Art Beyond Aesthetics

Or, The Consequences of Promiscuity

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In this paper I shall discuss some of the questions the organizers of this conference raised in their invitation for they touch upon issues of crucial importance for aesthetics. Let me point out two of these to which I shall primarily relate: (1) In the past, the organizers note in their conference announcement, conceptualising about art has not only been deeply influenced by art, contemporary art included, but has also been able to intervene in the forming of art. (2) "Aesthetics today largely reflects on art and the arts in an apparently ahistorical manner. Yet is it possible to ignore differences between times and cultures and reflect on art generally?"

Both issues would of course require extensive and complex comparative analyses, so what I shall do is to offer just a few comments and sketch a few possible and interrelated answers, by relying mainly on a few contemporary authors from the Anglo-American, French and German "cultural empires" which, although certainly not being the only relevant ones, may offer a sufficiently representative picture of some tendencies in contemporary aesthetics—in spite of the fact that some of these authors don't use the term "aesthetics" or understand it in a different sense than I do here, where I use it as a synonym for "philosophy of art". Although the designation of aesthetics as philosophy of art causes some additional problems (or pushes them onto another level), I find it, on the one hand, sufficiently clear (for it omits the issue of natural beauty, etc.) and, on the other, sufficiently devoid of historical and ideological charge which have caused aesthetics to be either praised as an isolated, academic and purely theoretical discipline (in both senses of the word) or be discarded altogether—and for exactly the same reasons, that is, for avoiding the issues raised by radical and avant-garde art, ideas and philosophies or, at least, for avoiding them until they became thoroughly assimilated and lost their subversive power.

I.

It may be safe to claim that an aesthetician finds himself or herself today in a situation where he or she feels overwhelmed by the ongoing events in philosophy, art and culture. Moreover, if only a few decades ago an aesthetician or a philosopher could well live within and refer almost exclusively to his own cultural and linguistic environment, this is no longer the case.

Let me mention an example of this latter change: Almost thirty years ago, in 1972, a British reviewer of Jean-François Lyotard's book *Discours, figure* from 1971 noted in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* that, "very little but the general position [of the author] is clear enough to be argued with."[1] At that time the borders between the cultural empires—and hence the philosophical ones—were obviously sufficiently firm to prevent any influence of the said work in the Anglo-American cultural empire. What was true about views on such works or of Hegelian philosophy in the U.K., was true of analytical philosophy on the Continent. Less than two decades after this review the very same work of Lyotard received an unprecedented response among Anglo-American authors: Geoffrey Bennigton, Peter Dews, Bill Readings, Scott Lash, Andrew Benjamin and Rodolphe Gasché, among others, have highly praised the ideas in this work, some even emulating its discourse. This all goes to show how much the previous high and perhaps rigid borders between different philosophical traditions have diminished in recent years. (Or, some may say, goes to show how criteria have been swept away.) It is such a plethora of thus far foreign ideas that adds to the apparent confusion concerning what is and what is not philosophy or aesthetics—as well as concerning what is relevant to them and what is not.

A number of authors—W.J.T. Mitchell, Richard Rorty and Martin Jay, to mention but a few—have shown not only how averse contemporary philosophy is to the "visual turn", but how the "linguistic turn" in philosophy may have arisen exactly as a consequence of the predominance of ocularcentrism. It is understandable that among philosophers and aestheticians much of what is usually designated as mass and popular culture is treated as consumer culture and hence disregarded as a proper object for a theoretical discussion. Most twentieth century philosophers not only sided with extravagant and avant-garde art, but, moreover, made explicit value judgments and offered reasons for them. Today it is instead

1. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, "Review of Discours, figure", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 12:1 (Winter 1972), 95.

fairly common to avoid issues of value judgments in art and to limit oneself to descriptive terms, explicitly or implicitly accepting as a fact value judgments offered by those whom Arthur Danto aptly calls "experts". Today only very few authors evaluate or even proclaim some or much of the so-called contemporary visual arts "non-art", this reproach being mostly directed towards most or some of contemporary conceptual and neo-conceptual art. One of the reasons why this is so difficult to do I have already mentioned: it lies also in the fact that for two centuries philosophers tended to side with new ideas and modes of thinking and creating, as well as with unrecognised, oppositional, non-traditionalist, bohemian, and anti-market oriented art. Contemporary (mostly European) conceptual art seems to fall under the same category of anti-establishment art for it appears not to be a part of affirmative or consumer culture and is, furthermore, seen as a direct descendant of avant-garde and neo–avant-garde art supported by figures as different as Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg and Lyotard and exemplified by artists as different as Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys.

