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THE POLITICS OF ART TODAY BEING SINGULAR-PLURAL

In his book *The Muses*, Jean-Luc Nancy states that when we go to the roots of the names of the muses, we find the meanings of enthusiasm, excitement, desire, and haste. At the same time, muses have also been used to mean those who desire to do and know something.¹ In Ancient Greece, the muses define the moment of inspiration itself; artistic creation is chanted by inspiration. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that the muses point to a poetic vitality in Homeric times. Representing a divine power, muses were conceived in plural form in Ancient Greece.² In the modern world, our conception has evolved into a different form over time. Today, the muse is mostly conceived of in singular form, as an external voice, an inspiration that comes to our ears through a whisper. The muse has been condemned to solitude, cloaked in invisibility but remained a whisper, detached from its own plural nature. Over the last two centuries, art has come to be used as an inclusive concept to include other artistic practices, including verbal and plastic arts. In modernism, the concept of art has been conceived of as a singular form under the inclusiveness of a single art concept. Even today, the vulgar concept of art carries the institutional remnants of similar thinking.

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¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1.

² Muses: Kalliope (the muse of epic poetry), Kleio (the muse of poetry based on historical events), Euterpe (the muse of music), Erato (the muse of lyric poetry), Melpomene (the muse of tragedy), Polyhymnia (the muse of religious poetry, hymns and dance), Terpsikhore (the muse of dance and chorus), Thalia (the muse of comedy and pastoral poetry), Urania (the muse of astrology) and finally, Plato added a tenth muse, the lyric poet Sappho.

We might think that there is a problem in our conception of art as something singular encompassing in its concept all other forms, since the artistic act, which is characterized by its plural creative power, is overshadowed by this activity of unification and fixation. We can find many good reasons to think that such a power, shaped in early times by the poet's creative activity, has been lost in the way we conceive of art today. Why did Nancy need muses, mythological female characters, to explain the singular-plural nature of art? Was he looking for a place for art rooted in feminine forces, based on a myth based on muses? Behind Nancy's attempt to resubstitute art, there seems to be an effort to equip art with regenerative powers that point to the essence of art, which is nourished by fecundity and creativity. We witness him invoking these concepts wherever he tries to define art and aesthetics. Following this line of thought, reflecting on the myth of pagan muses in our investigation into the origins of art may give us some clues about the plurality of art. Moreover, what is meant by plurality here is rather the existence of art as a variety of plural practices, and ultimately, this determination also says something about the ontological origin of art. For each of the muses defines a different aspect of artistic capability. The muses represent the forces that put the artist in an active productive state that define artist's creativity. Because, in terms of their origins, muses are beings whose emergence is not based on any logic, instead, they appear by chance, and their emergence is simultaneous with an act of creation. Another idea that we need to underline is that the art object that brings artistic creation to light is not a reflection of something, a product of a prior decision or a mere representation of an idea; on the contrary, the art object is the expression of a transformation of the way we comprehend the world. As such, we can conceive of the artistic act as a force that challenges the normative order, dismantles it, with the singularity of the moment of its emergence, but also considering the plural existence of the way we conceive it, with its singular-plural nature.

What might be the ways of thinking about art as a singular-plural aesthetic experience today? One way of talking about the aesthetic experience phenomenologically is to think of it as a becoming. We can draw a parallel between the nature of aesthetic experience and the nature of sensation, and in this way, we can move towards a new path not only for the nature of aesthetic experience but also for the nature of sensation. The term "sense" is generally used for both the five senses and signification in many European Languages. The affinity between the terms meaning and sensation in the Latin "sensus" can guide us to understand the commonality of both the sensible and the intelligible i.e., the plurality of art.³

³ Nancy, *The Muses*, 14.

