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## GREAT QUESTIONS OF AESTHETICS AND SMALL GARDENS OF ART

We live in a world of dispersion and variability, immersed in the turbulent course of events. Art has relative autonomy. The instability of boundaries and amorphism of works of art and their theories may be disturbing but may also be a challenge worth accepting. My response to this challenge is also a hybrid one in a sense. I am an aesthetician, and thereby a theorist, and at the same time I am an art recipient and art lover. This state tends to be, in the nature of things, a state of suspension of judgment. Does this help or hinder aesthetic experience? The first part of the paper will deal with theory, and the second — with direct contact with art.

The art philosopher hedges the question about the essence of art with a number of conditions, trying at all cost to avoid the so-called essentialist error consisting in a belief that there are characteristic features of works of art that theory can determine. An art recipient, ordinary art lover, does not search for the universal nature of art and understands the intention of the questioner in more general terms. I do think, however, that this question is banal or unjustified to a recipient-theorist, on condition, though, that we are aware of initial assumptions and accept the fact that others adopt different premises. The blurring of boundaries between art and other forms of activity prompts one to avoid a large quantifier in describing creative activity. In the framework of competing theories it is impossible to formulate a real, complete definition of a work of art. This obvious conclusion, recommending methodological consistency in reasoning, ceases to be applicable in borderline situations, and as well as when we go beyond reporting definitions towards projecting definitions or adopt a priori beliefs regarding their existence and qualities of events under investigation. As the history of debate on the essence

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of art has shown, we have to do with a similar situation after adopting strong assumptions on what is and what is not art. There is then a danger that a theoretical dispute will transform into a dispute over concepts, and, eventually, not only does it contribute no new substance to the debate but also loses heuristic overtones. Institutionalists and contextualists versus essentialists is only one part of this type of academic struggle. Underlying the debates held in the nineteen-sixties and seventies was a conviction that it is impossible to endlessly broaden the scope of art, from which it was concluded that in that case it was necessary to rethink the role of art theory. Attention was drawn to the conception itself as a set of theorems whose task is to define the essence of art, and what is more, which aspire to express it in the form of definitions. The history of the dispute will not be dwelt on here. It can in general be summed up as the history of supplanting general theories with more specialist discourses. Contrary to the intentions of the initiators of this debate it largely turned into linguistic acrobatics over the concept of art. A reflection arises that a similar fate may happen and does to other debates on contemporary art, which is explicitly shown by the pace of various turns in theories. Even if they (debates) are philosophically supported by a priori judgment, they become blind to the subject of their inquiries. And even so in two ways: one – by taking insufficient account of the historical and cultural variability of artistic practice, two (which is connected with the former condition) — by insufficiently taking into consideration the historical and cultural variability of concepts and the theories built on them. Although the historical field of the concept of art is not challenged, but what is less often accepted is that its influence affects every recipient to a different degree, not only a qualified one. This was aptly expressed by Hans Georg Gadamer in his description of the hermeneutic circle. A question therefore arises: does the knowledge of the life of art and the life of theory treated as human products help or hinder the reception of art? Under different circumstances other than the narrowed framework of the paper, Hegel's classical opinion could be broadly applied for the purpose of contemporary problems, as he wrote "Therefore, the science of art is in a much more pressing need than it was in times in which art, simply as art, was enough to furnish full satisfaction. Art invites us to consideration of it by means of thought, not to the end of stimulating art production in order to ascertain scientifically what art is."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. G[eorg] W[ilhelm] F[riedrich] Hegel, *On Art, Religion and History of Philosophy: Introductory Lectures* (Hackett Publishing, 1997), 324 / *Wykłady o estetyce*, t.1, trans. Janusz Grabowski and Adam Landman (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1964), 21.

Do contemporary scholars — historians, anthropologists, aestheticians and critics — involved in great and small narratives, live in contact with art in doubled worlds and, for this reason, are their relationships with art so radically different from those of people of other professions? And here is a new question related to Hegel's historical theory: can their knowledge, under specific circumstances, become a distinctive or exclusive power in the world of art? How strong an influence on such phenomena is exerted by art institutions and to what extent they themselves are affected by external factors, economy and politics, and by grass-roots contesting or anti-establishment movements within the world of art itself?

