

A Formalist Manifesto

i. The Situation

Although the social landscape today postures acceptance towards artists, it is in reality more hostile than it has ever been. The Art Market identifies itself as being the instigator of artistic freedoms and of aesthetic progress, yet the so-called "advancements" of art have become increasingly non-artistic, and the situation progressively dogmatic.

Our circumstances, however, are also more promising than ever before, for the more the incumbent treatment of art descends further into its self-annihilation, the more it feeds a response from artists the likes of which shapes movements which portend a major shift for the cultural position of art as well as for the life of the artist.

ii. Two Treatments of Art

Attitudes taken up during the movement of "Pop Art" caused art to be treated as though it had fully articulated, universally understood meanings existent outside of the work itself. The social and cultural mentalities towards art have since developed into two primary treatments, to which all others might be subordinated. These two treatments may be known as objectism and formalism.

Although the procedures involved in both are not necessarily antithetical to each other, the conditions put forth by contemporary cultural values have spawned living applications of both to art, which has bred enmity. The conflict arises in that the dominant treatment – objectism – has been unnaturally *misapplied*. Hence there is a constant attempt on the part of objectism to take the place of something essential to art which cannot be replaced without destroying it.

Objectism has retained cultural relevancy for the past few decades, however, there has been a recent resurgence of formalist ideals among

artists, fueling secession from the mainstream Art Market and potentiating the formation of new kinds of prosperous aesthetic cultures in which artists may autonomously realize their work.

Such secessions began with the general understanding that modern Capitalismⁱ cannot be thought of as something separate from daily life, or as being incidental to the situation in which we find ourselves now. Indeed, modern Capitalism is the generator of our culture's moral and ethical values, which inform every aspect of society. Such values have traditionally been absolutely unsympathetic to artists, unsurprisingly so; in such societies, the worth of things derives from a concept of "usefulness", which is determined by measuring to what degree the value of the thing can be accounted for finitely in terms that are significant for Capitalism.

Such criteria make no sense for art, as the real values of art are immeasurable in units that would be meaningful for modern Capitalismⁱⁱ. In other words, the real values of art cannot be quantified in terms of monetary profit or incentive towards profitⁱⁱⁱ. In this case, art and artists are determined to lack a social function. So it is that both are treated with considerable contempt by society, a contempt augmented by technology. In the eyes of such a system, art – insofar as it is worth something to and therefore recognized by Capitalism – can be produced by machines, in patterns, or that one work may be cheaply reproduced. In this way of treating art, expression is meaningless, and the work can be reduced to a series of formulas. An object that approximates a work that is mass-produced is just as good as a genuine article of expression – or perhaps even better, as it is easier to integrate into the Market as a product.

Artists are systemically identified as leaches on society, then bled of support because we do not generally conduct recognizable kinds of "usefulness" – artists are considered dead weight for Capitalism in this way, and are done away with, albeit quietly, so as not to cause outright rebellion: the artist's life has become one that by definition is economically impoverished to the point of destitution. Additionally, as we are given no worth by our own virtue or by art's own virtue, artists who are already desperate become regular subjects of further exploitation. Such an existence has become normalized, as though it

were the natural place for the artist – it has as such become an accepted truism in these circumstances.

This position is well known to the artist in general, who, in order to survive, has to come into the situation as an individual who is simultaneously adaptable while remaining steadfast to original values. Of course, such values, incompatible with the shape of contemporary society, typically give way under the need to survive. The courage of the artist-as-artist is thus extinguished; we become artists-in-service in order to live.

For the artist-in-service, the vital impulse to express, which is the quality that defines the very nature of being an artist, is recognized only when it is directly applied to a purpose which sublimates expression. The notion of art existing for itself, which is the only thing art is actually capable of doing, is something that is heavily demonized on one side by Capitalism, as we have seen, but it is also attacked by anti-Capitalists, who might otherwise be allies to artists but have been manipulated by the procedures of the Market to believe that "useless" art serves the enemy by being the object or even the practice of the bourgeoisie. Even when that has been made true through the Market's perversion of art as a "luxury item", it cannot be said that this is the fault of art; neither art nor artists could have created such a circumstance. It can only be the result of a corrupted treatment of art.

