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The Fiction of the Global Artistic Universe: Arts, Institutions, and Material

1. *The contemporary and the generic*

The presupposition of this conference – indeed the presupposition of any non-trivial reflection on contemporaneity – is the observation that the contemporary is not a reality in the simple sense of factual existence. It is real in the sense that the current situation of the world not only invites but calls for a critical idea of contemporaneity to describe a coming together of times, histories and places that links them without eliminating the differences and tensions that exist between them. In his *Anywhere or not at all*, Peter Osborne assembles several concepts to describe the contemporary: idea, problem, fiction, task.¹ They all describe something that is not simply given but postulated, worked for, or undertaken. The contemporary is an idea because it cannot be experienced as such, and has no subject, it is a fiction because it works as a narrative mode of self-reflection that is not a statement of fact but a projection into the future that serves as a frame of reference to understand the present and describes it as something to be accomplished rather than being given.

Ultimately, as Osborne writes, the contemporary assumes “the transcendental status of a condition of the historical intelligibility of social experience”². That means that the contemporary is a *necessary* fiction if we want to understand anything about our current situation at all. The reference to a historicized Kantian philosophy gives you an idea just how charged with *Geschichtsphilosophie* this is – and here the German term seems appropriate because it has strong normative overtones that imply an intelligibility and inherent logic of the historical process that tend to get lost in the literal translation “philosophy of history”.

Now art is supposed to be one of the most important, maybe the only way of adequately articulating this idea. There is, however, a second problematic concept at work here, which is not an idea in the Kantian sense and also not as future-oriented as the concept of the contemporary: the idea of the generic concept of art. As Osborne, Rosalind Krauss, Thierry de Duve, and others have conceptualized it, contemporary art has left medium specificity behind and entered a phase characterized by art in the singular. This generalization cannot be conceived without the conceptual element that has infused all art since the sixties – an element that cannot substitute the aesthetic dimension but cannot be discarded either. In fact, one of the lessons of conceptual art consists in the acknowledgement of a conceptual element in *all* art.

From the perspective of artistic disciplines other than the visual arts this may sound suspiciously like a very traditional move that can be found in a lot of writing on art: the tension between art in the narrow sense of visual art and in the encompassing sense of art in general has led many theorists to generalize observations and theses derived from painting or sculpture to Art with a

capital A as if the two were identical. Now Osborne's philosophy of contemporary art obviously doesn't simply fail to make this distinction. But if the idea of the generic concept of art is true, it loses its importance: there is no such thing as "visual art" or even "the visual arts" anymore, just art, postconceptual work carried out in all kinds of different materials.

But there is a problem here. The field that Osborne mainly, or rather almost exclusively, talks about is still the field of the visual arts – after all, this is where the generic concept of art originated, where Duchamp produced (or rather selected) his readymades, where conceptual art developed and had its pervasive impact. In its earliest incarnation, art in the generic sense was art that was not painting or sculpture: the readymade. That is not to say that this had no impact on the other traditional genres, or that they were completely left out of the subsequent development; in fact the emergence of conceptual art in the sixties involved not just the visual arts but music, poetry, and even dance. But it wasn't continued in each of these fields in equal measure. A friendly account of these developments could be that the genres have simply taken different routes; a less indulgent view would be that an "art" like music has experienced a backlash or regression, reinstating or at least reaffirming an obsolete ideal of absolute music, which was one of the sources of inspiration for the formalism and the idea of medium specificity that have long been abandoned in the visual arts.

While this is not far from the truth, I still think that we need to come to terms with the fact that a lot of artistic work is still done *within* the traditional genres – which doesn't mean that there is no conceptual work or no employment of different media in dance or music or that there aren't plenty of works and projects that cross disciplinary borders. But conceptual or postconceptual work in dance and in the gallery is simply not the same kind of work, and this has to do with the institutional condition, which concerns education as well as presentation and distribution, and the discursive situation, which includes the way the discipline relates to its own history, in each of these fields.

I don't think it is entirely feasible to distinguish between empirical and philosophical questions, as Osborne does, which would relegate this kind of work to sociology or ethnography who cannot afford to deal only in actualities but have to take into account the realities of the arts as they present themselves, including what Hegel calls "idle existence" (*faule Existenz*). A clear-cut distinction between the "merely" empirical and the actual is openly Hegelian, and while I think a philosophy of art has to have some way of distinguishing the truly contemporary from the merely present, I would be wary to put that much trust in reason and in the logic of the historic process.

To sketch an alternative view that employs philosophical reflection to provide a framework for sociological research I would like to draw on Adorno's concept of artistic material and also on a less obvious concept: Umberto Eco's idea of the code as heuristic fiction.