I realize that there is no room here for large-quantifier questions. These are great subjects that would require raising classical problems that explain the road from aesthetic experience to judgments on art, from participation in the world of art to artistic theories etc. Everything that would have to be written about is immersed in a deep ocean into which rivers of concepts flow from everywhere. They come in almost permanent streams because the movements of concepts, so convincingly described by Mieke Bal, take place on the surface of the world of life. She argues that concepts take the form of words but are not them, their status being in fact metaphorical, which not only allows them to travel within disciplines but also enables going beyond the (sometimes dubious and conventionally understood) boundaries between science and art.<sup>2</sup>

Warm and cold currents (in a metaphorical sense albeit more general than in Marshall McLuhan's work) carry families of concepts that acquire meanings and undergo a transformation process, which in turn results in that when searching for the crucial in art we have no chance of meeting the radically different, the dissimilar, exclusively on the level of intellectual reflection and language. This is the case *inter alia* with the concept of art: some communities do not know this notion at all. Willy-nilly, when talking about art and producing its theories, we go with the tide, on the surface. Concepts are tools of relative intersubjectivity, because they curve an object, deprive it of stability and distort.<sup>3</sup> Returning to the question about the role of knowledge in the reception of art, my answer is in the affirmative: yes, the knowledge of inevitable movement in the mass of signs, concepts and symbols teaches respect for the unknown, the inexpressible — the knowledge that others swim on the wave of different tides allows a distance towards oneself, excludes the vainglorious belief that we know better than others

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mieke Bal, *Wędrujące pojęcia w naukach humanistycznych. Krótki przewodnik* [orig.: *Travelling concepts in the humanities: A rough guide*], trans. Marta Bucholc (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2012), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 47.

what is hidden in the depths. On the other hand, theory and theoretical attitudes supported by the awareness of the diversity of art discourses and discourses about art should not be satisfied with the ascertainment of such state of affairs. The desirable openness might then turn out to be only a voluntary and free drift on the (relatively safe) surface of phenomena, without investigating their causes. The concept of art, treated both descriptively and evaluatively, allows defining the meaning of the word 'art' in a specific period, style, and trend; it allows the identification of features that were termed as art in comparison with those in which recipients are interested today. If we do not make an essentialist error and accept theories that use the concept of art as an open concept, then it does not seem to be useless. It performs an emotive and persuasive function, provokes discussion over assessment criteria, consolidates or dynamizes theories, and creates interpretive explanations. Every time, in the real process of reception of a specific work of art, the theoretical aspect co-occurs with other characteristics, and as such it is a prejudgment, a prejudice — preunderstanding, which does not mean that we cannot once again express our rapture or shock — to paraphrase Umberto Eco's words from the *Afterword to The Name of the Rose*. Today, more than ever, we know that there are no innocent words and therefore, as the present-day scholars say, we "theorize with uncertainty."<sup>4</sup>

What then are these metaphorical depths, of which we fear and whose presence we feel when we commune with art? It would be naïve to seek some pre-language, some final vocabulary in their abyss. Language is, in a sense, the producer of problematic oppositions "surface — depth" and the like, such as "external — internal," "close — distant," "known — unknown." In describing relationships with art, I deliberately used two recurring words: the noun "presence" and the verb "commune." Communing means being close, not to say intimately, and at the same time "communing" means rubbing shoulders with the alien. Presence is precisely "communing," being "with," co-living. To avoid committing an error of generalization, which was mentioned above with certain deference, it should be admitted that abstract concepts, although defective and not necessarily reaching the truth of being, are not, nevertheless, alien; they commune in human existence with feelings, experiences, they are an imperfect but at the same time desirable medium of feeling and living. How does it relate to the reception of art? In the traditional sense, reception is "taking/receiving" — from the author, artist, and even from "the work in itself" — something that is given, which does not need to mean a literal interpretation of intentions, or feeling

