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**Between
Romantic
Isolation and
Avant-Gardist
Adaptation**

Bert Taken & Jeroen
Boomgaard



In the current debate on the social role of art and the position of the artist, the notion of an elite plays an important part. While there is a tendency to regard the elitist exception as obsolete — a view that seems to legitimize the radical cut-backs in the field of art — there are also those who long for a return of the elite. In such circles people feel, for instance, that the present-day media society has silenced the cultural elites. The success of the democratization movement of the 1960s and 70s supposedly introduced an anti-elitist attitude that can be summed up as 'everyone has an equal voice with the rest'. This is one of the reasons for the disappearance of the distinction between high and low culture. Artists started using elements from popular culture and, aided by new media, have been able to target new audiences that traditionally were not regarded as consumers of culture. According to the same view, our increasing compulsion to consume, and the associated short-term thinking of present-day capitalism, has also influenced the world of the arts, culture, and media. The well-established set of convictions, knowledge, and opinions propagated by the old elite has been undermined and undone by fashionable trends. Also, the digital revolution has immensely increased the speed of communications and greatly diminished the distance between social groups. Whereas the elite symbolised distance, nowadays everyone uses the same social media and anyone's opinion or analysis is just one among many others. We are living in an egalitarian society where elites are mistrusted and challenged. The 'man-in-the-street' has become the norm.¹ This line of thinking presupposes the evident necessity of an elite that leads the various sectors of social life in every aspect and sets the tone in matters of taste. However, it is less evident how this privileged group might be reconstituted. In general, though, the prevailing idea is that isolation is an essential part of it. On their own, isolated from the levelling and mind-numbing influence of the commercially controlled media society, the cultural guides of the future must be prepared for their role as leaders.

This is a familiar reaction, which doesn't make it any less disputable, especially with regard to the present social role and position of visual artists and of art and design education. If we expect artists and designers to be leaders and trendsetters, will they be better able to do so by staying far away from the hype- and commerce-driven media society while preparing themselves for their serious task? In other words, should we start thinking of the 'academy' again in the ancient sense of the word, when it referred to the walled-in garden near Athens where Plato taught his students about the ephemeral

and treacherous nature of everyday reality? The solid education to be given to the new elite in isolation should not only enable them to skilfully produce persuasive images, but also teach them to keep their distance from fashionable trends and assume responsibility as cultural guides. The question, however, is whether a distant elite is the only or most desirable model if we expect more cultural guidance from artists.

The call for a resurrection of the elite may be an obsolete one, but it does confront us with the question of exactly what it is that we expect from artists and how we train them to meet these expectations. Over the last decades, much has changed in the field of visual art. Artists are increasingly involved in many sectors of society and it is impossible to tell what the professional practice of future artists will look like. This makes it difficult to decide what content, skills, and insights are essential in contemporary visual art education. There are no longer clearly defined disciplines and media. Various forms of cross-disciplinary approaches have become routine and even the distinction between art and design is no longer obvious. The new media have produced and are still producing new art forms, continually widening the field of application of visual art. The distinction between art and popular culture has become very blurred as artists combine images and strategies from both areas. The same goes for the sharp distinction between art and science: artistic research has become an accepted domain for artistic activities aimed at acquiring knowledge. Also, as the art world is internationally orientated, it must ask itself for what reality it wishes to train its students. Are they still also being prepared for a role as critical observer of current social developments in a world that is dominated by the commercial market of biennials and art fairs?

The social position of visual art has changed a lot as well. Labelled the 'creative industry', the arts are expected to make a tangible contribution to society, and their success is increasingly being measured in figures and numbers. The special position of the arts definitely seems to be a thing of the past now. All these changes have consequences for how art academies define their task. Not that anyone is clear about what that task is – on the contrary. Art academies still largely seem to rely on the elite model, where the education of artists takes place in social isolation and they simply take the Romantic

¹ For this view, see for instance Henri Beunders, 'Eenzame grazers', *De Groene Amsterdammer* 24 February 2011.

connotations of this model in their stride. When it comes to the arts, the Romantic heritage is obviously still alive and kicking. Therefore, we will first take a closer look at the historical background of visual art education before turning our attention back to the present situation. In doing so, we will concentrate on certain philosophical notions that gave rise to the Romantic view of art and its consequences for art education. Then we will briefly discuss Bauhaus and how Romantic notions influenced the educational philosophy its adherents developed.

