle to raise the value of their works (http://www.mucsarnok.hu/new_site/index.php?lang=hu&t=478).

Looking at the other side of the coin, this event was very useful as many of the young art professionals, art historians, curators, and artists had never seen a collector before and had absolutely no idea what a private collection looks like, as the market and the museum are two very separate spheres in Hungary. Going round the display, it was obvious firstly, that there is intense art collecting going on in Hungary, and secondly, that collectors can afford to buy works by international artists who we can only read about in Budapest.

As we can see, even the illusion of impartial, legitimate quality-judgments is questioned when the market is involved in the operations of the museum institution. Market politics endanger impartial quality judgments. But do

impartial judgments exist at all? This question will be explored in the next chapter.

Endnotes:

1 *Show me a hero*. Exhibition in Calvert 22 non-profit art foundation and gallery for Eastern-European and Russian artists. For further information see: http://www.fadwebsite.com/2009/06/26/show-me-a-hero-at-calvert-22-from-26-june-%E2%80%93-2-august-2009/

2 For illustrations see www.budapestartfactory.com/en/bodoni-zsolt.html

3 In a gallery I am familiar with there were two artists who sold very well internationally to prestigious collectors and their names constantly continue to rise. We can assume that the collectors who buy these works would not have consistently poor quality judgments about the works. At the same time, local critics and art historians considered their works shallow, vulgar and popular and they felt that these artists were disgracing Hungary in the international forums. Who are we going to believe? In spite of all the efforts to find common ground for judgment of quality, art remains subjective.

4 "The 'best' works of art are bought by/sold to the most prestigious people." There are many examples to support this claim, for example the collectors Steve Cohen buying Damien Hirst's shark entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living.* One of the wealthiest collectors of the world buying artwork from one of the superstar artist.

For the claim that collectors are also classified by what they buy I would like to bring an example: While listening to a Hungarian collector expressing interest in a particular artist, I was amased to see that he actually fought for a piece, which was reserved for more prestigious collectors. Only after his collector-status was checked and a reference was given, the gallerist was willing to sell him the piece. This deal elevated him to a higher level of collecting which made him very proud.

5 Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991). Tiger shark, glass, steel, 5% formaldehyde solution, 213 x 518 x 213 cm. Private collection. (Illustration available at: http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blogon/upload/2007/07/hirst_impossibility.jpg&imgrefurl)

6 Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God* (2007). Platinum, diamonds and human skull, 17.1 x 12.7 x 19.1 cm. Private collection. (Illustration available at: http://www.artvehicle.com/content/images/19/damien-hirst-beyond-belief-67.jpg&imgrefurl)

CHAPTER 5

ART CRITICISM

Art and ideas around art are changing so rapidly and constantly in the contemporary art world, that if we wanted to have an understanding about what defines a good work of art today, we also need to explore current art criticism. Art criticism usually goes ahead of art history meaning art history tries to keep up with art criticism. Art history, in this sense, becomes the history of art criticism. Therefore, it is essential to take a look at how today's art critics form judgments about works, what are the basics and shortcomings of these judgments and how they affect the art world.

Art criticism is a practice which involves analysing, interpreting and making judgments; considering what good art might be and deciding what should get attention. If art criticism is seen as the foundation of the art world, we would necessarily expect art critics to be able to make reliable and legitimate judgments about works of art. However, as it was demonstrated in the chapter on contemporary art theories, due to the complex field of contemporary art and the dematerialisation of art itself, making any kinds of judgments, even consensual, is difficult.

During modernism, where art continued the historical development set up by the Renaissance, art critics had a simpler job then than they have now. Formalist criticism set up standards and methodologies that art critics could follow and

apply to all kinds of art made up until the 1960s. But since the era when contemporary art came up with the confusing scene of pluralistic styles, these set criteria for deciding what is good and what is bad can no longer be forced onto artistic styles which are composed of works of art that reject the superiority of the form. Criteria now focus on meaning and content, question the art world, art itself and present a strongly socially critical message. The works of art in a pluralistic art world need to be examined according to their own standards and should not be related to a global, eternal, or timeless narrative.

As Danto (1997:150) says: "A pluralistic art world calls for a pluralistic art criticism, which means, in my view, a criticism which is not dependent upon an exclusionary historical narrative, and which takes each work up on its own terms, in terms of its causes, its meanings, its references, and how these are materially embodied and how they are to be understood."

Before I explore the different options art critics have attempted to establish in order to understand and judge works of art, let me dedicate some thoughts to the brief history of art criticism.

Art criticism emerged during the 18th century in the context of middle-class and intellectual culture. Because of the increasing number of works of art and the newly emerging genres that flooded the western European art market, the buyer needed a consultant (Gardner 1989:1).

As it was already pointed out in the chapter on the art market, such a consultant during the 18th century was often associated with the wealthy merchant who also

acted as a dealer. In this situation, the connection between theory and the market was already being intertwined – even at these early stages. Later on, art criticism became a separate and significant branch of academic study as it gained status with the emergence of the avant-garde. Outside the canon, it was the market and art critics who worked with the market, who started to voice the importance of new art and new painting that had further goals than following the legacy of the Old Masters (Gardner 1989:1)**.**

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a distinction between two types of critics: the journalist and the engaged. The journalist was usually associated with a particular newspaper or journal and, besides other things, s/he also wrote about art. The second type was the critic who had art training and wrote specifically about art events. The latter often represented one particular art movement - Roger Fry was associated with Post-Impressionism, Laurence Alloway with Pop Art and Celement Greenberg with Abstract Expressionism. These writers did not wish to remain impartial or simply analytical. They focused on becoming advocates to a particular artistic direction (Gee 1993:10).

Today, art criticism mostly occurs in a journalistic context, as it is not as academic as art history. Art critics usually write for periodicals that support themselves from advertising and from regular paying customers. These publications, such as *FlashArt, ArtNews, Modern Painters,* to name a few, have a unified vision and a given language (Gee 1993:12).

Art critics are the first judgment makers. They can discover an artist by writing a good review about him or her, or they can damage careers by negative

criticism. Theoretically, we would expect art critics to be impartial judges. Gee argues that there are four criteria when making value judgments about art that most art critics follow: A good work of art has to be innovative and it has to create new values. It has to belong to a category of art whose value is already recognised, in other words the work has to refer to or belong to a trend or movement. Furthermore, it needs to represent the unique vision of the maker and it must articulate drives that are beyond the maker and the work itself (1993:13).

Gardner (1989:1) points out that the criteria listed above closely resemble the criteria of art criticism during the avant-garde. As art criticism, in a sense, is the legacy of the avant-garde, it still carries values that were popular during modernism - namely innovation, development, art being revolutionary, breaking with the rules and tradition.

There are different methodologies art critics use in order to be able to come up with judgments. One of the most popular models is the Feldman model. This model can be applied to most works of art that occur in the contemporary world (with the possible exception of Conceptual works).

