

REVIEW

The Aesthetic Relation

Morten Kyndrup: *Den æstetiske relation*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2008. 175 pages. ISBN 978-87-02-06299-1

1. Two versions of aesthetics

Aesthetics might appear to occupy the same position as time in St. Augustine's *Confessions*: if no one asks me, I know perfectly well what it is, but when asked to define what I really mean by the term, I end up in endless contradictions and inconsistencies. Is aesthetics as a philosophical discipline essentially connected to what has come to be the "fine arts," or quite simply "art," as we would say today? But if so, what kind of competence or domain of knowledge does it circumscribe, and how does it differ from the specialized discourse on works that we find in other disciplines like literary history, art history, etc.? Or is aesthetics a theory of something that pertains to certain experiences with a particular sensory quality, or even to all kinds of objects and situations, perhaps due to a process of aestheticizing peculiar to our contemporary societies, which would require an analysis of a rather different kind than the one normally undertaken in philosophical aesthetics? On another level, we might ask if aesthetics is only about surfaces, perhaps even things superficial, as when we say that something is *merely* aesthetic in order to set it against more profound questions of the true and the good. Or is the aesthetic in fact more like a *relation* that exists between us and things, and that may neither be ascribed to some objective feature of things nor reduced to subjective states, but forms an essential part of intersubjectivity, and thus in a certain sense would be co-implied in all questions of truth and goodness?

Morten Kyndrup's book *Den æstetiske relation* attempts to clarify some of these entangled ideas and to pave the way toward aesthetics as a science, or at least provide it with a secure foundation. In order to achieve this, he argues, we must dissolve the "marriage" between art and aesthetics that has existed at least since German romanticism. Such speculative fusion of art and philosophical reflection, he notes, has indeed yielded many remarkable results, but it has also impeded aesthetics from becoming a scientific discipline, and also put an exaggerated emphasis on art as the producer of some higher truth; today the task would

rather be to return to more modest tasks, which also means to place aesthetics on a more secure basis.

From a historical point of view, this means a return to a version of aesthetics that existed, at least as possibility, from Baumgarten up to Kant, and to some extent the book can be read as plea for a kind of Kantian analysis that seeks to understand the role of aesthetic judgment in the formation of intersubjective communities. Historical models, be it Baumgarten or Kant, however have no necessary priority, and the focus lies on the present. Today, Kyndrup argues, such an aesthetic theory must be able to include phenomena like media, design, and various features of our everyday life (which was already the case for Kant, for whom artworks in many instances were misleading examples if we attempt to understand pure judgments of taste). On the other hand it would show that works of art in fact contain many features that cannot be understood as “aesthetic,” although they would still be essentially connected to their significance as *art*. This squares well with many current “anti-aesthetic” tendencies,¹ especially in the visual arts, which increasingly tend to understand themselves as quasi-cognitive endeavors, drawing on social science, documentary techniques, and various forms of journalism, while the “aesthetic” itself seems to have undergone an unprecedented expansion and now permeates all of everyday life, from cooking to politics. In short, aesthetic issues, and even questions of taste, permeate all aspects of our life, except art, where they are often seen as sure signs of superficiality. All of this demands a new type of analysis, and Morten Kyndrup’s book is a plea for a reformed discipline that would be able to do the job.

II. The marriage between art and aesthetics

Kyndrup provides us with a broad and non-technical outline of the basic issues involved, both from a historical and a systematic point of view, and in this sense his book could also function as an excellent introduction to the study of aesthetics. As a particular philosophical discipline, but possibly also as a new mode of experience, aesthetics has its roots in the 18th century (the word was famously used for the first time in Baumgarten’s 1735 thesis *Reflections on Poetry*), and it was the result both of transformations within philosophical discourse and of changes in society at large. Modernity, Kyndrup argues, is to a large extent about a process of differentiation, out of which autonomous domains or “collective singulars” like aesthetics, but also history, science, and politics, have emerged, and he underlines that this is an irreversible development. There is no going back to the unity of the true, the good, and the beautiful, first and

foremost since such a unity never existed in any other way than as a historical myth – and a myth that obviously in itself was oriented toward the future, as in romanticism: the lost unity, of the Greeks, early or medieval Christianity, etc., is something that must be retrieved at some *future moment*, and in this sense it already partakes of a proto-modernist logic. If this differentiation is also a secularization, and a compartmentalization of experience into separate spheres, each with their particular mode of rationality, it does not imply that this process proceeds from some primordial unity, but that it is a *differentiation of differences*. In short, in aesthetics as well as in all other things, there is no going back, and we should stay tuned to the present and that which is emerging, which is also the only way for us to uphold a productive instead of an antiquarian relation to the past.

