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# The naked king

On the desire to replace philosophy with  
Conceptual art during the years 1966-1972  
and the aesthetic response by Theodor W.  
Adorno, Umberto Eco and Jacques Rancière

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# Abstract

The aim of this essay is to investigate the reconfiguration and, to some extent, the total deconstruction of the aesthetic field, such as we have known it since Baumgarten, that is promoted by Conceptual art. It is our intention to show the philosophical importance and the theoretical implications of the questions raised by this artistic movement, which somehow instigated the tumultuous debate directed to overwhelm much of the art world from the late 1960's onward.

We believe that the very core of Conceptual art is philosophical and in this respect our programme is to investigate how Conceptual art not only challenges the viewer with traditional aesthetic concepts, but also with the very means used by philosophy to analyse art.

This essay aims therefore to be an analysis of the philosophy of Conceptual art, which we put in relation to the aesthetic investigations of three philosophers - Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Umberto Eco and Jacques Rancière.

The ambition is to shed theoretical light on an artistic movement certainly scantily considered within the philosophical domain, while it indicates itself as the contingent successor to philosophy.

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# Introduction

The American philosopher Henry Flint, particularly interested in and involved with the art movement *Fluxus*, was the first to use the expression “Concept art” in 1961, defining it by the material of such art being “concepts”. Nevertheless, the notion of Conceptual art has to be ascribed to one of the most important and influential Conceptual artists, this being Joseph Kosuth, who, in the article “Art after philosophy” (1969), defines the significance of *dematerialization* that occurred in contemporary art and is related to the divestment of all the decorative meanings within an artwork. The artistic intention is thus to shift attention from the object/artefact to the ideas subsumed under it. In this regard, aesthetic discourse needs to change the focus of inquiry since a work of art has to be considered as a tautology, completely self-sufficient like Kantian analytic propositions. The work of art develops as an idea and the idea becomes the very core of artistic expression, so much so that even the almost literary definition of the conditions of art becomes a work of art because of its *conceptual* state.

The temporal range presented in the title takes up the historical overview made by the art critic Lucy Lippard in *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. However, it is in any case not our purpose, and neither was it Lippard's, to categorize in time the process of *dematerialization* within such a movement, whose identification is difficult to delineate in a specific manner. The notion of Conceptual art is in fact not directed towards the precise definition of a movement, but rather represents a way to classify a perspective that emerges globally in art and that occurs in different fashions, in different contexts, in different countries. Movements as Land Art, Arte Povera, Body Art, Action or Performance Art, Art & Language could all be included in the tortuous configuration of Conceptual art.

This essay will investigate the aesthetics of Conceptual art and relate it to philosophy. In this respect, we are going to consider the positions of three philosophers – Theodor Adorno, Umberto Eco, Jacques Rancière - involved in discussing the question of art. We will thus try to establish a dialogue or aesthetic confrontation between the aesthetics of Conceptual art and philosophy, because we believe that the former contains a theoretical core really close to philosophy.

It is our opinion that Conceptual art, rather than setting up a new technicality or a new art extrinsically aesthetic, aims directly to found its own proper aesthetics based on its own conceptual aesthetic considerations. We will show how this aesthetics attempts to innerly change and renew the significance of aesthetic research, and also the general system of aesthetic criticism, from the inside, trying to undermine the very basis of philosophical investigation concerning art. It is in this respect that we will form the desire to replace philosophy with Conceptual art, because of the theoretical effort it promotes within its practice. In this regard we would like to even underline the difficulty of our attempt in finding a line of argument in previous research, which could have provided the basis for developing our investigation on this art movement. The difficulty in fact lies in the way philosophy practically ignores the theoretical core of Conceptual art, not sufficiently looking into or analysing Conceptual art's aesthetics. Our effort will thus become to reflect on and intertwine researches that apparently do not have so much in common, or at least that are not directly connected, in order to enhance a new field of studies that according to us has been disregarded through the years. With regards to Conceptual art the most that has been written on it is referable to the history of art or to records of the artists themselves, while an appropriate aesthetics investigation on this movement did not occur. Obviously there are some exceptions as shown by Peter Osborne; nevertheless even the English philosopher scantily uses philosophy when editing *Conceptual art*<sup>1</sup>.

The only previous, philosophically intended, research in matter of Conceptual art is given by the collection of fourteen pieces essays, *Philosophy and Conceptual art*<sup>2</sup>, edited by Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens; nevertheless we will choose to not use the book for our investigation, because according to us it unfortunately does not add more than the artists themselves articulate

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1 *Conceptual Art*, ed. by Peter Osborne (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005).

2 *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, ed. by Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

through the account of their analysis, both artistic and theoretical. At the same time the relation between Conceptual art and the three philosophers we will take into consideration has never been evaluated, or at least object for previous research within the philosophical domain.

For giving an account on Conceptual art, we will thus proceed primarily referring to anthologies, such as that edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson or that edited annotated by Lucy R. Lippard, which provides collections of articles, essays of and interviews with the artists involved in Conceptual art. On the other side we will analyse philosophers' works taken into examination considering the critical reviews proposed by Peter Osborne, Todd May and Alain Badiou, other than relate to each other and to the aesthetics of Conceptual art.

With respect to Conceptual art we will outline three main features, which we consider the most powerful and important, and analyse their aesthetic implications:

- the deconstruction and annihilation of the space of art, intending with that a general critique of aesthetics and of art's institutions - both academical and financial, which consider art as part of a system that in reality sterilizes art's theoretical inferences.
- the dematerialization of the art object; the problems inherent in the consideration of an artwork as product; the tautological instances put forward, even in regard to downgrading the importance of the subject within an artwork.
- the increasing significance assumed by, and given to, the receiver, recognized as an internal part of the artistic production and not as an isolated interpretative counterpart.

These features are of course correlated and we are going to show how they develop together in a unicum.

The discussion will afterwards proceed with the presentation of the aesthetic analyses of the three philosophers mentioned above, all of whom we believe to be of help in the recognition of the specificity of Conceptual art, in particular with regard to the philosophical and aesthetic problematization inherent to it. Furthermore, we shall consider the philosophical reaction with respect to the instances promoted by Conceptual art, which we would call “the aesthetic response”.

The exposition of the three philosophers' aesthetics will occur in a sort of dialectical manner, in the sense that their positions could be easily seen as an antithesis (Adorno), a thesis (Eco) and synthesis (Rancière) in relation to Conceptual art and in relation to one another. We would nevertheless like to emphasize that this classification is solely internal to the structure of our discourse. We will examine Adorno's, Eco's and Rancière's aesthetic reflections by following the analysis proposed as regards Conceptual art, that is to say by first making a brief presentation of the peculiarity of their theories, then presenting those features in their researches that are comparable to Conceptual art, showing analogies and disanalogies between the former and the latter.

The first chapter will examine Conceptual art in depth and it will be based on artists' reflections.

At the beginning a brief historical overview of the movement toward Conceptual art will be sketched out, which we believe serves the purpose of providing a better understanding of the historical causes that led to Conceptual art. Subsequently, we will analyse the anti-aesthetic character of it, then taking into consideration the implications of the notion of dematerialization of the art object. In the last section we will delineate the so-called Conceptual art's catalytic attempt, namely what Conceptual art promotes in matter of the relationships between the beholder, artist and artworks, describing the social character of Conceptual art.

In “Dialectical fear in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*”, we will relate to Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, considering the importance of the reflections contained in it. They could to some extent be considered in strenuous opposition to Conceptual art, especially with respect to this art's new attempt to inquire into its own concept.

We will first shed light on the most important features of Adorno's aesthetic theory, characterizing his materialist metaphysics as regards art. Afterwards, we will take into consideration what is, according to Adorno, the social specificity of art and the work of art, then making clear why he rejects and judges inadequate the new forms of art, in the sense that they do not display any concrete opposition to the system of domination.

“The aesthetic of openness in Umberto Eco”, will analyse Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*. Individuating in terms of openness aesthetic value as conceived by contemporary art forms, we think he enhances those features constituting the aesthetics of Conceptual art.

We will primarily describe what is the meaning of the notion of openness that Eco assigns to contemporary artworks, considering its peculiarity in the aesthetic context. We will then proceed to illustrate how Eco's aesthetic researches, intertwining mathematics, semiotics and philosophy of language with the study of the innovative character of contemporary art, solicit a reconsideration of art's inferences, disregarded by traditional aesthetics. In the last section we will conduct a deeper examination of Eco's notion of the addressee, which is strongly related to the character of openness defined by the new art.

“Aesthetic *sauvetage* on the shores of politics in Jacques Rancière” will, evaluating several works of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, define the specificity of his aesthetic reflections, which are bound to his notion of politics. They enhance the socio-political value of art and artworks and we will consider them in relation to what Conceptual art tries to achieve. Furthermore, we are going in this chapter to render clear why we consider Rancière's aesthetics as reconciliatory and constituting a synthesis of Adorno and Eco.

At first, we will outline the passages towards the configuration of the aesthetic regime of the arts within the attempt to surpass the condition of crisis promoted by post-modernist reflections. We will then make a closer analysis of the relation between politics and aesthetics, explaining the meaning of the politics of art. Later, we will take into consideration the condition of the spectator in relation to art, subsumed under one of Rancière most important notions, namely that of “the emancipated spectator”.

At the end we are going to draw some conclusions, observing where Conceptual art's revolutionary aesthetic purposes lead. By that I mean we shall consider whether they really change our view of art and the way we conceive of an art object in a progressive meaning, that is to say whether they really revolutionize the basis of aesthetics. Or else, whether they conduct to an utter aphasic relativization as regards art, which is no longer actively and in first person involved in any kind of analysis or concrete contribution in investigating both itself and society.



# An art in exile

## 1.1 Toward Conceptual art

It is undoubtedly the case that Conceptual art has in some manner inherited its own praxis from previous efforts regarding either a newer approach to the discussion and inquiry into art, or the will for a *decontextualization* and *recontextualization* of art itself. Nevertheless, a chronological summary would give us just a distorted overview of a false progression in modern art that at the end culminates in Conceptual art.

Surely, Duchamp could be considered as one of the first who seriously tries to query the field of art, proposing the annihilation of dogmatic Cubist avant-gardism within aesthetic academia, fusing verbal elements with objective-figurative components. He affirms that he is interested in ideas, not only and merely in visual products, because he wants to return painting at the service of spirit. Duchamp, by so doing, leaves the horizon of significance of the work undecided without drawing any conclusion, inviting the observer/reader to reflect on the meaning of the work. Duchamp's ready-mades, being – apparently - independent of the artist's skill, promote a revaluation of art-theoretical components. Furthermore, through choosing a standardized item and arresting its circulation of use and renaming it, Duchamp confers to it a new dimension of significance, extending at the same time the domain of the work of art.

The word “art”, etymologically speaking, means to make, simply to make. Now what is making? Making is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red, putting some of it on the palette, and always choosing the quality of the blue, the quality of the red, and always choosing the place to put in on the canvas, it's always choosing. So in order to choose, you can use tubes of paint, you can use brushes, but you can also use ready-made things, made either mechanically or by the hand of another man, even if you want, and appropriate it, since it's you who choose it. Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting<sup>3</sup>.

In this regard, we could affirm that Duchamp communicates a showdown for the *strictly* aesthetic in relation to what could be considered as art. Aesthetic judgments and investigations now have solve a totally new inquiry, which has nothing to do with the task they had in the past, when it was a question of distinguishing between what to classify as art

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<sup>3</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *Interview by Georges Charbonnier*, radio interviews, RTF, 1961, here taken from T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 163.

and what not. Appealing to a merely mechanical capacity that consequently represents a passable knowledge from hand to hand, Duchamp is maybe the first in modern times who deprives the artist of his own specific terrain, putting him in a more advanced and speculative area in which the activity of conveying a content is a question of choice. The artist thus begins to work like a semantic communicator, by giving space and meaning to items that have other meanings, forcing the inclusion of such elements in what we could define as *art's novel*.

We could affirm that art, with regard to Duchamp's *choices*, becomes what within linguistic is termed "pragmatics", that is to say an analysis of its own aims and purposes, proposing a meta-reflection as regards art and aesthetics. Duchamp turns on end and inverts the domain of inquiry, classifying an object or a manufacture from the real world as an artwork. In this respect, it appears that the transient certainties on which aesthetics bases its discourses are now completely uncovered and in need of a new explanation. The peculiar influence that Duchamp has on Conceptual art is revealed by Joseph Kosuth's words:

The function of art, as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp. In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity [...]. "Modern" art and the work before seemed connected by virtue of their morphology. Another way of putting it would be that art's "language" remained the same, but it was saying new things. The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to "speak another language" and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted ready-made. With then art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change – one from "appearance" to "conception" – was the beginning of "modern" art and of conceptual art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually<sup>4</sup>.

Previous *decontextualizations* and *recontextualizations* comparable to those of Duchamp could be ascribed with the incoming of the so-called dialectics of Modernism, which proposes the first stirrings of a conceptual idea in matters of art.

Thanks to artists like Edouard Manet and Paul Cezanne, visual arts tries to examine itself and reflects on its own basis, either roughly and almost photographically drawing subjects from the real world – Manet, or finding the way for an abstraction subtracted from the imperative reproduction of reality – Cezanne.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy", *Studio International*, 178:915-917, (October-November-December 1969), here taken from J. Kosuth, *Art after philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966 – 1990* (Cambridge: Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1991), p. 18.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new generation of artists began to work on pictures that seemed to be thoroughly independent from any contact with reality whatsoever, striving for a completely pure painting. They follow Guillaume Apollinaire as he affirms that “real resemblance no longer has any importance, since everything is sacrificed by the artist to truth, to the necessities of a higher nature whose existence he assumes, but does not lay bare”<sup>5</sup>. Contemporaneously, in Russia, Kazimir Malevic, developing the stylistic language of Suprematism, proposes that determinations of content should be overshadowed or avoided.

Later on Dadaism, Constructivism and Surrealism put on question the autonomy of art, criticizing - as Dadaism does in nuce – the fundamental paradigm of “*l’art pour l’art*”. Politics and the problematization of exceeding the limits of the artwork fuse together, even though not really imposing any substantial ontological critic upon the aesthetic field. In this respect, even the indetermination of Action Painting with the unconscious *dripping* and the *all-over* technique, interweaving Freudian notions of the subconscious and the physics determinism in quantum mechanics, is not able to solve the problems of composition and structure.

These movements, though suggesting and promoting a structural reconsideration of the polarization in matters of art, still continue moving into aesthetics. They undoubtedly move forward the domain of aesthetic inquiry, even destabilizing it, but they do not conceive any form of radical probe that would open to a wider reflection – a metareflection – on the significance of art and aesthetics. This does not occur because these movements continue to be subsumed under the aesthetic environment of frame, academia, musealization, while Duchamp stimulates a complete emancipation from the external aestheticization. De facto, he renders the artwork *allographic*, more similar to music because of their reproducibility, and therefore no longer *autographic*<sup>6</sup>. Duchamp, removing the *subject* - its significance and its value – as intended in aesthetics, aims to shift the understanding and investigation of the work of art to a theoretical level. Duchamp puts thus in evidence the theoretical value of artist's standpoint attained through his work of art; this undoubtedly determines that the artist no longer needs to be supported by or subject to external criteria and statements. He thus makes meaningless what we could call the reification of the art object with the essential support of critics, revealing the necessity of re-articulating the discourse of art.

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5 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Peintres cubistes, Méditations esthétiques*, 1913, trans. by Lionel Abel, *The Cubist Painters: Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1949), p. 12.

6 For further information concerning the distinction between allographic and autographic art we refer to Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art, An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company 2003), chapter III “Art and Authenticity”, pp. 99-123.

However, it is at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties that, through different art movements, what we could define as the de-structuration - in various meanings - of art takes place.

International groups like Fluxus or movements such as Pop Art, Hard Edge, Land Art and Process Art aims to produce, quoting Yoko Ono, *wonderment* within the context of art<sup>7</sup>. The mix of different art forms denigrates the aesthetic dogma of differentiation and stimulates a re-orientation of the fields of inquiry, connecting the latter with vitalist conjectures and offering a continuum and a discontinuum at the same time. Artworks are made not for a categorization, but for stimulating questions about society, mass production and art itself. Subjectivity, pathos and figurativeness are immediately rejected, opposing to them a sterile factual dimension which operates to focus attention on the *necessary*.

In this scenario we should ascribe the first divestment of art's *decorative meaning*<sup>8</sup> to Minimalism. The critic Richard Wollheim was the first who, in 1965, gives a definition of Minimal art with the intent of labelling a tendency shared by several artists at this time<sup>9</sup>. Reduction to simple and crude structures, a self-reflexive attitude in the concrete praxis of making art and an analysis of painting's primary conditions of existence: these are the guidelines, briefly considered, underlined by Minimalism.

In this regard, the serial factuality conceived by Minimalism represents a constant non-relationship that aims to avoid every kind of rationalistic presumption of a pre-constituted order. "The order [, Donald Judd affirms,] is not rationalistic or underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another. A painting isn't an image. The shapes, the unity, projection, order and colour are specific, aggressive and powerful"<sup>10</sup>. Art's reality is faceted and composed of single unities that do not constitute any complete or cohesive appearance. Forms are kept separated and the edge is not ontologically involved, instead it is related to the simple geometric modulation of the inside. The model is thus two dimensional, with the outer space composing the third feature. Establishing that three-dimensionality in a

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7 See Yoko Ono, "Lectures at Wesleyan University" (January 1966), here taken from Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 13.

8 With *decorative meaning* we intend all those practical aesthetic qualities referred to art and connected with the notion of taste. With this notion we as well intend the transcendent feelings and immanent characteristics related to artwork discussed during the centuries by theoretical studies.

9 See Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art", *Arts Magazine* (January 1965), here taken from, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Gregory Battcock, intr. by Anne M. Wagner (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 387-399.

10 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects", in *Arts Yearbook n.8*, 1965, here taken from Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax and New York: New York University Press, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005), p. 184.

painting is too much complex and full of external purposes and meanings, Minimalism strives to merely provide a simple two models apparatus for understanding, excluding the possibility of an extensible aesthetic meaning. The reduction to the object, which erases the intentionality of significant internal relationships, aims to give a direct perception of forms and their qualities. It processes an abdication of every kind of prescribed hierarchy of values, merely focusing on what Donald Judd terms as *interest*, since artworks have just one quality<sup>11</sup>. Minimalism, primarily and objectively, enhances the immanent physicality of artwork, conceiving that the pure essence of art coincides with its *objectness*, presence and existence in *real* space. This means that the preeminent question within this context deals with the supposed *literalness* of the artwork, which makes almost meaningless the importance of critiques and critics.

The elimination of external references and theoretical effort from the artist's side as not to be blended with the artefact represents a guarantee for the self-sufficiency and autonomy of the work of art.

[...] Painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he's doing. Painter is making a thing. All that should be taken for granted [...] All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion.... What you see is what you see<sup>12</sup>.

The coinciding of aesthetic experience with the physical entity – *objectness*, means that the objective structures present themselves as self-referential, completely independent *in se* and at the same time composed by a logical unit set<sup>13</sup>.

This is the reason why we could assume that Minimalism operates a phenomenological reduction - in realistic terms - that suspends judgement on art through a deprivation of occurrences of judgment. The phenomenological reduction attempted by Minimalism is, according to us, the manner to cramp the inference of the external knowledge apparatus that does not deal with the real existence of the artwork. It appears in fact that art at this stage aims to define the work of art as autonomous in its constitution, thus asserting a re-positioning of

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11 Ibid.

12 Bruce Glaser, *Questions to Stella and Judd*, interview broadcasted on WBAI-FM, February 1964, with the title "New Nihilism or New Art", *Art News* (September 1966), here taken from Battcock, *Minimal Art*, p. 158.

13 See Francesco Poli, *Minimalismo, Arte Povera, Arte Concettuale* (Bari: Laterza, 2009), p. 90.

the aesthetic inquiry. It should moreover be clear that the reduction we are assuming is not to be intended as a pure isolation of an essence that tries to reach the absolute isolated form. It rather produces a complete opening to reality and its empirical features as space, scene and spectatorship, which for the first time are ontologically included and not solely subsumed under an illusionary mystification. It is by means of a conscious reduction to the primary form and structure of the art object that Minimalistic work could be considered a *tabula rasa*<sup>14</sup>, which nevertheless suggests something more. Hence *less is more*, aiming not to an abstract investigation, but rather to a grounded theoretical review in matters of art.

Notwithstanding the stimulus given by Minimalism concerning to the discourse on art and art in itself, we still have the object as residual. Persisting with the sense and the empirical essence of *objects* - though in *objectness*<sup>15</sup> – from which the following idea is abstracted, Minimal art is still linked with those immanent clichés it tries to refuse, therefore provoking only *desires*<sup>16</sup> and not a deep and real dematerialization.

Whether the object in itself no longer constitutes the artwork, but merely becomes a medium for referring to the idea, this means that one can go beyond material or standard methods using any kind of medium or technique.

The anti-intellectual, emotional intuitive processes of art-making [...] have begun to give away to an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively. [...] Since the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is [...] becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete<sup>17</sup>.

