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The Aesthetics of Relations: The Modernist, Contemporary and Post-Contemporary General Conceptualizations of Art

Abstract: The article will juxtapose the modernist, contemporary and post-contemporary general conceptualization of art and aesthetic appearance of an artwork. Even though all three conceptualizations can be understood as intertwined because they are largely established in mutual relations, for our purpose they will be analyzed in terms of the basic epistemological terrain on which art enters the Western tradition of knowledge and power: the terrain of aesthetic education. The conceptualization of modernist art/artwork will mainly draw from its link with the autopoietic image of artwork/artistic creativity that can be traced to Romanticism as well as the tradition of the so-called aesthetics of form at the beginning of the 20th century, while conceptualization of contemporary art will be primarily reconstructed on the ground of cultural studies and its reception theory that focused on the analysis of social mediation of cultural texts where the text itself loses the status of an exclusive source of meaning. On the one hand, this article attempts to expose the difference between the two by focusing on conceptualizations of their modes of production of meaning (modernist autopoiesis as producing the artwork's meaning by, through and of itself versus contextually determined meaning of the artwork within conceptualizations of contemporary art), while on the other, it will expose a general aesthetic appearance of the two based on the differentiation of avant-garde and dialogical aesthetics. From there on, the article will focus on conceptualizations of post-contemporary art in the last ten years that also offered a critique of how contemporary art has been (self)limited to aesthetic experience and by it the present time. In the final part, post-contemporary art will be compared with modernism, for instance in terms of the modernist aim for the transcendent standpoint and its methods of aesthetic alienation in contrast to the post-contemporary aim to eliminate aesthetic experience as such and demonstrate that there can be knowledge without aesthetic experience, or the modernist media research to the post-contemporary media archaeology.

Keywords: aesthetic education; modernism, autopoiesis; avant-garde aesthetics; dialogical aesthetics; contemporary art; post-contemporary art.

The article will juxtapose the modernist, contemporary and post-contemporary general conceptualization of art and the aesthetic appearance of an artwork. Even though all three can be understood as intertwined because they are (historically)

largely established in mutual relations, we will focus on their intertwinement as well as their specifics in terms of the basic epistemological terrain on which art enters the Western tradition of knowledge and power (epistemology, ethics, politics), namely the terrain of aesthetic education (understood in the broadest sense). Specifically, in the context of modernity, the basic terrain of aesthetic education can be related to the spectrum of ideas how art and aesthetic experience effects, or rather, prepares one for moral action and/or a desirable form of knowledge. The 'and/or' in this case indicates the fact that in the formative context of the modern concept of art at the beginning of the 19th century, justifications of desirable forms of knowledge can hardly be distinguished from those of moral behavior. However, as long as both are connected to art and aesthetic experience, we can identify sketches of the two lines that will be differentiated later on, namely the line that connects aesthetic and art with ethics and morality, and the one that connects aesthetics and art with epistemology and knowledge. As the article will attempt to show, the shift from (proto)modern art to modernism can be seen in proximity to the shift of focus of aesthetics and art from ethics to epistemology, while conceptualizations of contemporary art actualize the relation of the two with ethics and morality. The latter is also the basis for specific ideas regarding forms of aesthetic education and through it the aesthetic appearance of art as well as conceptualizations of modes of meaning production (through art).

In the formative context of the modern conceptualizations of art, important transformations in this connection can be identified based on the transformation of aesthetics as a theory of aesthetic judgment into a theory of artistic production. We could say that this shift, as Peter Osborne suggests, coincides with the reflections of Romantic art within the tradition of philosophical idealism to proper Romanticism marked with the loss of a thing in itself and consequential autonomization of the position of enunciation.[1] In the narrower field of knowledge of art, this shift is the reason why modes of legitimation of the autonomy of art change: "It is no longer autonomy of a type of judgment (Kant), of the illusion of self-determination (Schiller), but of a certain kind of production of meaning in the object, an autopoiesis, distinct from both *techné* and *mimesis* (Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel)."[2] The emerging autopoietic image of artistic creativity as the basis for modern and modernist image of an artwork can be most directly traced in Schlegel's concept of transcendental poetry that refers to itself and explores its own conditions of possibility,[3] and is closely linked to his notion of irony as an aesthetic process in which the act of artistic production is directly inscribed in the product itself (the idea of the synthesis of *praxis* and *poiesis*).[4] However, for our current

