
Art and the Enunciative Paradigm

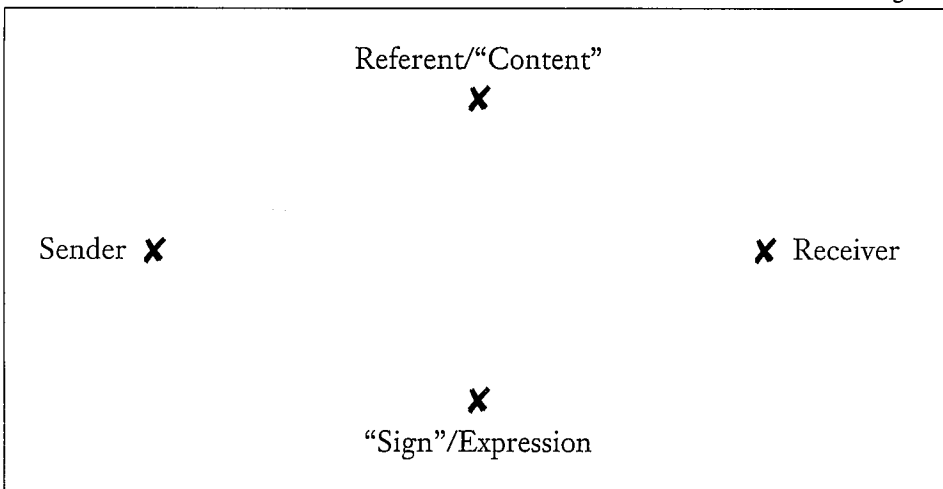
Today's Objectual De-differentiation and Its Impact on Aesthetics

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I.

Enunciation, as we know, is the designation of the very act in which a given enunciated statement is being communicated. [Cf. fig. 1.] We owe the theory of enunciation above all to the linguist Émile Benveniste who, exactly in relation to the enunciation did in fact revise Ferdinand de Saussure at several crucial points.¹ Among other things he introduced the strict distinction between the semiotic and the semantic functions of language respectively. To the semiotic part of language belongs the sign and consequently also the language system's entire reservoir of possible meanings, understood as the content part of the sign or the signified, *le signifié*. But in the real world meanings are being exchanged exclusively through

fig. 1.



1. Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I-II (Paris: Gallimard, 1966–1974). An excerpt has been published in Swedish: *Människan i språket*, *Texter i urval av John Swedenmark* (Stockholm/Stehag: Symposion, 1995).

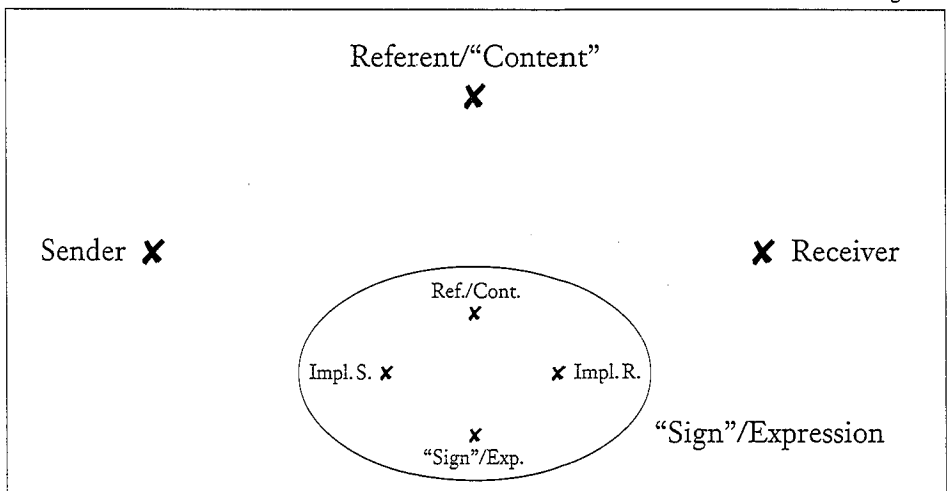
semantic usage of language, i.e. in the shape of enunciations. Unless you are dealing with a concrete communicative act, i.e. an enunciation within a specific context, no exact meaning can be determined and consequently no communication can be carried out.