The Feldman-model uses four categories for making judgments: description, analysis, interpretation and valuation (See Appendix 1). By description Feldman means the objective empirical study of the work in front of us - describing the elements used namely shape, colour, texture, angles, motion, time and so on. Analysis is the description of the observed behaviours, the principles behind the design, possible identification or difference from the style. Interpretation

attempts to make sense of the work by looking at the message and what it wants to evoke in the viewer. The fourth is judgment, where the critic refers back to the first three steps and asks questions such as 'has the artist succeeded in making the impression s/he seemingly want to achieve? Are his/her stylistic references well put, does his/her use of technique support his/her message? And how could s/he do a better job' (http://www.spsu.edu/htc/bseabolt/2001/feldmansmethod.pdf)?

Another popular model for learning and practicing art criticism is Broudy's aesthetic scanning (See Appendix 2). Aesthetic scanning is similar to the Feldman-model, but it also takes technical skills into consideration. The first category here is the sensory properties, where the critic looks at the formal elements of the work and registers what s/he sees. The second is the formal analysis, where the formal attributes and their relationship are explored. The third is the expressive category where interpretation is applied and the critic examines the mood, the feeling the intellectual message of the work evokes. Then the technical analysis follows where the critic examines whether the artist used his materials in such a way that they help to convey his/her message. Judgments take place at the second, third and fourth stage (http://www.d.umn.edu/artedu/scan.html).

The models above can be applied to a large range of works of art representing different media and styles. At the same time, as Hamblen (1991:9) also points out, the difficult part is in making quality judgments. In order to make judgments about how something could have been done better, the critic would need to assume that there is an ultimate and a conclusive way of making an

absolutely good work of art. This means that we cannot escape from the grip of formalism.

And indeed, Hamblen (1991:9) remarks that formalist criticism still makes a huge impact on how art criticism is taught as students are encouraged to find information only in the work of art without looking outside the work and without paying attention to the artist or to the socio-cultural situation of the piece.

If art criticism still relies on formalism, it does not fulfil its social function. The ultimate goal of art criticism would be similar to a Marxist direction, namely to teach the kind of art criticism that judges the works according to their function as a social utility. We should use a method that steps out of the exclusivist and formalist realm of the art world and look at how much that particular work contributes to the betterment of the life of humankind (Hamblen 1991:13).

Art criticism often fails the postmodern test as it looks at works of art without considering the context. The ignorance towards the context is the continuation of the modernist and formalist tradition that – paradoxically - the people in the art world would so desperately want to overcome. Gee states that art criticism has to accept that it is context-based, meaning that the political, social background of the artist, of the work and the critic determines what she or he considers to be a good work of art. As criticism is embedded in culture, it ought not only deal with art only, but it should also take other spheres of life into consideration in the process of making judgments (1993:17).

Calling for a context-conscious art criticism Gee (1993:17) argues: “The language of criticism is penetrated not only by the traces of other aesthetic texts, but also… by those of political, religious, philosophical and scientific discourse, and is, therefore an instrument not just of promoting art, but also of bringing it to specific spheres of value beyond the aesthetic.”

As we can see, among art critics the greatest tension occurs when some critics follow and believe in formalism, whereas others judge art by how much good it does to society. Gardner detects further problems that highlight how problematic art criticism has become and how difficult it is to find common ground for making quality judgments about art. He argues that - theoretically - the art critics, through their professional influence, make a high impact on the prices of the market. In reality it is not the case as the market follows its own speculative logic as it was demonstrated elsewhere in the dissertation. Since these are the critics who decide what is worthy of attention, their ideas will constitute contemporary art history books, they make art history. However, the truly critical voice is missing from most of the art publications, as if critics were afraid to form opinions. This is the case not only because art critics might be concerned about offending certain people with judgments, but also critics may not be confident enough to raise a radical voice regarding what is good and what is bad (1989:1).

Certainly there are still people who say what they have on their mind and they are very critical. Gardner argues that there are two types of art critics. One kind thinks that everything is wrong with the world and most things are wrong with art. These critics are usually highly opinionated and accept very little as good

art. The other kind of critic takes all art to be grand, from modernist painting to the performances of Beuys. The majority of art critics belong to the second group, they refuse to engage with one particular type of art and become very critical of other kinds of art. These critics often do not stick to any standards of excellence which would be essential in order to protect quality (1989:1).

In spite of all the problematic aspects, art criticism is happening and art history is being written according to what art critics consider good works of art. Many art critics have very clear ideas about what good art is and they apply those ideas when making judgments about works. At the same time, these rules and criteria are not often articulated.

5.1 Art criticism in practice

Referring to contemporary art, I use the ideas of Dr Willi Bongard, the well-known German art critic in order to demonstrate how categorical and straightforward the ideas of a contemporary art critic can be when judging contemporary art.

In his article *Cork and Mahogany* (1984)[1], Bongard – who was very involved in and very critical of the art market - argues that what art represents should call for a definition. In a world where art is considered to be a product, we have to differentiate between good art and bad art, but even bad art is art.
The reason for the confusion regarding what art represents originates from Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle wheel* (1913)[2]. This very piece broke the art

definition that was known before and took art into a conceptual and cognitive direction. The art that follows the Duchamp-turn is constantly subjected to misunderstandings. For the art critic this is an important point of debate as many art historians argue that art with a conceptual twist cannot be judged for quality. As we could see earlier on in the chapter on contemporary art, the ideal theory and the institutional theory of art were created in order to come to the rescue of art professionals who are lost because art has become and idea. As practice shows, curators and museum professionals can still perform their duties and include Conceptual pieces into exhibitions. It would be thoughtless to imagine that the highly skilled art professionals would choose art according to personal likes or dislikes (Bongard 1984).

Bongard (1984) argues that most skilled art professionals agree that Pollock, deKooning, Noland and so on are brilliant artists. In the case of these great painters, it is easier to decide whether their works are good as there are the criteria of Greenberg to follow – when there is not another way to approach the works.

Although they can deal with painting and sculpture, art critics and historians are challenged when they face Conceptual works especially when it comes to quality judgments. Bongard (1984) argues that the art critic has to set up criteria that are objective and can also embrace works such as Conceptual pieces, installation, and media. He argues that criteria help us make valid judgments.

As for criteria, he takes innovation as the first criterion for good art, innovation that is followed by the birth of an original work of art. To be recognisable, is

also one of the criteria we can expect an artist to fulfil. This is also supported by the fact that art means creativity, and to create means to make something new. Therefore, since the Renaissance *invenzione*, innovation and originality are crucial conditions for good art making (Bongard 1984).

