

RELATIONAL SYNTAX

Aesthetic awareness and ideological experience
in post-industrial society

A project by Marco Mazzi

MASCHIETTO EDITORE



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010

Lorenzo Carlucci

THE NATURALIZATION OF ART, METAMIMESIS AND CHOICE OF SELF:
PROSPECTS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

1. *Contemporary art as self-recognition*

We can describe the progress of artistic forms as a succession of languages L1, L2, L3, ... over time¹. For every time t , the language L ($+1$) is proposed as an *extension* of the previous one. Extension can mean various things in this context: in very many cases, the characteristics of language L ($+1$) are obtained by negation, contradiction, or opposition to those of language L (t). Modern art has always provided the new language with its justification, i.e. an explanation why the language L ($+1$) can be understood as an extension and often the overcoming of the language L (t). Historically, this justification or series of justifications J1, J2, J3, ... corresponding to the series of the languages, has taken different forms. However, it may be possible to reduce it to a single type: language L ($+1$) is *more adequate* to reality (or world) \mathbb{W} and is therefore better than language L (t). The justifications can be distinguished according to the choice of the world \mathbb{W} and the sense in which language L ($+1$) is most adequate to it. In most cases, world \mathbb{W} is the world at time $\mathbb{W} (+1)$, i.e. the *contemporary* world, or better, a *description* of it. In other cases world \mathbb{W} is an ideal world projected into a future or past time. In these cases, world \mathbb{W} is just a shadow of an esthetic or philosophical principle. In other cases, world \mathbb{W} is a portion of empirical, psychological or conceptual reality (recognized as partial but) to which particular importance is assigned. In these cases, it is still the shadow of an abstract principle, i.e. the reality contained in world \mathbb{W} is conceived as always being present, as the fundamental core of truth of all the worlds $\mathbb{W}1, \mathbb{W}2, \mathbb{W}3, \dots$ past and future. In most of Western art history, the main sense in which language L ($+1$) is more adequate to the world \mathbb{W} associated with it than language L (t) is that a resemblance relationship, ultimately a mimetic relationship, holds between L (t) and \mathbb{W} . By mimetic we mean not only a relationship characterized by the reproduction – in the artificial creation – of the sensory qualities of an initial object, but any meaningful relationship based on the artificial creation having some qualities (not necessarily sensory) corresponding to the qualities of the initial. In this respect all the historic avant-gardes have based their attempts at renewal or revolution on a concept of the adequacy of L ($+1$) to \mathbb{W} on an essentially mimetic basis.

It seems correct to say that the series of languages L1, L2, L3, ... is determined by a rule of formation which will not be fully described here. We can thus consider

the series of artistic languages as the expression of a *process*, which we call P. This process, basically dialectic, of the *progress* of art, corresponds to a profound and to a certain extent unavoidable need: the need of art to renew its forms in order to counter the paralysis (or entropy) of the signifiers. In this regard we can trace the expressions of this process – basically a *querelle des anciens et des modernes* – throughout Western art history (see, e.g., Ratiu 2010, for a succinct overview). While, on the one hand, process P described above corresponds to a need related to the information aspect of the artistic act and of human language in general, on the other we can say that 20th century art has shown a lack of continuity, a particular advance in quality in the consciousness of the artists if not in the material sense. Process P becomes part of the *contents* of the artist's consciousness. This becomes obvious, for example, with the Historic Avant-gardes in art and with Russian Formalism in the theory of art. In the latter, art is basically described in the same terms used above to describe process P as a process of overcoming linguistic automatisms, as a movement away from the 'primary system' of non-artistic signification to the 'secondary system' of art. It is, in fact, the result of a reflection originating at least in Romanticism (but probably in the Renaissance) with its maximum philosophical expression in Kant and in Hegel's idealism. What concerns us here is that process P is brought to the attention of the artist, and becomes the object of theorizing for the art philosopher. This has inevitable and immediate consequences on the practices of the artist and on esthetics.

Though with the due exceptions, 20th century art history has been extensively affected by this awareness. From the Historic Avant-gardes up to the 1960s, we can interpret the variations in artistic forms as a series of reactions to this self-recognition, and as solutions to the problem it poses:

"Until then, art meant everything that was in it – not what you could take out of it. The esthetics of painting were always in a state of development parallel to the development of painting itself. They influenced each other and vice versa. But all of a sudden, in that famous turn of the century, a few people thought they could take the bull by the horns and invent an esthetics beforehand. After immediately disagreeing with each other, they began to form all kinds of groups, each with the idea of freeing art, and each demanding that you should obey them. Most of these theories have finally dwindled away into politics or strange forms of spiritualism" (Willem de Kooning, "What abstract art means to me", 1951, in Chipp 1968)

The dialectic succession of languages accelerated, with "-isms" appearing at a faster and faster rate. This is because once process P has been manifested in the consciousness of the artist, what counts, at least initially, is conceptual positioning within the dialectical framework².

The sense of panic or anguish in this trend is increasingly evident. This is be-

cause we can understand clearly that the strategy of avant-garde cannot continue indefinitely, and that the awareness of process P requires new solutions both in art and esthetics.

Process P, which determines the series L1, L2, L3, ... of artistic languages, is now threatened by entropy. Once objectified, it risks losing all meaning, to become *in itself* something automatic to be overcome; something which can only be perceived as *the ultimate automatism*.

