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Book Author(s): Arne De Boever

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## Introduction: The Toporovski Affair

ON OCTOBER 20, 2017, an exhibition titled “From Bosch to Tuymans: A Vital Story” opened at the Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Museum of Fine Arts) in Ghent, Flanders (Belgium), where it was supposed to run through February 28, 2018. The exhibition was curated by the internationally recognized art critic and art historian Catherine de Zegher, who had become the museum’s director in 2013. It included works of early twentieth-century Russian avant-gardist art attributed to Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich, among others. Through those works, de Zegher ambitiously sought “to rewrite the history of the Russian avant-garde.” Not part of the museum’s permanent collection, the works had never before been publicly exhibited. It was revealed that the museum had them on loan from the Dieleghem Foundation, a charity established by the Russian/naturalized Belgian Igor Toporovski who (with his wife Olga Toporovski) owns the castle in Belgium after which the charity is named.<sup>1</sup>

However, as soon as—and even before—the works from the Toporovski collection had gone on show, doubts were raised about their authenticity. After all, if the works included in the exhibition were authentic, the museum would have had the exhibition of the century, one for which major institutions in major cities would have *killed*. Something about the works just seemed

1. Apparently, the Toporovskis are planning to turn the castle into a museum to exhibit their extensive art collection. See Colin Gleadell, “Experts Say Russian Modernism Show at Ghent Museum is ‘Highly Questionable,’” *Artnet News*, January 15, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/experts-say-russian-modernism-show-ghent-museum-highly-questionable-1198757>.

too good to be true. Moreover, the Toporovskis' record in the art world wasn't exactly clean: some ten years earlier, the discovery of a fake Malevich and Kandinsky had been traced back to a sale by . . . Igor Toporovski.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the exhibition opened, a public letter appeared in *The Art Newspaper*, signed mostly by art dealers and collectors (as well as a few art historians, curators, and one independent scholar), that claimed that the works from the Toporovski collection featured in the show were "highly questionable."<sup>3</sup> If de Zegher, when she became the museum's director in 2013, had said she wanted to create an "open museum," the letter pointed out that surely *this* was not the openness she would have wanted.

That letter landed on the desk of a politician, the Flemish Minister of Culture and the Media, the liberal Sven Gatz. Apparently, it had been Gatz who had initially put de Zegher in touch with the Toporovskis after he had seen some of the Toporovskis' art collection at their home. Because the Toporovski affair was taking on larger proportions by the day—because it was turning, precisely, into an *affaire*—Gatz decided to become involved again, this time as a politician who knows nothing about art and whose hands were therefore clean in the entire situation: he had merely put de Zegher and the Toporovskis in touch. Gatz now pressed the city of Ghent to put together a commission to investigate the works in the exhibition.

2. Sarah Cascone, "Belgian Museum Removes Show of Disputed Russian Avant-Garde Works after Damning Exposé," *Artnet News*, January 30, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/russian-avant-garde-exhibition-closes-expose-1210742>. For a more extensive account in English, see Simon Hewitt, "The *Art Newspaper* Exposé Helps Close Dubious Avant-Garde Art Display in Belgian Museum," *The Art Newspaper*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/the-story-behind-the-dubious-russian-avant-garde-art-show-in-ghent-museum>.

3. "Arts Professionals Accuse Ghent Museum of Exhibiting Unauthenticated Works," *Artforum*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/news/arts-professionals-accuse-ghent-museum-of-exhibiting-unauthenticated-works-73539>.

Another public letter followed in the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, signed not by dealers and collectors this time but by representatives of important institutions in the Flemish art world.<sup>4</sup> It, too, openly questioned the authenticity of the exhibited works but it specifically charged the museum and its director with having neglected all deontological codes and rules during the preparation of the exhibition. Rather than being concerned with the authenticity of the works, the letter focused on the *modus operandi* of the museum and how it reflected back on the Flemish museum world in general.