At the same time, the innovative aspect of art is also questioned these days, and we have to admit that innovation is just one aspect of good art making, but not the only one criterion. Bongard (1984) also looks upon art in context. He lets go of the independent art object and looks at the entire career of the artist and argues that the long-term development of a unified body of work of the artist would be the second criteria. Artists have to be given time to develop, in two-three years an artist cannot truly show a significant body of work. If the artist is forced to be productive s/he gets lost in the gallery world dictated by production. Therefore, when looking at a work of art, we also have to look at other works by the same artist; continuity and permanence have to become criteria. The true social turn that Bongard (1984) takes is similar to Hamblen's commentary on the social aspect of art criticism. Bongard argues that great artists are usually also great people since their art is the manifestation of their personality. Therefore, a work is good if it contributes to society.

For Bongard (1984) one of the artists who fits all these criteria is Joseph Beuys. Beuys is innovative, absolutely original and has a permanent, continuous body of work and he claimed that he was a shaman who came to heal the world through art. Changing the world, working for the betterment of humankind is important, therefore Bongard considers the Fauves, for example, lesser artists than Goya or Rembrandt.

In Broudy's model technical perfection was also a criterion. Bongard (1984) argues that it is indeed important, but is should be a given, that the artist is the master of his technique; therefore technique is not a criterion.

All the ideas and criteria mentioned above come to life only if they can be applied to specific works of art and artists. The career of Zsolt Bodoni and Damien Hirst were explored in the chapter on the art market, and it was argued that although they are good artists, the recognition they have achieved is due to the influence of the market and promotion of their careers.

Now I would like to examine their works from an art critical point of view. Since art critics are judging them as well as art professionals currently working today, I will use the standards outlined by practicing art professionals.

5.1.1 Zsolt Bodoni and Damien Hirst – theory applied

Interviews were conducted with Dianne C. Brown, art dealer and art consultant former owner of the Art Factory galleries, Budapest, Krisztina Szipőcs, art historian and senior curator at the Ludwig Museum, Contemporary Museum, Budapest, Zoltán Somhegyi, art historian and prominent art critic, Berlin, Budapest, Jeff Taylor, art historian, senior lecturer at the International Business School Arts Management department, owner of the Taylor art advisor and shipping company, Budapest. All these people were kind enough to answer questions about what they consider to be a good work of art. Although they have not seen the works I am referring to below, they only gave me their general opinion on what defines a good work of art for them, I will try to legitimately

follow their criteria in order to perform quality judgments on the works of Zsolt Bodoni and Damien Hirst (See Appendix 3).

Zsolt Bodoni paints dynamic, figurative, mostly large-scale works. His works vary in meaning, early in his career he painted manga figures in a gestural manner, then he produced a series of urban landscapes, then a series of portraits, then allegorical works that reflected on death and dying, the dissolution of the observable image-reality into decay. Today he deals with issues regarding the past, the reinterpretation of history, especially Communism and the impact of the dictatorial communist past on the present, on the land, people and places.

Bodoni says that his works are autobiographical; painting is a necessity for him, a language that he uses to clear his mind; he puts a piece of himself onto the canvas.

> Through my paintings I am expressing emotions. Everything that touches me stays in my mind until I paint it out. Sometimes in the first version of a painting I don't feel that the full expression has come through. So I start it again, or I repaint it over and over, until I feel the vision is true to what I am feeling. … In this way, that I'm reacting to the environment that surrounds me, painting became part of my life. It is not that I like doing it -- it is a necessity. After finishing a painting, a part of me dies and continues to live on the canvas (Bodoni http://www.budapestartfactory.com/en/bodoni-zsolt/10-bodoni-zsolt.html).

Since Bodoni has caught the attention of the international art world with his last, Communist series, I will examine a painting that is part of this series. *Madonna* (2008) (fig 2) is a small-scale work with the usual dark colours Bodoni likes using to express the gloomy and depressing mood of his subject matter. Making small-scale works is not what we usually see from the artist, he enjoys making

large canvases where he can use his whole body to work on the canvas. Interestingly, on the Los Angeles gallery website only his small scale works are listed.[3]

The *Madonna* gives us a very powerful first impression. Bodoni has made similar paintings after statues such as abandoned angels when he started this series. *Madonna* is executed with loose and dynamic brushwork, dark colours and tones are used, the only bright spot in the painting is the lap of the Madonna. The rest of the figure is covered with a shroud, like a Muslim woman wearing a chador. The representation of this Madonna is the exact opposite of how we generally think of the Madonna, the glorious, the pure, the bright figure of the mother of Christ. Such a representation of the Madonna also has connections with Communism, since religious practices were banned and punished throughout the Soviet Union. During Communism the Madonna was symbolically killed and covered with a black shroud.

Using the criterion of Brown, the piece is good since it has a universal message, namely loss and the abuse of a dictatorial regime towards the most basic hope of people, religion. The piece is original, although it references artists such as Francis Bacon in terms of the use of brushstrokes and dynamism or Anselm Kiefer in terms of its message. Kiefer also deals with the issues and effect of dictatorship on people, on hope and on religion. For Szipőcs, the work is good if it is universally relevant and the expression happens on a high aesthetic level, I believe that all this credit could be given to this work. For Taylor, who is actually very fond of the works of Bodoni in general, the work is good since it demonstrates technical skills, presents a visual narrative and it illustrates

thoughts about universal matters. However, for Somhegyi, the work might not be original enough and he might be reminded too much of Francis Bacon, only now, in a depressed, Central-European setting (See Appendix 3).

Or, we could also use the theory outlined by the interviewees in a different way. Using the criterion of "original" and "innovative" by Somhegyi I could say that *Madonna* is not original since it mimicks the Romanian trend of figurative painting – young artists in Romania are also enthusiastically painting Communism. For Taylor the harmonious coming together of the visual and the narrative and intellectual are important, in this case the narrative is too strong, the visual too catchy, the intellectual too simple. For Brown "enlightenment" and "new perspective" are important, in the case of this work the old narrative on the satanisation of Communism is presented (See Appendix 3).

Already there is controversy among art professionals on whether this work of art is good, moreover, depending on how I apply their theories, I get different judgments on quality. (Or who knows, if they were standing in front of the work they would have completely different opinions from what I outlined here. What I am doing here is following their theory and applying it to the work and I am inevitably failing.) Even if we accept that in the first application of the theories of the three art professionals the piece can be a good work of art, does this piece make Bodoni to be a good artist? Although he is still young (born in 1975), there is continuity in his work, at least among the pieces of this series. However, the Communism-series cannot be brought into connection with what Bodoni was previously working on. Certainly a psychological connection can be detected, since the artist is generally interested in death and dying, but the tie

might not be strong enough, and so Bodoni fails the Bongard category that would require from an artist to present continuous, identifiable work (Bongard 1984).

Moreover, in his other works of art within this series, Bodoni sometimes makes the mistake of excessive figuration. What I mean by this is that he paints images of Horty, who was a right-wing leader before the Second World War, or workers tearing down or gathering in front of the Stalin monument. These other works are much more narrative - the figures are actually shown and we can identify the action (http://www.nicodimgallery.com/beta/artists/zsolt-bodoni/).

