

# Summary

## From Bayreuth to Bauhaus

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The gesamtkunstwerk and the modern forms of art

The gesamtkunstwerk, or the total work of art, is a unification of the art forms in a single work of art that releases the possibilities inherent in art and through this also its meaning in culture. All through the ages there have been grand stagings of political and religious events which united the arts for the monumental task at hand; this movement goes from the ancient tragedies, over the gothic cathedrals, to our modern day multimedia events. The question is however, how do the countless attempts to mix art forms in modern times help to redeem “the meaning of art in culture”? In the age of romanticism one assumed that the unity of culture had somehow disappeared and had to be recreated through artistic endeavour. The concept of a total work of art first appeared in this period and therefore mostly represents the dream of recreating a lost, or maybe even an hitherto unseen, connection between art and people, between culture and society. Richard Wagner left an indelible mark on this concept with his unique vision of “The Artwork of the Future”. This artwork was thought of as a musical drama for the people, by the people. Wagner embraced folklore and mythology, sought the support of powerful patrons and gathered around him an array of artists with the purpose of creating a festival, that through a shared experience could animate the collective consciousness of the people.

When looked upon as an isolated project one might say that Wagner’s project was borne out of a mixed ideology that had its roots both in the revolutionary upheavals of 1848-49 and in the unification of Germany in 1871. But Wagner’s aesthetical ideas of the possibilities of art and his vision of realizing the conditions for a better society through a critique of the established cultural order, had a far wider reach touching the hearts and minds of many different artists in Europe; from symbolist poets, painters and dramatists through the ‘style-artists’ of Art Nouveau to the avant-garde. These ideas came forth as spectacles, installations and visions of a new architecture and a new idiom of material and visual culture. These are the further developments that are to be traced in my investigation; furthermore the focus of this

work is primarily on the painterly arts and practical design. The dream of the unifying and redeeming work of art can be said to culminate in the work of the Bauhaus school which in its education stressed the unity of the arts on the path towards creating a communal “building” which would include new art forms and new forms of visual communication that could make modern society more coherent. The special focus of this investigation in no way excludes other forms of art, as music was ever present, and theatre as well as festival projects came to the fore again and again for example in the works of Peter Behrens, Wassily Kandinsky and in the theatre workshop at the Bauhaus school.

My investigation will chart and investigate the dream of the total work of art as both a subject of discourse and as an object of reflection, this goes to say, that I will only follow the phenomenon from the age of romanticism and see how it is inherited by the art of today. The specific works of art that can be regarded as total works of art interest me less than the pure dream in all its possible and impossible forms. When the use of the concept wanes I will also stop my pursuit of it. My examination is of a historical and conceptual nature and not so much an exercise in classification and analysis. My goal is not to bring forth and recognize total works of art in our present day, rather it is to track what became of them and in what form the mode of thinking is still valid.

The hypothesis is, in all its simplicity that the transformation and realization of Wagner’s vision into not only one version of the common work of art, but a plurality of art forms had a profound and significant effect on the modern art forms that came to characterize modernism in its continuing evolution through experimental and transgressive works of art. The thoughts of Wagner must therefore also be able to shed light on crucial elements in the modern way of thinking about art and its historical development. Seen in a wider perspective it is possible to chart the transformations in the idea of a total work of art as a romantic/modern concept of art. The hypothesis may even be made more wide-ranging with the suggestion that the thought behind the total work of art, is the key to understanding the concept of modern art and aesthetics that has moved beyond the conventional barriers of traditional art.

It is no coincidence that the call for a total work of art came from music. One might expect that it would come from the field of architecture that

had long been hailed as the mother of all art, but this field had lost its sure footing in the cooperation of the arts. Architecture was to be the hardest hit by the crisis in style and was therefore often reduced to a mere backdrop for historical stagings. Music on the other hand had been through series of strong developments in both the classical period and the romantic period. Music had thus increasingly become the model art form. The reverence that was shown toward Beethoven and Wagner in the painterly arts in the period around 1900 further illustrates the point that by this time music had become regarded the highest ideal of art.

One question remains, how does music as an ideal, translate into something painterly? The answer to this rests on a special conception of music as both an orderly and at the same time a vibrant and living force; a world both of abstracts and expressions. In Art Nouveau one sought flowing curvilinear forms that at once were abstract and stylised, but still emotional and alive. This was a way of presenting movements and tensions in the inherent soul of the world. One might see the stylised universe of the symbolists in the same way. The abstraction in the painterly arts (of the period) must be seen as a strengthening of the formal qualities in an attempt to reach the same level of self containment and absoluteness as that of music; this is at least the case if we follow the theories of Kandinsky regarding the subject. Music and the ornaments of architecture and crafts were interconnected in the shaping of the abstract painting.