As a process of differentiation and secularization, modernity can also be understood as a quest for autonomy, or “maturity” (*Mündigkeit*), as Kant says in his essay on the Enlightenment. This autonomy, as it is constructed in Kant’s *Critiques*, is based in the discovery of a subject that henceforth will relate only to itself as the source of a set of rationalities, which still must transcend any particular perspective. At least two fundamental problems are at stake in this “Copernican turn,” first, how to mediate between singularity (of empirical existence) and universality (of transcendental conditions), and second, how to prevent theoretical and practical reason from becoming a mere dualism, i.e. how to account for the differentiation as well as the unity of reason. Ever since Kant’s third *Critique* a certain type of aesthetics has been proposed as a possible solution to both of these questions, i.e. as an experience where the individual actualizes that which is spontaneous (judgments of taste) in a medium that is also a space of intersubjectivity – the “supersensible stratum” of taste, which Kant admits is only an idea, but whose reality, he also notes, we *ought* to *bring about* – and in this produces a bridge, or a harmony, between the strands of theory and practice, nature and freedom. The project of a “marriage” between art and philosophical reflection stems from this, although Kant himself would undoubtedly have disinherited his romantic followers had he been aware of their more full-blown creations (his acerbic attacks on the “elevated,” *vornehmen*, tone in philosophy can surely be read in this sense). The so-called *Oldest System Program of German Idealism* from 1796/97 – indisputably in Hegel’s handwriting, although the text has also been attributed to Hölderlin, Schelling, or even to other lesser known authors – is one of the first visionary accounts of this project, where we can see how traditional academic philosophers,

the *Buchstabenphilosophen* of the past, must learn how to include the poet within themselves in order to fuse reason and sensibility in a “new mythology,” and how the aesthetic idea becomes the highest idea which includes all the others, in a movement that can look back to Plato, as for instance Hölderlin explicitly does, and yet acquires a radical new sense in a post-Kantian world where subjectivity is at the center.

This was also the moment of the birth of “Art” as a *singulare tantum*, “die Kunst,” as a concept that transcends the system of the arts and points toward an experience of the ultimate ground of being, and which Schelling was probably the first to propose.² This was not only a claim to autonomy, but perhaps also to what we, following Christoph Menke,³ could call a theory of *sovereignty*: art as an event or experience that somehow legislates over the other spheres. Such a claim was obviously from the start a utopian demand or *counter-claim*, in view of the general process of social differentiation that rather tends to entrench art within a sphere of particular competence and its concomitant division of labor – artists, aestheticians, critics, historians, and the various institutional, curatorial, and editorial skills that develop within each of the arts – all of which makes art more akin to science. And yet such a promise is what underlies many modern conceptions of Art, upheld by artists and philosophers alike, and this connection is what Kyndrup wants to undo. In this he follows certain suggestions by Jean-Marie Schaeffer,⁴ although with much more caution and nuance than his predecessor, who tends toward sweeping condemnations of modern aesthetic philosophy and somewhat populist claims for the role of art, whereas Kyndrup provides a more balanced view of the advantages and disadvantages of this coupling – even though, as I would argue, he still accepts its basic premises, whereas I think that a case can be made that there is something wrong with this story *as such*. My suspicions have to do both with how it reconstructs romanticism and how it takes us through the latter parts of the 19th century and into early phases of the historical avant-garde; in fact, in referring exclusively to a set of canonical philosophical texts, it remains just as speculative and negligent of historical detail as those “speculative” philosophies of art that it so emphatically criticizes. Even though the details of this story are in the end less important to Kyndrup than his own constructive proposals for what aesthetics, in his perspective, *could* or *ought to* become, I must still pause a little to reflect on it, since it has become a widespread idea.

III. One of many stories? The problem of polygamy

What, then, was this “marriage,” as Kyndrup aptly calls it – was it based on true love, parental coercion, or on mere convenience? In order for it to function, both parties have to give the other something valuable, and indeed the speculative theory of art made possible a long and rich exchange. Through a certain type of philosophical discourse, art was endowed with a privileged status, and as unique disclosure of a truth that was superior to the truths of everyday life and the sciences it could lay claim to a world-constitutive function. This theory unfolds in various versions from romanticism through Nietzsche up to Heidegger and Adorno, and it has undoubtedly also, at least unconsciously, provided at least some avant-garde artists with a source of legitimacy. Inversely, the speculative claims of philosophy could pretend to be guided by this truth that it first places at one remove from itself, but only in order to finally appropriate it and explicate its true meaning, in an act of subtle ventriloquy where the one who speaks and the one who listens ceaselessly exchange places.