2.

This applies not only to verbal statements but to all kinds of communication. In artworks this takes place in a specific manner. Whenever an artwork is perceived by somebody, it is evidently part of a concrete communicative act, i.e. an enunciation. If I am regarding a painting in an art museum this situation includes the artist, the museum, the curator of the exhibition, and then of course myself as beholder. But beyond that all artworks contain a sort of frozen enunciation, that which is technically termed enunciated enunciation, *énonciation énoncé*, udsagt udsigelse, *ausgesagte Aussagen*. This means that the positions of the originator and of the beholder are to be found as implicit positions within the work in question. [Cf. fig. 2.]

Sometimes these implicit positions are very visible as for example the position of the narrator in a novel or a film, or as classical music's interplay with the centres of tonality of the implied beholder. But these positions are in principle always to be found, just as we have been taught by *Rezeptionsästhetik* (which by the way is an inadequate designation for a monumental endeavour in aesthetics – “reader-response criticism” is even worse).

fig. 2.



3.

Many of you probably know the art theorist Thierry de Duve. De Duve has worked in Belgium, France, Canada, and the United States, and he has in particular written about Marcel Duchamp, Clement Greenberg, and about the theory and history of the concept of art within Modernity from the point of view of the archeology of knowledge, inspired by equal parts Michel Foucault and Immanuel Kant. In English his general art-theoretical reflections are collected in his book *Kant after Duchamp*, which was published by MIT Press in 1996. The title of that book is a fully intentional ambiguity, “after” is to be construed both temporally and conceptually.²

De Duve thinks that the condition of art after Duchamp should adequately be designated as that of the “enunciative paradigm”. By “after Duchamp” and as he puts it “the permanent scandal of the ready-made” he does not of course have in mind Duchamp’s original works from the 1910s but their realisation in the art world in the middle of the century and since then.

4.

By the term “the enunciative paradigm” de Duve above all intends to characterize the very state of objectual de-differentiation which art has become subject to. Beginning with the ready-made and later on conceptual art, appropriation art, and in a broader sense the development of the installation, we are facing a situation in which it is no longer necessarily possible to decide from the characteristics of objects and artifacts themselves whether they are artworks or something else. Whether when closing my eyes for 4 minutes and 33 seconds I am just giving myself a well-deserved break, or whether I am intensively reexperiencing in my inner life the performance of John Cage’s famous work by that very name which I happened to attend in April 2000 in Paris, is not decidable on the basis of this piece of silence in itself. The same would apply to a confrontation with an example of “The Brillo Box” or for instance with extreme cases of monochrome paintings. Whether the object does belong to art is decided exclusively by enunciation: is it or is it not part of an enunciative act in which it holds the position of an artwork? The Brillo Box *is* not art, it *becomes* art by being placed just there, in the position of the art object through an act of enunciation explicitly taking place

2. To underline this ambiguity, the title of a chapter in one of the French originals was “Kant (d’)après Duchamp”; de Duve, *Au nom de l’art: Pour une archéologie de la modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1989). Cf. Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996).

within the framing conditions of art. This change of the object, it should be noted, is neither ephemeral nor temporary. On the contrary, it is permanent. The nine replicas of Marcel Duchamp's original *Fountain* are today to be found in nine of the world's leading art museums and only there. The urinals in the very same museums, and in the rest of the museums of the world are not looked upon as ones having value as art. The ordinary making use of a urinal, a snow shovel, or a bottle stand has not been turned into an art experience in general. Artworks are singularities, not classes of objects designated by certain appellations such as "chair", "snow shovel" or "canned shit".

