



AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, OWNERSHIP, AND POST-TRUTH

SOME POLITICAL REFLECTIONS ON SYLVIE FLEURY

by Johannes Hoernig



It has always been possible for artists, at least at some stage in their career, to become benefactors and ideological patrons of the prevailing social and economic order. Instances of this are Pablo Picasso's return to classicism *entre-deux-guerres*, the bourgeoisified search for authenticity of Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer,¹ or the now common relationship between contemporary artists and creative industries. This latter phenomenon has gradually turned the possibility of complacency into unexceptional reality, and is the farthest we have come from what Walter Benjamin, less than a century ago, still thought was an "impossible place" for any artist or intellectual to occupy.² One upshot of this complacency is that no one tries to preserve even the semblance of high culture as a utopian realm for imagining an alternative future and sociopolitical horizon. This development is not, as one might think, a symptom of ever greater democratic concerns over excluding people from various forms of culture. There is no shortage of exclusion today. Rather, it stems from the realization that it is not profitable to intimidate, offend or challenge potential customers, who are made to believe that understanding a work of art is a matter of ownership.

Some of these social phenomena are reflected in the work of Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury, who was born 1961 in Geneva. Her artistic method for visualizing what has aptly been described as the "new culture of total affirmation"³ often takes the form of pastiche, and is, in part, motivated by the glaring discrepancy between the market's and modernity's promise of individual freedom and its actual realization. But unlike some of her engaged contemporaries, Fleury does not promise a way out by spreading false hopes for a more enlightened form of egoism or the possibility of spiritual renewal. Perhaps she does not even want a way out from the predominant social and economic laws because (like most of us?) she identifies with the desires and values they perpetuate. Her body of work is framed by what one might call an eccentric need for self-contradiction; a need that seems to originate from a deep realization that, indeed, contradictions are a defining feature of our identities. Such realization turns the belief in unity or authenticity of self into an antagonistic, yet emotively persuasive, exercise. This psychosocial tension re-emerges in some of

Fleury's all-caps, large neon writings, such as "ETERNITY NOW" or "BE AMAZING!" Utterances like these lose their innocence as lexical décor of private commodities to which their initial function was reduced. Once extracted from their contextual bases, they almost take the form of political slogans freed from any political agent or agenda. There is a resounding energy in these slogans, enhanced by the artist through scale, color and placement, which nonetheless fails to make any real political sense in the public sphere.

At the level of individual psychology, efforts to be oneself within Fleury's universe seem incapable of taking any other form than libidinous subjection to heteronomy. In the absence of emancipatory interests and self-critique, one is left with the suggestion that "THE ONLY GOOD SYSTEM IS A SOUNDSYSTEM." Again, such words insinuate unchanneled political energy against a system (which one exactly?) and remind one of the charge against German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's *Systemtheorie* that its preoccupation with how systems function leaves social critique wanting. The same is true of Fleury's fascination and treatment of these words, for they have no identifiable political role to play as aesthetic objects.

Many of the seemingly innocuous imperatives, handpicked by the artist from their market habitat, are reinterpreted as autonomous self-commands by market-infatuated individuals, who see their freedom continuously augmented. Once "conformity has replaced consciousness"⁴ but is registered as freedom, the self has become tailored for consumption like other commodities and serves the realization of capital. It does so perhaps not immediately in the crude form of seeking profit but through the principle of maximization of recognition and followers, which is equally oriented at profit. Fleury's artistic repertoire reveals that the much-celebrated locus of individual freedom at the same time contains its opposite: heteronomy, oppression and domination.

While her critique does not take the form of specific analyses of class and social identities, much of her work is organized around the inegalitarian logic behind the fashion industry, which is predicated upon status competition and struggles for social recognition. A unanimous agreement

among commentators of Fleury's work is that they believe she blurs the lines between art and fashion.⁵ This is an interesting claim. By "blurring," these writers seem to have in mind something like an opening up of the realm of art to that of fashion. They claim that what is blurred in Fleury's installations, in other words, is our ability to distinguish between experiences of fashion and experiences of art. But such a claim results from a misunderstanding about what constitutes an aesthetic experience. When it comes to aesthetics, the difference between art and fashion is that one cannot have an aesthetic experience by looking at fashion. Fashion objects and market commodities in general are not aesthetic objects.