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[1] The loss of a thing in itself also represents the loss of an objective anchor of subjective knowledge based on which a new procedure of truth follows, relying on the autonomization of the position of enunciation. Cf. Jure Simoniti, "Romantična znanstvena revolucija med odpravo reči na sebi in institucijo mesta izjavljanja," in *Izvori romantike*, ed. Isaiah Berlin (Ljubljana: Krtina, 2012), 181–201.

[2] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2013), 42.

[3] A reference to Kant's justification of autonomous knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

[4] Cf. Friedrich Schlegel, *Spisi o literaturi* (Ljubljana: Literarno-umetniško društvo Literatura, 1998).

purpose, Fichte's conceptualization of aesthetic education may be more informative. In brief, Fichte focuses on the reflection of the artistic creative process where the productive power of imagination is exposed since it represents the foundation for reaching the transcendental standpoint[5] as well as the ability to liberate ourselves from (directly in the experience given) actuality.[6] (Proto)modern articulation of the artistic creative process, therefore, claims that the artist chooses from the given, but does not operate in a vast modus of transformation/deformation and, accordingly, creates a duplicate of the given. He transforms/deforms the given,[7] knits it into a new semantic whole, a self-referential system of signification and thereby creates a conversion of the given (*retournement*), an imaginary reality within an imaginary reality.[8]

At the beginning of the 20th century, protomodernist images of artistic production, for instance, the one by Charles Baudelaire in reference to Constantin Guys[9] or the interpretations of a creative process of Paul Cézanne Heidegger suggested,[10] were further deepened by avant-garde artistic movements. In the context of the latter, a strong materialistic line based on the affirmation of materiality, self-sufficiency of an art media can be identified along with some sort of an 'artistic religion' based on a move from materiality to the supersensual escorted by the image of the artist as a mystic and visionary (Malevich). However, since our connection between modernism and Romanticism is based on a thesis about the shift of aesthetics and art towards epistemology within the framework of 'Romantic epistemological intervention', the specifics of modernism can be most suitably identified in the context of production of meaning about an artwork. For instance, within the tradition of the aesthetics of form during the first half of the 20th century, aesthetic ideas manifested within art will be defined, ie. the ideas which apply neither to Kantian forms of sensuality (time and place) nor categories (forms of reason) since they, in the strict sense, do not concern objective reality, but rather sensual independence of men. Generally speaking, we could say that modernist art tries to achieve sensual independence (of men) through the medium of sensual (experience): a sensual supersensual (if we borrow from Marx's reflection on commodity fetishism). Regardless of direction and approach, we could also say modernism is marked by the image of an artwork as a design of a poetic world that produces meaning by, through and of itself – either by negating constraints with the existing order and therefore the imperative of consensus that shape aesthetic and

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[5] I.e. the ability to move from the particular/singular/individual to the general.

[6] Cf. Daniel Breazeale, "Against Art? Fichte on Aesthetic Experiences and Fine Art," *Journal of the Faculty of Letters* 38 (2013): 25–42.

[7] I. e. given only as a phenomenon, imaginatively as Romantic epistemological interventions claim.

[8] Which, as such, also indicates that reality is actually given only imaginatively. Cf. Alain Badiou, "The autonomy of the aesthetic process," *Radical Philosophy* 178 (2013): 32–39.

[9] Cf. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1965).

[10] Cf. Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 96–105.

formal norms, or the established ways of art production[11] or through the means of nominalism (autonomization of the position of enunciation).