For this series, the expression of spaces and moods through simple means would be enough. Recalling Taylor (See Appendix 3), if the work is too narrative, it becomes literature, so his other pieces might not be as interesting as the *Madonna*.

Bodoni still has time to develop and he is surrounded by critics and artists who guide him. The fact that he is accepted by both the profit and non-profit spheres is already encouraging.

We might still wonder what other art critics would say of *Madonna.* Would they all come up with similar categories as the four art experts I interviewed? Laying out theoretical criteria is not the same as looking at a particular work of art and make the quality-judgment after having looked at that particular piece.

Artists and works of art that are more well-known to the art world, are often subjected to loud controversial critical debates. In order to demonstrate this, I

will now turn to Damien Hirst, to see how his works of art stand their ground when they are looked upon without a price tag.

Hirst works on more diverse grounds than Bodoni. Thomson puts Hirst's works into six categories. The first group Thompson calls the 'tank pieces', which Hirst calls his *Natural History* series: dead animals, cows, sharks, sheep floating in tanks in formaldehyde. These are the pieces Hirst is most known for, and most of the people who are even the slightest bit interested in contemporary western art have heard about these works (2008:70).

The second category that Thomson mentions is Hirst's 'cabinet series'. These works deal with the issue of health, the obsession with health, the fear of death through the concept of the pharmacy. The third category is the spot paintings. Hirst set up factories that produce all of his works of art, his 'spot paintings' included, and assistants make the spot paintings for him, which are basically coloured spots on a single-coloured background. Hirst does not touch the final art, he only gives instructions as to which colour should go where. These spot paintings have become the brand for Hirst. The fourth is 'spin painting', where Hirst pours paint onto a spinning potter's wheel, the fifth are his 'butterfly paintings' where he either collages butterfly wings onto the canvas or he mounts butterflies onto the monochrome coloured base. The final category is 'photorealist' paintings of death and accidents, executed by his assistants, as Hirst claims that he, himself, cannot paint, but the idea is his (Thompson 2008: 71,72).

How is an artist capable of working in such diverse and different realms of styles and genres? Can all of the works be good? One of the categories that was drawn up by most art critics in the interviews and also highlighted by Bongard (1984), was that someone is a good artist if s/he produces consistent work, if there is a line of consistency and development detectable within the individual style of the artist.

When looking at Hirst, it seems to be difficult to find this track, to relate one of his works to the other, a spot painting to a dead shark, for example. In spite of the diversity, we can identify two ideas that Hirst continuously explores in his art. The first one is death and dying, obviously present in the tank series and in the pharmacy works. The other, I would say is the idea of playing with the art market.

Although some consistency can be detected, the spin and spot paintings do not satisfy the criteria set up by art professionals in the interviews, namely the works do not evoke a universal, human experience, although they might be executed at a highly aesthetic level with technical skills, they do not present intellectual forces, as Taylor would require. The original idea, that is important for Somhegyi might be good, regarding mocking the art market, but the works only make sense within a market framework, they do not stand their individual ground (See Appendix 3).

The tank and pharmacy series are different, since they evolve around a certain thought, they are innovative, original, they deal with issues that are crucial to the human existence, and for Brown they would evoke a “visceral response”. To use

the ideas of Taylor, the works show “intellectual activity in a form of advanced expression” (See Appendix 3).

Here, again, I might be applying the theory outlined by Taylor in an inadequate way, since Taylor also indicates in the interview that generally he does not think much of the works of Damien Hirst. Still, if I only follow his theory, without asking him about the particular work, I might come to the conclusion that he would consider the tank pieces and the pharmacy series good works of art. My behaviour as a ‘bad student’ here demonstrates that theory without the person who is judging and the particular work that is being judged cannot stand on its own.

Returning to the works of art of Damien Hirst, we can make further conclusions. The tank pieces and the pharmacy series represent a certain brand for Hirst, therefore, following the criterion of Bongard, that the style of an artist has to be recognisable, makes Hirst to be a good artist. Szipőcs argues that it is important that the work communicates with other people as well. Since the issues of death and dying are universal, most viewers can identify with it (See Appendix 3). Moreover, the pieces are aesthetically interesting. As part of Hirst’s shock effect, it is not often that, in a museum or gallery, we see dead animals hovering in suspended, green liquid or pharmacy interiors, tablets, pills and liquids laid out meticulously in a sterile and elegant manner.

Hirst’s tank pieces are not only simply good, since we come across a lot of good art in the art world, but they have also become the icons of contemporary art, inspired a lot of literature and controversial criticism. This shock-effect is what

Hirst was aiming for, we are not only shocked by seeing a dead shark or other animals in a tank, but the message of these pieces also gives leeway to some serious thinking.

I dedicate some thoughts to one particular piece I consider very interesting, the *Mother and child, divided* (1993) (fig 3). The piece does not only deal with death and dying, but also with the tension between murder and ritual. The piece takes the viewer to instinctual, pre-linguistic depths. In the four tanks Hirst presents a cow and calf cut in half, suspended, floating in formaldehyde. As the title suggests, the maternal connection, love between mother and child is one of the themes, the mother represented by the cow, the child by the calf. Since ancient times cows have been associated with fertility, growth, nurturing and love. Besides love, there is also the aspect of ritual in the artwork. Slaughtering a cow or bull is associated with ritual, an offering to the gods, ritual that is about flesh and blood, instincts before rationality, the connection of the material reality with the supernatural realms. Slaughtering for sacrifice is death for a reason; it is an honour since it takes place for the pleasing of the gods.[4]

Dying for a cause, for a higher reason was an honour in ancient times, however, Hirst twists this message around by not only presenting the cow, but the calf as well. By putting the calf next to the cow, he personifies the cow, makes her to be a mother and as soon as she becomes a mother, she is no longer only a sacrificial animal, but something who has to live on, to nurture and love. When both mother and child are sacrificed, we can no longer see the justified act to please the gods, but we associate the piece with murder and genocide, with war and brutality, with death without a reason, without a higher cause. In our world

ritual, martyrdom and sacrifice no longer exist. Instead, there is murder, pointless deaths and pain.[5]

When recalling the opinion of the experts, we can say that *Mother and child, divided* is a good work of art. For Brown the piece would be original and complex, it connects to the universal human condition and also to the tragic emptiness of our contemporary world. Using the criterion of Szipőcs, the piece channels an universally relevant message in an aesthetically interesting way; for Taylor the intellectual forces, the visual narrative is there but the piece is not literary, therefore it becomes good; for Somhegyi, the idea is good and original, also universal and there is truly an original form of expression (See Appendix 3).