Conceptual art renounces being an aesthetic polyseme, contrarily providing the basis for considering the work of art as tautological, true a priori<sup>18</sup>, as questioning the nature of art<sup>19</sup>.

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14 See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years*, "Introduction", x

15 See even Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum* (June 1967), here taken by Battock, *Minimal Art*, pp. 116-148. In this article Fried aims to contrast and react to the so-called literalism of Minimalism, connecting Minimalistic objectness to theatre, assuming that "theatre is now the negation of art" (p.125).

16 See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years*, "Introduction", x.

17 Lucy R. Lippard, John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art", *Art International* (February 1968), here taken from Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years*, pp. 42-43.

18 See Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, p. 20.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

## 1.2 The aesthetics of the aesthetic withdrawal<sup>20</sup>

Aesthetic considerations are indeed *always* extraneous to an object's function or "reason-to-be." Unless of course, that object's "reason-to-be" is strictly aesthetic. An example of a purely aesthetic object is a decorative object, for decoration's primary function is "to add something to, so as to make more attractive; adorn, ornament, and this relates directly to taste"<sup>21</sup>.

For Conceptual art the inquiry into the ground of aesthetics, as discipline and as advocate of discourses, is something prior to the attack on *object materialization* – as we will see more closely in the next section, even though the two are of course intertwined and develop together. This procedure aims on the one hand to deprive the artwork of external aesthetic contents and on the other hand to break the flourishing of aesthetic considerations concerning the work, proposing that "the philosophy of the work is implicit in the work"<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, it does not mean to totally disregard aesthetics, but rather to actively and directly intervene in the aesthetic field. It is in this sense that we should intend the reconfiguration of the discourse concerning art, where the artist is now intentionally involved in the ultimate theoretical appropriation of his work. He aims in fact to withdraw the conceptual connection between art and aesthetics; a connection occurring since philosophy was *duty-bound*<sup>23</sup> to deal with the notion of beauty. We could affirm that the artist is now the one who constitutes, conceives and conveys the conceptual core of his work, starting with the work itself. This aims to stop the circulation of his work in the aesthetic domain, thus halting the circulation of the work of art into a counter-alterity that becomes irrelevant in relation to work or art's own proper theoretical value.

Conceptual art promotes a complete depuration, conceptually and stylistically, of those external inferences that have always occurred in relation to art, which no longer represent any

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20 We would like to acknowledge that the title of the present section has been involuntarily inspired by the work of Conceptual artist Robert Morris. Robert Morris, *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal*, 1963, Typed and notarized statement on paper; sheet of lead over wood, mounted in imitation leather mat, 45 x 60,5 cm, Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Morris made his work in response to a collector, the architect Philip Johnson, who had not paid for his earlier sculpture made the same year [*Litanies*]. *Litanies* is a lead cover box from which hang twenty-seven keys. In withdrawing all aesthetic qualities from *Litanies* by means of a legalistic-looking statement, Morris produced a new work, which challenged fundamentally with the notion of artistic intent as the source of the aesthetic and meaning of a work of art.

21 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, p. 17.

22 Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", *Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), here taken from *Conceptual Art: A critical anthology*, ed. by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (London: The MIT Press paperback edition, 2000), p.14.

23 See Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, p. 16.

certain criteria for the evaluation of the work of art. We are therefore in front of an aesthetic project that directs to revolutionize and reconsider some values that undoubtedly appeared established in art history. It is first and foremost a theoretical project that moves on different levels for unhinging art from a hierarchical set that orders mere illusions.

The Conceptual artist attempts to build a conceptual awareness, which is able to unchain the work of art from the deceit that occurs when it is consumed and subsumed under a standardized aesthetic assessment.

For a better comprehension of the matter of inquiry, we would refer to the pamphlet edited by the BMPT-group published at the “Salon of Young Painting” at the Paris Museum of Modern Art in 1967:

Because painting is a game, Because painting is the application (consciously or otherwise) of the rules of composition, Because painting is the freezing of movements, Because painting is the representation (or interpretation or appropriation or disputation or presentation) of objects, Because painting is the springboard for the imagination, Because painting is spiritual illustration, Because painting is justification, Because painting serves an end, Because painting is to give aesthetic value to flowers, women, eroticism, the daily environment, art, dadaism, psychoanalysis and the war in Vietnam, *We are not painters*<sup>24</sup>.

The artist clarifies the rejection of the inner aesthetic basis that should contrarily found his work, claiming that he does not make what should be made and that he is not what he should be. Those features, by which a work of art should be evaluated, do not correspond in any sense to the attempt to make art as this is conceived by the artist. They are instead related to an obsolete idea that aims to phagocytose the work, whereby rendering it transcendent and thus available to the aesthetic discourse. In this regard, the artist tends to eliminate from art's domain that illusion which runs parallel to aesthetic content; illusion that rests on the fact that “a work of art is a space in which material or spiritual odds and ends taken out of context are deposited and which, we are persuaded, form an entity”<sup>25</sup>. The artist, as in the case of Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni, questioning the whole basis of art through his art, extends the limitation and the regimentation imposed by the aesthetic domain, which still supports the existence-in-itself of the work of art.

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24 Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, Niele Toroni, “Nous ne sommes pas peintres”, Pamphlet, 21 x 13,5 cm, “Salon de la Jeune Peinture”, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 3 January 1967, original in French. The present English translation is taken from Michel Claura, “Paris Commentary”, *Studio International*, 177:907 (January 1969), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 84.

25 Michel Claura, “Paris Commentary”, p. 83.



Before the arrival of Conceptual art, the history of art is in reality the history of artistic technique. This is one of the reasons why Conceptual art demands a change in aesthetics, because the discourse is merely about shape and colours, about empty technicalities that do not fulfil any fundamental theoretical value.

Following the line of research proposed by Charles Harrison in *Essays on Art & Language*, we could affirm that Conceptual art begins as a violent and thorough reaction to Formalist criticism. This has its most important and influential figures in the American Clement Greenberg and Michel Fried. They impose on the aesthetic domain the absolute necessity of the procedure of criticism in matters of articulating the dialogical character of the artwork, emphasizing elements such as that of colour, shape and form, meanwhile annihilating those other features such as content and context. The kind of criticism promoted by Greenberg and Fried has its own basis in “a complex process of domination”<sup>26</sup> that aims to produce a dominant culture in an inner relation to the foreign policy conducted by the United States during the late 50's and the 60's<sup>27</sup>. To this dominant culture of late Modernism – or the “second voice” of Modernism<sup>28</sup>, based on the dictatorship of the external word promulgated by the critics as a form of lengthening of works of art, a reaction takes place from a generation of artists who attempt to conceive the cultural and theoretical shape of their own work *through* their own work. Conceptual art points towards the theoretical essence of art, removing from the work of art every kind of strictly aesthetic element. In this respect, Ad Reinhardt, in the article *Art as Art*, states: “no lines or imaginings, no shapes or composings or representings, no visions or sensations or impulses, no symbols or impastos, no decoratings or colorings or picturings, no pleasures or pains, no accidents or ready-mades, no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities-nothing that is not of the essence”<sup>29</sup>.

In other respects, it could be useful to give an account of John Latham's *experience* with Formalist criticism. His artwork “Art and Culture” concerns the collection of essays written by Clement Greenberg – *Art and Culture*<sup>30</sup> – that finds, as he affirms, “its way into the library of St. Martins School of Art”<sup>31</sup>. Since the book has both a persuasive power among students

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26 Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge: The MIT Press edition, 2001), p. 11.

27 We are not going deeper in the discussion about the value of the notion of dominant culture in relation to the figure of Greenberg and Fried and in relation to their criticism. For further information we refer to *Ibid.*, “A Kind of Context”, pp. 1-28.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

29 Ad Reinhardt, “Art as Art”, *Art International* (December 1962), here taken from Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 56.

30 Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture, Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

31 J. Latham, *Art & Culture* (Rep.), London, August 1966, here taken from Lippard, *Six Years*, pp. 14-16.

and a provocative title<sup>32</sup>, Latham takes it out it and together with the sculptor Barry Flanagan organizes an event called “ Still & Chew”, where artists, students and critics are invited at Latham's house. Once the guests arrived “they we each asked to take a page of *Art & Culture* and to chew it – after which they could if necessary spit out the product into a flask provided. [...] The chewed pages were later immersed in acid – 30% sulphuric – until the solution was converted to a form of sugar, and this was then neutralized by addition of quantities of sodium bicarbonate. The next step was the introduction of an Alien Culture, a yeast. After which several months went by with the solution bubbling gently”<sup>33</sup>. At the end of May 1967 a postcard from the library, addressed to Latham, requested the return of *Art and Culture* since a student urgently needed it. Latham presented himself to the librarian with a “suitable glass container”<sup>34</sup> where assembled a distilling apparatus was assembled with a label on it describing what it is – i.e. the book previously withdrawn. After the few minutes required to convince the librarian that this was in fact the book, Latham left the room and one day later he lost his job as part-time instructor at St. Martins School of Art.

The work of art becomes, as suggested by the work of Latham, anti-aesthetic in the sense that the conceptual core of the work aims to deny and surpass the aesthetic administration within the field of art. The effort of the artist has to be seen not simply as a funny happening, but rather as praxis that is a priori theoretical. Considering for instance Latham's artwork, it follows three different theoretical inquiries: it questions in praxis the circulation of those theoretical instances in form of aesthetic literature that deprives the work of art of its own proper meaning; it questions the academic hierarchy posited within the aesthetic domain, that is to say the book of the famous art critic in the library of the institution – the school - that should form a prototype for the artist; it faces and gives a report of the utter closeness of the institutions – both the library and the school – as concerns of the consideration of any possible claim about themselves as part of a hierarchical structure.

“Aesthetics is an issue only in Formalist art in which a direct function of the work is to be aesthetic, [... *insofar as*] the critical role sustaining the function of Formalist art depends on the Formalist presenting the *experience* and the critics presenting the *ideas*”<sup>35</sup>. In this regard, the artist on the one hand takes back the responsibility for his ideas through not allowing the critic to analyse or interpret the experience provided by art and on the other hand presents by

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32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p. 16.

34 Ibid.

35 Ian Burn, “Conceptual Art as Art”, *Art and Australia*, 8:2 (September 1970), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 188-189. Italics mine.

himself the ideas within the artwork through an accurate theoretical account of the project, proposing the aesthetics of the work based on anti-aesthetic features.

Conceptual art shifts the focus from what is said through language to an investigation of the language of art itself, expanding art ideas beyond the theoretical and linguistic limits of the production of visual-object-making and repudiating in so doing all formal aesthetic considerations. The aesthetics of the artwork is considered as re-cognition, that is to say thinking again<sup>36</sup>, which becomes from the side of art because “all art exists as it exists within its own described set of conditions”<sup>37</sup>. Art becomes the only sure yardstick for judging art, because the division proposed and imposed by the aesthetic-critical policy that separates presentation from idea can no longer *sacrifice* the idea within an artwork. Hence, it seems that the only real alternative to criticism is art<sup>38</sup>. Aesthetics and criticism aim to transform art so “that it does not require faith in its reflection of a specific situation”, at the same time leaving the artist “in the position of a naïve producer or maker of finery for high society”<sup>39</sup>.

After having seen the non-value of aesthetics, the investigation of the aesthetics of Conceptual art's aesthetic withdrawal is directed towards the question of the nature of art itself, that is to say to fragment the real within the real. To inwardly question the nature of art in its anti-aesthetic attempt means that art should apply, as suggested by the Art-Language group, the Husserlian epoché<sup>40</sup> to the artistic paradigm of materialization. This aims to reject the so-called “commodity form” in art, which presupposes confinement in an administrative-aesthetic context that is exactly what Conceptual art tries to avoid, contrarily proposing “as its basic tenet an understanding that artists work with meaning”<sup>41</sup>.

Within Conceptual art “the repudiation of the aesthetic suggests the total elimination of the art object and its replacement by an idea for a work or by the rumour that one has been consummated”<sup>42</sup>.

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36 See Mel Bochner, “Excerpts from Speculation (1967-1970)”, *Artforum*, 8:9 (May 1970), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 194.

37 Ibid.

38 See Charles Harrison, “Notes toward art work”, *Studio International*, 179:919 (February 1970), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 206.

39 See Michel Claura, “Interview with Lawrence Weiner”, in *VH.101*, 5 (Spring 1971), trans. by B. Stimson and first published in English in Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 236.

40 See even what we affirmed on Minimalism at pp. 9-10.

41 Joseph Kosuth, “Intention(s)”, *Art Bulletin*, 78:3 (September 1996), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 462.

42 Harold Rosenberg, “De-aestheticization”, *The New Yorker* (24 January 1970), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 221.

### 1.3 The object dematerialized

The notion of dematerialization, with regard to the art object, is ascribed to the critic Lucy Lippard when she delineates the meaning of the Conceptual work of art. Considering that the idea is paramount while the material is secondary, we can understand why Lippard defines Conceptual artworks as dematerialized<sup>43</sup>. Nevertheless, this does not involve the work of art no longer is being a material one, but rather that the material is fragmented and does not concretely sustain the intention of the artist. The standard correlation, within a typical artwork, between the object and its physicality, no longer represents the artist's form of thought and those inquiries he wants to carry out. In addition, whether the intention is to go further aesthetics – the latter considered as an external delimitation of art's own proper field and as an illusionary novel, Conceptual art cannot avoid questioning even the notion of objectness in its aesthetic meaning.

The object is the physical part of the aesthetic experience. This experience presupposes a clear visibility of the art object that, according to the history of aesthetics, should stimulate aesthetic appreciation. Rather, Conceptual art surpasses – as Kosuth affirms – the decorative aspect within art, i.e. the primary aesthetic quality subsumed under the object. It is by presenting new propositions, rather than objects, that, according to Kosuth, is possible to investigate the nature of art<sup>44</sup>. In so doing, physicality within an artwork is undoubtedly put on the threshold of a complete dematerialization.

Sol LeWitt affirms that “in conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decision are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes art”<sup>45</sup>. Materiality, intended as the ontological basis of the suitable aesthetic work of art, has for the Conceptual artist no importance, because we instead are in front of an open-art criticism that develops and presents itself through the analytical work of the artist. Art becomes im-material or de-materialized because it now directly refers to ideas, freeing itself from all those links with technicality and materiality assumed as inevitably necessary for providing the essence and the existence of an artwork. In this respect, dematerialization could be understood as an intentional lack of material substance, useful for rendering fairly evident the idea present in and expressed through the artwork.

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43 Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years*, “Introduction”, vii.

44 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after philosophy and After*, p. 19.

45 Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on conceptual art”, p. 12.

“The works [...] are ideas that are not intended to be any more than ideas”<sup>46</sup>, asserts Gregory Battock reviewing the exhibition entitled “0 OBJECTS, 0 PAINTERS, 0 SCULPTURE ...” (New York, January 1969) organized by Seth Siegelaub. The title of the exhibition marks out the ultimate rupture with the previous schemata according to which artworks should be subjected to various passages, which finally have the result that works of art become impoverished of their inner significance. What occurs is a change of those structures of values and rules that oriented towards artwork's categorization and definition in the aesthetic pantheon. The whole basis on which the aesthetic domain is grounded collapses when it does not have any sensible and strictly physical object to relate to, but rather a material theoretically dematerialized that merely functions as compendium to the idea.

The criticism of the critique and the rupture with the past promoted by Conceptual art could be seen in the attempt to react from the inside to a process of enchainment, with regard to artwork and artist, which was previously considered as a matter of fact.

The stuff is transformed when it is transposed into imposed “higher” values. First, a gallery, then perhaps a museum, and further extended by translation into the data of art information when reproduced in an art magazine; at which point the artist, seeing the transposition, is pissed off. As time is transposed, money is transposed into private worth for the artist and “high” *quality* for the collector and art critic in the business society. The art world is a collection of people who dig the dirt, or pay the artist to dig it for him, to get a “piece” of the action – the games people play – for personal fun and profit<sup>47</sup>.

Following what Dan Graham affirms in the quotation above, it appears clear that Conceptual art tries to achieve a pure art – not abstract - without a material base, only directing the conception of ideas. Conceiving ideas eludes all the problematics inherent in the art object, that is to say to elude the intricate yoke of transposition that reduces the importance and the meaning of artist's work. Conceptual art replaces the principles of aesthetics, the latter considered as theoretical investigations historically subsumed under an area of philosophical investigations, in the way the artist proposes the aesthetics of his work through a constant and accurate self-reflection on the validity of his own proper ideas.

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46 Gregory Battock, “Painting is obsolete”, *New York Free Press* (23 January 1969), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 89.

47 Dan Graham, “Art workers' coalition open hearing presentation”, *Art Workers' Coalition, An Open Hearing on the Subject: What Should Be the Program of the Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform and to Establish the Program of an Open Art Workers' Coalition* (New York: Art Workers' Coalition, 1969), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 92.

We could thus interpret the dematerialization as the obvious continuity in those guidelines followed by Conceptual artists, which aim to reform the basis of aesthetics. Hence, propositions about and inquires into aesthetics becomes at one and the same time Conceptual work of art (anti)aesthetic value and material core.

In this scenario *Index* emerges as an artwork and *Indexes* allow *forming* an exhibition. In 1972 the group Art & Language is invited to participate in “Documenta 5” and then a series of “Indexes” allocates in one of the room of the Museum Friedericianum at Kassel. This is the first time a series of Art & Language “Indexes” is organized into public display, meaning with this that the art world for the first time furnishes the condition for exhibiting “Indexes”<sup>48</sup>. We could briefly consider *Index* as the “purposive activity of Art & Language”<sup>49</sup> group, whereby it intended conducting an analysis of art's *Indexicality* - its own idiom, its language or languages, “on the evidence provided by accumulation of written material”<sup>50</sup>. *Index* is a deep linguistic research promoted by the group, which in a way lies outside the general Conceptualist context, because it moves forward the use of conversation and written words adopted by several Conceptual artists. As Charles Harrison affirms, “the implication of Art & Language's position [*is*] rather that, if a tendency existed such as [*has*] been observed in Modernist theory, and if self-consciousness as regards style and representation [*are*] distinguishing aspects of modern art, then the consequence to be drawn [*is*] that the analysis of linguistic idiom [*will have*] to be faced not as a voluntary form of avant-gardism but as condition of modernity”<sup>51</sup>. The “Indexes” so conceived and structured occupy the space of art with a specificity that is antagonistic to a normal aesthetic content. In this regard, the room assigned to the Art & Language group, composed of four walls, is papered with a form of index that lists the texts contained in eight file cabinets according to their alphabetical and numerical designations. Furthermore, a list of 87 separate citations *re-presents* the possible relationship between the listed texts. To find a key to reading these 87 citations there are three different symbols, used as explanations of the relations obtaining between the various texts. The symbol “+” signifies a relationship of compatibility between a given pair of texts, while “-” signifies a relationship of incompatibility, and “T” signifies that documents that should presumably have a close connection between each other actually do not have in common the same logical/ethical space and therefore cannot be compared in advance of some notional

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48 See Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, p. 64.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid. Italics mine.

transformation<sup>52</sup>. An “Alternate Map” for the *Index* mapped through a matrix the reading from one citation with the other eight-six.

According to us, the “Index” installation at “Documenta 5” represents the highest stage of dematerialization in the field of works of art. The so-called art arena is transformed into an investigative-logical space where the figurative has as little room as possible. Attention is shifted to materials, nevertheless considered as intellectual materials. In this respect, the aesthetic participation of the spectator is reduced almost to null because the possibility to “look at” is reduced and what is clearly visible are solely the cabinets containing texts and the printed wallpapering.

“Index” conceives the spectator as “a reader and potential interlocutor – and thus as the type of an engaged and intellectually versatile public quite distinct from that constituency of detached and self-sufficient beholders which was predicated in mainstream [...] art and theory, and from that constituency of professional and knowing curators”<sup>53</sup>.

The spectator is no longer considered as an external observer. The suppression in this meaning of the notion of beholder<sup>54</sup> is an essential part of the aesthetic withdrawal of Conceptual art, as testified by the example of the Art and Language group. The disposition of conceptual artworks does not promote any aesthetic experience, but rather a cognitive exchange between different parts that in several and different forms stimulate an active intellectual participation. When the core of an artwork is conceptual and thus the idea is paramount of the work, the interrelationship between artist and spectator tears down those gnoseological divisions occurring within aesthetics, attaining a cooperative awareness that corresponds to the intellectual and cognitive function that art should have.

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52 See *Ibid.*, p. 65.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

54 We would like to refer for more information about the notion of “the suppression of the beholder” to *Ibid.*, pp. 29-63.

## 1.4 Catalysis

The aesthetics of the aesthetic withdrawal, as we defined the anti-aesthetic character of Conceptual art, supports a dematerialized art object. The idea is the machine that makes art; the object, in itself, is not longer meaningful. The elimination of the object as material identification of the work of art even entails a different evaluation of the importance of spectators. We have seen in the previous section how Art & Language group installation - "Index" - at "Documenta 5" aims to produce a deep active intellectual participation rather than merely aesthetic appreciation.