2. *Material and place*

The concept of material occupies a central place in Adorno's philosophy of art, and it's also one of its most controversial elements. First elaborated in his *Philosophy of New Music* in 1949, material is the pivot that holds together historical development and present composition, necessity and freedom, the objectivity of the art work and the subjectivity of its creator. In this view, material far exceeds the physical matter that is used in the creation of art (and what would that be in music?) and encompasses everything the artist is confronted with as s/he sets out to work. As Adorno put it two decades later in his *Aesthetic Theory*: "Material [...] is what artists work with: It is the sum of all that is available to them, including words, colors, sounds, associations of every sort and the various techniques that have been developed. Consequently, forms too can become material; it is everything that artists encounter about which they must make a decision. [...] Even innovative expansion of the material into the unknown, going beyond the material's given condition, is to a large extent a function of the material and its critique, which is defined by the material itself."³

The key concept here is that of a "function of the material". Artists are not entirely free in their choice but confronted with the demands of the material, which represents not only the state of things but projects a trajectory into the future in that it conditions what is possible and what isn't (anymore) and thus even implies its own critique. What prevents the artist's choice from being reduced to being nothing more than a function of the material is the fact that material is not simply given; what is given are works of the past and the immediate present, and only when someone sets out to create a new work do the forms of the past appear as material for present creation. If material thus mainly refers to production, it is also a critical category that allows the theorist to evaluate works with respect to their relation to the historical situation.

The problematic aspect of this theory is the idea of a clearly discernible state of artistic material which suggests a linear progress that leaves no or very little room for side tracks or even pluralism. Faced with the development in the 20th century, this is of course difficult to sustain, and it's the idea of a developmental logic, not a dogma of a single trajectory that is decisive here; besides, assuming an unambiguous theory of progress would ignore the dialectic of enlightenment that is at work even in the *Philosophy of New Music* with its seemingly clear-cut division between progress and reaction. But I want to focus on another point: Adorno always speaks of material relative to a specific artistic genre, mostly music; he was very skeptical about intermedial works. His late essay "Art and the arts", in which he famously speaks of a "fraying" of the arts (which Rodney Livingstone not very accurately translates as "erosion"⁴), creating intermediate zones where one merges into the other, makes it clear why that is: switching to materials of another art or incorporating them was dubious because it appeared as inconsequence, skirting the difficulties

the material at hand presented, like changing the subject in a discussion if one's arguments fail to convince.

Consequently, Adorno's theory of musical material has very little in common with Clement Greenberg's idea of medium specificity it has sometimes been compared to. Greenberg grants the medium an ontological status and commits the artist to reflection on medial essence and to an increasing purification of this essence. There is nothing in Adorno's idea of material that binds it to media in this sense. The reason for his insistence that a composer primarily has to deal with *musical* problems is the way they have historically evolved, not some putative essence of music in contrast to painting, literature etc. The fact that even in his reflections on art in the singular in *Aesthetic Theory* he took most of the boundaries between the arts for granted does not concern the concept of artistic material, which is more flexible. "Art and the Arts" shows that, however reluctantly, he had to grant the possibility of a situation where these boundaries lose some of their relevance and where artistic consequence might even mean *having* to cross or ignore them.

When Osborne speaks of "the expansion to infinity of the possible material"⁵, he seems to employ the term in a different, less theory-laden sense; it might be taken to mean medium in the traditional understanding, minus the Greenbergian essentialization. To materially realize their conceptual ideas, artists can draw on sound, image, objects or whatever they can get their hands on and learn to manipulate, but their works will never be tied to any one medium but exist across multiple realizations and states of aggregation, as it were. If we wanted to reintroduce the Adornian concept of material into this theory, we would have to situate it on another level: different modes of relating concept and realization, forms that can be realized across different media, different standards and possibilities of dealing with time and space all could be called material; not only form but also the role and relevance of form and its relation to concepts.

Even in such a situation, however, artists would be confronted with a state of the material that is always *specific* and poses specific problems. But how can we conceptualize such a situation? The blurring of boundaries, the establishment of intermedia in Dick Higgins' sense and even the existence of similar problems across all arts, like the mediation between concept and aesthetics, do not automatically imply the emergence of a singular field of art that would allow us to speak of a single state of artistic material. I think it makes sense to supplement the concept of material, whose primary reference is history, by a concept of *place*. By place I mean actual physical places like cities and continents but also institutional places like museums, biennales, concert halls and dance venues and finally discursive places that are related to institutions, being constrained by them, reflecting them and transforming them. When related to material, place primarily denotes the situatedness of the artist, which is never universal. Her sensibilities and training and its standards are also part of her situation, no matter how much they call for critique. What is possible

and necessary at one place might be possible but not convincing in another and impossible in a third.

