

# Art and Aesthetics: From Modern to Contemporary

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## I.

In a statement made famous, Barnett Newman exclaimed that ‘aesthetics is to the artist as ornithology is to the birds’. Since its enunciation around 1952 this claim has been reiterated on innumerable occasions. Its original addressee was Susan Langer, and its intent was to denigrate attempts to introduce semiotics and linguistics into art criticism and aesthetics. Often it was also explained as criticism of the beautiful on the part of Newman and his embracement of the sublime, although it was most frequently interpreted as a criticism of aesthetics as such. Nonetheless, such a situation was more typical of the United States or the United Kingdom and their ‘philosophical empire’ (Richard Shusterman) than of continental philosophy, aesthetics included. In recent decades the Anglo-American ‘empire’ also underwent a change not yet discernible in Newman’s statement: today ‘political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago’ (Bishop 2004: 77).

What occurred in forty years? May we claim that artists no longer see aesthetics as something irrelevant, as Newman probably did? The answer is affirmative. Arthur C. Danto recalls that after 1964 philosophical books of the austere and technical order began ‘to be preempted by the artworld and made its own, it was as though some deep transformation in artistic consciousness had taken place. A wholly different relationship between philosophy and art ... now seemed to exist. It was, almost, as if philosophy were somehow now part of the artworld, ... whereas in 1964 philosophy stood outside that world and addressed it from across an alienating distance’ (Danto 1986: x).

In spite of aesthetics and related theories finding – as Danto witnesses – a response and appreciation in art, this relationship remains uncertain: in the last two decades, i.e. since the cultural explosion of the late seventies and early eighties, when postmodern artistic practices and theories reigned, most aesthetic theories have once again left the path on which they had walked together with art. In the last two decades philosophy of art has apparently gone its own way, leaving contemporary artistic practices to rely on sporadic instances of art criticism or on rare philosophical theories that attempted to selectively grasp contemporary artistic phenomena. This had much to do with the current situation in art, bringing to mind the mentioned observation that ‘political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment’, for hasn’t the

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predominant recent and contemporary art really become politically, morally, and ethically involved, frequently focusing on topics related to social, ethnic, political, and other issues which make it appear to be political and politicized – not in the sense of the twentieth-century master narratives but in the meaning of Michel Foucault's 'microphysics of power'? In other words, is it not true that art of today still strives, very much in the tradition of modernism, romanticism, and the avant-gardes, to be provocative, critical, partisan, subversive, and 'involved'? It apparently continues to retain its objectives from modernity, even if most often without equivalent theoretical support.

To ascertain how the story – one of the possible stories – of some artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical positions unfolded in the last two decades, I shall sketch some of the common preliminary circumstances and then some theories that detected and articulated them. I thus intend to revisit three theories which have influenced – and are still influencing – not only global views and opinions about contemporary aesthetics, but equally or more intensely views about art and culture – realizing this not in the sense of determining what is good or bad art, but what is to be considered art as such.

In the past four decades the big shifts from modernism and modernity to the present contemporaneity occurred. Today a term missing on this path from modernity to contemporaneity seems to be postmodernism. Nonetheless, in spite of frequent criticism, it should not be forgotten that postmodernism emerged as the great liberator from the suffocating modern totalizations and high modernism. In the words of Wolfgang Iser from 1988, 'Postmodernity is traversed by the knowledge that totality cannot come without establishing as the absolute a certain particularity, which is then related to the destruction of other particularities' (Iser 1988: 25).

Postmodernism in Europe emerged as a theoretical and practical novelty in the seventies. After a few years it was replaced by cautious and reluctant admissions of the factual emergence of the postmodern newcomer, complemented by celebratory praise for postmodernism as a new and liberating cultural paradigm. A critical attitude towards it nonetheless remained strong. The main claim against it was the incompleteness and therefore the still actual relevance of the project of modernity. This attitude was also witnessed by alternative or complementary reflective articulations – some still being with us – such as 'parallel modernities', 'second modernity', or, as in the case of China, that of 'modernization'.

