



THINKING IN CONTEMPORARY ART

How to pose the problem of contemporary art - a manifesto? a lament? In these notes, I have a more modest intention. I'd like to look at what this art is and what 'ideas of art' it involves or invents. In this way, I'd like to better formulate for myself the questions with which it confronts us.

The larger problem of 'ideas of art' and in art is one I'm now interested in elaborating further. It is part of what I call the 're-aestheticization of thinking', or the reinvention of thinking in the arts. Philosophy offers many examples of the relations between thinking and art; but, in formulating this problem, I think we need to avoid the two extremes of a 'didactic' relation, where art just illustrates a given theory, and a 'romantic' one, where art is the preserve of an element that can't be thought about at all. We need to focus more on how artists actually think in and with the arts - the new ideas that come to them, including new 'ideas of art' or of their own activities, their own materials or institutions - and then how those ideas themselves fit into larger fields, involving many other discourses, in science or politics, or philosophy itself. I think Deleuze offers an example of this approach, when poses the problem of 'image' in cinema - how did the great filmmakers 'have ideas' in cinema, which in turn served to intersect many political or technical changes, as well as with philosophical questions about time or duration and the manner in which it 'appears' or is 'shown' our lives in ways that force us to think.¹ I've also tried to look at this problem in the work of a particular artist, Richard Serra: how does one 'think' or 'have ideas' in and with sculpture, or in and with abstraction in sculpture?² But this problem of 'thinking' in art is at the same time a problem of 'institutions' of art and of thinking, hence shows and collecting art. Philosophically speaking, an important turning point came about two centuries ago, just across the Baltic Sea from Oslo, when Kant invented a new discipline called 'aesthetics', distinct art history or art-appreciation. The form of the relations between art and thinking was then cast in a new way, at first posed in terms of the presuppositions of judgment, but assuming other guises almost immediately after. In this history institutions matter, and I'll refer briefly to the Bauhaus as a kind of laboratory for 'ideas'. At the same time, some ideas carry with them a violent of critical departure from institutionalization (and in particular 'academization'), drawing formations like 'the collective' or the avant-garde group, with its journal, its internal exclusions, and its sense of what is to come. For what I'm calling 'ideas' are not just notions in the air - they have presuppositions, subjective and objective, times or circumstances in which they 'occur', ways they are 'taken up', larger fields in which they acquire their sense and function, or are transformed in turn. But how then does this problem of having ideas or of 'thinking in art, with art' apply to what, in an increasingly large and mad globalized business, has come to be called 'contemporary art'?

Biennial fever, new collectors, new money, museum expansions, global curators - all this has given rise to a meta-literature on contemporary art, often critical, often usefully so. But I'd like to avoid blanket acceptance or rejection. I'd like to start from the principle that there is no art - and in particular, no 'contemporary art' - without search for new ideas of art, of what it is and of its particular relations with thinking itself. For what is new is in fact not what is in fashion, but what we can't yet conceive, can't yet see, or have the sure means to judge - which is just why it forces

1. I tried to work out this view in an essay called 'Deleuze's Time or How Cinema Changes our idea of art', to be published as part of a Deleuze symposium by Minnesota Press as well as in a volume of critical writings on cinema and art, edited by Tanya Leighton for the Stenberg Press.

2. See my essay 'Serra's Abstract Thinking' in Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years ed. Kynaston McShine and Lynne Cooke (a Museum of Modern Art catalogue).

us to think and think together. With this larger project in mind, I'll now briefly look at three familiar theses as to what 'contemporary art' is or does.

Thesis 1: Contemporary art is post-medium art.

The usual definition opposes 'contemporary' to modern or 'modernist' art. The 60s or early 70s is often given as date for the emergence of contrast, with New York as an important center, but happening in other forms elsewhere. There are now many names for this turning-point - 'the end of art', 'postmodernism', the 'neo-avant-garde' etc. For our purposes, it might also be pictured as a moment when the idea of art freed itself from series of constraints and distinctions, conventions and habits, in which it had been enclosed - from the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture and related 'skills'; from production-in-studio and white-cube exhibition; from the divisions separating 'high' art from mass or commercial art, or from popular or vernacular culture; or again from those distinguishing art from everyday life, or art from information or documentation and their 'apparatuses' of production and reception, or art from the languages of criticism and theory. It is striking that in this process 'visual' art and arts institutions play a key role without parallel to other arts, in which 'modernism' (its related questions) is also to be found. Of course today these same 'visual arts' institutions (often reserving for themselves the term 'art') have acquired a role, and a space, of different sort than the 'literary' ones, in relation with which the whole problem of 'modernism' often itself posed, thus posing the questions of 'spatial' or 'visual' intelligence along with 'textual' ones, and freeing the function of intellectuals or public space from the literary form with which it had long been associated - thus acquiring a new place in and across cities. At the same time during this period, we see the invention of many new styles, new ways of doing philosophy, its relation to institutions, its drama and presuppositions, with which the developments of 'contemporary' art would become increasingly entwined in what is now known as 'theory'. Contemporary art thus belongs to a rich moment of new relations between thinking and art, and in particular, with new ways of doing philosophy or theory, which in many ways still with us today, on a 'global' scale. There of course would be installation, participation, performance or theatre, tied up with search for active rather than passive kinds of seeing and with urban intervention rather than traditional display of 'beautiful objects' to the public. Writing in part under the influence of Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his 'archeology' of the moment back in the PoMo 80s, Thierry de Duve saw a shift in aesthetics (with antecedents in Duchamp), through which the question of 'beauty' had been replaced by the question 'is it art' in the larger problem of judgment that descends from Kant, into which the notion of 'medium' might be re-inserted.³ It in any case, it was a moment that called for new ways of doing 'aesthetics', a new sense - a new 'idea of art'

