

**Re-evaluating Byung-Chul Han's Stance against the Aesthetics of the Smooth in
Jeff Koons' *The Balloon Dogs***

Kongkrit Traiyawong✉
Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University

(Received 2nd September 2022; Revised: 24th October 2022; Accepted: 26th October 2022)

Abstract

This article analyses the critical stance of Byung-Chul Han towards the aesthetics of the smooth as it is epitomized by Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dogs*. In his critique of Neoliberalism, Han argued that arts are the Other that contests the consumption and velocity of the digital age. Accordingly, Han devalued arts to be merely within the contemplative stance. The *vita contemplativa* is positioned as a contesting *vita activa* that devalues human beings to be simply *animal laborans* that exploit themselves in the achievement society. Art demands distance and contests lustful touch. Consequently, Han praised only certain genres of arts and ignored the potentials of contemporary arts which could point out political issues in public domains. In order to solve this problem, the author proposes two following arguments: Ways out to solve the problem in this digital age that affects the lives of human beings can be considered within the framework of contemporary arts, and to redeem human beings from exploitation in the capitalist working environment requires struggling for recognition through arts.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, digital technologies, aesthetics of the smooth, *vita contemplativa*, achievement society

✉ kongkrit.tr@gmail.com

Prologue

The relations of art and technology have been scrutinised by both philosophers and theorists for a long time. To mention but a few, in the previous century, Martin Heidegger, one of the most influential German philosophers, warned us about the dangers of modern technology that affect human beings. He also pointed out that humans' experiences of art could be a saving power (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 17-87). Another is Walter Benjamin who provided an analysis of the potential of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Even though such technology causes the disappearance of the aura of the art, the mechanical reproduction of that could be considered as power that prevents the mass from being lured by fascist ideology (Benjamin, 2019, pp. 166-195). Both philosophers attempted to deal with the phenomenon of capitalist modernity in Western society at the dawn of the 20th century with different approaches.

Byung-Chul Han is a Korean-born German philosopher who analysed the dominative power of digital technology in the service of Neoliberalism that affects people in their selves, experiences, and mental symptoms. For Han, contemporary art represents the condition of society and human existence. He understood that aesthetics in the digital age praises the smooth and polished, just like the screen of smartphones. Jeff Koons' sculpture *The Balloon Dogs*, in which the observers can see only themselves as reflection from its surface, needs only 'a wow' from them, just like a *Like* on Facebook. Not only is this example akin to a smartphone screen that is smooth, but also to the communication which implies only positivity such as a 'Share' and a 'Like.' In other words, the communication itself is smoothed. As a result, negativity has been eradicated.

Neoliberalism is a theory of political economy which has been brought into practice since the 1970s. The two most outstanding politicians who enthusiastically promoted this theory were Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Neoliberalism held the belief that the best way to promote human well-being is to promote freedom of individuals and the free-market. The role of the state is not to intervene in the market but to sustain the institutes that preserve the competitions in the market: the quality and integrity of money, legal systems, military, and police. For neoliberals, the state cannot possess enough information to guess market signals and powerful interest groups might misuse state interventions for their own benefit (Harvey, 2005, p. 2).

Jeff Koons (1955) is one of the most successful contemporary American artists. His works of art represent a mixture of many techniques such as pop art, conceptual art, and craft-making in popular culture. His subject matters are concerned with contemporary issues such as sex and desire, media, celebrity, and commerce. He called himself 'the idea man' because his working process is to hire technicians and artisans to take part in the creation of his work that comes from his ideas. Many of Koons' works are controversial. For example, the work entitled *Made in Heaven* (1990) presented himself having sex with his then wife, a porn star who later became a politician. *Balloon Dogs* are mirror-polished stainless steel sculptures. In 2013, the *Balloon Dog (Orange)* was sold at auction for \$58.4 million so that he became, for five years, the living artist whose artwork was the most expensive. In 2019, he beat his own record by selling the stainless steel *Rabbit* for \$91.1 million (Brockes, 2015; Stańska, 2018).

