Fifteen theses on contemporary art
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1. Art is not the sublime descent of the infinite into the finite abjection of the body and sexuality. It is the production of an infinite subjective series through the finite means of a material subtraction.

2. Art cannot merely be the expression of a particularity (be it ethnic or personal). Art is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone.

3. Art is the process of a truth, and this truth is always the truth of the sensible or sensual, the sensible as sensible. This means: the transformation of the sensible into a happening of the Idea.

4. There necessarily a plurality of arts, and however we may imagine the ways in which the arts might intersect there is no imaginable way of totalizing this plurality.

5. Every art develops from an impure form, and the progressive purification of this impurity shapes the history both of a particular artistic truth and of its exhaustion.

6. The subject of an artistic truth is the set of the works which compose it.

7. This composition is an infinite configuration, which, in our own contemporary artistic context, is a generic totality.

8. The real of art is ideal impurity conceived through the immanent process of its purification. In other words, the raw material of art is determined by the contingent inception of a form. Art is the secondary formalization of the advent of a hitherto formless form.

9. The only maxim of contemporary art is not to be imperial. This also means: it does not have to be democratic, if democracy implies conformity with the imperial idea of political liberty.

10. Non-imperial art is necessarily abstract art, in this sense: it abstracts itself from all particularity, and formalizes this gesture of abstraction.

11. The abstraction of non-imperial art is not concerned with any particular public or audience. Non-imperial art is related to a kind of aristocratic-proletarian ethic: Alone, it does what it says, without distinguishing between kinds of people.

12. Non-imperial art must be as rigorous as a mathematical demonstration, as surprising as an ambush in the night, and as elevated as a star.

13. Today art can only be made from the starting point of that which, as far as Empire is concerned, doesn't exist. Through its abstraction, art renders this inexistence visible. This is what governs the formal principle of every art: the effort to render visible to everyone that which for Empire (and so by extension for everyone, though from a different point of view), doesn't exist.

14. Since it is sure of its ability to control the entire domain of the visible and the audible via the laws governing commercial circulation and democratic communication, Empire no longer censures anything. All art, and all thought, is ruined when we accept this permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy. We should become the pitiless censors of ourselves.

15. It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent.
I think everybody has the 15 theses, it is necessary, I think, for the talk. I'll comment about the theses and you can read them. I think the great question about contemporary art is how not to be Romantic. It's the great question and a very difficult one. More precisely, the question is how not to be a formalist-Romantic. Something like a mixture between Romanticism and formalism. On one side is the absolute desire for new forms, always new forms, something like an infinite desire. Modernity is the infinite desire of new forms. But, on the other side, is obsession with the body, with finitude, sex, cruelty, death. The contradiction of the tension between the obsession of new forms and the obsession of finitude, body, cruelty, suffering and death is something like a synthesis between formalism and Romanticism and it is the dominant current in contemporary art. All the 15 theses have as a sort of goal, the question how not to be formalist-Romantic. That is, in my opinion, the question of contemporary art.

Lombardi is really a good example, and I am very glad to speak here tonight. We can see that there is something like a demonstration, a connection, points of connections. You have something very surprising, because Lombardi knew all that before the facts. We have somewhere, a great drawing about the Bush dynasty which is really prophetic, which is an artistic prophecy, that is a creation of a new knowledge, and so it's really surprising to see that after the facts. And it's really the capacity, the ability of art to present something before the facts, before the evidence. And it's something calm and elevated, like a star. You know, it's like a galaxy, see, it's something like the galaxy of corruption. So, the three determinations are really in the works of Lombardi. And so it's the creation of a new possibility of art and a new vision of the world, our world. But a new vision which is not purely conceptual, ideological or political, a new vision which has it's proper shape, which creates a new artistic possibility, something which is new knowledge of the world has a new shape, like that. It's really an illustration of my talk.

The first thesis: Art is not the sublime descent of the infinite into the finite abjection of the body and sexuality. It is the production of an infinite subjective series through the finite means of a material subtraction.

