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THE LONELINESS OF THE PROJECT by BORIS GROYS

The formulation of diverse projects has now become the major preoccupation of contemporary man. These days, whatever endeavor one sets out to pursue in the economic, political or cultural field, one first has to formulate a fitting project in order to apply for official approval or funding of the project from one or several public authorities. Should this project in its original form be rejected, it is then modified in an attempt to improve its chances of being accepted. If the revised project is dismissed out of hand, one has no alternative but to propose an entirely new one in its place. In this manner, all members of our society are constantly preoccupied with devising, discussing and dismissing an endless series of projects. Appraisals are written, budgets meticulously calculated, commissions assembled, committees appointed and resolutions tabled. Not inconsiderable numbers of our contemporaries spend their time reading nothing but proposals, appraisals and budgets of this nature. Most of these projects remain forever unrealized. All it requires is one or another assessor to report that a project lacks promise, is difficult to finance, or is simply undesirable, and the entire labor invested in the project's formulation has been a waste of time.

Needless to say, the degree of work invested in the presentation of a project is quite considerable and becomes more labor-intensive as time progresses. The projects submitted to various juries, commissions and public bodies are packaged in increasingly elaborate design and formulated with ever-greater detail so as to suitably impress their potential assessors. Accordingly, this mode of project formulation is gradually advancing to an art form in its own right whose significance for our society is still all too little acknowledged. For, regardless of whether or not it is actually carried out, each project in fact represents a draft for a particular vision of the future, and in each case one that can be fascinating and instructive. However, most of the projects which our civilization is ceaselessly generating often just vanish or are simply thrown away once they have been rejected. This culpably negligent treatment of the project as an art form is indeed highly regrettable since it bars us from analyzing and understanding the hopes and visions for the future that have been invested in these projects and which might offer greater insight into our society than anything else. This is clearly not the appropriate context to undertake a sociological analysis of contemporary projects. But the question one might ask at this point is what hopes are linked to the project as such? Or, why do people want to do a project at all, instead of just living on into the future unfettered by projects?

The following answer can be given to this question: above all else, each project strives to acquire a socially sanctioned loneliness. Indeed, to lack a plan of any kind inevitably puts us at the mercy of the general flow of world events, of overall universal fate, compelling us to maintain constant communication with out immediate surroundings.

This is strikingly apparent in the case of events that *per definitionem* occur without prior planning, such as earthquakes, major fires or flooding. These sorts of events bring people closer together, forcing them to communicate with one another and act in unison. But the same also applies to any kind of personal misfortune – whoever has just broken a leg or been struck down by a virus immediately becomes dependent on outside help. But in everyday life, even when it mindlessly ticks on without purpose, people are held in a common bond by a shared rhythm of work and recreation. In the prevailing conditions of daily life, individuals who are not prepared to enter into communication at any moment with their fellow men rate as difficult, antisocial and unfriendly, and are subject to social censure.

But this situation undergoes a volte-face whenever someone can present a socially sanctioned individual project as the reason for his self-isolation and renunciation of any form of communication. We all understand that when somebody has to carry out a project, he is under immense time pressure that leaves him no time whatsoever for anything else. It is commonly accepted that writing a book, preparing an exhibition or striving to make a scientific discovery are pastimes that permit the individual to avoid social contact, to discommunicate, if not to excommunicate himself – yet without automatically being judged to be a bad person. The (agreeable) paradox about this is that the longer the project is scheduled to run, the greater the time pressure one is subjected to. Most projects that are approved in the present framework of the artistic world are scheduled to run for a period of up to five years at the most. In exchange, after this limited period of seclusion, the individual is expected to present a finished product and return to the fray of social communication, at least up to the point, possibly, when he or she submits a proposal for yet another project. In addition, our society still continues to accept projects that might preoccupy a person for the entire length of his life, as for instance in the fields of science or art. Someone in avid pursuit of a particular goal of knowledge or of artistic activity is permitted to have no time for his social environment for an unlimited duration. What is nonetheless still expected of him is that, at least by the final moment of his life, he has some form of finished product to show for – namely, a work – that will retrospectively offer social justification for the life he has spent in isolation. But there are also other kinds of projects that have no set time limit, infinite projects such as religion or the building of a better society that irrevocably remove people from their overall communicative contemporaneity and transfer them into the time frame of a lonely project.