For Han, Koons is the master of smooth surfaces and his works can be labelled as the aesthetics of the smooth in the age of the *Like* which needs no judgment, reflection, or even thought. Jeff Koons' artworks attract observers to touch them and that eliminates distance,

mystery, and the Other. The smooth screen is nothing but sex toys that one can see in pornography in which sucking and licking seem never-ending (Han, 2021a, pp. 81-82). In this light, the glossy smoothness in Jeff Koons' sculpture represents the narcissistic selves of people in the digital age that is a symptom of contemporary society under capitalism, Neoliberalism, and digital technologies. Unlike the aesthetics of the smooth of Jeff Koons, Han held the view that the work of art, or beauty, is the Other that can resist consumerism. For him, art plays a key role in transforming and reshaping human experience. To understand art requires interpretation and therefore we need time in order to linger over art.

This article analyses the critical stance of Byung-Chul Han towards the aesthetics of the smooth as it is epitomized by Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dogs*. In the first part, I will offer my interpretation of Han's critique of Neoliberalism and capitalism that he regarded as the origins of achievement society. For Han, the *vita contemplativa* is positioned as a contesting *vita activa* that devalues human beings to be simply *animal laborans* that exploit themselves for achievements. In the second part, I will provide an analysis of Han's critique of what he called the aesthetics of the smooth. I will also argue that the distinction between the Same and the Other and his claim that arts are the Other that contests the consumption and velocity of the digital age are problematic in that he devalues arts to be merely within the contemplative stance. Art demands distance and contests lustful touch. Consequently, Han praised only certain genres of arts and ignored the potentials of contemporary arts which could point out political issues in public domains. In the third part, in order to solve this issue, I will propose two following arguments: Ways out to solve the problem in this digital age that affects the lives of human beings can be considered within the framework of contemporary arts, and to redeem human beings from exploitation in the capitalist working environment requires struggling for recognition through arts. Public issues will be set up for common decision making.

Neoliberalism and the Achievement Subject

In his critique of Neoliberal capitalism, Han argues that Foucauldian genealogy and Marxist analysis of class struggle are not up-to-date enough to shed new light on the realities of society. Society in the 21st century is not a disciplinary society as Michel Foucault (1991) presented through genealogy. Stated simply, genealogy is a method to dig deep down to the origins of disciplines by focusing on relations of power; and this kind of power exercises itself on the level of microphysics: the power that works upon the bodies of individuals. Genealogy investigates the principle of order and exclusion, that is, the principle that includes something into the order or rule, or excludes something which is unable to be subsumed under this very order. This produces the disciplines of practice in various institutions such as hospitals, prisons, barracks, and factories.

For Han, the neoliberal society in the present is an achievement society or *Leistungsgesellschaft* in German, which consists of skyscrapers, fitness-studios, banks, supermarkets, and airports. People are not obedience-subjects, but rather entrepreneurs who seem to be free. The concept of power in Foucault's analysis could not be properly applied within today's society in that the concept of a disciplinary society has only negative aspects. We see only prohibition and the imperatives such as 'may not' or 'should.' In contrast, the society of achievement has mainly a positive side, being governed by a 'can', such as one can see in a slogan in the advertisement of a brand 'Just do it.' The achievement society replaces prohibitions with a project, initiation, and motivation. Unlike the disciplined society which is compelled by the word

‘no’, and there emerges from it madmen and murderers, the achievement society causes depression and creates losers (Han, 2015, p. 8).

The shift from a disciplinary society to an achievement society is a cause of depression. Achievement has become a new imperative in late-modern labor society, that is, a society in which humans become *animal laborans* who exploit themselves without any external compulsion. To fight with oneself is some kind of auto-aggression. Here, we can see the paradox of freedom that self-exploitation can go hand in hand with freedom (Han, 2015, pp. 10-11). To put it in other words, Neoliberalism forces people to exploit themselves in order to achieve their highest efficiency and increase their productivity. For Han, this is an illusion of realizing themselves. The freedom that Neoliberalism proclaims is nothing but an advertisement. The most important neoliberal imperative is to be authentic. It means one must behave without any regulation, or one should produce oneself for oneself. *“The I as its own entrepreneur produces itself, performs itself and offers itself as a commodity, authenticity is a selling point”* (Han, 2018b, pp. 19-20).