Such theoretical cultural issues have been connected to political issues in the sense that they were related to the end of ideologies, the clash of civilizations, the end of Marxism as the main master narrative of the previous century, the related fall of revolutionary socialism and its industrialist ideological supports, the surprise at discovering limits to the neoliberal political and economic agenda, as well as the lack of viable political projects and ideas capable of replacing it or at least offering a sustainable alternative to it: is this to be a revival of the relevance of Marxism, communism, and of the class struggle as recently argued by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, or spontaneous outbursts of social revolts of the multitude as conceptualized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and discussed by Paolo Virno, or something as yet unthought? And where does art stand in this?

How can we determine the cultural delineations of the last four decades and especially those related to aesthetics? A starting point can be the rise of postmodern ideas and postmodernism. The fascination with postmodernism and its incessant attempts at establishing its identity by demarcating itself from modernity perhaps revealed as much about modernity as about postmodernism. From the contemporary perspective it would appear that postmodernism was essentially a transient phenomenon, but at the same time one that represented a cultural marker of a deeper historical shift: from industrial society and national cultures and economies to the postindustrial and information society and, of course, to multinational capital and globalism.

In the early eighties one of the central theoretical issues was the question of the existence and nature of postmodernism as the most recent cultural dominant. The as yet undecided response to this query has almost prohibited a similar questioning in our current historical situation. In order to establish what some of the possible answers to this question may be, I will briefly discuss three theories that have captured the attention of audiences that may be broader or different from one of aestheticians. I will thus be discussing ‘relational aesthetics’ as developed by Nicolas Bourriaud in the nineties, Jacques Rancière’s aesthetics from the past decade, and Terry Smith’s theory of contemporary art developed mainly in the last few years.

Two of these authors, Bourriaud and Rancière, explicitly regard their theories as aesthetic ones. That of the former is an endeavour undertaken by a curator, editor, and art critic, while Jacques Rancière is a philosopher. The third author, Terry Smith, is a historian of art and architecture (and known in the past mostly for his book *Making the Modern*, 1993). While hardly mentioning aesthetics, he nonetheless explicitly or implicitly discusses issues of essential relevance to contemporary philosophy and theory of art. It is worth noting that Smith employs an abundance of artistic examples to establish and persuasively support his views.

In all three cases the theories offered are mainly devoted to visual art, taking such kind of art as a privileged artistic domain. Only Rancière is to some extent an exception, for he also uses literature as an important point of reference. All three authors take into consideration contemporary or recent art, thereby offering their theories as theories that are to influence the philosophical and the theoretical communities as well as various art worlds. The authors of the three theories also discuss contemporary global art. For them there no longer exists a recognizable border between the art of the First, the Second, and the Third Worlds; instead they see contemporary artists and art as progressively becoming inextricably linked and combined, making the demarcation between various parts of the globe impossible or irrelevant.

## 2.

If we say that a historical period which marks a transformation in relation to the past and to the future is a time of profound change, then the period in art and culture from around 1980 was such a time. Its cultural dominant, postmodernism, was the last cultural paradigm that was essentially created and almost exclusively theorized within the European and American context.

As a concept and empirical fact, postmodernism emerged in the realm of architecture, by this very fact witnessing to a cultural stance irreverent as regards the previous dominant literary artistic and cultural paradigm. In 1977 British architect and critic Charles Jencks published a book entitled *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. The term ‘postmodern’ immediately became a cultural catchword, for it conceptually crystallized in a single word a multitude of similar although unrelated cultural and social phenomena. As Jencks explained in a later edition of this book, ‘When I first wrote this book in 1975 and 1976 the word and concept of Post-Modernism had only been used, with any frequency, in literary criticism. Most perturbing, as I later realised, it had been used to mean ‘Ultra-Modern’, referring to the extremist novels of William Burroughs and a philosophy of nihilism and anti-convention. While I was aware of these writings, of Ihab Hassan and others, I used the term to mean the opposite of all this: the end of avant-garde extremism, the partial return to tradition and the central role of communicating with the public – and architecture is *the* public art’ (Jencks 1987: 6).