This is an intimation of how not to be a Romantic. It consists of the production of a new infinite content, of a new light. I think it’s the very aim of art; producing a new light about the world by means of precise and finite summarization. So, you have to change the contradiction. The contradiction today is between the infinity of the desire for new forms and the finitude of the body, of the sexuality, and so on. And new art needs to change the terms of this contradiction and put on the side of infinity new content, new light, a new vision of the world, and on the side of finitude, the precision of means and of summarization. So, the first thesis is something like the reversal of the contradiction.

Subtraction: the word subtraction has two meanings. First, not to be obsessed with formal novelty. I think it’s a great question today because the desire for novelty is the desire of new forms, an infinite desire for new form. The obsession of new forms, the artistic obsession with novelty, of critique, of representation and so on, is really not a critical position about capitalism because capitalism itself is the obsession of novelty and the perpetual renovation of forms. You have a computer, but the following year it’s not the true computer, you need a new one. You have a car, but the coming year it’s an old car, something like an old thing and so on. So, it’s a necessity for us to see that the complete obsession with new forms is not really a critical position about the world as it is. It’s a possibility that the real desire, which is subversive desire, is the desire of eternity. The desire for something which is a stability, something which is art, something which is closed in-itself. I don’t think it’s quite like that, but it’s a possibility because the perpetual modification of forms is not really a critical position, so the desire of new forms is certainly something important in art, but the desire for the stability of forms is also something important. And, I think we have to examine the question today.
The second meaning of subtraction is not to be obsessed with finitude, with cruelty, body, suffering, with sex and death, because it’s only the reversal of the ideology of happiness. In our world there is something like an ideology of happiness. Be happy and enjoy your life and so on. In artistic creation we often have the reversal of that sort of ideology in the obsession with suffering bodies, the difficulty of sexuality, and so on. We need not be in that sort of obsession. Naturally a critical position about the ideology of happiness is an artistic necessity, but it’s also an artistic necessity to see it as a new vision, a new light, something like a positive new world. And so, the question of art is also the question of life and not always the question of death. It is a signification of the first thesis; we have to search for an artistic creation which is not obsessed with formal novelty, with cruelty, death, body, and sexuality.

Second thesis: Art cannot merely be the expression of a particularity (be it ethnic or personal). Art is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone.

The great question here is a question of universality: is there, or is there not, a universality of artistic creation? Because the great question today is the question of globalization, the question of the unity of the world. Globalization proposes to us an abstract universality. A universality of money, the universality of communication and the universality of power. That is the universalism today. And so, against the abstract universality of money and of power, what is the question of art, what is the function of artistic creation? Is the function of artistic creation to oppose, to abstract from universality only a singularity of particularities, something like being against the abstraction of money and of power, or as a community against globalization and so on? Or, is the function of art to propose another kind of universality? That’s a big question. The more important issue today is the main contradiction between capitalistic universality on one hand, universality of the market if you want, of money and power and so on, and singularities, particularities, the self of the community. It’s the principal contradiction between two kinds of universalities. On one side the abstract universality of money and power, and on the other the concrete universality of truth and creation. My position is that artistic creation today should suggest a new universality, not to express only the self or the community, but that it’s a necessity for the artistic creation to propose to us, to humanity in general, a new sort of universality, and my name for that is truth. Truth is only the philosophical name for a new universality against the forced universality of globalization, the forced universality of money and power, and in that sort of proposition, the question of art is a very important question because art is always a proposition about a new universality, and art is a signification of the second thesis.

Third thesis. It’s only a definition of the universality of art. What is an artistic truth? Artistic truth is different from scientific truth, from political truth, from other sorts of truths. The definition is that artistic truth is always a truth about the sensible, an outline of the sensual. It’s not a static sensible expression. An artistic truth is not a copy of the sensible world nor a static sensible expression. My definition is that an artistic truth is a happening of l’Idèe in the sensible itself. And, the new universality of art is the creation of a new form of happening of the Idea in the sensible as such. It’s very important to understand that an artistic truth is a proposition about the sensible in the world. It’s a proposition about a new definition of what is our sensible relation to the world, which is a possibility of universality against the abstraction of money and power. So, if art seems very important today, it is because globalization imposes to us the creation of a new kind of universality, which is always a new sensibility and a new sensible relation to the world. And because the oppression today is the oppression of abstract universality, we have to think of art along the direction of the new sensible relation to the world. And so, today, artistic creation is a part of human emancipation, it’s not an ornament, a decoration and so on. No, the question of art is a central question, and it’s central because we have to create a new sensible relation to the world. In fact, without art, without artistic creation, the triumph of the forced universality of money and power is a real possibility. So the question of art today is a question of political emancipation, there is something political in art itself. There is not only a question of art’s political orientation, like it was the case yesterday, today it is a question in itself. Because art is a real possibility to create something new against the abstract universality that is globalization.

