

# The Banality of Good

That art has little or nothing to do with beauty is something we have known since the avant-garde revolted against it. But the jury is still out on whether goodness is its ultimate aim. A clumsy, Christianised Platonism according to Nietzsche, or a Platonised Christianity if we listen to Kierkegaard, it makes no difference really: it manages to live on in our museum galleries, in university classrooms, in the political discourse of the now permanently moderate left, and in social media that are worn out by so much intellectual posturing and so many likes. We go on and on, denouncing evil and thus siding with good. They applaud us. The old Platonic triad: truth, beauty, and goodness. Núria Güell's latest work throws the first stone, at the risk that it may fall on her head.

## From Aestheticism to Moralism

Let us begin by saying that art is a recent invention dating from the late 18th century. Just read Shiner or Rancière. What we call, say, “primitive art” or “Greek art” when we look back through our retrospective lens may have been sculpture, painting, or architecture, but it was certainly not “art”. Three factors had to converge for the notion of art as such to emerge: the consolidation of aesthetics as a discourse that describes a work of art as an object of disinterested contemplation (Kant), the birth of institutions such as museums and galleries that removed works from their contexts (of religion, power, etc...) and thus legitimised them as autonomous works of art, and the existence of a market that provides an exchange value capable of turning artworks into a commodity. Without this discursive, institutional, and economic triangle, there is no art. From then on, the concept of beauty, redefined by Kant as that which provokes the harmony of the faculties, remained closer to the type of commodity that the bourgeoisie fetishized and turned into an object of complacency and veneration. Reassurance of the stable order of their world, of the “order that is required pure”, as the title of Núria Güell's exhibition states. It was this order of beauty and commodification that the avant-garde revolted against. From then on, art showed the structural dissonance that lurks behind the concept of beauty—the system failure, as Žižek would say. The Kantian notion of the sublime, which had applied to nature and mathematics, came to govern art. The experience of a time and space capable of expanding the boundaries of ordinary perception, enabling us to feel beyond the transcendental forms of sensibility, became the criterion for defining what art is. The time in question is probably the time of film and video art, the time of Antonioni, Duras, Tarkovsky, Mekas, and Bill Viola. The time when time itself was torn. A time that—unfortunately, for some of us who are old and still eager for experience—has ended. As Viveiros de Castro says, the end has already come: that of the linear and teleological time which still believed in progress, and that of its flip-side, the art that counterattacked and took us by surprise.

## Dematerialisation and the Discourse of the Good Guys

It turns out that this art of dissonance could not entirely rid itself of its commodity status. Although it had renounced beauty it was still too material, aesthetic enough to be admired, hanging over the sofa in the living room of the rich guy in slippers who does not have the heart to deny himself a Kiefer or a Barceló. Being cultured still looks good. Ownership makes the man. The end never quite comes.

This is why conceptual art countered with the dematerialisation of the artwork. Contemporary art resignified the concept of art, giving it an ontological status that set it apart from the elements that had made it too sensual, aesthetic and beautiful enough to encourage commodity fetishism. A painter, a filmmaker, or a sculptor is no longer an artist by virtue of painting, sculpting, or filming. No one who has not understood the evolution of contemporary art and the eradication of the old disciplines can be an artist now. The time of “artivism” has come. Be it through language, performance, actions, or projects, the cult object is now in decline, along with the figure of the artist. Or not. Museums oscillate between becoming tourist attractions and organising projects that speak of the end of a world that got off to a bad start from the beginning. Museums still need artists, artists still need money, and consumers still need spectacle, highbrow or not, as the case may be.

This is the point where Núria Güell's latest exhibition starts, with its Act 1: “In the Beginning Was the Word”, in which mission statements from some of the most active and socially engaged contemporary art museums are displayed. Naturally, the concept of beauty has disappeared from their discourses, but we should not rejoice too soon because a whole list of moralistic terms parade before our eyes instead. Some are vaguely edifying, others mildly political, in line with the ideology of the day: “non-hierarchical, multifaceted mediator”, “welcoming and hospitable space”, “empathy, diversity, and inclusion”, “gender equality and empowerment”, “participation and dynamism”. The metaphor of weaving is inevitable, as are “practices based on care and listening”, gender perspectives, “archives of the commons”, and “the climate situation”. It was too early for Núria to include the “MACBA of affects”. How we would have laughed.

Good is as banal as beauty. Moralism has replaced aestheticism, which was, at least, rigorous with its object of study. From now on it seems that art will concern itself with pointing out evil, inequality, hierarchies, the climate situation. There will be no mention of aesthetic rigor or consistency of language. Curators have replaced artists. It is now curators who weave the discourses, arrange the artworks, create narratives. It is immaterial whether the work is consistent or not, as long as it persists, as Deleuze would say. As long as it adheres to the official sermon, to the discourse of the good guys. At best, it will be formalised correctly. Capital is laundered in cultural production. We are all very happy.