The role of architecture as the birthplace of postmodernism was highlighted also in philosophy and cultural theory. Thus Jürgen Habermas begins his programmatic lecture/essay on ‘Modernity – An Incomplete Project’ from 1980 by stating: ‘In 1980, architects were admitted to the Biennial

in Venice, following painters and filmmakers. The note sounded at this first Architecture Biennial was one of disappointment. I would describe it by saying that those that exhibited in Venice formed an avant-garde of reversed fronts ... A critic advanced a thesis whose significance reaches beyond this particular event; it is a diagnosis of our times: "Postmodernity definitely presents itself as Antimodernity" (Habermas 1983: 3).

Yet another analysis of postmodern architecture was offered by Fredric Jameson, who claimed that 'architecture ... remains the privileged aesthetic language' (Jameson 1991: 37). Jameson also spoke of a 'postmodern space', relating it to the notion of the sublime in the sense that it defers a cognitive mapping.

In many ways architecture – often in the sense of 'corporate postmodernism' – was the initial paradigm of postmodernism: it was, as Jencks acutely noticed, *the* public art, meaning that it was focused on the public and the users (and therefore the market); it was averse to avant-garde experimentation, it allowed or even cherished ornaments and embellishments, it furthermore demolished the barrier between the inside and the outside, and promoted the aestheticization of our lived environment, which went hand in hand with the embellishment of the objects of our quotidian life and the aestheticization of the human body.

In this sense, postmodernism represented much of what was considered negative when viewed from within the tradition of critical theory and avant-gardes. While this view could be correct when regarded from a Western European or American viewpoint, it became questionable when observed from Third or Second World perspectives: in Cuba, for example, the term postmodernism was avoided because of its associations with the U.S. In China it was understood in the sense of 'modern', while in the former European socialist countries its irreverent treatment of ruling ideas (cultural or political), its fondness for eclecticism and its 'anything goes' approach made it a liberating social and cultural theory. Postmodernism was furthermore welcomed in small cultures, which have in the modernist past always practised a cultural policy of appropriation and eclecticism. Suddenly their former cultural practice, which had until then been interpreted as a symptom of a lack of originality, of copying larger cultures, and of being late-comers, was suddenly transformed into a marker of being active participants in the most recent cultural invention and trend.

In the eighties Zygmunt Bauman hypothesized that the essential characteristic of postmodernism was that it represented a point in history in which the question of the end of modernity could be posited and thought for the first time – and that it was this possibility which represented the actual essence of postmodernism. In classical modernity, argued Bauman, nothing conceivable existed beyond it (Bauman 1989).

Regarded from a contemporary perspective, such observation appears very true: postmodernism, postmodernity, and their theories – be it those of Bauman, Jameson, Welsch, Lyotard, or others – appear to exist today primarily as interrelated critiques of modernity and modernism and not as positing of alternative theoretical edifices that would or could subvert materializations of the enormous inventions of modern development. It also appears that while much of postmodern art is eclectic and offers meaning instead of the modernist truth, it today at the same time reveals something about its transcendental conditions and its historical and existential contexts; somehow it reveals truth where it seemed there was none to be searched for, only a pure or opaque surface, thereby also revealing a specific kind of truth. Often such truth is related to the postmodern acknowledging instances of otherness related to differences in subjectivity.

Postmodernism today resembles modernism and modernity. Even Fredric Jameson, probably the most globally influential postmodern author, is seen today as a modernist figure and theorist. Is not his recurring tripartite scheme a typical Hegelian triadic construction, with the postmodern cultural dominant possessing all the modernist prerogatives and postmodernism revealing

the historical necessity of its ontological blindness as concerns its inner artistic nature and its obligatory nature of ‘not seeing’ in the sense of not mapping its place in its here and now? Does not his theory, just as postmodernism itself, increasingly resemble a modified and critically transformed discourse of modernity?

### 3.

‘Relational aesthetics’ was a notion presented for the first time in 1996 and developed in Nicolas Bourriaud’s book of the same title published in French in 1998 and in English in 2002. Bourriaud, a French art critic, curator, and editor, has also authored other books (the more recent *Postproduction*, for example). A concept related to Bourriaud’s, but one that never gained similar international attention, was ‘Context Kunst’, coined by the Austrian art critic and curator Peter Weibel and publicly presented at an exhibition by the same name in Graz, Austria, in 1993.