Aesthetic objects leave their recipients insecure about how best to understand what is being looked at, heard or read. They bring into play the intellect and, at the same time, invite us to reflect on what the cognitive process of understanding itself means.⁶ Such objects call for interpretation but leave us frustrated whenever we attempt to reach a final analysis. The insecurity and inadequacy that market-prescribed commodities produce in their potential consumers, on the other hand, is of an entirely different nature. These feelings bring to the fore the social relations that determine their value and, as such, are a function of their inegalitarian meaning as tokens of the economic power their owners enjoy over others. Insecurity can be remedied temporarily through the act of consuming but will, no sooner, automatically be reinstated in order not to curb surplus motivation. Moreover, anxious comparison with others will do its part to help prescind from reflecting on the averageness of one's own existence as conformist consumer. Notably, the title of Fleury's 2016 show at Karma International Zürich was "Your Dress Is More Beautiful."

What, at last, are we to make of the hedonistic promise that our consumerist way of life essentially caters to the need for pleasure? It appears that the abundance of sensual pleasures inscribed into consumable objects retain their seductive quality even after Fleury's aesthetic reorganization, no less due to the enticing use of fur and glossy, colored enamel. But while pleasure might be a side effect of the deeper logic of capitalism, it cannot itself be its motivation because, as Marx said, "capitalism is already essentially abolished once we assume that it is enjoyment that is the driving motive and not enrichment itself."⁷ Pure pleasure is as unproductive as enrichment for the sake of enjoyment. Both would offend the Yuppie's quest for industriousness and social usefulness. Once it becomes clear that the economic imperative of capital accumulation for its own sake subordinates every other motivation or imperative, one can put into general perspective the ethical ambitions of corporations—from sustainability to equal opportunity—which have us believe that ethics, not profits, matter. What exactly, we may then wonder, is the ethical message of Dior's recent question, printed on a USD 500 Breton-striped shirt in the Spring/Summer 2018 collection, "Why have there been no great women artists?"

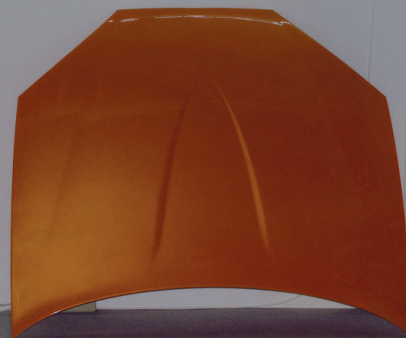
(Opening page)
Installation view of SYLVIE FLEURY's *Eternity Now*, 2015, neon, 10.2 x 83.8 cm, at the Bass Museum of Art, Miami, 2015–18. Courtesy Bass Museum of Art.

(Opposite page)
SYLVIE FLEURY, *Be Amazing*, 1999, electric lights, wood, paint and metal frame, 77.5 x 497.8 x 6.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(This page)
SYLVIE FLEURY, *The Only Good System is a Soundsystem*, 2014, white neon, 33 x 574 x 5.5 cm. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg/London.

1 See Benjamin HD Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October*, 16 (Spring 1981): 39–68.
2 Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), 93.
3 Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," *Artforum International* 51, no. 4 (Dec 2012): 252–261.
4 Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 104.
5 See, for example, the essays by Verena Hein, "Beauty and Oddity" and Maria Muhle, "My Life on the Road," in Sylvie Fleury, *My Life on the Road*, eds. M. Buhrs and V. Hein (Berlin: Distanz, 2016). Similarly, Beatriz Rufi, "Customize," in *Parlett* 58 (2000): 97–99, and the introduction by Simon Lamuniere in Sylvie Fleury (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2015).
6 See Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 117: "Kunst verstehen heißt immer mitzuverstehen, was Verstehen eigentlich heißt." (Understanding art always also means to understand what understanding actually means.)
7 Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 199.