One obvious case is the economic crisis in Asia, especially South Korea. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forced South Korea to accept irrefutable neoliberal reforms; therefore, depression and burn out symptoms have been afflicting people. As a result, South Korean society has the highest suicide rate in the world which means people are using violence against themselves. Even within the same organization or community, the competition is fatal. To focus on only productivity does not lead to a sense of solidarity or belongingness as a community. At this point, Han claimed that Marxist tools of analysis are outdated. It is impossible to generate a revolutionary mass out of people who are depressive and disconnected. In this aspect, Marxist theory could not provide critical explanation towards Neoliberalism because people are not facing alienation in the working process as explained by Marxists. Instead, these groups of people dedicate themselves to hard work, which is the first step toward burnout (Han, 2021a, pp. 18-19).

In a neoliberal society supported by digital technologies, a new species of human, the digital swarm, has come into being. In other words, by looking at Jeff Koons’ *The Balloon Dogs*, we can see the swarm who controls the ongoing de-distancing communication in the digital world. Consequently, the public sphere that requires distance disappears. Instead, digital technologies turn the private sphere into the public. The anonymous systems in social media create no respect that requires distance. There is only the phenomenon of *shitstorm* without mutual understanding (Han, 2017b, pp. 1-7). Moreover, today’s society eradicates the negativity whose symptoms are pain and wounds. It focuses instead on positivity which is happiness and smoothness, just like the screen of a smartphone. We can witness a number of evidences for this positive psychology. Unfortunately, we cannot expect debates to happen on socio-political issues that are important in politics. As Han argued, *“Instead of revolutionaries we have motivational speakers, who come on the scene in order to ensure that no anger, or even discontent, arise...”* (Han, 2021b, pp. 11).

Fragmentation of time in the age of digital technologies also has a deep impact in the individual’s self which is constitutive to actions. Many actions are significantly related to time; namely, promises, truthfulness, and fidelity (Han, 2017a, p. 18). These experiences connect the future and present that assumes continuity and consistency in that they need long term intentions that lead to conclusions. Another example is good sleep, an experience with a form of meaningful conclusion which is missing in the digitized world (Han, 2017a, pp. 7-10). In this digital age, narrative loses its sense and becomes point-like without continuation. It is

different from mythical and historical times that have been woven by narratives. Such atomized time cannot draw our attention for a long period, and thus we have experienced a loss of contemplative lingering. To put it in Han's terms, the atomized time has no scent or duration. The cause of this phenomena is not acceleration but the fragmented time. To find the way out of this problem is to deal with the latter.

Marcel Proust's work, *In Search of Lost Time*, may be interpreted as a resistance against acceleration in the locomotive age. Longing for lost time in Proust's sense is a reaction to the reduction of temporality into series of moments, so a human lacks the wholeness of being. In portraying the experience of the taste and scent of Madeleine in a cup of tea, this literary work has the potential to create a durability of self-identity. For Han, the scent of time brings back the sense of duration. Sensation and memory in the crystal of time are not transcendent, but rather immanent. The mere scent of one thing could bring back a scene of childhood. That is to say, the scent of time is a form of *self-gathering* (Han, 2017a, pp. 42-46).

Han pointed out that obsession with work becomes obvious in the age of industrialization. Thus, human temporality is subjected to the procedure of machines for which highest efficiency is the first commandment. People then become a part of the machine, as we can see in the film *The Modern Times*. Life is dominated by *vita activa* and separated from *vita contemplativa*. Humans are deprived of their capacity to contemplate and become *animal laborans*. Even leisure time is a part of work; that means taking leisure is expected to be part of how to work more efficiently (Han, 2017a, pp. 90-92).

Hannah Arendt was a target of Han's attack for she was the one who tried to revitalize *vita activa*. According to Han, Arendt's work *The Human Condition* was based on problematic assumptions. Contemplation in Christian and Greek traditions was responsible for the disappearance of action by reducing it to become labor with utility. As a result, in modernity, human beings become *animal laborans* and the way out is to rehabilitate *vita activa*. In contrast, Han held the idea that human actions are reduced to mere activity and labor because of the disappearance of contemplation (Han, 2017a, pp. 101-102). Accordingly, to solve this problem is to revive *vita contemplativa*. He claimed that contemplation is not to be idle but contains the sense of seriousness. He argued that "*the determination to act and the determination to work share the same genealogical root. Only a revitalization of vita contemplativa would be capable of liberating human beings from the compulsion to labour*" (Han, 2017a, p. 110).