2. A parallel with the exact sciences

It is suggestive and perhaps illuminating to draw a parallel between the situation described above and the development of mathematics between the end of the 19th and the 20th century, i.e. more or less in the same period. This period starts with the so-called “Crisis of the foundations of mathematics” (see Mancosu 1998). In brief, some great mathematicians of the time have felt the need to give a firm logical basis to their subject taken as a whole. The new discipline of Mathematical Logic has a fundamental role in this attempt. While art expresses itself in a set of languages (e.g. painting, sculpture, etc.), mathematics expresses itself in a series of theories (algebra, analysis, geometry, etc.). Each theory systematically expresses our knowledge about a particular area of the mathematical universe. The ideal form of a theory for the 20th century mathematician is that of an axiomatic theory. After assuming certain “elementary truths” (axioms), we try to deduce all the consequences. For example, after assuming some elementary truths in arithmetic, we try to deduce from them all the truths on the structure of natural numbers (number theory). The deduction must take place according to strict, unambiguous logical rules, and we must be able to mechanically verify the correct application (which before the invention of computers meant, roughly, on a ‘formal’ basis, i.e. on the basis of the form of the rules of logic and without recourse to intuition or external justifications). The hope is to succeed in grasping *all and only truths* about the structure involved. Here we have a requisite of adequacy similar to that of the adequacy of artistic language L (\neq) with respect to reference world W associated with it. In the 1930s, this hope proved to be patently unfounded and not realizable. Gödel’s famous First Theorem (Gödel, 1931) provides a mathematical proof that the attempt was a mere utopia. If any theory T contains a very small amount of arithmetical axioms, and is not a contradictory theory (i.e. one that shows both everything and its opposite), this theory T contains a truth V (expressed in the language in which T is expressed) such that T does not provide either a proof of V or a proof of the falsity of V. We then say that T is incomplete: on the basis of the axioms of T, we cannot decide on the truth or falsity of all the propositions regarding the

mathematical objects theorized in T . Even more surprisingly, this truth V can be produced in a uniform and mechanical way, starting from a description of theory T . Finally, one of these truths V is the one expressing the non-contradictory nature of theory T itself! In this respect the Gödel's so-called Second Theorem tells us that no formal axiomatic theory containing a minimum of arithmetic can demonstrate its own non-contradictory nature, or coherence. The situation of mathematics after Gödel's theorems is therefore the following. Far from being able to aspire to an extremely general theory containing all of mathematics, we only deal with a succession of theories T_1, T_2, T_3, \dots which are increasingly strong, in the sense that theory $T_{(i+1)}$ can demonstrate everything that can be proved in $T_{(i)}$ and some further truths inaccessible to $T_{(i)}$. On the other hand there are truths that theory $T_{(i+1)}$ is unable to prove, *et sic in infinitum*. Truths of this type can only be assumed as axioms, never proved on the basis of weaker axioms. Furthermore, the series of theories can be generated by applying a uniform and mechanical procedure which we can call G . The result is therefore the *incompleteness* of any axiomatic theory and the *impossibility to complete* any axiomatic theory. Gödel's Theorems has revealed the substantial and inevitable incompleteness of formal mathematical theories. At the same time, however, it has revealed to us the *inexhaustibility* of mathematical truth. Gödel's results, not surprisingly, have had strong repercussions on the conception of mathematics, and have been the subject of considerable debate, also in philosophy. We cannot review these developments here. It will be enough to examine the analogy with what has been described in the previous paragraph on 20th century art: with Gödel's theorems, mathematics has become aware of itself (in the form appropriate to it, i.e. as a mathematical theorem), becoming aware of an inevitable process of producing increasingly powerful theories, none of which is complete. Just as process P has become the contents of the artist's awareness and of the works of art, and the subject of esthetic speculation, process G has become the subject of mathematical study in the discipline going under the name of meta-mathematics. Just as meta-mathematics has somehow exhausted its role and has led to other disciplines, mainly in computer science (theoretical and applied) and to the Theory of Computational Complexity, this could be happening to 20th century art, in contemporary art. After Gödel's Theorems, the philosophy of mathematics (and the part of mathematical practice) divided (dialectically) between the supporters of a return to truth and intuition (non-formal) and the supporters of a form of relativism and pluralism (see Benacerraf and Putnam, 1983). As a third dialectical opportunity, a program for the naturalization of mathematics has been proposed (see, e.g., Maddy, 1997). As we shall see, art and esthetics have had a similar fate.



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010

3. *Strategies of overcoming: the end of art and metamimesis*

Becoming aware of process P as described above has placed the contemporary artist before a dilemma: how to overcome the automatism expressed in process P? As Arthur Danto (1984) essentially suggests, the awareness of P and the resulting dilemma could be a *characteristic feature* of contemporary art, sharply distinguishing it from the art of the past.

The artists must continue to produce works, but which works can be produced after they become aware of P? Obviously, continuing to produce works according to the law laid down by process P would be an act of bad conscience. It should be pointed out that through process P we express a form of the concept of *totality*. Process P extends over the entire artistic production of the past and, in its indeterminate nature, the artistic production of the future. Like every idea of totality, the idea of art as totality is a limit concept. Like every limit concept, the idea of art as totality poses special problems to the artist and the thinker. When the very process of overcoming the automatisms appears in our awareness as a worn-out reflex, an obstacle preventing the indispensable efficacy of artistic expression, what is there left to do? Somehow overcoming process P *as an automatism itself* means confirming the death of art, at least of art as we know it, i.e. the art that is part of process P. We are well aware that this has been definitely done: “The time for Art is over”, we read in one of the manifestos of Situationism. But at the same time, since art is not an amusement that men can do without, the manifesto demanded that art be *realized*. Realized art, in this case, was *cancelled* art. The survival of art was possible through *the suicide* of art.