As contemporary phenomenology and physiology studies point out, a sound or a color can affect more than one of our senses; for example, the color green can appeal to our eyes, and it can also evoke the smell of a blade of grass that we feel at the tip of our nose; a burst of sound can move from one sense to another with different degrees of intensity; red evokes movement by stimulating the senses of thickness and fluidity.⁴ Such examples are very intriguing in terms of showing the transition between different sense organs; especially when experiencing works of art, it is necessary to determine that each of our senses is stimulated in different ways and that these stimuli intertwine with each other, because the plural nature of sensation will lead us towards the plural nature of aesthetic experience. Neither a single person nor any object will be sufficient to explain the nature of sensation since it does not seem possible to speak of a sensation without our sensing the world. In this sense, sensation is something one does, but not something one does without being in relation to someone or something. At this point we can claim that the singular-plural art is directly related to the plurality of sensation. As a result, it seems that if there were only one sense or emotion, meaning could not emerge, because meaning is not something that can be grasped without a relationship, without being in a relationship. Hence, we can define aesthetic experience in terms of a sensorium whose intensity is constantly changing.

We can extend our investigation of art as a field of experience to the moments when we witness the birth of art. Let us think of the Chauvet and Lascaux cave paintings in France, let us focus on the artist's handprint that suddenly appears in Lascaux or the handprint with a broken finger in the Chauvet cave, the gesture of the artist that is there as the artist's signature. It is such a gesture that the form separates itself from the other figures and is born on the cave wall, in a way, with this gesture we witness the birth of a world, the figure-signature opens itself as a part of that world. In *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, George Bataille states that we are touched and entangled by something in an astonished and mesmerized way.⁵ In this respect, the work of art has no telos. It is the world as it unfolds itself; it is an opening. It is a creation that manifests itself in an extraordinary way in our understanding of the world, a talismanic creation as transfiguration. This scene of creation manifests itself in the moment of touch, in the gesture of the hand. Nancy was asking if we can think of the touch of the muses as an artistic creation. What is a gesture? A gesture is a touch of the world,

⁴ Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, "L'Art et les gens: Jean-Luc Nancy's Genealogical Aesthetics," *Project MUSE, College Literature* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 174.

⁵ George Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Switzerland: Skira, 1955), 130.

of the earth. The Latin root of the gesture gives us the verb *gerere*, which means to sustain. In another sense, a gesture preserves the meaning of conceiving something new. We can use gesture in the sense of a substratum for the sense of touch. We can read a gesture as the movement of the hand, and in this sense, perhaps painting in particular is nothing but the action of the hand. This moment, in which seeing and touching are intertwined, is revealed, seems to prevent the painter from emerging as the inventor of painting; both the painter and the viewer mingle with the muses.

In my opinion, the question of what art is must always be considered together with the question of what exists today in the name of art. Is singular-plural art emerging today as an aesthetic experience under the name of contemporary art? Are the expectations encompassed by the new in contemporary art being met? This is undoubtedly a legacy that makes us uncomfortable. The emphasis on contemporaneity in contemporary art is more than a matter of terminology; it is a source of new artistic ideas where the old is subjected to radical criticism.

Before discussing the idea of "contemporaneity" in contemporary art, I should first note that it seems quite difficult to talk about art today. I think, first and foremost a series of problems in Turkey and in the West need to be mentioned along with the idea of contemporary art. The first problem is whether there is a specific type of contemporary art, that is, a contemporary visual art, which is meant (or assumed) by the term contemporary art; If there is an activity that goes by the name of contemporary art (and it seems indisputable that there are a number of activities that we all point to in one way or another to contemporary art), another problem that arises is whether there is a contemporary criticism that emerges out of this activity (of course, what is meant here is whether it can produce an alternative to the ideas, paradigms or theoretical frameworks about the nature of art that existed before it. Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry comes to mind).⁶ When we look at the art movements of the 60s and 70s, we observe that art in general goes beyond the sterile exhibition spaces and beyond white cube walls. Therefore, considering the political discussions, street demonstrations, happenings and marches about the Vietnam War and the '68 student movements at that time, we can say that museums were under the spotlight as institutional hegemonic spaces. The emergence of "performance," a kind of improvisation at the center of art, and the emergence of other types of activities (conceptual art, minimalism, installation and video art, environmental art, performance and body art) that transcend and transform the artistic activity of painting