Han's standpoint is not to ask us to leave *vita activa* in order to embrace only *vita contemplativa*, as he wittingly adapted Kant's formula "*A Vita Contemplativa without acting is blind, a vita activa without contemplation is empty*" (Han, 2017a, p. 112). For Han, Heidegger is the one who points towards the mediation between contemplation and action. According to Heidegger, to focus on *vita contemplativa* (or *Besinnung* in German) is to reveal the place for Da-sein. Human experiences such as hesitation means to stop to hear the voice of stillness. Contemplative *epoché* is considered a period of time in which we are able to linger (*verweilen*) and being still. It then brings back ourselves to ourselves (Han, 2017a, p. 112).

According to my interpretation, however, Han's returning to Heidegger, his admired philosopher, is problematic. Heidegger went to the hut in Todtnauberg in order to philosophically contemplate many occasions in his life. As Adam Sharr has pointed out, "...he interpreted the hut and its landscape with his philosophical vocabulary" (Sharr, 2006, p. 63). Heidegger called life in the city and university as *unten*, which literally means 'under' or 'below.' He called life at the

hut as *oben*, or ‘above,’ that implied superiority (Sharr, 2006, pp. 62-65). This could be interpreted to mean that he preferred contemplative lingering to *vita activa* in the city life. Moreover, in the occasion he encountered with the visitor like the outstanding poet Paul Celan, who was a Jew and was in a Nazi concentration camp, it seemed the hut failed to welcome the poet as the Other. Peter Sloterdijk, a contemporary German philosopher, pointed out that while Heidegger’s grave was located in the countryside, the political theorist Arendt had her graveyard located in the campus -- in the heart of New York City. The first instance aforementioned implies a solitary life of contemplation, with the great philosophers in the past like Plato and St. Augustine. Meanwhile, the latter represents the concept of cosmopolitanism (Sloterdijk, 2017, pp. 1-48). As it should be clear now, contemplation and welcoming the Other are probably incompatible in the same moment.

In short, the lost scent of time reveals a temporal crisis which is related to *vita activa*. Human beings are devalued to be *animal laborans* without time to stop to think or linger; therefore, they lose their world and temporality. In dealing with the effects of the digital technologies, Han thought that we should find our own experience of duration, or the scent of time. However, it is not longing for the epoch in which narrative still plays a key role in the pre-modern period. Rather, it aims at revitalizing *vita contemplativa* as an antidote against the overwhelming *vita activa* that drives human beings to become *animal laborans*. Han insisted that the so-called slow-life movement is just a symptom, not the way to solve the problem. A possible form of survival is to mingle contemplation with action properly (Han, 2017a, pp. vi-vii).

Han’s Stance against the Aesthetics of the Smooth

Han’s stance against the aesthetics of the smooth, as represented by Jeff Koons’ sculpture *Balloon Dogs*, erases the very negativity which requires distance – the contemplative distance. Consequently, there exists no distance that creates meanings. Interestingly, he referred to Hegel’s idea of art that only seeing and hearing have meanings, but touching has no meaning because it lacks distance. Touch can give only agreeableness; therefore, it is not related to the beauty of art. Jeff Koons’ *Balloon Dogs* is perfectly seamless, weightless, and empty. These characteristics invite the observers to touch it, even suck it. Unlike sight, touch and taste destroy distance and mysticism. Consequently, the observers can easily be obsessed with pleasure and the fact that they are consuming it. In other words, touch eradicates negativity or the Other, just like a smartphone touchscreen that causes the aesthetics of *Like* (Han, 2018b, pp. 4-5).