5.

This tendency towards an objectual de-differentiation has by some art theorists been construed as a crucial weakening of art's autonomy, i.e. a weakening of its ontological strength as a specific field or area of signification. Indeed, some have, as we know (Hans Belting, Arthur Danto), even gone so far, as to proclaim that we have reached the end of art.³

This may of course be a question of definitions. If art is defined exclusively as that which certain objects, overtly manufactured according to certain rules, have in common essentially or functionally, yes in that case we may perhaps be facing the end of art. But in that sense art will, for that matter, have been ended or at least decisively have begun its endgame already at the entrance to Modernity, at the moment of its birth, so to speak. In all circumstances, the assertion of a weakening of autonomy is clearly inadequate. The same is true of the asserted dilution of art's ontological strength as a framing condition generating meaning. On the contrary, seen semiotically, art is stronger than ever. Actually, it is so strong that it can transform whatever-what into art just by placing it at a certain position within its own machine of enunciation. It can transform stone to bread, up to down, shit to gold, ugly to beautiful – in other words its semiotical strength beats that of everyday language by many lengths.

In that connection it is furthermore important to underline two issues: Firstly that the whatever-what case – which is an option of the so-called enunciative paradigm – in no way excludes artifacts manufactured with traditional, skilled art techniques and having sensory qualities in the shape of narration, representation,

3. See for instance Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

figuration, imagination, fictionality. Secondly, the fact that whatever-what may be art, or more precisely that whatever-what may become art, is decisively distinct from the notion that everything *is* art. The deal is *not* that the infinite noise of the contingency of wornout objects is being injected into art and consequently influencing its essential qualities, turning them banal. What is at stake is the exact opposite movement. It is the distinguished mode of experience, the aura and the specific transcending effects of art which are offered at the disposal of chosen objects. The fact is not that the limits of art have been weakened to such an extent that everything is flowing over them; on the contrary it is the very limits of art which have become so strong that they can transform anything whatsoever that has been placed inside them. And that last point is of vital importance, not least to aesthetics.

6.

Now this change or transformation of the conditions of the engendering of art has of course indeed lead to the production also of bad or uninteresting art. For example, some artists seem to believe that by manically repeating Duchamp's permanent scandal they enlarge or differentiate the signification of this scandal; this of course is no more true than for example the careful repetition by deconstructivist criticism of the very same theoretical points about the dispersion of signification applied to various empirical material. An outstandingly untalented interpretation both artistically and theoretically is signed by a figure like Joseph Kosuth. The assertion about conceptual art as a kind of philosophy after the historical termination of philosophy and consequently the exclusive obligation of art to demonstrate its own conceptuality over and over again, is not of course only that tautology in terms of an analytic assertion which Kosuth himself proudly proclaims it to be. It is also a tedious and aesthetically seen utterly uninteresting pleonasm.

But fortunately, the transformation of the basic conditions of art has brought forward extremely fruitful results as well. The concentration on enunciation and on the artworks' character of being acts did indeed come off also inwardly on the constructions of the works. At any rate, we have experienced, especially during the last fourth of the twentieth century, the engendering, within all artforms, of a series of artworks which pay more and more attention to their own enunciation, i.e. their enunciated constructions of enunciation. This confronts us with a new elaborateness which is in no way compensatory or in any way opposed to the objectuality of traditional art. On the contrary this elaboration of enunciation seems to thrive side by side with traditional aesthetic qualities, indeed seems even to be

calling for those to come back on stage. By three singular cases I shall try to illustrate the extension of this fruitful part of the concentration of attention on enunciation.

7.