The work of art of the Conceptualist kind induces a form of catalysis, like that considered by Adrian Piper, that is to say an agent that encourages "a change in another entity (the viewer)"<sup>55</sup>. The consideration as concerns spectatorship takes place on another level compared to when the work of art was acknowledged as an external existence with separate and autonomous attributes. Conceptual art promotes an anti-spectatorship, or a participatory beholding, integrated in a wider process, which inwardly tries to build a bilateral communication. Obviously, communicative factors have been present in every aesthetic<sup>56</sup>; nevertheless, the Conceptual work of art is catalytic in the way art's activity is explicitly, and not only implicitly, based on the viewer's response<sup>57</sup>. In this respect, a work of art is conceived in a way that withdraws it from the isolation that occurred in traditional aesthetics, for contrarily allowing inferences by the viewer. With the notion of traditional aesthetics, we intend the theoretical and ontological consideration within art of the necessary separation between the artist, the artwork and the viewer.

The relationship between the artist and the viewer becomes with the advent of Conceptual art a reflective one, because the artist develops a work that deals with "the perceiver's standpoint" and because the perceiver becomes himself the "primary concern of the work"<sup>58</sup>. On the contrary, Modernism's promotion of discrete forms does not aim to generate any active inclusion, but is based more on a status of independence. This, as result of the assumption that the artist is separated and should keep himself separated from his work, strongly marks out a work of art's decline in relation to its own proper "potential strength as catalytic agent"<sup>59</sup>.

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55 Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968-1992, Volume I* (Cambridge: The MIT Press edition, 1996), p. 32.

56 Ibid., p. 34.

57 See Ibid., p. 32.

58 Ibid., p. 35.

59 Ibid., p. 33.



The tendency promoted by Conceptual art to *volatilize* an artwork, with regard to its material features, signifies that the cult of the object in its isolation and discrete form is surpassed by artist awareness to communicatively direct his work to an indefinite number of people that constitutes the “*idea of the public*”<sup>60</sup>.

Things [*exist*] in terms of what they [*can*] spark off in the body of society. [...] Of course, art has a social function and has more ways of being densely *aware*. [...] The work only exists to the extent that other people practice it<sup>61</sup>.

The social function of Conceptual work of art lies in the work of art's being potentially more democratic, since viewers deal with ideas and works of art are re-producible in art magazines, catalogues or books, with the possibility of reaching a wider audience in a faster way. Furthermore, a dematerialized object of art could easily be *internationalized* because there is no longer any physical or material limit to the circulation of it. Ideas can be easily carried forward in different contexts without requiring the presence of the artist, who, becoming ideas-producer, does not need to merchandise his name. The physical execution is either not carried out personally by the artist or is thoroughly theoretically meaningless. By so doing, the artist promotes a complete anonymity since he bases his activity on his cognitive ability.

Anonymity represents a rupture with the traditional and alienating aesthetic system composed by curator, galleries and museum and thus with an involvement of capitalistic kind within aesthetics. In this respect, Ian Burn affirms that “capitalism has created the most effective form of censorship ever: if something does not reach the market place (or any of its agencies), then it does not exist”<sup>62</sup>. When ideas represent the artwork, it means that there is no longer any “cultural confinement”<sup>63</sup> where the marketing rejects and disengages artworks from the outside world, for attaining a painful “aesthetic convalescence”<sup>64</sup>.

What mainly emerges in Conceptual art is the will to first and foremost found an interrelationship with the external, spectator and people in general, which become primarily

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60 Cildo Meireles, *Statements*, in “Cildo Meireles: IVAM Centre del Carme, 2 febrero/23 abril 1995”, (Barcelona: Generalitat Valenciana, Coselleria de Cultura, 1995), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 410.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 411. Italics mine.

62 Ian Burn, “The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (or the memoirs of an ex-conceptual artist)”, *Art and Text*, 1:1 (Fall 1981), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 393.

63 Robert Smithson, “Culture Confinement”, originally published in the “Documenta 5” exhibition catalogue (Kassel, 1972), subsequently in *Artforum*, 11:2 (October 1972), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 280-282.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

considered when an artwork is conceived.

Furthermore, the demand for the acquisition of *traditional artistic skills*, of any sort of skills, is devalued within Conceptual art<sup>65</sup>. The artist works and reflects on society like anyone else interested in investigating the causes of its structure and order; an analysis of society which runs parallel to the attempt for finding a resolution within a context of social crisis<sup>66</sup>.

The real value of Conceptual art lies, according to Ian Burn, in its progressive and transitional character, which marks out the orientation towards the inquiry and the developing of society, interrelated to a reflective collective participation<sup>67</sup>.

Art is an inevitable part of the larger order of society, its language and world shared and interdependent with the language, “vision” and stuff of its specific Time, Life, place and function. [...] What does the artist have in common with his friends, his public, his society? Information about himself, themselves and all ourselves – which [...] shares in both categories as it has past, present and future time/space<sup>68</sup>.

The content of the work of art is directed to other persons, who can use it for exchanging ideas. No borders are instituted between the work of art and the external, but rather a primary unavailability to aesthetic discourses or outer inferences such as those of market and institutions. The inquisitive character of the work is based on its being non-artistic constituted<sup>69</sup> or aesthetically inadequate, and in so doing the artwork aims to be both open and shareable by everyone wanting to be involved in a logic of mutually interdependency.

The social function of Conceptual art furthermore lies in the fact that notions such as those of spectator, public, viewer or beholder are freed from the theoretical and hierarchical oppression of their traditional aesthetic significance. The artist in fact no longer works under the myth of defining himself and his time through his work, but rather attempts to inquire into society and is defined by his relationship with the social.

The artist is not a machine; the artist shares in mankind's various media of expression having no better “secrets” or necessarily seeing more inside or outside of things than any other person. [...] We must go back to the old notion of “good work” - i.e. art to go public<sup>70</sup>.

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65 Ian Burn, “The Sixties': Crisis and Aftermath (or the memoirs of an ex-conceptual artist)”, p. 397.

66 See Ibid., p. 405.

67 See Ibid.

68 Dan Graham, “Art workers' coalition open hearing presentation”, p. 94.

69 See Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, p. 56.

70 Dan Graham, “Art workers' coalition open hearing presentation”, p. 94.

The artist addresses himself to the spectator mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, traditional aesthetics does not intend the spectator as an active participant, but rather as a part of a pre-established order, which is something that Conceptual art totally avoids, contrarily developing an intellectual and theoretical dialogue with no intermediaries. On the other hand, the artist of Conceptualist kind finds himself in the position of a conscious observer of the outside world that he tries to intellectually and actively inquire, claim and revolutionize. In this regard, it could be said that the artist shares this position with that of the spectator.

It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual artist is out to bore the viewer. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to expressionist art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art<sup>71</sup>.

The trajectory of Conceptual art moves on different levels, following a *pars destruens* with respect to traditional aesthetic contents, and a *pars construens* concerning those changes within the social and society that could be only attained collectively.

It is undoubted the case that art movements break with the past and thus assume a de-constructive character. Nevertheless, Conceptual art, both as tendency and within its planning, aims to totally de-construct the whole aesthetic basis, supporting a completely new, both philosophically and theoretically, aesthetic domain. Hence, Conceptual art claims to build a participated and progressive theoretical awareness based on an intellectual interrelationship between the work of the artist and the spectator.

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71 Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", p. 12.

# Dialectical fear in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

## Premise

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is without any doubt one of the most important contributions to aesthetics in modern times and one of the most interesting critiques of art. The approach to an posthumous opus of an author such as Theodor W. Adorno obviously brings about several problems. Adorno left unfinished the work, which was edited and published one year later his death by Adorno's wife Gretel Adorno and his student Rolf Tiedemann; we also know that he did not work continually on the text. However, systematization, a purposefulness and a conceptual sharpness in investigating the matter of the inquiry are easily traceable in the text.

Despite all hermeneutical and philosophical problems that could be arisen within the consideration *Aesthetic Theory*, we do intend to analyse the main features of the work in relation to our discourse regarding Conceptual art. We think Adorno's work offers a deep critical engagement with philosophical aesthetics and with the art tradition, which allows us to affirmatively consider *Aesthetic Theory* as an open project of critical theory.

In this regard, that is to say in its being a *dynamic work*, we will not follow *Aesthetics Theory* in its arrangement and thus not proceed punctually inch by inch from its structure. We are going to enlighten those analyses present in the text that we believe are useful for defining Adorno's standpoint compared to what Conceptual art promotes and claims within the aesthetic field. We will especially take into consideration what Adorno considers as the revolt against its own concept conceived by art, and his claim for *true* art which displays its truth content in opposition to an enchained and unfree society.

We would even like to stress that, unlike the chapters concerning Umberto Eco and Jacques Rancière, we will first analyse Adorno's reflections about art's social character, then examine his position on art's substance, in particular with respect to the notion of disartization or desubstantialization<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> We are going to analyse in 2.3 - Adorno contra: *Die Entkunstung* in the new art - what Adorno intends when defining art's disartization or desubstantialization, using the notion of *Entkunstung* which, according to Robert Hullot-Kenter, literally means the destruction of art's quality as art.

## 2.1 Art in the aporetic solution

The evolution concerning art in the modern age and later in the revolutionary art movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century makes Adorno wonder “whether art is still possible”<sup>73</sup>. Hegel already formulated the theorization of the possible death of art; nevertheless, Adorno renegotiates the double character of the Hegelian philosophy<sup>74</sup>, proposing on the contrary transitoriness as art's own substance<sup>75</sup>. Transitoriness, according to Adorno, marks the possibility not of rebirth but of another passage that includes the previous even in the occurrence of this exclusion. Transitoriness should therefore be intended as an ontological self-evidence that historically occurs in art. In this respect, we could affirm that art finds its own proper meaning in liquid laws which do not establish any invariances, insomuch that Adorno claims that “art can only be understood by its laws of movement”<sup>76</sup>.

In addition, it is important to point out that art's denouncement of autonomy from the external objectivity is to be considered as part of the definition of art as such. According to Adorno, art has in fact always striven for its own autonomy; however, its *meta-physical*<sup>77</sup> nature has to relate to its opposite, that is to say the empirical. It is by virtue of the separation between the artwork and empirical reality that the former achieves the consideration of its own existence as “life sui generis”<sup>78</sup>. Thereby, considering the demarcation line between art and empirical, it is possible on the one hand to recognize the work of art's attempt to dissolve and abjure the empirical always subsumed under it, and on the other hand artwork's need of the external empirical for attaining a heightened order of existence.

Art's foundation is based on the dualistic struggle between autonomy and heteronomy, which obliges us to consider that “art and artworks [...] are perishable [*so much so that*] admixed with art's own concept is the ferment of its own abolition”<sup>79</sup>. The latter statement shows the gnoseological difficulties occurring in the analysis of art and its substance; hence, it appears self-evident for Adorno “that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its

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73 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. and trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 1.

74 With double character of the Hegelian philosophy, Adorno means that art's transitoriness and its possible death is intimately in accord with his system. At p. 4: “That Hegel considered art transitory while all the same chalking it up to absolute spirit stands in harmony with the double character of his system”.

75 See *Ibid.*, p.4

76 *Ibid.*

77 We do want, using the term meta-physical, just consider art's own discourse as something that tries to overcome its strictly factual nature.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 5

79 *Ibid.* Italics mine.

inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist”<sup>80</sup>.

The quotient of comprehension thus lies in the subtle ontic distinction inherent in art, since art is undoubtedly in relation to reality, but only within the attempt to constantly regress from it. The two forms of organization, i.e. art and reality, are indeed different and they communicate in the effort of non-communicating. The silence of the artwork is communicative because it requires reflection on its disposition to transcend the empirical reality; at the same time the empirical relates itself to the silence of art by proposing a constant counterbalance, based on its circular identification, to art's structural non-identical givenness. “Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience”<sup>81</sup>.

The model proposed by Adorno rejects, on the one hand, any form of rationalism and idealism that merely offers an exclusive top-down theorization concerning art and, on the other hand, any form of mimetic function that ignores the importance of art's theoretical impact with reality. In this respect, what Adorno elaborates is, following what affirmed by Peter Osborne, a form of *materialist metaphysics of modernity*<sup>82</sup>.

Adorno stresses in his analysis the relationship between the factuality of the artwork, due to the material attachment it has, with the consideration of it as phenomenon - that is to say as a product of intelligibility subsumed under a factual actuality -. This means that the *in se* of art doesn't exist for itself - *per se*, but it is a modulation of different stages, through which it denies the premise of a single origin. This modulation of different stages marks not only out the refusal of absolute criteria in investigating the aesthetic field, but rather aims to render evident the work of art's double-edged character and its phenomenological paradox.

[The] artifactual more does not in itself guarantee the metaphysical substance of art. That substance could be totally null, and still the artworks could posit a more as what appears. Artworks become artworks in the production of this more; they produce their own transcendence, rather than being its arena, and thereby they once again become separated from transcendence. The actual arena of transcendence in artworks is the nexus of their elements<sup>83</sup>.

The *more* depends on artwork's internal dialectics that dialectically refers to the external. It

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80 Ibid., p. 1.

81 Ibid., p. 5.

82 Peter Osborne, “Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism: the problem of a 'postmodern' art”, in *The problems of modernity: Adorno and Benjamin* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.

83 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.104.

means that art develops itself in two directions that occur simultaneously: it demands to be unrelated to the fluid reality of being, though in re-presentation of that, and it engages in a radical attempt to attest its overview as the real one. Artworks are thus closed to the outside and nevertheless they aim to explain, within the absoluteness they intend to have gained and regain over and over, relations with the outside and its own proper relation with empirical reality.

Nevertheless, despite their closeness artworks cannot avoid coming into contact with the external givenness because of their materiality and factuality. This proposes an ontological tension which is peculiar to art and represents art's *raison d'être*.

They [*artworks*] are in need of continuity and capable of it by virtue of their incompleteness and, often, by their significance. It is as a result of their own constitution that they go over into their other, find continuance in it, want to be extinguished in it, and in their demise determine what follows them. This immanent dynamic is, in a sense, a higher-order element of what artworks are<sup>84</sup>.

Through the use of the term *immanent* Adorno resolutely maintains the primal form of the artwork, though stressing at one time artwork's externalization. He analyses the factuality within art, considering that as part of a gnoseological evolution defined by the artwork in itself. The *practice* displays the *rationale* of the artwork, in the meaning that it is only through a process of material unification that art aims to achieve its metaphysical role in relation to external objectivity. This, undoubtedly, marks out that we cannot choose only one side of the topic, erasing the other possible manifestations. In this respect, Adorno is careful not to give more value to one aspect than to the other, even because he consciously proposes the multiplicity underlying the unity of work of art<sup>85</sup>, defining work of art as an extant paradigm in becoming. This is the reason why, for Adorno, even material takes part in developing the phenomena of art; a material that, according to him, should be considered as “thoroughly historical”<sup>86</sup>.

Historicizing the material and immersing it into the flow of intelligibility, surely represents a form of declination of artwork's factuality that gives even technicality a reason to be just in the way it is. The latter could be mistaken for an idealistic perspective in which a general

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84 Ibid., p. 232. Italics mine.

85 To not incur in problem of misunderstanding of any kind, we would quote Adorno who declares that (p. 389): “artworks are not unity in the multiplicity but rather the unity of the one and of the many.

86 Ibid., p. 195.

purposefulness has to be individuated and to be seen in all the occurrences. Nevertheless, this is not what Adorno wants to achieve. It is in fact indubitable that the work of art renders itself only in concretion and that concretion is its univocal articulation, apart from the consideration of material's intelligibility. Concretion is in fact one stage of the process in which randomness and causality fuse together for constituting the immanent logic of artwork, so much as “in artwork the element that precedes their fixation as things constantly breaks through the thing-character”<sup>87</sup>.

The truth of artworks depends on whether they succeed at absorbing into their immanent necessity what is not identical with the concept, what is according to that concept accidental. The purposefulness of artworks requires the purposeless, with the result that their own consistency is predicated on the illusory; semblance is indeed their logic. To exist, their purposefulness must be suspended through its other<sup>88</sup>.

In this respect, we could affirm that Adorno asserts a second order thing-character whereby the humiliating dichotomy between intuition and concept, residue of a petit-bourgeois model where “appearance is to be purely intuitable and the concept purely conceptual”<sup>89</sup>, is overtaken.

For Adorno, the work of art's thing-character outlines the work of art's own proper development, within its constitution, as monad. This depends on art's assumption for a tautological legitimation, which should help in overcoming the possibility of its disappearance in semblance. According to Adorno, it is undoubtedly the case that art has always to confront itself with the possibility of its death; that within art there is a continuous and constant either theoretical or empirical dissolution, though in the desideratum of homeostasis<sup>90</sup>; that art tends in a way to suppress itself declaring the absence of a legacy from the past and not proposing any legacy for the future – since there will be no art after the current one. In this endless dialectical friction art finds the necessity of forming itself as monad. We could then affirm

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87 Ibid., p. 130.

88 Ibid., p. 134.

89 Ibid., p. 127. In this case, we would like to bring the attention to the differences between the English translation and the original German. In the English translation it has been used the adjective *philistine* to denote the dominant model – “The dominant model is philistine”, while in the original German it has been used the adjective *spießbürgerlich*: “Das herrschende Modell ist spießbürgerlich”, Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 7* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 150. We give the preference to original German, translating *spießbürgerlich* with *petit-bourgeois*, which nevertheless occurs several times in *Aesthetic Theory*.

90 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 180. For further information concerning the concept of homeostasis we refer to “Paralipomena”, pp. 374-375.



that artwork's claim of being a monad depends on its own proper immanent logic and *raison d'être*.

The artwork is both the result of the process and the process itself at a standstill. It is what at its apogee rationalist metaphysics proclaimed as the principle of the universe, a monad: at once a force field and a thing. Artworks are closed to one another, blind, and yet in their hermeticism they represent what is external<sup>91</sup>.

In its autarchical absolutization artwork intends to pose the immanent nexus with and within the otherness, though its lack of windows<sup>92</sup>. Nevertheless, this antagonistic and problematic movement should not be intended as the product of an ultimate resolution. The paradoxical voluntary privation and the blindness in front of the external and to one another, does not entirely depend on a reduction to its own meaning and structure. According to Adorno, artworks' constitution in a monadic form is problematic because “their stringency and internal structuration are borrowed from their intellectual domination of reality”<sup>93</sup>. This means that a work of art is the interpretation of a matter of fact that comes from the external, afterwards becoming an *imago* re-presented of the latter. In this respect, Adorno affirms that “the monadological character of artworks would not have formed without the guilt of the monstrous monadological character of society”<sup>94</sup>. It is, in fact, by means of the ultimate irreconcilability within an unreconciled society that the mimetical character of artwork and the rationale of its results prove to be ultimately irreconcilable<sup>95</sup>.

The double-edged character of art is therefore related to the double-edged character of society. The monadological character of artwork, its *principium individuationis* of it, has then to confront and combine itself intersubjectively with the external; otherwise it should be left, according to Adorno, only in its windowless solipsism. For Adorno, it is not only self-evident that art is the product of a process but it appears also socially related. In fact he affirms that “art's social fate is not simply imposed on it externally, but is equally the unfolding of art's own concept”<sup>96</sup>.

We find here the first *dissonances* between Adorno and Conceptual art, because, as previously seen, Conceptual art never intends to determine the work of art as autonomous or

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91 See *Ibid.*, p. 237.

92 *Ibid.*

93 *Ibid.*

94 *Ibid.*, p. 389.

95 Peter Osborne, “Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism”, p. 33.

96 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 391.

enhance its factuality. The double-edged character referred by Adorno to the artwork is simply negated by Conceptual artists when they rather developed a proper cultural activism in relation to a critique of society, which is subsumed under a theoretical work disenchanting by concretion. Although this is for Adorno a way to better define singularity of works of art, it appears contradictory, rather than only constitutively aporetic, the attempt to confine the object of art in its essential factuality, as monad. It is undoubtedly so that on one side Adorno enlightens art's resistance to every kind of domination and this allergy "to any relapses into magic"<sup>97</sup>. Nevertheless, it appears that it is by means of an involuntary obligation, a quasi-constriction that art is intertwined with the external. Conceptual art solves the problems of being entwined in heteronomy by not underlining any autonomous character. Rather, Conceptual art proposes, as affirmed by Peter Osborne, "the negation of established modes of autonomy of the artwork"<sup>98</sup>, which means that the constitutive aporia that Adorno sees in the work of art is surpassed and overtaken by a priori negating its existence as an ontological feature. The character of unity and self-sufficiency of the work of art is a product of the withdrawal from the aesthetic context, but never oriented to determine an autarchical absolutization in relation to the monadological character of the artwork as so assumed by Adorno. Surely, Conceptual art claims a certain amount of autonomy with respect to artworks, but merely in matter of contrasting the aesthetic of administration, for "making the middle-man unnecessary"<sup>99</sup> and withdraws itself from marketing consumption.

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97 Ibid., 70.

98 *Conceptual Art*, ed. by Peter Osborne, p. 18.