The execution of such projects often demands collective effort. The isolation of a project thereby frequently becomes a shared isolation. Numerous religious communities and sects are known to have withdrawn from the overall communicative enclosure to pursue their own religious project of spiritual improvement. During the communist era, entire countries severed themselves from the rest of humanity in order to achieve their target of building a better society. Of course, all these projects can now be safely said to have failed since they have no finished product to show for, and because at a certain point in history their proponents also eschewed their self-isolation in favor of re-entering general communication. Accordingly, modernization is generally understood as the constant expansion of communication, as a process of progressive secularization that disperses all states of loneliness and self-isolation. Modernization is seen as the emergence of a new society of total inclusion that rules out all forms of exclusivity. But the project as such is an altogether modern phenomenon – equally, the project to create an open, thoroughly secularized society of total communication is ultimately also still a project. And, as already mentioned, each project first and foremost amounts to a proclamation and establishment of seclusion and self-isolation. This gives an ambivalent status to modernity.

On the one hand it fosters a compulsion for total communication and total collective contemporaneity, while on the other it is constantly generating new projects that repeatedly end in the reconquest of radical isolation. This too is how we must perceive the various projects of the historical artistic avant-garde, which devised their own languages and their own aesthetic agendas. The languages of the avant-garde might have been conceived with universal application in mind, as the promise of a common future for one and all; yet, during their own time, they brought on the communicative (self-) isolation of their advocates, thus clearly branding them for all to see.

Why does the project result in isolation? The answer to this has in fact already been given. Each project is above all the declaration of another, new future that is supposed to come about once the project has been executed. But in order to induce such a new future one first has to take a period of leave or absence for oneself, with which the project has transferred its agent into a parallel state of heterogeneous time. This other time frame, in turn, is undocked from time as experienced by society: it is de-synchronized. Society's life carries on regardless thereof; the usual run of things remains unimpinged. But unnoticed somewhere beyond this general flow of time, somebody has begun working on another project. He is writing a book, preparing an exhibition or planning a spectacular act of terrorism. And he is doing this in the hope that once the book is published, the exhibition opened or the assassination carried out, the general run of things will change and all mankind will be bequeathed a different future; the very future, in fact, to which this project has anticipated and aspired. In other words, at first glance every project would appear to thrive solely on the hope of its resynchronization with the general run of things. The project is deemed a success if this resynchronization managed to steer the run of things in the desired direction. And it is deemed a failure if the run of things remains unaffected by the project's realization. Yet, success and failure of the project both have one thing in common: both outcomes terminate the project, and both lead to the resynchronization of the project's parallel state of time with that of the general run of things. And in both cases this resynchronization familiarly causes a malaise, even prompting despondency. Whether a project ends in success or failure plays no role whatsoever. In both cases what is felt to be distressing is the loss of this existence in parallel time, the abandonment of a life beyond the general run of things.

If one has a project – or more precisely, is living in a project – one always is already in the future. One is working on something that (still) cannot be shown to others, that remains concealed and incommunicable. The project allows one to emigrate from the present into a virtual future, thereby causing a temporal rupture between oneself and everyone else, for they have not yet arrived in this future and are still waiting for the future to happen. But the author of the project already knows what the future will look like, since his project is nothing other than a description of this future. The key reason, incidentally, why the approval process for a project is so highly unpleasant to the project's author is because, at the earliest stage of its submission, he is already being asked to give a meticulously detailed description of how this future will be brought about and what its outcome will be. If the author proves incapable of doing so, his project will be turned down and refused funding. Yet, should he in fact manage to deliver the stipulated precise description he will eliminate this very distance between himself and the others that constitutes the entire appeal of this project. If everyone knows from the very outset what course the project is likely to take and what its outcome will be, then the future will no longer come as a surprise to them. With that, however, the project loses its inherent purpose. For the project's author, namely, everything in the here and now is of no consequence since he is already living in the future and views the present as something that has to be overcome, abolished or at least changed. This is why he sees no reason

why he should justify himself to, or communicate with the present. Quite the contrary, it is the present that needs to justify itself to the future that has been proclaimed in the project. It is precisely this time gap, the precious opportunity to take a look at the present from the future, that makes the life lived in the project so enticing to its author and, inversely, that makes the project's execution ultimately so upsetting. Hence, in the eyes of any author of a project, the most agreeable projects are those, which, from their very inception, are conceived never to be completed, since these are the ones that are more likely to maintain the gap between the future and the present for an unspecified length of time. Such projects are never carried out, never generate an end result, never bring about a final project. But this is by no means to say that such unfinished, uncompletable projects are utterly excluded from social representation, even if they could never be expected to effect a resynchronization with the general run of things through some manner of specific result, successful or not. These kinds of projects can, after all, still be documented.