Some authors such as Stefan Morawski and Paul Crowther have criticized the contemporary version of such art, the latter attempting to draw a dividing line within the conceptual art itself, distinguishing between what he calls "at best a set of exercises in applied aesthetics,"[2] and genuine art which Crowther finds "aesthetically interesting."[3] In this latter less frequent case it appears as if aesthetics or philosophy seems to influence the artistic domain and to create some semblance of hierarchical and hence normative order and distinction where apparently very little of it exists any longer. Such critical authors are not numerous, they come from different traditions and possess very few other shared characteristics. But a critical position is hardly possible without criticism. The French aesthetician Gérard Genette thus defends the view that aesthetics should be a philosophy of criticism,[4] while Hal Foster, no doubt a very different author, asks himself,

> What *is* the place of criticism in a visual culture that is ever more *administered*—from an art world dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever? [...] Of course this very situation makes the old services of criticism ever more urgent.

2. Paul Crowther, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 186.

3. Ibid., 183.

4. Gérard Genette, *La Relation esthétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 10.

He concludes by stating his doubt "if any artist, critic, theorist, or historian can ever escape value judgments."[5]

Nonetheless, such views are uncommon. What hinders such interventions are historical reasons that I mentioned earlier. Today only the most conservative critic will dare criticize an exhibition or a book, play or author for moral or ideological reasons, aesthetic reasons being popular no more—the only reasons generally accepted as a proper cause for reproof being denigration of religion and race. Maybe a further cause for this situation is the burden of repression in the previous century which is apparently so heavy that a strong disapproval or rejection on any other basis but the two mentioned is almost unthinkable. Or, equally if not more true, maybe works appear and exist in so many different frameworks that it appears almost impossible to apply common criteria to them. Thirdly, art today may simply be different from that of the past or may play a lesser role. And—a general observation—it may be that the described situation is mainly limited to Europe.

If in modernism and prior to it, art was divided into art and non-art, with the former being then divided into mediocre and superb, today "all art is equally and indifferently art" (Danto); or, in the words of Gérard Genette, "An artwork requests a (positive) appreciation and it is this request which defines it as such, and not appreciation as 'aesthetically correct' which it obtains or not."[6] An early warning concerning such a shift in our appreciation of art was expressed in 1962 when Henri Lefebvre in his *Introduction to Modernity* noted that art is less and less frequently being viewed as "beautiful" but is characterized instead by the normatively neutral adjective "interesting". A recent critical note related mainly to contemporary conceptual art, was put forth by Crowther: "Once the Duchamp Readymade is allowed as art, literally, everything else can be allowed as art."[7] In Crowther's view the consequences of this opening of the gates of art to conceptual art are enormous: once "in principle, any object can be counted as art, then the possibility of large-scale innovation—the development of new paradigms—is heavily restricted."[8]

Is what is true of visual or fine arts also true of literature, music, architecture and so on? Etienne Souriau quoted Victor Hugo saying "Le vent c'est tous les

5. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), xv and 226.

6. Genette, *Relation esthétique*, 272.

7. Crowther, *Language of Twentieth-Century Art*, 177.

8. Ibid., 215.

vents,"[9] "The wind is all the winds," implying with this metaphor that various art forms form a whole. Nonetheless, at least some of the issues of the visual arts appear limited to them only: hence no great and divisive contemporary dilemmas similar to those associated with conceptual art have arisen in poetry or in theatre; architecture had no Marcel Duchamp whose influence would continue for almost a century. Also, other art forms weren't subjected to such an influence of technical innovations, commercialization and instantaneous globalisation, all of which have caused the visual arts to be often indissociably linked to global popular culture, on the one hand, and to merge with a series of other forms of artistic expression, on the other. Finally the very term, "visual arts", witnesses to the dilemmas associated with this artistic and cultural realm.

II.

In the past, the organizers note, conceptualising about art has not only been deeply influenced by art, contemporary art included, but has also been able to intervene in the forming of art.