During the process of moving towards what will become commonly known as 'contemporary art' from the second half of the 1990s onwards, the primary object of critique was precisely the modernist idea of the autonomous artwork: for example, criticism focused on the idea that meaning is stored within an artwork as well as the corresponding spectrum of hermeneutic interpretative approaches based on a more or less clear distinction between an art object and subject. In this regard, the key theoretical reference represented a wide range of contributions from which a heterogeneous discipline of cultural studies and their reception theory have been formed since the 1980s. Generally speaking, the reception theory focuses on the analysis of the process, conditions and effects of social mediation of cultural texts, whereas the text itself is largely understood as a means of communication.[12] Analyses of cultural and social phenomena as communication tools since the late 1980s, in short, shift from the textual to the pragmatic model of thinking about cultural/social phenomena where the text itself loses its status of the exclusive source of meaning, while the production process and context as well as (aesthetic) experiences of readers are established as new objects of analysis. Gradual deconstruction of autonomy, solidity and clear borders of cultural texts draws from earlier poststructuralist and semiotic claims (death of an author, open work, etc.) and also marks the possibility of equalization between communicator and recipient, which can be perceived in the light of digital technological communication and reproduction.

However, since we only wish to outline the differences between modernism and contemporary art in terms of aesthetic education, we can draw from the general aesthetic appearance of the two by differentiating between avant-garde and dialogical aesthetics as proposed by Grant Kester. The avant-garde aesthetics of artwork is, according to Kester, based on the idea that an authentic artwork presupposes certain independence both from the artist and the viewer, whereby it communicates precisely through this independence and inconsumability, most often in various forms of aesthetic alienation.[13] When Kester tries to outline the dialogical aesthetics of an artwork, which is characteristic for a large part of contemporary art as well, he also identifies it in the pre-modern period, where art was closely connected with morality and played an important role in

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[11] For instance: purification of the art medium, series of abandonment of particular aspects of what has been the established way of art production, abandonment of craft as such. Here I am referring to the specifics of aesthetic, media-specific and generic modernism as proposed by Peter Osborne, which all negate the established art practice, but differ in the object of their negation. Cf. Osborne *Anywhere or Not at All*, 64–74.

[12] In the analysis of the process, conditions and effects of social mediation of cultural texts, mostly through references in Marxism, different levels of communication and its conditions are exposed, for instance how messages depend on institutional power relations (so-called priority reading) or ways of (non)matching different codes (source and recipient codes), etc.

[13] "Avant-garde art work therefore tries to reveal the inability of conventional language to grasp the infinite complexity of the world and the naive, and possibly reactionary, constraints of a 'confectionary' consensus [shared understanding] about the world." Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), 19.

everyday life. For instance, it was an integral part of aristocratic and bourgeois salon gatherings, anticipating the ideals of the bourgeois public sphere, since both share similar theater/fictional structure and are based on a certain image of *sensus communis*. The transition to the avant-garde aesthetics during modernity was supposedly marked by the change in how artists were positioned in relation to their consumers, in their refusal of the bourgeois imperative of utilization and instrumentalization, their increasing sympathy for or identification with the revolutionary working class, and by the changes that have affected both the role of art and the social, political and economic circumstances during the 19th century, i.e. free market of artistic goods. All of the listed transformations in positioning of art and artists in social processes is, therefore, a basis for establishing methods of 'aesthetic didactics' in the way of 'aesthetic alienation', mentioned conceptualizations of art's negative positioning to the world as well as its ability of revealing the appearance of reality/ideology.