In this way, we could trace the outlines of a vast dialectical drama that unfolds from romanticism up to Heidegger and Adorno, where a certain idea of Art functions as a mirror that philosophical thought holds up to itself, in which it sees its own unity and fulfillment achieved, only in a form that yet lacks conceptual reflection, which philosophy is called upon to supply. “The true,” Adorno writes in a compressed sentence that summarizes the quintessential force of this logic, “is open for discursive knowledge, but precisely for this reason the latter does not possess it; the kind of knowledge that art is, it also possesses, but as something incommensurable to itself.”⁵ This chiasm (neatly expressed in the semicolon that splits Adorno’s sentence into two reflecting parts) just as much embraces a certain “aestheticizing” of philosophy – for instance when Adorno claims that philosophy must always refer to the singularity and monadic dimension of the work as the “*organon* of truth,”⁶ and even that *Aesthetic Theory* is his true *prima philosophia* – as it implies a becoming-philosophy of art, when he claims that “truth gradually unfolded in the artwork is none other than the philosophical concept,” and that “genuine aesthetic experience must become philosophy, otherwise it is nothing.”⁷ On the one hand, this sets up a tension that surely can become immensely productive, as in Adorno’s own detailed analyses of musical works, but it obviously also entails a risk of reductionism and a violence done to the singularity for the work. Kyndrup suggests that there is a certain “impotency” in this tradition, and that it somehow fails to approach the

individual work of art; I think that the case of Adorno proves this to be wrong. It is true that Adorno's aesthetic would collapse (or at least would have to be substantially rethought, as for instance Albrecht Wellmer has attempted to do) if the idea of reconciliation would go away; and yet this idea would mean little were it not ceaselessly developed out of the actual substance of works from Beethoven to Schönberg's dodecaphony, Webern's serialism and beyond, and it can hardly be argued that Adorno would remain indifferent to musical detail or formal analysis, only that these empirical features, for him, as a *philosopher* (and not a musicologist) must always be related to a philosophical task.

Now, the story of the speculative theory can undoubtedly be told in many ways, and it surely has a great rhetorical efficiency, especially when it is contrasted to another form of aesthetics which allegedly stays close to the individual works and no longer places on them the exorbitant claim that they should somehow save the world from its fragmentation and diremption, as in the earlier romantic phase of this story, or inversely, as in the later modernist phase, save us from a "reconciliation under duress"⁸ that cover its differences, and instead discover the non-identity at the heart of identity. As soon as one looks closer on individual authors and artists, this sharp divide between two ways of conceptualizing aesthetics, and above the idea that modern art would somehow be essentially determined by it, however begins to look less convincing, and the vast difference between thinkers who have been engaged in the "speculative" narrative of art must be accounted for.

There has indeed always been philosophical counter-movements within this story, beginning already with Hegel, whose sublation of art into philosophy in Kyndrup's (admittedly brief) presentation looks like a continuation of the romantic gesture, but in fact constitutes the sharpest conceivable criticism of it. Philosophy, Hegel emphasizes, cannot be guided by some ineffable experience of unity contained in the artwork, but has to grasp its *concept*, which also means to *supersede* it. With respect to its highest determination (the presentation of religious and/or philosophical truth), Hegel says, for us, art is a thing of the past, *ein Vergangenes*, which does not mean that it simply disappears, but rather that it is emancipated from metaphysical claims and may engage in precisely the kind of sensuous pleasures that many of those who decry the speculative narrative seem to be missing.⁹

And beyond Hegel, explicitly opposed to his "aesthetics from above" there is a long tradition starting "from below" (as Fechner famously said), joining forces with various positivist discourses of science, from optics

to physiology, which then fused with the emerging discourse of empathy in transforming the legacy of Kantian idealism by re-interpreting it in a psychological fashion. These and many other forms of aesthetic theories that took their cue from the sciences were in fact much more influential than the alleged “speculative” narrative for the emergence of categories like space and tectonics, form and structure, in architecture and the visual arts, and they became the bedrock of early modernism.¹⁰ Many (though not all) of these movements explicitly rejected the philosophical aesthetics of idealism, whereas we, from our historical vantage point, can see that they are inextricably bound to it. Any closer look at the role played by aesthetic theories at the turn of the century would, at least as I see it, render the question if they simply *belonged* to a “speculative” philosophy rather pointless: the more interesting task is instead to assess the exact hold that this tradition in fact had over early modernism, and how it came to be *transformed* by the encounter with a spectrum of new scientific discourses. In view of this, overarching historical constructions like Schaeffer’s are in fact much more speculative than the tradition they decry, and they stray much too far from the factual trajectory of aesthetic theory to be really useful; instead we should perhaps consider the possibility of promiscuity, or an inherent polygamy, already at the outset of the speculative narrative, which has only increased as this history unfolds through the 19th century and ushers into the various modernisms and avant-gardes at the beginning of the 20th century, where alliances with sciences and political movements were a determining factor.