My first example is literary and is taken from Milan Kundera's novel *L'Immortalité* from 1990. [Cf. fig. 3.] Milan Kundera's novelistic art in general is a good example of what one might call the thickening

of enunciation in art. In the light of that it is no mere coincidence that Milan Kundera as a historian of the novel – and let there be no doubt about it, as a theorist he falls far short of his talent as a novelist – he invents for himself a history of novels which marginalises the great realistic referential tradition of the 19th century and emphasizes the strongly enunciation-elaborating traditions of the 18th century with among others Sterne and Diderot and further back to for instance Cervantes.⁴

In *L'Immortalité* it is the epistemological order within the very construction of access into the novel which is being frustrated by enunciational devices. Never mind that Goethe and Hemingway, both dead, are able to discuss immortality, commented on vividly by the narrator. That is just fantastic realism. But in this little scene the female protagonist of the novel, Agnès, is being narrated – and at the same time the author of the novel, who is here actually narrating himself, is visiting a swimming pool and subsequently having dinner with another one of the protagonists of the novel, and all the while he is commenting on the termination of the very novel of which this scene is a part. As if this was not enough, there is in this scene brought forth a temporal linking between these two levels, and that

4

L'après-midi était déjà fort avancé lorsqu'elle revint à sa voiture. Au moment précis où elle glissait la clef dans la serrure, le professeur Avenarius, en slip de bain, s'approcha du petit bassin où je l'attendais dans l'eau chaude, fouetté par les violents remous qui jaillissaient des parois immergées.

C'est ainsi que les événements se synchronisent. Chaque fois qu'une chose se passe à l'endroit Z, une autre se produit aussi aux endroits A, B, C, D, E. « Et au moment précis où... » est une des formules magiques que l'on trouve dans tous les romans, une formule qui nous ensorcelle à la lecture des *Trois Mousquetaires*, le roman préféré du professeur Avenarius, auquel je dis en guise de salut : « En ce moment précis, tandis que tu entres dans le bassin, l'héroïne de mon roman a enfin tourné la clef de contact et prend la route de Paris.

— Merveilleuse coïncidence, dit le professeur Avenarius avec une visible satisfaction, et il se plonge dans l'eau.

fig. 3.

4. Milan Kundera, *L'Immortalité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 271. As concerns Kundera's history of novels see his *Les Testaments trahis: Essai* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

implies a putting at the same footing ontologically different worlds: that world which is being narrated and this world from which the narrating comes. This makes time, space, and the fictional hierarchy implode into a sort of epistemological anacoluthon. And this gives enunciation a special and crucial position within the total meaning of the novel. By the way, this construction ultimately prevents a filmatization of the novel, which is also one of the declared intents of its (fictive) author. This obstruction in turn is not, we may argue, too strange thinking about Kundera's former novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as respectively a novel and a film. But that is a different story.⁵

8.

My second example is the *sjuzet/fabula* construction within Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*. [Cf. fig. 4.] Here the ordinary course of time at the level of the fabula and at that of the ordinary world is broken up and remounted without any kind of mediation or comment, in the *sjuzet* of the movie.⁶ As a result, the movie at the level of the narrated fiction completely changes the character of its meaning, changes its mode of meaning. The narrative desire for the "result" of the fabula is substituted by an intradiscursive desire for filling in its thus artificially mounted lacunas. This moves the main attention over to the position of the enunciator of the film and endows the outer action of the film, from scenes of violence over gang fights to fast life stories and fortitious but unbelievably gruesome accidents, endows all this with some comic-opera character – of course helped by a number of other constructional elements in the movie which it will take us too far to comment on here on this occasion.⁷

9.

My third example is just an ordinary snapshot of a man whose hat and papers are blown away by a gust of wind. [Cf. fig. 5.] Or is it a snapshot? No, not quite. If you, like I did, meet this "snapshot" blown up into a cibachrome in the size of

5. Philip Kaufman's 1988 movie on Kundera's novel was not necessarily that bad. Still, Central-European melancholy staged as Hollywood mainstream is a pretty strange mixture.

6. The *sjuzet/fabula* distinction has become commonplace in contemporary narratology; it stems from Russian formalism. See for instance Victor Ehrlich, *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 240 ff.