⁶ John Rajchman, "The Contemporary: A New Idea?", in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, ed. Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski (London: Sternberg Press, 2011), 126–127.

and sculpture have changed the content of the concept of art. These artistic activities, which were sometimes referred to by different names, such as “post-modern art,” not only showed that the ways of doing art and the questions about the nature of art were differentiated, but also contained a paradox. This paradox is that the most radical artworks of the 60s and 70s were the art forms most easily commercialized by the culture industry (in this regard, it will suffice to recall pop-art icons and collages). The difficulty we face can be explained by the fact that the formulation of critical art is becoming increasingly invisible. The new developments that emerged with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 led to discussions on the role of the critic, the public sphere and the concept of the curator. It seems that the emergence of large-scale exhibitions such as biennials and art fairs, and the ongoing debates on identity, multiculturalism and post-colonialism have led us to ask the question “what is global?” Thus, globalization, global art and global art criticism started to be discussed.

When we look at the debates on contemporary art, we encounter two important ideas that point to contemporary art. While some theorists such as Arthur Danto claimed that the 60s marked the birth of contemporary art (and perhaps the death of aesthetics), others such as Hans Belting defined the late 80s as the starting point that changed the course of western art. For Danto, for example, Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box exhibited in 1964 disrupted precisely the way art is conceived and represented.⁷ While periodization finds substitutes for concepts such as globalization, pluralism and contemporaneity, it also allows us to define contemporary art practices in this way, and perhaps it is precisely with this temporal determination that many of the problems we encounter with the term contemporary begin.⁸ So, at this point, the real questions we need to ask are how, where and when we are contemporary, global, or (starting from the negative) how, where and when we are not modern or postmodern.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, if contemporary is to be a category like surrealism, dada, modern or postmodern art, arguably, an oil painting made with classical techniques will be excluded from this category; that is why Nancy uses the expression “art today” instead of contemporary art. Rather than conceiving of contemporary as a concept that defines a specific period, we can think of it as a general attitude that can be attributed to art in any moment of time in the history of art. In this respect, especially when it comes to art, every period has to have its

⁷ Arthur Danto, *Beyond The Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (London, Berkeley and California: University of California Press: 1998), 19–23.

⁸ John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 3.

contemporaneity, because the concept of contemporary points to a non-categorical category in which we cannot fully find ourselves, a category without an aesthetic schema and manifesto.⁹ However, we can observe that behind many art forms that have left their mark on the history of art, there is a certain scheme of thought, which I formulate as the artistic form being based on a certain way of thinking. Contemporary art, at least, does not include such a schema in its concept, but in this respect, it only exemplifies itself. Questions about what art is today should be considered together with the questions about how art makes us feel, what we experience in the name of art when we go to biennials, art fairs and events, and how we comprehend the world through art.

Today we can talk about the lack of a plastic touch characteristic of some works of art. We can call this touch artist's gesture. For Nancy, a gesture is not a movement, not a mere form, but rather what remains after taking all the meaningful parts of a work of art.¹⁰ When I say hello to someone with a smile, just as we make a small change in the meaning of hello, just as we play with the meaning of hello, the artist's gesture changes the semantics of language in the same way. We can also show the artist's gesture by referring to the oldest examples we know: cave paintings. What is the artist's gesture in the Lascaux cave paintings? Can we leave aside the formation of the paintings around a hunter cult, the human and animal figures and the external features that distinguish them, the impressions of an observer who lived at that time, the struggle between man and nature, and talk about the artist's gesture? Perhaps, apart from all these questions, we can find nothing in her except a pure desire to paint and a palpable sensation that she leaves with us. Someone's desire to paint a glowing picture on a cave wall with a flint is a gesture that points to a feeling far beyond any purpose. The sign that leads us to something other than itself is perhaps the thing that most clearly shows us the artist's gesture. Some examples of contemporary art today show us a place where the artist's gesture disappears. However, it is impossible to talk about either art or philosophy without a gesture; in my opinion, this is one of the most important dilemmas contemporary art faces today.