99 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, p. 39

## 2.2 Art as *fait social*

According to Adorno artwork is the result of social labor<sup>100</sup>. This, has indeed to be related to artwork's dialectical constitution, that is to say the prior consideration of the ontological distance between the itself of the artwork and the otherness of the external. Artwork, as product of social labor, de facto communicates with the empirical experience it obstinately rejects and, at the same time, the latter allows artwork to extract its own proper content [*Inhalt*]<sup>101</sup>. Artwork, within its double-edged movement to empirical reality, naturally devolves its unity and completeness to the external, nevertheless obeying those windowless monadological principles by which it constitutes itself. In this respect, Adorno affirms that the artwork has a purposefulness without practical purpose since the relation between its own content and reality follows a roundabout path. It seems quite clear that in this sense Adorno even aims to drain of meaning the concept, promoted by Kant, of a teleology of modelled art organism, necessary theoretical presupposition for beauty's paradoxical purposefulness without a purpose<sup>102</sup>.

We could then affirm that the objectification of reality in artwork is bound to empirical reality; otherwise art would not exist and would not have any content. In this regard, Adorno shows a determinate irreconcilability<sup>103</sup> concerning the possibility for art to establish and conceive by itself its own proper concept. Semblance is artwork's logic and its necessity is immanent. This determinate irreconcilability shows on one side a parallel and on the other side an opposition to what Conceptual art attempts to conceive. Conceptual art in fact, in accordance to what is affirmed by Adorno, promotes that “what is to be seen is something done [... *and*] illusion must be eliminated”<sup>104</sup>. However, Conceptual art is resolute to conceive artwork's unnecessary objectification, that is to say to not derive artwork's content from

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100 The concept of *social labor* concerning artwork is not in reality explained in all its possible externalization but only emerges in the first chapter “Art, Aesthetic and Society”. However, we think it is a concept that could be easily understood following Adorno's text.

101 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 5. In *Aesthetic Theory* the use of the term *content* generates some problems because of the double significance it has in German. In this respect, we would refer to what the translator (Robert Hullot-Kentor) affirms in the note 7, p. 19: “[For the English “content” German has both “Inhalt” and “Gehalt”, which, in aesthetic contexts, serve to distinguish the idea of thematic content or subject matter from that of content in the sense of import, essence, or substance of a work. This distinction, however, is not terminologically fixed in German or in Adorno's writings. One concept may well be used in place of the other]”.

102 See *Ibid.*, p. 185.

103 Peter Osborne, “Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism”, p. 32.

104 Georges Boudaille, “Entretien avec Daniel Buren: L'art n'est plus justifiable ou les points sur les ‘i’”, in *Les Lettres Francaise* (Paris, 13 March 1968), trans. by Alexander Alberro, “Interview with Daniel Buren: art is no longer justifiable or no longer setting the record straight”, here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 68. Italics mine.

semblance since the object, as presentation of forms from which derive contents, has no longer any function<sup>105</sup>.

For Adorno, art's mechanism for the determination of reality is subsumed under a social agreement, in the way the artwork refers to that social agreement on which society is based, though opposing to that its own unity<sup>106</sup>. Nevertheless, the society based on a social agreement tries to deprive of significance the unity of the artwork, since it foresees an intentional shifting within the consideration of artifactual as a product of subjectiveness.

In its development of the *in se* the artwork has to confront with the premise, which stands a priori, of a society that defines artworks as products of individualized subjectivities. De facto society, proposing a strict dichotomization between the two categories of universal - or totality - with regard to society and particular - or subjectivity - with regard to works of art, aims to strip the latter of their consistency and unity. The maximisation of subjectiveness is indeed intentionally adduced with respect to artworks, by side of an exaltation of a private individuality from which works of art's meaningfulness derives. We could consider this as the logical consequence of the theorization promoted by a bourgeoisie that follows those principles and guidelines by which it aims to denote and characterize society.

In this context, it appears ineluctable that the hyperbolic concept of "genius" results to be an historical residue of romantic derivation, used for appeasing the alienation present in the capitalist society. Capitalist society in fact intentionally draws the equation between the subject and the individual, causing in this sense the *fetishization* of the idea of genius<sup>107</sup>. Adorno contrarily claims that the "subjective process of the work's production is, with regard to its private dimension, a matter of indifference"<sup>108</sup>. The individual has its place in the object's constitution; however, this does not imply overwhelming the meaning of the individual by antagonistic significances.

The labor in the artwork becomes social by way of the individual, though the individual need not be conscious of society; perhaps this is all the more true the less the individual is conscious of society. The intervening individual subject is scarcely more than a limiting value, something minimal required by the artwork for its crystallization<sup>109</sup>.

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105 See *Ibid.*, p. 69.

106 See even our considerations with respect to Jacques Rancière definition of the concepts of *consensus* and *dissensus*, later in 4.2, "Art's politics in the aesthetic regime", pp. 66-71.

107 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 223-224.

108 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 220.

We could at this stage wonder where lies the social character in matters of art and artworks because it is undoubtedly true that, according to Adorno, art bears a socio-political meaning. Presuming that art produces “things among things”<sup>110</sup> and gives itself in the appearance, Adorno declares that this movement to reality constitutes the spirit of the artwork. In Adorno the concept of spirit should not be understood within the Hegelian terminology, where spirit with regard to art is “deducible from the system as one level of its manifestation and [*is*], as it [*was*], univocal in potentially”<sup>111</sup>. For Adorno, spirit is something related to the artwork in the way the latter appears and presents itself; thus, it has to be intended within the dynamic evolution and formation of possibility. Spirit lies in the conscious consequence of being part of an act, namely in the work of art's concretion. In a tautological way Adorno considers the spirit of artworks as “the spirit of the thing itself that appears through the appearance”<sup>112</sup>.

As product of the social labor of spirit, art is always implicitly a *fait social*. [...] Art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies its position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful”, it criticizes society by merely existing<sup>113</sup>.

We could affirm that in this sense Adorno proposes the artwork, in its immanent antisocial concretion, as able to wrest itself from society's possession of it. However, the work of art cannot be completely undifferentiated and separated from society. It is in fact due to artwork's immersion in society, though in its autonomy, the possibility of the former being deprived of its own proper content by the latter is not precluded. This underlines art's constitutive precariousness: art's autonomy is precarious in so far as if art had been entirely absolute and stable among other things, it would not have been possible as art. Furthermore, if society in its ultimate model of domination and control were completely represented in artwork, the latter would either disappear or not have its social function. The introjection in its monadic form makes the sociality of artwork.

What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its opinions. Its historical gesture repels empirical reality, of which artworks are nevertheless parts in that they are things.

Insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness<sup>114</sup>

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110 Ibid., p. 114.

111 Ibid., p. 119. Italics mine.

112 Ibid., p. 120.

113 Ibid., p. 296.

114 Ibid., p. 297.

Artworks of necessity obey temporal and spatial laws that presume the possible fallibility in the future of art's statement at a defined moment. Works of art cannot go beyond it and they have thus to accept what we could call the intervention of history in their social opposition to society, by means of their functionlessness. Artworks' antagonistic impact, open to society in their closeness to it, has to count on the possibility of being immersed in the harmonisation advocated by history, through which artworks merely exist in their fetishistic character, as consumer goods. The neutralization is the price, Adorno affirms, artworks have to pay for their autonomy, interrelated with the damage to their truth content when they are entombed in the pantheon of cultural commodities<sup>115</sup>.

The work of art is also as well damaged and neutralized when society covers artifactual of values it does not properly have, that is to say when society ideologizes work of art, or rather when work of art's non-communicative communication is wounded by ideology. In artwork there is a core that could affirmatively be defined as ideological, based on the self-assertion by which artwork explains its truth content<sup>116</sup>. Nevertheless, there is an onto-phenomenological distinction between the two: the ideology present in society, considered as necessary social semblance, can only produce a deformed image of the true; whereas, artwork's ideological background is to be viewed within the social critique of the ideological and therefore never as mechanical reinterpretation or reiteration of it. We could then argue that ideology undermines art's externalization into reality and threatens art's truth content. The artwork does not need to defend itself through an ideological opinion but only in production; in production it finds its interest in decoding society<sup>117</sup>.

It implicitly follows that even the political, as well as the ideological, is defined by art refusal of every kind of politicization. We could in fact consider that politics, operating a political division, in reality oppresses the work of art's concrete freedom. Hence, when an artwork declares itself political this signifies that it does not have any political significance. The dictatorship of critical aesthetics that aims to find participative political meaning in relation to work of art derives from an external wish to charge art into something that in reality should be banned from art's field. According to Adorno, the only way a work of art has of being political and behaving politically is to refuse any prior political significance.

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115 Ibid., p. 299.

116 It is undoubted that the category of "truth content" - which has been defined as a tricky category - has a particular function in Adorno that surely gives the sense of his chiasmic and complex dialectics. However, it is not our intention to go deeper and analyse the matter of the inquire. What is of interest to us is the parallelism between ideology and artwork, within the consideration that the latter, as object, has its own truth content, depending of its material existence, not bound to any transcendental categories.

117 See Ibid., p. 299.

It holds that all art, the negation of the reality principle, protests against the image of the father and is to this extent revolutionary. This objectively implies the political participation of the unpolitical. So long as social imbrication [*is*] not yet so agglomerated that form itself [*becomes*] subversive protest, the relation of artworks to existing social reality [*is*] less contentious. Without altogether surrendering to this reality, art [*is*] able to appropriate social elements without any great to-do, to continue clearly to resemble society and to communicate with it<sup>118</sup>.

Whether art is intimately abreast of perpetual attacks from different fronts, enlightening at the same time its own perishable condition due to its own status, we could wonder how art should react when it becomes aware of what is at its side. It is in fact indubitable that in the age of the culture industry there is a strict administrative control over artworks. It is moreover evident that in the mass-production era, everything becomes merely goods to be consumed by customers. Furthermore, a society that aims to form a *one dimensional man*<sup>119</sup>, undeniably represents a society that dis-acquaints man from thinking beyond the primal ego, not allowing the latter to ontologically surpass the mere reproduction of its own proper ego's life.

Whether artist presumably has in any case to individualize his works for selling them as consumer goods, enabling visionary art-dealers and critics of every kind twist them into commodious merchandising for galleries, what is the possible claim from art's side to defend itself? If the only reaction is to concretely display silentness, as for instance John Cage does with his "4' 33'", wherein lies the affirmative concretion that Adorno thinks is necessary with regard of an artwork for surviving art's annihilation and fetishization promoted by monopolistic capitalism? What is, according to Adorno, the social function and responsibility of the new art?

What is true in the most recent rebellion against art is that - in the face of the absurdly incessant scarcity, the expanding and self-reproducing barbarism, the ever present threat of total catastrophe - phenomena that are not preoccupied with the maintenance of life take on a ridiculous aspect. Whereas artists can afford to be indifferent to a cultural mechanism that in any case swallows up everything and excludes nothing, not even what is relatively good, this mechanism nevertheless tinges everything that thrives within it with something of it subjective in difference [...]. The abolition of art in a half-barbaric society that is tending toward total barbarism makes itself barbarism's social partner<sup>120</sup>.

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118 Ibid., pp. 331-332. Italics mine.

119 We refer here to Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (London: Routledge, 1991).

120 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 317 and p. 327.

It is indubitable that Adorno seems not to have seen any kind of advancement in art, but rather considers the latter as the social partner of the half-barbaric society. Art's abolition of art is, according to Adorno, art's greatest mistake, foretelling a sort of catastrophe. Adorno does not accept any great to-do of art<sup>121</sup>, because he theoretically considers art as ontologically distant from any active participation into the flow of events. This evaluation is, according to us, quite reductive of the attempt art historically tries to achieve, the opposite to the direction of Conceptual art.

Conceptual art produces works that are “explicitly focused on political-ideological conflicts and promote awareness of particular alternative or subaltern ideological position”<sup>122</sup>. This means that art finds at this stage its *raison d'être*, or using Adorno's term, its truth content, by participating in a social opposition to society, developing a discursive disenchantment from the position, in concretion, it should have. Art is by Conceptual art abolished because of its functionlessness in relation to the development of society.

The dialectics of the artwork that Adorno finds for clarifying the concrete opposition to capitalist way of phagocytosing artistic expression is by forgetting the capacity for analysis that art and artist uses for compelling a change in society. It is this lack of belief in art's progressive opposition to domination's system that makes Adorno affirm that “the [*current*] situation of art, which has lost any sense of art's very *raison d'être*, turns to the past in the hope of finding the concept of art, which retrospectively acquires a sort of unity”<sup>123</sup>. The concept of art cannot, according to Adorno, be the result of analyses promoted by the artist himself through his theoretical awareness, but rather the artist is confined to produce factual works of art at the disposal of the theory of art<sup>124</sup>.

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121 See *Ibid.*, p. 332.

122 See Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p. 19.

123 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 342. Italics mine.

124 See *Ibid.*



### 2.3 Adorno *contra*: *Die Entkunstung*<sup>125</sup> in the new art

For Adorno, art is and has to be a fact and its own responsibility is subsumed under the principles of factuality. There is nothing more art can do, through its systematization as artwork, in posing any sort of inquiry, but rather the more of work of art lies in its concretion that leads to work of art's own proper rationale. Founding its communication in a non-communicative relation, proposing its openness as a result of its closeness, art traces the peculiarity of its own proper theoretical meaning. Politicization in matters of art, as tendency to enlarge itself to the size of society, is to be seen in production's internal historicization and in the work of art's monadological anti-sociality. Furthermore, it could be affirmed that art's anti-traditional and anti-aesthetic character is within its own law of movement, which represents the cornerstone of its inner dialectics and is as such historically considered. In addition, it seems to be clear that art's perpetual, rather existential, claim of its death is due to its constitutive windowless absolutism.

According to Adorno, art's being-for-other is within not being-for-other. The interrelation between art and external reality, although initially promoted by art itself, de facto increases the character of fetish in matters of artwork. Society always aims to *fetishize* artwork, depriving the latter of its value for intentionally rendering the work of art merely a commodity. Historically, this is something that occurs, though in different meanings, from classical time until the modern day, passing through the bourgeoisie in the modern age and the late-capitalism<sup>126</sup>.

Adorno is aware of the decisiveness of culture industry to totally administrate and control art, considering art as a residue of the interfaced standardized society in which no distinction between social life and art should exist. In this respect, we could see how Adorno's instances are to some extent in relation to what Conceptual art points out when affirming that “art is only one item in the dangerous commodities being circulated in [...] society”<sup>127</sup> and that Conceptualist works of art represent a rejection of the commodity form of art confined within

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125 Even in this occasion we would like to stress the inappropriate English translation with regard to the term *Entkunstung*, which let us to give the preference for the title of this section to the original German. *Entkunstung* has been translated with *deasthetization*, while, according to us, it would have been better translated with *disartization* - as in the Italian edition, where it uses the term *disartizzazione* -. Peter Osborne, in “Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism”, uses instead the term *desubstantialization* for translating *Entkunstung*.

A more complete delineation of *Entkunstung* as concept is present in Theodor W. Adorno *Prismen, Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, trans. by Samuel and Sherry Weber, *Prisms, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge: The Mitt Press, 1997).

126 See even Peter Osborne, “Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism”, p. 33.

127 Dan Graham, “Art workers' coalition open hearing presentation”, p. 93.

a museum and controlled by the external within the definition of a style<sup>128</sup>.

In this context, Adorno claims that the so-called *vested interests* promoted by the culture industry are in reality a way to control artworks, making them classifiable among other consumer goods. The *vested interests* functions by means of the correlation between a subjectivity and an object, in the way an object aims to have a subjective behaviour. Object attitude becomes of *vested interests* when it is forced to take into consideration the importance of being expressed subjectively, that is to say to promote a subjective involvement in its constitution. This is, according to Adorno, a way to humiliate the necessary differences between art and “life people” because “life people”, for attaining a *vested interest*, need to be consumed by art,. Hence, the subjective character of “life people” comes into artwork's object attitude, making people consume their life merely as artistic articulation <sup>129</sup>. The *vested interests* thus appear as the essential tricks used by the culture industry to twist the subjective aesthetic appreciation in matters of selling cultural commodities. It represents the ideological appropriation for commercial purposes supported by the culture industry for creating standardization, since the less of the mass is discriminated by means of a careful and appropriate use of the *vested interests*<sup>130</sup>.

In the era of overproduction, the need for non-differentiation is in relation with efforts to indistinguishableness that cover every kind of possible personal aesthetic dissatisfaction. The new art is, according to Adorno, not capable of helping contemporaneity to observe its mistakes, but rather what the new art shows is merely its regressive attitude. The new art does not have that appropriate critical impetus and does not strive for its autonomy, but barely serves cultural customers with an abstract being-for-other that is easily swallowed by monopolistic heteronomy. This occurs because of the new art's complicity with society as regards obtaining that reconciliation that should never be possible. Reconciliation with society that, according to Adorno, has fatal results for art since this relation, subsumed under the mimetic principle, is in reality a relation with an alienated society. Art should contrarily, as previously seen, conceive a determinate irreconcilability in relation to the external objectivity and at the same time not be involved with the explanation of its own concept<sup>131</sup>.

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128 See Victor Burgin, “Yes, difference again: what history plays the first time around as tragedy, it repeats as farce”, *Flash Art*, 143 (November-December 1988), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 428-430.

129 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 22.

130 See even Theodor W. Adorno (with the assistance of George Simpson), “On Popular Music”, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941, vol. IX), pp. 17-48.

131 See *Ibid.*, pp. 40-42.

Fantastic art in romanticism, [...] its traces in mannerism and the baroque, presents something nonexistent as existing. The fictions are modifications of empirical reality. The effect they produce is the presentation of the nonempirical as if it were empirical. This effect is facilitated because the fictions originate in the empirical. New art is so burdened by the weight of the empirical that its pleasure in fiction lapses. Even less does it want to reproduce the facade. By avoiding contamination from what simply is, art expresses it all the more inexorably<sup>132</sup>.

The rejection of the external intention to solely obtain lack of distinction could be overtaken, according to Adorno, by focusing on semblance, because art has its truth in semblance<sup>133</sup>. Thus, semblance as counterpart of the epiphenomenal advancement within the monopolistic society. In its essentiality, semblance bears its truth content in the representation of something illusionless. Contrarily, when the new art properly directs itself to the illusionless within society, it means that there is no longer any factual friction with the empirical, because art follows the abstractness present in alienated capitalist society. Adorno points therefore out that the possible failure of new art is subsumed under its evident openness; the openness to the empirical solely produces the annihilation of art's character as dialectical counter alter to the external reality. According to Adorno, this is in close relation to the repudiation of tradition promoted first by modern art and later by movements in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Repudiation of tradition, not of previous artistic practices, is meant as a refusal based on a privative concept. It is undoubted that the new, as aesthetic category, always occurs as critical progression that faces the lack of the old and thus serves as historical-gnoseological development, surpassing what inevitably cannot be perpetuated. Nevertheless, the anti-traditional critique ontologically saves the tradition through overcoming it. On the contrary, what has been stated from modernity onward is the gnoseological ban of the tradition, something that debouches into non-tradition. The non-tradition, according to Adorno, favours the monopolistic heteronomy of commodities systems in which the concept of the new, completely undressed of its own proper history and left ontologically alone, is functional to its exploitation by society within society's exploitation<sup>134</sup>.

The dialectic of modern art is largely that it wants to shake off its illusoriness like an animal trying to shake off its antlers. The aporias in the historical development of art cast their shadows over its possibility as whole. Even antirealist movements [...] [*take*] part in the rebellion against

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132 Ibid., p. 25

133 See Ibid., p. 174.

134 See Ibid., pp. 26-29.

semblance. [...] In the aftermath of that rebellion, however, artworks are at the point of regressing to the status of mere thing as if in punishment for the hubris of being more than art. [...] Many works in contemporary [...] painting, in spite of absence of representational objectivity and expression, would rightly be subsumed by the concept of a second naturalism<sup>135</sup>.

Claiming the regression to a mere thing means that art renounces its proper function and dissolves in the capitalistic non-differentiation. The only attempt left to art is to be commodity, something that in reality delineates the death of art. Art's possibility as art vanishes when art tries to be something else than what it is in accordance with its nature. The inquiry art tries to unfold, through broadening its own borders, results in failure and puts on evidence just the decay of its significance to null. The investigation of the aporia subsumed under its condition, renders art vulnerable and weak in front of external forces of an ideological kind compared to which it has no power. For Adorno, the conceptualization of art and the research to render evident to itself the substance of its own nature, though in its historical necessity, represents the catastrophe within art. The artwork that aspires to the absolute, that is to say when it aims to find a rational explanation of its own *in se*, in reality becomes irrational and can only meet the absolute commodity with no chance of overtaking the latter. When art concretely aims to shift itself to a transcendental and consequently ephemeral plan, this solely reifies the destruction of art's quality as art – *Entkusntung*, producing no damage to the external reification. In spite of in its feebleness, art has always established its power; nevertheless, its power disappears and decreases in the moment art radicalises itself and attempts to move in on its own subjectiveness, trying to clarify the ultimate meaning of its existence. This radicalization shows, according to Adorno, trace of a concrete solipsism, rendering clear that the sole way to participate within the annihilated society signifies to not be dangerous, but to decorate hotel rooms with its abstractness<sup>136</sup>.