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Raney, *Art in Question* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2003), 6.

the complete emotional content. The problem of contemporary art consists in that it has ultimately and probably forever given up the thus understood concept of contact with art, passing from the conception of reception to understanding art as joint creation. One can, admittedly, defend the thesis that everything depends on the definition of art, but, to avoid falling into the closed circle of reasoning, we shall confine ourselves to a general statement that the place of art in modernity has fundamentally changed when compared with the previous periods. Reflection on the subject is here limited to the area of Western culture, which is not, however, treated as an enclave closed to the influence of other cultures — this is not possible nowadays. The origin of radical changes in art reception goes back to the avant-garde, and, from the perspective of post-modernity, mainly to the neo-avant-garde. On the basis of its assumptions and in the significant context of discussion on modernity questioning the importance of metaphysics came the awareness of the inadjustability of the previous, although not so long, theory of art as a concept originated in the early Romantic period. According to Peter Osborne, the conceptual art of the 1960s, mainly its “analytical” variety associated with Joseph Kosuth and the Art & Language group, is characterized by the absolute need for deaestheticization and dematerialization, which can be construed both as a failure and — paradoxically — as an artistic success of the ideas going beyond the conceptual understanding of a work of art. The failure of the avant-garde project in this version consists, according to Osborne, in the impossibility of implementing the program of complete dematerialization and deaestheticization: art absolutely requires some form of materialization. In this sense, the failure of purely intellectual contact with art is its success at the same time because, contrary to the intentions of some artists, it demonstrates the irremovable nature of the aesthetic dimension.<sup>5</sup> To spare the reader a complicated lecture, it can be said that the aesthetic as interpreted by Baumgarten or Kant crashes into reefs submerged in the depths hidden under the surface of conceptual currents. Osborne is perfectly aware of the discrepancy between the conceptual judgment by the mind and the temporal and spatial dimension as transcendental conditions of our sensory perception and says that neither of the two meanings is able to capture “the ontological specificity of ‘art’.”<sup>6</sup>

These are the great questions of aesthetics. I will not undertake to answer them on this occasion, especially in such a short study. I admit that not only the situation of “suspended judgment” described by theorists does not hinder me but it

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 158.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

even increases my desire to be in the world of artistic events, in the environment changed by artists. Co-participation in the undivided environment, though distinguished by art, is a pleasure of relishing, succumbing to astonishment, although sometimes also facing the terror of their strangeness. The phenomenal presence in Martin Seel's presentation<sup>7</sup> (to which I subscribe) does not cease to be 'real presence', but is a special state of being "between" conceptual thinking and aesthetic thinking through sound, image, and movement. Direct experience eliminates boundaries between them. Aesthetic perception enriches other possibilities of knowing the world - it does not eliminate or replace conceptual cognition, it protects the latter against the pride of absolute power. That is why, tired of discourses, I feel very well in contact with works of art and events that, in a natural way, cross the rigid boundaries between art and other areas of reality. They "talk" to them through their own "language" (the inverted commas are not accidental), create new frames for new ways of viewing the world, or those other worlds create contexts for them (works and events) not intended by the artist. This idea can be defined in many different ways: historically and analytically.

Reconstructions, deconstructions, contextualizations and decontextualizations are a permanent phenomenon in the shared history of people and things. Regardless of whether we agree with the intuitions of phenomenologists, we experience that retentions and protentions: the past and future horizon of experience are/is part of the world of life. For example, the awareness that the past is continually created anew is one thing, and another is the experience of the past, which has little to do with the correct reading and interpretation of the language of bygone periods, its meanings and symbols. I like museums, including those that still resemble giant collections of antiques gathered according to the taste of an unknown collector. It is we, with our thinking and sensitivity of our time, who create the context. We enter into individual relationships with the objects assembled there; we place in our memory their conceptual and non-conceptual meanings, the fleeting smell of the past and alien shape. What should be done so that the influence of the "text" of old art, the turning of now useless objects over in the hands and in the mind, could be something more than a nostalgic (which is also important!) moment? Contemporary museums surprise us with inventiveness in this area.