Fourth thesis. This thesis is against the dream of totalization. Some artists today are thinking that there is a possibility to fuse all the artistic forms, it’s the dream of a complete multimedia. But it’s not a new idea. As you probably know, it was the idea of Richard Wagner, the total art, with pictures, music, poetry and so on. So the first multimedia artist was Richard Wagner. And, I think multimedia is a false idea because it’s the power of absolute integration and it’s something like the projection in art of the dream of globalization. It’s a question of the unity of art like the unity of the world but it’s an abstraction too. So, we need to create new art, certainly new forms, but not with the dream of a totalization of all the forms of sensibility. It’s a great question to have a relation to multimedia and to new forms of images, of art, which is not the paradigm of totalization. So we have to be free about that sort of dream.

A few words about theses five and eight. The question here is what exactly is the creation of new forms. It’s very important because of what I previously said about the infinite desire for new forms being a problem in contemporary art. We have to be precise about the question of new forms in themselves. What is the creation of new forms? I hint that, in fact, there is never exactly pure creation of new forms. I think it’s a dream, like totalization, pure creation of absolute new forms. In fact, there is always something like a passage of something which is not exactly a form to something that is a form, and I argue that we have something like impurity of forms, or impure forms, and purification. So, in art there is not exactly pure creation of forms, God created the world, if you want, but there is something like progressive purification, and complexification of forms in sequence. Two examples if you wish. When Malevich paints the famous white on white, the white square on white square. Is that the creation of something? In one sense yes, but in fact, it’s the complete purification of the problem of the relation between shape and color. In fact, the problem of the relation between shape and
color is an old one with a long story and in Malevich’s white square on white square, we have an ultimate purification of the story of the problem and also it’s a creation, but it’s also the end, because after white square on white square there is, in one sense, nothing, we cannot continue. So we have a complete purification and after Malevich all correlation between shape and color looks old, or impure, but it’s also the end of the question, and we have to begin with something else. We may say that with artistic creation, it’s not exactly the pure creation of new forms, something like the process of purification with beginnings and with ends too. So, we have sequences of purification, much more than pure rupture of pure creation. And it’s the content of theses five and eight.

We come now to theses six and seven. The question here is what exactly is the subjective existence of art? What is the subject in art, the subject in the subjective sense? It’s a great discussion, a very old one. What is the subject in art? What is the agent of art? The subject in art is not the artist. It’s an old thesis too, but an important one. So, if you think that the real subject in artistic creation is the artist, you are positing the artistic creation as the expression of somebody. If the artist is the subject, art is the expression of that subject, thereby art is something like a personal expression. In fact, it is necessary for contemporary art to argue the case that art is a personal expression, because you have no possibility to create a new form of universality and you oppose to the abstract form of universality only the expression of the self or the expression of communities. So, you understand the link between the different problems. It’s imperative for us to say that the subject in artistic creation is not the artist as such. “Artist” is a necessity for art, but not a subjective necessity. So, the conclusion is quite simple. The subjective existence of art are the works of art, and nothing else. The artist is not the subjective agent of art. The artist is the sacrificial part of art. It’s also, finally, what disappears in art. And the ethic of art is to accept the disappearance. Sometimes the artist is someone who wants to appear, but it’s not a good thing for art. For art, if you want art to have today the very important function of the creation of a new universality, if you think that art is something like a subjective expression for the market, it’s necessary that the artist makes a great appearance, naturally, but if art is the creation, the secret creation, something like that, if art is not something of the market, but is something against the force of universality of the market, the consequence is that the artist must disappear, and not to be someone who appears in the media and so on. And a critique of art is something like a critique of something like desperation. If the ethic of art is something like desperation, it is because what show are works of art, which are the real subjective existence of art in-itself.