Esthetics has closely followed, and later oriented and consolidated this formulation of the problem and its consequences. With Arthur Danto (1984) and Hans Belting (1983) philosophy largely accepted this paradigm, under the name of the “End of Art” or the “End of Art History”.

Together with the “End of Art”, in more or less the same period, the “End of Metaphysics”, the “End of History”, etc. were proclaimed; and often this trend has been distorted by a hint of millenarianism. Despite this, the theory of the “End of Art” involves the complete expression of an idea which, from its Renaissance or Romantic roots, has acted as a hidden and then open driving force in the development of artistic practice in the 20th century.

The esthetics of the “End of Art” has also highlighted the process of the “sacralization of art”, with roots in the Renaissance and then in Romanticism. 20th century art has been attributed with functions beyond its scope, and European culture has sought in art the answers to the questions asked by philosophy, ethics and religion. This process, well expressed in the Romantic idea of the superiority of art with respect to philosophy (due to the capacity of art to express the truth



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010

through sense objects), has survived idealism (which first proclaimed the end of the time of art as a superior discipline of the spirit) and has become stronger as the philosophical disciplines have weakened. Art has received this investiture. It is hard to find an artist since the 20th century – even the most anti-intellectual and the most anti-mystical – who has not expressed an eschatological or ethical view of the function of art³.

It seems reasonable to think that at the time of the crisis (self-recognition of process P), art has chosen to somehow take over the demands from philosophy and politics, and in any case non-artistic demands, finding in these some forms of a possible way out from its *own* impasse.

When process P is perceived as a whole, and when the rule that has produced it has been made abstract and theorized, the possible expression of the artistic languages of the future L ($t+1$), L ($t+2$), L ($t+3$), ... seems to the more impatient and intransigent to be the result of a boring, mechanical application of a rule. Some artists decide to devote themselves (and in some cases deliberately) to this activity (to the “infinitesimal variations of a method”, as they were called in poetry by Alfredo Giuliani in his introduction to the *Novissimi* poets). Others have, instead, decided to transform process P taken as a whole into the *object* and *contents* of art. This is an elegant solution, with a representative example in Kosuth's work, but not without risks.

Extending to art in general some considerations made elsewhere for the special case of poetry (Carlucci, 2008), we could classify a major current of contemporary art under the idea of *transcendental art*, or *metamimetics*⁴. Transcendental art, which responds to the problem of overcoming the automatic mechanism of process P *as a whole*, is an art dealing with the conditions of the esthetic fact. The purpose of this type of art is to represent, investigate, or change *the conditions* under which the subject perceives. In other words, transcendental art has the aim of overcoming those very automatisms that were started of by the dialectic process of overcoming the linguistic automatisms. Examples of this transcendental attitude in art can be found in the entire second half of the 20th century. In its highest and perhaps not yet achieved form, transcendental art faces not only the *static* totality of the artistic languages of the past, but also the *dynamic* totality, of language, and therefore of artistic dialectics, defined as all those processes causing the (observable) change of natural language and literary language (i.e. the ‘primary system’ and ‘secondary system’, to use Lotman's terminology). We can distinguish various forms of transcendental art, according to whether the purpose of this art is identified with a representation, a trial or an alteration of the conditions of the esthetic act. As in other cases, the self-recognition of process P corresponds to a rather long phase of reflection and self-examination of the artistic activity.



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010

This is necessarily followed by a second phase, which cannot be characterized on the general level. With regard to transcendental art, we can try to describe it as follows. The mimetic activity of the work of art, after turning to itself, must then turn to the causes governing the individual conscience. For transcendental art, mimesis can no longer be the mimesis of an individual conscience as given, or the mimesis of the individual conscience as a self-reflective structure. The new challenge is art that becomes the mimesis of the *conditions* of an individual conscience. Any art accepting this challenge no longer acts by expressing models, i.e. occupying the conscience of the spectator, but rather creates the space in which the knowledge of the spectator can be activated spontaneously. Art is no longer the icon of a possible individual conscience; the work of art becomes the instrument by which the individual can stimulate in himself or herself the process of mimesis and knowledge. The mimesis of the creative act does not have an information-oriented, but rather a performance-oriented purpose. It is another form of realized art, living art that reproduces itself, not as an object but rather as a process (and therefore does not actually reproduce itself but something else, similar and different, as happens in the biological reproduction of a living organism), in those observing it. We believe that this view can be fruitfully compared to the recent studies on “embodied simulation” as a key to social cognition⁵. Somehow, transcendental art and metamimesis have not been wholly freed from being forced to repeat process P. Process P is, to some extent, inevitable. The contemporary artist always has one foot close to a trap; once he has gained self-awareness (perhaps the one put off by Hegel?) he faces the risk of being trapped in the loop of self-awareness and by the corresponding theory. In other words, there is a risk of objectifying the achievement of self-awareness, and of subordinating one’s artistic production to the exhibition of the foundation myth. We can recognize that in the most hackneyed avant-garde themes, contemporary art is a victim of this trap, and the same could happen to contemporary philosophy of art.