There is no doubt about the truth of this statement when referring to past art: not only in antiquity, the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, but also in Classicism, Romanticism and Realism, ideas in philosophy, philosophy of art included, had direct consequences for art and, equally often, vice versa. Similarly, philosophical, social and historical ideas behind the October Revolution had a direct impact on the Russian avant-garde. Russian formalists such as Victor Shklovski, Boris Eichenbaum or Roman Jakobson influenced Russian futurists such as Victor Khlebnikov and offered theoretical arguments for their poetic inventions. The theory of *Einfühlung* or empathy as developed by Theodor Lipps and later by Wilhelm Worringer directly influenced expressionism, especially Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky.[10] Theodor Adorno was a friend of Arnold Schönberg and wrote about atonal music, comparing it to modernist painting. His *Philosophy of Modern Music* is one of the rare works by a philosopher devoted to music, and many musicologists have a high regard for it; in many parts of Europe it is seen as one of the few relevant classical philosophical books on modern music. French existentialist philosophers not only influenced fiction writers and playwrights but were themselves sometimes—as in the case of Jean-Paul Sartre—appreciated and highly regarded

9. Etienne Souriau, *La Correspondence des arts* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), 7.

10. Cf. Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 9.

as writers and playwrights. The same is true of Maurice Merleau-Ponty who influenced artists as different as Alberto Giacometti and Richard Serra. Even later, in the late sixties and early seventies, French writers around the review *Tèl Quel* not only promoted Isidore Ducasse—the Count de Lautréamont—and similar authors, but also their own circle of modestly successful writers, such as Philippe Sollers or Marcelin Pleynet. Similar cases exist in architecture, with the most recent global example being deconstruction. In the late eighties it led to cooperation between the art of building and the love of wisdom, as in the architectural project of Parc de La Vilette near Paris which brought together the architect Bernard Tschumi and the philosopher Jacques Derrida. In the case of philosophy the situation was similar to that of sciences and scientific discoveries and ideas that were transposed into art. Nonetheless, it still remains an interesting question as to what extent and in which ways artists understood, transformed and applied scientific and philosophical ideas and vice versa.

Numerous other cases of the recent intertwining of philosophy or philosophy of art and artistic practice could be offered which don't seem to support the statement about the meagre influence of philosophy on artistic practice. Or, more to the point, this statement is hardly true of continental philosophy. What we may find problematic is thus not so much a lack of cases of mutual influence and interdependency but two other issues which, in my view, are responsible for the impression that aesthetics and philosophy no longer influence art and which may also throw a different light on some of the statements I have made thus far concerning value judgments and their relevance in relation to contemporary art. They both appertain not so much to aesthetics or philosophy but primarily to contemporary art proper.

The first issue is related to the impression that today we no longer find much of the so-called "great art" being created. While we may all agree that Sophocles, Bosch, Tintoretto, Shakespeare, Mozart or Gaudi have created great art, many seem to think that nothing of that stature is created today. The second issue is related to the impression that the designation "art" is being used too indiscriminately. Combined with the frequency of such designations it makes us question the import of the notion of art altogether. It is like using the word "food" for everything from a hamburger and steak to grass, acorn and tree-bark. Although calling all these items "food" is not incorrect, it doesn't really tell us much about their culinary or nutritional value.

May we compare food and other trivial activities and artifacts to art? If we are concerned with aesthetics as philosophy of art we cannot be but sceptical about

such a comparison. Nonetheless, the consequences of views held or suggested by some contemporary philosophers and aestheticians are sometimes not dissimilar to such an interpretation of the notion of art. This was highlighted by Wolfgang Welsch in his lengthy paper, presented in Ljubljana during the XIVth International Congress for Aesthetics in 1998, where he seriously compared art to sport. In his view sport "fulfils the function of art for a broader audience no longer reached by art."[11] A related observation is implied by Gérard Genette when he notes in passing that Heidegger and Adorno have both overvalued the role of art.[12] Viewed from our present perspective the status the former assigned to poetry really may appear unusual, as may the wager of the latter on avant-garde art which alone counters the complete dominance of society by market forces. Isn't this—and, equally or more importantly, wasn't this in their own time—more a kind of wishful thinking far removed from any cultural reality than a statement of fact? The answer is negative, for although avant-garde art didn't fulfil the historic role it aspired to according to its artists, theorists, philosophers and ideologues, it nonetheless had tangible effects in artistic practice and in the social and aesthetic evaluation of such art.

A good example of the social failure of the avant-garde ideas is modernist functionalist architecture which was intended for workers but ended being inhabited, as Tom Wolfe pointed out years ago, by the rich bourgeois who alone could afford its price. In spite of its failure to carry out a genuine social mission, in the eyes of its beholders, visitors, and inhabitants, it remains great art. It could even be claimed that the failure to carry out its social mission may have substantially added to its artistic value for this allowed it to avoid compromises and sliding into ideology and remain on the level of a semantically open idea.