The Romantic Revolution

The Romantic revolution of the late 18th century created a new kind of subjectivity. Inspired by the philosophers Kant and Fichte, the Romantics developed an ideal of humanity that had imagination at its core. The gap between the harsh reality of everyday life and the desire to shape life according to one's own feelings and convictions could, according to them, only be bridged by the imagination. This new image of man stressed that each individual is unique, and in doing so it emphatically placed each individual opposite the world in which he or she had to prove their worth. These unique individuals could prove their uniqueness by manifesting themselves in reality in their own, authentic way.

In his philosophy, Kant had placed moral man opposite man as a natural being. On the one hand, man is free to choose for or against good, while on the other hand the concept of 'freedom' is meaningless with regard to establishing knowledge and the truth. In searching for scientific explanations, the process of thinking in causal relationships simply excludes the notion of freedom. In his analysis of the aesthetic, Kant then attempted to link the domain of morale to that of knowledge. In aesthetic perception, we experience the world as having a purpose; and this experience contains the promise that nature and freedom may in the end be reconciled, because the discerning capacity of man enables us to see nature as if it were a purposeful and harmonious whole. Therefore, by analogy, we may assume that there is also an umbrella entity that includes morale. Kant's reconciliation of nature and freedom followed the path of the aesthetic, assigning art a special position in fathoming mankind's destiny.²

Fichte radicalizes Kant's notion of subjectivity. He takes the 'I' as an absolute starting point and places it opposite the objective world, the 'Non-I'. Fichte views the 'I' as an activity, a motion that

in the very moment of understanding itself as self-consciousness simultaneously becomes aware of its opposite, the objective reality. In its reflexive activity, the 'I' produces the world as a result of its own mental efforts. In other words, in the very moment that the 'I' thinks of itself as a spiritual being, it also becomes aware of the world as *its* world, as the creation of its own mind. To Fichte, self-consciousness is the foundation of the world and the 'I' is the basic principle of life. The 'I' is freedom and this freedom is unlimited, as everything that presents itself as an objective hindrance to the self-creation of the 'I' ultimately has been produced by the 'I' itself. Fichte's radical subjectivism posits the world as a makeable world. It is only a matter of freeing creative freedom from its chains.³

Fichte's ideas were especially embraced by many young intellectuals at the time. Although well-educated, their chances of a social career in the rigid society of Germany were slim, and their hopes for change were shattered when the French Revolution failed. Fichte's ideas offered a philosophical translation of their revolutionary zeal. The Romantics created an alternative reality in their minds, carrying out an imaginary revolution. They withdrew into reflection and contemplation, making art the vehicle of their urge for change. As Novalis said: 'If you cannot turn thoughts into external things, then turn external things into thoughts.'⁴ Art was thus endowed with a special, sublime mission. Its task was to articulate the freedom of the individual opposite the limitations of existing reality. What's more, art was thought to be able to bring about a reconciliation between man's creative powers and oppressive conventions, between sensuality and rationality. This reconciliation would bring mankind closer to the essence of life.

All this meant that artists were assigned a special role. They were not only regarded as the geniuses who point the way to an escape from a repressive and inauthentic existence, but their special mission in a sense lent them the status of 'chosen' people. In the words of Friedrich Schlegel, their relationship with mankind was like that of mankind with the rest of creation.⁵ Therefore, artists were above society or at least stood to one side of it. In this light,

2 Kant sets out his art philosophy in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974).

3 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* 1794 (Hamburg: Philosophische Bibliothek Felix Meiner Verlag, 1997).

4 Novalis, quoted in Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik: Eine deutsche Affäre* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2007), 83.

5 See Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (London: Penguin, 1979), 246.

the idea that their genius is best developed in solitude is not all that strange. The training of artists — insofar as they needed training at all — had therefore also better take place in isolation.

The ideas of the Romantics at first had no impact at all on the practice of visual art education. In the early 19th century, nearly all of the art academies in Europe adhered to classical principles, meaning that art students spent nearly all of their time copying the works of masters. Only later in the course of that century were some changes made under the influence of Romantic notions, but these did not affect the basic principles of art education. Only much later, in the 1960s, did visual art education become 'Romanticized' and only then did Romantically derived ideas start to largely define educational practice, both in terms of what art was and how art education should be organized.