According to Han, aesthetics of the beautiful has its origins in the modern age. Beauty and the sublime are different in that the former is related to pure positivity. Modern subjects gain more power to transform beauty into objects of pleasure. Not only that, but the subject also turns the sublime to become positivity by using reason. In ancient times, beauty and the sublime were not yet distinguished, as we can see in Pseudo-Longinus’ work *On the Sublime* (peri hypsous), in which beauty is not just about pleasure. A beautiful woman, for instance, “tortures to the eyes.” This means that beauty is not without negativity or pain. The beautiful can also cause a shock that is a characteristic of the sublime. In Plato’s philosophy, beauty drives onlookers to feel awe and terror, or even drives them into madness. In modern aesthetics, on the other hand, pleasure plays a key role in the autonomy of the subject (Han, 2018b, pp. 15-16).

According to my interpretation, the main target of Han’s criticism is Immanuel Kant. For Kant, pleasure becomes a part of the epistemological process. Two human faculties by which

we generate knowledge are imagination and understanding. In this process, on the one hand, imagination plays a role in synthesizing the sense of data acquired through intuition and then turns it into a harmonious picture. Understanding, on the other hand, has its function at the abstract level, in that it subsumes the pictures under the concepts. Judgement of the beautiful has its origins in a play mode between the faculty of knowledge and that of understanding. When we look at the beautiful, the faculty of knowledge is entering the mode of play without producing any knowledge. However, Han argued that this mode of playing is not totally free, for in producing knowledge, the subject likes the beautiful because it stirs up the play between imagination and understanding. In this regard, Kant positioned play under a working process. Despite the fact that the beautiful does not produce knowledge, it keeps moving the ongoing process of producing knowledge. In confronting the beautiful, the subject likes itself, or, in other words, it has an autoerotic feeling (Han, 2018b, pp. 19-20).

According to Han's interpretation of Kant, the sublime is enormous and overwhelming for the imagination and hence it cannot be transformed into a picture. The subject is overwhelmed with the feeling of awe, so that the negativity of the sublime no longer possesses the power of the subject. However, one can still be calm because of reason. In comparison with the infinity of reason, everything in nature becomes small. Even harmful natural phenomena cannot drive the subject to any unstable state. In confronting the sublime (*Erhabene* in German), the subject might fear death but later he/she is raised (*erhaben*) higher than nature. In this light, the sublime is no longer the object for a while but the feeling of the subject. According to Han, even in Kant's aesthetics, neither beauty nor the sublime could represent the Other. In contrast, it implies that the subject absorbs the Other into itself. Han pointed out that there is a way to go beyond such 'autoerotic subjectivity', that is, by de-subjectivizing sublimity which can happen only by abolishing the distinction between the sublime and beauty (Han, 2018b, pp. 21-22).

Han's main thesis is that beauty invites us to linger in contemplation, and with such a process, our willing shall fade away. Like Schopenhauer's philosophy of art that proposes the pure contemplation of art in this very debate, the ego disappears. Desire, care, and concern with interest, which are present, flow through us and disappear. In this regard, the moment of contemplation makes time still. Contemplation itself aims to preserve the Other and eternity. For Han, art saves the beauty that at the same time saves the Other. It resists reducing art to be merely an object of consumption. In other words, beauty preserves the Other by suspending the violence of time (Han, 2018b, pp. 67-68).

Han tried to focus on explaining the negativity of art by using German philosopher Hans George Gadamer's idea of art. He claimed that, for Gadamer, the significant characteristic of art is the negativity that causes a wound. It affects the viewers by asking them to change their life. In his work, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer claimed that the ontology of art is comparable to festival. When we go to festivals, we suspend the purpose of everyday life and worrying about work. In suspending this, it makes time stay still. We learn to experience lingering at a festival so that something finite like a human has a chance to have an experience of eternity. However, Han argued that today's art loses its characteristics of cult and then becomes the object to be exhibited in museum. The more art attempts to attract the viewers' attention, the more its characteristics of cult decrease. Thus, art becomes mere commodity (Han, 2018b, pp. 70-71).

In my opinion, it is important to see that Han's argument is based on the duality of the Same and the Other on which he relies heavily through his intellectual trajectory. In this, he aimed

to de-centerize the subject and then welcomed the Other. He claimed that the beauty of art can be resistant to reducing everything to be the same. Therefore, the resistance of consumerism in the age of acceleration requires time to linger. He referred to Hegel's aesthetics and the notion that art requires distance. Therefore, sight and acoustics are considered as the only senses that we employ to experience art. It means smell, touch, and taste are excluded because distance is not necessary for them. Unsurprisingly, this reveals Han's prejudice that he praised artwork in high culture (including art film) rather than popular culture. To put it in Walter Benjamin's words, the perception in the turning point of history could not be contemplation through optical means alone. However, the other perceptions, such as tactile appropriation, should be included as well. The case of architecture could be used as an example (Benjamin, 2017, p. 192). Above all, in the present, works of art almost renounce the borderline abovementioned.