What also caused Heidegger and Adorno to assign such an outstanding place to art within their philosophy was a totalising philosophical view. If we want to grant art (or some other human activity) a privileged position, this has to be carried out from within a broader philosophical framework. A common denominator of all recent philosophies which assigned to art a special place (and, as previously mentioned, directly or indirectly influenced artists, critics and other members of various artworlds), was the belief that art was something very special. One of the basic, now often forgotten tenets of anthropological Marxism as well as of

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11. Cf. Wolfgang Welsch, "Sport—Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?", *Filozofski vestnik (XIV ICA – Proceedings, Part I)*, ed. Aleš Erjavec, xx:2 (1999), 235.

12. Genette, *Relation esthétique*, 11.

existential phenomenology was the idea that to be creative is the highest form of self-fulfilment. We find this idea in Marx's early writings, in Heidegger's praise of Hölderlin, or in Merleau-Ponty for whom painting plays the role equal to that of poetry in Heidegger. Instead of looking for the age of authenticity in pre-Socratic Greece, Merleau-Ponty finds it in one's own childhood instead—in the last two centuries a recurrent metaphor for the creative approach of an artist: to look at the world with the eyes of a child.

It is mainly within such a framework that philosophy and aesthetics have attained an influential position in relation to art. What united the two was an understanding that an artwork is a creation of the human being who himself or herself is striving to make his or her life or its segments similar to a work of art by turning living into an art of living. It is the idea of *Bildung* as developed by Schiller and recently by Michel Foucault that brings the two together. As Etienne Souriau wrote in 1947: "Don't believe that you yourself could exist without art—without making from yourself an artwork."[13] Not only the anthropological, but also the political consequences of such a statement are obvious.

The issue of the intervention of aesthetics in the forming of art thus boils down to the observation that at least in the recent past intervention occurred not within the realm of aesthetics proper, but in totalising philosophies or, the second case, in realms adjacent or partly intertwined with aesthetics and philosophy, such as different "artists' theories" as discussed by Heinz Paetzold, or, as Danto claims, manifestos which brought philosophy into art,[14] as well as what we may call, for lack of a better term, "theories of art": deconstruction, for example. Pure academic aesthetics—be it that of Nicolai Hartmann or even Etienne Souriau, for instance—never had a visible influence on artists or critics. It was too dry, too systematic and too orderly. It was the poetic and unsystematic theories and philosophers like Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson and Walter Benjamin who were often directly influential instead. It appears that the mutual enrichment of theory and art or between individual disciplines of the humanities usually occurs via misunderstanding and via what Jean Baudrillard called "seduction": interesting things happen not when people understand each other, but when they are seduced.

13. Souriau, *Correspondence des arts*, 299.

14. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 30.

III.

Much of today's continental philosophy usually avoids the issue of totalisation, preferring instead partial views (usually designated by the term "critical theory") or deconstruction—as conceptualized by Derrida on the basis of Heidegger's notion of "Destruktion". Paul Valéry designated aesthetics as a "wing in the palace inhabited by philosophy" and even today aesthetics essentially shares the destiny of philosophy. In his influential *Critique of Cynical Reason* from 1983 Peter Sloterdijk began the preface with the following words:

> Since a century ago philosophy is dying and cannot achieve its demise for it hasn't fulfilled its aim. Its farewell is therefore sadly prolonged. [...] Sensing its end to be near, it would like to become honest and reveal its last secret. And it confesses: its grand themes were lame excuses, half-truths. Its vain and beautiful big words—God, Universe, Theory, Practice, Subject, Body, Mind, Meaning, Nothingness—this wasn't it. These are nouns for young people, marginals, clerks, sociologists. [...] There is no longer a knowledge of which one could be a friend *(philos)*.[15]

A related and more far-reaching conclusion was drawn by Lyotard: there can be no general theory of small narratives because there is no master narrative on which it could base its authority.[16] The philosophical discourse of Heidegger or Adorno still appertains to the era of master narratives, an instance of which may be art. So long as art was a representation (the signified, the signifier and the referent were linked together to form a sign), it was possible to retain the master narratives. One of the first demands of the theory which began to emerge in the late sixties (and became known in the Anglo-American world as "poststructuralism") was to eliminate the designation of literature—or, as it was then called, "writing"—as representation: "In its productive functioning writing is not representation,"[17] wrote the *Tel Quel* group in October 1968 in a volume which brought together authors such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva. In the view of one of the contributors to the volume, Philippe Sollers, who supported his theory with that of Derrida, the need for a "transcendental signi-

15. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique de la raison cynique* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1987), 7.