If artists are not merely to survive, but to thrive in the future, then some questions must be asked seriously, so as to make an obvious case even more apparent: is the system that ostracizes, isolates, and takes advantage of the artist the same system that could perpetuate the best interests of the artist, or of art? That is to say, could a culture that regularly misappropriates artists for activities it believes to be more beneficial really be the kind of culture that would allow art to become consequential, when it is otherwise treated as a superfluous nuisance? Would it be capable of redefining its whole criteria of "usefulness", simply for the exception of art, which it considers useless? Could such a system make the determination that art is not simply a good – but that it *is* good for its own sake?

Our answers to these inquiries are perpetually apparent, amplified empirically; as has been said, they are obvious: such a system could not do such a thing without unraveling itself altogether, and, as the pursuit of art has retained a justified reputation for being a form of economic suicide, we must conclude that this culture has never re-oriented itself towards art in the way that is required. We have no reason to believe that a fundamental, permanent change will ever occur of its own accord in such a social climate; to wait for such a thing truly *is* useless.

If artists and the general public must acquiesce to the idea that our climate will not or cannot change, that we must adapt once more and forever, then it would seem that the best solution is to treat art in such a way that becomes valuable to modern Capitalism and its reductionist mentality. It is in this attempt to compromise where the treatment of objectism arises.

iii. The Problems of Objectism

The contemporary "Art World", which is also called by its more appropriate name, the Art Market, provides a rubric of values for art that are already quantifiable, because they have been determined by systems which already existed: as the Art Market is a Market, these values are simply versions of cultural Capitalistic values, and originate from the Market in general.

These values are accepted to the degree that they have come to dominate not only how art is treated, but how art is made, and ultimately the experience of art as a whole. Anything which falls outside of the province of the Market is demonized or ridiculed, as this is where the true threat to it is found. For to find real meaning in something which has no meaning for Capitalism is dangerous to it; such findings unravel the ignis fatuus values of Capitalism and its Markets. The fall of these illusions encourages abstinence from indulging them, and its meaning collapses altogether.

As a treatment, objectism requires a system of meanings. As such, it is the originator of practices such as the "artist statement", pseudo-art

criticism, elitism, academicism, conceptualism, exclusionism, and ultimately, to the actual disappearance of the work of art and of expression itself. The name "objectism" is apt for this treatment because its practices dictate that the work of art ought to be treated as an object; therefore, that it relates to its atmosphere the same way any other object might.

It must be stated again that the procedures of objectism are not inherently evil, nor are they even necessarily destructive. This approach is beneficial to worthwhile pursuits, but pursuits in which art is subordinated to or illustrative for some other venture, such as art-as-history, art-as-anthropology, art-as-sociology, art-as-politics, or art-as-philosophy. It is not, however, an approach that is conducive to *art-as-art*, because the essence of art eludes the kinds of object contexts that function for the other pursuits. The biggest distinction between the adventure of art and these other studies is that the latter hinge upon methods of *secondary* interpretability in order to be comprehensible, which are taken to be readily given, even universal – language is the most significant of these. Works of art, on the other hand, can only be glimpsed properly if it is understood that the criteria of their interpretability are found *within themselves* – artistic or aesthetic interpretability is in this way a *different kind* of interpretability; it is a *primary* interpretability.^{iv}

Any criteria external to the work are simply not applicable to art, because any criteria outside of the work of art cannot explain, expand upon, or justify the nature of the particulars of a work. The biography of the artist may plausibly give a type of object justification for the *apparent content* of a work (that is to say, the apperceived "subject matter"), but it absolutely cannot give the formal *method* of the work (the actual subject matter) – in other words, it will not get one to the *forms of the expression* (the actual "why", or the actual "how" of the work), which are the things that make the work indispensable. Where object things may be explicated, argued, examined, or weighed through language, verbal facts, or other sciences, the essence of art eludes those types of comprehension and maintains its own inner logic. It is the essence of art that we want, for it is the essence of art alone that consummates the vital impulse of expression. Without it, art is

extraneous to anything non-art that is applied to it. Without it, there would be no need for art – we would get on well totally without it.