## Good Is as Banal as Beauty

When, during his trial, Eichmann brought up Kant to justify taking part in the “Final Solution”, he did two things. The first was to show, as Hannah Arendt explains, that one does not have to be a psychopath, or a die-hard anti-Semite, or a monster, to do evil. Often it suffices to follow the law, to be obedient, to uphold the rules with enough conviction. Good conscience will do the rest. The second, however, illustrates what Lacan argues in his essay “Kant avec Sade”, namely that of these two moralists of modernity—Immanuel Kant and the Marquis de Sade—the sadist is Kant. What does this mean? Well, that good is what we must fear. There is nothing more dangerous, more sadistic, more malevolent, than someone who is convinced that he is acting correctly, in accordance with moral law. This explains why Kant, the most moral and rational of men, was a staunch defender of the death penalty, while Sade, the libertine for whom desire is law, was against it. As implacable as an official, good never waivers. Nor did Eichmann.

And what did the priests say to Núria in the videos in Act 3, “The Banality of Good”? Well, the very same thing. That despite her bold artistic projects, which are often on the verge of illegality or immorality, despite all those works that are reinterpreted by fellow artists and presented in Act 2, she is on the side of good, and so are her colleagues. Artists are “prophets”, they are “humanity’s vanguard”, opening up “paths of hope”, one priest says. Another, slightly more muddled one, not as well-versed on the history of aesthetics, equates goodness with beauty, and beauty with God. He refers us to the “Letter of His Holiness to Artists” (1999), an encyclical that would delight the cultural industry and its splendid spectacle, as it bestows its blessing on all those obsolete notions of art and beauty that contemporary art set out to demolish. The end never quite comes. Sister Maria, the YouTuber nun, a woman who I honestly warm to, and who seems to believe in what she does—although we have seen that Eichmann, Sade and Kant, also believed strongly in what they did—, goes even further, saying that what Núria does is “an act of righteousness”, because she points out sinfulness. That is a good deed that Núria contributes to society, Sister Maria says, and she has been called to build the kingdom of God in her own way. Of course Núria ends up becoming a nun. What’s more it’s much cheaper for tax purposes. When you belong to the community of the good guys, all is well. We are blessed, applauded, “liked”. We are all very happy. Eichmann smiles with satisfaction. Sade less so. He’s bored.

If this work by Núria Güell—her last act for the time being—had consisted in showing up the lack of aesthetic culture among members of the Catholic church, if she had limited herself to mocking their banal moralism, we would have been bored to bits, in a fraternal embrace with the Marquis de Sade. There is nothing so banal as pointing out what we already know (even if some people don’t know it yet). What makes this work unsettling is the fact that the mechanism points instead to art itself and to the art

institution. “All Order is Required Pure” questions the evangelical undercurrent of contemporary art, which is no small thing. And in doing so, Núria points the finger at herself. The stone about to fall on her head.

### **It's Hard to Say**

It's hard to say what contemporary art should consist of. Whether it should be destroying a recently created notion associated with the market and the bourgeoisie, which it constantly speaks out against despite being its counterpart; or resignifying the term in order to turn it into an effective weapon that would, for once, cause serious pain, as Minguet Batllori sometimes argues; or becoming an artefact of parasitic resistance that lives in the art institution while revealing its hypocrisy, as Joan Burdeus suggests in his review of this exhibition, a view shared by members of the Post Brothers project. What is certain is that art does not consist of doing good, of teaching us how to care for one another, how to be well-rounded and love the common good, how to understand ourselves and our own fragility, or how to acquire fine sentiments that are harmless and useful to the system it criticises. If this is the art of today, as the mission statements of the museums that house it suggest, it lacks the boldness and acerbity of the works and manifestos of the avant-garde artists, when they insisted on tearing down the ideal of beauty that governed art. It lacks the courage shown by those who refused to accept its status as a cultural commodity. Or by the anarchist art thief who Fabra i Coats has hired as a security guard for the exhibition. If art limits itself to denouncing colonialism, sexism, sexual exploitation, neoliberalism, precarisation, the absence of historical memory, global social and economic inequality, and so on, without questioning itself, without overturning the notion of good that underpins it— and that has been dismantled for centuries by Sade, Nietzsche, Artaud, Genet, and so many others—,we will all be very happy, but art will be as banal as the institutional discourse that sustains it.

In fact, even religion has never been that. And it's hard to believe that the priests Núria spoke to did not know this. Kierkegaard rebelled against official Christianity because the Church had turned God into a moraliser, when it was actually a matter of believing by virtue of the absurd, of believing in the impossible. It was morality that killed God, replacing faith with its pale substitute: goodness. If there were ears to hear it, many people today—starting with the priests and YouTuber tuns—would still be shocked by this conclusion that Kierkegaard reached in the 19th century. Perhaps it will also be morality that kills art today. Everything points to it. The end never quite comes. Eichmann smiles. Sade is bored, and so are the “still-living”.

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