Something similar must be said about the artistic evidence for this story. Here names and references are even more scarce than in the philosophical tale, but sometimes the claim seems to be made that certain types of abstract art (Malevich is cited by Schaeffer as a major piece of evidence), and above all conceptual art, would be the outcome of some speculative theory of art, and the normal support for the latter claim is the singular figure of Joseph Kosuth (to be found both in Schaeffer and Kyndrup).¹¹ This curiously disregards the complex dialectic of idealism and materialism in painting from impressionism and onward, of which Malevich and his generation were acutely aware, and the link becomes even more tenuous when it is extended to the 1960s. Apart from the fact that Kosuth’s early work in fact grew out of a violent rejection of both aesthetics and philosophy – his 1969 manifesto bearing the significant title “Art After Philosophy” – the trajectory of conceptual art displays a wide array of constellations of particulars and concepts in the wake of a long debate on post-painterly abstraction, and it cannot with any art-

historical accuracy be understood, let alone criticized, as Schaeffer does, as a descendent of romantic philosophies of art.

As we noted above, the proposal that we should dissolve this marriage brings us back to Baumgarten, for whom aesthetics was not exclusively related to the fine arts, but also had to do with the possibility of sensuous cognition, as a mode of knowledge that would somehow preserve the individuality of the object, its flavor and fullness, which is supposed to have been lost in the speculative theory. The problem with such a return is of course that this idea of aesthetics as sensible knowledge has long since been integrated into and even become an essential part of the speculative theory, from Merleau-Ponty to Adorno, Lyotard, and beyond: art redeems the sensible, it allows the non-identical to persist in the midst of conceptual subsumption, it preserves a *touch* that precedes naming and discourse, and to this extent the distinctions that once presented themselves to Baumgarten have been blurred over and over again, if they ever were clear in the first place. In short, it remains doubtful whether a return to discourse of a particular sensuous knowledge in any simple way constitutes an alternative to the speculative narrative of modern art.

IV. A happy divorce?

It is true that Kyndrup does not propose that we should return to something that once existed, and he also displays a healthy distrust toward the synthetic and sweeping gestures of someone like Schaeffer, although I would argue that he, presumably for reasons of rhetorical efficiency, at strategic points appears to accept it. His own proposal is however oriented to our present and to the future, and he suggests that the increasing presence of aesthetic considerations in our everyday life, in design, media etc., necessitates a much more concrete approach to the things themselves, and this is where the strength of his analysis lies.

Aesthetics, Kyndrup suggests, should be understood in terms of “modeling operations,” i.e., discursive constructions through which certain objects become readable as aesthetic, and subject to judgments of taste. There is always a “signifying signification” (*betydningshandling*) that must be accounted for and which is what ascribes a certain position, a temporality, and a context to the work.

Aesthetic properties and values are thus neither subjective nor objective features, but exist in the interrelation between subjects and objects, which, as Kyndrup notes, comes close to the phenomenology of aesthetic judgment proposed by Kant in the third *Critique*. The *sensus communis* can in this light be understood as a kind of cultural encyclopedia or a

habitus, which can account for the seemingly surprising fact that our judgments tend to be fairly similar (at least if we refer to aesthetic practices that aim directly to produce calculable effect on us, for instance design). In this sense, aesthetics describes the process that leads from the *I* to the *We* of a community that is not necessitated by a concept or a strict rationality, but by a kind of feeling that is as it were spontaneous in each and every one, or as Kyndrup suggests, a kind of “civilizing” process.

This understanding of aesthetics as a “modeling” operation can also shed light on the transformation of the artist from a *homo faber* to a *homo significans* – if art increasingly appears as disconnected from a set of definable manual practices (with Richard Serra’s famous *Verb List* as the last and no doubt inconclusive attempt to establish a synoptic overview), it is because what it deals with is *sense* or *signification*, and not a particular type of material entities (it is not “territorial” in the physical sense, in Kyndrup’s vocabulary). But as he underlines, the fact that anything can be art makes it only more obvious that everything is not art, i.e., that the autonomy of art is thereby not at all threatened – in fact, it is the seemingly limitless applicability of the term “art” that makes the institutional framework visible as such, whereas earlier stages of the unfolding of autonomy could conceal it as somehow “natural” (and in this he largely follows Thierry de Duve’s analysis of how Kantian aesthetics not only, seemingly against all odds, survives “after Duchamp,” but in fact receives its final confirmation).