This happens when art, according to Adorno, abandons its own proper form as semblance, but rather tries to define its own concept, through achieving its literalness. Art cannot live up to its concept because it should merely express its failure. Since art is not able to disclose its own unity through concepts, what is left to it is to perform the affirmative function of culture in bourgeoisie society<sup>137</sup>. In this regard, we could affirm that art's attempt to communicate with the external through literalness, and thus by dint of a language that in reality is not its own proper, clearly defines art's thorough openness to the external. However, according to Adorno,

135 Ibid., p. 136. Italics mine.

136 Ibid., p. 37.

137 See Peter Osborne, "Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism", p. 35.

the openness to the external should be based on art's closeness to it. When, on the contrary, art's inner discloses its own openness to the external literalness, becomes merely a letter among other letters. Adorno accurately describes the situation in which the new art finds itself.

The allergy to *aura*, from which no art today is able to escape, is inseparable from the eruption of inhumanity. This renewed reification, the regression of artworks to the barbaric literalness of what is aesthetically the *case*, and phantasmagorical guilt are inextricably intertwined. As soon as the artwork fears for its purity so fanatically that it loses faith in its possibility and begins to display outwardly what cannot become art - canvas and mere tones - it becomes its own enemy, the direct and false continuation of purposeful rationality. [...] There is no separating what is legitimate in the rebellion against semblance as illusion from what is illusory — the hope that aesthetic semblance could rescue itself from the morass in which it is sunk by pulling itself up by the scruff of its own neck. Clearly the immanent semblance character of artworks cannot be freed from some degree of external imitation of reality, however latent, and therefore cannot be freed from illusion either. For everything that artworks contain with regard to form and materials, spirit and subject matter, has emigrated from reality into the artworks and in them has divested itself of its reality<sup>138</sup>.

Since art lacks concept, new art's attempt to disclose its own concept cannot be reasonable and ontologically possible. We could observe how this totally contrast what Conceptual art attempts to do when stating that “ideas alone can be works of art”<sup>139</sup> and when presenting “no object but concept”<sup>140</sup>. According to Adorno, the artwork has de facto the sole possibility to oppose its factual facade to the world's factual facade, and it is within this opposition that art emancipates itself from the world's factual facade and converge upon its own real essence.

Concept adapts itself to artwork's factual facade, rather than becoming artwork's facade. For Adorno, theoretical inquiry comes in or comes out the artwork in modification, not in the work of art's presumptive aspiration to the truth. This means that, when art aims to facet its

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138 Ibid., p. 136. Italics mine. Italics are here meant to stress two particularises concerning this quotation.

With regard to the concept of *aura*, we could affirm that it appears in *Aesthetic Theory* without an exhaustive explanation of its meaning. *Aura* in Adorno should be seen, according to us, in relation to the concept of *mana*, that is to say the appearance of the whole in the particular. The term *mana* is present in *Aesthetic Theory* [p. 106, p.111, p. 356, p. 391], but is better explain in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* - “The Concept of the Enlighten”.

With regard to the term *case* it is a reference - as shown in translator's note 2, p. 155 - to Wittgenstein's statement - the world is all that is case -, in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuiness, intr. by Bertrand Russel (New York: Routledge Classic, 2010), p. 5.

139 Sol Lewitt, “Sentences on Conceptual art”, in *0-9*, n. 5 (January 1969), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual art*, p. 107.

140 Daniel Buren, “Mise en garde # 3”, *VH101*, n. 1 (Spring 1970), trans. by Charles Harrison, “Beware”, in *Studio International*, 179:920 (March 1970), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual art*, p. 147.

own reality and the empirical-objective one, dismantling its own facade considered as closed enigma, vanishes from itself and proclaims its death. The new art betrays its own truth content because rather than keeping the distance from the concept for the sake of its truth, comes nearer to it. Art's possibility is founded, according to Adorno, in its dialectical laws of movement made of opposites that interrelate with each other. New art on the contrary attends to investigate these laws of movement with the attempt to understand and penetrate them with the result of annihilating its own proper significance and foundation. The latter could be seen as the effort of a false consciousness, intending that in its Engelian-Marxian occurrence, that at the end turns itself from an assumed-presumed liberation into an indefinitely continue bondage.

The truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed by each and every one. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics. Although no artwork can be reduced to rationalistic determinations, as is the case with what art judges, each artwork through the neediness implicit in its enigmaticalness nevertheless turns toward interpretive reason. [...] Artworks [...] await their interpretation<sup>141</sup>.

It appears that Adorno aims to save philosophical interpretation within the aesthetic field. This, though in its dialectical problematization, de facto is necessary to solve art's enigma, which is considered as art's proper *raison d'être*<sup>142</sup>. Contrarily, when art, as attempted by Conceptual art, strives to decipher its own enigma, becoming philosophical analysis, it merely reveals its own false consciousness and fallibility, insuring its own end.

According to us, Adorno's aesthetic theory is based on the fear that even in art the assumption declaring that “*es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*”<sup>143</sup> can materialize. The fear that art as the latest concrete opposition to the advancement of totalitarian monopolistic capitalism is no more efficient and effective as such, because of its being part of the false life created and built for the perpetual domain.

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141 Ibid., p. 169.

142 See even Peter Osborne, “Adorno and the metaphysics of modernism”, pp. 32-35.

143 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia, Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, in *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 4* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 43. “*There is no right life in the wrong one*”. We give the preference to original German since we think it is more powerful in its meaning compared to the English translation.

# The aesthetics of openness in Umberto Eco

## Premise

*Opera Aperta* appears for the first time in 1962 and the intention of the editor Valentino Bompiani is to give out a collection of essays previously published by Umberto Eco in different magazines such as “Verri”, “Rivista di Estetica”, “Incontri Musicali”, “Menabò”; all these texts in somehow derive from Eco's dissertation at the 12th “World Congress of Philosophy” - Venice, 12-16 september 1958 -. Bompiani's purpose is to later edit a more complete book – although it never happened, while a second release of *Opera Aperta* appears in 1967.

The reactions provoked by the first edition of *Opera Aperta* are several and for the most violently contrary to Eco's positions. It is important to consider that at the time in Italy the idealism of Benedetto Croce, heavily influenced by Hegel's philosophy, exercised a widespread influence over the Italian intelligentsia. Eco in fact, proposing openness as the main feature of the work of art, unhinges the closed and well-structured homogeneity of the artwork promoted by Crocean aesthetics. However, many find in *Opera Aperta* an important contribution to the analysis of the *poetics* of contemporaneity whose increasing value few seem to consider. In this regard, as pointed out by Eugenio Battisti in “Pittura e Informazione” (Il Mondo, 17-7-1962), aesthetics here appears as only shedding a light on the phenomenon of contemporary art, while the problems taken in exam in *Opera Aperta* are very little debated in proper institutions - as those of history of art -.

We consider *The Open Work* of primary importance for our discourse concerning Conceptual art since it concurs in contributing to a wider theoretical overview of the thematics posed by contemporary art movements, first and foremost recognizing the specificity and the meaning of the poetic of the open structure within an artwork. Openness of the artwork that Eco puts in relation to the information theory developed by Claude Shannon, which provides the analytical tools for aesthetic reflections regarding the grammar of contemporary art forms. Eco is furthermore important for our inquiry because he solves the problematics inherent in art as so denounced by Adorno, with regard to art's condition of crisis and its irremediable irreconcilability.

### 3.1 Changing the plot: the direction of contemporary art

“Any work of art can be viewed as message to be decoded by an addressee. But, unlike most messages, instead of aiming at transmitting a univocal meaning, the work of art succeeds precisely insofar as it appears ambiguous and open-ended”<sup>144</sup>.

This short and surely condensed passage holds the very particular view in matters of artwork present in *The Open Work*. We find here some of those main features of Eco's text such as message, decoding, addressee, openness, transmission and ambiguity that, together with others, we are going to analyse in the present chapter.

At the very beginning Eco clarifies his standpoint concerning the definition of the open work, trying to avoid any kind of misunderstanding and mystification, since the notion of openness, as related to artworks, has already occurred in aesthetics. In fact, theorists have recourse to the notion of completeness and openness with the aim of delineating the interpretation process that expands and renders evident the whole closure of the work of art. Nothing of the established and concluded artefact is touched but its reception, which is useful to critics and philosophers for grounding their discourses. This means that the artwork is left at its place and the possible intervention has to be based on an interpretative level. In this respect, we have for instance seen in the previous chapter how Adorno<sup>145</sup> bases the dialectics of art on the attempt to acknowledge the openness of the artwork; nevertheless, for Adorno, work of art's openness depends solely on its ultimate windowless monadological closeness.

The original essence and structure of the work of art is therefore not in danger, and the work of art's aesthetic validity is, according to Eco, in proportion to the perspectives it entails. It is furthermore undoubtedly so that the finished product refers in most cases to a receiver, which finds himself in the condition of gnoseologically entering into an interplay of stimuli with the artwork; this, marks out that artwork continues to be displayed in addressee's intellectual-interpretative perception<sup>146</sup>.

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144 Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta*, trans. by Anna Cancogni, ed. by David Robey, *The Open Work* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 195. Furthermore, it is useful to underline that chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 are from *Opera Aperta*; chapters 9 and 10 are from *Apocalittici e Intergrati* (1964), and *La struttura assente* (1968). Chapter 7 is from *Lettere italiane*; chapter 8 from *La definizione dell'arte*; they appear in *The Open Work* in English translation by arrangement of the author.

145 With regard to Adorno we would mention that Eco is quite critical to what he defines as a negative criticism, totally unproductive; this, especially concerning the fetishistic character of mass consumption present in Adorno's *Dissonanzen*. For more information about the topic we refer to p. 195.

146 See *Ibid.*, p. 3. For further information about the notion of stimulus we refer to the section “The Aesthetic Stimulus” pp. 35-39.



A work of art [...] is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself<sup>147</sup>.

If the openness is the *result* of the externalization of those possible innumerable interventions caused by one or several agents, contemporary art starts rather from the evidence of the openness and bases its own foundation on this evidence. Contemporaneity aims to a complete spoliation of those structures that over the years has characterized works of art, participating directly in the dialectics of heteronomy and thus recasting the work to the maximum possible openness. According to Eco, this tendency seems to be the manifestation of a matter of fact. It appears as a necessity for progress, or as a necessary progression due to the transformation occurring in other disciplines and as a reflection of society's *liquidification*.

A work of art is never properly and so sufficiently closed, since it is always surrounded by infinity of possible readings<sup>148</sup>. In this respect, Eco underlines that “the contemporary artist feels the need to [...] try to work out what historical evolution of aesthetic sensibility led up to it and which factors in modern culture reinforced it”<sup>149</sup>. The sensibility of the artist is now shifted to another plane - taking for granted that openness is in relation to the artifact -, because he now works on the work of art's theoretical character.

We find here similarities with what Conceptual art attempts to do when delineating artwork's potential strength as a catalytic agent. Starting from the consideration that aesthetic standards have never evaluated the possibility of a work of art being explicitly catalytic, Adrian Piper, as well as Eco when defining the implicit openness of the artwork, stresses how the catalytic potency of the artwork has always been practically present in aesthetics. The difference with the past lies in the modes of development established by the Conceptual work of art, or by the open work as so defined by Eco, which is considerable as such when it functions as medium of change between the artist and the viewer, that is to say when abandoning the intermediacy of a discrete form, embodies viewer response as artwork<sup>150</sup>.

The investigations promoted by Eco are related to the causes of openness, generating a new kind of language and message that seem to be the response of a cultural initiative

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147 Ibid., p. 4.

148 See Ibid., p. 24.

149 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 4

150 See Adrian Piper, *Out of Order; Out of Sight*, pp. 32-35.

throughout aesthetic. In this respect, they follow the transformation that has occurred in other disciplines, especially the scientific ones. Claiming that “in every century, the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality”<sup>151</sup>, Eco traces the model of his researches within the consideration of the effects that culture and scientific changes have on artwork's structure and message. Some brief historical considerations could be of help in rendering clear Eco's intention and the matter of his inquiry.

In the midst of a world built up on a closed geocentric view that is shaped by a cosmos founded on a fixed and ordained hierarchy, as for instance in the Middle Ages, the work of art is the reflection of a syllogistic system that logically descends step by step without any interruption. The elasticity and the energy of the forms represented in Romanticism are signs of the replacement of Aristotelian logic by empiricism, which focuses its attention on subjective perceptions. When in physics the concept of causation collapses and is replaced by quantum theory, which instead limits itself to expressing only probability and is based on the uncertainty principle, the work of art becomes in its constitution a “field of” rather than the expression of a one-directional representative system.

The work of art [is] stripped of necessary and foreseeable conclusion, works in which the performer's freedom functions as part of the *discontinuity* which contemporary physics recognizes, not as an element of disorientation, but as an essential stage in all scientific verification procedures and also as the verifiable pattern of events in the subatomic world<sup>152</sup>.

Eco thus starts from the assumption that the object must be related back to the total series of which it is a member, replacing the polarity between being and appearance with that between finite and infinite – infinite at the core of the finite. This means that synthetic suggestions of any kind are not appropriated because the horizon remains open.

This is the reason why Eco criticizes the aesthetic orientation promoted by both Benedetto Croce and John Dewey. With regard to the former<sup>153</sup> Eco notices that the representation of totality within an artistic expression is not a useful and a complete explanation since it doesn't see the possibilities subsumed under an artifact, but solely the constraints of an universalization concerning a particular phenomena. This aesthetic standpoint, that directly derives from the Hegelian philosophy<sup>154</sup>, is based, according to Eco, on the mere equation

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151 Ibid., p. 13.

152 Ibid., p. 15

153 Eco refers in particular to Benedetto Croce, *Breviario di Estetica*, trans. and intr. by Pietro Romanell, *Guide to Aesthetic* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 1995).

154 For further and more complete information about the influence of Hegel in Crocean philosophy see for

between artistic form and totality in which an artistic representation is true when it is at the same time itself and the universe - the universe as individual, and the individual form as universe. Totality is considered under a faceted partiality and thus artistic expressions need an a priori foundation, helped by a cosmic inspiration<sup>155</sup>. To render clear Croce's equivocal dialectic of totality, Eco links the pythagorean theorem<sup>156</sup>, which has its validity at every time and in every point of the *globe*, with the fixation of a *denotatum* – i.e. just a part of a bigger whole - that through its expansion, in the successive proliferation of its meaning, becomes at the end a concentrated image of the entire universe.<sup>157</sup>

With respect to Dewey, Eco considers the aesthetic analysis of the philosopher of Burlington as a remarkable refusal the inner property of work of art's. According to Dewey, the artwork becomes a medium for experiences' externalization solely through artwork's interrelation with our experiences. In this regard, the significance of an artwork and the approach to it by a receiver are subsumed under the components of one set of experiences, something that undoubtedly marks out an effective spoliation of autonomy's features within artistic expression and artwork. “The expressiveness of the object of art [, Dewey affirms,] is due to the fact that it presents a thorough and complete interpenetration of the materials of undergoing and of action, the latter including a reorganization of matter brought with us from past experience”<sup>158</sup>. Eco, in opposition to Dewey, rather proposes both stimuli and artifact – the latter as organization of stimuli, considering man, within the whole culture complexity is subsumed under, as the promoter of these realizations<sup>159</sup>.

The notions of creativity and of autonomy in matters of art are central to Eco, while denigrated by Croce and Dewey. Eco, contrary to any form of structuralism<sup>160</sup>, considers the open work as a work in movement, as a non-synthetical form that discloses an array of possibilities. In this respect, Eco refers to Luigi Pareyson's theory of formativity, whereby the definitiveness of an artwork has to be found in its infinite aspects, never intended as parts or

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exemple Benedetto Croce, *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto della filosofia di Hegel, Studio critico seguito da un saggio di filosofia hegeliana*, trans. by Douglas Ainslie, *What is living and what is dead of the philosophy of Hegel* (Ontario: Batoche, Kitchener, 2001).

155 See Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetic*, here taken from U. Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 25.

156 The square of the length of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

157 See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 25.

158 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 107.

159 See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, pp. 26-27.

160 See Ibid., pp. 217-236. In the chapter “Series and Structure” Eco quite clearly criticizes structuralist theory and in particular that of Claude Lévi-Strauss present in *The Raw and the Cooked* affirming, at p. 232, that: “the notion of structural unconscious present in every human being as well as in every historical period can generate only contradictory solutions”.

fragments, but rather as elements of a process that have intercourse in a form. Pareyson means with form an organism with a physical inner life and where production, not expression, constitutes form's main feature - that is obtained after the *trial*<sup>161</sup> promoted by the artist. “The work in movement is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions [...], the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author. In other word, the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed”<sup>162</sup>. The plot is therefore changed in the meaning that the artist consciously directs himself to what is external, organizing the work on an exchange between different factors that become a priori involved in artwork's constitution. The problem is thus to disclose the infinite relationships, based on the perception of the openness, inherent in artwork. In this regard, we would like to underline that the perception of the openness follows directly what Conceptual art conceives when challenging the idea of art as a set of special kinds of objects, thus re-organizing the mode of appropriation of cultural forms. It is in fact by means of the unnecessaryness of physical objects that Conceptual art re-organizes, rendering theoretically more complex the task, the engagement of the artist in conveying a message in order to transfigure the structures of everyday life<sup>163</sup>.

Aesthetics, which previously based its systematization in the dichotomy between being and appearance, has to shift the matter of its inquiry to the interrelation between infinite and finite, considering infinite as the core of the finite. Aesthetic phenomena aim to produce a cultural phenomenon, especially in matters of a continuous stimulus a priori determined. “Contemporary poetics merely reflects our culture's attractions for the “indeterminate”, for all those processes which [...] prefer to disclose a field of possibilities, [...] open to all sorts of operative choices and interpretations”<sup>164</sup>.

The poetics of contemporaneity, according to Eco, puts necessarily in relation openness, information and communication, basing itself on communicative features and on the multiplication of a given message; more plots are in fact subsumed under the form of a plot constructed on the basis of a plurivocal communication<sup>165</sup>.

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161 Eco refers to Luigi Pareyson's formativity theory present in *Estetica: Teoria della Formatività* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1960, I ed. 1954). There is no English translation of the text. For more information about Pareyson's aesthetics see *The Open Work* chapter “Form and Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson's Aesthetics”, pp. 158-167. For Luigi Pareyson there is a struggle between the artist's intention and his sometimes-recalcitrant material, which culminates in a finished work. In this struggle, always a process of trial and error, the artist is guided by some concept of the work. See even U. Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 161.

162 Ibid., p. 19.

163 See Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p. 19 and p. 35.

164 Ibid., p. 44.

165 See Ibid., p. 42.

### 3.2 The openness of second degree<sup>166</sup>

Eco bases his researches on a communicative level since he defines the peculiarity of contemporary art expressions within the consideration of openness as the nucleus of their poetics. Eco declares the necessity of making a detour to science, in particular through information theory<sup>167</sup>, a detour that provides access to the singularity of artwork's openness<sup>168</sup>.

Information theory is the branch of mathematics that describes how uncertainty should be quantified, contrived and represented, aiming to the reduction of uncertainty within a system of communication and in particular with regard to data.

Imagine your friend invites you to dinner for the first time. When you arrive at the building where he lives you find that you have misplaced his apartment number. He lives in a building with 4 floors and 8 apartments on each floor. If a neighbour passing by tells you that your friend lives on the top floor, your uncertainty about where he lives reduces from 32 choices to 8. By reducing your uncertainty, the neighbour has conveyed *information* to you<sup>169</sup>.

Calculating the quantity of information in a given message, information theory tries to achieve an error free communication. It is based on binary calculation, i.e. 0-1, and on the compression of data to unity of information called “bit” - contraction of binary and digit -. Information theory assumes that “information is [...] and additive quantity, something that can be added to what one already knows as if it were an original acquisition”<sup>170</sup>. Using unity of information<sup>171</sup> - bit – to simplify the calculation, information theory measure the quantity of information conveyed by a given message saying that it is equal to the binary logarithm of possibilities necessary to define the message without ambiguity<sup>172</sup>. The binary logarithm is

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166 This section refers for the most of its parts to the chapter “Openness, Information, Communication”, pp. 44-83.

167 *Information theory* is the result of the researches conducted by the mathematician Claude Shannon and present in the article “A Mathematical Theory of Communication”, which appears the first time in 1948 in *Bell System Technical Journal*. More informations can be found in Claude E. Shannon, Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

168 See Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 44.

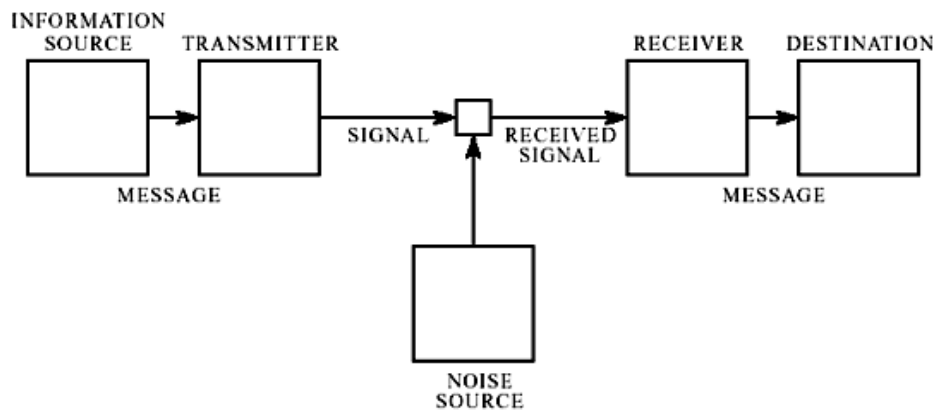
169 A typical linguistics example, here taken from Zan Ghahramani, “Information Theory”, in *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* (London: University College of London, 2000), p. 1.