16. Cf. David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1989), 158.

17. Tel Quel, *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 9.

fied had to exist so that the difference between the signified and the signifier would be absolute and insurmountable."[18] This line of reasoning brings us into the vicinity of Fredric Jameson's historical division of art based on the relation between the referent, the signifier and the signified and there is probably a good reason to see in poststructuralism of the late sixties the theoretic birthplace of features of what was later to be called postmodern culture.

Another facet of this changed role for philosophy was expressed a few years after Sloterdijk by Zygmunt Bauman: philosophers and intellectuals in general have ceased being legislators and have become interpreters; they don't implement norms and evaluate, they only analyse, explain and disseminate knowledge. As a prime example of such interpretative practice Bauman mentioned the institutional theory of art. In his words,

> the institutional theory of art (as an institutional theory of any other value domain) sounds the death knell to the philosopher's dream of control. What has been put in the place of the absolute principles that only they had access to and only they were able to operate, is this evasive, unwieldy, unpredictable entity of "consensus".[19]

It is Arthur Danto's writings and his use of the notion of the artworld and the subsequent introduction of the institutional theory of art which is increasingly often the central reference point in contemporary discussions of visual arts. As Joseph Margolis notes in his latest book, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?*, "Danto is the most important philosophical theorist of the history of the arts (of painting in particular) practicing at the moment."[20] What makes Danto's writings so influential? This is certainly partly due to the fact that he is an art critic. Also, his interpretation of the institutional theory ascribed to George Dickie and to him has been influential, although the former explicitly dissociates himself from Danto's notion of the Institutional Theory of Art, "according to which what makes something art and something else not is something the Artworld—i.e. the 'experts'—prescribes."[21] Although Danto has formulated his stance on the same is-

18. Philippe Sollers, "Le Réflexe de réduction", in Tel Quel, *Théorie d'ensemble*, 397.

19. Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 139.

20. Joseph Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), 18.

21. I am referring to the essay by George Dickie, "A Tale of Two Artworlds", *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 73–78. The quote is on p. 73.

sue in different ways, and more importantly, has written on other issues related to contemporary art, it is this basic idea which underlies most of his more recent views and positions. There is no doubt that this theory aptly describes the current situation in the visual arts. As I will show, many of Danto's views resemble those of Luc Ferry, only that Danto reaches much more positive conclusions than the latter.

Today the experts are no longer critics: what they explicitly do is describe, not evaluate. The beginnings of this—highlighted also by Bauman—are aptly described by Michael Fried who in 1998 writes about his critical writings from the sixties and seventies:

> I remember feeling as early as the late 1960s, and with increasing force during the 1970s and after, that what might be called evaluative art criticism no longer mattered as it previously had. No longer was it read with the same interest, no longer could the critic imagine that his or her words might intervene in the contemporary situation in the way in which, perhaps delusively, I had sometimes imagined my words intervening in it, no longer were there critical reputations to be made by distinguishing the best art of one's time from the rest or analysing that art with respect to its treatment of issues that were, in a strong sense of the word, "inescapable".[22]

In the past the critics were the experts. Today it is mostly the curators who have at their disposal government owned galleries that are the experts. It is they who implicitly and explicitly prescribe and do this by selecting someone's work for exhibition and ignoring someone else's, without having to rely on more than intuition built upon acquired practice. If in the past the gallery owner and the artist decided where to hang which painting, it is today frequently the curators who suggest (or even prescribe) the artists what to make or, even more frequently and especially in the case of large galleries, select different artists in such a way that the final result is just as much their creation as that of the artists.

Such projects are easier to carry out with works which have either severed or severely weakened the link between their referent, the signified and the signifier, in other words, works in which no intent to function as a representation is perceptible. It is such works which have caused aestheticians to repeatedly raise the issue "but is it art?" How do we know whether an object or some phenomenon is

22. Michael Fried, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism", *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 15.

a naturally or simply spontaneously occurring entity or whether there was some human (if not outright subjective) intent invested in it?