Now, one might ask, could this not just as much be understood as a continuation of the “marriage” between art and aesthetics? If it is true, as Kyndrup says, that “the domain of art in the widest sense of the term remains a primary and exclusive laboratory for the development for strategies and codes of aesthetic relationality – also for possible uses outside of art,” (p. 105), could we not in a certain way see this as a completion and fulfillment, albeit in a different form, of the promise once made at the outset of German idealism? Art as a laboratory where new rationalities and relationalities are tested, where a society reflects upon itself, and where a certain group of artists, critics, theorists etc., are allowed to loosen and even wholly reject the strictures of everyday instrumental rationality, although within an institutional framework that both elevates and neutralizes the particular claims made inside the institution? And if this is autonomy perfected, the fully developed institution art, would then in fact the premature analysis of the historical avant-garde proposed by Peter Bürger be applicable precisely to our own present?

The divorce between art and aesthetics recommended by Morten Kyndrup might then in the end turn out to be an unhappy one where

both parts would feel certain dissatisfaction, precisely because it seals both of them in a space where their respective freedom is bought at the expense of a sense of impotency. If there is a kind of “malaise dans l’esthétique,” as Jacques Rancière suggests (paraphrasing the standard French translation of Freud’s *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*), it might consist precisely in this: that aesthetics becomes a *science*, with its own method, but severed from the radical transformative potentials that resulted from the love relationship that it once had with art and the avant-garde. Morten Kyndrup’s short, lucid, and thought-provoking book poses all of these questions, directly or indirectly, and it points to the potentials of the discipline, perhaps not by making us decide between marriage and divorce, but by pointing to the necessity and pleasures to be had from a certain ineluctable promiscuity.

SVEN-OLOV WALLENSTEIN

Notes

1. One of the first anthologies (edited by Hal Foster) that provided a synoptic overview of various post-formalist conceptions of art was significantly enough entitled *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), although in later editions the name was changed to the presumably more commercially viable *Postmodern Culture*.

2. For a discussion of this transition from the arts to Art, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Les muses* (Paris: Galilée, 1994).

3. See Christoph Menke, *Die Souveränität der Kunst: Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991). In this sense, sovereignty stands opposed to autonomy; whereas the latter seals the “fate of art” as separated from the true and the good, i.e. as something removed from practical and theoretical concerns, the former attempts to re-install art as the center of society, and to overcome the split between aesthetics and life. This analysis famously underlies the analysis in Peter Bürger’s classic *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), and it is developed with great precision in Jay Bernstein’s *The Fate of Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

4. For Schaeffer’s account of the speculative theory of art, see his *L’art de l’âge moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

5. *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 191.

6. *Ibid.*, 338.

7. *Ibid.*, 197.

8. “Reconciliation Under Duress” (“Erpresste Versöhnung”) is the telling title of an essay by Adorno, where he criticizes Lukacs’ theory of realism, trans. in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

9. The debate on the meaning of Hegel's thesis on the "Vergangenheitscharakter" of art is of course multifaceted and cannot be summarized here; for recent discussions, see Annemarie Gehrmann-Siefert, *Einführung in Hegel's Ästhetik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005), and Eva Geulen, *Das Ende der Kunst: Lesarten eines Gerüchts nach Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), who in an interesting way connects Hegel's claim to the birth of the museum as the institutional setting for an art that henceforth will be divided between an aesthetic attitude that severs the works from their "world" (basically the Kantian attitude, which Hegel in this sense by no way rejects, instead he proposes a historical genealogy of its possibility) and art history, which no longer offers enjoyment but positive knowledge.

10. For a detailed discussion of the genesis of these concepts in the 19th century, see Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000). I have myself attempted to sketch the Hegelian background to the idea of "tectonics" in "Hegel and the Grounding of Architecture," in *Paradoxes of Appearing: Essays on Art, Architecture and Philosophy*, ed. Michael Asgaard Andersen and Henrik Oxvig (Baden: Lars Müller, 2009).

11. The curious lack of specificity also comes across in certain passages, no doubt intended as comments *en passant*, but which still require reflection, as when Kyndrup exemplifies contemporary artists who supposedly focus only on ideas, and are indifferent to manual skills, with "Jeff Koons or Anselm Kiefer, Beuys or Manzoni" (p.110). The connection between a postmodern dandy as Koons, and someone who to such an extent upholds the traditional ethos of the Painter as Kiefer, seems very tenuous indeed.