An adjusted commission was created to look into that, and during questioning de Zegher confirmed that the museum had most certainly followed standard procedure during the preparation of the exhibition. Very quickly, however, it was revealed that the experts she claimed had been consulted during the vetting of the questionable works' provenance, had in fact not actively been involved in that process at all.<sup>5</sup> On the basis of this new information, and due to increased media pressure, de Zegher was then temporarily suspended as museum director, even if during that time she remained an official of the city of Ghent, which is technically her position (the city "lends" her to the museum as director). On March 14, 2018, newspapers revealed that Ernst & Young had been engaged to do an audit of the museum to see whether proper procedures had indeed been followed during the preparation of the exhibition.<sup>6</sup> After months of silence, another open letter was published on October 10, 2018, in which many major artists, art critics, and curators expressed their support for de Zegher and criticized the curator's "trial by media."<sup>7</sup> At this point, the museum

4. "De Imagoschade Na Toporovski is Groot," *De Standaard*, March 5, 2018, [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180304\\_03390328](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180304_03390328).

5. Geert Sels, "De Zegher Loog Gentse Politici Voor," *De Standaard*, March 7, 2018, [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180306\\_03394363](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180306_03394363).

6. gvds. "Ernst & Young Doet Audit in MSK Ghent," *De Standaard*, March 14, 2018, [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180314\\_03409354](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20180314_03409354).

7. Sarah Cascone, "Luc Tuymans, Giuseppe Penone, and Other Art-

audit had not yet been concluded; there was still no news about the authenticity of the works.

Finally, for now, on October 17, 2018, de Zegher and Toporovski held a press conference to announce that a material and technical analysis performed in European laboratories on ten of the works that had been exhibited, proves that the works are authentic. It is unclear what exactly is meant by “authentic”: while such analysis may prove that the works date from the 1920s, it does not necessarily prove that they were made by the actual artists to whom the museum had ascribed the works.<sup>8</sup> In a letter titled “Fake Art or Fake News?” that was made available at the press conference and will at a later time be published in the art magazine *Hart*, de Zegher recounts some of the facts of the case—the letter does not comment on the Toporovskis’ reputation in the art world—and points out its economic (financial) and political dimension. She highlights, for example, that it was initially art dealers who questioned the work and notes the implications of the affair and her “trial by media” for “our democracy.”<sup>9</sup> The letter also announces that a book will be published in spring 2019 detailing all of the facts of the affair, including all the art historical, archival, literary, material, and technical evidence proving the authenticity of the works in question.

Those were the facts, as they say, or the facts to the extent that I was able to confirm them based on the reporting that was done about the affair. And I want to emphasize, before I get started, that I do not in any way want to discredit here the facts, or the attempt

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World Figures Defend Museum Director after Russian Forgery Scandal,” *Artnet News*, October 11, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artists-art-professionals-defend-ghent-museum-director-russian-forgery-scandal-1369207>

8. Geert Sels, “Toporovski en de Zegher Claimen: ‘Werken Zijn Authentiek,’” *De Standaard*, October 17, 2018, [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181017\\_03852188](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181017_03852188).

9. Catherine de Zegher, “Fake Art or Fake News?” [https://www.scribd.com/document/391046833/Tekst-De-Zegher#from\\_embed](https://www.scribd.com/document/391046833/Tekst-De-Zegher#from_embed).

to get the facts right. This may be a critical tale about fake art, but that is not the same as a tale about fake news. Fake art is still within the realm of the aesthetic. Fake news is no news at all.

To be very clear: my goal in what follows is not to cast judgment on the works from the Toporovski collection or even on the museum. I leave that to the art *connaisseurs* and the politicians (given that a public institution is involved). I should add that de Zegher's qualities as an art critic and curator are, in my view, beyond doubt. My interest is instead philosophical and takes its cue from de Zegher's comments about the economic and political dimensions of the affair. I would like to think a bit more about how this Toporovski trouble is made possible. My suggestion—provocation—will be that the Toporovski affair is enabled by what I call *aesthetic exceptionalism*.<sup>10</sup> Briefly put, aesthetic exceptionalism names the belief—and I choose that word purposefully, as will soon become clear—that art and artists are *exceptional*. Before anyone gets offended, let me quickly add that I do not intend to argue the opposite: that art and artists are somehow *normal*. Everyone knows they are not. To break out of that simplistic opposition between the norm and the exception, which structures aesthetic exceptionalism, I propose instead a theory of *unexceptional art*. Neither exceptional nor normal, unexceptional art manages to be a kind of antidote to the exceptionalism that can be found in much contemporary aesthetic theory.<sup>11</sup>

