

## *The Emergence of Change Through Embracing Freedom: Agent Art*

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary art may not be formulated as one thing, however, instead of generating new propositions, its reproduction and aestheticization of social reality and identities can be spotted. Conversely, aspiring for positive change, the aim of this paper is to propose an alternative way of existence and conception of social reality through the approach of *agent art*. Sartre explains that even if we try to refuse to take the responsibility of our choices "we are condemned to be free." However, since our freedom designates our responsibility in our choices, we resist accepting being free and the changeability of our identities and social reality, even though we *know* that they are our constructions. With this notion, *agent art* aims to reveal and depict viewers' resistance to change and to their freedom. Since viewers *know* that the social reality and identities are their constructions and they are the ones responsible of pursuing them, *agent art* abolishes the hierarchic patronising position of the artist over the viewer in the sense that artist presents something that is not known. This statement indicates the equality between the artist and the viewer in *knowing*. Consequently, *equality*, rather than an object of desire that will come in the future, hence, will never come, is comprehended as *here and now*, just as freedom is. Accordingly, *agent art* abolishes the constructed hierarchic dualities between the artist and the viewer, such as educator-learner, demonstrator-spectator, talented-untalented and so on. This comprehension arises the capacity to change, thus, the future becomes now.

Keywords: Reality, change, agent art, freedom, equality, capacity

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## Introduction

This paper is based on one of the focuses of my Ph.D. thesis titled *Agent Art: Freedom of Nothingness* (2013). The research question of the thesis is, ‘how would art not reproduce social reality, and rather change it?’ For artists and viewers who would like to change their perspectives towards social reality rather than reproducing it, the answer is founded on “reclaiming the future” through embracing *freedom*, which is already at present, now. For this task, in this paper, the hierarchies between unchangeability-changeability, conditional freedom-existential freedom, art-agent art, inequality-equality, inability-ability, talent-capacity will be questioned, and these hierarchies, which are established through transferring the responsibilities, will be replaced with the notion of everyone having the capacity to change.

## Unchangeability – Changeability

As humans living in this existing social reality, we are not pleased with its every aspect. As a part of the social community, artists and viewers also want to change many things in terms of how the system works and how we operate within it. Even though we want things to change, at the same time we do not want to accept that change is possible, particularly change in our perception and our identity. Therefore, the greatest obstacle for change appears to rest on *not wanting to change*, choosing to stay in a safe, irresponsible position. This statement is existentially regarding demolishing our illusionary perception of social reality and our identity.

[...] the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. (Žižek, 2008, p. 29-30).

Even though we try to overlook, we all *know* that this reality is our construction. We find it ready when we are born but at the same time by pursuing it as it is, we comply with it, as if it is absolute, meaning unchangeable. When we consent on its unchangeability, we release ourselves from the fact that our identity being also a construction. However, we build our identity, our self through making choices. By avoiding this fact, we consider our identity absolute, as if we are born with an essence that makes it absolute. However, we *know* that we actually construct, make our self. Jean-Paul Sartre makes the distinction between *to be* and *to make itself* (1992, p.568) and explains essence as a project constantly being constructed, making itself, not something we are born with. Emphasising on both the reality and identity being a construction, thus something that can be reconstructed, means that they are changeable.

## **Conditional Freedom – Existential Freedom**

Since reality, our identity and our perception about them can be changed; the question now would be how? According to Sartre, the answer would be through freedom. Because, all the choices we make, either conscious or unconscious, are because of our existential freedom. Here, the distinction between *existential freedom* and what I call *conditional freedom* needs to be pointed out. While the conditional freedom is based on social limitations and focuses on obtaining what is wished, existential freedom is, as Sartre explains, about oneself, determining oneself to wish, choose, act (1992, p. 621-22). Since everyone chooses, acts, wishes, then everyone is existentially free. Therefore we are responsible for all our choices. We cannot transfer the responsibility of our choices to the institutions within social reality, such as; state, law, family, religion, art and such. Because of that, we try to refuse our freedom. However, Sartre explains, even when we refuse to be free, we are condemned to be free (1992, p. 567), because even the act of this refusal requires a free being.