In connection to this, the fundamental question arises: what type of productional circumstances marked contemporary artistic actualization of dialogic aesthetics, for instance during the 1990s in relational aesthetics or later in participatory art and some new media interactive artworks? The general aesthetic appearance of dialogical contemporary art after the so-called 'social turn'[14] could be analyzed precisely on the terrain of aesthetic education in connection to socio-political circumstances since the 1990s (perhaps most evidently in post-Socialist transition context and period). If we ignore the fact that the 'social turn' in contemporary art was mostly explained in connection to the analysis of alleged side effects of neoliberalism,[15] where art was legitimized as a generator of the social, conceptualizations of contemporary art were also an important generator of a new moral register of art criticism.[16] Such a moral register of art criticism stems from the past claims on the political, emancipatory, revolutionary potentials of art, but in large part appears in the political and ethical field of identity policies or the politics of recognition and their theoretical legitimations (that have been, according to Nizan Shaked, the basis of contemporary art since the transition from conceptual art to conceptualism in the 1970s).[17] More precisely, theoretical legitimations of identity politics or the politics of recognition, particularly since the

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[14] E.g. within socially engaged art, community art, dialogical art, interventional art, participatory art, etc.

[15] E.g. destruction of the common, the end of solidarity, decay of the welfare state, etc. in neoliberalism.

[16] The moral register of art criticism refers to the analysis whether art projects represent a good or bad example of cooperation or criticality, are empathically and horizontally connected or merely impersonally exploit the activated audience, criticize ruling ideology or merely reproduce it, etc.

[17] Shaked's analysis is based on the thesis that the shift from conceptual art to conceptualism during the 1970s was one of the formative contexts of contemporary art from 1990s onwards. A heterogeneous conceptualism should, according to Shaked, adopt the methodology of analytical research on ontology of art as well as abstract themes that were present in the framework of conceptual art of the 1960s (language, subject crisis, perception, image, space, etc.), but apply them to various social and political issues (synthetic proposition methodology), including the question of the political subject, and thus step into the field of identity politics that, at least in the Northern American context, coincide with the transition from public (the civil rights movement) to private funding of social movements (cultural nationalism and identity politics) at the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, when social movements were also forced to demonstrate a clearly defined minority, i.e. 'particularistic' perspective. Cf. Nizan Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017): 113–93.

1990s, were based on the recognition of differences, protection of fundamental freedoms, questions of (subjective) conscience, respect, justice, consensus and dialogue at the micro-social level, in brief: on the basic liberal-humanistic field where structural social inequalities are supposedly achieved primarily through aesthetic education (susceptibility, sensitivity, tolerance, sense of community) of individuals. Identity politics or the politics of recognition as the dominant theoretical basis underpinning a large part of 'dialogical' contemporary art therefore also indicates the shift away from the modernist ideal in transcendental or general standpoint towards a contemporary particularistic ideal, while embedded knowledge imperative within contemporary art criticism can be seen as a symptom of autonomization of the statement from position of enunciation (which had previously guaranteed its authority) within the current 'age of digital reproduction' as well as some sort of an attempt to ground it.

In the last ten years, contemporary art and its (self)limitation on aesthetic experience and by it the present time was perhaps most originally analyzed by conceptualizations of an "exit from contemporary art" to the post-contemporary (art), if we borrow the formulation by Suhail Malik. Conceptualizations of post-contemporary art are often derived from new theoretical approaches, such as OOO, speculative realism and media archaeology that tried to overcome epistemological restrains of the so-called 'literary culture' still largely present within conceptualizations on contemporary art even though it is not so much focused on perceiving art as a text/language and reception as reading, but more of a game algorithm and reception as usage.[18] In addition, they also derive to a large extent from the reflection on the current state of affairs regarding political action offered by accelerationism, insisting on the thesis "that the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, critique, or détourne it, but to accelerate and exacerbate it's uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies,"[19] i.e. from the diagnosis of the death of politics as such. General specific of conceptualizations of an exit from contemporary art therefore derive from critique of limitations of art and its discourse to human experience as well as its contextualization imperative. For instance by a critique of the inevitable impotence of contemporary critical (aesthetic) art in the context of techno-capitalism that is to an ever smaller extent determined by the individual and his experience, and to a lesser degree linked to the present time.[20] Especially those contributions definitely

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[18] All of the above references of post-contemporary art and its critique of contemporary art could also be analyzed in the context of the so-called affective turn in theory since the 1990s inasmuch as key differences of the two can be highlighted on those grounds. In the framework of contemporary art, the affective turn often presents a certain revision of the humanistic tradition, for instance a shift from (art) history towards memory studies (that can be seen as a nostalgic actualization of the oral tradition of narration in 'the age of digital reproduction'), and in connection to post-contemporary art's conceptualizations, it in theory usually appears within the anti-humanistic framework. In other words, the affect is understood in the original Spinozic sense and is, as such, not limited to (human) experience, it eliminates transcendence and focuses on the 'level of immanence'.