10. I am not the first to use this term in print, but as far as I know, the content I give to it is original. Jon Robson already used this book's title as the title for a chapter he contributed to the book *Art and Belief* (ed. Ema Sullivan-Bissett, Helen Bradley, and Paul Noordhof [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017]). Robson's work is in aesthetic epistemology, however, and pursues a related but different angle into the issue of aesthetic exceptionalism through its focus on "belief pessimism" in relation to aesthetic judgment.

11. Let me note that while I focus on visual art here, I consider this situation to apply across the visual, performing, and literary arts. Aesthetic exceptionalism explains, for example, the difference in honoraria paid to creative writers and scholars when they are invited to speak about their

But why the need for an antidote? In what way, exactly, is aesthetic exceptionalism a poison? And why this move from the exception into the direction of the norm, only to hold back from the norm through a continued attachment to the exception (as the term *un-exceptional* makes evident<sup>12</sup>)? I want to question aesthetic exceptionalism first and foremost from a political perspective, with attention to political exceptionalism and its complicated relation to democracy, a regime that is sometimes opposed to political exceptionalism and sometimes described in those very terms—as politically exceptional. To put it a little ambitiously, one could say that I am interested in a form of political reason and the ways in which it is also aesthetically active, and supported even by aesthetics. This line of questioning will focus on the sovereign figure of the artist as genius. Along the way, the exceptionalist art market—art’s economic exceptionalism—will be considered as well. In that consideration, the distinction between the original and the fake will be my central concern. This is a good mo-

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work. If the creative writer is paid vastly more, and often to read from work that has already been published, this is not because they generally do not have a fixed income, as some maintain. It is because, unlike scholars, they are considered exceptional. The question-and-answer sessions after their talks often make this explicit. If the scholar is usually asked about the content of the (generally new) material they have presented, the creative writer is asked about their writing discipline. No one ever asks the scholar how they write. People want to *be* the creative writer; they want to know their secret. The scholar has no such cachet. The creative writer has the touch of the theological that the scholar lacks. The exception here would be the star scholar, often a theorist, who shares the exceptionalist allure of the creative writer. In the latter case, one may want to speak of “academic exceptionalism” instead. Much abusive behavior in the university is enabled by such academic exceptionalism.

12. In its relation to the term it qualifies, the prefix “un-” is similar to the prefix “post,” which, in Wendy Brown’s useful understanding, “signifies a formation that is *temporally after but not over* that to which it is affixed” (Wendy Brown, *Waning Sovereignty, Walled Democracy* [New York: Zone Books, 2010], 21). Indeed, *Post-Exceptionalism*—a term that has been used in policy studies—may have been another possible title for this book.

ment to recall that the initial public response to the exhibition of works from the Toporovski collection came from a group of art dealers and collectors, rather than from art historians, curators, or art critics. Why might that be so? Art is a particularly good place to question exceptionalism, because it is where the two lines of questioning that I've opened up coincide. More comprehensively, then, *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism* pursues a transgressive critique of a widespread political and economic reason of art that the Toporovski affair lays bare.

In chapter 1, I explain what I mean by both aesthetic and political exceptionalism as well as how I consider the two to be related. My focus is on an exceptionalism that many have understood as undemocratic: the theory of sovereignty as the power to decide on the state of exception as it can be found in the work of the twentieth-century German constitutional scholar Carl Schmitt. Schmitt is a controversial figure due to his affiliation with Nazism. I build on the work of other scholars to identify a certain Schmittian exceptionalism in the work of various contemporary theorists of art, specifically in the work of the French philosophers Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière.