Since ‘they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it’, then they are making a choice, thus, they are free. This is the very reason why they choose to pursue activities that will chain themselves. The people who choose to chain themselves with the notion of reality have to be free to do so and therefore created this ‘reality’ chain as for their escape strategy from being free (Selmanpakoglu, 2014, p. 218).

## **Art – Agent Art**

If a person chooses to reckon with this escape strategy, they need to choose to embrace their freedom with its responsibilities. When adopting this notion to art, and the artist-viewer relation, the agenda of agent art that is to abolish the transference of responsibility and the hierarchies between artist and viewer will be discussed. Agent art finds its foundation on existential freedom and changeability of social reality and identity.

Contemporary art may not be formulated as one thing, however, instead of generating new propositions, its reproduction and aestheticization of social reality and identities can be spotted. Art has always been a reflector of its era even when it was not yet called art and also today. Art is a reflector, when it reveals, displays or reproduces our perceptions or what takes place. Art is not free from the social structure; always interacts with it, and takes position depending on the courses. Agent art is paradoxically indifferent to its era. It does not take its position depending on the productions of its era. Since freedom is not determined by a certain period, time and space, the operation of agent art, which is not directed at a certain time and culture, never ends. Accordingly, the agent art does not operate through the notion of utopia, that is, the field of possibilities not yet here, the future that will come, in other words, constantly in the state of coming; all meaning will never come. Contrarily, agent art focuses on freedom, which is always present, here and now. So, utopia’s postponed future is relocated, and therefore it becomes always possible here and now.

## **Possession of Change**

The performance of viewing –gazing– comprises two standpoints: one is the position of the conveyor, the artist, and the other is the position of the receiver, perceiver that is, the viewer. They both assume each other.

The viewers can only engage with an artwork, which they understand and communicate with, thus conceptually possess it. “[...] to possess is to wish to possess the world across a particular object” (Sartre, 1992, p.762). Even though what they understand, discover or reminded of is something they resist, their resistance shows a reverse possession. “[...] being-in-the-world is a project of possessing this world [...]” (Sartre, 1992, p. 763). Their resistance would indicate their possession of the object of their resistance. What agent art presents is something everyone already existentially has; that is freedom, but it is also what everyone tries to escape, resist. Thus, the agent art does not promise to present to the viewer something that they do not have: it aims to show that, trying to reject freedom, thus responsibility, is also rejecting change and consequently the joy of being anything/everything. Everyone can determine oneself to wish to be everything. Everyone possesses the potential to change.

## **Inequality – Equality: Inability – Ability**

If the possibility of change is always present through the acceptance of freedom, now, the question would be on the ‘ability’ to change. We usually transfer our responsibility on abilities, as if some are able and some are not. However, since everyone is free to act, there must be an equality principle. If everyone is equal then everyone must be able to change, has the ability to change, both the artist and the viewer. Rancière explains that “teaching or playing, speaking, writing, making art or looking at it”, meaning “what our performances [...] verify is [...] the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else” (Rancière, 2009, p. 17). Therefore, the ability is associated with capacity. Everyone is equal in terms of capacity; has the capacity to be able to make art or look at it.

Irrelevant to being successful, everybody has the capacity to be able, both the artist and the viewer. If we put a hierarchy between the artist and the viewer, that would be similar to the teacher-student relationship, where inability is promoted. Rancière explains the pedagogical logic of teacher-student relationship, which Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840) calls “stultification”, where the student is ignorant and “does not know what she does not know or how to know it” (Rancière, 2009, p. 8). Accordingly, “The first thing it teaches her is her own inability. In its activity, it thereby constantly confirms its own presuppositions: the inequality of intelligence” (Rancière, 2009, p. 9). Therefore, knowledge becomes a position of power. Since it is a position, this position can change hands. Rancière explains that Jacotot puts intellectual emancipation as the practice of “verification of the equality of intelligence” against “stultification” (Rancière, 2009, p. 10).