In the 19th century, the Romantic influence on education manifested itself after the 1820s in the introduction of 'master classes', first in Germany, but later in other countries as well. To overcome the impersonal character of academic schooling, advanced students were given the opportunity of choosing a master and completing the rest of their studies in a personal work relationship with an artist. This change in the educational system was brought about by the influence of the Nazarenes,⁶ a group of students at the Vienna Academy who reacted against the classicist view of art and retreated to the Italian countryside to discover true art. True art had its foundation in the depths of the human spirit, where the religious truth of life also manifested itself. Isolated from the world, living in a community that was based on strong personal bonds, artists could learn to express a universal truth in a personal way.

The work of the Nazarenes was greatly appreciated in Germany. Also, their views on art and society fitted in very well with post-Napoleonic endeavours to develop a new national consciousness. As a result, after 1820, most Nazarenes were offered positions at various academies throughout Germany. Their ideas, originating in the Romantic movement and harking back to mediaeval views on the relationship between art and life, led to the large-scale introduction of master classes. This did not change the fundamental organization of art education, but the notion that education — at least for advanced students — should be orientated more towards personal talents was accepted almost everywhere.

From Bauhaus to the 1960s

A true revolution in visual art education did not take place until after the First World War. The debate about the necessity of organizing art education differently and bringing it in line with arts and crafts education had been going on for some time already. The World Fairs had demonstrated that product design was definitely in need of an artistic impulse. After the war, this open attitude toward new initiatives led to the establishing of the Bauhaus school in Weimar in 1919.

Led by initiator and director Walter Gropius, Bauhaus strove to overcome the social isolation of modern artists. Artists should be freed from their 'complacent individuality', in the words of Gropius.⁷ Bauhaus wanted to give future artists a broad technical training and make them familiar with the latest industrial developments. The basic idea was that artists could play a truly social role if they applied their artistic qualities to designing people's actual living environments. This required them to work together with industry. By designing new products that could be cheaply manufactured and marketed, the population could be sensitized to aesthetic values. That such an aesthetic education would have positive effects on the community was taken for granted. It also came as no surprise that Gropius considered architecture — that pre-eminent designer of the living environment — to be the mother of all art. This view coincided with the principles of the avant-garde of that era. To them, being an elite no longer meant isolation and distance, but rather assuming a leading role in social developments.

Gropius' aims are not immediately apparent from the Bauhaus founding manifesto, which is still phrased in a language with a strong Romantic flavour. According to Gropius, this was done for tactical reasons.⁸ Immediately after the war, young people were full of an idealism that was suspicious of business and of the importance of industry and technology. The manifesto therefore emphasizes the creation of a tightly-knit working community in the sense of the mediaeval *Bauhütte* (workshop) and stresses the general formative

6 On the Nazarenes, see Herbert Schindler, *Nazarener Romantischer Geist und christliche Kunst im 19. Jahrhundert* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1982) and Christa Steinle and Max Hollein, *Religion, Macht, Kunst: Die Nazarener* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung König, 2005).

7 See Walter Gropius, 'Manifest und Programm des Staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar', in Hans M. Wingler, *Das Bauhaus 1919-1933* (Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Dokumente) (Cologne: DuMont, 1975).

8 Walter Gropius in a letter to Tomás Madonado, quoted in Rainer Wick, *Bauhaus Pädagogik* (Cologne: DuMont, 1982), 29.

aspects of the educational programme. It states that what is most important is not art, nor the work, but mankind. The manifesto implicitly rejects a society that places greater value on material goods than on moral development.

Despite Gropius' later explanation for the Romantic tone of the founding manifesto, these views definitely did play an important part in the history of Bauhaus. Some of the avant-garde artists associated with the Institute, among them Johannes Itten, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, held decidedly Romantic views on art. In their eyes, art was directed at the mental and spiritual side of human life and its most important mission was to reveal the transcendental order. This line of thinking will, however, have hardly any influence on the way in which education is organized, as it is structured around workplaces focused on practical training in the handling of materials and the mastering of technical work processes. The ultimate goal of the training programme is to design new products, and to achieve this, the mental and spiritual possibilities of art are not really a necessity. The contradiction that this brings to light is characteristic of the new role that art wishes to take on. Artists want to be part of social reality and bridge the gap between art and life, but at the same time this mission cannot originate in society itself. A true vanguard advances towards a better world, and it's the artists who know where to find it.

