

Aesthesis

International journal of art and aesthetics in management and organizational life



Strati
AESTHETIC DISCOURSE
IN ORGANIZATIONS

Bereson
UNWRAPPING CHRISTO

Verdi
ART FASHION CITY

Warren
ORGANIZATIONAL
TOPOPHILIA

Scalfi
UNTITLED 2004 # PARIS

Pope
iDREAM.....

Poulson
PORTFOLIO

Nuur
WE SHARE AIR

AESTHESIS: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ART AND AESTHETICS IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

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ART AND FASHION IN A RESPONSIBLE CITY

LAURA VERDI

The issues created by social change in the multifaceted scenery of post-modern culture have strong repercussions on the world of art communication in general and on fashion in particular. With a background dominated by an often strong and hostile detachment from politics and institutions (caused by the crisis and then the fall of various ideologies) and by the increasing triumph of the private and its values, it is not far-fetched to hypothesise the birth of a society founded more on participation and solidarity, sharing and responsibility, than on generic positions of consensus or conflict, which are

becoming progressively inadequate to understand complex societies. Thanks to art, such values should become the go-between and the guarantee of a society with a more extensive and widespread participatory responsibility, outlining a completely new function for art, no longer non-utilitarian, but rather the promoter of strong community values. By analysing social change as the product of economic and cultural scenes that have actually substituted the real with the artificial, investment of social and cultural capital with immediate economic return, and the future with the present, ideology with consumption

(Gorz, 2003), my ensuing hypothesis suggests a need for the “ethicalisation” of economy (Georgescu-Roegen, 2005; Sacco, 2004; Salvadori, 2005). This could finally return to the citizen-demoted-to-client (passive “homo utens”) and consumer (hedonistically single), the full role of responsible user. At this point, art communication (Becker, 2004; Crane, 1992; Griswold, 1994; Heinich, 2001) will be able to perform its role as the hinge between social and cultural change and productive economic investment, capable of transforming the user into a responsible “homo civicus” (Cassano, 2005)

The same as for art, the material construction of all that becomes fashion passes, first of all, through the production of the value of the manufactured object (Bourdieu, 1978). Heralded by full processes of negotiation and social sharing of meaning, fashion objects, too, can no longer be simply creative, but must become also ethical and sustainable. The first benefit that can be drawn from creativity is leaving behind the Weberian disenchantment with its rationalisation excesses, and recovering, well into post-modernity, a new dimension of *Wandern* that can save us by recalling the value of tribalisation.

Anti-ideological and anti-logic par excellence, fashion as a mass phenomenon enforces itself because of the showiness of its generalised consumption, compared to the exceptionality of showy consumption only a century ago (Veblen, 1899). In giving in to endless reproduction and technical multiplication, fashion, like art, loses the aura (Benjamin, 1955) that was supposed to signal its bond with class membership. However, unlike art, it does not have the *dépense* and non-utilitarian dimension that makes it an end to itself. Even haute couture, albeit almost self-referential, can no longer define strong identities within a culture that has made the *pret-à-porter* the globally valid way of expressing the “liquidity” (Bauman, 2005) of individual identity, even in the face of a persisting need for identification.

A CIVIL ART THAT INHABITS A SOCIAL SPACE BETWEEN NECESSITY AND FREEDOM: AN ART-FASHION BINOMIAL.

The issues continually produced by the social change of post-modern culture are having strong repercussions in the world of art communication in general and of fashion in particular. Behind artistic action (in a no less macroscopic way than everyday action) social imagery has long ceased to be controlled by political ideologies and has progressively yielded to the triumph of the private and its values. But myths and cosmogonies (Augé, 2005; Lyotard, 1979) have also stopped supporting our illusions and warming our hearts. Over the last few decades we have resigned ourselves to being consumers in an

immaterial society, where space and time, knowledge and information are as volatile as the goods that feed our material life no less than our imagination. Within desolately globalized scenarios, the mondialization processes have caused a final distancing from nature in order to follow full mechanistic economic models aiming to maximise profits in any context. Efficiency models, not ethical models dominate (Salvadori, 2005), but not enough to guarantee us a life free from risk and uncertainty. It is indeed within these scenarios that the artificial condition of the consumer (*homo empor/utens*, the passive clients, who grant their, just as passive, consent to power) leads to their becoming one with goods, and identifying with them in a process of an increasing loss of identity and creativity (Gorz, 2003). Designing a target for the passive consumers implies knowing that they are incapable of feedback, indifferent in individual and social choices alike, insensitive to differences of gender, education, social class and life style.