If we accept this reading of the application of the theory of my interviewees, I can say that this work of art is good. If an artist is capable to come up with such powerful messages conveyed in such a professional manner, why does he waste his time with works like the spot and spin paintings? Hirst in these works plays with the art world, with branding, provoking ideas that were already explored by Warhol and the Conceptual artists. The works have nothing to do with the creative artistic hand, but still they sell as art and they sell for astronomical sums. They are repetitive, mindless or accidental; we get the impression that Hirst makes such pieces for those who cannot buy a tank but can, at least, buy something by Hirst. Even the factory-idea has passed its novelty. So yes, in many ways Hirst can be subjected to heavy criticism. At the same time, he makes works that stir up profound experience and make us re-think our human condition. Such a piece is the *Mother and child.*

Does *Mother and child, divided* make Hirst to be a good artist? The answer is most likely yes, but if we look at his other works, such as the spot and spin paintings, we might have reservations, since through playing with the market and putting thought and energy in spin and spot works, Hirst declares that he does not take even his own art seriously. It is as if Hirst said that he did not want to be a good artist, he did not want to take on the burden of the romantic role of the artist, the one who sees the world and whose duty it is to make the life of mankind better. Hirst wants to be corrupt.[6]

Moreover, not everybody would agree that even the *Mother and child, divided* is a good work of art. Matthew Collins compares the works of Rothko, Bacon and Hirst in his article, *Yippie, we are all going to die* (2009), and argues that the idea of death and dying when represented by Bacon and Rothko really reach the viewer, whereas the pieces of Hirst simply do not work. For Collins, the works of Hirst are nothing more than hunting for a shock effect, the works are empty and sensational, and although Hirst wants to follow in the footsteps of Bacon, he is just simply not good enough to do so (2009:28).

For the art critic Robert Hughes, Hirst's works, in all the media he works in, his tank pieces included, are nothing more than a simple-minded tacky commodity. Hughes (2008) also denounces art critics and collectors who are interested in the works of Hirst.

He writes:

> What serious person could want those collages of dead butterflies, which are nothing more than replays of Victorian decor? What is there to those empty spin paintings, enlarged versions of the pseudo-art made in funfairs? Who can look for long at his silly sub-Bridget Riley spot paintings, or at the pointless imitations of drug bottles on pharmacy shelves? No wonder so many business big shots go for Hirst: his work is both simple-minded and sensationalist… (Hughes 2008).

Prominent art critics such as Collins and Hughes are disappointed with Hirst's performance, moreover they are outraged by how the market is not able to see that Hirst is playing with the collectors, only in order to get more money out of them. And maybe if we asked Brown, Szipőcs, Somhegyi and Taylor personally what they thought of the tank pieces of Hirst, they might be just as judgmental as Hughes and Collins. Still, by following their prescribed criteria for determining what a good work of art is, the *Mother and child, divided*, can be interpreted as a good work of art.

As we can see, art criticism and the application of art theory is problematic. Within art criticism, as it was demonstrated above, there are two (main) directions, namely art critics who still cannot let go of formalism, and art critics who judge art in terms of how socially relevant it is. Moreover, even if art critics can come to an agreement in terms of what criteria they apply to determine what a good work of art represents, when those criteria have to be applied to particular pieces, radically different quality judgments emerge.[7]

Mother and child, divided by Hirst won the Turner Prize in 1995, and the curatorial board accepted the works of Hirst as good and important. At the same

time, all of Hirst's tank pieces are denounced as tacky and sensationalist by the prominent art critic, Robert Hughes. On the other hand, the curator of the Tate Modern, Virginia Button, who is just as prominent in terms of making judgments about art as Robert Hughes, argues that there is powerful and important meaning behind the works of Damien Hirst. By referring to his *Physical impossibility of death in the eyes of someone living,* Button says that his piece is "brutally honest and confrontational, he draws attention to the paranoiac denial of death that permeates our culture" (Thompson quoting Button 2008:74).

We can decide whom we are going to believe. The only problem is that if it was up to Hughes, Damien Hirst would be relatively unknown. However, other influential forums which are of a different opinion, made Hirst to be a star. Art criticism therefore remains a practice that only makes sense within the art world, a discourse that is applied to particular works through the subjective taste of the critic. The work of art becomes an object the art world can play with, but what it is in itself remains hidden because of the discourse that is applied to it.

This is probably the reason why artists are so sceptical about criticism; many of them feel that theory violates their art. As it was explored in the sub-chapter on Marxist criticism, Adorno also pointed out that if art is forced into a discourse, into context and institutions, it ceases to be what it is, the particularity of the work is lost (Eagleton 1999:352).

Art criticism becomes a discourse that is played within the art world by the decision-making elite as explored in the sub-chapter on taste. Who becomes

known and who becomes a good artist depends on which art critic has a louder voice. He or she can communicate it to the market and to the museums that there is a talent here, who would need to become part of the art world game.

Endnotes:

1 The original title is: *Parafa és Mahagóni* (my translation).

2 Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). Metal, painted wood, ready-made, 126.5 x 31.5 x 63.5 cm. Georges Pompidou Centre, Paris. (Illustration available at: http://www.centrepompidou.fr/images/oeuvres/XL/3I01504.jpg&imgrefurl)

3 see: http://www.nicodimgallery.com/beta/artists/zsolt-bodoni/

4 Animal sacrifice is common to many ancient religious rituals and they are still used in traditional societies. For further information see http://www.humanreligions.info/animal_slaughter.html

5 In the case of ritual there is a supernatural cause for sacrifice. This same idea is present in the works of Austrian performance artist Herman Nitsch. Nitsch, who was part of Viennese Actionism, slaughters animals on stage and performs a ritual that reminds the viewer of mythical, ritualistic, religious events. For Nitsch as well as for George Bataille, this ritual is a way back to our true self, to the mother's body, to the dark, red, bleeding, comforting womb. For artists such as the Surrealists, this getting back to the basic instincts was one of the reasons for making art. The Surrealists thought about art as the only way to replace the forgotten rituals, the only way to reconnect with the core of our human existence, to dismember, to come together with the supernatural (Taylor 1992:231-246).

Where Nitsch grants us the purity of ritual as he performs art that has replaced ritual, Hirst does not. He draws our attention to the unnecessary aspects of murder and killing and he destroys the illusion of ritual.

6 It was interesting to talk to the Hungarian artists about the works of Damien Hirst, especially to sculptor Gyula Baditz who believes that art is able to make a difference and the duty of art is to open the eyes of people to beauty that still exists both in nature and in our world. Baditz became furious when we were discussing Hirst's attitude towards art and the art world. According to Baditz, Hirst had no pure conscience, and instead of being true to himself, he sells himself short and becomes corrupted.

7 Since the purpose of this dissertation is to find what defines a good work of art, meaning to approach works of art from the level of theory, practices and institutions, I did not ask for the opinion of my interviewees on these specific works on purpose as I only wanted to apply the theory that already exists onto particular works of art. My reason for doing this was to show how fragile theory is and how many different judgments can arise when one theory is applied to a particular work of art. Szipőcs even acknowledges the fragility of theory by saying that quality judgments can only be made if we are standing in front of that particular work of art (See Appendix 3).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

I have arrived at the end of the long quest for trying to find answers to 'what defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world'. Throughout the dissertation it was demonstrated that although the question is philosophical and theoretical, the answers given have profound practical consequences.