I should note that in my discussion of Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ I will be relying almost exclusively on the book by this title, for over time Bourriaud’s views change and sometimes contradict each other. Referring thus to a single work of his will facilitate our discussion of his basic tenets.

Bourriaud’s book is consciously a work whose intention is to theoretically, perhaps even philosophically, reflect upon the art of its time, i.e. the nineties. In his view the art of his time is characterized by a pronounced establishment of relations and communication between the artist and the public. As the author states in the foreword to the book, the misunderstandings concerning the art of the nineties arose out of the lack of theoretical discourse. In his view, the majority of critics and philosophers were averse to tackling contemporary artistic practices, which thus mostly remained unreadable.

Bourriaud intended to compensate for this deficiency and develop a theory which would to some extent philosophically grasp and plausibly explain what he saw to be not only a temporary phenomenon – i.e. the art of the nineties, with ‘relational art’ being the specificity that emerged in that decade – but an art that in his opinion possessed a more substantial historical significance. He claimed that today history ‘seems to have taken a new turn. After the area of relations between Humanity and deity, and then between Humankind and the object, artistic practice is now focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations, as illustrated by artistic activities that have been in progress since the early 1990s’ (Bourriaud 2002: 28).

Bourriaud thus proclaimed the art of the nineties to be the essential instance and materialization of relational art and thus also the privileged object of relational aesthetics, in this respect somehow repeating Hegel’s thesis about the development of the self-consciousness of the mind but – similarly to Rancière’s notion of the ‘aesthetic regime of art’ – not positing a historical closure to its development. Bourriaud claimed that relationality was a universal feature of art, one that was opened up in art by the Italian renaissance, only that in that case art was not yet creating intersubjective relationships but those between art and the objects it depicted. By his tripartite historical scheme Bourriaud followed in the footsteps of other recent French theorists, such as Régis Debray (*Vie et mort de l’image*, 1991), and Jacques Rancière, who divided history into similarly conceived regimes, even if in Rancière the historical divisions between them were blurred. Rancière thus referred to the ‘ethical regime of images’, the ‘representative regime of art’, and the ‘aesthetic regime of art’ that did not necessarily follow each other but could temporally overlap.

Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ and his notion of ‘relational art’ have been subjected to innumerable reviews and criticisms, and also served as the basis for other critical discourses. In spite of many obvious fallacies and contradictions inherent to his book, the latter not only generated

interest among theorists, but was also well received by artists, curators, critics, and the so-called 'art world' in general. It was the 2002 English publication of *Relational Aesthetics* that put the book on the global art map and turned it into an important point of reference for those with an interest not only in the most recent fine arts and new technologies (which were Bourriaud's main points of reference), but also those involved with performance art and even theatre. The success of Bourriaud's book also confirmed his observation about the lack of theoretical discourse on the art of the nineties – a period when creative art was emerging not only from Western Europe and the United States, but also from the former Soviet bloc countries, with the latter being subjected to more developed theoretical reflection. The lack of critical theoretical response to the art of the nineties perhaps had something to do also with the still vibrant postmodern ideas and the thesis that the art of that time was only a chain of meaningless signifiers, not allowing for a cognitive mapping that could equal that of the class consciousness as theorized by György Lukács, artistically making itself visible in its co-temporal modernist manifestations. On the one hand, western artists were confronted with the politicized art coming from the former or present socialist countries, and on the other with the critical art of the neo-avant-garde tradition and its forms of resistance. Curators, furthermore, became the crucial artistic figures of the nineties, turning themselves into roles previously reserved for film or theatre directors and setting up their almost private exhibitions, establishing in this way the pronounced dominance of the curator who replaced the previous persona of the modernist art critic. Since the curator became the pivotal figure of the art world, it was not unexpected that he also attempted to articulate the theoretical positions which were to create, reflect upon, and support the principles of his curatorial practices. Nicolas Bourriaud did just that, and this fact became one of the sources of the impact his book made and continues to make in the world, be it the world of art or of academia.