Sartre once described the state of 'being-a-project-in-progress' as the ontological condition of human existence. According to Sartre, each person lives from the perspective of their own, individual future that perforce remains barred from the view of others. In Sartre's terms, this condition results in the radical alienation of each individual, since everyone else can only see him as the finished product of his personal circumstances, but never as a heterogeneous project of these circumstances. Consequently, the heterogeneous parallel time frame of the project remains elusive to any form of representation in the present. Hence, for Sartre, the project is tainted by the suspicion of escapism, the deliberate avoidance of social communication and individual responsibility. So it is no surprise that Sartre also describes the subject's ontological condition as a state of 'mauvaise foi' or insincerity. And, for this reason, the existential hero of Sartrean provenience is perennially tempted to close the gap between the time of his project and that of the general run of things through a violent 'action directe' and thereby, if only for a brief moment, synchronize both frames. But while the heterogeneous time of the project cannot be brought to a conclusion, it can, as previously observed, be documented. One could even claim that art is nothing other than the documentation and representation of such project-based heterogeneous time. Long ago, this meant documenting divine history as a project for world redemption. Nowadays, it is about individual and collective projects for diverse futures. In any case, art documentation now grants all unrealized or unrealizable projects a place in the present without forcing them to be either a success or a failure. In these terms, Sartre's own writings could also be considered to be documentation of this kind.

In the past two decades the art project – in lieu of the work of art – has without question moved to centre stage in the art world's attention. Each art project may presuppose the formulation of a specific aim and of a strategy designed to achieve this aim, but this target is mostly formulated in such a way that we are denied the criteria which would allow us to ascertain whether the project's aim has or has not been achieved, whether excessive time is required to reach its goal or even if the target as such is intrinsically unattainable. Our attention is thereby shifted away from the production of a work (including a work of art) onto life in the art project; life that is not primarily a productive process, that is not tailored to developing a product, that is not 'result oriented'. In these terms, art is no longer understood as the production of works of art; but as documentation of life-in-the-project, regardless of the outcome the life in question has or it supposed to have had. This clearly has an effect on the way art is now defined. Nowadays art is no longer manifested as another, new object for contemplation that has

been produced by the artist, but as another, heterogeneous time-frame of the art project, which is documented as such.

A work of art is traditionally understood to be something that wholly embodies art, lending it immediacy and palpable, visible presence. When we go to an art exhibition, we generally assume that whatever is there on display – paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, ready-mades or installations – must be art. The works can of course in one way or another make reference to things that they are not, maybe to real-world objects or to certain political issues, but they do not allude to art itself, because they themselves are art. However, this traditional assumption defining visits to exhibitions and museums has proved progressively more misleading. Besides works of art, in present-day art spaces, we are now to an ever-increasing degree also confronted with the documentation of art in various guises. Similarly, here too we see pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts and installations, in other words: the same forms and media in which art is commonly presented. But when it comes to art documentation, art is no longer presented through these media but simply documented. For art documentation is *per definitionem* not art. Precisely by merely referring to art, art documentation makes it quite clear that art itself is no longer at hand and instantly visible but, instead, absent and hidden.

Art documentation thus signals the attempt to use artistic media within art spaces to make direct reference to life itself, in other words: to a form of pure activity or pure praxis, as it were; indeed, a reference to life in the art project, yet without wishing to directly represent it. Here, art is transformed into a way of life, whereby the work of art is turned into non-art, to mere documentation of this of life. Or, put in different terms, art is now becoming biopolitical because it has begun to produce and document life itself as pure activity by artistic means. Not only that, but art documentation could only have evolved at all under the conditions of our biopolitical age, in which life itself has become the object of technical and artistic creativity. So, once more we are faced with the question as to the relationship between life and art; but in an utterly novel constellation, one which is characterized by the paradox of art in the guise of the art project now also wanting to become life, instead of, for instance, simply reproducing life or furnishing it with art products. But the conventional question that comes to mind is to what extent documentation, including art documentation, can actually represent life itself?