7. I have given a more thorough analysis of *Pulp Fiction* in my 1998 book *Riften og sløret: Essays over kunstens betingelser* (Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1998) with a specific focus on the film's play with levels of representation (pp. 150–174).

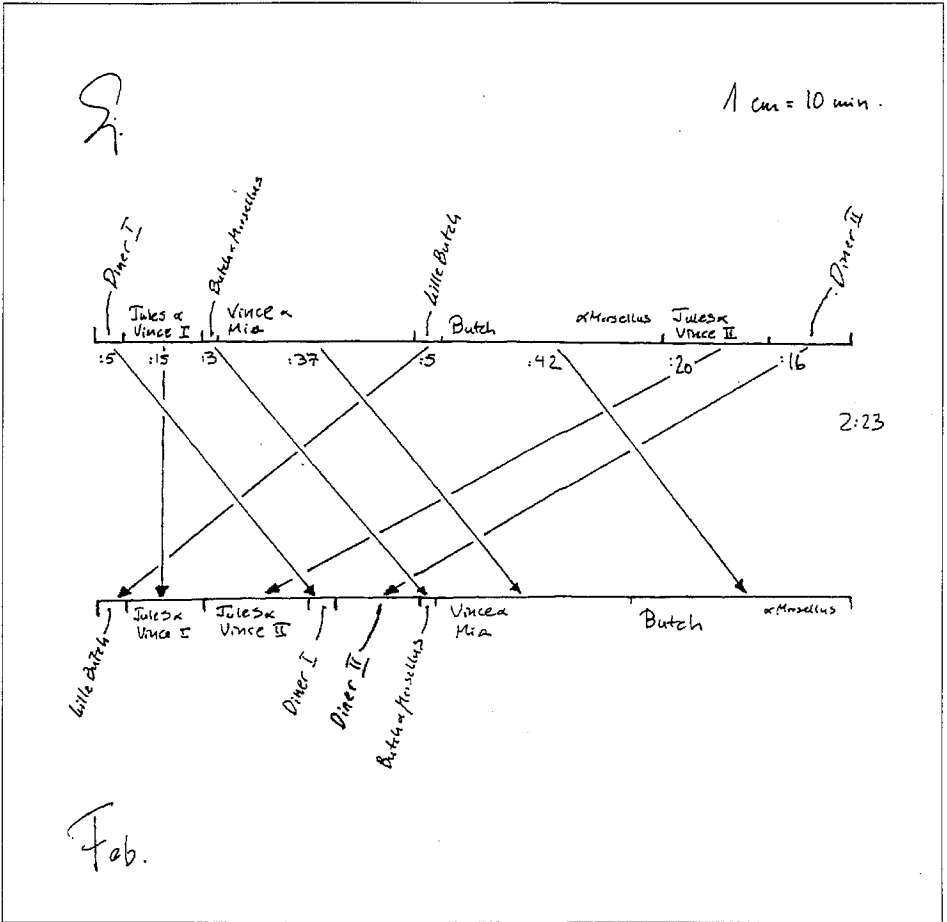
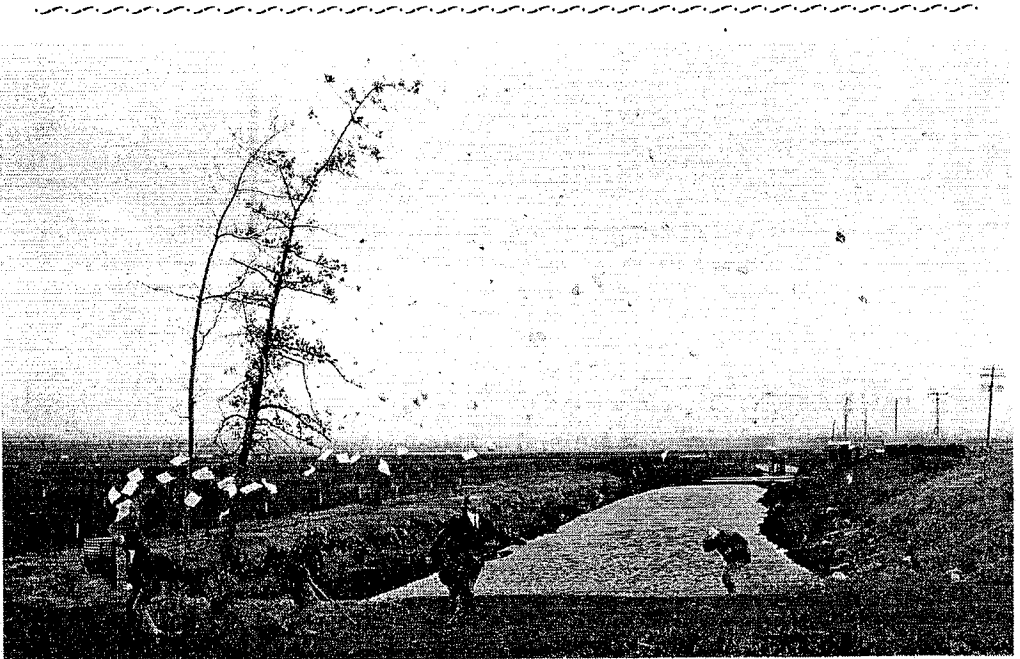