4. Naturalization of esthetics and naturalization of art

In recent years, some have responded to the theory of the “End of Art”, and to the problem of the “sacralization of art”, with the proposal of the naturalization of esthetics. This move is quite predictable, if we recall that the naturalization programme has been applied to almost all the intellectual disciplines and phenomena (metaphysics, ethics, perception, epistemology etc.). Not even mathematics has escaped naturalization. The naturalization of esthetics responds to the need to keep on developing an esthetic theory that renounces metaphysics, overcoming the *impasse* of the “End of Art”. The project of naturalization is expressed well in the words of its founding father V. O. Quine:

Knowledge, the mind and meaning are part of the same world they are involved in and must be studied in the same empirical spirit animating natural science. (Quine, 1960)

Starting from this formulation we can identify two aspects of naturalism: (i) Knowledge, the mind and meaning are part of the same world they are involved in, and (ii) they must be studied with the same empirical outlook used in natural science. We could call point (i) the *holistic* approach of naturalism and point (ii) its *reductionist* tendency. Keeping them separate will prove necessary and useful. In particular, I think that the holistic aspect should be kept and the reductionist tendency be eliminated.

In recent years, the naturalization of art has received a decisive contribution from the birth of neuroesthetics (Zeki and Lamb, 1994; Zeki 1999; Zeki 2002). This discipline is the result of the rapid growth and successes of neuroscience and the cognitive sciences in recent decades. The concept of neuroesthetics can be briefly summarized in the words of its founder, Zeki:

All visual art is expressed through the brain and must therefore obey the laws of the brain, whether in conception, execution or appreciation and no theory of esthetics that is not substantially based on the activity of the brain is ever likely to be complete, let alone profound. (Zeki, 1999)

As in naturalism in general, we support the concept in neuroesthetics of applying the rules of scientific investigation (in this case from neuroscience) to the field of artistic perception. However, we decisively reject the reductionist form, which is actually an abuse of the scientific method. As often happens, the most interesting results of the discipline are to be found in special studies. This means that neuroscience, despite its great growth, is far from being able to offer a single, self-sufficient theory of the human mind and its functioning. For example, Zeki and Lamb's fundamental study (Zeki and Lamb, 1994) on the parallel between the development of kinetic art and the discovery of areas of the brain specialized for visual motion (containing directionally-selective and colour-insensitive groups of cells) is of great interest. These studies can clearly be fruitful independently from the acceptance of the reductionist approach, and independently from whether or not they *explain* the artistic phenomenon. I am not the first person to call for a non-reductionist form of naturalism, and the rehabilitation of esthetics. In recent years, these sorts of proposals have come from the theory of the "End of Art" (Danto, 2003), and from neuroesthetics (e.g., Pignotti, 2010), as well as from alternative prospects (Good, 2006; Carrasco Barranco, 2012).

The neuroesthetic approach offers a valid *metaphor* of artistic practice (not a regulatory framework). This metaphor can give results in artistic practice.



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010

Zeki and Lamb's study (Zeki and Lamb, 1994) illustrates how the historical development of kinetic art can be considered as an *experimental investigation* (though not fully aware) conducted by the artist on the nature and functioning of the brain. The artist is similar to the scientist who through experiments seeks to limit the sphere of investigation and discover its characteristics. The artist performs this experiment in a largely unconscious, indirect and implicit way. In this regard, neuroesthetics offers the contemporary artist a self-image in perfect agreement with the situation we have outlined in the previous paragraphs. Once the knowledge of process P has been achieved, art turns to investigate its own nature, and the esthetic act *becomes a cognitive act*, with the creative act as a way out of automatic mechanisms.

Even though the separation between 'esthetics' and 'art' has dominated philosophical discussion on art over recent decades, there have been recent signs of a return to esthetics (cfr. see, e.g., Rosenstein, 2002; Danto, 2003; Carrasco Barranco, 2012), and this is no surprise. The separation between esthetics and art arose from the need to leave art free to adapt to its new function after the self-recognition of process P, and to give time to philosophy to develop new paradigms. Naturalism is in some way a rather vague blanket theory that is useful at the present time; however, we cannot deny the usefulness of esthetics for art, as well as the close relationship between artistic production and philosophical thought that has definitely led to the highest expressions of art history. This is why we should ask how the current situation of art and the current trends in esthetics can orient artistic production. The separation of esthetics from art must only mean the renouncing of the rule-making character of esthetics.

The naturalization of esthetics seems to be coherent with transcendental art seen as metamimesis. The self-recognition of process P has heightened the rejection of so-called mimetic art by contemporary artists. This rejection had already determined the development of the major artistic movements at the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, although from the early 20th century on the rejection became deeper and more radical. This is justified by the fact that we can identify a very strong mimetic tenet in process P, with the claim of the greater *adequacy* of language L ($t+1$) to world W ($t+1$). The concept of mimesis involved here is much broader than the previous one, and this explains how the self-recognition of process P has heightened the diffidence of the contemporary artist towards mimetic art in a much more general sense. This could perhaps be the reason for the development of the non-mimetic, a-semantic and finally asemic arts. It is also clear that these arts express a solution to the problem that suffers even more from the impact of process P: mimesis is recognized as the driving force of the process, and as such it is rejected. The evidence of the mimetic element (in the broad sense) in process P, and therefore in art itself, can also lead to a different concept of mimesis. The

mimesis of process P, as the mimesis of a cognitive act, is an act of self-reflection and therefore of self-knowledge. Meta-mimesis can perhaps therefore be better explained with a concept of mimesis that is based on knowledge rather than replication. The mimesis of process P is the mimesis *of the conditions, or causes*, not the effects. But the same applies, in a certain sense, to any mimesis. In this regard, contemporary art is just recovering the Aristotelian concept of mimesis: the ‘mime’ must produce a series of causes to produce the icon, and this series of causes it has a relationship of resemblance or analogy with the series of the causes that have produced the object of the mimesis, and thus forms a type of possible knowledge of these causes. This knowledge, in art, is always relative to the means of production chosen⁶.