An account of this would never be purely descriptive (or “empirical”) because material is not a purely descriptive term but a critical one. Determining one’s material would entail critically relating to one’s place in the artistic field in all its dimensions without being able to simply leave it. Actual relocation is of course possible and produces interesting results. The norms and movements that exist in one place can and often do challenge that of another but they can neither be simply transported nor universalized. Maybe working in music today means working on a thorough transformation of the place one is working in, challenged by theories of the postconceptual, among others. But this transformation would have to be (and is) effected from within, and its results cannot be completely foreseen.

3. The Global Artistic Universe

The image that emerges from this operation is that of a topology of the arts, a world where location has a decisive influence on what is possible and what is called for. There is an obvious criticism of this image that objects to its static character – as a systematic structure a topology of the arts looks suspiciously like a spatialized and sociologically augmented version of the old “system of the arts”. This of course is not what I have in mind. For a more appropriate one I would like to turn to Umberto Eco’s concept of code – not in order to suggest a semiotic theory of art but only as a formal structure that seems productive for our purposes.

At first sight a semiotic code and the structure and spatial distribution of artistic material seem to have little or nothing in common. It is Eco’s specific conceptualization of the code that makes it an adequate and productive image. As it was conceived from the beginning of the 20th century, language was a systematically structured whole, a system whose order could be determined more or less precisely. This was postulated even for the semantic dimension, as Saussure’s concept of *langue* demonstrates: as opposed to *parole* or speech, *langue* is a system of differences whose evolving character can be suspended in order to analyze it synchronically. The use of the term code seems to draw on this idea and testify to a semiotic and technological enthusiasm we tend to have lost.

Eco retains the concept of code but transforms it – his point is precisely that there is no such overarching structure in language. Of course this does not mean that there is no structure at all, and the various attempts to determine the code of a language are not completely vain. But it is one thing to accept dictionaries and rules of grammar as pragmatically useful tools of orientation and another to postulate that there is in fact a definite structure that they reveal. As Eco puts it: “Semiotics must proceed to isolate structures *as if* a definitive general structure existed; but to be

able to do this one must assume that this global structure is a simply [sic] regulative hypothesis and that *every time a structure is described something occurs within the universe of signification which no longer makes it completely reliable.*"⁶

Here he mentions one of the two reasons why the code cannot be a definite structure, and that is time: since language is not structure but structured action, every linguistic action, including the description of the code, changes it. At the bottom of this lies Derrida's insight that to repeat is to deviate, if only ever so slightly. Consequently, stability and change are not opposites but reciprocally imply each other. In his Kranichstein lectures, Adorno says something very similar about artistic material: every work changes the state of things, so a state of the material is at best a snapshot from the perspective of the creation of a particular work.⁷

But there is something else, which could be termed the linguistic (and artistic) relativity principle: the various connections and oppositions look very different depending on where you start, i.e. where you situate your analysis. A model of the semantic system would thus be an extremely complex multi-dimensional thing that contains relations that are relatively stable and others that are transient, while their stability and transience would depend on the context and undergo constant change. This Global Semantic Universe, as Eco half-mockingly calls it, is a heuristic fiction.⁸

The same can be said for the Global Artistic Universe. A survey of the world of the arts does not reveal a uniformly ordered structure nor a center with an enormous periphery with frayed edges. While the fiction of the Global Artistic Universe doesn't support the idea of art in the singular, it also lets the idea of "the arts" appear dubious, or at least, as Adorno put it "touchingly philistine". The arts are configurations in the field of the artistic, relying on institutional and discursive formations that have some stability but are finally subject to change like everything else. There are boundaries that still appear very solid while others have eroded or all but disappeared, and boundaries that are easy to cross from one side but almost impossible to cross from the other, like that between music and visual art.

By taking material as the basic category of this constantly changing topology of art, we stress that no place, method, repertoire, medium, or concept is ever simply given but remains a task, something to be accomplished, critiqued and transcended. If the contemporary is to be associated or identified with art in general, which, according to Adorno, is what the arts strive for, it is a task that will never be fully accomplished, distributed in a field that presents very different tasks depending on where you situate yourself or find yourself situated. "As the antithesis to empirical reality, by contrast, art is one."¹⁰ Maybe, but that doesn't absolve us from the widely different problems that tend to be obscured by the emphatic appeal to the generic.

¹ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all. Philosophy of contemporary art* (London: Verso 2013), p. 22.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London/New York: Continuum 2002), p. 148 (translation modified).

⁴ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, Art and the arts, in: *Can one live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2003), p. 374.

⁵ Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, op. cit., p. 50.

⁶ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1976), p. 129.

⁷ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Kranichsteiner Vorlesungen*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2014), p. 438.

⁸ Cf. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, loc. cit., p. 124.

⁹ Adorno, Art and the arts, loc. cit., p. 371.

¹⁰ Adorno, Art and the arts, loc. cit., p. 383