Most often it is the intention which is viewed as crucial. Thus Margolis speaks of artworks as possessing "intentional properties",[23] as does Genette who raises the question of when something is received as an artwork. His answer is in part: "When an aesthetic intention is attributed to it."[24] But isn't such a definition deficient or, at least, fails to note an essential issue which is that today its purpose may not be primarily to distinguish an art work from something created by nature, but an art work from an ordinary object with *no* aesthetic intentions? Such a definition furthermore also demonstrates an ignorance of the nowadays often discarded notion of creativity: "We make things," notes René Passeron, "for the pleasure of constructing and not only to communicate."[25] This shows that the import the notion of intention that we find in Margolis or Genette, probably arises from the current unavoidable omnipresence of conceptual works. If this is the case such a definition misses two important points which both relate mainly to traditional art. The first is that art works communicate and hence allow for what Crowther calls "reciprocity".[26] The second is that often works that are subsequently recognized as works of art may easily be made without prior intention of the kind Margolis and Genette speak—except, of course, if we consider any play to be an intentional activity. This relates to Kant's notion of genius. It may furthermore be worth noting that today, with conceptual art, traditional art finds itself in an ambiguous situation similar to that in which, in the past, nature existed in relation to art, for again their is a need to distinguish between two related but ostensibly different phenomena. And the last observation: conceptual works are not so much works as concepts, ideas and intentions. As Foster aptly put it, Duchamp's *Fountain* "is a declaration, a performative".[27] A conceptual work—at least the kind which functioned as an antipode to traditional art—in a museum is almost a contradiction in terms, for its adequate existence would be in its original and unrepeatable setting. Such works nonetheless became the artistic dominant in the Jamesonian sense; devoid of their original setting, semantically recontextualized, they have become the opposite of their former selves. It is a different case with the

23. Margolis, *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?*, 34.

24. Genette, *Relation esthétique*, 266.

25. René Passeron, "Poïétique et pathologie", *Psychologie médicale* 122:10 (1980), 2210.

26. Crowther, *Language of Twentieth-Century Art*, 4, 14, etc.

27. Foster, *Return of the Real*, 20.

Brillo boxes, for they make use (or exploit) the achievements of Duchamp and, although provocative, function very much like much of avant-garde art.

IV.

A work of art is no longer distinguished by being a representation: in contradistinction to the classical definition of an image, the artistic one included, an image is no longer, as John of Damascus put it already in the eighth century, "of like character in every way with its prototype, but with a certain difference. It is not like the archetype in every way."[28] It is not so much the infinitesimal difference between the original and the copy which makes the copy a representation which in the past offered the pleasure of recognition and hence potentially elevated it into a work of art but, instead, the "intentional properties" in Margolis's terminology and the "aesthetic intention" in Genette's. But if it is the intention which is the distinguishing characteristic of an artwork, this tells us something only about its ontic and nothing about its ontological status. In Danto's words, "there really is no art more true than any other, and there is no one way art has to be: all art is equally and indifferently art".[29]

A comprehensive explanation why this happened is offered by Heinz Paetzold:

> Since classical modernity, which one would locate in the period between 1850 and 1930, the time has passed when the arts could mirror themselves in philosophy's idealistic systems. They have developed their own forms and forums for discussing their practices. [...] Systematic philosophy developed aesthetic practices independently of, and often in contradiction to, the poetic reflections of writers and fine artists; the integration of aesthetics into the body of systematic philosophy was the price it paid for the distance it took from the theories of practising artists.
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> Romanticists such as Philip Otto Runge and Caspar David Friedrich were still able to consider their self-reflections in relation to philosophy. Later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, aside from the work of Wagner and Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche's implicit influence upon the arts, the alliance between art and philosophy came to an end.
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> Since classical modernism, however, "artists' theories" (Künstlertheorien)

28. John of Damascus, "Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images", quoted in Mosche Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 193.

29. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 35.

have emerged, in which artists reflect upon the conditions and aims of their own practices.[30]

Paetzold offers as examples of such writings those by van Gogh, Cézanne, the Surrealists, the Futurists, Joseph Kosuth, Donald Judd, Jenny Holzer, etc. From such writings "art conceptions" could be developed and it is these that are a prerequisite for art to be recognized as such: "If we want to understand contemporary art, we need to have 'conceptual knowledge' concerning the particular genesis of each work."[31] But why is such understanding necessary? Because it offers us an "entry" into the work and its artistic potentials. Paetzold furthermore quotes Cassirer saying that art "is not imitation but a discovery of reality,"[32] echoing numerous authors of the twentieth century—Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard, even Althusser—who all stressed the revelatory, originary and authentic truth-offering feature or even essence of art.