Even though Han could see the significance of both action and contemplation, he valued the latter. He considered art as a resistance against the violence of time in the digital age. In doing so, he subjected art to be under contemplation. In other words, art becomes a way of contemplative lingering that human beings can regain their experience of duration so that they can gather their selves once again. Therefore, he claimed that the autonomy of art is free from consumption. However, this leads Han to only praise art that is qualified according to his criteria. In the meantime, he criticized art that does not meet his standard severely, such as that of Jeff Koons. Even Ai Weiwei, a Chinese born artist who dared to challenge those authoritarians by means of art, Han considered to be under the banner of an aesthetics of 'wow' in a moral sense (Han, 2021b, p. 4).

Toward Equal Aesthetic Rights

For my part, the saving power of art can be seen in the world of contemporary art itself. Roberto Simanowski, a German theorist and philosopher who specialized in New Media, pointed out that we can understand these digitized phenomena in philosophical and cultural perspectives. Simanowski appropriated the term 'cannibalism' to define the process of consuming the Other. The digital technologies have been reducing language to become mere image. Even though he held that contemplative distance plays a significant role in preventing human faculties such as understanding through interpretation from being totally consumed by the digital technologies, he is by no means pessimistic about contemporary art. For one thing, he pointed out that art itself could reveal the dangers of the digital technologies.

One of Simanowski's examples is *Text Rain* (1999), an interactive installation by Romy Achituv and Camille Utterback. In this work, the observers will see the letters of the alphabet falling down on the screen. The observers can participate in the work by playing with the text. They could use their bodies in the play by being photographed with a camera that is hidden between the screen and projector. Although the letters are from texts such as poetry that are right there in front of the observers, they are not decoded for them. The participants themselves have to put much effort to decode the meanings of the texts. In short, *Text Rain* has no function as traditional texts do that would invite the viewers to interpret them. In other words, the texts function as if they were images in this case (Simanowski, 2018, pp. 87-89).

According to Simanowski, 'a form of survival' from the situation that the digital technologies consume the otherness of language is to revitalize human capacity of interpretation. Caleb Larsen's work, *The Complete Work of W. S.* (2007), for instance, proposed a solution

to this. The artist uses a number of colored pixels to represent letters of the alphabet (R is red, B is black, for example) and then turn them into a picture. The viewers did not know whether this were the portrayal of a work of William Shakespeare because the alphabet has not yet been decoded, but they could use a computer program to do this. In other words, with this process, the observers can linger and interpret it. Unlike an interactive installation such as *Text Rain* that tempts the observers just like pornography, Larsen's work has the potential to bring them back to engage with the world of literature and the meanings of texts. In this light, otherness of language is not being totally dominated by image (Simanowski, 2018, pp. 96-97).

Another flaw in Han's argument is that he implicitly accepted the autonomy of art in a traditional sense and at the same time subjected it under the fabric of contemplation. In other words, art is to be contemplated, not to be consumed. According to a German philosopher and media theorist such as Boris Groys, the autonomy of art is neither the autonomy of an art institute, an art system, nor the art world. The art system is based on aesthetic judgement that is by no means autonomous. Rather it is permeated by the dominative tradition and structure of power. Groys argued that without autonomous aesthetic judgement, art itself is autonomous in that it does not rely on a hierarchy of autonomous taste but rather it aims to overthrow that very hierarchy and then constitute equal aesthetic rights.