On the contrary, the lone users of goods are often at odds with the existing power system but lack the strength and the willpower necessary to transform their own opposition into a civil-political gesture. They are not yet the responsible users – ethical and non-passive consumers, *homo civicus* – able to enjoy goods that have become, in a responsible and harmonious way, shared or participatory. In a word, common. Among these common responsibilities are, the environment, legality, education, and health. However, why not count among them also beauty and art, perhaps thanks to their seemingly paradoxical contribution of the economy? Why not think of art as the new vehicle for civic values? Why not then resort to fashion and draw up a scandalous binomial between economy and art which mitigates the artificial efficiency of the former and the non-utilitarian, but real and humane, beauty of the latter? And why not try, at last, to plan a new, ethically and civilly sensitive consumer target, also thanks to art?

Under these conditions, hypothesising the birth of a society founded more on participation and solidarity, sharing and responsibility, than on generic positions of consensus or conflict (which are becoming progressively inadequate to understand complex societies) may indeed seem utopian. On the contrary,

transforming what seems utopian into a research hypothesis implies some willingness to test, through what Cassano (2005, 25) calls “the exercise of citizenship”, new civil values. Through developing a prominent role for art, such values should be able to become the go-between and the guarantee for a society with a more extensive and widespread participatory responsibility, rather than one focused on looking after its own individualisms and idiosyncrasies. The ideal scenery in which to test this possibility is the city, the driving centre of culture, of modern art, and of fashion. Here, cultural complexity becomes clear as a network of perspectives (Hannerz, 1992); here the widest variety of subcultures (Hannerz, 1992) is on show, as is also the widest possible range of contrasting ways of handling its meaning. The city is at the same time an active place of cultural production and a passive and active place of memory keeping. It also fuels styles and models of sensitivity, especially through art and architecture. Therefore, it becomes itself a cultural model (Benedict, 1982), able to orient taste, but also to continually disorient it through agency (Bauman, 2003). Pervaded by a continual flow of cultural and social changes, the city is less and less recognisable as *Lebenswelt* (Husserl, 1974), a finite province of meaning (Schütz, 1979) or as a place of auto-poietic closure (Luhmann, 1970) or a field (Bourdieu, 1978), and perhaps more and more as a habitat of meaning (Bauman, 2003), capable of expanding and contracting thanks to the flexibility of an agency that shapes and re-shapes collective sensitivity (Hannerz, 1996). In this sense, it can be said that the city proposes itself not as the ideal habitat of the ideology of the present, which excludes imagination of the future and utopia (Augé, 2005), but rather as a place of cultural growth through change.

A NEW LOGIC FOR THE RESPONSIBLE CONSUMER

Within the city as a framework thus defined, a completely new function of art is outlined: considered useless in itself, it is now capable of contradicting its own nature. Following Bataille's footsteps, the economic-utilitarian logic of conservation, production and acquisition have remained behind us, whereas art, at long last free from the category of utility,

art among them. Instead, we think that just at this point a new, seemingly paradoxical logic can be used which we can call “productive-unproductive”, that is to say capable of considering also the concept of *dépense* as useful. In this sense, and in line with the hypothesis here formulated, the need-economy and freedom-art binomials can find an adequate corrector in the concept of *dépense-civitas*, which is linked to gift and civic responsibility.

By promoting strong community values and strengthening feelings of solidarity, art (understood also to include design and architecture) can show its vitality in creating and maintaining public space. Creative interventions (supported by adequate public policies), aiming especially to heighten the value of public space in many Italian cities – Milan, Rome and Naples in particular – have prompted in their citizens a positive perception of the function of art¹. Contemporary art projects in public spaces (public art in undergrounds, parks, stations and squares, etc.) have used a common language which is functional, original and innovative and joins research, technology and art, design and architecture, showing its efficacy in producing imagery as well as communication.