170 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

171 Claude Shannon uses for its researches on information theory a discrete model within a discrete channel, which appears more useful for the calculation since it is composed by a finite group of options: “Generally a discrete channel will mean a system whereby a sequences of choices from a finite set of elementary symbols  $S_1, \dots, S_n$  can be transmitted to one point to another.”, Claude E. Shannon, Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, p. 7.

172 About the definition here proposed Eco affirms that it is a transliteration of mathematics information theory by linguistics, see Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, note 2, p. 256.

chosen since the logarithm of two to base two is one and it means that “one bit of information is enough to tell us which of two probabilities has been realized”<sup>173</sup>. The schematic diagram of a general communication system in Claude Shannon's article “A Mathematical Theory of Communication” of 1948, could be of help to understand the matter of inquiry information theory tries to define, that is to say to get over the effect of the so called noise in the channel<sup>174</sup>.



Information theory, aiming to calculate the amount of information, especially as regards the increase or decrease in information, adopts the second law of thermodynamics, namely the concept of entropy deduced by the law. The law expresses the tendency of a process that, in a isolated system, constrains a body of higher temperature to exchange its own proper heat to a cooler body with the intent of reaching a situation of equilibrium. Nevertheless, natural processes do not allow this kind of exchange-for-an-equilibrium since there is always a certain amount of consumption of energy that is dissipated; this defines the irreversibility of the process. Although considering the irreversibility of the process, one can measure the preferences in nature for a certain state; it is in this sense that the concept of entropy finds its clarification.

We could thus affirm that entropy is the statistical measure of behaviours that are improbable, but that could nevertheless occur. In this regard, that is to say as general measure of the irreversible process on which nature is based, entropy proceeds within a neutral mathematical analysis that numerically describes certain natural preferences. “The entropy [, Eco affirms,] is the measure of that state of maximal equiprobability toward which natural

173 Ibid., p. 46.

174 Fig. 1 - schematic diagram of a general communication system, Claude E. Shannon, Warren Weaver. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, p. 5.

processes tend [;] [...] no less [...] the process of reversion within a closed system is not impossible, only improbable”<sup>175</sup>.

Eco assumes the concept of entropy as fundamental for the discourse on the poetics of the open work because of the concept's use in information theory for measuring “the level of order and disorder in the organization of a given message”<sup>176</sup>.

Languages and expressions aspire to structure a system that should elude any kind of disorder and thus the increase of entropy. The elimination of entropy - intended as the equiprobability of both order and disorder - is the ultimate desideratum of a proper systemic organization.

Language is, for instance, a human event that proposes itself as system in order to prevent a state of disorder. Nevertheless, the concept of entropy does not allow in any way, even in a closed system, a complete elimination of the possibility of disorder. This means that to render clear a message or, as Eco affirms, to protect the message against consumption<sup>177</sup>, the linguistic system finds in reiteration the necessary tool for seeing a message not altered in its meaning. The amount of reiterations useful to negotiate the entropy of the system is called redundancy, which is an important feature as concerns the pre-establishment of probabilities within a linguistic arrangement, where language aims to appear as communicative code.

Communication - originally based on an accepted code – could thus be considered as the reiteration of informations, always new - redundancy, which give more knowledges about the topic taken into consideration. Furthermore, as system it aims to eliminate the negative character of the entropy entropy of messages.

Art, as well as language, is a human product and in this sense it is important to stress that artistic expression orients itself to form an ordered system where messages have a proper and understandable meaning. Nevertheless, as Eco affirms, with regard to a work of art what we should value within an artistic message is not information but its aesthetic analogues. In this regard, Eco wants to elude and avoid any kind of “overusing” of the notions and concepts present in information theory, instead illustrating the functional use of that theory in the exposition of contemporary poetics<sup>178</sup>. What the open work does with its peculiar poetics is to ground another order intended as dis-order. The dis-order is no longer based on a common and assimilated structure related to a common use of the language - art's language. Contrarily,

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175 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 48.

176 Ibid., p. 49.

177 See Ibid., p. 51.

178 See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 59.

it follows the organization of a system that is in itself liable-to-be something else, that is to say not strictly consequential. Since the expression is based on a system that uses conventional structure, which obeys the laws of probability - the latter studied to dodge the increase of disorder and noise -, it could be useful for a new poetics to thwart and counteract this governance, instead promoting a systematic openness of possibilities.

The concept of information is useful here only to clarify one of the directions of aesthetic discourse, which is then affected by organizing factors. That is, all deviation from the most banal [...] order entails a new kind of organization, *which can be considered as disordered in relation to the previous organization, and as order in relation to the parameters of the new discourse*. [...] Contemporary art constantly challenge with the initial order by means of an extremely “improbable” form of organization. In other words, whereas classical art introduced original elements within a [...] system whose basic laws it substantially respected, contemporary art often manifests its originality by imposing a *new [...] system* with its own inner laws<sup>179</sup>.

As in the case of Conceptual art the system presented is undoubtedly finite because it serves to contain an idea. The idea, to exhaust its possibility as idea has to be presented within certain formal limits for surpassing the noise channel<sup>180</sup>.

The structure of new art considers the possibilities within a deliberate open process as the essential pattern of its poetics. This means that the notion of form remains valid but in a completely new sense, since it is no longer the recognition of a single form that aesthetic pleasure depends on, but on the awareness of an ever-changing profile discoverable within the opened organization of the work. The artist, through artwork, gives barely a “hint”, an indication or general direction. This is the case with Conceptual art, as testified by Rolf Weder, where the creative process does not end with a final product, but stays within the field of open forms, representing and ongoing process<sup>181</sup>.

The aim of contemporaneity is thus still to present an arrangement to does not fall into a undifferentiated chaos where merely noise is displayed and re-displayed. However, the arrangement is in itself extensible because of the importance given to all those that approach to it. This is the reason why it could be affirmed that the addressee becomes a focal nucleus within the poetics of the open work. The consideration of the addressee is subsumed under

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179 Ibid., p. 60.

180 See Adrian Piper, *Out of Order; Out of Sight*, p. 5.

181 Rolf Wedewer, *Introduction to Konzeption/Conception*, introduction for the catalogue to the exhibition “Konzeption/Conception”, Städtischen Museum in Leverkusen, October-November 1969, here taken from Alberro Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 143.



artefact's setting up of possibilities of interpretation and intelligible intervention inner to its constitution. The addressee is exposed to “the necessity and, at the same time, the possibility, to reflect upon the indications the sketch provides him with following his own ideas and associations”<sup>182</sup>. In this respect, we could point out how the use that Conceptual art does of the language is aimed to designate potential, both theoretical and practical, acts. We have previously seen how Art & Language installation at “Documenta 5”, negating the visuality<sup>183</sup> of the work, opposes a “reading” to “looking” and stimulates a different kind of visual attention, founded on a theoretical participation. The value of texts and statements are within Conceptual art of a particular importance in matters of destabilizing the aesthetic canon through breaking down the critical orthodoxy governing art's space<sup>184</sup>. Conceptual art establishes itself as media, or a “mediumistic” translation<sup>185</sup>, capable to convey information in visual forms.

The characteristic of the new aesthetic message is similar to the source of a normal informative chain where the work is not to be interpreted but becomes an interpreted work. Eco sees a pedagogical function within contemporary artworks because they persuade one to come in contact with a much larger context that is not a mere configuration of inviolable spaces of denotations, far away from any possible active participation. Perception is rather on the side of intelligence and both are originated by the openness of the artwork. This represents, according to Eco, modern man's path to salvation<sup>186</sup>.

This tendency toward disorder, characteristic of the poetics of openness, must be understood as a tendency toward controlled disorder, toward a circumscribed potential, toward a freedom that is constantly curtailed by the germ of formativity present in any form that wants to remain open to the free choice of the addressee<sup>187</sup>.

Eco show, in clear opposition to Adorno, how artwork's openness, in strict relation to addressee's free choice of interpretation, represents the ultimate instance for liberating oneself from society's perpetual domain. The work of art's function lies in its being open to the addressee, rather than in its functionlessness – considered as the ultimate critique of society, which is achieved by barely being there.

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182 Ibid.

183 See Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p. 27.

184 Ibid.

185 See Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, p. 5.

186 See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 83.

187 Ibid., p. 65.

### 3.3 Sociality in art commitment

We would like to mention a music experiment conducted by the band *Area-International Popular Group* in 1976 at the “Festival of the Youth Proletariat”, Parco Lambro - Milano -<sup>188</sup>. Under the influences of the book written by Norman Spinrad *Agent of Chaos*, they develop a series of experimentations under the thematic of chaos, and one of these is *Caos (seconda parte)*<sup>189</sup>. At Parco Lambro they unwind two uncovered electric cables, connected to a synthesizer, to the audience. What happens is that the synthesizer emits a sequence of semi-accidental sounds with a limited range; when a person touches these two cables, she closes a circuit so that the resistance of the body, namely considered as electric resistance, interacts with the machine – the synthesizer. The more people touching the cables, the higher is the resistance and higher become the frequencies of the machine. Thus the audience becomes the ultimate producer of the sound via their bodies and the machine. In this way, as Patrizio Fariselli affirms, the synthesizer is able to develop its idea of chaos<sup>190</sup>.

The audience's intervention and active participation in the constitution of an artwork could as well be seen, considering nearer the matter of our inquiry, in the work of Conceptual artist's Hans Haacke *MoMa Poll* at the exhibition “Information” at The Museum of Modern Art of New York in 1970<sup>191</sup>. The artist, in his attempt to postulate that a system is art, works on a query that produces an exact algorithm with regard to the two possible responses offered; then as result, feedback is shown in a visual form. The question posed by Haacke is: “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?”, while the answer is: “If 'yes' please cast your ballot into the left box; if 'no' into the right box”. Ballots are dropped into one of two plexiglass ballot boxes, which are connected to electronic meters that at the end of the exhibition would count the different amount of 'yes' and 'no' in the answers. The final count shows that the 'yes' results as the majority with the 68,7% of the ballots, while the 'no' seizes on 31,3%.

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188 “Festival del Proletariato Giovanile”, Parco Lambro, 26-30 June, 1976.

189 Area-International Popular Group, *Maledetti, Maudits* (Vicenza: Cramps Records, 1976). *Caos* (parte seconda) is the third track of side B.

190 This is my translation of Patrizio Fariselli's - former pianist of the “Area” - speech taken from the movie *Nudi Verso la Follia – Parco Lambro 1976*, directed by Angelo Rastelli, Italia, 2004: “così il sintetizzatore poteva sviluppare la sua idea di caos”.

191 Hans Haacke, *Moma Poll*, 1970, text, two ballot boxes – plexiglass – with equipment for numbering ballots (102x51x24,5 cm), installation at the art exhibition “Information”, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preßische Kulturbesitz, Kunstbibliothek, Collezione Marzona.

Haacke thus induces exhibition visitors, near the museum entrance, to take a position on a political problem of the day, involving them to actively participate of the artwork and its final outcome. Moreover, it could be useful to mention that at that time New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller was a member of the board of trustees of MOMA and planning a run for the United States of America presidency.

In the open-ended structure of the artwork the addressee has an internal importance, not only as an interpretative actor, but even as the fundamental and ontological extension of the artistic expression. The receiver participates in the structure of the artwork a priori, that is to say not merely by being involved in the hermeneutical process through his peculiar aesthetic experience, as in the past. In fact, the artist, rather than presenting the openness as an inescapable element of interpretation of the artistic, unfolds the work into the utmost possible openness.

Eco is convinced that “the real content of the work is the vision of the world expressed in its way of forming”<sup>192</sup>, something that induces him to consider an artist like a scientist or a philosopher, who defines the world through the structures of his method. The rejection of a given link, from which follows an expressive and representative explanation of a given model, defines art's liberation from the latter since art now produces models. In this regard, the direction is shifted from representation to self-presentation, in the meaning that art intends to present a knowledge of the world through artwork's own proper open structures; structures and arrangements that underline the multiplication of possibilities inherent in the artefact. The work of art is no longer a signifier of the external, but rather becomes an aspect of the world, establishing moreover a mutual participation of the addressee who is thoroughly involved to producing its result.

The new perception of things and the way of relating them to each other, promoted by art might eventually lead us to understand our situation not by imposing on it a univocal order expressive of an obsolete conception of the world but rather by elaborating models leading to a number of mutually complementary results<sup>193</sup>.

Reception therefore becomes something that stimulates to an active perception, because of the need for complementary participation subsumed under the artwork. We thus find in the constitution of the open-ended artwork a will to organize a phenomenology of the

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192 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 144.

193 Ibid., p. 150.

interrelationship whereby the artefact functions as a stimulus for the movement and progress of the work itself. The work of art establishes a dialogue between itself and the addressee, which implies participation. The product, as object, stops having a focal centre because perception is based more on open ideas. As Ian Burn affirms, “participating in a dialogue gives the viewer a new significance; rather than listening, he becomes involved in reproducing and inventing part of the dialogue”<sup>194</sup>. In this regard, rationalism, idealism and structuralism as beliefs in a general categorized understanding that should explain human occurrences are flatly eliminated by the openness within the arrangement of the open-ended artwork. The way of describing perceiver and object perceived as two different forms, defines the distance that commonly occurs in those theories - akin to a *deus ex machina* conception - which treats most of human experiences and events as if they were the fauna of a distant land<sup>195</sup>. Contrarily, the aim of the open work is to make visible the infinite opportunities and possibilities of arrangement, rather than to make the visible. “The rejection of the plot signifies recognition that the world is a web of possibilities and that the work of art must reproduce this physiognomy.”<sup>196</sup>.

A question that could be posed at the current level of the inquiry is how the artist is able to formulate what could be called the grammar of the open work, that is to say the way to communicate the a priori possibilities within an artwork. According to Eco, the artist solves the problem to avoid and deny formal structures within a formal system, for consequently constituting new open forms, through alienating himself in that system. Alienation is in this case conceived not as that of Marx but of Hegel. The latter describes the situation of one that “alienates himself in the world of things and of social relationship because he has constructed it according to the laws of subsistence and development that he himself must adjust to and respect”<sup>197</sup>. The alienation posited by Hegel is, following Eco, an existential situation that it would be useless to try to eliminate since it is part of the dialectic inherent in one's relationship with objects and nature<sup>198</sup>.

Obviously, in modern technological civilization it is much more difficult and complex to

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194 Ian Burn, “Dialogue”, in *Art Press* (New York: July 1969), here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual art*, pp. 110-111.

195 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, Routledge, 1989), p. 240.

196 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 115.

197 Ibid., p. 124. It could moreover be interesting to mention the analysis that Eco does of the notion of alienation in Marx and Hegel, present in chapter VI “Form as Social Commitment”, pp. 123-157, which is based on his studies of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) - in particular on the section “Critique of Hegel's Dialectic and General Philosophy” - and of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807).

198 See Ibid., p. 126-127. Eco stresses the necessity to not be misunderstood when he uses the awkward expression “existential situation”, which could easily be linked to negative existentialism that he, on the contrary, absolutely rejects.

overcome the alienation that so pervasively occurs in society, so much so that it seems problematic to elude every kind of possible protest or will for the re-appropriation of one's peculiar space. We have for instance seen, considering Adorno, how society's monopolistic capitalism tries to constitute an essential structure of non-differentiation, promoting a totalitarian alienation. Nevertheless, the proper way is to be aware about the alienating manipulation within a system; the system's manipulation that manifests itself expressed in both society and structure. It is in fact through the awareness of the possible alienation in an external structure that starts the spoliation of those main features that represents the premise for alienation.

Society and art ground themselves on arrangements, albeit on different ones: whilst art can organize itself in an ordered univocal manner, with regard to society it is certainly more difficult to establish, though in the efforts of the systems, a perfect order that entails and organizes a total control.

The artist who protests through form acts on two levels. On one, he rejects a formal system but does not obliterate it; rather he transforms it from within by alienating himself in it and by exploiting its self-destructive tendencies. On the other, he shows his acceptance of the world as it is, in full crisis by formulating a new grammar that rests not on a system of organization but on an assumption of disorder. And this is one way in which he implicates himself in the world in which he lives, for the new language he thinks he has invented has instead been suggested to him by his very existential situation. He has no choice, since his only alternative would be to ignore the existence of a crisis, to deny it by continuing to rely on the very system of order that has caused it<sup>199</sup>.

According to Eco, it is a matter of fact that the crisis within society is displayed in artwork. Nevertheless, this is not constitutively negative, as in Adorno, but rather represents the possibility to transcend the crisis. For Eco, although the subjection to the condition of alienation probably remains, this does not mean that detrimental conclusions about art's situation should of necessity be drawn. Rather, alienation could be reformulated and discerned through its analysis. In this regard, the new art, starting from the analysis of alienation present in society, clearly aims to produce modifications within the latter.

It is thus by the desire for clarification and explanation that the artist is led to formulate the poetics of openness; discursive clarity is the effort of the reason to give a form to disorder.

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199 Ibid., p. 141.

This means that the intention of artwork's openness is to disclose an intellectual participation, rather than a simple aesthetic appreciation. This expressiveness lies under the subsumption of the definition of the external; if the discourse is at a primary stage unclear, it is due to lack of clarity of things themselves and our relation to them. Art tries to render evident the presentation of what it comprehends of reality, producing the work as organic. The stimulus that artist has internalized, due to a conscious alienation in the form coming from the outside, becomes stimulus for the receiver; the latter is induced to participate of the analytical process that multiplies the entrances for a wider and more satisfying comprehension. The translation from amorphous matter into a human dimension is the task of the artist who proposes to the addressee the open-ended results of his work. The social commitment of art bases itself on principles that establish a intentional interrelation between different actors, which are equally necessary for the work of art's theoretical outcome. In this respect, the work of art develops the chances to eliminate the intellectual and existential alienation present in society.

The addressee [, in front of an open artwork,] finds himself in the situation of cryptographer forced to decode a message whose code is unknown, and who therefore has to learn the code of the message itself. [...] The addressee will find himself so personally involved that his attention will move from the signifieds, to which the message was supposed to refer, to the structure itself of the signifiers, and by so doing will comply with the demands of the [...] message<sup>200</sup>.

In Eco, it appears to be a matter of fact that the work of art of contemporaneity proposes the liberation from those obsolete aesthetic structures and features that are now in their death throes. The openness is not a justification but a purpose for a completely new poetics, not complementary to a embalmed philosophy of art. Eco is aware about this evolution and promotes an aesthetic of openness, giving an aesthetic voice to the evolutionary appeal for innovation posited by art, which now becomes philosophical investigation.

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200 Ibid., p. 195-196.

# Aesthetic *sauvetage* on the shores of politics in Jacques Rancière<sup>201</sup>.

## Premise

Jacques Rancière is surely one of the most influential contemporary philosophers, with a wide interest in the aesthetic field, in particular with respect to visual arts. He could be easily classified as a representative of the French post-Marxist school of thought that breaks with the Althusserian structural-Marxist school in which Rancière was involved until the late sixties. This break was due to the general strict orientation and orthodoxy present in the school that was mainly put in evidence through the events of May 1968.

“Dissensus” is for instance one of the notions that mark the separation between Rancière's theoretical stance for a generalized and spontaneous uprising and the academic lesson bound to the French Communist Party (PCF) advocated by Althusser. Rather, Rancière comes closer to the experience of Joseph Jacotot, French educator and philosopher straddling the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, from whom Rancière borrows important notions like that of “intellectual emancipation” and that of “ignorant schoolmaster”, which, among others, we are going to analyse in the present chapter.

Concerning the subject of our inquiry, Rancière is important for several reasons and basically because his researches are grounded on the intertwining of aesthetics and politics. This intertwining, which mainly emerges in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, constitutes the strong point of his theoretical framework since he situates aesthetics at the core of politics and vice-versa - defining the way in which aesthetics interacts with reality by its own proper policy -, something that is exemplified by the notion of *aesthetic regime of the arts*. The latter together with other notions - such as for instance that of “the emancipated spectator”-, obviously disclose a wide range of considerations that we will connect to our discourse concerning Conceptual art. Furthermore, we will delineate why his analysis could be evaluated as a synthesis of the positions expressed by Adorno and Eco.

The texts by Rancière that we consider of interest for our attempt are *Disagreement* (1999), *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000), *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004) and *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008).

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201 We let us the freedom to use for the title of the present chapter the name of one of Rancière's books: J. Rancière, *Aux bords du Politique*, trans. by Liz Heron, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995).

## 4.1 The aesthetic regime

The solicitation that induces Jacques Rancière to discuss and render clear his theory about the politics of aesthetics is inscribed, he affirms, in a broader context, which claims and denounces the crisis of art and the relative death of the image; features that seem to be substituted with the pervasiveness of discourses within the aesthetic terrain. The subject matter in the aesthetic field, that is to say the supposed *end of art*, thus appears to not have changed since Hegel *Aesthetics*<sup>202</sup> and that the “battle fought yesterday over the promises of emancipation and the illusion and disillusion of history continues today”<sup>203</sup>.