The trouble with saying that 'contemporary art' just is post-medium, de-skilled, post-studio, post-white-cube, post-'absorptive-looking', neo-avant-garde, or 'anti-aesthetic' art (or 'condition' in which art 'dies') is that it says almost nothing in fact about what this 'idea' is or was, what we might yet do with it. Instead it tends to insert it in melancholy stories of loss, death, obsolescence, puffed up with overblown stories of decline, and so discourages more complex histories, more pointed conceptual distinctions, that would allow for new ideas or new ways of taking it up. It holds onto the Oedipal character of the new forces and 'generation' in the 60s long after the 'institution' has absorbed them and their protagonists - including even the art and

3. See especially 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas' in his *Kant After Duchamp* (MIT).

artists of 'institutional critique'. Thus it serves to block the task, at once philosophical, artistic, and art-historical, of identifying new 'ideas' in this complex, inserting them in new histories or sequences, associating them with new fields, which, among other things, would allow us to 'see' work from this period in new ways. For 'ideas' in arts always have histories, linking them to many other practices, through which they acquire their 'sense' - the idea of abstraction, for example. We still need today to free the idea and practice of abstraction, in many domains and forms, from the 'modernist' scheme according to which all the art would turn in on their essential mediums in a grand effort to negate the increasingly menacing rise of Kitsch. One might then look instead at how if figures in new or 'expanded' notions of time or duration in image or space, as with the case of Richard Serra, and the new groups, at first outside 'the institution' or 'the market', with which his inventions became linked in New York. Or, to take another example, we need the free the ideas of 'theatre' or 'theatricality' (and hence 'performance'), its preservation and revival) in the visual arts from the simple contrast with 'absorption' as a kind of seeing, and include it in a larger series involving what is to see and think 'critically', with antecedents in Brecht or Artaud, each of whom tried to recast the relation between drama and 'ideas' (as does Deleuze in analysis of the 'theatricality' peculiar to cinema, in Dreyer or Cassavetes, and more generally with Artaud's enthusiasm for silent film in the 'thinking-cinema' relations). For in fact the problem 'dramatising ideas' is also one to be found in philosophy from the start (with Plato's 'dialogues'), and forms part of a long history. 'Having an idea' in philosophy involves a whole theatre, an 'agon', with a changing cast of characters, in which new sorts of personae emerge, as when Maurice Blanchot wrote of the 'disaster' befalling the idea of 'friend' or 'comrade', leading to new pictures of the 'friendship' between artists and thinkers, and the larger role of groups, collaborations, collectives in their institutional histories. Along such lines, we might start to complicate the rather vacuous notions of 'participation' or 'interaction' or 'relations' in contemporary art, introducing into them the news of figure, body, space, narration, identity and 'dis-identification' found, for example, in those theatrical traditions, which sought a contrast between active and passive viewing or space of viewing. Similarly, it would be useful to pose the question of 'institution' not simply in the reductive manner shown, for example, in Pierre Bourdieu's attempt to oppose to the specious 'universality' of Kantian aesthetics, a sociological or statistical study of its actual publics. One needs at the same time to elaborate a notion of institution (and of 'public') that includes an element of change not fixed in prior rules, an element of agon nor fixed by prior agreement, not simply in relation to the School and the Party, but also to the Museum or Exhibition space, and notions of 'the public' it involves or supposes. In this way, one might preserve in the notion of 'having an idea' the element of questioning which pushes institutional meanings or habits to an 'outside', for which there don't pre-exist social rules, where it is linked to others.