Thus, art can contribute to organisation but also produce cultural engagement, to promote the local heritage as it is often called upon in urban redesign projects, if not as a prothesis for architecture (cf. *teknemedia*). In other words, it has the duty of creating an alternative model of ‘city consumer’, not only emotionally reactive, but also more conscious and civil thanks to significant public art interventions.

This function of social reactivation passes through different types of operations of design and alternative architecture (liquid, invisible, transarchitecture), which are qualified not only for the objects that they design, but especially for their relationship with the public and the perceptions they produce. This is the case in anti-monuments: ‘a monument is something that represents power, or which selects a piece of history and tries to materialise it, visualise it, represent it always from the point of view of an elitist establishment. On the contrary, the anti-monument is action, it is performance. It is something that can be continually

remodelled and everyone is immediately aware of its artificiality, there is no strong connection between place and installation, it is like a special effect’ (Rafael Lozano Hemmer: <http://www.lozano-hemmer.com>).

Design in particular is directed at the multisensoriality (olfactory, tactile, aural) of objects and at the eco-compatibility and mimesis of technology in seemingly simple objects. Shifting the consumer’s attention from an object to the service that it can provide (e.g., from the car as an object to urban car-sharing), design has decreed the success of friendly and more intuitive objects that communicate the quality of their experimentation. Vis-à-vis the increased gap in consumption differentials between luxury and preciousness, on the one side, and democratisation, on the other, the attention of design in that direction is clear (one example for all: Ikea as an outlet standard).

It is problematic to discuss design, without an engagement with the role marketing plays in relation to design. Therefore, more must be said on some of the new tendencies in marketing. Not unlike design, marketing seems inclined to consumers’ experience and involvement, and so to give more importance to symbolic benefits (related to what the good or the service represents at psychological and sociological level) along with functional benefits (linked to what the good or service is for). Reference to mental and social processes is useful to give additional meaning to products and services, making them salient experiences for consumers (cf. Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). Greater attention paid to consumers’ experiential condition and to the expression of their subjectivity and emotionality can then favour also the personalization and fidelization of customers. According to Dominique Bourgeon Renault (2002), ‘Becker (1998) maintains that the new forms realised by artists ensure that the only utility of works of art is to be the object of admiration, appreciation and involvement. Consumption of cultural products, especially in the art sector (performing arts, museums, cinemas), involves the sphere of subjectivity more than happens for other products. In the cultural field, understanding consumers’ feelings and emotions is just

as fundamental as understanding their thoughts. The value of cultural products seems to lie in the reactions they excite in individuals rather than in their extrinsic functions [...]. Explaining their behaviour through emotions and feelings would seem particularly appropriate in the artistic field. Search for cultural behaviour should then point towards the imaginative, sensory and emotional aspects of the personal experience’. A clear example of this comes from Barnes & Noble and Starbucks, with their offers of coffee shop-libraries and mobile phones; art gallery/bar palmtops; meeting places/shops; multiplex structures; etc.

POLITICS, ART, ECONOMY AND FASHION FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

What is proposed is not the image of citizens understood as *idiôtes*, all comprised in their *particulare*, but that of *politês*, persuaded that only in the *polis*, albeit extended, the contradictions and conflicts originated by complexity can be handled. While politics returns to its original vocation towards the *politês*, it must be remembered that also the democratic societies in which it governs the *res publica* (common welfare) are founded above all on the inexhaustible preference given to public rather than private interest. If, entering into relation with art, politics acknowledges to art its own freedom as individual expression (*invention*), it will also have to work to back it through the necessary recognition of an economy of freedom. Individual *invention*, however, runs the risk of subjection to mechanisms of economic reproduction, when these are not put in the service of the public interest, thus becoming ethical instruments.

Art, rather, will have to create useful crevices to insert itself between state, market and civil society (Ranci, 1999) and to actively act on economic success through the promotion of social capital: according to Fukuyama (1996), 20% of economic success is indeed produced by social capital.