The purpose of Rancière is that to re-establish debate's condition of intelligibility, considering that what we should intend as aesthetics is no longer the denotation either of a general art theory nor of an explicative theory that deals with art's effects on sensibility. In this respect, it could be affirmed that the dominant intellectual perversion of the last years has caused the abandonment of the condition of intelligibility, that is to say the abandonment of the evaluation of the presence of art as such. According to Rancière, the condition of intelligibility should on the contrary be necessary for the very designation of the term aesthetics. Rather, what appears is that most of the reflections concerning art have the sole goal of producing “discourse *on art*”<sup>204</sup>. The discourse on art distorts the proper value of the term aesthetics and distances the latter from both reality and art; nevertheless, during the time it has tended to become art's very reality. For Rancière, this merely contributes to the *mise-en-scène* of the “end” and “return” in art's terrain; a *mise-en-scène* moreover spilt into a mediocre prose<sup>205</sup>.

Aesthetics came to be seen as the perverse discourse which bars [the encounter with the unconditioned event of the work] and which subject works, or our appreciations thereof, to a machine of thought conceived for other ends: the philosophical absolute, the religion of the poem or the dream of social emancipation<sup>206</sup>.

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202 We refer here to Georg W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, trans. by Thomas M. Knox, *Hegel's aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

203 Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, trans. and intr. by Gabriel Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The distribution of the Sensible* (London: Paperback edition, 2008), p. 9.

204 Jacques Rancière, *Maliase dans l'esthétique*, trans. by Steven Corcoran, *Aesthetics and its Discontent* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.3.

205 See both Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, pp. 2-3, and Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 10-11.

206 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 2. We refer to book's “Introduction”, pp. 1-15, for further historical considerations about the notion of aesthetics proposed by Rancière.



For Rancière aesthetics is not defined in its real attempt by any captious discourse on some artistic procedure or on the affection of the work of art to people's thoughts because it merely creates discontent and dis-enchantment. Aesthetics is not a discipline or genre of studies, but it rather has to do with the inner comprehension of the situation with regard to art. Art's situation internally discloses and reveals the link between autonomy and heteronomy, between art that becomes life and life that becomes art. In this respect, Rancière aims to cut at one and the same time with the so called *modernatism*<sup>207</sup> of modernity, replacing modernity in the sphere of intelligibility and providing the overcoming of the fatal destiny proclaimed by the philosophers of crisis.

Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (which presupposes a certain idea of thought's effectivity)<sup>208</sup>.

Since aesthetics refers to a regime, we could understand it as the specific organization of occurrences similar to those pertaining to the organization of reality. We could therefore affirm that Rancière, on the one hand, attempts to divest aesthetics of those properties that have been attached to it without knowledge, properties that merely promote the captiousness of the discourse for then declaring the crisis of aesthetics - substituting the latter with a much more aware of its limitations *intrap philosophical inaesthetics*<sup>209</sup>. On the other hand, he reorganizes the aesthetic terrain, considering it at the core of *politics* and examining it in relation to *the distribution of the sensible*.

We think it is now necessary to clarify these important notions in Rancière, i.e. that of the distribution of the sensible and that of politics, which provide the necessary tools for understanding his theoretical framework.

With regard to the distribution of the sensible, we could affirm that it is the arrangement of

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207 With the notion of modernatism Rancière means “the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of the arts [– the notion of aesthetic regime of the arts will be later clarified –] with forms that accomplish a task or fulfil a destiny specific to modernity. [...] Artistic modernatism [...] was set against the degeneration of political revolution. [...] The failure of political revolution was later conceived of as the failure of this ontologico-aesthetic model”. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 26-27.

208 Ibid., p. 10.

209 Alain Badiou, *Petit manuel d'Inesthétique*, trans. by Alberto Toscano, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005): “By “inaesthetics” I understand a relation of philosophy to art that, maintaining that art is itself a producer, makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy. Against aesthetic speculation, inaesthetics describes the intraphilosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art”. Furthermore, we refer to Rancière's interesting considerations about Badiou's notion of inaesthetics present in Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, “Alan Badiou's Inaesthetic: the Torsion of Modernism”, pp. 63-88.

those interrelationships between places and forms of participation occurring in a common space, or community space. The distribution of the sensible produces a system that bases its governance on a partition of those occurrences that are subsumed under what is defined as sensible order. It is, in this sense, the implicit regulation of a *territorium* where affirmative and negative are included and systematized.

I call the distribution of the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses something in common and the delimitations that existence respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and position is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution<sup>210</sup>.

The notion of distribution of the sensible derives directly from the consideration of what politics and in particular the qualification of citizen means in both Plato and Aristotle, though considering the proper distinctions between the two. The distribution of the sensible has in fact to do with what is in common in a community, that is to say all the inferences concerning such a community from the shareable to what constitutes the exception. In this regard, it has to do with the implicit law governing<sup>211</sup> a particular *occupation*<sup>212</sup>, since the terms of this distribution are related to one singular governance that occurs in space and time. However, to not cause misunderstandings it is important to stress that the distribution of the sensible is prior to the distribution of a following governance's partaking – i.e. occupation.

The *police* could take the occupation of the distribution of the sensible as the organizational system that aims to divide the community according to the law. Police is the way of forming a civic body by following organization's rules that aims to establish in the body a definite ordering. The police could be seen as the strictly structured arrangement whereby a division and rigid collocation of the parts within the distributed sensibleness is conceived, thus defining what and who takes part and what and who is excluded.

The police is essentially, the law, generally implicit, that defines a party's share or lack of it [...]

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210 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 11.

211 Ibid., “Appendix I” by G. Rokchill, p. 85.

212 In Rancière the term “occupation” is referred to one's skill within the distribution of the sensible, or the sensible distributed. We would like to use this term in another sense, that is “the way to occupy” peculiar of the organization of the distribution of the sensible.

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees those bodies are assigned by the name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. It is police law, for example, that traditionally turns the workplace into a private space not regulated by the ways of seeing and saying proper to what is called the public domain, where the worker's *having a part* is strictly defined by the remuneration of his work. Policing is not so much the 'disciplining' of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed<sup>213</sup>.

Police is thus located at the primary threshold of the distribution of the sensible where each is positioned in a way similar to Plato's ideal state. In Plato's state artisans for example, although not only them, could not take part of the community's decision since their work could not wait<sup>214</sup> and since in “in all well-ordered states every individual has an occupation to which he must attend”<sup>215</sup>.

Contrarily, politics intervention within the distribution of the sensible occurs when two heterogeneous and opposite processes, like that of police and that of equality, meet. Politics is in fact the positive liberation from the state of police promoted by the emancipated mode of *subjectivation* concerning people. People are considered by politics as its only subject, and in this meaning they are recognized as *dēmos*, representing those who do not have any part – and cannot take part - in the police distribution of the sensible. The reconfiguration of the police distribution of the sensible is thus due to the intervention of politics, and hence of people, in the terrain of order. Politics finds its universal axiom in equality and its own subject in *dēmos* – the unrepresented part of the whole system; both strive for emancipation from the police's logical evolution of the sensible order distributed as such<sup>216</sup>.

Seeing politics as the functional subjectivation in relation to the emancipation of *dēmos* that confronts the police order, aesthetics is considered as at the core of politics because of its own proper subjective character - as mode of experience<sup>217</sup> - that is of primary importance for

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213 Jacques Rancière, *La Mésestante: Politique et Philosophie*, trans. by Julie Rose, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 29.

214 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 12.

215 Plato, *Republic*, Book III, trans. by George M.A. Grube and revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Cambridge: Hackett publishing company, 1992), p. 83.

216 We refer to Gabriel Rockhill “Appendix I”, in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 80-93, for further information concerning terms such as *distribution of the sensible*, *police*, *politics*, *dēmos*, *equality*, *emancipation* and in general those terms and notions typed in italics.

217 Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy”, in *New Left Review*, 14 (London, 2002), p. 135.

implicitly constituting what is called *regime*. Aesthetics, just like politics, has to do with a particular praxis that aims to decide on and governs the distribution of the sensible.

*Aesthetic practices* [...] are forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they *do or make* from the standpoint of what is common to the community. Artistic practises are [...] *ways of doing and making* that intervene in the general distribution of the sensible of ways doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility<sup>218</sup>.

The artistic practices within aesthetic practices could therefore be considered as particular ways to reflect on a peculiar distribution occurring in a defined period - although we would not intend the latter notion in its possible historical inference. The way to intervene in the distribution of the sensible is not in fact through aesthetics, but rather aesthetics is merely a singular regime of identification that manifests itself through a “specific type of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the latter”<sup>219</sup>. De facto, aesthetic practices establish their respective regimes; this means that there are different regimes of identification concerning art, as a result of their specific type of connections.

Rancière indicates three major regimes of identification: the ethical regime of images; the representative regime of the arts; the aesthetic regime of the arts.

In [the ethical regime of images], “art” is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images. As a specific type of entity, images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently their truth content) and the question of their end or purposes, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in. The question of images of the divine and the right to produce such images or the ban placed on them falls within this regime, as well as the question of the status and signification of the images produced<sup>220</sup>.

Rancière assumes that the perfect model of this regime is represented in Plato's ideal state since there the works of art have no autonomy, but they are considered merely as images with an intrinsic and questionable ethical value. This means that artistic practices are directed to the way in which images, which should represent the modes of being, affect the ethos of a

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218 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 13.

219 Ibid., p. 20.

220 Ibid., pp. 20-21.

community, intending with community the mode of being of individuals and communities<sup>221</sup>. In this respect, it appears obvious that autonomy concerning the work of art is prevented within this regime, because of the a priori ethic boundary the images have or should have.

Identifying what we could call the second horizon of artistic practice with the representative regime of art, Rancière considers a set of artistic protocols codified during the European Classical Age - from the Renaissance until the 18<sup>th</sup> century -, which aim to refine, generally speaking, the Aristotelian conception of art. The representative regime assigns to art a proper function that is the activity of imitation or mimesis, which provides a network of norms defining fine art's own duties and forms.

The poetic – or representative – regime of the arts breaks away from the ethical regime of images. It identifies the substance of art – or rather of the arts – in the couple *poiēsis/mimesis*. The mimetic principle is not at its core a normative principle stating that art must make copies resembling their models. It is first of all a pragmatic principle that isolates, within the general dominion of art (ways of doing and making), certain particular forms of art that produces specific entities called imitations<sup>222</sup>.

The representative regime of art aims to maintain a hierarchical ordering of different genres and subject matters, including rules that concern the correct matching of types of artistic expressions with the subject represented. For Rancière, an important characteristic of the representative regime is the regime's own proper organisation in which it displays a set of oppositional categories, rules and hierarchies that are roughly analogous to the oligarchic order within society. However, Rancière sees no bonds between the representative regime of art and the formation of the social body, as occurred in the ethical regime of images. Rather, what takes place in this regime is a proper and accurate definition of art's borders; within these borders, the regime outlines proper ways of doing and making, which are directed to produce imitations subsumed under established rules. It is in this respect that the logic of representation could be considered in analogy with a proper distribution of socio-economic differences, identities, roles and qualifications occurring in society, that is to say in analogy with a “fully hierarchical vision of the community”<sup>223</sup>.

The aesthetic regime of the arts is the third pattern through which art, with its peculiar

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221 See both Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy”, note 1, p. 135 and *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 21.

222 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 21.

223 See. *Ibid.*, p. 21 and p. 91.

praxis and knowledge, relates to the distribution of the sensible. Historically, this regime has prevailed in Western culture only for the last two centuries, although Rancière does not make any historical distinction between the three regimes that could on the contrary contemporaneously occur together. It is moreover interesting to point out that in reality the *aesthetic regime*<sup>224</sup> displaces the representative regimes of art without entirely surpassing it, especially with respect to artistic practices - the aesthetic regime for instance does not refuse figurative representation. Nevertheless, this regime *politically*<sup>225</sup> ruptures with the previous regime for considering artwork's autonomy and mode of being as its main concepts.

The aesthetic regime of the arts stands in contrast with the representative regime. I call this regime *aesthetic* because the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products. The word aesthetics [...] refers to the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art, to the mode of being of the objects of art. [...] The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres<sup>226</sup>.

Rancière so defining the aesthetic regime aims to clarify the possibility inherent in art in general and artwork in particular, even through reminding that those boundaries that utterly constrained art are blurred in this regime.

In this respect, the aesthetic regime could be considered as political because it follows the subjectivation occurring in the distribution of the sensible with the emancipatory advent of politics. Art, in the aesthetic regime, becomes a subject with a singular mode of identification, coming unstuck from the structural hierarchisation of genres and ways of doing and making. The specificity of the aesthetic regime could be seen in the way of comprehending and overtaking the previous regime, promoting a theoretical shift as regards art because “the locus for a form of thought [*becomes*] the invariable core in the identifications of art”<sup>227</sup>.

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224 For simplicity and convenience we are going to use the contraction “aesthetic regime” in place of “aesthetic regime of the arts”.

225 *Political* is here related to that meaning politics has, as described upon.

226 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 22-23.

227 *Ibid.*, p. 23. Italics mine.

## 4.2 Art's politics in the aesthetic regime

Rancière, in his analysis concerning the domain of the aesthetic regime of the arts, makes a distinction with regard to those forms of criticism proposed by art and subsumed under the politics of aesthetics. We have seen in the previous section that the relationship between politics and aesthetics lies in the mode of identification and mode of being within the consideration of the distribution of the sensible. The politics of art in the aesthetic regime is recognized by Rancière as a form of knowledge producing a material rearrangement of reality's externalization. Assuming that the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought, Rancière thinks aesthetics and politics as systems of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. This underlines a delimitation of time and space, not intended in the meaning of a restrictive view but rather as the intervention in the general distribution of the sensible<sup>228</sup>. Considering politics as the configuration of a specific space, aesthetics is thus perceived as the configuration of the form of experience peculiar to art.

The relation between aesthetics and politics consists in the relationship between [...] [*the*] aesthetics of politics and the “politics of aesthetics” - in other words in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular<sup>229</sup>.

The art of the aesthetic regime is not political because of the message it conveys, but it is rather political because of what it institutes, namely *dissensus*. This is once again a notion that Rancière sets up first as a political concept so we need a detour into his *political theory* for providing access to its aesthetic meaning.

We have seen above how *dēmos*, as the only political subject, strives for its own emancipation struggling with the police order of the distribution of the sensible. The *dēmocratisation* of society begins with an ontological friction that turns into dissensus. In this respect, dissensus is intended as the practical opposition of the political subject facing the attempt to render the community normative and homogenous. Furthermore, *dēmos*, intended as people, is indeed not a notion promoting an undifferentiated subject, but rather denotes a

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228 See Ibid., p. 13 and p. 25. At p. 13 Rancière affirms: “If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.

229 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 25. Italics mine.

community of “peoples”. The complexity and variety of the individuals, indiscriminately subsumed under the notion of people, clarifies the reason why Rancière, for avoiding any reduction to singularity, with *dēmos* means “peoples”.

A political community is in effect a community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself. A political “people” is never the same thing as the sum of population. It is always a form of supplementary symbolization in relation to any counting of the population and its parts. And this form of symbolization is always a litigious one<sup>230</sup>.

The political subject, confronting with the police order, produces dissensus through its own proper heterology of emancipation. Contrarily, when a reduction of the political subjectivation inherent in the *dēmos* occurs, when we thus have a contraction of “peoples” in people, we have *consensus*. Consensus is the product of the ethical community as established in Plato's ideal state, where it aims to suppress the division between ways of opposing right to the fact and the separation between law and fact – as inversely implied in *morality*<sup>231</sup>. The abolition of dissensus and the placement of an interdiction on political subjectivation, is consensus' attempt in reducing politics to police<sup>232</sup>.

Consensus is the reduction of [...] various “peoples” into a single people identical with the count of a population and its parts, of the interests of a global community and its parts. Insofar as it strives to reduce the people to the population, consensus in fact strives to reduce right to fact. [...] The political community thus tend to be transformed into an *ethical* community, into a community that gathers a single people in which everyone is supposed to be counted<sup>233</sup>.

The politics of art starts from the recognition of what politics is - even though we do not aspire to subsume art under the heading of politics since we have already made clear that they are two distinguished forms that intervene in the distribution of the sensible. It is important to once again stress the latter; otherwise it would be difficult to understand Rancière's subject matter. In its peculiar intervention in and on the distribution of the sensible, the art of the aesthetic regime follows a twofold logic. This logic discloses what we could term the criticism of art, that is to say the proper way of art to be involved in and opposed to society,

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230 Ibid., p. 115.

231 See Ibid., for further information about the notion of morality in Rancière.

232 See. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 82.

233 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 115.



becoming a counterpart of society's distributed sensibleness. It is in this way that aesthetics produces, as does politics, dissensus, because of its autonomy, the form of a sensory experience. In fact, in the politics of aesthetics the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy does not have the dualistic significance proper of a certain police or ethical view. The politics of aesthetics is subsumed under a core of autonomy, because of the procedure by which the aesthetic regime profiles its own way of identification, that is to say in dissensus to the distribution of the sensible. Art is, as Rancière consciously declares, a *dispositif* that renders arts visible rather than a concept under which different arts are unified<sup>234</sup>. This means that the property of being art is to be outlined as a specific form of sensory apprehension<sup>235</sup>.

The aesthetic regime of art institutes the relation between the forms of identification of art and the forms of political community in such a way as to challenge in advance every opposition between autonomous art and heteronomous art, art for art's sake and art in the service of politics, museum art and street art<sup>236</sup>.

The politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art is individuated, according to Rancière, in two different directions or rather two different politics.

The first could be ascribed to relational art<sup>237</sup>, which criticizes society through the way one a priori relates to the latter. Relational art aims to form a collective body in which art, suppressing its own proper private space, gives itself to the external. In this regard, that is to say for its being related to society with the aim of transforming it, relational art has to overtake its own boundaries. This underlines the necessity of investigating and inquiring what

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234 See. Ibid., p. 23.

235 See Ibid., p. 29.

236 Ibid., p. 32.

237 Rancière takes the notion of *Relational Art* from the consideration made by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998). Bourriaud's book in reality traces the lines of an artistic mode or tendency that has been introduced by the French art critic. *Relational Art* should be thus intended as the approach of certain art and certain artists of the late 1990's, that could be considered as political because of the way they institutes "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" - Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, trans. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 113. Rancière's judgment about *Relational art* we could affirm be quite negative – see *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 22-29-129 and in particular p. 57, since he is contrary to the fact that it could still be present some art as such after post-utopian's time, that is to say after the time of crisis and thus after the defeat of revolutionary movements – i.e. when the revolution turns in the totalitarian state. Rancière has some difficulties to accept what he calls as the late offspring of a wider tradition that in reality is behind the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, Bourriaud affirms that *Relational Art* and *Relational Aesthetics* are exact the opposite, that is to say a proper approach to things in a contemporary context, forgetful of those passed artistic utopias, that promotes a social environment.

We would underline that we will not take position in this discussion and that we are going to direct our considerations to what we think it is important in Rancière phenomenological presentation of the political value of *Relational art* as we have understood it.

is the political – strictly speaking – limit of the definition of art as such. Relational art claims the inner participation to external reality or otherness, aiming to become a real form of life; to do this, it needs to reconsider art's self-sufficient character and de-specify different arts' proper specificity<sup>238</sup>. From the valuation of society and the way on which the sensible is distributed, relational art presents itself as the aesthetic awareness promoting a new kind of man, a collective one.

This could be considered as Umberto Eco's position. We have in fact seen how the artwork, by means of its constitution as open-ended structure, directs itself to the addressee. Furthermore, by means of the work of art's theoretical stimulation, the addressee is considered as a continuation of the artwork. It is for this reason that art conceives the spoliation of those characteristics delimiting the conceptual core of art. Furthermore, it is due to alienation in society's dis-order that art is able to articulate its own discourse in dis-order. A discourse that becomes philosophical investigation. In this respect, we could affirm that the aesthetic politics of relational art is that of the logic of becoming life.

The other shape of aesthetic politics, that is to say the other form conceived by art for criticizing society, is represented by the so-called politics of the resistant form. This politics finds its social boundaries in the manner of resisting external reality or otherness. The resistant form defines its own proper politics in the tenacious “keep the distance from”, promoting its purity and its ultimate autonomy in relation to the otherness.

The other great form of “politics” specific to the aesthetic regime of art is precisely the one that refuses an elimination of form in act, namely the politics of the resistant form. In such a politics, form asserts its politicity by distinguishing itself from every form of intervention into the mundane world. Art does not have to become a form of life. On the contrary, it is in art that life takes its form<sup>239</sup>.

This political form is resistant in the way of not being involved in ephemeral circulation within the sensible. As consequences of the fear of being absorbed and alienated in alterity's deception, the artistic form becomes aware of and then resistant to every kind of inclusion or intervention. It could easily be seen how the resistant form is at the opposite pole by comparison with relational art. The shock in front of the *aistheton* – that is to say the sensible alterity that aims to produce an ontological subordination in terms of the distribution of the sensible – constituted, thus conceived, artwork's political retraction in the anti-relational field,

238 See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 22.

239 Ibid, p. 40.

which nevertheless provides the politics of the resistant form. The autonomy of the artwork becomes its heteronomy; the solitude of the artwork represents the political dissensus in the commerce of mass exhibition. Isolation from the worldly affairs of the culture industry constitutes art's weapon to defend itself, promoting at the same time an overall denouncement of the capitalistic society.