In his book *The Century* (2005) Alain Badiou points out that the predominant part of the modernist art of the twentieth century did not appear in the form of a material work but in the form of an act, as some kind of performance. Boris Groys similarly claims – but in relation to contemporary art – that installation art and performance art are the authentic and the dominant art forms of our contemporaneity (Groys 2008). In this respect Bourriaud conforms to this view and confirms such observation.

Bourriaud has advocated performativity, social contexts, transitivity, and dialogue over the limitations of traditional modernist values such as individualism and objecthood. Bourriaud finds empirical support for relational aesthetics in the art of the nineties, and theoretical support especially in Félix Guattari's philosophy. According to Guattari's philosophy, it is illusory to aim at a step-by-step transformation of society. The only realistic options are microscopic attempts, of the community and neighbourhood committee type, such as the organization of day-nurseries in the faculty and the like, which play in his opinion an absolutely critical role.

If in any, then we are with Bourriaud in the inverted cosmos of Michel Foucault's microphysics of power, a cosmos in which – to use examples from Bourriaud – the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija prepares a meal and invites visitors to share it with them, or 'when Gabriel Orozco puts an orange on the stalls of a deserted Brazilian market, ... or slings a hammock in the MoMa garden in New York' (Bourriaud 2002: 17). According to Bourriaud, with such gestures the artist acts in the small space of everyday gestures that are determined by the superstructure, with this one consisting of and being determined by the 'large' exchanges. In other words, what Bourriaud is promoting is an art that does not strive to be a part of modern utopias or that would want to resist current social antinomies (and therefore continue the avant-garde tradition of modernism), but one that is content to create 'microtopias'. In Rancière's words, in Bourriaud 'art no longer tries to respond to an excess of commodities and signs but rather to a lack of

bonds. As [Bourriaud] puts it: “Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond” (Rancière 2009: 57).

A related criticism is aimed at Bourriaud by Claire Bishop. In her view – which is less political than Rancière and that I find to be among the most relevant and pertinent – the main problem with Bourriaud’s theory and the artistic examples he chooses is that he promotes art that requires ‘a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness’, instead of basing relationality on (or also on) the art of the same period that provides experiences ‘more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today’ (Bishop 2004: 79).

Bourriaud’s work shows that in spite of being frequently contradictory – as when he embraces modernity, and the criticality of various modes of modernist art, while at the same time opting for cosy and intimate non-conflictual community-building and sharing experiences as art – personal choice, even if one-sided, has enormous effects in society and in art. In spite of its weak points, Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics had a strong impact on contemporary art criticism. Bourriaud justly pointed out that one of the essential features of art – any art – is and remains the establishment of communication and interpersonal exchange.

#### 4.

In the preface to *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault raises an issue on which this work of his is based: ‘Between the already “encoded” eye and reflexive knowledge there is a middle region which liberates order itself... In every culture, between the use of what one might call the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself, there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being’ (Foucault 1994: xxi).

This passage from Foucault can help us shed light on a large segment of Jacques Rancière’s philosophical and aesthetic project which started in recent years to have a visible global impact not only among philosophers but also among contemporary artists and art critics.

As Rancière explains in a 2002 interview, ‘something of Foucault’s archeological project – the will to think the conditions of possibility of such and such a form of statement or such and such an object’s constitution – has stuck with me’ (Rancière 2003: 209). What is relevant for Rancière in Foucault and what recalls Kant’s transcendental philosophy is precisely his interpretation of the constitution of aesthetics, of the way aesthetics as a concept became possible, thereby aiding in the development of a general notion of art. His aesthetic project consists of nothing less than a thorough overhaul of the current dominant theory of modernism and autonomous art.