## **Inequality – Equality: Talent – Capacity**

When the viewer approaches an artwork focusing on the artist’s ability rather than their own, they also promote inequality. This hierarchic activity between teacher and

student, artist and viewer, postpones equality to the future, which turns it into an object of desire. Hence, equality becomes something that will never come, even though it is always here. But we want it to be an object of desire, something that will come in the future, moreover will not come, so that we could avoid the responsibility of our choices, thus freedom. However, if our performances verify our capacity, thus equality, then we are also equally capable in terms of intelligence. Therefore, we understand that equality is not something that will happen in the future; rather it is already present.

Considering art through the concept of 'talent' also supports the hierarchy between the artist and the viewer. Placing artist in the position of talent also brings the role of depicting the 'sublime' or conveying the truth. Just like the role of the teacher. Knowledge and intelligence become the property of the teacher, and talent, depiction, conveyance of truth become the property of the artist. Such externalizations of the viewer serve them to transfer their responsibility by promoting their own incompetence. The viewer legitimise theirs seek for guidance, meaning transference of their responsibility through promoting their incompetence.

### **Determining to Transform: Change**

On the contrary to this declaration of incompetence, the performance between the artwork and the viewer can be described as a correspondence: inasmuch as what the viewer writes –interprets- becomes their property. “‘The signifier’ is the writer’s domain, but it is everybody else’s too. And if the signifier is subdivided according to its local modes of action, and thought of as a competitive interplay between the two ‘slopes’ [...], it becomes still more plainly a piece of public property over which the writer has no special rights” (Bowie, 1993, p. 68). Rancière explains this performance through the viewers’ act of refashioning and connects it to emancipation:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way [...] (Rancière, 2009, p. 13).

Subsequently, viewers already observe, select, compare and interpret the artwork by linking it with their prior knowledge, experience and so on. In both cases –in conveying and receiving- both the artist and the viewer act on prior knowledge, assumption, attribution. The artist establishes the intellectual context of what they want to convey through these assumptions and truths, and the viewer interprets what they see based on their own assumptions. When the viewers embrace their freedom, equality, intelligence and capacity, then they would start *consciously* refashioning what is before them: they could alter reality and their identity altogether. What agent art aims to depict is this potential, this capacity.

Clearly, the same principle is applied for the artist, i.e. agent artist. Agent artist does not depict existing social reality, the fantasy identities and whatever enables their pursuance. Agent artist abolishes the transference mechanism and focuses on human's resistance to freedom and potential to change. In order to do that, first, the agent artist must embrace their freedom and take the responsibility of their choices to put their thoughts forward and towards change. In order to talk about the art viewer, initially, an artwork must be placed before them. But not to reproduce the hierarchy between the artist and the viewer, in this paper, a reverse strategy has been followed and the position of the viewer is analysed. Both the artist and the viewer can determine to change their identity, their perception about social reality and its operation simultaneously, here and now, since it will be absurd to wait for something that is already potentially here. This decision and determination need to be made intellectually and aesthetically.

## **Conclusion**

It is understood that the hierarchies between the artist and the viewer is predominantly laid on the notions of ability and talent. Viewers, as a means to transfer their responsibility, attribute the ability and talent capacity to the artist. This practice nourishes from the inequality conception, moreover from sponsoring the conditional freedom in place of the existential freedom. When the viewers position themselves in an unable, incapacitated, unequal place, what they actually do is resisting to their freedom and to change. However, since everyone can act, choose and wish, everyone is equal in terms of freedom, in other words, has the capacity to change. Ultimately, in order to change and embrace our equal capacities to transform, a decision and determination are required. As Foucault points, the "transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, [...] something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?" (Foucault, 1997, p. 131).

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