For Groys, the very genre of art should be considered as the manifestation of equal rights of all visual forms, materials, and media. This kind of diversity reveals various possibilities of resistance in the name of the autonomy of art; art as a result of the struggle for recognition that happened throughout the age of modernity, and the early avant-garde that struggled for being, recognized both as an art form, movement, and materials. In this sense, art is not deprived of its political significance (Groys, 2008, pp. 14-15). The equal aesthetic right is the basic condition that leads to participation in politics. The politics of emancipation is itself a politics of inclusion that takes a stance against the exclusion of minorities in the economic and political spheres. This is possible only when desires and equal aesthetic rights of those minorities are not suppressed in the first place. The presupposition of equal aesthetic right of all visual forms is a way to the resistance of inequality of images that represents socio-political inequality (Groys, 2008, pp. 16-17).

In conclusion, Han reversed the direction by accepting the autonomy of art in a traditional sense and positioned art under contemplation. Art loses its potential in struggling for recognition. Groys, on the other hand, pointed out that the concept of equal aesthetic rights has a potential role in the struggle for recognition of oppressed minorities. Human beings in Neoliberal capitalism are dominated and devalued as *animal laborans* whose time becomes time for working, as Han is well-aware of. Time cannot be regained by ways of contemplation, as we can see in Andrew Niccol's film *In Time* (2011).

Coda

Neoliberalism and capitalism supported by the digital technologies affect the human condition in pronounced but also in more subtle ways. Consequently, contemporary art represents such a situation very well. For Han, Jeff Koons' sculpture *Balloon Dogs* is an example of the aesthetics of the smooth in that it is like the screen of a smartphone. Koons' work requires no hermeneutics or interpretation but a 'wow' from the viewers. The reflections on its smooth surface are for those narcissistic swarms who are obsessed with efficiency without external

compulsion in the name of achievement. On the one hand, Han pointed out that, in solving the abovementioned problems, we must revitalize contemplative life in order to balance it with the active one. On the other hand, lingering in art is a form of survival, for art can resist the violence of time in the digital age. To put it in Heideggerian terms, art is a ‘saving power’ that can prevent things from being the objects of consumption.

However, one of the flaws in Han’s argument is that despite being well-aware of the fact that capitalism reduces human time to be only the time for working, his suggestion that we should distance ourselves from daily work life in order to contemplate is odd. We cannot abandon the yoke of our work in the first place. Another flaw is his thesis on art that he implicitly accepted is the idea of autonomy in a traditional sense. Therefore, he put art under contemplation. In so doing, it is unavoidable that art has a potential for political activism. By comparing the argument of Han with that of Roberto Simanowski’s, we can see that they share the idea of the digital technologies affecting the human condition and the capacity of interpretation. However, the difference is that Simanowski proved that a form of survival lies in the contemporary art world itself. By comparing Han’s idea of art with that of Groys’, we can see that art has a potential role in the struggle for recognition of minorities. As should be clear by now, Jeff Koons’ *Balloons Dogs* not only mirrors the new species of humans who are narcissistic and obsessed with achievement in capitalism but also Han’s prejudice in using Koons’ sculpture to support his own argument.

REFERENCES

Benjamin, W. (2019). *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, in Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Mariner.

Brockes, E. (2015). *Jeff Koons: 'People respond to banal things – they don't accept their own history'*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/05/jeff-koons-people-respond-to-banal-things-they-dont-accept-their-own-history>

Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish: The birth of prison*. Vintage Book.

Groys, B. (2008). *Art power*. The MIT Press.

Han, B.-C. (2015). *Burnout society*. Standford University Press.

Han, B.-C. (2017a). *The scent of time: A philosophical essay on the art of lingering*. Polity Press.

Han, B.-C. (2017b). *In the swarm*. The MIT Press.

Han, B.-C. (2018a). *The expulsion of the other*. Polity Press.

Han, B.-C. (2018b). *Saving beauty*. Polity Press.

Han, B.-C. (2021a). *Capitalism and the death drive*. John Wiley & Sons.

Han, B.-C. (2021b). *The palliative society*. Polity Press.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1971). *The origin of the work of art, in poetry, language, thought*. Harper & Row.

Sharr, A. (2006). *Heidegger's hut*. MIT.

Simanowski, R. (2018). *The death algorithm and other digital dilemmas*. The MIT Press.

Sloterdijk, P. (2017). *Not saved: Essays after Heidegger*. Polity.

Stańska, Z. (2021). *Jeff Koons and His Balloon Dogs*. DailyArt Magazine. <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/jeff-koons-balloon-dog/>