Bauhaus has had a profound influence. Especially in the United States and Northern Europe after World War II, art education at many academies was restructured according to the basic principles of Bauhaus. The main idea was that the gaze of artists-in-training should be directed at current design problems. In an interdisciplinary-orientated study programme in which the guiding principles are a general formative first year for all students and a curriculum that is interrelated with the current social context, the final goal is improvement of the visual culture. The institutes that are inspired by Bauhaus regard artists in the first place as designers of the visual environment, a task they should carry out together with industry and government.

In that same period, however, artists themselves took an increasingly radical turn away from the current society. Horrified by the mass destruction that had taken place and disappointed by the lack of true social change, many artists once more turned to the Romantic ideas at their most extreme. During the 1950s and 1960s, the debate on art and culture was dominated by a strongly Romantic-orientated vocabulary. It was only now that the Romantic revolu-

tion in art education firmly took hold. Although this tendency was manifested in many other countries as well, we will discuss only the Dutch situation here.

In the 1950s, the Dutch government found that there was a gap between art and the people, and proposed to bridge this gap by offering 'artistic education' to everyone and persuading artists to descend from their 'ivory towers'. The notion of 'free expression' now dominated the thinking about art by both the government and the artists. The idea was that civil society suppresses people's creative powers. If there was to be a free society and a New Man, we had to call upon the 'unspoiled souls of children and artists', as Willem Sandberg said.⁹ All forms of education should focus on the free development of the individual, and naturally this especially applied to art education. After all, artists were pre-eminently capable of breaking out of established frameworks of perception and diagnosing the current social order. Their independent outlook and free creativity could lead the way in establishing social change. Art education should therefore take place in the margins of society. To prevent the corruption of their 'innocence', artists-to-be should not be overly confronted with the reality outside the academy. And the study programme itself should contain as few obstacles as possible, in order not to frustrate the process of free self-fulfilment. The academy was seen as a sanctuary and the artist as a freely creating individual.

Art as Criticism

Since the 1970s, society has undergone profound changes. We now live in a media society – or rather, we have become 'mediatized' beings. This means that we view and experience the world to a great extent through the agency of technical media. The advent of the Internet has not only greatly speeded up and globalized all means of communication – which has far-reaching consequences in and of itself – but in a more fundamental way, we have become part of a computer-driven complex that envelops us like an ecosystem. In today's world, no factory would function and not a single plane would take off anymore if worldwide communications networks were to fail. As W. Daniel Hillis says: 'Welcome to the Age of Entanglement.'¹⁰

⁹ Willem Sandberg, quoted in Roel Pots, *Cultuur, koningen en democraten: Overheid en cultuur in Nederland* (Nijmegen: SUN, 2000), 534, note 180.

¹⁰ See W. Daniel Hillis, 'Het tijdperk van verstrengeling', *Hoe verandert internet je manier van denken?* ed. John Brockman, trans. Tijmen Roozenboom (Amsterdam/Utrecht: Maven Publishing, 2011), 19-22

The art students of today have grown up in this age. They feel connected with the global world of art and do not regard art as a separate segment of life in which higher values and insights are being articulated. For them, visual art is about images; and never before have so many images been so universally accessible. This raises the question of what the specific significance of an artistic image is within the context of the present-day media society, and of course also what the specific significance of the makers of those images, the artists, is. And how do the academies deal with this new reality? How do they define their relationship with and attitude towards the media world and the entertainment industry?

The prevailing theoretical discourse on art education is still largely determined by a Romantic notion of art, typically regarding art as a separate domain from other social activities. Art is autonomous, which literally means that it makes its own laws; and this autonomy is interpreted in a radical way. Especially Romantic is the notion that art has a higher truth to announce, and that revealing this truth is its core nature. Art is criticism, criticism from 'beyond'. Direct involvement with social activities would corrupt the role that art has to play and would annihilate the special value of the artistic image.