Contemporary art seems to have been given the opportunity to try out the “solution” skillfully outlined by Emmanuel Lévinas in one of his “readings from the Talmud” (Lévinas, 1968. Comment to the text of the “Shabbàth”, pp. 88a-88b). Here, too, a circular situation is described, the situation of Western Man fascinated by the “temptation of temptation”, by that “ambiguous wisdom” of which Kierkegaard’s esthetic man was also a victim. According to Lévinas, the only way out of the climax of the self-awareness of the person is an aberrant logical reversal of the order between *knowing* and *doing*. Art could be an ideal context of application for this type of reversal, and the metaphor of the artist as an unwitting experimental scientist, as proposed by neuroesthetics, could be a model. Lévinas so explains the connection:

That which is a scandal for logic can be taken for blind faith or for the ingenuousness of infantile belief”. This is in any case the condition common to any inspired action, including artistic action, in which the act alone leads to the arising of the form which then represents the recognized model, not even glimpsed before that time. We might, in fact, wonder whether all inspired actions originate from the unique and fundamental situation of the giving of the Torah, i.e. whether that situation throws adequate light on inspiration itself and whether, more specifically, the reversal of the normal chronology of acceptance and knowledge could mean the overcoming of knowledge – a type of overcoming of the temptation of temptation – while the return to infantile ingenuousness is another type of overcoming altogether.

The project for the naturalization of esthetics offers a further suggestion that closely regards artistic practice. The situation of contemporary art is often described in terms of ‘pluralism’, ‘relativism’, or more positively as ‘freedom’. In particular, the artist feels free to use and dispose of the means and products of the previous art. This re-use can somehow be seen throughout all of art history, and also drives process P. The elements of past art are constantly re-elaborated. However, in the 20th century this reuse almost always had (and in many cases still has) the con-

notations of a *critical* or *reactionary* function, of either opposition or recovery, where the recovery expresses criticism towards the alternative of opposition. In other words, there is a reuse and rearrangement of the products of past art that is *a full part* of process P. In this respect this type of act is not free, but is driven by the dialectical process P. Now we can observe that in art in recent decades, the critical function and the regressive function have declined and are disappearing. In the context of naturalism, the reuse of the products of past art can be seen in a different way. Here we can speak of a process of *naturalization* – this time in the biological sense – of the products of past art.

For art, nature is unavoidable. [...] Nature might be defined as anything which presents itself as fact – that includes all art other than one's own. And after a while, one's own too, if one begins to be detached from it and influenced by it, which happens to almost every artist. Nature does not imitate art; it devours it. If one does not want to paint a still-life or a landscape figure now, one can paint an Albers or a Rothko or a Kline. They are all equally real visual phenomena of the world around us. That is, there is a point where any work stops being a human creation and becomes environment – or nature. (Elaine de Kooning, Subject: what, how, or who?, 1955, in Chipp 1968)

If it is true that the products of art are part of the world (note how this view is akin to the “holistic” epistemological standpoint of naturalism), then their relationship with the artist can be *pacified*, once the artist has consciously removed himself from process P. The signs of the secondary system at time t inevitably become the signs of the primary system at time $t+1$, but once the artist becomes aware of process P as a whole, he is no longer forced to oppose the contemporary primary system as such. A sort of positive cycle starts up: at time $t+1$ the artist looks at the products of art at time t with a sort of fraternal compassion, more than with the resentment of an adolescent son to his father. For the contemporary artist the products at time t and the decline of their informational capacity are no longer the sign of a defect from which he can be said to be immune. To him, they are rather just the signs of the entire process P which he cannot avoid, except in his own conscience. The contemporary artist is then in the position to be able to use the signs produced by previous art with unprecedented transparency, and peace with his conscience (an example of this attitude is Bill Viola). The products of past art are no longer to be seen as signs of a particular limitation and insufficiency of information or expression, as signs of a power to be opposed, or as signs of a false idea of the world. Instead, they are taken and reused in a *transparent* manner as objects of a world which, *as a whole*, includes future and past, nature and culture. The contemporary artist can utilize the products of past art as Greek and Roman columns were used to support the apses of Christian cathedrals.



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010

They see in these products a lack, an insufficiency and a limitation that is not exclusive to them, but which refers directly to the limited and insufficient position of the artist before the world and the time *as a whole*. The signs and codes of past art become a gentle alphabet by which the artist can express his position as a complete and self-conscious individual facing the inexhaustibility and unknowability of the world as a whole, which includes the artist himself as an individual subject. The “freedom” to reuse tradition characterizing contemporary art conceals yet another trap: the pluralism and multiplicity as categories with which we try to conceptualize the direction of contemporary art risk endowing the artist with a conscience which on the exterior level involves the same type of naturalized reuse of the works of the past, while being sharply distinguished from what we have described with regard to the intentions of the artist and his self-awareness. In this context, it is easy to conceive of - and there are many examples - an artist who freely reuses the products of past art in a way that is absolutely banal, i.e. depriving them of their nature of signs of humane finitude (to which the artist is subject), while sometimes endowing them with a veil of cynical detachment. But no detachment is acceptable for the one who is aware of the nature of process P, and of being constantly devoured by all.