Rancière – a former student of Louis Althusser and involved in his *Lire le Capital* book project who later, like Alain Badiou, dissociated himself from Althusser – published works on pedagogy and on political philosophy, to become in the last decade known also outside the Francophone world and to become at the moment probably the most influential continental philosopher pursuing ‘aesthetics’. In his view – described, often repeated, and somewhat developed in a series of thin volumes, conference papers and interviews which in his words ‘allow him to say as much as possible in as little space as possible’ (Rancière 2003: 209) – Rancière persistently repeats a few main tenets of his philosophy of the aesthetic. These are some of the central ones:

Aesthetics is a discourse born two centuries ago and is the condition of possibility for thinking art in general. ‘It was in this same era that art, in its indeterminate singularity, was first set in contrast to the list of fine, or liberal, arts’ (Rancière 2009: 6). ‘For art to exist what is required is a specific gaze and form of thought to identify it’ (ibid.). A specific gaze is the gaze of the aesthetic regime of art. But without having aesthetics as its transcendental condition, art would not attain the singular generalized mode which has allowed us for two centuries to speak about art as well as to

pose questions about its nature and its universal properties. In this way aesthetics has carried out a 'distribution of the sensible', that is, it developed the notion of art – and thus the whole field of art – in a specific way, including some and excluding some other forms of production and creativity. What Rancière is after are conditions that make possible categories such as art, critical art, autonomous art, etc. The aesthetic regime of art which, he argues, came into existence more or less simultaneously with aesthetics, has essentially replaced the representative regime of art which was erected upon the verisimilitude of the representation and the represented. The aesthetic regime purportedly rejected such a hierarchical system, allowing for an osmosis among elite and abstract art and arts and crafts, thereby bringing together under the same roof the abstractions of Malevich and the Bauhaus projects or Stendhal and the Arts and Crafts movement.

Rancière attempted to turn aesthetics into a tool of interpretation of contemporary art by proclaiming modernism – especially of the Greenbergian type – obsolete and counter-productive for an analysis of the art of the last two centuries. In his view, the notion of modernism (a part of which he calls 'modernitarism') raises all kinds of problems, such as the division of art into formalism and politicized avant-gardism or the lumping together of theories as diverse as those of Adorno and futurism.

In spite of some persuasive arguments, Rancière's attack on modernism seems problematic and risky especially because it requires a complete reinterpretation of the art of the last two centuries. Rancière claims that art is like democratic politics: the persons who are without a voice in a community have to attain a voice, have to fight for the right to speak and to be heard. The same is true of Rancière's theory. A question also arises as to the delimitation of art and crafts in the aesthetic regime. Today nobody defends the 'pure' art that Rancière chastises and we all agree with him that modern art is a mechanical mixture of artistic (formal) and extra-artistic (heteronomous) elements.

According to Rancière then, there exist three regimes or modes of art, with the 'aesthetic regime' being the one instituted by the aesthetic revolution at the end of the eighteenth century when works were proclaimed art without possessing the representational properties which previously purportedly distinguished art from non-art.

Since then, and Rancière is quite adamant about this, the aesthetic regime of art stretches on into contemporaneity, disregarding issues such as the autonomy of art or the modernism/postmodernism dilemma, the theory of the end of art, or that of the purity of art. All these are, claims Rancière, issues created by the false supposition that modernism is a concept rooted in historical reality and not simply an ideological notion created *post festum*.

## 5.

In his *Aesthetic Theory* Theodor Adorno claims that 'the principle of method here is that light should be cast on all art from the vantage point of the most recent artworks, rather than the reverse' (1997: 359).

In both authors so far discussed it is obvious that their starting point is contemporaneity, although in Rancière's case this contemporaneity paradoxically runs through an ahistorical and synchronic continuum within which only the starting point – around 1800 – is explicitly noted, which then stretches into an undefined contemporaneity.

Terry Smith's theoretical endeavour warrants attention for he tackles the issue of contemporary art head-on. Like Bourriaud, Smith also approaches the art of his time, only his time is currently also ours and he does not ascribe historic proportions to the current epoch as Bourriaud did. Also, if the art discussed by Bourriaud included recent non-European and non-American art, such art was



nonetheless mostly the creation of artists who permanently emigrated to Europe and the US from other continents. In Smith's case the art presented is more locally defined and determined, or it is explicitly 'global'.