Seen in relation to music as the highest ideal of art, the decorative arts must be seen as belonging in the lower parts of the hierarchy, but under the rallying call of *Ars Una* (one art that is indivisible) they became an important part in the struggle for a new art. Up towards 1900 they gained a new recognition in their cooperation with the higher forms of art and they were even considered as having a potent effect on the style of the arts that were in a state of crisis from being suffocated in the stale salons of the time. A number of prominent personalities in the movement towards a total work of art were originally painters but moved through crafts and interior design towards the field of architecture. This was already true for William Morris but the tendency really bloomed in the generation around 1900 that was headed by Henry van de Velde and Peter Behrens. Through the *Werkbund* and later the Bauhaus school they were influential in the radical transformations that changed the face of architecture and design; this was a vitalisation of the arts

indeed. In decoration and design it was possible to unite the reality of daily life with art and thereby seek the organic unity in culture that could heal the rift that was therein. This gave the concept of design a visionary and critical dimension that allowed the modern history of design to evolve.

The field of architecture could also evolve along these lines and thereby reach its unique position as the frame and staging of artistic unity and cultural life in general. The building must not only be seen as an artistic form but also as something that gives form in society. These principles made it obvious that one had to see architecture as both a social and artistic entity and as a guiding light for culture in general. The early modernist architects such as Behrens, Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius even dreamt of a new monumental architecture that would give birth to the cathedrals of the future. The cathedral became a symbol of the common goal of revolutionising the whole of society but the task could also be undertaken on a smaller scale, in the working through of the individual house, solutions for the many houses or the city as an artistic whole. My specific contribution to the history of the total work of art lies in my elucidation of the role architecture and design play in conjunction with art. The influences are constantly shifting back and forth between the theories of music, theatre and poetry and between the theories of architecture and design.

Among the many art forms which have already been hinted at, a distinction will be drawn between two different dimensions that seem possible in the effort to create the redeeming and unifying work of art. One is the monumental form where the art forms manifest themselves in stylistic and normative unity; here one may think about the pictorial arts and architecture as the forms which create coherence. The other dimension is the one wherein the art forms converge and create a unifying experience; these are the performing arts as they are realized in the festival for example. The combined effects of the art forms are in this instance directly aimed at the observer or at the audience as a whole. Here one must feel the ecstasy of being torn away from everyday life and one must experience new relations between objects and a higher reality.

A strictly formal definition of the total work of art is made impossible by the need to distinguish between both outer and inner determinants as one views the total work of art as both a phenomena and as a vision. Fundamentally the outer determinant is that the total work of art must be a

unified work where the different artistic dimensions create a purposeful and impressive, and maybe even contradictory, totality. The unification of the art forms is seldom a goal in and of itself; the fact that the total work of art creates a new reality is much more crucial. The work must, in its surpassing of the various art forms, also transcend itself and become a vehicle for another or stronger reality. Wagner sought to lead the audience into rapture at the festivals and thereby redeem humanity for the coming of a new culture. The limitless possibilities in the creation of new art forms through the combination of the arts have been guided by speculations of a utopian nature in both philosophy and politics. The actualized unification of the arts has often been considered secondary in relation to the thought of the ideal transcendence between art and reality.

It can almost be seen as a feature of the mindset that through time it occurs in more and more derivative forms. The artwork and art itself seem to disappear. Among the derivative forms a new category appears which must be seen in relation to the tradition and considered as a total work of art in a different respect. In relation to the two categories mentioned earlier; the monumental and the momentary, the distributive total work of art appears as a third alternative. In this new category the work of art diffuses in order to manifest itself in as many relations as possible. It can manifest itself as an ornament, a style or an artistic idiom which then creates a world of form before us that is at the same time liberating and healing in an aesthetical sense. Even though the unity in the monumental or momentary sense is broken, the strategy of diffusion often reaches further in its realization of the total work of art than the total work of art *per se*. We must think about this kind of work as a sort of centrifuge which scatters all its related forms but also that these forms reflect back onto us wherever we may be. The distributive or diffusive work of art is disputed as a category but it will remain as my contribution to the world of research. The dream of the unifying and redeeming work of art was transposed onto style as an idiom and around 1900 a few artists took upon themselves the task of creating a new style. There is a clear trace from art nouveau over the Werkbund to the Bauhaus school where crafts and design merge as they create a synthesis in society, cities and the individual home. It is not only thoroughly composed buildings that can be thought of as freestanding works of total art but also the combined movement towards creating universes of form in the public sphere.

The thinking that surrounds the total work of art helps us understand the visions behind modern art. The newest art, it seems is in opposition to the idea of an autonomous art and in favour of letting its artistic strategies work in the broader contexts of culture, aesthetics and society. This movement may be understood as the dissolution of art, if it is understood as a freestanding work of art but it is not the case if we follow the logic of the total work of art. The dream of a work of art that is liberating and redeeming still harbours many transgressions and interactions between the work of art and reality. In the age of romanticism there was already a goal of creating a cohesion that was beyond the work of art. It is as a result of thoughts such as these that I have allowed myself to write an alternative account of the development from romanticism to modernity, where I am not guided by the ordinary concepts such as differentiation, autonomy and the immanent evolution of the materials or medias of the arts, but rather by the dream of the total work of art and its derivative forms and consequences.