The demand for the naturalization of the sign and the need to express the position of an individual conscience before the totality of which it is part can be related to the success of ‘video art’ in recent decades. On the one hand, the photographic sign (in the broad sense) is a natural sign, closer to the imprint than to the symbol; on the other hand, it does not exclude the presence of the subject as the active and passive subject of the esthetic act (as happens, for example, in automatic art). Furthermore, photography and video are especially suited to responding to the needs of transcendental art and of an art of totality. Photography and video are naturally the means of transcendental art, since their effectiveness is based on the active and passive qualities of the means – or condition – of vision, i.e. of light. On the other hand, photographic images lend themselves to being conceived as signs of totality⁷. Any visual image can be received as an image of totality, i.e. of the dynamic totality of the world and the dynamic totality of the subject in the world. In this regard, photography and video can fly the banner of naturalization and metamimesis, with every photograph being an index of the world as totality. Photography and video do not require the artist to utilize the elements of the world (colors, sounds, objects, etc.) to create a different meaning. They require (and allow) the artist to utilize the world as totality, per mean the world as totality. In this respect their possibilities of signification are extremely limited; the only possible meaning of a photograph is the world as totality. Today, however, it is easy to see this extreme limitation as also being the source of an extreme power: the world as totality is the only thing that can



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in Lviv*, 2010

concern contemporary art. The only possible affirmation of a work of photography or video-art thus seems to take the form of a tautology, which we could call esthetic tautology. “A work of art is a tautology”, wrote Kosuth in an influential study (*Art after Philosophy*, Kosuth, 1969). It is not necessary to take this concept as an impoverishment of art which just precludes its end. This would mean forgetting that something tautological can be extremely simple, as ‘A or not A’, but can also be extremely complicated. So complicated as to require an unusual intellectual effort *to be recognized as tautology*, despite the fact that any tautology always and only expresses the truth. The same applies for works of contemporary art seen as esthetic tautologies, if it is true that an increasing intellectual or cognitive effort is required to recognize them as works of art. Reading Kosuth’s definition as an epitaph substantially means forgetting Frege’s distinction between *sense* and *meaning*. An esthetic tautology can have a very rich structure and considerable informational contents, while remaining a tautology, and finally demanding to be recognized as such. An analogy with the modern Theory of Computational Complexity (see Arora and Barak, 2009, for a modern treatment) can be useful here. A branch of this theory is wholly devoted to the study of how to recognize if a formal sentence is a tautology in an *efficient* way, i.e. with an algorithm not requiring exorbitant calculation resources. It is always possible to mechanically recognize whether an affirmation is a tautology: we need only construct the so-called truth-table. But this possibility is just theoretical; the size of the truth-table for a tautology grows *exponentially* with the increase of the number of variables contained in the tautology. This makes the method of truth-tables impracticable, even though it is a perfectly correct and mechanical method. Effort is required to demonstrate that an affirmation is a tautology; similar commitment is required to recognize a work of art, i.e. an esthetic tautology. The structure of tautologies is so rich – even within propositional logic – that the greatest open question of theoretical computation (“P versus NP”, the only computer-related problem in the list of the Problems of the Millennium drawn up by the Clay Institute) can be solved by answering the following question: is there a system capable of *efficiently* verifying whether a given affirmation is a tautology?

5. *A crossroads for contemporary art: acting before knowing?*

The present day of art still seems to be a non-reducible multiplicity, and still seems to be a *laboratory*. The *impasse* regarding definition and self-reflection following the self-recognition of process P and characterizing 20th century art seems to have been overcome. Many artists seem determined to produce works of art based on the awareness of process P and on a climate of somewhat like an alert armistice, freely using the products of naturalization. Works that we can liken to what neuroesthetists call “mid-level hypotheses”, i.e. hypotheses renouncing an excessive claim to

generality, and together attempting to consider the results of the most classical esthetic disciplines, while renouncing the excessively demanding idea of methodological purity. This means - and it would be desirable – to work for the integration between the various naturalistic prospects rather than for their mutual elimination. This means, on the one hand, enjoying the “freedom” theorized by Danto, but not turning it into a state, an abstraction. The present state must not, in fact, be frozen in time. It is an extremely rich state of preparation for making a jump – a jump that may perhaps never take place. However, the prospect for contemporary art and for contemporary esthetics is to get out of the circle of self-reflection and forced reaction. Renouncing its own position in ‘History’. And also renouncing the present. And definitely renouncing the cult of talent and the sacralization of art that still survives in the ‘*art world*’.