Smith's project – presented especially in his 2009 book *What is Contemporary Art?* but also in his other publications – consists of an attempt to untangle the incessantly loose ends of contemporary art and to establish some common points and features in what appears to be a jumble of contradictory, excluding, or parallel works and events that apparently share only the title of 'art', which they appropriate by being presented within an environment that is designated as that of a museum, a gallery, a biennial, or some other artistic space/place/location. Their shared characteristics often have nothing to do with their shared locality but with their common, related, or similar concepts. Also, if in the past, as Zygmunt Bauman claimed in 1989, philosophers were 'legislators' – think, for example, of Hegel's cannonic role in determining our perception of past art – then they turned in recent decades into 'interpreters'. Today even this role of interpreters has lost its significance, for the number of art worlds has become infinite. It is such a situation that makes Smith claim that universalisms such as modernity or postmodernity will not achieve totality, nor allow for a sustainable compromise.

Smith's main position concerning contemporaneity could be condensed into the following statement: '*Contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them*' (2008: 8–9).

Smith argues that in contemporary art a pattern exists between universal determination and random plurality. The pattern of which Smith speaks reminds one of the set theory that Alain Badiou posits in his main work, *Being and Event* (1988), as his ontology. The important feature of Smith's theory is that it limits the import of common features to a pattern which is based on resemblance and not on a causal relationship.

According to Smith, contemporary art consists of three main currents which form the mentioned pattern: the first is institutionalized Contemporary Art (which amounts to an aesthetic of globalization and is related to neoliberal economics and art institutions), the second is a current that emerges from decolonization within the former colonial worlds and includes its impacts in the former First World. It is within this current that postmodernism is to be included as a segment thereof. In Smith's view, 'postmodernism' is a term too thin to denote this great change that is still continuing. He argues that postmodernism is today but a pointer to the first phase of contemporaneity.

The outcome of Smith's theory of contemporary art is that there exists not one but three answers to the question of what is contemporary art. There exist then three interrelated kinds of contemporary art, the essence of which is raised on empirical grounds but which nonetheless possess some broader philosophical characteristics. Such interpretation of contemporaneity and its art have often met with criticism and denigration – as at a conference in 2004 which resulted in the collective volume *Antinomies of Art and Culture. Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (2009) where some participants flatly refused to accept Smith's claims about contemporary art.

Art is contemporary in an infinite number of ways, insists Smith, offering again a statement very similar to Alain Badiou's argument about set theory, where there is no all-encompassing mathematical set. In Badiou this truth carries universal proportions, that is, it is not only historically or geographically valid, but is instead, like Kant's epistemology, valid universally. Because contemporary art is not only globally created and exhibited but also globally conceptualized, it is also universal.

## 6.

In this brief sketch I have pointed to some of the encounters of aesthetics and art in recent decades. They witness that in spite of numerous examples proving the opposite, art and aesthetics occasionally become or remain partners in our attempts to fathom, legitimize, and appreciate art.

What occurred within and after postmodernism was a series of individual poetics and expressions. This development was detected, presented, and analysed also by some contemporary aesthetic and art theories. I have noted three. The first represents a reflection upon a segment of the art of the nineties. It offers a theory in a situation when there was obviously none available. The second theory represents an attempt at a thorough overhaul of the ruling discourse on modernity and modernism, collapsing modern past and present art into the aesthetic regime of art. The third theory, that of Terry Smith, offers at the moment a starting point, since for the time being it remains in an underdeveloped state. It promises to think the contemporaneity of contemporary art anew, which is a much needed endeavour. Let me therefore conclude this essay with two propositions by Smith: One: 'Art everywhere today is contemporary in every sense.' Two: 'Today art is still modern, in part, but residually so. It sees postmodernism as a recent repository of useful strategies that do not, however, add up to a whole' (Smith 2010).

I would subscribe to both statements. It remains to be seen whether this theory of contemporary art will acquire a significance that will reach beyond the needs stemming from the ambiguity whether today we should refer to the museum of modern or contemporary art – or perhaps both. We know what theories are behind the notion of modern art, but which theories are to philosophically support the notion of the museum of contemporary art?

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