In this way, the plausibility of a post-capitalistic economy can be quickly hypothesised in which investments in art and aesthetics, grounded in knowledge-based economic systems or in what is known as intellectual capital, will become

1. Especially in Naples, as can be seen in some of my students’ dissertation theses. From questionnaires and interviews on public art administered in 2003 to a sample of 640 individuals in Milan and Naples underground stations, a futuristic and progressive city like Milan was found not to be receptive to this particular form of art. On the contrary, Naples, more often caged by the indissoluble symbols of tradition and folklore, turned out to be more receptive, thus contradicting initial hypotheses and expectations.

the guarantee of economic prosperity. In fact, the knowledge economy addresses the analysis and solution of economic problems by resorting to personal emotions and sensitivity, cultural and social contaminations, information and intellectual capital which represent many spheres of organisational knowledge. The aim is always that of valuing the human capital as a key productive factor. The new understanding between economic capital on the one side and social and cultural capital on the other – between ‘Enterprise and Culture’ as a fortunate Milanese formula goes – will produce better and better fruit the more art and culture cooperate to “give symbolic depth to the product and establish strong relationships with consumers” (cf. Bondardo Comunicazione, 2002a and Art & Business). Art and culture together will then become, in a creative way, the originators of strong communication and identity values. Compared with a policy aiming at producing identity and solidarity, the enterprise-culture binomial will have at its disposal instruments with a high symbolic concentration, such as art, design, architecture. Such an Enterprise and Culture system has existed as a non-profit organisation in Italy since 2002 and ‘founds its activity on three instruments that reflect the fundamental axes of the immaterial economy: a Prize, a Forum, and an Observatory to advertise those enterprises and institutions that have identified in culture a strategic lever of development’ (cf. Bondardo, 2002b). Through culture and art, the aim of institutions and enterprises becomes at the same time an advantage for both the enterprise and the community. The most popular examples come first of all from the world of fashion: first Benetton, then Krizia, Trussardi and Armani -to mention but the best known names- are large groups that invest in culture. Benetton, for example, manages Fabbrica and a Foundation in Treviso (North-East Italy), where space is devoted to great exhibitions at Palazzo Bomben. The success of operations of this kind, which finance cultural projects, was highlighted in an international meeting organised in Milan at Teatro Dal Verme in May 2005, entitled ‘CULTURES ON THE MOVE: Instruments and resources for an intercultural city’, promoted by the Province of Milan/Culture Department, in collaboration with the Association for the Economy of Culture.

CONSUMERS’ CONSCIOUSNESS

In an uncertain and fluid world dominated by global dynamics, even the buildings devoted to art (museums, galleries, shops and also hotels) no longer have a set referent. The use that is made of them changes with great ease (from public spaces to cinema or music sets, to theatres or even hospitals), while large buildings or areas, abandoned mostly by the industry, are more and more often changed over to “artistic use” (see for example Tate Modern and The Baltic Exchange), and architecture is increasingly becoming more flexible in the use of new materials for building. At this point a pressing question arises: is it possible to hypothesise the existence of a new type of consumer (sort of a fish that swims in the global sea), more ethically correct than consumerist? Such a dynamic socio-economic and cultural context can identify in the enterprise itself the instrument to create a conscience in the consumer (less passive or solitary client and more responsible user) with the help of art and fashion. The most interesting and frequent applications of this are investments in social and cultural settings, in the field of environmental impact and recycling, and of interventions in urban landscapes and on the terrain. For instance, by investing in recycling, many enterprises and cultural institutions can actually contribute in this sense. By enjoying a fruitful reciprocal collaboration (in other words, joining with management in developing new ideas and creativity) enterprises and institutions can take advantage of the mediation of design, which is a gate between man and the objects, instruments, concepts and space around him. It is also from here that that work of social reactivation mentioned above, that so often achieves for example excellent public art, could indeed take off. It would be a good scheme to regenerate art with social commitment, a project that has been neglected over the last decades. In Italy, there are many enterprises, institutions and galleries already going in this direction: Antonella Anecchiarico and Gennaro Castellano (Progetto Zingonia, Ciserano), Massimo Bartolini, Lorenzo Benedetti (Mooroom, Roma), Botto & Bruno, Alvisè Chevillard (ArteGiovane, Torino), Mario Cristiani (Associazione Arte Continua, San