But do such traces of Schmitt—and of a certain kind of Schmitt, as will become clear—cast a shadow over all political and aesthetic exceptionalisms? In chapter 2, I look at the work of a small range of contemporary political philosophers (Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe, and Judith Butler) who have arguably sought to reclaim exceptionalism from Schmitt for democratic purposes. Following both Honig and Butler's discussion of indigenous politics in this context, I turn to a controversial work of contemporary art, Sam Durant's *Scaffold*, and read it as a site where aesthetic exceptionalism as well as various political exceptionalisms are productively played out against each other. As such, these first two chapters revolve around a sovereign conception of the artwork as well as the artist.

If the focus on democratic exceptionalism already presented a minor transgressive gesture within the logic of aesthetic exceptionalism, in chapter 3 I build on aesthetic theory by the



Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han and the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler to begin to develop an alternative to aesthetic exceptionalism. While Han and Stiegler provide the historical and especially philosophical underpinnings for this, the chapter pursues an in-depth reading of a series of paintings by the little-known Los Angeles-based artist Alex Robbins. Titled “Complements,” these works can be understood (through the lens of both Han’s and Stiegler’s thought) as conceptual works that undermine—in a much more radical way than *Scaffold*—the exceptionalism on which the contemporary Western art world, and in particular the contemporary Western art market, is built. While the sovereign figure of the artist as genius is still present in this chapter, the chapter also establishes a shift toward the exceptionalist notion of the original with which *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism* began.

In chapter 4, I return to the Toporovski affair from an economic point of view and propose the notion of unexceptional art as the end of aesthetic exceptionalism. After having philosophically grounded this alternative in chapter 3, I also articulate its political consequences through a discussion of destituent power and anarchy in the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, specifically his book *The Use of Bodies*, which completes the multivolume *Homo Sacer* project in which Agamben has taken on the exceptionalist logic of modern Western power. If Agamben’s project was overwhelmingly political, I seek to draw out its consequences for aesthetic exceptionalism. Second, and returning to the theoretical references from chapter 1, I pursue here the notion of democratic *anarchy* in the works of Jacques Rancière and the literary theorist Stathis Gourgouris as marking the politics of the alternative theory of aesthetics that this book seeks to theorize.

Overall, this book thus comes down more on the political than the economic side of things. It is a work of democratic political theory rather than a work of Marxism. This is for specific reasons. While one may expect the commodity to be an original (rather than an imitation), one does not expect it to have been produced

by an exceptional worker. The art work is a better target for my two lines of questioning because in it the exceptionalism of the original and of the person who made it are combined. With luxury commodities, however, one can already see these distinctions shift: here, the suggestion is often (in advertising, for example) that the commodity was indeed made by an exceptional person, and just for you. The goal of such a suggestion, as I see it, would be to lift the luxury commodity to the level of the artwork, with all of the exceptionalism this implies. The particular set of issues that I am interested in, then, are better realized in the artwork than in the commodity, and necessitated the focus on democratic theory rather than Marxism. It is, in my view, not only the more appropriate but also the more original path to pursue.

In the end, and echoing Emily Apter's work on unexceptional politics, this book is a plea for unexceptional art. By this I mean an understanding of art (rather than actual works of art that one can point to) that would unwork the aesthetic, political, and economic exceptionalisms that structure the art world. This does not mean, as I already indicated, that I seek to do away with exceptionalism altogether: the notion of the *un-exceptional* marks an attempt, precisely, to hold on to exceptionalism's trace in order to open up a path toward other kinds of exceptionalism. *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism* does not propose an aesthetic relativism according to which anything is art, and anyone is an artist. Unexceptional art holds on to a trace of the exceptional in aesthetic judgment, the economic valuation of art, and the verticality of art's political reason, because it considers such traces to be valuable. Before I am misunderstood, then, let me close by stating—again, a little provocatively—that this is therefore anything but another manifesto for horizontalism.