However, the developments that we mentioned earlier and that define the current situation in the field of visual art demonstrate that we need a different notion of art to do justice to these developments. Art education is still focusing too much on the individual work and not enough on the prevailing image culture, or, in other words, it is focusing too much on the makers and their personal musings and not enough on the spectator and the context in which the image is functioning. Each new image is dropped into an ocean of other images of all kinds: artistic, journalistic, advertising, and hobbyist images. There is no longer any hierarchy among images and the distinction between 'high' and popular culture has been lifted. Nowadays all images are 'material', lending themselves to reproduction, processing and rearrangement. Within this framework, Romantic insights have lost their meaning.

The above shows that the call to have the education of this presumably essential cultural elite take place in isolation and seclusion fits remarkably well within the Romantic discourse on art. The argument has three elements: the old cultural elite has gone, and we suffer from this loss; an elite should play a critical and guiding role; and a new elite should be educated in isolation. All of these elements correspond with fundamental Romantic principles. The question is

what exactly is meant by 'elite', 'isolation' and 'critical' and whether these concepts can be defined differently and more adequately.

The concept of a 'cultural elite' is rather broad. It throws together people who are active or have expertise in very different domains of culture. They are specialists and professionals that are well informed about the most current developments and problems in specific areas within the cultural field. However, the idea of a 'cultural elite' is mainly associated with some sort of moral authority. It does not primarily refer to the knowledge and experience of those involved, but to their implied status and aura, which reach far beyond the boundaries of the profession. It is the moral aspect of the concept that has lost meaning. Within an egalitarian society such as ours, that moral authority is no longer accepted at face value, especially not if it claims status with regard to fields outside of its own profession. The question is whether this is regrettable. From a professional perspective, cultural elites still exist: there will always be people who, based on insight and professionalism, take up special and authoritative positions in their particular field, and these elites will always be there. They will not, however, be guiding to society as a whole but at most within their own specialism, and even then, probably only for a limited time.

The idea of wanting to educate new specialists in isolation does sound — especially in view of the current, rapidly developing media world — rather like a contradiction in terms. Of course it may be useful to withdraw from the turmoil of social life for shorter or longer periods in order to concentrate or reflect, but that is not what this is about. The intended isolation, 'far away from the media', is not only an illusion nowadays, it also demonstrates a nostalgia for the 'high' culture that was so lamentably lost and for the pretension of being able to prescribe from the sidelines what course society should take.

The notion that artists should play a critical role in society is certainly still defensible, but it is very important to consider the nature of such criticism. In itself, the fact that visual art has become part of an overall visual culture does not imply that it would no longer have a critical function. However, such criticism should then not be seen as commentary coming from a neutral or detached, let alone exalted position. Artists can most certainly be the critical conscience of the current visual culture. Their critical contribution can be to show or make tangible that which is excluded by the prevailing perspective on the world. Not by basing themselves on grand ideals, but by being practical, involved, and focused, and by visualising what is

not being mentioned in common reality. Criticism should be given from within, and as image specialists, artists can assume this role from their relatively autonomous position.

Redefining the guiding role of the arts seems to go more in the direction of an ideal of the avant-gardes than back to the Romantic notions that still prevail in art education. More of a vanguard that is fully aware of social developments and from there tries to find the best way forward. And yet, this position also has its drawbacks. Art that emphatically commits itself to progress and 'the best possible solution' is not only prone to be hijacked by goals it never intended, but can also be easily called to account when the effect it predicts does not occur. In other words, while the self-selected instrumentalization of art does free artists from their isolation, at the same time it neatly places them in the category of the 'creative industry', where criticism has become a commodity. Art academies ought to be places where the function of artistic production is discussed within the framework of wider cultural developments. In this debate, the academies must ask themselves which values they regard as central, while they cannot escape from extensively paying attention to the growing influence and significance of the art market, the entertainment industry, and popular culture. A critical reflection on these phenomena should be part of the curriculum – not to haughtily dismiss them, but to understand their mechanisms and attraction. Only then does a critical approach to the visual products of mass culture become possible. But first, the last vestiges of the Romantic notion of art have to be cleared out. Handed-down remnants from the Romantic discourse can only play a role in this as long as they are not copied indiscriminately. They do represent a striving towards 'a different world', and this endeavour must keep acting as a counterbalance against an overdose of social reality. This will not produce a new elite. But then again, that notion is now definitely obsolete.