The-work-of-art-as-object is presumed to have, embody, and be “understandable” through object histories or contexts because it is through them that the work is “completed”, assuming they are ever obtained. This means, of course, that objectism presupposes that the work of art is inherently *incomplete*, so that it requires external, post-hoc materials to be made supposedly intelligible. This *kind* of so-called intelligibility, which is not intelligibility direct but intelligibility misplaced, is what makes art potentially viable for Capitalism, because it annexes art to the elite, who are told they are capable of comprehending so-called artistic concepts, who have a knowledge art history which grants them authority, and who have access to participate in the contemporary art discussion. Additionally, as contemporary art – primarily objectist art – is the project of innovation for innovation’s sake, it is the image of the self-made successful individual, which is justified by pre-given criteria, which, when it is said to be embodied in a work of art, provides the upper class with an easy way to prove their status – thus it becomes luxury. Thus it becomes attractively compatible with Capitalism.

By being viable for Capitalism, artists are offered not only the potential for survival, but also the opportunity to thrive economically; for this, artists have either had to succumb to values and procedures antithetical to themselves or to their work, or they have embraced it fully under the impression that the situation signifies the genuine “advancement” of art, internally or culturally. Anything found lacking in object justifications, or individuals who cannot or do not have access them, are labeled philistines, which is typically shorthand for saying that they are not of consequence economically or socially speaking. They are thereby totally disregarded. It is unacceptable to think that this could be a primary quality of real cultural advancement.

When objectism adopts novelty, it falsely asserts that it is approaching some “ideal” of art by virtue of simply being “new” – that the never-having-been-done has some intrinsic merit, or is indicative of progress. This is calculable by the attention given to it as

spectacle. The actual implication in this, the functional one, is that the "advancement" of art is to approach a world in which the work of art is done away with completely. We already have several cases where empty rooms are lauded by objectist mentalities as being successful works of art. This must mean that for the objectist, art is reducible to nothing at all – yet even this absolute nothingness can come to have apparent substance by the application of secondary justifications.

Although objectism may have at first appeared as a life raft for art by making a version of it that is viable for Capitalism, by the same token it is now destroying it in being misapplied. Artists are prepared for a new method.

iv. The Future of Art

There has, within the past decade, emerged a pattern: an increase of artists deciding to live their lives within communities that coagulate organically through shared ideals. The decision to work and live this way has become gradually more of a conscious effort, as artists have begun to recognize and articulate the kind of damage that the mainstream Art Market causes to themselves, to their colleagues, and to art. In this recognition, we depart from modern Capitalism to enter a world of different values.

The shift is embodied in quiet practices such as peer gatherings, non-profit galleries, free art schools, studio collectives, self-published works of criticism, and general treatments of art that are functionally alternative to the Art Market. The increased viability of living outside of cities while remaining involved in communities of artistic import has encouraged artists to do precisely this, which has brought about a further rejection of the mainstream Art Market. The decision to involve oneself in these things with little to no financial reward is a practice consistent with an artistic culture, whose values are similarly artistic; such values cannot be regulated by Capitalism.

Once it fails to regulate, the Art Market attempts to ridicule or put down such entities by deeming them "unserious". Yet it is in these

places that we see the vital impulse of artistic expression being nurtured; it is here that the most truly serious art is being made.

Artists who have chosen to refuse to be competitive, to be isolated, to accept a meaningless concept of "success", who have chosen instead to devote themselves to their work and to their communities, to thrive off the investment of their colleagues, and to let themselves be porous to the world, are today creating art that feeds itself, that has its own life. They make new meanings of "success". This revitalization of art in these places is propped up by formalism, which is a treatment that naturally follows art, and when actively applied, only serves to assist the experience of it.

v. Formalism

As a treatment, formalism employs procedures of investigation that approach the work of art as a complete whole. That is to say that the work is taken to be something that cannot be explicated nor experienced through any system extrinsic to the work itself. In other words, the rubric for interpretability for a work is taken to be *primary* – immediately located within the work itself. Such a treatment understands that the vital impulse of art, which is consummated in expression, is inherently tied to the artist's immediate, mysterious aesthetic thinking, which is a kind of feeling thinking. As such, the artist is accountable for the expression; the work of art by definition is the naturally occurring combined efforts of thinking, feeling, experiencing, and then expressing in such a way that it becomes re-expressible.