It’s also the same thing in thesis nine. I don’t comment The question of the ethic of art is not to be imperial. Desperation because operation is always something like imperial operation, because the law of operation is today imperial law.

About theses ten and eleven, I think we can demonstrate that imperial art is the name for what is visible today. Imperial art is exactly Romantic-formalism. That is a historical thesis, or a political thesis if you want. The mixture of Romanticism and formalism is exactly the imperial art. Not only today, but for example, during the Roman Empire too. There is something common between the situation today and the situation at the end of the Roman Empire. It’s a good comparison, you see, and more precisely between the United States and the Roman Empire. There is really something very interesting with that sort of comparison, and in fact the question is also a question of artistic creation, because by the end of the Roman Empire we have exactly two dispositions in artistic creation. On one side, something really Romantic, expressive, violent, and on the other, something extremely formalist, politically straight. Why? When we deal with the situation of something like an empire, something like having the formal unity of the world, if you want, it’s not only the United States, it’s finally the big markets, when we have something like a potential unity of the world, we have in artistic creation something like formalism and Romanticism, a mixture of the two. Why? Because when we have an empire, we have two principles. First, all is possible because we have a big potency, a unity of the world. So we may say, all is possible. We may create new forms, we may speak of everything, there is not really laws about what is possible, what is not possible, so everything is possible. Yet, we also have another maxim, everything is impossible, because there is nothing else to have, the empire is the only possible existence, the only political possibility. So, you can say that everything is possible and you can say that everything is impossible, and when the two are said you have an artistic creation, formalism, that is to say all is possible, new forms are always possible, and Romanticism and nihilism because all is impossible, and finally, we have the mixture of the two, and contemporary art is saying that all is possible and that all is impossible. The impossibility of possibility and the possibility of impossibility. That is the real content of contemporary art. To escape that sort of situation is to state that something is possible, not all is possible, not all is impossible, but something else is possible. There is a possibility of something else. So, we have to create a new possibility. But to create a new possibility is not the same thing as to realize a new possibility. It’s a very fundamental distinction, to realize a possibility is to think that the possibility is here and I need to conceive the possibility. For example, if all is possible, I have to realize something, because all things are possible, but, naturally, it’s quite a different thing to create something possible. The possibility is not here. So, it is not true, that all is possible, some things are not possible, and you have to create the possibility of that thing which is not possible. And it is the great question of artistic creation. Is artistic creation the realization of a possibility or is artistic creation the creation of a new possibility? The possibility of something, the possibility of saying something is possible. If you think all is possible (that is the same as to think all is impossible), your conviction in the world is finished, the world is something closed. It is closed with all the possibilities, which is the same thing that everything are impossibilities and artistic creation is closed too, it’s closed in formalist-Romanticism which is the affirmation that all is possible and all is impossible. But the true function of artistic creation today is the possibility of saying that something is possible, so to create a new possibility. But where can we create a new possibility when something is impossible? Because we can create a new possibility when something is not a possibility. If all is possible, you cannot create a new possibility. So, the question of a new possibility is also the question of something impossible, so we have to assume that it’s not true that all is possible, that also it’s not true that all is impossible, we have to say something is impossible where something is impossible. I have to create a new possibility. And, I think the creation of new possibility is today the great function of art. In other
activities of circulation, communication, the market and so on, we have always the realization of possibilities, infinite realization of possibilities. But not creation of possibility. And so it’s also a political question, because politics truly means the creation of a new possibility. A new possibility of life, a new possibility of the world. And so the political determination of artistic creation is today whether it is possible, or impossible to create a new possibility. Actually, globalization carries the conviction that it is utterly impossible to create a new possibility. And the end of Communism, and the end of revolutionary politics is, in fact, the dominant interpretation of that all: it is impossible to create a new possibility. Not to realize a possibility, but to create a new possibility. You understand the difference. And I think the question of artistic creation lies here. It proves for everybody, for humanity in general, that it is a possibility to create a new possibility.