The dissertation started with the exploration of modernist theories, the concept of the genius, the idea of the artist-messiah as outlined by the Jena Group and formalist criticism were explored. Looking at modernist theories was essential for this topic as in many ways contemporary art theory and artistic practices are still bound by modernist concepts of art; for example the idea of the innovative genius and the unique masterpiece are recurring concepts in contemporary art theory as well.

However, I demonstrated that the shortcomings of modernist theory – both for modern and contemporary art - are revealed when we take a closer look at how modernist museums operate. The modernist museum, just like formalism, isolates the work of art from its context and treats it as an a-historial, frozen aesthetic object (Maleuvre 1999:15-32).

Moreover, formalist criticism can only be applied to works of art where the formal elements dominate. When art becomes an idea as it happens in the case of Pop Art and Conceptual Art, formalist ideas can no longer be applied, therefore the formalist approach cannot be used as a legitimate adjudication.

When it comes to judgments, we always need to examine who the people are who make the judgments. A sub-chapter was dedicated to the exploration of the concept of taste. The Kantian concept of disinterested high taste, sensitive to the pure aesthetic experience was explored, however through the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu it was revealed that taste is a social construct, therefore high taste is an illusion that the intellectual elite claims to be a universal answer for the selection of good works of art (Mattick 2003:42,175).

By using the theory of *habitus* of Bourdieu, it was argued that the concept of high taste, a mythical intellectual construct is used in order to hide the authoritarian nature of the culture-making elite. Even if there is such a concept as high taste, it is diverse and varied. By looking at the ever changing trends within the art world, it was demonstrated that even if the culture-making elite decides that a trend or works of art representing this trend are 'good', they [the culture-making elite] are scarcely interested for longer than a season.

In order to get out of the manipulative grip of high culture, Marxist criticism was explored. The three Marxist thinkers who I introduced to the discourse of the disseration, namely Ernst Fischer, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin argued that by making judgments about works of art if they are displaced (shown in a museum), or if they are bound by discourse (art theory), is impossible as the true nature, to use the term of Benjamin "the aura of the work of art", is lost if it is forced into a context that is not its own (Benjamin 1936).

For the Marxists, art should be taken back to its original function, namely ritual. It was interesting to see a parallel between the idea of the Marxist theorists and the artist-messiah idea of the Jena Group since they both identified art with ritual, art objects with objects of ritual, the artist with the messiah who is able to lead us to a higher reality, be it a spiritual kingdom, or Communism.

By the 1960s the art world had matured towards change. With the birth of numerous art movements, such as Pop Art and Conceptual Art, artists demonstrated that the modernist discourse had come to an end. In the contemporary scene, new rules apply for making quality-judgments. Learning from the mistakes of modernism, contemporary art theorists did not want to fall into the trap of creating unitary meta-narratives for determining what good art might represent. Moreover, the pluralistic artistic practices and the introduction of postmodernism could not bare the idea of a unitary discourse. With the 1960s, notably with the exhibition of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, art had become dematerialised, it had become an idea. Danto points out that in the contemporary art world, it is no longer possible to differentiate art objects from everyday objects (1997:113).

The challenge for contemporary art theory therefore was to determine what art is supposed to be and how we can create quality-judgments in a pluralist, changing world. Needless to say that the advocates of the 'old order', namely Greenberg and his followers such as Michael Fried, were struggling to accept the newly emerging movements. Conceptual Art was one of the movements Fried heatedly

criticised by arguing that the presence of the works of art with the conceptual turnabout was literally transformed into theatricality (Fried 1998:157).

Those who did not exclude the newly emerging movements from the art world were trying to find a way to make quality judgments about the newly created works of art. The conceptual turnabout showed that art had become an idea, therefore the ideal theory of art and the institutional theory of art were incorporated into the theoretical discourse.

For Collingwood if art is an idea, it is judged by how it is expressed. If it is expressed well, if the content of the work becomes visible through its form, the work of art can be labelled as good (2003:538).
For the institutional theory, what good art represents depends on the consensus of the art institution, the audience and the artist. If an object is created to be a work of art and there is an agreement between the public, the institution and the artist about their specific concept of art, the work becomes art. The same consent is applicable to quality. If a work of art is shown, it usually means that all the forums, especially the institution (the museum or gallery) decided that what they had in mind as art was performed well by the artist. Since art is placed and functions within the institutions of the art world, the discourse on quality only makes sense within the art world. We have to give up the idea that there is art out there, beyond and above us, and that good art is an ahistorical, context-free concept (Dickie 2003:55).

Although the institutional theory is an easy answer for questions such as 'what is art' and 'what defines good art', it was interrogated by collaborative artistic practices that became widely popular among artists in the 1990s. These practices do not necessarily happen within the framework of the institution, moreover, the projects/practices just happen, their purpose is not necessarily to make art. One of the collaborative artistic practices was the *Oda Projesi*, introduced by Claire Bishop (2006:179-183).

A group of Turkish artists set up a space where people with all kinds of inclinations - artistic as well – could meet. It was a space for being together, initiating dialogues among different people, a space for interactions, a "collective game" that explored what space means and what it means to be a community (http://odaprojesi.org/lang-pref/en/).

How can we create quality-judgments in the case of such collaborative artistic practices? It is difficult, but Bishop also expressed the need to do so. By quoting Ranciere she argued that there is an aesthetic side to these collaborative practices, however it is no longer the aesthetic that was used during modernism, but an abstracted aesthetic that exists in the tension between the detached autonomous art object and social practices. Socially referential art is often accused of not being more than narrative visual social criticism. Abstracted aesthetics in collaborative artistic practices is a space for questions and hope that generates change (Bishop 2006:179-183).

Although Bishop's ideas might have been an answer to what good art can be in the contemporary art world, the exploration of the mechanisms of the art market

sheded a different light to the topic. The art market forces works of art to become commodity. Theoretically, it identifies quality with monetary value, but in practice it is not the case. As it was demonstrated through the two case-studies of Zsolt Bodoni and Damien Hirst, if an artist, if well-promoted, becomes internationally known, his or her prices rise. The art market is speculative, and since art is an abstract concept, it does not have a price. The works of art, due to marketing, have a fictive, speculative price, therefore their monetary value does not correspond with their artistic quality.

If the art market was separated from the non-profit art organisations, from museums, the deeds of the art market would not be a problem. However, in the capitalist world, museums are dependent on private or corporate funds, therefore they are tied to the market. Necessarily the market uses and abuses this connection for its benefits. No matter whether there is a quality-judgment that comes from officially appointed disinterested judges, the final judgment is manipulated in order to satify the funder; the collector or the corporation whose taste - as it was demonstrated by the argument of Bourdieu, and by the ever-changing trends - cannot be but subjective.

