

Vesna Mitar

PhD Student, University of Arts, Belgrade

vesna.mitar@yahoo.com

Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London, Verso, 2013 (review)

Peter Osborne's book *Anywhere or Not at All* presents a philosophical deliberation on contemporary art. It is a contribution to the clarification of the nature of contemporaneity and understanding contemporary artistic praxis, by means of revealing and, more precisely, defining the critical discourse, which is based in already existing theoretical thought. The discussion remains in the framework of the visual arts, and the book's seven chapters contextualize elements that drive and effect the creation of its critical discourse. On the basis of previous theoretical interpretations of contemporary art, discussing the praxes of major artistic groups and better-known artists, Osborne makes conclusions, asks questions, and gives potential answers and his own interpretations of contemporaneity. The theoretical position that permeates his discussion in general states that contemporary art is, generally speaking, post-conceptual art; therefore, art today has little in common with the Kantian understanding of aesthetics; by contrast, the "idea" is the main construct of its sense and concept. The book presents a professional reading and is therefore specifically aimed for readers familiar with general philosophical, aesthetic, and artistic discourses. It is a major contribution to understanding art today, when it is actually happening.

In the opening chapter, "The Fiction of Art", Osborne defines contemporaneity as an living and existing at the same time and space and yet, on the other hand, the book's historical and critical connotation is connected with the post-war period of the 1950s. Osborne proposes his own periodization of contemporary art, based on the distinction between the early avant-garde of the 1920s and the artistic "neo-avant-garde" of the 1940s and '50s. His periodization comprises three stages: the predominance of American institutions of art and artistic praxes after the Second World War; the 1960s and the break with a characteristic ontological object and medium of the avant-garde period; and, finally, neo-liberal art after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, marked as the definite end of avant-garde praxes, as well as the integration of autonomous art into cultural industries and the global and transnational acceptance of *biennales* as a characteristic form incorporated into the world of art. Osborne begins the defence of the major thesis of his book, concerning the definition of contemporary art as post-conceptual art and defining the gap between the aesthetic in its traditional meaning on one side and art on the other, in the following chapter, "Art beyond Aesthetic". Referring to Sol LeWitt's work, *Sentence on Conceptual Art*, he indicates the connection between romantic aesthetic theories

and the theory of the concept. The next chapter, “Modernism and Mediations”, offers a new conception and classification of modernism, aimed to shed light on the gap between the conventionally accepted but ambiguous definition, as a category of negation and historical classification, compared to the meaning it has today. Osborne discusses Sigmar Polke’s and Gerhard Richter’s work as a consequence of the obstruction of media, in terms of their resistance to losing the modernist metaphysical, post-romantic, and post-conceptual concept of art in a changed environment of experience and presentation. The outcome of the destruction of media established the transcategorial character of post-conceptual art, notably in Robert Smithson’s work (“Transcategoriality: Post-conceptual Art”). The following chapter, “Photographic Ontology, Infinite Exchange”, discusses the digital’s era effect on the historical development of and turning to the distributive principle in the art world, as well as the importance of digital networks for enabling infinite visual multiplication and a change in the ontology of photography. The final two chapters, “Art Spaces” and “Art Time” concern place and time as crucial elements in the contextualization of contemporary art.

The book’s title, *Anywhere or Not at All*, is a wide-ranging answer to the question: Where does post-conceptual art exist? Osborne applies the French anthropologist Marc Augé’s idea of de-localization to art and comprehends it so as to distinguish supermodernity, which neglects all local and temporal classification. He thereby equalizes non-location with abstraction and hence posits an idea of enigmatic character as a typical ontological feature of post-conceptual art. He argues that the autonomy of contemporary art is conditioned by the production of artworks as non-located objects. In the context of that claim, he presents Smithson’s work, which illustrates the concept of the de-location of an artwork’s material. Observing Smithson’s usage of constructive material, Osborne notes its wide reach and infinite potential in the period after the 1960s. He views visual multiplication, enabled by photography and the element of urbanization as a component of “modernity”, from the perspective of architecture and its connection with art. Osborne sees this transcategoriality in Gordon Mata-Clarke’s work, noting the contribution of architecture to the critique of contemporary art, as mediation between modern and post-conceptual art. Another important characteristic of postmodernity is the transnational element of institutional praxes and industry of art. Today, the institutional system represents perhaps the most significant part, which completes contemporary art and among other things makes it present and alive. Osborne views the global institutional network, with its transnational symbol, as a capitalist construction, which signifies the collapse of art into commodity production.

The most interesting part of the book, which broaches new questions about the creation and existence of art, is discussed through the dialectical relation between amusement and boredom, which grounds the contemporary order of reality. At what moment does art become amusement produced by boredom? Relating to the modernist utopian understanding of boredom as an enabling factor, he explains the experience of abstraction as a space beyond limits: “We have a world of pleasure to win, and nothing to lose but boredom”.¹ Osborne connects the theoretical basis for rethinking boredom in the framework of critical discourse with the work of Marcel Duchamp and the second half of the 20th century. Osborne’s final sentence, “At its best, contemporary art models experimental practice of negation that puncture horizons of expectations”, sublimates the entire book in a simple conclusion and provides an undeniable justification to all of the foregoing.

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, *“Postscript”: The Revolutionary of Everyday Life*, London, Rebel Press, 1983.