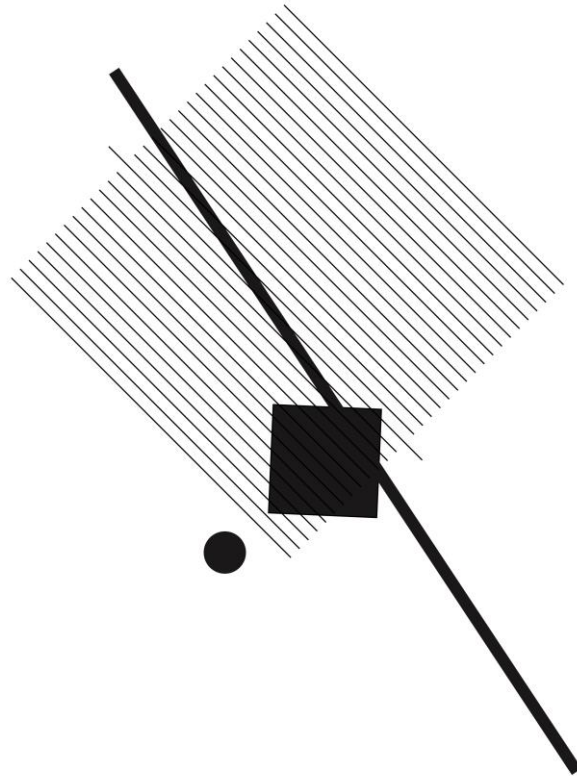


The aesthetic imperative

PSJM

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Is it now the moment of truth? The crucial moment? Is the crisis, whose cronos stretches back for almost a decade now, the qualitative time to take a stand? The time is now, we tell ourselves. Maybe the time *is* now, but perhaps this has always been the case. The crucial moment to express a concern, a feeling or e thought. But isn't there kairos even when there is no crisis? Isn't every historic moment a decisive point in the future of mankind? Isn't there always a crisis? Isn't there always conflict, and hasn't there always been? Is "now" now? When is "now"? We're going through a historic moment of change, but haven't they all been? Isn't the world sensitive to perpetual change? Perhaps, like always, it's just a matter of degree.

Let's leave these metaphysical questions aside and assume that we are going through a major crisis. Or rather, through a change of regime, aimed at a goal that has been designed by economic powers. We're already familiar with it: new high-tech feudalism, financial authoritarianism, exploitation going unpunished, the plundering of public wealth to the extreme. In times of plenty, the individual appropriation of shared resources doesn't hurt because it is invisible - at least to the majority. In times of scarcity, however, it becomes painfully apparent. That's when we are hit with the knowledge, the awareness of having been robbed. From this epistemological realisation, this collective knowledge, comes a feeling that is also collective: widespread anger. The neoliberal theory - which has been stewing and put into practice for decades behind the scenes - therefore comes face to face with its antithesis through popular resistance, social rejection. This is the moment of a visible, aware, sensitive struggle. A struggle that has a doubtful resolution and, as with all wars, will leave many casualties along the way, wounds that will not heal, embryos that will spawn new crises. New kairos.

And what does art have to say in all this? As far as artists are concerned, do they - do we - have to fight and resist through our cultural output? Is there anything like an aesthetic imperative which is similar to a moral imperative?

A few months ago, a postgraduate student was interviewing us over Skype as part of her research into the relationships between the world of business and art. The first question focused on our opinion of events which are taking place primarily in the Basque Country and Catalonia, and involve companies creating teams that also include artists in order to help incorporate the "values of art" into business processes. That was more or less the question. Our first reaction was to clarify that art has no values apart from the use of creativity or imagination, and that these abilities are not exclusive to artists, but shared by all human beings to a greater or lesser extent. Furthermore, these abilities can be used to adhere to moral values or otherwise. Cooperation, justice and mutual understanding without duress are moral values and not aesthetic ones, however much authors like Marcuse wanted to call them "aesthetic values" in his commendable quest to reconcile reason and sensibility. It is something else entirely when certain values of moral behaviour are linked to certain

artistic practices, but creativity and imagination can be used both to dream up idyllic worlds and to create an atomic bomb. This kind of confusion arises very often.

There is no such thing as the aesthetic imperative or, at least, it does not exist in the same way as the moral imperative. It is therefore best not to confuse the two concepts. When an artist takes on an aesthetic commitment, they are agreeing to create art in a formal way, shall we say. This formality includes whether or not their pieces are communicating a linguistic idea, as in conceptual art. The aesthetic imperative cannot and must not aspire to be universal, unlike Kant's moral imperative. The latter has to apply to everybody - it is a rule that the individual imposes on themselves independently and must necessarily be applicable to every other person. Nothing of the sort happens when committing to a particular way of organising sensitive material. In our case, for example, we are committed to the clean shapes of the constructivist tradition, a commitment to beauty or a particular avant garde canon of beauty that we regard as best suited to the way of creating art that we are adopting. Clearly "ways of worldmaking", to use Goodman's terminology, are not neutral and their formal principles are usually linked to other commitments. These are ethical-political, such as the defence of an applied art which has an explicitly social and democratic purpose. However, both commitments are, or can be, correlative; in other words, they are not the same commitment. Nothing prevents us from adopting a moral imperative and a certain form of ethical-political conduct, creating aesthetic realities with other formal criteria and vice versa. The correlation between the two responds to the issue of history or tradition in the Gadamerian sense of the word, and not to a logical or ontological need. If we adopt a commitment to certain moral values and, by extension, political values, we have to commit to particular "aesthetic values" or, to be more precise, to a particular formal tradition.

Nevertheless, we could also take aesthetic imperative to mean the artist's need to do what they do. Any artist in this room will know what we mean. Once you have been bitten by the creation bug, you need to create. That never goes away, except on very rare occasions. There is always "something" that pushes you on to create. You need it. It is not about logical needs because in human action, everything is conceivable and belongs to the realm of possibility. However, the artist feels the compelling need to create. They can't not create. So, what need are we talking about? We think that

need has more to do with willingness, the desire to express a thought or feeling. The desire to use words or material to formulate a message that you need to send to your peers. Perhaps it is the need to speak, to communicate. Communicate *what*? Communicate *how*? Formal commitment takes care of the *how*. Individual concerns that may be collective take care of the *what*. In times of social emergency, the moral (or rather, political) imperative is imposed more than ever before. A moral imperative that does not justify rules subjectively in a Kantian way, but intersubjectively, like Habermas in his review of deontological ethics. This is when ethics turns into social ethics, when ethics basically becomes political or *poli(é)tica* (“poli-ethics”), to use the term coined by Ródenas.

It is ultimately about making this journey together, resisting together, as Avelino Sala claimed in an early paper. At this defining moment, in the midst of this social emergency, maybe our role as artists takes on a new importance. This is what Santiago Zabala seems to suggest in his new book, which has yet to be published: *Emergency Aesthetics: Only Art Can Save Us*. “Only art can save us”. Extreme words indeed from our friend Zabala. Emergency art alone cannot save us, that much is obvious, but the efforts are appreciated. Of course, we’ll do it together. By carrying the burden of our faults and assets, our contradictions, our flights of fancy and also our achievements, we will fight shoulder to shoulder. Emergency art: an aesthetic imperative, “poli-ethical” imperative and art as an instrument. These are our weapons.