Subjectivity is also an issue within the wide arena of art criticism. It was demonstrated that although there are certain models an art critic follows, when theory is applied to particular works the quality-judgment can be radically different.

The fact that different art critics set up different criteria to define what good art represents, ensures conflict and controversy within the art scene. Projecting

theory onto a particular work can never quite work. One theory can be understood radically differently when applied to a particular work of art, whilst the same work can receive completely opposite criticism and commentary. Although the art critic, as in the case with Bongard, selects works that support his already existing theory about what a good work of art represents, the works are not looked upon outside the context of the critical discourse.
The problem with not having a theory that can stand on its own or can be applied, can be seen as political. As we could see, the decisions on which work of art is throught to be good and which one is not affects the entire art world, makes an impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands. If there is not a properly applicable theory, how can we make the person responsible for his/her decision? Moreover, as Benjamin and Adorno pointed out that forcing artworks into theory places the work into a context that is not its own, it loses its aura, its ritualistic function (Benjamin 1936).

At the same time, we still talk and write about art and we construct different art theories, some judgmental, others less so. The question whether there is such a phenomenon as universal 'good art' comes up whenever we deal with art. Many of us, just like Arthur Danto, the Hegelian, are tempted to think that there is art, good art out there that manifests itself in different forms through history, free but at the same time bound by the art world and the artistic discourse (1997:28). Interestingly, there was a recurring thread throughout the dissertation, namely that the idea of the kind of art that is made for the betterment of the future and life of humankind was thought to be good by several art theoreticians from the

1790s until 2006. This thread started with the Romantics and a very similar idea occurs in the definition of good works of art by Claire Bishop.
There are also people who claim to have a ‘good eye’ therefore they are able to recognise ‘good art’. However, we know that Greenberg was also known for having a famously ‘good eye’, still, in spite of Greenberg’s efforts, Andy Warhol did become famous.

Looking at the bigger picture, does it matter whether there is such an independent, detached phenomenon as ‘good art’? Even if such a phenomenon existed, it would not matter much, since the inability to apply theory, personal subjectivity and promotional factors, would take over the so called inherent quality of the work. Trying to find the detached phenomenon of ‘good art’ becomes a fantasy, a dream we chase. Until we find it, it is probably useful to see clearly the different drives that motivate adjudicators in order to reveal the alternatives the art experts and artists should consider when judging or making art.

Appendix 1

THE FELDMAN-MODEL

The Feldman model as explained at
http://www.spsu.edu/htc/bseabolt/2001/feldmansmethod.pdf :

DESCRIPTION
GOALS: To describe objectively what you see; to delay judgment. List title; artist; date; medium; size. Is the work representational, abstract, or non-objective?
Can you identify a subject? If not, are there objective "hints" about a subject? Describe how the elements are used: line; shape; form; space; colour; light & dark; texture; time; motion.

ANALYSIS
GOAL: To describe behaviours of what you see. Describe how the elements above use the principles of design (balance, scale & proportion, emphasis & focus, repetition & rhythm, & unity & variety).

INTERPRETATION
GOAL: To find meaning in what you see. What does the work remind you of? How does the work make you feel? Why? What do you think the artist was trying to do? What is the intended use of the object? Are there symbols in the work? What do they mean?

EVALUATION
GOAL: To evaluate what you see. Does the work have value through formal qualities (use of elements & principles of design)? Value through expression of emotion or feeling? Value through purpose? Are materials appropriate? How could it have

been more successful? Who might value this work?

Appendix 2

BROUDY'S AESTHETIC SCANNING

Broudy's aesthetic scanning as explained at:
(http://www.d.umn.edu/artedu/scan.html)

Sensory (descriptive) Properties: *The art elements of line, shape, texture, and colour. large and small size, deep and shallow space, dark and light, etc.*

1. What colours do you see? 2. Are there any lines? 3. Can you see a round shape? 4. Is there a dark colour? 5. What is the biggest shape? 6. How deep is the perspective?

Formal (analysis) Properties: *The way the artwork is organized. Unity, repetition, balance, contrast, dominance, rhythm, variety, etc.*

1. Are there repeated shapes? 2. Are there opposite things? 3. Is one thing more important? 4. Can something be changed? 5. Is the colour needed over here? 6. Are there light/dark things?

Expressive (interpretation) Properties: *The mood, feeling or philosophical concepts of the work.*

1. Is this a sad/happy work? 2. Why did the artist make it? 3. What is the artist telling us? 4. Would you like to have this? 5. Does it make you feel good/bad? …

Technical (judgement) Properties: *How the work was created. The medium used (watercolour, oil paint, acrylic, bronze, wood, etc.). The tools used (brush, pencil, crayon, ink, pen, printing press, camera, etc.). The method used to make the work (drawing, photography, painting, sculpting, printing, etc.).*

1. How did the artist make this? 2. How did the artist make this part look so rough? 3. What kind of tool did the artist use? 4. Do you think the artist used crayon to make this? 5. What is the difference between a pencil drawing and this work? 6. Do you think the artist drew a picture before making the painting?

Appendix 3

INTERVIEWS

Zoltán Somhegyi – art historian, art critic, Berlin, Budapest

1. In your opinion, what defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world?

It is very difficult to make such quality-judgments, since there are radically different principles the different forums of the art world use for making judgments. However, the different systems of judgment play equally important roles. For the art historian or for the art critic the good work of art is different from what it is for the experts who work in museums, for curators or for collectors. For example, even if an art historian does not consider a particular work of art exciting, aesthetically interesting and innovative enough, a good exhibition could still be built around it or – from the art market point of view - it could still be a good investment.

In trying to answer this question, everybody would say that it is the quality that counts. The problem is that good quality is not a straighforward category, since in many cases the components of particular works are not on the same level. I mean that often the original idea of the work is good, but the method of execution is poor. It is also imporant that the piece is original. This means that the work of art should not mimic fancy trends that come from the west so in the end we end up seeing work from Hungarian artists who are the Hungarian Gerhard Richters, Warhols or Marlene Dumas. The concept, the artistic attitude, the straighforward position of the artist also helps. This does not mean that the work cannot be interpreted in different ways but the work should have at least one good interpretation.

2. Can we set up general criteria for making quality-judgments for visual art as it is, or do we have to apply different criteria to different styles and genres?

There is not any general criterion, since there is not any mutual aim in judgment-making. I, as an art historian, follow my own system of judgment-making, my own taste when I deal with art. This can be very different from the approach of an investment-driven collector who judges the works less from an aesthetic, but more from an economic point of view.

4. How, do you think, the art market influences judgments on quality?

It depends on whose judgments we are talking about. It would be good, if the decisions of art professionals who work for the non-profit sector, or even the decisions of galleries about what kind of art they exhibit, were not influenced by the art-valuation statistics of the market. Regardless, I am sure that many forums are influenced by the market.

