

Boris Groys's Topology of Art

Writing a PhD on contemporary art practices at a department of Sociology, I have repeatedly been confronted with the need to reflect on classical sociological approaches to art articulated in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979) and *Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982) and Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art* (1981). One of the principal problems I have encountered in much sociological studies of art is their lack of a positive definition or engagement with the aesthetic, and the reduction of questions of artistic agency to a priori structuralist principles.

The writings of the Russo-German cultural theorist and philosopher Boris Groys have provided an alternative point of orientation for me in trying to come to terms with contemporary artistic practices from a point of view that pays attention to the aesthetic, and equally aims to relate it to contemporary social and political conditions. Since 2008 a crucial part of Groys's oeuvre has become available in English with the publication of his collection of essays *Art Power*.¹ The essays included in *Art Power* offer an overview of Groys's writings on art, in particular his concept of cultural innovation (which conceptualizes the production of the culturally new as the 'revaluation of values' according to a spatial logic: the placement of the profane in relation to what has been culturally archived and valued; the valorising and devalorising comparison; the shifting of the value border between profane space and the valorised cultural archive; and the reconfiguration of cultural archives), and his analysis of the relations between art and politics, i.e. art and power.

Groys's concept of cultural innovation as following a spatial logic is articulated most elaborately in his German book *Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie* (1992) - On the New. An Experiment in Cultural Economy. However, the essays 'On the New' and 'Equal Aesthetic Rights' included in *Art Power* provide a revised summary of it.² Groys's reflections on the relationship between art and politics are best known from his *The Total Art of Stalinism* ([1988] 1992), which examines the relationship between the early 20th century Russian avant-garde, 1930s and 1940s Socialist Realism, and Stalinist politics. *Art Power* continues these reflections but in a post-soviet time, now looking at the relations between art and political-economic forces. The essay 'Equal Aesthetic Rights' and the 'Introduction' to the *Art Power* provide an insight into the nature of Groys's thinking on the subject of art and politics.

Crucially, I suggest, that what binds all of Groys's writing together is the analysis of art through its 'topological situation'. The German language collection of essays entitled *Topologie der Kunst* (2003) – Topology of Art, expresses this tendency most clearly. For the *Interart* workshop, I propose a discussion of Groys's writings on art defined as a 'topology of art'. My interest is in discussing the potentials and weaknesses of Groys's topological insights for researchers who are looking to draw from them in the analysis of subjects sitting at the intersection between 'art' and 'society'. The texts I provide for discussion include: the 'Introduction' to *Art Power*, and the essays 'Equal Aesthetic Rights' and 'On the New'.

I suggest the following three questions as a starting point for the discussion:

¹ Groys, B. (2008a) *Art Power*. London: The MIT Press.

² The final part of the essay "On the New" also provides an insight into Groys's media philosophy previously articulated in his book *Unter Verdacht. Eine Phänomenologie der Medien* (2000) – Under Suspicion. A Phenomenology of the Media.

1. One of the peculiarities of Groys's writings on art is that he presents its topological situation neither in a general theory about art, nor does he examine art through the social or other 'context' exterior to it. Instead, his arguments develop from inside specific moments of artistic practice. In most cases, the latter are modern artistic works (e.g. Duchamp's ready-mades) which in themselves already reflect the 'context' in which they function. As Groys observes: 'Increasingly literary texts and art works themselves reflect the commercial, the semiotic, the medial and last but not least the political context of their own functioning'³. On the other hand, and somewhat contradictory to the first point, many of Groys's claims are what Barry Schwabsky has recently called 'breathtaking generalizations immune to empirical validation'⁴.

Given these peculiarities, how can one if researching contemporary artistic practices 'make use' of Groys's analyses? (A) Can his generalizations be taken serious; and (B) can his arguments, developed from within very specific moments of artistic production, be transposed onto other no less specific situations?

2. Where do Groys's reflections on cultural innovation leave artistic agency?
3. Can the concept of 'equal aesthetic rights' serve as a starting point for an 'interventionist' research of artistic practice?

³ Groys, B. (1997) *Kunst-Kommentare*. Wien: Passagen Verlag, p. 65

⁴ Schwabsky, B. (2009) 'Post-Communist Aesthetics', in *New Left Review* 56(March/April 2009): 154-160.