Rosenstein (2002) argues that the end of esthetics corresponds to the “end of art”, *including* the very theory of the “End of Art”. Rosenstein’s assertion is based on the observation that there can be no theory of art because it is not possible to establish a criterion defining what it means to be artistic, necessary and sufficient for contemporary art. Therefore, every theory, as Pignocchi puts it (2009), is destined to under-determination or essentialism, also because works of art do not form a *natural kind*. Here we find the starting point for further discussion. The theory of the end of art (similar to what happens for the philosophy of “pensiero debole”) cannot be set up as a theory, since this would falsify its own assertions and violate its own requirements. The critical intelligence that denounces the exhaustion of metaphysics cannot proclaim itself to be a new a new type of metaphysics. It is one thing to recognize that we no longer need (or at least for a little) a certain form of the organization of knowledge; it is quite another to transform this intuition into a palliative of theory. Here we have the same trap we found at the foot of transcendental art: the theory of art, having become aware of the end of art, must escape from the confines of definition and self-justification. But to go where? The theories of art pursue the same paths as art, and continue to focus on art and its definition. However, the highly worthy enterprise should not be the only focus of esthetics and even less so of philosophy. Philosophy can pursue its own aims and these aims can be to raise questions about art and indicate ways. Theory concentrating on the idea of the end of art resembles art that does not want to come out from the climax of self-awareness. A laboratory, on the other hand, is *not* a place for pluralism and relativism. The artist’s action is based on a particular project related with his own individuality. The laboratory in which the artist *is both scientist and guinea-pig*, in an infinite circle, requires a particular position of individuality of the artist as subject. The transcendental prospect of the contemporary artist requires the artist to have a certain peculiar form of individuality. The artist dedicated to metamimesis must undertake the



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in PÇcs*, 2011



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in PÇcs*, 2011

difficult feat of eliminating all the contents of his empirical ego, though without eliminating his own finiteness and individuality. The end of art history also means the end of the cult of talent and artistic individuality as an exceptional individuality. But what will replace this cult? In this regard it is interesting to read the rest of the excerpt from Elaine de Kooning quoted above (my italics):

[...] Western art is built on the biographical passion of one artist for another: Michelangelo for Signorelli, Rubens for Michelangelo, Delacroix for Rubens, Cézanne for Poussin, the Cubists for Cézanne, and Picasso, the philanderer, *for anyone he sees going down the street.*⁸

The conclusion is clearly paradoxical: the passion for “anyone he sees going down the street” is not an example of the “biographical passion of one artist for another”! Even so, this opening up of the artistic subject to any subject, this possible outcome of contemporary art, also mysteriously responds to the necessity so clearly expressed by Mondrian:

The only problem in art is to achieve a balance between the subjective and the objective. But it is of the utmost importance that this problem should be solved, in the realm of plastic art – technically, as it were – and not in the realm of thought. [...] art has shown that universal expression can only be created by *a real equation of the universal and the individual.*⁹

This equation has to be verified in the artist, in the work of art, and in the spectator. The artist must become a ‘universal subject’, and his identity must become that of a mathematical variable. The contemporary artist, as Celan says (1961), is the person who “does not forget that he is speaking under the angle of incidence of his own existence, of his own condition as a creature”. We should not be surprised that the form of subjectivity offered as a privileged for to the contemporary artist, if he wants to free himself from the circuit of self-reflection, is the one that Kierkegaard associated with the “ethical choice”. The present poses Kierkegaard’s *aut aut* to art and esthetics, enabling them to make the ethical choice, i.e. to *choose themselves*. For art and esthetics this means deciding to get out of the circuit of self-reflection and self-definition. And so we can return to what Lévinas says: *doing* before *knowing*. Unsurprisingly, this ethical choice for contemporary art means not only a return to esthetics, but also *a return to art*, and indeed to art conceived as the discipline able to *affect man in his totality*. Not in his abstract and ideal totality, but in his concrete and individual totality¹⁰.

Some may think – and perhaps it is true - that we have just closed the loop starting and ending with Romanticism¹¹. If this were the case, we could just apologize by saying that we have not been able to resist the infinite force of attraction of process P.



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in PÇcs*, 2011

NOTES

¹ Language $L(t+1)$ appears at time $t+1$ which is subsequent to time t . This ordering of languages can be taken as a linearization of an otherwise partial ordering.

² Barnett Newman in “The Sublime is Now” (1948, see Chipp 1968) has very clearly expressed this situation: “So strong is the grip of the rhetoric of exaltation as an attitude in the large context of the European culture pattern that the elements of sublimity in the revolution we know as modern art, exist in its effort and energy to escape the pattern rather than in the realization of a new experience”.

³ This excerpt from Harold Rosenberg’s, 1952, “The American Action Painters” (see Chipp 1968) is of considerable interest: “Form, color, composition, drawing, are auxiliaries, any one of which [...] can be dispensed with. What matters always is the revelation contained in the act. [...] based on the phenomenon of conversion the new movement is, with the majority of the painters, essentially a religious movement. In almost every case, however the conversion has been experienced in secular terms. The result has been the creation of private myths. The tension of the private myth is the content of every painting of this vanguard. The act on the canvas springs from an attempt to resurrect the saving moment in his “story” when the painter first felt himself released from Value – myth of past self-recognition. Or it attempts to initiate a new moment in which the painter will realize his total personality – myth of future self-recognition”.

⁴ A concept of transcendental art (“transcendental realism”) is also introduced and discussed in Carlucci 2007.

⁵ “Neuroscientific research has shed light on the ways in which we empathize with others by emphasizing the role of implicit models of others’ behaviors and experiences – that is, embodied simulation. Our capacity to pre-rationally make sense of the actions, emotions and sensations of others depends on embodied simulation, a functional mechanism through which the actions, emotions or sensations we see activate our own internal representations of the body states that are associated with these social stimuli, as if we were engaged in a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation” (Freedberg and Gallese 2007) and in particular with the discovery of the neural underpinnings of empathic responses to works of art. See, e.g., Freedberg and Gallese 2007, where the role of the mirror neuron system in “instances in which beholders might find themselves automatically simulating the emotional expression, the movement or even the implied movement within the representation” (Freedberg and Gallese 2007) is clarified.