Amazingly, my first experience of many years ago, of a multisensory inter-media museum exhibition, does not come from a modern art museum but from the museum of the Benedictine monastery in Admont, Austria. In 2003, a modern

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Martin Seel, *Estetyka obecności fenomenalnej* [orig.: *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*; Aesthetics of appearing], trans. Krystyna Krzemieniowa (Kraków: Universitas, 2008).

museum was established in the abbey, based on the existing collections of works of art from the Middle Ages to the present, which was enriched with art workshops and multimedia presentations. With the collaborating archivists, information technologists and artists, a unique project of the artistic design of the magnificent monastic library was produced as a kind of “hypertext.” A novel and daring attempt was made to reconstruct the way of thinking of the remote period rather than single objects. The thinking of “between” that I strongly espouse found its embodiment in the room of artistic interventions. The authors of the project “Universum im Kloster” justify their involvement in contemporary art as follows: “Only a portal separates history from current art. It can be said that in every second one crosses the ‘time window of art history’.”<sup>8</sup>

The opposite of the admirable attitude of the monks cooperating with artists is “muzealization” as the process of not so much protection as separation of a work of art from the time of exhibition. As an art recipient I feel, as a theorist I know, that we are dealing with a delicate matter that requires expertness and special sensitivity so as not to cross the boundary between enlivening and complementing a work of old art with new meanings, thus destroying its aura. A very good example of problems to which designers are exposed is architectural reconstructions. To create the atmosphere of time interval, the feeling of a state of suspension between the past and the present, requires a huge knowledge and special sensitivity. I have seen excellent and unsuccessful reconstructions. I have devoted a separate study to them and I stick to the conviction that the experience of the past, feeling of the days of yore, does not compete with symbolic meanings that successive generations gave to a place dear to them<sup>9</sup>. The sense of the term “patina of time,” as I understand it, is connected with the difficult-to-define uniqueness and atmosphere of a place. In the approach to this issue, I agree with Umberto Eco’s critical remark about “ice-old incomplete interiors” after conservation.<sup>10</sup> Physicality and intelligibility in communing with objects produce one environment. One cannot fail to observe that the aestheticization of the past plays a tremendous role in the processes that critics term as “collecting experiences.” I look at phenomena calmly, with distance at commercial forms, and I favorably view mature, well-thought-out and artistically valuable projects aspiring for a new form of aesthetic experience.

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<sup>8</sup> *Benediktinerstift Admont: Universum im Kloster. Ein Führer durch das Stift, seine Bibliotheken Museen* (Admont: Bibliothek der Provinz, 2010), 130.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Teresa Pękala, *Estetyczne konteksty doświadczenia przeszłości* [Aesthetic contexts of past experience] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiologia życia codziennego* [orig.: *Semiologia Quotidiana*; Daily Semiology], trans. Joanna Ugniewska and Piotr Salwa (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1996), 47.

An art theorist is a special kind of recipient, very frequently falling into the trap of a theory and its successive turns... I was convincingly shown how great a trap can be a purely theoretical attitude by my aesthetic experiences during my stay in the USA. There is no time here for presenting the travel diary. I will refer to the above-mentioned monastery museums and will report, using a specific example, on the comparison of my positive impressions with the theorist's earlier critical attitude towards reconstructions that consist in transferring structures from their natural place onto another, in taking away a historical building from its context. This creative cognitive confusion was triggered off by the exhibition "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination" in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, particularly its part: The Met Cloisters (New York, NY, USA, 10 May – 8 October 2018), which presented creations by the present-day fashion designers in the Met galleries of Byzantine and medieval art. Contrary to all "pre-judgments," this artistically sophisticated exhibition in the interiors of the cloister reconstructed in New York (!) from medieval (mainly French) fragments produced a curious impression of authenticity of crossing the portal between the present and the past. This was one of the most surprising and moving experiences, demonstrating the idea of a discrepancy between the conceptual judgment by the mind and the temporal and spatial dimension of our sensory perception. The positive experience of encountering the exceptional/the special speaks as much of the power of influence of art as about the intensity of aesthetic experiencing.