THE ONLY GOOD SYSTEM IS A SOUNDSYSTEM





Misleading and effective gestures like these cry out for pastiche by Fleury, which, if not already glaringly obvious, would unmask ideological patronage as ethical impotence and political nonsense.

True, works of art too are ambitiously commodified and every bit a part of commodity culture. They answer to the same desires for status display and affirmation of class membership in their potential owners. Yet the economic transaction of a work of art does not terminate the work's interpretative instability.⁸ Owning a work of art does not replace understanding it. There is, therefore, something egalitarian about works of art despite their deep imbrication with inegalitarian market logic. This egalitarian dimension does not issue from what these works are about, even when they directly address social struggle, oppression and inequality. Rather, it issues from the need to interpret them and to negotiate their meaning publicly through aesthetic discourse—if only to reject works as *Betroffenheitskitsch*, or consternation-kitsch, to which many of today's artistic and curatorial occupations with the disadvantaged and oppressed fall prey.⁹

The production of instability and insecurity is not exclusive to the meaning of works of art. What makes interpretative openness both necessary and possible is a matter of a larger epistemological context, lacking a binding normative order. There are, today, no ultimate standards for ethical orientation. One way to characterize this situation is by calling it “post-truth”—the word of the year in 2016. Another way would be to say that truth has died, which does not mean that any one particular truth has died but rather that the conditions that make the notion of truth intelligible have ceased to exist. It has become unviable to appeal to a fixed notion of truth that could serve as a common frame of reference for answering social, political or aesthetic questions.

We have, in fact, been living in the age of post-truth for quite some time. Perhaps it took the election of United States president Donald Trump to be brought face to face with the consequences of this historical development. The death of truth is the upshot of a greater historical event, famously announced by Friedrich Nietzsche in aphorism number 125 in *The Gay Science*: “God is dead!”¹⁰ Part of his death is the collapse of any foundation for truth and the radical erosion of epistemological hierarchy that once enabled some to claim superior knowledge to what the good life is, or to final aesthetic judgment. Once this form of qualitative hierarchy is gone, all are brought down to the lowest common denominator, as it were, and to the level of moral and political equality. With equality firmly in place as a moral horizon, we have only ourselves to count on with regard to everything, from knowledge to political practices to aesthetic experience.

When under such equalized conditions—nothing is particularly good and nothing particularly bad, nothing high and nothing low—the only suitable stance to take is a blatant “YES TO ALL.” But this “YES” does not simply state Fleury's undifferentiated “aspiration to openness,” as curator Verena Hein believes, or, what amounts to the same, a sentimental egalitarianism of the kind recently embraced by Ai Weiwei in his aesthetic treatment of Europe's refugee crisis. It rather proves her awareness that any human practice—political, social, aesthetic—takes place under post-truth or post-metaphysical conditions. What these conditions make unviable in the case of aesthetic judgment is the deference to fixed criteria such as genre, material, content or form, which would suggest that there can be a closure in our interpretative efforts once we have identified the meaning generated by them.

When it comes to answering aesthetic questions, we might find that someone with a particularly well-trained eye can convince us about the accuracy of their interpretation. But the fact that we need to be convinced, with arguments, is already indicative that there is something else at work, which determines the relation between ourselves and those who offer their expertise or authority on a given aesthetic or any other matter. That there can be no monopoly of correct reception, or more generally, a monopoly of what counts as correct knowledge, is the result of a long historical process augmented by the death of truth.