Instead of grand monolithic stories of modernism and 'the end of art', one would thus start to construct more complicated stories in which of concepts and related problems and ideas in art, the role they play in larger fields, their sites of invention, the new things they make possible to see and to think, in their own domain as in others. Thus the great pictures of the 'historical avant-garde' or 'modernism' against which 'contemporary' art is defined and measured would themselves no longer have been locked in the past, as an ideal we have lost and can never again attain, whose 'ghosts' endlessly haunt everything we might try to do or invent. Instead one might imagine new ways of taking up 'ideas' in arts - for example, we might take up in new ways the old Bauhaus idea of learning by doing, and of 'making visible' what we can't see just because of the terrible machine of self-evidence regulating what we are accustomed, what we are given to

see and think, appealing not to a statistical or sociological public (Nielson ratings, niche audiences...etc.), but indeterminate people, that doesn't yet exist as such that 'comes from outside' to experiment with new ways of seeing and speaking and doing. For the Bauhaus in fact offered a space of exchange and interference among disciplines, including philosophy itself, whose role in the Bauhaus (and its subsequent immigration to the US) has been studied by Peter Galison. In other words, one might try to re-open the 'modernist' past itself to invention or re-invention. For a story of the decline and final obsolescence of an Ideal, one would substitute the construction a resource for invention and re-invention of new ways of thinking, seeing, talking, as they arise from particular circumstances, interfering and connecting with others in larger complexes. For, after all, for a young artist in Shanghai or Dakar or Sao Paolo, is the New York visual-arts drama of the 60s, in which new 'ideas of art' arose, in fact the sole horizon of everything they can think or do today; or is not rather a matter of taking up ideas where one finds them, creating exchanges and groups in the process? For today the problem of contemporary art is not simply a matter of (mostly 'European') history, but also, at the same time, increasingly (if not, in the first place), a matter of geography. We come thus to a second thesis:

Thesis 2: Contemporary art is art of the 'globalization' of art and its institutions.

A 'radical' form of this thesis is as part to a larger critique of 'neo-liberalism', or its 'immaterial labor' - itself an uncertain update of the old 'critique of political economy' Marx invented in the nineteenth century. Contemporary art is then the art that either 'reflects' or 'resists' this new post-industrial 'formation' of capital or the larger Empire it serves. A problem with this view is that often that art is called upon to do too much, as if part of a grand Romantic Revolutionary project, which always seems doomed to failure. It might be useful instead to try and free the ideas of 'spectacle' or 'commodification' to which such analyses often revert from the all-too-familiar critical genre in which, in effect, in a proud dejected spirit, one capitalizes on our inability to resist or overcome them, complicating them in turn. For this purpose, it is worth working out a more complicated picture of 'globalization' itself, and the role of 'critical analysis' in it. In this regard, Etienne Balibar has distinguished four different models in an essay that tries to develop the notion there is an irreducible territorial or spatial dimension to politics itself, against which one might measure the attempts to great a 'transnational citizenship'.⁴ One might take those two principles as a starting point for thinking about the 'geographic' element in contemporary art and art institutions - in the themes of displacement, exile, nomadism, and problems of 'local' and 'global' audiences and institutions, or the new role of maps, diagrams and topographies (recalling Svetlana Alpers theses about Dutch painting in an earlier 'globalizing' moment in Europe, in which the 'map' replaced the classical 'window' as principle of pictorial visibility), or in the new forms of fair and biennial 'tourism'. In what ways does the emergence of such themes or pictorial ideas we see in the visual arts then form part of the larger question of a 'transnational polity' opened up by the geographical expansion of traditional European institutions, as with the Bilbao effect, or with the ongoing take-off of biennials in cities?

To answer this question we need to get away from the old problems of what is 'other to the West', the scheme of 'center and periphery' and the somewhat vacuous sociological ideas of 'modernity vs tradition'. In the new geographical zones of art outside (but also inside) Europe, it is more useful to imagine grafts and exchanges around the 'ideas of art' that developed in

4. See his lecture 'Borderland Europe', reprinted in *We the People of Europe* (Princeton).

Europe, migrating and changing elsewhere, in clash with other practices. Indeed the 'theory' with which 'contemporary art' became linked itself 'travels' and was a product of 'travel', giving rise to the ideas of 'exile' and 'nomadism' with the visual arts would become associated, associated with the larger aspirations and functions of the visual art practices, for example, in 'diasporic' or displaced groups – as with Edward Said's influential views, treated by Balibar in terms of the 'super-imposed layers' model of globalization. For there exist geographical assumptions or pre-suppositions for 'having ideas' in the arts - for example, in its relation to 'ecological' questions of land, earth, landscape, milieu. How one figures in a landscape or environment, in a manner that is oriented or determinate or instead formless or indeterminate - that is a central problem not only in 'modernism' (or with 'flannerie' or 'derive' as conditions of seeing), but in the larger situation in which the idea of 'milieu' includes social relations, new machines and cities as well as nostalgic pieties of the country, as, for example, with the displacements of old industrial with new leisure and informational spaces, with which the photographers trained by the Bechers seemed to be pre-occupied in various ways. Geography is not simply a theme or object in visual arts (and the nature of the 'spaces' it shows us), but also in the conditions of seeing and thinking themselves, or as part of what it is to 'have ideas', and as such is part the very activity of thinking, and particular figures invented to do it, the larger 'politics' with which it is linked. We thus come to a third general thesis about contemporary art:

Thesis 3: Contemporary art is art without transgression.