All documentation is under general suspicion of inexorably adulterating life. For each act of documentation and archiving presupposed a certain choice of things and circumstances. Yet, such a selection is determined by criteria and values which are always questionable, and necessarily remain so. Furthermore, the process of documenting something always opens up a disparity between the document itself and the documented events, a divergence that can neither be bridged nor erased. But even if we managed to develop a procedure capable of reproducing life in its entirety and with total authenticity, we would again ultimately end up not with life itself, but with life's death mask, for it is the very uniqueness of life that constitutes its vitality. It is for this reason that our culture today is marked by a deep malaise towards documentation and the archive, and even by vociferous protest against the archive in the name of life. The archivists and bureaucrats in charge of documentation are widely regarded as the enemies of true life, favoring the compilation and administration of dead documents over the direct experience of life. In particular, the bureaucrat is viewed as an agent of death who wields the chilling power of documentation to render life grey, monotonous, uneventful and bloodless – in brief, deathlike. Similarly, once the artist too starts to

become involved with documentation, he runs the risk of being associated with the bureaucrat, under suspicion as a new agent of death.

As we know, however, the bureaucratic documentation stored in archives does not consist solely of recorded memories, but also includes projects and plans directed not at the past but at the future. These archives of projects contain drafts for life that has not yet taken place, but as it is perhaps meant to in the future. And what this means in our own biopolitical era is not merely making changes to the fundamental conditions of life, but actively engaging in the production of life itself. Biopolitics is frequently mistaken for the scientific and technological strategies of genetic manipulation, which, theoretically at least, aim to reshape individual living beings. Instead, the real achievement of biopolitical technology has far more to do with shaping longevity itself, with organizing life as an event, as pure activity that occurs in time. From procreation and the provision of life-long medical care to the regulation of the balance between work and leisure and medically supervised, if not medically induced death, the life of each individual today is permanently subject to artificial control and improvement. And precisely because life is now no longer perceived as a primeval, elementary event of being, as fate or *fortuna*, as time that unravels of its own accord, but is seen instead as time that can be artificially produced and formed, life can be documented and archived before it has even taken place. Indeed, bureaucratic and technological documentation serves as the primary medium of modern biopolitics. The schedules, regulations, investigative reports, statistical surveys and project outlines that this kind of documentation consists of are constantly generating new life. Even the genetic archive that is contained in every living being can ultimately be understood as a component of this documentation; one that both documents the genetic structure of previous, obsolete organisms, yet also enables the same genetic structure to be interpreted as a blueprint for creating future living organisms. This means that, given the current state of biopolitics, the archive no longer allows us to differentiate between memory and project, between past and future. This, incidentally, also offers the rational basis for what in the Christian tradition is termed the Resurrection and for what in political and cultural domains is known as a revival. For the archive of elapsed forms of life can at any moment turn out to be a script for the future. By being stored in the archive as documentation, life can be repeatedly re-lived and constantly reproduced within historical time, should anyone resolve to undertake such reproduction. The archive is the site where past and future become reversible.

The art project can be documented because life in the art project was originally artificial, and this life can be reproduced in time in just the same way as works of art can be reproduced in space. By this token, an unfinished, unrealized or even initially rejected project is far better suited for demonstrating the inner nature of modern life as life-in-the-project than all those projects that have been approved of and successfully concluded. Such 'failed' projects namely shift attention more clearly away from the project's result and onto the processual character of fulfilling the project, ultimately focusing on the project author's subjectivity. The art project that addresses the impossibility of being concluded offers a constantly changing definition of the figure of the author. In this case, the author is no longer the producer of an art object, but the person who is documenting – and thereby authorizing – the heterogeneous time of a life in the project, including his own life as well. But the author is not being occasioned to do this by some public body or institution that possesses the power to authorize in the sense of granting permission. Rather, this is more like an authorization provided at one's own risk, one that not only admits the possibility of failure, but indeed explicitly celebrates it. In any case, though, this kind of authorization of life-in-the-project opens up another, heterogeneous parallel time frame – the time of desirable and socially legitimate loneliness.

The MuHKA invited Boris Groys to write this text following a discussion between him, Bart De Baere and Barbara Van der Linden on this topic in Essen on February 11th and 12th 2002.

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