Gimignano), Anna Daneri (Isola dell’Arte, Milano), Emanuela De Cecco, Anna Detheridge (Connecting Cultures, Milano), Flavio Favelli, Matteo Fraternali, Flaminia Gennari and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi (Fondazione Adriano Olivetti, Roma), Piero Gilardi, Bernardo Giorgi, Cristina Mundici (Opere per il Passante, Torino), Arabella Natalini, Cesare Pietroiusti, Roberto Pinto, Alessandra Pioselli, Ludovico Pratesi and Costantino D’Orazio (Associazione Futuro, Roma), Lorenzo Romito (Stalker, Roma), Gabi Scardi, Marco Scotini, Bert Theis, Luca Vitone, Emma Zanella (Gam, Gallarate) (cf. survey by a.titolo on www.tekmedia.net/magazine/arte). For example, in the case of A. Annichiarico and M. Miale in Grottaglie (Taranto district, Apulia), the threat of the construction of a dump for toxic refuse in a nearby village was contrasted with an original as well as ethically strong business initiative: in September 2004, with a grant of 150 Euro, an unusual and poetic fashion collection and show were arranged. The background was a tuff cave² mapped out as a refuse dump, the models were two elderly people from the village, the supplies came from second-hand markets, old wardrobes, manufacturing remnants. Possible profits were to be devoted to research and the technical and legal preservation of the environment. Similar initiatives have started up all around the globe: in New Delhi, for example, Anita Ahuia managed to transform discarded plastic bags into fashionable handbags to be sold all over the world. In 1999 Anita founded the Conserve NGO and decided to give, through refuse collection, a job and an income to the poorest inhabitants of the Indian capital. She tried to wash, dry and press the plastic sacs until she successfully produced a new material that was perfect for the bags that she was designing. Today, she turns out 4000 pieces a month and orders come from boutiques in New York, London, Paris, Madrid. The NGO not only supports itself, but produces income for entire families that collect refuse bags and work them (cf. Sica, 2006). From small to large, the Lombardy region, with REMADE IN ITALY (RMII), offers Lombard enterprises the opportunity to get to know this new market, and to produce low environmental impact goods.

²This is a type of cave in the tuff rock of Italy that have served local communities as places of habitation, refuge, commerce or simply storage for centuries.

And so, outside the Salone del Mobile [Furniture Show] 2005 in Milan, the RMII presented innovatively designed products: useful, beautiful and realised with post-consumption recycled material, in accordance with the orientation of the European Community policies and a logic that, without any doubt, bring industrial manufacture near to the artisan and artistic production. Even the recycled object, nonetheless a designer's industrial product, shows a poetic soul, perhaps hinting at everyday gestures or at the footsteps left by animals on the soil, the snow, the grass.

The initiatives aiming at producing 'responsible fashion objects' continue to multiply: using creativity to produce environmental support and sustainability, seems to have become one of the main ways to make ethics and aesthetics meet. Producing 'limited edition' training shoes, spectacles, lingerie or evening clothes as responsible objects means that, when they are bought, part of the purchase price goes to a worthy initiative. The Red project, illustrated in 2006 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, for instance, has coined this slogan: 'Do the Red thing: your retail therapy can pay for someone else's drug therapy'. The trademark Red, chosen by Bono of U2, was founded by American Express with Giorgio Armani, Converse and Gap, who devote a part of their revenue from this line to the Global Fund. To extend our field of observation it will suffice to quote one of the most striking examples in Europe, the English Art & Business which defines itself as 'the world's most successful and widespread creative network. It helps business people support the arts and the arts inspire business people because good business and great art together create a richer society. This is the most important non-profit world organisation that operates through public art interventions in a number of fields: art, culture, design, education, environment, health, and housing. The main concern of the artists that participate in this type of work is the positive impact of their projects in the places involved and, through their own emotionality, the emotional involvement of the users that are the target of these goods. And so, yet again, art can be confirmed as an important vehicle of civil and ethical values, showing its power to turn its intrinsic uselessness into forms of usefulness, participation and social responsibility.

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