For those who think that without 'transgression' there can be no real art (or no 'critical' art), this thesis rejoins the early melancholy stories of the Loss of the Avant-garde or The End of Art and, indeed, often quickly ends up as conservative variant of it. But there is also a more positive variant: contemporary art is an art no longer based in the great act of Negation of which Adorno dreamt, but rather in the affirmation of possibility or 'virtuality' (opened by 'events'), and the way such possibility is taken up by 'connections' or 'groups', closer to what Adorno called 'micrologies'. But, as we have already seen, it is a misleading oversimplification to just superimpose on the modern-contemporary distinction on a contrast between critical negation and affirmation. It is more useful to ask how the notion of transgression arose, already in 'modernist' traditions, as part of different ways of having ideas. How for example did the idea of the artist as great Gangster and Transgressor arise in the work of Georges Bataille in the 30s, leading to a picture of artist as dirty priest or unemployed aristocrat? How is that picture different from the idea of artist as 'producer' which Walter Benjamin sketched in relation to Russia at the same time in France, that would be defined by how his work alters the 'function' of the apparatuses of production and reception 'in the direction of Socialism'; or again with the Bauhaus idea of author as 'engineer', or with Dadist notions of diagramming spaces of body and machine in different times and places in Europe? And, why later, after the Second World War, in France, did Deleuze and Foucault insist, in our image of thought, of trying to displace the grand figure of Transgressor as new priest or 'sovereign', as a condition of critical thought or art, substituting for the idea of a great Symbolic Order that is Transgressed, a sense of the concrete dispositifs that govern the 'self-evidence' of what we see and say, and the new forces that break with them, opening experimentation with other possibilities - artist as 'experimenter', thinker as 'cartographer' etc? As in the case with the previous theses, the question of having ideas, of thinking in and with the arts, offers a way of posing the problem offering new paths into and out of the modern-contemporary divide.

Such indeed is the larger problem about thinking in and with the arts that I've been trying to get at in these notes; and one way of posing it is through the old question of how such 'ideas' are taught and taken up later, sometimes in circumstances quite unforeseen, even unimaginable, by those who invented them. We find one version of this problem of 'learning' in the Bauhaus (or later in Black Mountain) in tandem with a problem that would increasingly turn into a great philosophical pre-occupation for Wittgenstein, his notion of games and ideas, his great vital agon with (and within) academic philosophy, and the very idea of the 'following the rules' of institutionalized meaning. It happens that this theme of 'having ideas' in and through the arts (with their relations to institutions, their departure from habitual self-evidence in what we see and think, the larger fields into which they enter), in other words of search and research in and through the arts, is now posed with respect to 'contemporary art' today.

Connected-up with this debate is the fate and nature of 'theory' itself - and of course it is also said that contemporary art is an art without critical theory (or 'after' it), or in which the critic has been replaced by the curator as the new 'catalysor' of thought. But such contrast is often based on a limited notion of 'theory' itself. There is even a sense in which one has 'ideas in art' (or in art institutions) only when those ideas don't just illustrate or translate given theories, as in 'didactic' models of the relation to philosophical problems and ideas, only when they instead excite or give rise to new ways of thinking. If there exists a sort of potential connection with philosophy or theory in the arts, such that one can speak of a 'non-philosophical understanding of philosophy' in and through the arts, to which philosophy (and the teaching of philosophy) is addressed, it is because in philosophy itself there is an element of 'un-learning' what is given to us to know and see, a kind of 'dis-identification' with given ways of talking and seen, which supply our images and words with their 'common sense'. To teach such ideas, in arts as in philosophy, providing for new for spaces in which they can be linked to one another, is thus not to 'academize' them - quite the contrary. In the issue of 'institutionalizing' ideas or research in art academies, in short, we need to include that element in having an idea, which takes us 'outside' academization to the fresh air of other ways of doing things. For in the case of what I'm calling 'ideas' (as already with Kant) to learn is never to imitate. It is more a matter of finding a way to place oneself in the peculiar situation and aesthetic state in relation to oneself and to others to invent in turn.

That is perhaps why, in an odd way, for me the question of - and in - contemporary art is that of thinking itself.

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