⁶ Danto’s provocative question is thus surprising: “Who needs, and what can be the point and purpose of having, duplicates of a reality we already have before us?” (Danto 1981). To produce the duplicate we had to acquire knowledge about the causes and structure of the phenomenon (regarding the means of expression). Another reply, though outside the present discussion, lies in the fact that art continues to satisfy the atavistic need to make the impermanent eternal.

⁷ “Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits”. (Wittgenstein, 1921, proposition 6.4311).

⁸ From “Subject: what, how, or who?”, 1955, (Chipp 1968).

⁹ From “Figurative art and non figurative art”, 1937, (Chipp 1968).

¹⁰ “While you choose yourself in an absolute way, you are likely to discover that this ‘I’ is just an abstraction or tautology. There it might seem to be at most, at the time of orientation, the occasion for the distinction between the changing variety of the world and simple identity of the ‘I’; and even then being completely abstract and without contents is just an illusion. This is because, as ‘I’, I am not aware of freedom in general (this awareness of freedom is a pure abstraction of thought), but in myself this determination can only be free through the choice of wanting to be myself and no one else. This ‘I’ contains in itself a rich concreteness, a multiplicity of determinations and quality; in brief, the entire esthetic ‘I’ is chosen ethically”. (Kierkegaard 1843)

¹¹ Interestingly enough, the neuroesthetics of empathy are essentially a scientific vindication of romantic *Einfühlung*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alberro, A. and Norvell, P. *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, Lewitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Sieglaub, Smithson, Weiner by Patricia Norvell*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011.
- Arora, S. and Barak, B., *Computational Complexity: A Modern Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Belting, H., *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?* München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1983. (Italian translation: *La fine della storia dell'arte o la libertà dell'arte*. Turin: Einaudi, 1990).
- Benacerraf, P. and Putnam, H. (editors), *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Brown, S., Gao, X., Tisdelle, L., Eickhoff, S.B., and Liotti, M., *Naturalizing esthetics: Brain areas for aesthetic appraisal across sensory modalities*. “NeuroImage” 58, 2011, pp.250-258.
- Carlucci, L., *Notes on transcendental realism in the work of Marco Mazzi*. In Pasi, G. (ed.) *Marco Mazzi*, Prato: Gli Ori, 2007, pp.65-72.
- Carlucci, L., *Su due funzioni conoscitive della poesia*. “Atelier” 50, 2008, pp.7-14.
- Carrasco Barranco, M., *The dogma of post-conceptual art. The role of the aesthetic in the art of today*. To appear in Proceedings of the European Society for Esthetics, vol. 4, 2012.
- Celan, P., *Der Meridian*, 1961. (Italian translation in: *La verità della poesia, “Il Meridiano” e altre prose*. Turin: Einaudi, 2008.)
- Chipp, H.B., *Theories of Modern Art*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968.
- Danto, A.C., *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Danto, A.C., *The End of Art*, in *The Death of Art*, Lang, B. (ed.). New York, Haven Publishing, 1984.
- Danto, A.C., *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Danto, A.C., *The Abuse of Beauty: Esthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago: Open Court

Books, 2003.

Freedberg, D. and Gallese, V., *Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience*. *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 11:5, 2007, pp.197-203.

Gödel, K. *Über formal unentscheidbare Sätze der Principia Mathematica und verwandter Systeme*. *Monatshefte für Mathematik und Physik*, 37, 1931, pp.173-198.

Good, J., *Wittgenstein and the Theory of Perception*. London: Continuum, 2006.

Kierkegaard, S., *Enten-Eller*, 1843. (Italian translation: *Aut-Aut*. Milan: Mondadori 2002.)

Kosuth, J., *Art after Philosophy*, 1969. Reprinted in: Kosuth, J., *Art after Philosophy and After*, *Collected writings 1966-1990*, MIT Press.

Lévinas, E., *Quatre lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1968. (Italian translation: *Quattro letture talmudiche*. Genova: Il Melangolo, 2008.)

Maddy, P. J., *Naturalism in Mathematics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Mancosu, P. (ed.), *From Hilbert to Brouwer. The Debate on the Foundations of Mathematics in the 1920s*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Pignocchi, A., *What is Art? A methodological framework for a pluridisciplinary investigation*. "Cognitive Semiotics", 5, 2009, pp.122-135.

Quine, W.V.O., *Word and Object*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960.

Ratiu, D.-E., *After the "Death of Art": Is there any Life for Esthetics?* In *Proceedings of the European Society for Esthetics*, vol. 2, 2010, pp.410-426.

Rosenstein, L., *The End of Art Theory*. "Humanitas", XV (1), 2002, pp.32-58.

Schaeffer, J.-M., *Adieu à l'esthétique*. Paris: PUF, 2000.

Wittgenstein, L., *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*. "Annalen der Naturphilosophie", 14, 1921, pp.185-262. (English translation by F.P. Ramsey e C.K. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. London: Ogden, 1922.)

Zeki, S. and Lamb, M., *The neurology of kinetic art*. "Brain", 117, 1994, pp.607-636.

Zeki, S., *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Zeki, S., *Neural concept formation and art: Dante, Michelangelo, Wagner*. "Journal of Consciousness Studies", 9, 2002, pp.53-76.



Isabella Hollauf, *Swimming Pool in PÇcs*, 2011