About thesis twelve. It’s a poetic thesis. The three determinations of artistic creation, to compare artistic creation with a demonstration, with an ambush in the night and with a star. You can understand the three determinations. Why a demonstration? Because finally the question of artistic creation is also the question of something odd, something possessing a sort of eternity, something which is not in pure communication, pure circulation, something which is not in the constant modification of forms. Something which resists and resistance is a question of art also today. Something which resists is something endowed with some stability, solid. Something which is a logical equation, which has a logical coherence, consistence, is the first determination. The second determination is something surprising, something which is right away the creation of a new possibility, but a new possibility is always surprising. We cannot have a new possibility without some sort of surprise. A new possibility is something that we cannot calculate. It’s something like a rupture, a new beginning, which is always something surprising. Thus, the second determination. And it’s marvelous, like something in the night, the night of our knowledge. A new possibility is something absolutely new for our knowledge, so it’s the night of our knowledge. Something like a new light. Elevated as a star because a new possibility is something like a new star. Something like a new planet, a new world, because it is a new possibility. Something like a new sensible relation to the world. But the great problem lies elsewhere. The formal problem for contemporary art is not the determination, one by one. The problem is how to relate the three. To be the star, the ambush, and the demonstration. Something like that. And Lombardi is really a good example, and I am very glad to speak here tonight. We can see that there is something like a demonstration, a connection, points of connections. You have something very surprising, because Lombardi knew all that before the facts. We have somewhere, a great drawing about the Bush dynasty which is really prophetic, which is an artistic prophecy, that is a creation of a new knowledge, and so it’s really surprising to see that after the facts. And it’s really the capacity, the ability of art to present something before the facts, before the evidence. And it’s something calm and elevated, like a star. You know, it’s like a galaxy, see, it’s something like the galaxy of corruption. So, the three determinations are really in the works of Lombardi. And so it’s the creation of a new possibility of art and a new vision of the world, our world. But a new vision which is not purely conceptual, ideological or political, a new vision which has it’s proper shape, which creates a new artistic possibility, something which is new knowledge of the world has a new shape, like that. It’s really an illustration of my talk.

The last thesis. I think the great question is the correlation between art and humanity. More precisely the correlation between artistic creation and liberty. Is artistic creation something independent in the democratic sense of freedom? I think if you consider Lombardi for a second time, we may consider the issue of creating a new possibility as not exactly a question of freedom, in the common sense, because there is an imperial definition of freedom today, which is the common democratic definition. Is artistic creation something like that sort of freedom? I think not. I think the real determination of artistic creation is not the common sense of freedom, the imperial sense of freedom. It’s a creation of a new form of liberty, a new form of freedom. And we may see here that sort of thing because the connection between the logical framework, the surprise of new knowledge, and the beauty of the star is a definition of freedom which is much more complex than the democratic determination of freedom.

I think of artistic creation as the creation of a new kind of liberty which is beyond the democratic definition of liberty. And we may speak of something like an artistic definition of liberty which is intellectual and material, something like Communism within a logical framework, because there is no liberty without logical framework, something like a new beginning, a new possibility, rupture, and finally something like a new world, a new light, a new galaxy. This is the artistic definition of liberty and the issue today consists not in an art discussion between liberty and dictatorship, between liberty and oppression, but in my opinion, between two definitions of liberty itself.

The artistic question of the body in some art forms, like cinema or dance, is precisely the question of the body within the body and not the body without body. It is an idealistic conception of the body without the body or the body as something else, crucial in the story of Christianity and in Paul. For example in the Greek classical painting the body is always something else than the body, and if you consider something like the body in Tintoretto, for example, the body is something like movement which is body like something else than the body. But in fact today the body has a body, the body in the body is the body as such. And the body as such is something very hard, because the body has no representation which is really a representation as a star, something like that. In that sort of painting (Lombardi), we have names, and no bodies. It is a substitution of names to bodies. We have no picture of Bin Laden, but the name of Bin Laden. We have no picture of Bush, but the name of Bush. Father and sons.

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