My investigation is divided four historical parts followed by an excursus on the use of this tradition in the totalitarian regimes.

#### ORIGINAL IDEAS

The artwork of the future  
 Ideals of art in the early Romanticism  
 Festival and redemption

#### EXPANSION

Wagnerianism  
 Beyond the gilded frames

#### THREE CENTRES

Monument or life form – Vienna  
 Ornaments, abstractions and theatre – Munich  
 The cathedral of industrial culture – Werkbund

#### THE AVANTGARDE

Universes of form  
 Bauhaus

## EXCURSUS

The third Reich and the art of sedation

## CLOSURE

Art beyond the work of art

The three chapters of the first part concerns the first ideas of Wagner, the prior conceptual conditions that were present in romanticism and the change that occurred in the mode of thinking as one tried to realize the festivals. The two chapters of the second part are concerned with how the tenets of Wagnerism influenced the other art forms especially the crafts and interior designs of Art Nouveau. The third part describes the three important scenes of Munich, Vienna and the Werkbund (with activities all over Germany) working an artwork of the future that could encompass all of modern reality. These were three attempts of evolution of modern culture towards the First World War, but only the last of these survived this collapse of the old European culture. People of the Werkbund, like Taut and Gropius rebounded with their visions of communal monuments in the founding of the Bauhaus School. The fourth part is devoted to the seeking out of certain aspects in the avant-garde, suprematism, neoplasticism and constructivism, which may not be considered as belonging to the Wagnerian tradition but which nonetheless, through artists like Kasimir Malevitj, Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters, have provided significant input into how the ideals might be realized. And Bauhaus unites many of these aspirations in an education where abstract art and theatrical experiments creates new forms and participants.

In addition to the historical analysis there also lies I include an historical excursus which deals with the third Reich as an aesthetical and philosophical phenomena; this is also part of the overall discussion because even though Hitler purged the third Reich of modern art he still adhered to many of the principles expressed in the discourse of modern art. Many features in the cultural politics of the third Reich are also present in Soviet art where the revolutionary avant-garde was much more prominent, but which also came to a brutal end. In the last chapter about 'art beyond the work of art' I briefly mention the happenings of Allan Kaprow and Constant's vision of a 'Unitary urbanism' because they represent the most radical consequences of the thought of an art which stretches beyond the work of art but still manages to

concentrate the artistic effects and all aspects of reality to create a liberating whole.

My historical analysis of the Wagnerian tradition with its modes of thinking and its references stops at Bauhaus because I do not feel that it can be taken beyond that and retain its form. The ideas thereafter become so widespread and watered down that they lose their contours and the references to Wagner become sporadic. Because of this I do not think that it makes much sense today to be naming new works of total art but then again it is not contradictory to retain the view that the idea of a total work of art is still an important one for present-day artists and critics. The idea of a total work of art has become also a part of the problem and not only the solution to it. Many artistic effects and forms of communication in modern consumer and media society take on an appearance that is much like that of a total work of art, but in this context it becomes a self-reliant spectacle of consumerism that is a cultural industry that touches all spheres of the experience economy.

The branding that we are witnessing today in all fields of visual culture is put forth as a work of total art for the present. A brand creates a value-based visual identity through the use of logos, trademarks, product design, graphic communications, uniforms, interior designs and corporate headquarters as architectural landmarks. We can understand this phenomenon as a work of total art in its distributive form where a connection is made between elements that seem to surface everywhere; in the public sphere, in the media and in the private sphere. The historical antecedents can already be found in the Werkbund where the artists designed trademarks as symbols of culture and Behrens created a whole corporate identity for AEG. This further evolved in the joining together of architecture, product design, logos, photography and typography in the fields with which the Bauhaus School experimented. Long after the school had closed Gropius steadfastly believed in the idea of a total architecture where all spatial and visual elements were interconnected with the educational, social, communicative and organizational aspects of modern society. He described this as an optical culture where one, starting in kindergarten, learns to decode, experience and use the modern language of form.

This optical or visual culture has evolved through an exchange between media technology and the experiments of the avant-garde and it creates both fantastic artistic and commercial possibilities but also significant challenges



in the field of cultural critique and its work concerning architecture and design today. How do we react and respond to this society which in many ways resembles a total work of art? Can we navigate in relation to it with critical versions of the total work of art, whatever that is? Or can we learn from Schwitters and compose further on this reality as an operative work of total art; a Merzgesamtweltbild, where both the existing state of affairs and ourselves are artistic material for the furthering of the process? At any rate there is a need for this examination of the history behind the total work of art if we are to understand the challenges and opportunities that face us.

Translation by Christian Guldsø