Paetzold's accentuation of the need for conceptual knowledge is strongly related to Genette's notion of aesthetic intention. But Genette also requires something else to make a work a work of art: it has to possess "the character of an artifact".[33] Stressing both properties and repeating after Nelson Goodman as the relevant question not "What is art?" but "When is it art?",[34] Genette counters Danto who, in the view of the former, takes into consideration only the artifactual character of a work. Genette hence suggests a different answer to the notorious question of the artistic status of Brillo boxes: according to Genette, "an art work doesn't reside in any of the objects but in the provocatory act,"[35] implying again that it was the *intention* which made the difference between a work and a work of art. In Genette's view the evaluation of such a work—or any work made with an aesthetic intention and possessing the character of an artifact (be it an object or an action)—is dependent upon what he calls "articité", its artistic nature or value. It is conceptual art, beginning with Duchamp, which incessantly appears as the turning point in the history of contemporary art. Warhol and his Brillo

30. Heinz Paetzold, *The Symbolic Language of Culture, Fine Arts and Architecture: Consequences of Cassirer and Goodman. Three Trondheim Lectures* (Trondheim: FF Edition, 1997), 21; cf. also Heinz Paetzold, *Ästhetik der neueren Moderne* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990), 66.

31. Paetzold, *The Symbolic Language of Culture, Fine Arts and Architecture*, 24.

32. Ibid., 9.

33. Genette, *Relation esthétique*, 252.

34. Ibid., 265.

35. Ibid., 254.

boxes are, in contradistinction, but a pop artistic diluted extension of Duchamp's ready-mades. In fact, they function very much like traditional art, i.e. they offer the *ostranienie* effect, that of "making strange" as suggested by Victor Shklovski in 1914.

Let me turn to another author, for it is exactly this point that is developed by Luc Ferry in his recent book *Le Sens du beau*, The Meaning of Beauty, from 1998, which is a revised version of his well-known book from 1990, *Homo aestheticus.* Ferry paints a very dismal picture of contemporary art. In his view, "the break with tradition has itself become a tradition."[36] Since 1913 and Duchamp no new arguments for or against the avant-garde have appeared[37] and the avant-garde itself has lost its power of negation.

In Ferry's view—which strongly echoes that of Henri Lefebvre—what we are witnessing is what Hegel has already foreseen: "So, if art is only an incarnation of a conceptual truth in a sensible material, art is dead. And I think"—continues Ferry —"that one of the great dangers encountered by contemporary avant-gardes was just what the anti–avant-gardists have always called [...] intellectualism."[38] The introduction of the intellect, of the concept, of what was, in Hegel, reserved for philosophy, signals the death of art, which thereafter remains only an empty shell, devoid of historical substance. Since art follows its own rules and criteria, it becomes a part of secularized society and, within the capitalist society, loses its subversive powers. Ferry supports his analyses by referring to an earlier French critical thinker, Cornelius Castoriadis, in whose view contemporary capitalist society possesses no values, no transcendence.

> In such conditions characteristic forms of great art—be it popular or not—disappear: it is the essential relation of the art work to the public which is blurred, at the same time in which emerges, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the distinction between the life of a philistine and the life of an artist with its inevitable correlate: the "avant-garde" public.[39]

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36. Luc Ferry, *Homo aestheticus: L'Invention du goût a l'age democratique* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 260.

37. Cf. Luc Ferry, *Le Sens du beau* (Paris: Editions Cercle d'Art, 1998), 198.

38. Ibid., 200. A similar critique was elaborated already by Henry Lefebvre, starting in 1948, who then wrote that after Baudelaire and Flaubert contemporary art became "hyperintellectual". Cf. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (Paris: L'Arche, 1958), 121. Similar views are elaborated also in his *Introduction to Modernity*, wherein Lefebvre claims that after Hegel modern art ceased being art. Cf. *Introduction à la Modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1962), 348.

39. Ferry, *Homo aestheticus*, 322.

Within such an environment culture dies off. And Ferry poses the ultimate question: could it be said that "after the end of great utopias and the master narratives we shall be assisting in that of great artworks?"[40]—raising, in a different way, the question also implied by Genette's observation that Adorno and Heidegger have overvalued art and, in a milder form, by Danto's notion of "posthistorical art".[41] If the importance of art has been overrated in the first half of the previous century, it may have been because at that time art meant something of paramount importance, while today it has drifted on the margins because there exist only margins and no centre. There is no master narrative any longer that could offer authority which would support the special role of art. That is also why, in Danto's words, there exists today "an absence of direction" in art.[42]

Much of what Ferry writes relates to the discussions about modernism and postmodernism which in aesthetics never really took off, or if they did, this happened very late and under very sceptical conditions. I therefore don't wish to broach this territory, nor shall I talk about the role of surrealism which formerly was often a pure negativity in the philosophical views on the history of twentieth century art, as witnessed by critical and derogatory statements by Adorno, Habermas, and Greenberg and which recently were resuscitated and reevaluated outside the French cultural empire by writers such as Rosalind Krauss, among others, in an attempt to reevaluate the position of modernism and its normative frameworks. The special place recently assigned to surrealism resembles that of conceptual art which raises questions of their similarities.