Finally, I would like to mention the issue of how some examples of contemporary art offend us, namely the problem of the viewer's inability to think in the face of some art works. What I mean is that a given form, which I have encountered in some works, comes before us in specific ways and these works fail

⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Art Today," translated by Charlotte Mandell, *Journal of Visual Culture* 9, no. 1 (2010): 91. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412909354265>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

to relate to the memory of the viewer and thus the message takes precedence over the form. Therefore, one is inevitably confronted with the question of what is the political gesture in these works. I think that some contemporary artworks reflect to us a kind of testimony in the name of “being political.” In these works, the given meaning is so dominant that as a viewer we can do nothing but feel offended and ashamed by this witnessing. The question to be asked here is whether witnessing itself adds richness to art. In our encounters with contemporary art practices, raising the question “what is art” can be an important criterion in terms of the artistry of the work of art. I believe, this is a plus in favor of contemporary art, because the question of “what art is” is essential for the continuity of artistic activity. At this stage, we can take as an example Chinese activist and artist Ai Weiwei’s enchanting installation “Law of Journey,” a seven-meter-long giant refugee boat with two hundred and fifty-eight life-size figures representing refugees, which was shown at the National Gallery in Prague in 2018. Housed in an emblematic historic building, a former Trade Fair Palace that served as a gathering point for Jews, this exhibition is the ark of migration with a monumental rubber boat similar to Noah’s ark. “Law of Journey” refers to a tragedy that occurred when a sea boat with migrant families capsized while attempting to illegally cross from Turkey to Greece. At first glance, it strikes us that the installation is a call to action denouncing the ignorance and blindness of the political and civil apparatus. In other representations of the installation, there is a life-size sculpture of a drowned child’s body lying face down on the shore, which we have seen many photographs of in the newspapers. The installation re-narrates not only the gigantic boat and its silent inhabitants, but all the elements of the event: the bodies washed ashore, the tattered life jackets and the gigantic boat itself. It is a fact that the migrant crisis, the effects of which we are increasingly feeling every day, has radically changed the lives of millions of people. People making their way to both Turkey and Europe have faced dangerous conditions, hundreds have lost their lives and been subjected to abusive conditions and sanctions. Another work that directly represents this situation is Erkan Özgen’s four-minute video “Wanderland,” which was screened at Galata Greek Primary School as part of the Istanbul Biennial. The video documents a deaf and mute boy named Mohammed, who fled northern Syria in January 2015 as a result of the ISIS siege of Kobane, as he conveys his trauma through his body language in front of a fixed camera installed in a room of the house where he is staying. Throughout the video, we feel the violence of the war that Mohammed depicts through his body language. “Wanderland” focuses on the war and forced migration in the region, telling the stories and documenting them.

For these works, the primary question is what constitutes a political gesture. The dominant effect of the given meaning, which keeps the viewer in place, may lead to nothing but embarrassment. The minor stories that close in on themselves do not go beyond showing the curators' political impressions on the current facts. The political message is so strong that the artist's gesture gets lost in this very system of meaning. The main reason why Bertold Brecht, who blended Nazi power with cauliflower allegories, created such powerful artistic forms in the 20th century was due to his ability to show not only heterogeneous elements but also the relationship between the opposites in a very striking way. However, a political gesture is only possible through the suspension of political representations so that art subjects society to a radical critique. Without discussing the conditions of critique, we ask art to repair and reshape our sense of community and social bonds. So how can we act as viewers? Today, at least for some of us, contemporary art represents only difference and diversity, and therefore transience and decontextualization. I think we should take a stand against certain occlusions, at least those works that offend us. This would certainly not mean judging contemporary art, but rather giving the contemporaneity in contemporary art its due, searching and questioning it. There is always the possibility of a new world.

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