

## REVIEW

# Post-modern Political Art Theory

Carsten Juhl: *Globalæstetik. Verdensfølelsen og det kosmopolitiske perspektiv*. Copenhagen: Billedkunstskolernes Forlag, 2007. 424 pp.  
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Carsten Juhl has written a powerful book. Its strengths flow from both its rational argument and its ethical commitment. Its starting point is the setting up of a new discipline called Global Aesthetics at the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen, where Juhl has been teaching since the 1980s, but the scope of the book by far exceeds its origin and presents us with a very interesting attempt to weave together art theory, critique of political economy, and contemporary continental philosophy in a bold argument for the role of art in the necessary reorganization of the resources of the world at a time where reactionary forces have the upper hand.

At a time when most academics, be its philosophers, sociologists, or art historians, consent themselves with small tasks within the secure environment of a single discipline, Juhl is engaged in a grandiose and eclectic exercise where contemporary art and its experimental expressions are presented as an important lever for the possibility of nothing less than a world revolution. In Juhl's erudite as well as passionate prose subjects traditionally unconnected are brought together: the council communist tradition is connected to a discussion about translation, the exhibition Documenta 12 in Kassel to Lenin's old question "What is to be done?", and an analysis of the relatively unknown Danish post-conceptual art group *Koncern*<sup>o</sup> and their refusal to participate in the competition for the expansion of Statens Museum for Kunst (The Danish National Gallery) in Copenhagen in 1993 leads to a critique of the Danish government and the racist immigration laws that were introduced in the 1990s in Denmark. The book reads as a history of the 20th Century and the failed attempts to establish a genuine cosmopolitical order hence the title of the book: *Global Aesthetics: World Feeling and the Cosmopolitical Perspective*. According to Juhl, all attempts to establish a revolutionary potentiality or a cosmopolitical vision during the last century have run into difficulties and have been diverted as it happened in the years following the end of the Second World War, where the outbreak of the Cold War effectively prevented a different and more just organisation of the

world. The war on terror is just the latest attempt to derail the possibility of a cosmopolitical sensibility.

The book brings together articles and essays from the last fifteen years and is an interesting testimony of the development that so-called post-modern theory has undergone since the beginning of the 1990s. Juhl demonstrates that the post-modern turn never meant a withdrawal into a non-political sphere, where the post-modern philosopher contemplates beautiful objects while sipping Chardonnay and listening to Mahler's Third Symphony. When it first arrived, post-modern philosophy was accused of being not just an a-political but a downright rightwing current that served neo-conservative or neo-liberal agendas (at that time in the shape of Reagan or Thatcher). It is one of the benefits of Juhl's book to show that at least one current within the post-modern turn has never been involved in any kind of straightforward political withdrawal, but rather in a radical rethinking of the relationship between politics, ethics, urbanism, art, and the mass media where politics is not necessarily privileged as the most important moment. In the book, Juhl himself shows this through a discussion of Jean-François Lyotard's oeuvre that has been a steady reference for Juhl's own thinking since the end of the 1970s. Lyotard was originally active within the radical left in the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in the 1950s and 1960s writing articles about Algeria. But following the break-up of several ultra-left wing organisations after May/June 1968, Lyotard started a thorough critique of all of the categories with which historical materialism identified the proletariat as the historical subject and with which historical materialism predicted the movements of history. Without the secure foundation of Marxist philosophy, Lyotard and later post-modern arrivals like Giorgio Agamben who in the second part of the book supplants Lyotard as Juhl's main reference have been deeply immersed in an attempt to reformulate the question of equality, community, and political sovereignty. Juhl himself took part in the dismantling of historical materialism and moved from Bordigism towards the post-modern position working with French philosophers like Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard and Italian ones like Mario Perniola. All of these thinkers went from different kinds of hardcore politics within the framework of ultra leftism like Situationism or Bordigism to a post-modern position where art acquired significance as a model beyond the certainty of a classic and teleological Marxist logic of history. In this regard, Juhl's book is a testimony of the challenges that post-modern theory has had to face since the middle of the 1990s and in the new millennium.

Juhl has written a challenging book that reflects a period with great instability. As he himself writes, the attempt to construct a global constitutional state-system has run into serious problems and it is unclear where we are heading. In many regards the past two decades mark a break with the social, political, economic, and cultural order that characterized the period of the Cold War. On the one hand, social, political, and cultural life has become increasingly global, on the other, we have witnessed the resurgence of nationalism and imperialism. This is the situation post-modern thinking has to come to terms with.

One of the most original and important of Juhl's contributions is the attempt to show how contemporary art through its experiments with form and space can be said to create a situation of openness and hospitality. A hospitality of pivotal importance in a situation characterized by racism and fundamentalism and the so-called war on terror where the political horizon is reduced to a false choice between two righteous political projects, namely Bush's neo-conservative American administration and Bin Laden's Islamic fundamentalism. Juhl shows how modern and contemporary experimental art makes possible a completely different way of being in the world where the other is not treated as a threatening stranger that has to be excluded. In art, we experience a sort of positive alienation, an encounter with the unknown through which our sensibility towards others and especially towards the wretched and the repressed of the world is heightened. A kind of cosmopolitical readiness, what Juhl terms a world feeling, manifests itself. According to Juhl, it is especially installation art in the book represented by among others the fluxus artist Henning Christiansen and the Indian video artist Amar Kanwar that is able to bring forth this sensibility. But modern art has in general been involved in an un-nostalgic expansion of itself, Juhl argues. According to Juhl, the broader political sphere has lacked the kind of experimentation present within art. And it is exactly this expansion through conceptual plasticity and installation aesthetics that has enabled art to experiment and made possible an aesthetic and ethical hospitality, which is unfortunately lacking in other discourses. The ability to be receptive and hospitable has characterized experimentation within visual art over the last 35 years, with traditional genres like painting and sculpture being combined and supplanted with new genres like video and philosophy. This ability to receive openly and experiment with mixing and hybridisation is what is presently lacking within the political discourse, where a multicultural synthesis is being destroyed by the rise of nationalism and different kinds of fundamentalist and racist ideologies.

It is definitely an interesting reading of the expansion of the artwork that Juhl is presenting. And through the idea of art's hospitality Juhl is able to avoid the traditional pitfall of much aesthetic theory and art historical writing because he is able to show how contemporary art and especially installation art can be both political and aesthetic at the same time.

Of course this perspective is not restricted to the aesthetic or art historical perspective, but is directly linked to the present state of things: the present conjuncture is not characterized by the readiness of experimental art but on the contrary by the greediness of capital. Although more than two billion people work each day to produce more wealth than there has ever been in history, hundreds of millions struggle each day to obtain the 2000 calories a day required for life. Tens of thousands of children die each day from malnutrition or diseases that have long been treatable. This situation is catastrophic and the need for a redistribution of the wealth of the planet is required. But unfortunately the bourgeoisie of the West does not seem up to the task. As Juhl argues, it is racism and not cosmopolitanism that seems successful right now. Art's ability to be hospitable has so far not been so to say implanted into politics. The ways that visual art has been able to enhance aesthetic and ethical hospitality could none the less present us with a very relevant and different perspective on the enormous transformations taking place right now across the world. One response to the developments currently shaping the world might then be to establish and strengthen a certain readiness in society by making it capable of thinking, researching, and experiencing arrivals and expansions – that is, the arrival of foreign cultures and ideas and the expansion of the population and its sense of locality. The development that visual arts has undergone during the last 35 years presents us thus, Juhl argues, with a reasonable idea of what might happen if racism was replaced with curiosity and hospitality.

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