[19] Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, "Introduction," in *#Accelerate. The Accelerationist Reader* ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth, Berlin: Urbanomic, 2014), 4.

[20] Cf. Suhail Malik, "Exit not Escape: On the Necessity of the Arts Exit from Contemporary Art," lecture on 3/5/2013, Artist space, http://artistsspace.org/programs/on-the-necessity-of-arts-exit-from-contemporary-art, acc. July 21, 2019.

do not eliminate the basic terrain of aesthetic education and, accordingly, also remain fundamentally anthropocentric or even humanistic. Conceptualizations of post-contemporary art either limit themselves to an artwork in itself or try to actualizes art's fictioning potentials which could enable re-opening of the (in contemporary art allegedly missing) future tense or even futurology.

If we said general aesthetic appearance of modernist artwork and by it aesthetic education is marked with connection between art, aesthetics and epistemology, we could say conceptualizations of post-contemporary art try to connect art, aesthetics and ontology, whereas ontology, at least nominally, have nothing to do with ontology of art in sense of symbolic practice. The larger part of this theoretical approaches namely steam from the critique of assumption human's access to reality is discursively mediated and tries to offer new conceptualizations of materiality while for instance focusing especially on sound and sound art.

For the purpose of sketching the key difference between the two, it is nevertheless perhaps best to compare conceptualizations of post-contemporary art with modernism, for instance the modernist aim for the transcendent standpoint and its methods of aesthetic alienation with the post-contemporary aim to eliminate aesthetic experience as such and demonstrate "that there can be a knowledge of what has never been experienced".[21] However, since our basis for comparison is the terrain of aesthetic education, we could highlight the difference between the modernist research of medium (medium-specific modernism) and the post-contemporary media archaeology. Modernist research of the medium can be understood in connection to Kantian critique, i.e. the exploration of conditions of possibility as a precondition of autonomy, purification of the media, or, as Osborne (at least indirectly) suggested, in continuity with the research on the ontology or art (that at some point led to conceptual art). In contrast, media archaeology, where 'archaeology' is largely understood in the Foucauldian, i.e. anti-humanistic context, explores the medium and/or immanent logic and specificities of machines, for instance, the time of the medium that is radically different from that of the human. It is precisely this that allows us to locate some of the specifics of post-contemporary art's conceptualizations, which are forced to ignore the institutional and symbolic components of art (as a status) so extensively highlighted by contributions in proximity to contemporary art in order to be able to analyze the artwork as it appears in itself. We could, therefore, conclude that if conceptualizations of modernism were marked with the aim to achieve sensual supersensual, post-contemporary art conceptualizations' aim could be perhaps defined as achieving sensual non-sensual or non-sensual sensual.[22]

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[21] Suhail Malik, "Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art," in *Realism, Materialism, Art*, ed. Christoph Cox et al. (New York, Berlin: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Sternberg Press, Annandale-on-Hudson, 2015), 198.

[22] For instance Graham Harman's conceptualization of relation as non-relation (Cf. Graham Harman, "Art and OOObjecthood," in *Realism, Materialism, Art*, ed. Christoph Cox et al. /New York, Berlin: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Sternberg Press, Annandale-on-Hudson, 2015/, 97–116), based on analysis of sound art concepts such as flux ontology, sonic objects or sonority that has no immediate affective or perceptive soundness etc. (Cf. Christoph Cox, "Sonic Thought," in *Realism, Materialism, Art*, ed. Christoph Cox et al. /New York, Berlin: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Sternberg Press, Annandale-on-Hudson, 2015/, 123–30).

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