5. How, do you think, the museum influences judgments on quality?

There are important museums which play a big role in making judgments about particular artists. Of course this is not an absolute rule, since the museum professionals also have subjective reasons and value-systems for deciding what is going to be exhibited and since objective standards for deciding what is good and what is not do not exist, the museum professionals could still stand by artists who are claimed to be less significant by other decision-makers.

Jeff Taylor – art historian, senior lecturer at the International Business School Arts Management Department, the owner of Taylor art advisor and shipping company, Budapest

1. In your opinion, what defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world?

A good work of art demonstrates technical skill in the art of representation. Intellectual skill and narrative expression also matter, but without a visual aspect that impresses… then the work is just some kind of literature, not visual art. The best work of art is where the artist combines both visual, narrative, and intellectual forces and makes a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* but this is only successful if the artist is capable of advanced expression in each one of these sectors.

2. Are there any criterion that could be applied in order to determine what is a good and what is a bad work of art? If no, why, if yes, why not?

Is the representation, as in what is being represented, consensual? If it is not, then the artwork is not good either. If we cannot know what is represented, we cannot evaluate it, and so it (in my opinion) has to be disqualified before the beauty pageant even begins. Once we know what the subject is, we can begin to see if the representation presents a unique and compelling vision. It need not be technically inventive, if the subject and topic are themselves new and inventive. But, yes, to imitate Cézanne forty years after Cézanne, that is not that impressive either.

3. Can we set up general criteria for making quality-judgments for visual art as it is, or do we have to apply different criteria to different styles and genres?

No, we can have the same criteria…like, for example… abstract sucks. That is a criteria that applies across the visual arts. But again, the intersection of different skills whether technical or intellectual apply regardless of the media.

4. How, do you think, the market influences quality judgments?

The market, similar to financial markets, tends to perceive trends, and then overshoot them. Which time and again leads to investing in art which will not accumulate value, because the artist's worth is later de-evaluated. And obviously, there is a constant misperception that market values correspond to

quality, but what would be more correct to say is that market values will shape a next generation's short-term judgments on quality.

5. How, do you think, the museum influences quality judgments?

Museums determine quality judgments over a much longer term and they will be the ones to finally outline the canon and write art history, and the artworks they show will serve as type specimens to the collectors for what is really great art.

6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Ever since the great Modernist experiment began in the late 19th century, we have become increasingly skeptical about our ability to judge quality in art, and as a society we are desperately scared that we will miss our own van Goghs and Csontvarys so we are accepting of everything, and at the same time we are trying to avoid degrading something that later generations will admire and accuse us of being a bunch of philistines for missing it. We are in fact doing just that by turning all our attention to Damien Hirst and Istvan Nadler (local example) and ignoring good local talent, like Zsolt Bodoni, for example.

Dianne C. Brown – art consultant, art dealer, former owner of the Art Factory Galleries, Budapest, Dubai

1. In your opinion, what defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world?

Good contemporary art is original and complex, either in the actual application or in concept and intention. And from a personal point of view I like it to have an interesting visual impact as well. Good art somehow speaks to universal themes or issues of the day. That does not mean it always must be a direct reference, for instance in the case of abstract works, but it should evoke some sort of emotional or visceral response that is connected to the human experience. There should also be a level of authenticity, meaning one should feel the piece is a true expression from the artist. This is a little more difficult to pin down, and it is often something you feel rather than being able to define or document. For me, the best pieces are ones that illicit an AHA! moment or an intense emotional experience, even if it takes a bit of study or time or contemplation. Such pieces can have lasting impact on one's psyche as you come back to it in your mind again and again over time. Sculpture by Anish Kapoor is a good example. At first glance the minimal elements could make his pieces seem simple. But focused observation reveals the complexity, and yes, the inner beauty of the work and looking at them becomes an intense experience. In today's digital world, where most experience is in the mind, rather than the heart, Kapoor's works can bring us back to our humanity. I guess that another sign of good work – one that kicks us out of our day-to-day stupor and brings about a new perspective, or inspiration, or enlightenment. I also find that the really good

pieces have some sort of reference in art history, even if it is a really obscure reference, it is almost always there.

2. Can we set up general criteria for making quality-judgments for visual art as it is, or do we have to apply different criteria to different styles and genres?

Mentioned above are general criteria. I think it is not good to get too specific with the different media because hopefully artists are going to come up with new ways of expression and how can you apply specific criteria to something that is completely new or original?

3. How, do you think, the art market influences judgments on quality?

I'm not sure I understand your use of the word 'quality'. Do you mean quality in terms of 'value'? In the art market quality and value are almost one and the same and defining it is based on a conglomeration of opinions from influential curators and collectors. The more important the curator and the more important the collector, the higher the value and the so-called quality. Galleries and art dealers are often responsible for influencing collectors, but they are not the final arbiters, only the facilitators and expeditors. The art fair has become the most important arena in which the art market operates, and that is where you can most easily see there factors at work. Consequently , the art fair, which is purely commercial, has become an important factor in determining value – the prestige level of the fair in which a work is displayed is a factor in determining the value of the work.

4. *How, do you think, the museum influences judgments on quality?*

The museum used to be the most important arbiter of quality, but now the art market has a say in the calculation. The art market moves more quickly and dynamically than most museum hierarchies so the museum often has to follow the market. But the museum remains a necessary stamp of approval when determining the value of a work. Today we also have influential freelance curators who work for several different museums and institutions. It seems to me that individual curators can be more influential in determining 'quality' rather than the museum *per se.*

Krisztina Szipőcs – art historian, senior curator at the Ludwig Museum Contemporary Museum, Budapest, editor of the Balkon art journal

1. In your opinion, what defines a good work of art within the contemporary art world?

The good work of art communicates universally relevant content to its audience by its own means in a high aesthetic level within the institutions of the contemporary art world.

2. Can we set up general criteria for making quality-judgments for visual art as it is, or do we have to apply different criteria to different styles and genres?

There are not any universal criteria for making judgments, it is always the given work that determines what constitutes its values. So yes, it is absolutely possible to say what makes a work to be good, but this we learn while analysing the piece.

3. How, do you think, the art market influences judgments on quality?

The market does not make judgments of quality but it determines the price of the work.

4. How, do you think, the museum influences judgments on quality?

Museums would like to think that their quality-judgments are independent from the judgments of the market and that they only make decisions on aesthetic grounds. As long as it is like this, we do not have to worry. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that objective, superior, professional, consensual judgments are an illusion. The museum collections are influenced by the personal taste of the director or of the museologists, so each institution/museum has its own character. The official professional forums try to find a solution for this, they are founded in a way that they should come to consensual agreements, but instead they simplify the process of selection.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 1. Zsolt Bodoni, *Stalin* (2008).

Fig 2. Zsolt Bodoni, *Madonna* (2008).

Fig 3. Damien Hirst, *Mother and child, divided* (1993).