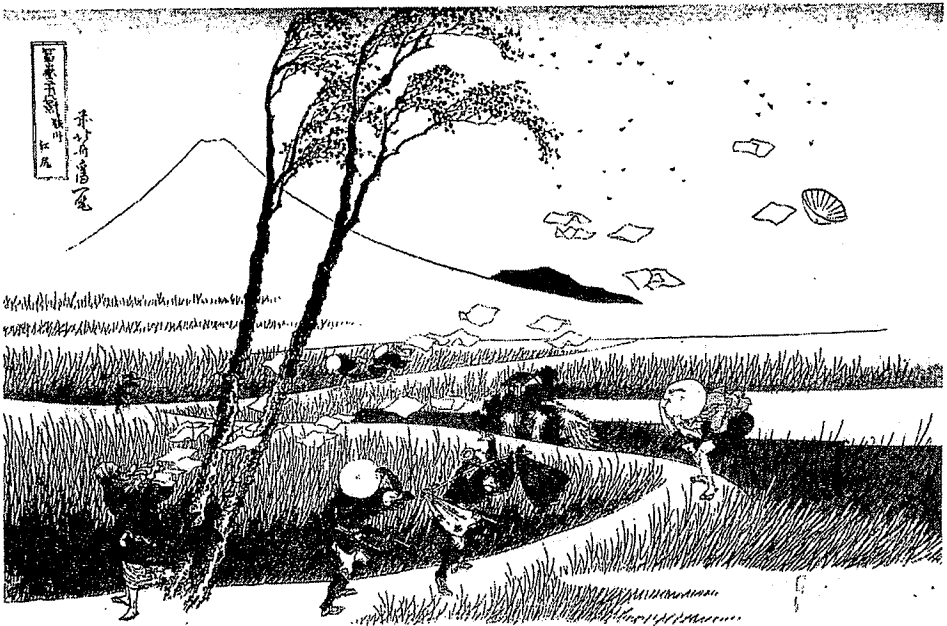
fig. 4.

229 by 377 cms at the Whitney museum in New York in 1995, it is not just a snapshot. It is an artwork signed by the Canadian Jeff Wall whose works are prominently represented at all the important art museums in the world. This one belongs to Tate Gallery in London. The title of this work is *A Sudden Gust of Wind* and in parenthesis *After Hokusai*. Even if you did not know in advance that Jeff Wall's snapshots are never snapshots, on the contrary they are carefully engendered compositions, maybe and maybe not postphotographically digitally manipulated – even in that condition the small parenthesis of the title would tell you just the same thing: Hokusai, as you know, is a Japanese painter from the 19th century, and as a matter of fact he has a small picture containing a parallel motive, called “A high wind in Yeigiri”.



Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai), Joff Wall 1993.

fig. 5.



57. A high wind in Yeigiri. Same set as last.

fig. 6.

So Wall's picture is not a snapshot, this is an arranged photograph. [Cf. fig. 6.] Still at the same time it is loaded with the so-called "white mythology" of photography with its claim to be the historical genre of true representation of reality. The man and the wind are there, the gruesome clash between culture/nature of the picture in the disgusting interzone between country and city is there, or is it? If so, how and why is it there? So, the elaboration of this picture is there above all for us in terms of enunciation, in terms of something which we are told by its implied sender. It is overtly a signifying act, before it is a representation of any kind. Also here the result is disturbing and as an act of signification utterly complex.

10.

These three examples may be randomly chosen from the shelves of contemporary artworks with which I have been working lately. Evidently they are not in an objective sense representatives of types and directions of the present enunciational elaboration. Still, however, all three of them make it obvious that their intrinsic constructional focusing on their own enunciation has so far-reaching consequences that in case one would ignore or not give sufficient priority to this fact by analysing these artworks, one would get completely inadequate results. Works like these must necessarily be interpreted as acts, in terms of their signification, so to speak. Their meaning is most often far more complex than what is literally uttered and thus also equally complicated to analyse. "The owls are not what they seem to be", to use David Lynch's double irony; the elaborated system of parables transforms this pictorial stasis into something that happens, makes it take place in several worlds, several spaces, several times, at the same time.

11.

Does this have consequences to aesthetics? A question like that could not be answered briefly by yes or no. Firstly, as we know, there is no general consensus about the object field and extension of aesthetics as a discipline. To some, aesthetics is philosophy of art, *schlicht und einfach*, and at the other end of the line there are concepts of aesthetics in which art does not even hold any privileged position as part of the objectual area. Anyhow, the greater the part of this objectual area held by art is, the greater may be the effect of the changes within art on aesthetics as a discipline.

Still, whether you work with broad or narrow conceptions of aesthetics, it is my main assertion that a displacement of the type which I have dealt with here, in an enunciative direction has *no* vital consequences to the discipline as such, that

is in terms of its status or limits. This is above all due to the fact that art's autonomy, and consequently the framing condition both conceptually and perceptually of artworks, this autonomy has in no sense been weakened as part of art perception, rather the contrary. Although the emphasis of enunciation does call for changed beholders' competences in order to produce adequate meaning, the aesthetic mode of reception in relation to artworks is basically intact: Individual judgement of taste as mode of *Aneignung*, that is the uncoupling of the purposive rationality of the surrounding reality, and that is the "subjective universality" of the experience itself. If we take a look at the broader conception of the discipline of aesthetics, we will meet, as shown by the culture analysts, above all what is called an aesthetification of everyday life. This implies a broadening out of these specific mechanisms of perception. But neither a weakening nor a banalisation of them.

12.

It is, for that matter, also evident that the transformation towards enunciation within artwork production and reception has in no way happened overnight. The whole complex of modernist and avantgarde movements of the 20th century may in a certain sense – now at this point – be interpreted as early states of or at least as necessary preconditions to this development. And also within philosophy of art of almost any observance whatsoever, the act, the coming-into-being, has been playing an increasingly important role. From Martin Heidegger to Gilles Deleuze, from Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno to *Rezeptionsästhetik* in its development ever since Czech structuralism over Roman Ingarden to Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and the semiotic analyses of art reception in Umberto Eco.