V.

To summarize: for various contemporary authors, be they philosophers, aestheticians or art critics, values still remain an important issue, although the institutional theory of art and the omnipresence of conceptual art have apparently diminished the role contemporary art plays today in society. Since the previous century art has been losing its paramount role in human existence which was still assigned to it in the twentieth century by existential phenomenology, the authors of the Frankfurt School and anthropological Marxism. The ensuing demands for the denigration of the privileged role of art, its deconstruction, and the accentuation of the

40. Ibid., 319.

41. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 12.

42. Ibid., 13.

non-representational nature of art, replaced the previous classical and modernist indissoluble link between the signified and the signifier, or between the art work and the outer and, in modernism, the inner truth. In the forties Etienne Souriau already claimed that it is wrong to substitute natural laws of the world O with the laws of the subjective world S, for this only causes art to replace the imitation of outer nature with the mirroring of the copy of the subjective world.[43] In his view, the only world that counts in art "is the world A, this world instaurated by the art work."[44]

From a historical distance Souriau's statement is surprisingly similar to that of Sollers two decades later. They both wanted to establish art as a new reality which would replace the previous two renditions and depictions of reality. At least in France conceptual art never carried much weight. That Genette finds it necessary to devote so much attention to Danto's theories and to the examples he uses, shows the extent to which postmodern commodification and posthistorical or postromanticist tendencies, stressing culture at the expense of art, have appropriated and replaced the previous modernist artistic paradigm. It is therefore not unusual that some authors are attempting to carry out research in the direction of culture and symbolic forms or to return aesthetics towards its original meaning as developed by Baumgarten, hence broadening its borders which in modernism used to confine it to the realm of art and artistics.

What is typical of art—and an essential agreement on this can be found in a surprisingly large number of otherwise very disparate authors, ranging from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to Lyotard and Althusser, to name but a few—is its feature of offering us not the original "truth", but a view, an opening, and an imaginary experience of the world and its intricate parts and phenomena as if seen for the first time, in their authenticity and immediacy. It is here that the line between culture and art may be drawn, for while art evokes this sense of authenticity, culture, especially mass culture, acts only upon our Imaginary, be it sports or television series. It is this feature of art which warrants its promotion and defence, the opposite tendency in aesthetics, the acceptance of everything designated as art, leading to the irrelevance of art and aesthetics. Some years ago our elder colleague Stefan Morawski painted a very bleak picture of contemporary philosophy, aesthetics and art,[45] describing nothing but an all-pervading cultural and artistic

43. Souriau, *Correspondence des arts*, 283.

44. Ibid., 285.

45. Stefan Morawski, *Troubles with Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

decline. I think, instead, that art, like nature in the form of dinosaur eggs in the movie *Jurassic Park*, always "finds a way". But we should not avoid the contemporary recurrence of seemingly obsolete questions related to human existence, to which art and related human activities have responded in the past. What there is may not be great works or generally acceptable or globally known works, but often their aesthetic and artistic role and impact is no lesser than in the past, only it is not universally known or accepted. In this respect aesthetics as philosophy of art and art share the same terrain.

It is unnecessary to accept as art everything that "experts" designate as such. The first step in such a direction is to reject an indiscriminate designation of art. Philosophers and aestheticians have been turned into passive recipients of views and implicit norms disseminated by the culture and the communication industry, instead of partaking in their creation and articulation, whether these aspire to local or universal status. Why is it that art is probably the only realm of human activity where completely random semantic designation is not only allowed, but very much universally accepted? By partaking in this practice aesthetics and philosophy are inadvertently accomplices to the present rule of the "experts". The situation that aestheticians often criticize is hence to a large extent a consequence of their own doing. We either have to accept this view or proclaim the notion of art to be a term applicable to anything appearing within a space designated as exhibition space. In this case it is hence the exhibition space—and the experts who put it there—which determines what is art. It is the law of theory, preceding the work at the expense of the previous law of aesthetics experience, which followed the work and was accompanied by criticism. Such a view was recently put forth by Peter Weibel, one of the promoters of conceptual art: "All ontology of art is the last triumph of conservative action against [...] the emergence of theory at the expense of experience."[46] Or we have to accept the view that art, or at least visual art, and its importance are over and are things of the past.

46. Peter Weibel, "Machine Experienced Space", *Lier en Boog* 14 (Amsterdam 1999), 162.