This, could be without difficulty related to Adorno's position where the very social function of art is to have no function, where the pedagogical and political characteristic of the artwork displays in its windowless monadism. The politicized of the resistant form is tied, as in Adorno, to the work's very indifference. Nevertheless, according to Rancière, Adorno's aesthetics, even though promoting a logic where the promise of emancipation is retained, shows aspects of *inhumanity* because of the refusal of every form of reconciliation. For Rancière, this irreconcilability, which commands aesthetic difference, is barely able to reconstitute the separation of two forms of aesthetic sensibility <sup>240</sup>.

The work that desires nothing, the work without any point of view, which conveys no message and has no care either for democracy or for anti-democracy, this work is “egalitarian” by dint of its very indifference, by which it suspends all the preference, all hierarchy. It is subversive [...] by dint of its radical separation of the sensorium of art from that of everyday aestheticized life<sup>241</sup>.

Relational art and the resistant form of art are thus the two logics pertaining aesthetics that are subsumed under the name of critical art. The latter has the duty of conciliating these opposite logics and blurring the boundaries that previously constrained in their own proper field the specific world of art and the prosaic world of commodities. The attempt is to find, through an engaged activity that aims to unify the logical tension of the politics of aesthetics, a third way of politics or a political third, namely a micro-politics of art<sup>242</sup>. The micro-politics of art is critical because the artists, in the space reserved to arts, render visible the “arts of doing”<sup>243</sup> that according to them exist already throughout society, even though presented in random directions. Critical art is at once art and anti-art, and it bases its criticism in relation to society on the collage of heterogeneous elements.

We find here a strict relation between Rancière's definition of critical art and Conceptual

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240 See *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

241 *Ibid.*

242 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

243 *Ibid.*, p. 55

art, which grounds its evidence on its being art's anti-art. The intervention, as defined by Peter Osborne, that occurs in Conceptual art is a question of the appropriation a reorganization of every day life; this constitutes the heteronomous core of Conceptual art political interaction<sup>244</sup>. The modification or the *détournement* of the environment promoted by Conceptual art is not merely antagonistic, through its own proper anti-form, but rather follows a progression in which artistic phenomena become positive and genuinely critical actions. Conceptual art, as testified by Maria Teresa Gramuglio and Nicolàs Rosa, reveals an attitude that points “towards the development of implicit political content in all works of art”<sup>245</sup>. Conceptual art could be with reason considered as a partial form of reality that integrates itself into total reality, aiming to be social and transformative, starting from the awareness of the reality of the artist “as an individual inside the political and social context that surrounds him”<sup>246</sup>.

In critical art, as well as in Conceptual art, the openness and the closeness no longer represent any distinction in the aesthetic terrain, but they are both displayed in the union of tension of the micro-politic form. There is thus no negotiation between art and politics, what occurs is rather the conception of a form that could lie in between two opposing aesthetics of politics. The attempt of critical art, through instituting a micro-politics, is to shift art towards life and art for art's sake – even administering the rebuff, as Conceptual art does, to the “demand for formal novelty for its own sake”<sup>247</sup> - into a proper political field within the aesthetic regime of art, where the spectator becomes an emancipated actor in the pattern of the artwork. “Critical art is a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanism of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation”<sup>248</sup>. This art-form emancipates the spectator, considering him emancipated. Hence, critical art does not establish the alterity of the pedagogical distance ex cathedra of the schoolmaster, but rather a free interplay of parts that aims to resemble the dissemblance within the dominant system. The artist, founding himself in the position of the conscious emancipated agent of reality, directs his art towards a sort of co-agent in the effort to institute an aesthetic-political community that should overtake and transform the situation.

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244 See Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 35-36 and p. 240.

245 Maria T. Gramuglio, Nicolàs Rosa, “Tucumàn Burns”, text published as a mimeo by the General Confederation of Labor of The Argentinas in Rosario, 1968, trans. by T. Navarette, here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, p. 76.

246 Ibid., p. 77.

247 Victor Burgin, “Socialist Formalism”, *Studio International*, 191:980 (March-April 1976), here taken from Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, p. 256.

248 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 45.

### 4.3 The emancipation of the spectator

The condition of the spectator before the formation of the aesthetic community in the aesthetic regime of art could be described as the condition of a passive alter in relation to what we might call the *magisterium*<sup>249</sup> of art and artwork. The separation and knowledge distance between the two is marked and remarked from the side of *magisterium* side by keeping unconscious the dispositional process that forms the work of art and produces solitude with regard to the spectator, who can only barehanded assist in displaying the work of art. The spectator remains in a state of ignorance that is achieved by the straight assignment of roles conceived in order to perpetuate the distance between imagery and spectatorship. The inactive assimilation of images by the spectator is part of an ontological deception occurring in art, where the need of spectatorship produces a twofold quite ambiguous logic: the giving of images that should pleasure the spectator without placing him in a position to fully and completely understand them. The representation of artwork is thus something that in reality does not present or represent anything, because of the very distance between the represented and the unrepresented, intending with the latter the situation of the spectator.

Being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, [...] the spectator remains [...] passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act<sup>250</sup>.

The spectating so intended is therefore an unproductive experience that produces nothing but consumption of decorative, not understandable, meanings.

The first and easiest solution, faced with this situation, could easily be found, Rancière affirms, in the proscription and prohibition of this unproductive experience that would build up a “true community”<sup>251</sup>, as conceived in Plato's ideal state. Nevertheless, Rancière does not believe in such a simplification, but rather in art's attempt to emerge as a form of aesthetic constitution, or sensible constitution, of the community; something that is inherent the very politics of aesthetics. In this respect, the situation is thus to render clear, first by art itself, art's

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249 With the notion of *magisterium* of art we intend that kind of artistic practice and art in general that does not produce any kind of development in matter of the relationship between itself and the spectator, underlining the subordination character with regard to the spectator.

250 Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur Émancipé*, trans. by Gregory Elliot, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 2.

251 See *Ibid.*, p. 3.

own proper fundamental feature of denouncement and emancipation. This could be achieved through proposing a new logic that at once discloses what was wrong in the past and creates a community's awareness, in terms of breaking domination's structures present in society. What is necessary is therefore not a simple negation, but rather a reconsideration of the structures already existing, which would assume a different connotation by means of the change at the very basis of the knowledge of, and active intervention in the distribution of the sensible. It is in this respect that Rancière proposes the figure of the ignorant schoolmaster, ontologically different from the schoolmaster.

The pedagogical relationship between the schoolmaster and the ignoramus is a relationship that needs, logically speaking, to nourish the distance between the two parts. Although the schoolmaster tries and aims to diminish the gap that separates him from the ignoramus, he will be always in the condition to constantly find himself ahead with respect to the ignoramus, since the latter lacks knowledge of what to know. It is thus not only a matter of subordination, but also an ontic condition that concerns the ignoramus, not yet emancipated from her ignorance.

The role assigned to the schoolmaster in the [*logic of the pedagogical*] relationship is to abolish the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignoramus [...]. Unfortunately, he can only reduce the distance on condition that he constantly re-creates it. To replace ignorance by knowledge, he must always be on step ahead, install a new form of knowledge between the pupil and himself. [...] In pedagogical logic, the ignoramus [...] is the one who does not know what she does not know or how to know it<sup>252</sup>.

The subversion of this pedagogical logic is due to the fact that the state of ignorance is not in itself a lack, but should instead be considered a form of knowledge. De facto, it is by means of the knowledge of ignorance that the schoolmaster is able to teach; at the same time, the emancipation of the pupil is reached when she becomes herself the schoolmaster, that is to say when she reaches awareness and cognition of her ignorance. The logical distance, based on arithmetical rules, is overtaken at the moment that the pupil knows about the “exact distance separating knowledge from ignorance”<sup>253</sup>. Nevertheless, when one recognizes that at the core

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252 Ibid. p. 8. Italics mine. About the notion of the ignorant schoolmaster Rancière refers to the experience of Joseph Jacotot during the Restoration time. When he drove into exile, he formulates a method that has the goal to be a useful tool for illiterate parents in teaching their children how to read. From the encounter of Jacotot's experience, Rancière wrote a book – *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) - on the occurrence of a method of teaching in present time that still remarks and reproduces social inequalities.

253 Ibid., p. 9.

of the measurement of this distance the assumption of the inequality of intelligences has been presupposed - positing at one and the same time the ability of the schoolmaster and the inability of the pupil, one becomes capable of twisting the prior significance in matters of pedagogy. In this respect, the attempt of the schoolmaster is to become an ignorant one, in the sense that he favours an autonomous and essential intellectual emancipation based on the conviction that there is actually no transcendental and a priori distance between knowledge and ignorance, but merely a path that separates what the ignoramus already knows from what she does not yet know. Seeing therefore the distance not as an evil to be abolished, but as the normal condition of any communication<sup>254</sup>, the position of the ignorant schoolmaster is to be considered as like what one knows about the “knowledge of ignorance”. The knowledge of ignorance is the conscious knowledge of the venture in the forest of things and signs<sup>255</sup>, able to translate what the acquisition of this chain of things and signs means.

The [*ignorant schoolmaster*] does not teach *his* knowledge, but orders them [- *the pupils* - ] to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified. What is unknown to him is the inequality of intelligence. Every distance is a factual distance and each intellectual act is a path traced between a form of ignorance and a form of knowledge, a path that constantly abolishes any fixity and hierarchy of positions with their boundaries<sup>256</sup>.

Rancière thus posits the political and intellectual emancipation of the ignoramus, in contrast to the hierarchical system of domination, thanks to the effort of the ignorant schoolmaster that establishes a lesson grounded on the equality of intelligences.

This position, that in Rancière's political discourse aims to propose a community of equals, is violently contrasted by Alan Badiou, who sees Rancière's conception as paradoxical and barely based on “*arrest clauses*”<sup>257</sup>. Badiou affirms that Rancière's delineation of the community of equals is conceived by being intrinsically bound to inequality. In this respect, Badiou considers this way to achieve the community of equals, based on the equality of intelligences, as a deceptive retrospection, which solely underlines and advocates a verdict of militant impossibility, because of its lack of *telos*<sup>258</sup>.

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254 Ibid., p. 10.

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid., p. 11. Italics mine.

257 Alain Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique*, trans. by Jason Barker, *Metapolitics* (London:Verso, 2009), p. 111.

258 See even in Ibid., in particular “Rancière and the Community of Equals” and “Rancière and Apolitics”.pp. 107-123.

On the other side, Todd May rather analyses the effectivity of the aspiration to a community of equals, as posited by Rancière. To prospect for and promote a gathering of equal intelligences already aims, as far as May is concerned, to threaten and subvert the police order. The politics of democratization that Rancière proposes, although it could be intended as a vision, nevertheless externalizes itself in activity; an activity that however conceives to subvert and transform both the police order and people's lives. In this respect, May stresses how these lives, following the principle of the community of equals, arise from participation in a commonality without identity, a subjectification without subject<sup>259</sup>.

For Rancière, the spectator who previously found himself in a condition of constant alienation subsumed under the separation between viewing and doing, begins to be aware of his knowledge. The emancipation of the spectator begins when he challenges this opposition and thus when the spectator begins to act and be the producer of the meaning of the work of art. This is a feature stressed by Conceptual art when defines, as Hélio Oiticica does, the participatory relation between the spectator - become participator - and the artist, the latter considered merely as the anticipator or instigator of twofold emancipating creations, both self and social emancipating<sup>260</sup>. In this challenge for spectator's emancipation, the artist represents the ignorant schoolmaster, the one who has the knowledge of the path separating him from the spectator. In this respect, art in the aesthetic regime should, within its praxis and intervention in the distribution of the sensible, produce a twofold emancipation, i.e. emancipation of itself from the past regimes through the inquiry of its structure, and emancipation of the spectator considered from the point of view of the ignorant schoolmaster. The emancipation here promoted by Rancière is thus total and covers all the spheres of the intelligible. The domino effect of the aesthetic emancipation of the spectator is due to its being simultaneously social emancipation, since what it institutes is a break with the old hierarchical order, that is to say a “break with the ways of feeling, seeing and saying”<sup>261</sup>.

The divestment of the polarization ordering within the system is both political and aesthetic. It appears clear how this divestment succeeds in terms of emancipating all the parts involved, because of its production of dissensus. No abolition, no proscription, no inverted arrangement - albeit within a hierarchical ordering, but rather a generalized alteration of the given otherness that produces the formation of a dissensual collective body.

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259 See Todd May, *The political thought of Jacques Rancière: creating equality* (The Pennsylvania University Press, 2008), p. 184. See even the entire chapter, “Active equality in Contemporary Politics”, pp. 142-188.

260 Hélio Oiticica, “Position and Program”, in Guy Bret et al., *Hélio Oiticica*, here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual art*, pp. 8-9.

261 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 35.



“What “dissensus” means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside. [...] Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in [...]. Collective understanding of emancipation [...] is the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus”<sup>262</sup>.

Art and artwork thus reveal their aesthetic efficacy when they contrast the link between cause and effect, for producing its own proper emancipation and a social effect in human beings. In this respect, the emancipatory and emancipating character, other than producer of political awareness and subjectivities – i.e. dissensus, defined by Conceptual art follows a twofold critical line, that is to say “not only to hammer away at the art of the past [...], but to create new experimental conditions where the artist takes the role of 'proposer', or 'entrepreneur', or even 'educator' [...], to create a wide-ranging condition of popular participation”<sup>263</sup>. We could affirm that the Conceptual artist, as the emancipated ignorant schoolmaster proposed by Rancière, relates himself to the spectator, so that both together become emancipated as political subjects. This, forming a collective political subjective-body, produces dissensus against the order of consensus and an active intervention in the distribution of the sensible.

Rancière, positing aesthetics at the very core of politics and individuating the politics within the aesthetics, try to solve the problematics inherent in the aesthetic domain. What could at first sight be considered a vicious circle, it is rather the promotion of a reconsideration of features disregarded by critical thought. We see in Rancière's theoretical framework the attempt to overcome the aesthetic of the crisis defined by Adorno and organize with political finality the poetics of openness presented by Eco. It is in this sense that we consider Rancière's aesthetic establishment as the *sauvetage* of aesthetics, because of his sharp critical analysis that aims to redirect the discourse to an enlarged and less false track.

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262 Ibid., p. 49.

263 Hélio Oiticica, “General scheme of the new objectivity”, in Guy Bret et al., *Hélio Oiticica*, here taken from Alberro, Stimson, *Conceptual art*, p. 42.

# Conclusion

Conceptual art attempts to render normative a conceptual development within an artistic context and, in extenso, aims to provide the basis for a completely new aesthetics. This aesthetics takes its distance from every inference of external critique and traditional aesthetics. The Conceptual artist has absolute possession of his work of art because he withdraws it from standard aesthetic contents and by means of the dematerialization of the features of art objects. The artist is the producer of the theoretical core of the artwork, which does not need any aesthetic definition unless of its own proper area. Hence, every work of art displays its own aesthetics.

Conceptual art provides the tools for considering art as the only sure means of judging art and gives itself to the external givenness through accretion of the idea or ideas displayed in artwork. Art within Conceptual art becomes aesthetics and philosophy, as well as sociological analysis of the situation present in society, based on a participatory political meaning.

It is in this respect that we established a theoretical confrontation between Conceptual art and philosophy, by means of the very speculative character of the former. We tried in this essay to show how could be thought Conceptual art's relation to philosophy, that is to say in what manner and within which fields Conceptual art challenges, or is akin to, philosophical analysis in regard to aesthetics. In this respect, we intended to illuminate Conceptual art's overcoming of what Adorno considers to be art's irreconcilability to reality and to philosophy, which states that art criticizes society by simply being there, and says what philosophy does not say by not saying it. At the same time, we aimed to underline the specificity of the informative character of Conceptual art in relation to Eco's notion of the open structure of the artwork, where interpretation's multiple choices render the relationship between the artist and the addressee an ongoing process based on an inclusive active participation. We even attempted to describe Conceptual art's correspondence with the analysis promoted by Jacques

Rancière, especially with regard to Conceptual art's emancipatory character, which politically intervenes in social development, aiming to produce a conscious dissensus.

Our intention was to furthermore set up a dialectical disposition within the consideration of three aesthetic perspectives, as so developed by Adorno, Eco and Rancière, that we believe are the most important contributions to contemporary art theory.

Adorno, on one side, strenuously defends an idea of aesthetics that contemporary art simply rejects. In Adorno, it appears evident that art challenges, and has to challenge, society; nevertheless, this implies a strict delimitation of art's mode of identification, which contrarily contemporary art deconstructs from Marcel Duchamp onwards. Adorno emphasizes in his theory the essential separation between fields of analysis, that is to say between that of art and that of aesthetics, which by necessity requires the support of philosophical investigation to attain a complete overview of the rationale present in art, constitutive of its indeterminacy. He does not disregard the development in contemporary art forms and movements, but rather fears for the possibility that art no longer could sustain an appropriate defence of its unity and autonomy in relation to the capitalist heteronomy. It is in this respect that he describes the danger within art's possible reconciliation with the existing world, occurring when art becomes to perform an affirmative cultural function in capitalist society. The art object has to be autonomous in regard to the evidence that, as Adorno declares, “where theory ends, there art begins”<sup>264</sup>.

On the other hand, Eco analyses the disenchantment from the standard aesthetic promoted by contemporary art forms as the possibility of achieving a more complex and less structured relation between artist and society. According to Eco, older forms of art represented the semblance of a hierarchical ordering. Eco never requires the work of art to be closed or autonomous as Adorno does, but rather individuates and defines its movement to the addressee. The openness of the work entails that the beholder to make the composition, because of the work's a priori participative structure that is open to degrees of interpretation. In this respect, art's opposition to the imposed social model consists in decentralizing and deconstructing established conventions and forms of expression. The *stimulus* conceived by

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264 Rüdiger Bubner, “Adorno's shift to aesthetic”, in *Modern German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 181.

the open work of art functions as the only essential pattern for surpassing the division between art and the external, autonomy and heteronomy, artist and spectator, observation and interpretation.

As an alternative to Eco and Adorno, Rancière underlines the importance of the notion of dissensus, firstly defining the political core of aesthetics and the aesthetic core of politics before describing the way in which art is critical. In opposition to Adorno, he solves the crisis of both aesthetics and art by individuating art's peculiar sphere of intervention that is related to the political subject, as so defined by the notion of *dēmos*, the subject's involvement in opposing himself to the establishment. There is no indeterminacy, but rather a movement that politically accomplishes, through artistic and aesthetic practices, a reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible. In addition, Rancière develops the participatory feature within the open artwork, as defined by Eco, by individuating the social emancipatory character of artistic practices, conflicting with the principles of *sensus communis* or social consensus.

However, we would like to underline that our proposal to dialectically interrelate these perspectives was never intended as a gnoseological twist, but rather as an analysis of the differences between philosophical approaches to the discourse on art. We thus tried to shed a light on those features in these philosopher's theories that we think could provide the basis for going beyond a certain fragmentation in the aesthetic terrain.

Before concluding our discourse, we think it is necessary to define what, according to us, constitutes the inheritance of Conceptual art, both historical and theoretical. Paraphrasing George Steiner, we could affirm that after the phase of *Logos*, namely of "the saying of being", what Conceptual art achieves and elaborates is the second phase, namely that of "after the Word"<sup>265</sup>. The latter considered by Conceptual art in its progressive significance, because the analysis has to continue and art in its ultimate definition has to be actively involved in the transformation of the external. Art's revolution should be permanent. Nevertheless, we could wonder what is left "after the Word".

According to us, the legacy of Conceptual art lies in the distortion of its efforts, which becomes manifested by current art's conceptual aphaeresis. By that we mean art's withdrawal

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<sup>265</sup> See George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 93.

from the analysis of its own substance and mode of being, the critique of the general system of administration, commodification and domination. We think in fact that the very critical core inherent Conceptual art has been disclaimed by being introjected into a system of administration, even though little modified; something that undoubtedly is in thorough opposition to what Conceptual art attempted to set up. Historically, this follows from the failure of the antagonistic, progressive and revolutionary character subsumed under the variety of protest movements of the late sixties and seventies. Nevertheless, it is not our intention to once again recall the crisis, the death or the end of art, which would merely be a mark of the same stupidity that, for Flaubert (*Letter to Louis Bouilhet, 8 september 1850*), consists in wishing to be final, supporting the eternal discussion on the decay of art. Rather, what we are here assuming is that, following Arthur Danto, after Conceptual art “everything is permitted”<sup>266</sup>. According to us, it appears evident that current art lacks a licit and proper criticism, which contrasts with its reduction to immaterial commodities by administrative policy. It thus appears that the art post-Conceptual merely displays its feebleness by means of its contradictory relationship to the culture administration's introjection of artistic expression.

We do not want to completely disregard the forms of current art, but our purpose is rather to find the basis, through our analysis, of a general investigation that aims to render this forms theoretically critical again, because what remains of *art after philosophy and after* could be philosophy at the service of art.

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266 Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 12.

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