All this points to the fact that it may be not too adequate to use the term "paradigm" about the shift. Paradigm leaves the impression of something absolute, at any rate if acknowledged in the ordinary sense of Kuhn. A milder and perhaps more adequate conceptualisation might take the direction of characterizing the conditions of formation of meaning within art. So it might be better to talk about an enunciative condition or an enunciative state of things, *la condition énonciative*.

13.

Anyhow, one should maintain the fact that enunciation – when we are dealing with artworks the enunciated enunciation – is not some invention or appendix which has now been brought to or added to the artworks. Enunciation nobody can get rid of, it has always been there and in that sense artworks have always been acts of signification – also, and, for that matter, exclusively. It is just that we have lived

through periods of conventions about art which for example have been much more interested in the artist as genius or in a certain representational penetration in terms of truths – and within these conventions enunciation has tendentially been subject to dissimulation, it has been hidden both perceptually and in terms of artificial mode of construction. This is a long story which is connected with the so-called “depth model” of Modernity and its turning the expression side as a whole into a secondary position as sign for a content.⁸ But in fact we are dealing rather with a change of emphasis than with a real novum. Enunciation has always been there and the present emphasis on enunciation makes a maintaining of the dissimulation of enunciation in former artworks difficult too. But this is a problem for history’s dilemma between the immanent historicity of art and historicism’s thrive for archeological correctness.

14.

Just a few more words about the transformations at the ontological level. It is true that from the point of view of the artworks art’s ontology seems weaker because everything becomes more transitory, the inclusion of objects, the ascription of aesthetic value. And maybe in general – when we are dealing with these enunciatively complex and elaborate works – the uncertainty as to precisely *where* the aesthetic status should be ascribed in artworks so distinctively act-like might be construed as weakness. But as mentioned it is worth noticing that concurrently with this weakening seen from the inside (or more correctly: as the absolute precondition to this weakening), the autonomy as semiotically active framing condition has become correspondingly stronger, i.e. seen from the point of view of the overall system. This implies that to aesthetics art as a framing device can no longer be ignored or even understated. But that has already been known for long to major parts of aesthetics. And once again: in case aesthetics acts accordingly, these transformations are hardly decisive, and definitely not threatening.

15.

In conclusion also a brief remark on epistemology – above all connected with the fact that an adequate critique of vulgar postmodernist and deconstructivist positions for leading into agnostic chaos and barbarity has indeed made someone believe that any small subscription to parabolic metastasation will lead to the same

8. The concept of the “depth model” we owe to Fredrick Jameson. See his *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1993).

result just like that. This of course is sheer nonsense. In principle, nothing prevents the possibility of “stable” cognition also about overtly unstable structures. An act of signification is in its mode of existence no more and no less objective than a so-called “clean object”. Complex enunciative constructions, including such constructions which perform epistemological breakdowns in order to demonstrate the constructional dependence of any epistemology, do not of course automatically entail similar breakdowns as far as the recognition of themselves is concerned. Still inferences like these, unfortunately, are not rare.

16.

So in conclusion: The extent, validity, and weight of aesthetics as a discipline is by no means threatened by a paradigm or condition of enunciation like that, or by any changing role of the enunciation towards being a dominant framing condition for production and reception of art. Just as this does not imply the end of art, it does not imply the end of aesthetics either. What there might, on the other hand, be reason for aiming at is an updating of the analytical instruments at our disposal. Just like, for instance, a snow shovel is not too helpful for the purpose of eating soup, there is nothing strange about the fact that complexification of artwork constructions calls for a refinement and extension of the repertoire of instruments for conceiving them. Just as many of the old masters in the history of aesthetics might hardly in their wildest dreams have been able to imagine the character of many of the constructions and events which we today name and perceive as artworks – imagine Im. Kant and Manzoni’s canned shit – it is also natural that systematisations and categorisations which were empirically based on the art of another time, should be corrected and supplemented. This, however, has nothing to do with any winding up or ruin of aesthetics and aesthetic analysis. This is just a necessary investment which does indeed, I believe, rather take the shape of a promise of its future.