There is no justification for the existence of works of art beyond their culmination into existence. The quality of the work may be judged in terms of the qualities of the forms of expression. As re-expression is practiced – as more work is actively experienced – one gains a more acute sense of oneself, so that the sense-knowledge of expressions becomes more refined. Down to the minute particulars, one may come to know why *this* work causes *this* experience of think-feeling, in *this* way. The more this happens, the better viewers we become, certainly;

but also, because art is primal, vital, we also become more self-intelligent, more self-aware; this in turn makes one more attuned to the world. We are better living creatures for going towards art, as a whole, rather than only ever turning away from it to something else.

The practice of *experiencing* a work of art is the foundation of the treatment of formalism; it is the practice of consciously applying the same methods used in its making: visual works are grasped through looking, music is grasped by listening, poetry is grasped by reading – so it is that looking then becomes a way of re-making, listening a way of re-composing, and reading a way of re-writing. When formalism is said to be a “natural” method, it is because this is what is already happening when the viewer is before a work. Then, to better get ahold of it, we instinctively take an active role with our senses: we are trying, naturally, to *behold* the work – to make work for ourselves by any other standard of comprehension is the result of our own interference and detracts from the essential; it is the act of actively not noticing, and to *notice* is the core of the formalist method.

What is seen, what is heard, and how? How do the elements of a work lie in relation to one another? What is the nature of that relation, in terms of its expression? What is the method of the work, how is it self-defining? How do the parts become wholes, become parts again, become new wholes? The formalist’s investigation stays within the work, which is the primary source, the only feasible source for art at all. The “why” of all of this puts itself forward: expression has the force of coming into being. It must be, and in order to be, it must be *this*.^v Formalism as a *treatment* is merely the bringing to consciousness the participation with a work, so that it may be more accurately experienced.

When the work is fully beheld – something accomplished with time and effort and a refined practice of noticing – then emotional, mental, and even physical states expressed in works of art are re-expressed in the viewer. This is why the experience of a work of art can be so profound for viewers who had nothing to do with its creation – they have found articulation in something that they could not themselves articulate, or realized something which they had never before experienced, so they did not before know it was possible; moreover, they were unaware that there

were parts of them that could be so deeply affected, until those parts were affected by some work of art. This direct transmission, this passage of feeling thoughts in such a way that they become ideal, and thus truly universal – this essential communicability is the lifeblood of art.

If we are to abstract this experience from ourselves, then we become culpable for stepping outside of ourselves, for stepping away from ourselves as living creatures, for giving ourselves over to something other than what is natural, and for discarding what is real. Such an end is unacceptable, so we will abandon *it* for the sake of art, for the sake of nature, for the sake of ourselves, and for the sake of all that we know to be good.

ⁱ Despite not wanting this to become absolutely political, I think it makes sense to address Capitalism as a
ⁱⁱ ie. the personal betterment of individuals, emotional and spiritual growth, aesthetic sensitivities; but not these things as then misappropriated for actions that feed Capitalism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Incentive towards profit = “luxury”; art is not supposed to be annexed to luxury.

^{iv} For example, science: you cannot *know* something in science without knowing the systems of measurement relevant to science. The effects or products of science is its primary; the systems for understanding it are secondary. Language, math, symbols – these are all necessary for science as a pursuit. History requires tremendous levels of secondary and tertiary interpretabilities; language, sociology, etc. are required.

“Formalism” is both a mentality as well as a treatment.

How to deal with theatricality (Fried’s) in these terms?

^v I’d love to go a little deeper into this, eventually. Go full-out Hegelian, perhaps.