Communing with art in a direct experience and theoretical judgment are not situated on the opposite poles. Gaining balance between them is not possible through a task one sets oneself, it is rather the achievement of a certain stage of aesthetic maturity, to which personal experiences in travelling across large and small gardens of art are conducive. Despite criticism that great art exhibitions meet, I appreciate the importance of Venice Biennales, which have strongly emphasized in recent years the philosophical problems of space and ecology, as well as the subjects of aesthetically experiencing time.<sup>11</sup> An especially distinct accent is architecture biennales, the field of creativity that I would today recognize as the most philosophical art of our times.<sup>12</sup> I try to attend them every year.

Outside the mainstream of grand events, what I regard as a particularly valuable experience is small gardens of art, situated far away from culture centers,

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<sup>11</sup> The future of mega-biennales was the subject of an issue of the German journal *Kunstforum*, with the meaningful title *Quo Vadis Biennale? Der Zukunft der Mega-Ausstellungen*. I recommend inter alia an interesting article by Ingo Arend. Cf. Ingo Arend, "Probekühnen einer anderen Welt," *KUNSTFORUM international* Bd. 271, Nov-Dez. (2020): 64–76.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Teresa Pékala, "Architektura (w) wolnej przestrzeni [Architecture of (in) free space]," *Aspiracje. Kwartalnik Akademii sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie* 53/54, no. 3/4 (2018): 20–24.



sometimes in inaccessible and unexpected places. For that reason it is difficult to plan the next encounter. Many have already materialized. I call them “small gardens of art” because art is often practiced there by art organizers and local artists, lesser-known or well-known but appreciating their “localness” and becoming involved in small communities. An additional and, in my opinion, distinctive feature of being a garden in this sense is the fact that most often this is art located in the close vicinity of nature and architecture. Its creators ask the perennial questions—it is not for me to judge how great—about the sense of human fate, how a space becomes a place, how the different and alien jointly shapes the place, inflicts wounds and teaches how to heal them.

I would like to finish my comment as a recipient-theorist with a memory of such a garden of arts, a garden in the literal and metaphorical sense at the same time. Parco d'Arte Quarelli Roccaerverano is an olive grove, situated among Piedmont's hills, in which olive trees and works of art form a landscape in harmony, understood as an “existential space,”<sup>13</sup> the place of man's eternal struggle with finiteness in the face of the infinite power of nature. Many roads have to be travelled before you reach the place. In the olive grove, in the scorching sun, sculptures and installations show up among the ripening olive trees, amorphous figures prolong the life of trees, and the wrecks of (continuously falling...) planes, hanging from tree branches, have different emblems. *Homo homini* (2016) by Francesco Lupo is one of such works. The symbolic figure, “meta-iconography” of man, who, in a repeatable gesture towards the sky, is standing on another one's hand, and this next one is standing on the next and so on, entrusting their fate to a new space and new time. The dynamics of infinite multiplication and absolute anonymity, among the cultures of the symbolic tree, among dust, is poetically becoming part of other temporospatial dimensions. Luigi Mainolfi's imaginary bestiary *Centaura Oro* (2006) worries the audience with the prospect of metamorphosis as an irreversible process. By using the play of light and shadow in his title installation *The Wall* (2016), Simone Benedetto tells about the impossibility of crossing the wall, the symbol of established boundaries that we want to cross but are stopped by our shadow. If someone wants today to seek answers to our nagging problems of life among other living beings, s/he can (like Baudelaire over the albatross) ponder on the whale left under the blazing sun, designed by Alfredo Aceto *NGC 6543* (2012). In the spatial portal of the living art of the landscape, of which we are part, we are awaited in the natural garden of art by beings created by man and nature, of mixed build, amorphous, and ready to lead our imagination to the state of deep concentration underlying human thinking.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Christian Norberg Schulz, *Bycie, przestrzeń i architektura* [orig.: *Existence, Space and Architecture*], trans. Barbara Gadomska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Murator, 2000).

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