



Rein Raud

Artistic freedom, the safety valve

Rein Raud investigates why artists are still important to uphold and to interpret notions of "freedom".

The idea of freedom has changed considerably during the course of history, and the main trend has been toward more concreteness, more particularity. Instead of speaking of freedom as such, we speak about freedom of speech, freedom of press, free enterprise or freedom of choice. This is a positive development, we are told, because instead of an abstract idea we now have to do with down-to-earth, practical matters that actually affect our own lives. Any "freedom from", the argument runs, is merely an escape from an undesired condition, but what next, what next? Yes, we hear, what is needed is a lot of well-situated "freedoms for", such as a freedom for a stable job, a freedom for a long-term bank-loan, and a freedom for a suburban home. A "freedom for" indicates a freedom that can be converted into something else. Thus the very word "freedom" has developed a meaning, which, in English, is not synonymous with the word "liberty" any longer. It would, I hope, be preposterous to imagine, for instance, the Statue of Liberty as a monument not to celebrate the abstract idea of freedom but its practical implications, or that French revolutionaries, had they known better, would have been happy to rephrase their slogan as "fraternity, equality and freedom for".

These are reminders from our cultural history that freedom has, in its crucial moments, been otherwise, first and foremost a political concept. The famous opening sentence of Rousseau's *Le Contrat Social* "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains" sets its ground very well: freedom is intrinsic to us as a right, but we are (well, *were*, at the time) deprived from it by an oppressive force that governs our living conditions. This is also how freedom was understood in the Baltics during the long decades of Soviet occupation. Our countries were supposed to be free, though they were not, but they could become free. In several restaurants in Tallinn that are popular with students, artists and intellectuals they serve deep-fried potato peel (and, incidentally, it is fairly popular and does not taste bad at all), because one of the popular slogans of the late 1980s was "let us free and we agree to eat potato peel". This, if anything, seems rather a far cry from "freedom for", although, I suspect, there always was a certain percentage of Estonians to whom national independence was mainly desirable as a gateway to better economical conditions and who, accordingly, would be willing to forsake it again, if there were sufficient gains to be had.

We are now a free society, which means we complain more about money and have less time and initiative to discuss freedom. Nevertheless, even a casual

look at our semiosphere indicates that the abstract idea of freedom is still a powerful drive in our culture, even if it has been forced underground in theoretical discourse. Middle class suburban types appear in TV commercials mostly to recommend us detergents or dishwashing liquids, but the clothes we are supposed to imagine ourselves in are presented to us as attributes of independent, casual, intrinsically free people who do not have to fight each other for the system's breadcrumbs. Cars to be coveted drive through spectacular landscapes on great speed, instead of being stuck in suburban traffic jams in the morning. On the whole, this semiotic idea of freedom has something to do with majestic and uncontrollable, yet noble force that is entirely lacking in our dire daily routine. Freedom is a condition of mind, an attitude toward reality, untainted by the constraints and hierarchies of the system, the absolute opposite of alienation. For me personally, this psychological (vs. the political or the social) definition of freedom is what matters most. It is possible to be free even in prison, and to be a slave on a royal throne. The freedom of Epictetus is what counts most in the last instance, because this is a freedom that cannot be converted into anything else.

This freedom is also something that needs to be practiced. We know of religions, such as Christianity, of which one can be a non-practicing adept, but not to practice freedom means to give it up. We know that, unless there are critical issues, only a rather small part of the population normally exercises its right to vote in free societies, but I believe almost nobody among the non-voting would give up their right to vote. The same applies even more to the freedom of speech. But although these freedoms stay in place as festive attributes of our society, the fundamental, psychological freedom is somewhat of a luxury most members of the society cannot practice, even if they have retained it in their minds. And this is precisely where, in contemporary society, art comes in.

The cultural practices of art have changed in their function at least as much as the idea of freedom, but for different reasons. Since the great breakthrough in the end of the 19th century, the individual visions the artists have of reality have triumphed over the correct representation of what the reality looks like to most other people, and just as well: modern technologies have rendered quite obsolete most of the representational tasks that arts used to have – after all, it is much cheaper and more efficient to take a photograph of one's family than to commission a group portrait from an artist, and the result, let us admit, is also much more likely to resemble the original. And when the *avant-garde* artists finally broke out of the limits of the "art-work" as a self-contained object, seeing their creations as events they themselves, as well as their audience, were a part of, then, at the latest, had the artists crossed over to a new status and acquired a new social role. Artists have frequently and in many cultures had a certain double position that is indicative at the same time of the respect for their ability to create and the fear of their difference. At the clearest we see this in the treatment of actors simultaneously as outcasts and as people who can have direct contact with the rulers, bypassing the long hierarchical ladders that keep normal people at bay, but a similar marginality has typically characterised other kinds of artists as well. Our society has delegated a remarkable function to these artists. They are the people who have the right to practice their inner freedom, sometimes going way beyond the limits of moral tolerance in the process. They can shock their audience and are even expected to do so. They can engage, among other things, in what is normally considered pornography and violence, they can kill animals and photograph naked children, and get away with it if their actions are endorsed by the artistic institution. But they can also exercise other kinds of extravagant behaviour that, in the best cases,

opens up truly breathtaking views on the breadth and beauty of the human mind. In order to achieve that, they have to walk on the edge of the reaches of human experience, they have to walk straight and they definitely cannot afford to deceive themselves in the process. Among other things, they cannot accept the illusion that liberty is actually related to the multitude of small freedoms—for. For the general audience, the security of whose lives is based on this self-deception, the artists are a kind of a dangerous Other, sometimes despised for doing nothing useful, sometimes envied for their ability to break with social conventions, and, by the majority vote, pardoned for doing so. Demonstration of freedom is a service they perform to the public. Most TV viewers, who watch the final scenes of a film where a sports car with a couple of young lovers passes, at dangerous speed, a smaller car packed with a nagging family and loads of useless stuff, identify themselves with the lovers and not with the family, which would be much more adequate. Truly great contemporary art shows us the range of our possible mental universe on a still higher level, and prevents us from becoming machines that perform their programmed tasks out of their own free will. Art, seen thus, is the safety valve that prevents our society from exploding as a result of its own too neat efficiency. On a reverse side, the artists help the system to relegate the experience of genuine inner freedom to the dangerous outskirts of human experience and thus to enable the majority to relinquish their own with more ease. But all of this is only allowed on the façade. In the inner chambers of the last artistic castle of freedom, there sits an accountant who is constantly busy with compiling budgets, writing applications for foundations and contacting sponsors to discuss how big exactly should their logo be. There is also the imagemaker, who is always thinking of how to present the next idea so that it would contain as many as possible of the terms that the trendiest art critics have lately started using, and the PR manager who keeps a database of people who should be cultivated, and follows the calls for entries of major art events in order to grasp in which direction it should be advisable for the artist to move. With its pretence to put things in order, the system has penetrated the defences of the free artist through a back door, in the guise of the arts institution. Pierre Bourdieu has in great detail described to us how the "market of symbolic goods" works, and his analysis leaves us with little hope that artistic freedom will prevail. The sacrifices needed to keep up honesty are simply too great. And thus I am afraid we can expect, in the future, from our artists only those kinds of extravagant behaviour that we know to expect, and we can safely enjoy the shocks and surprises that do not really shock and surprise, while we can note with satisfaction that the dangerous Other has been domesticated, that their unseemly clothes are just another kind of uniform, but deep down the artists are just like ourselves, no freer. Liberty is a mirror, and when we cannot bear to look at it, we smash it in order to pick up little splinters of freedoms—for.

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