There are, of course, countless attempts in art and politics to explain away the force of Fleury's “YES TO ALL” and to condemn the death of truth. One such example is Wolfgang Tillmans, who recently launched a new search for liberal truth, in his campaign against Brexit and populist insurgencies.¹¹ Through some of his latest work, appealing unambiguously to scientific findings about the relation between dishonesty (about the truth of liberal values) and signals in the amygdala, Tillmans proposes his very own *rappel à l'ordre*, which serves to provide access to a universal truth about the human condition. This is good news for liberal elites, who, like Tillmans, view populism as a cognitive problem rather than as an expression of a political division between ever fewer winners and ever more losers of globalization.¹²

Defenders of an apparent liberal truth face a serious challenge, namely that the promise of a liberal capitalist society for a free and flourishing life for all is a structural

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SYLVIE FLEURY, *Serie ELA 75/K (Go Pout)*, 2000, 24-karat gold leaf, mirror and aluminum, 83 x 55 x 96 cm. Courtesy the artist.

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SYLVIE FLEURY, *Insolence*, 2007, mixed-media installation with shopping bags, dimensions variable. Courtesy Sprüth Magers Galerie, Berlin/London/Los Angeles.



⁸ On the concept of interpretative instability under post-metaphysical conditions, see Juliane Rebentisch's *Ästhetik der Installationen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003).

⁹ “But when art seeks to give a voice to those who cannot afford to be above the fray... art kitschifies these others into political subjects without the politics to match.” See Diederich Diederichsen's critique of Documenta 14 and the 57th Venice Biennale, “Summer of the Stumblers,” *Artforum International* 56, no. 1 (Sep 2017): 310–315.

¹⁰ “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 3, #125, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

¹¹ “Wolfgang Tillmans Explores the Role of Art in a Post-Truth World,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2018.

¹² Wolfgang Strecker, “The Return of the Repressed,” *New Left Review* 104 (March/April 2017): 5–18.

¹³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 139.

impossibility. “Capitalism,” American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein reminds us, “represents material reward for some, but in order to do so, it can never be material reward for everyone.”¹³ More importantly, if there was such a thing as liberal truth, then art would have only one legitimate role to play: the aesthetic garnishing of this truth. This would amount to making all aesthetic and political imagination about other ways of organizing society a futile, if not an outright reactionary, exercise. The conclusion to draw is that the death of truth makes the case for democracy stronger, while the case for liberal or any other proclaimed truth ultimately renders democracy superfluous. Fleury’s work, then, in its self-contradictory and nihilistic affirmation, is a solitary reminder that there can be no assurance about outcomes, be they political, social or aesthetic.

Whatever else might be true of our liberal capitalist society, one basic fact is that there are winners and losers. The winners take what they can, while the losers endure what they must,¹⁴ since the losers themselves are responsible for their condition and are made to understand that they have no one but themselves to blame. That there is ever-greater effort to achieve equal opportunities does not change the competitive nature of what we do but only reinforces the willingness to compete and to outdo others. Whenever we can afford to take a break from our competitive diligence, we tell ourselves, either to curb frustration or to perhaps mitigate our unjustifiable social advantage, that despite quantitative inequality and social stratification, we value, above all else, human equality. Part of Fleury’s preoccupation with the historical reality of conspicuous consumption and status competition raises the question of the meaningful place for this deeper human equality. That she does not disavow her own involvement with market ideology is both a truthful reflection on the prevailing conditions of artistic practice and an affront against those who believe that artists and intellectuals can and must position themselves outside.

Sylvie Fleury is a Geneva-based artist. Recent shows include “La Bougainvillea,” Karma International, Los Angeles (2018), “Eye Shadows,” Salon 94 Bowery, New York (2017), and “My Life on the Road,” Villa Stuck, Munich (2016).

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¹⁴ This formulation is loosely based on Thucydides: “...συντάττει δὲ οἱ πρῶτοι κερδοσκοποῦσι καὶ οἱ δευτέραις εὐχαιοῦσιν.” Thucydides *Historiae* Vol. II: Books V-VIII, eds. H. Stuart Jones and J.E. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Book V, 89.



Installation view of SYLVIE FLEURY's YES TO ALL, 2009, neon, 75 x 500 x 25 cm, at “Eternal Tour,” Centre d’Art Neuchâtel, 2009. Photo by Sully Balmassière. Courtesy the artist.