AESTHETICS
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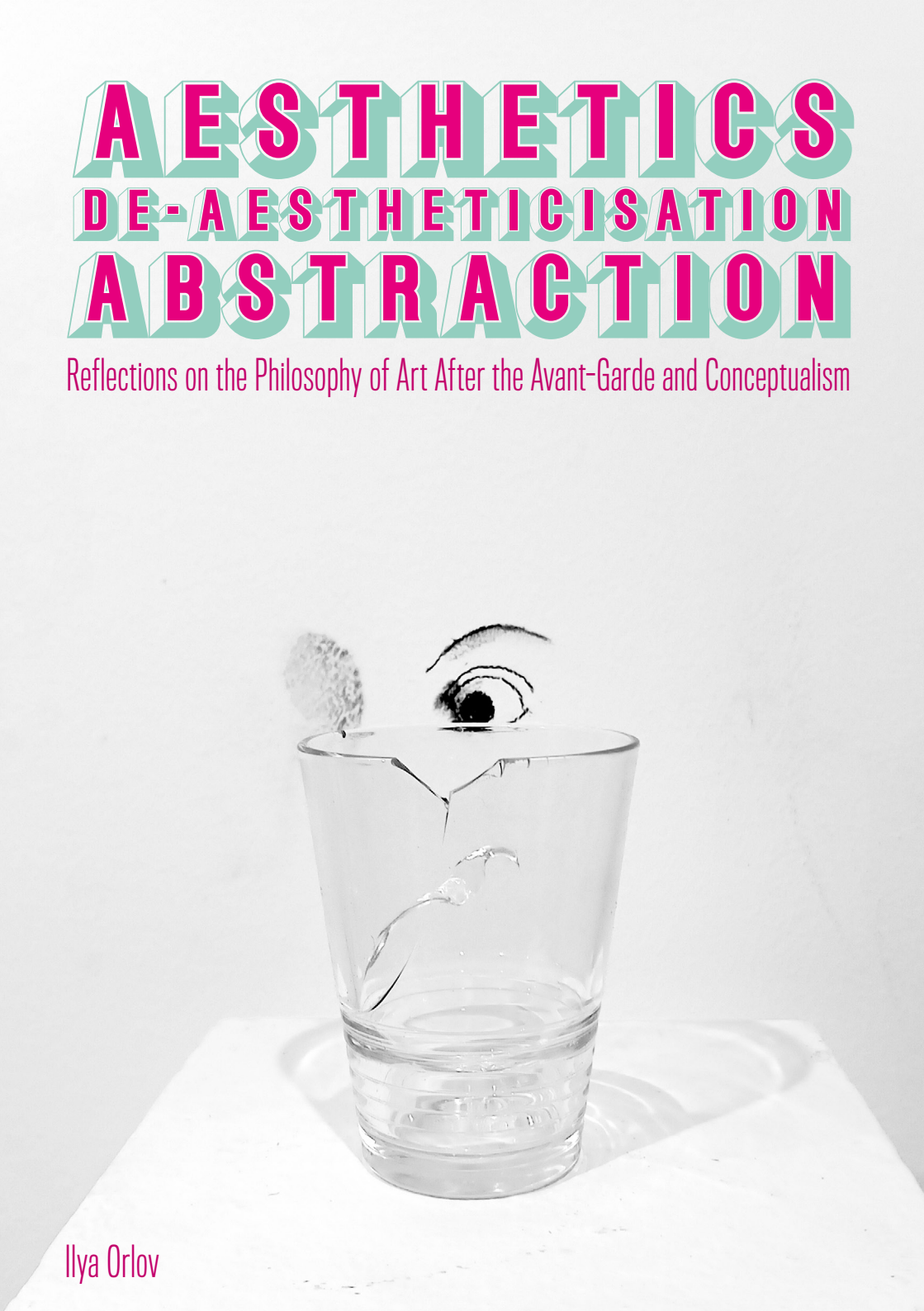
ABSTRACTION

Reflections on the Philosophy of Art After the Avant-Garde and Conceptualism



Ilya Orlov

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Reflections on the Philosophy of Art After the Avant-Garde and Conceptualism

Ilya Orlov

ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS HELSINKI

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Abstract

The research presented in this publication embarks on a novel revision of art's ontology by analysing the clash between classic aesthetics and the revolutionary art of the 20th century. Proceeding from the hypothesis that the tension between German aesthetics and the 'antiartistic', 'de-aestheticising' and 'radical abstraction' programmes of the avant-garde and Conceptual art is under-researched, the study delves into the problem of art's ontology in its temporal-historical dimension, thereby examining the nature of art in relation to the conceptual difference between contemporary art and art of the past.

After first examining overlooked schisms and connections in different bodies of art philosophy, the study then attempts to bridge the lacuna between academic art theory and practical art-making methodologies. Written from the dual perspectives of a theorist and an art practitioner, this study unveils the ontology of artwork as the key problem of contemporary art, thereby posing a topical question for today's artistic practice: how can art be socially and politically engaged without reverting to conservative pre-avant-garde ideas and methods of making art, such as realism, 'art as representation' and 'art as aesthetic'?

The study is divided into three parts and navigates through *Aesthetics*, exploring German philosophy's diverse models of aesthetics; *De-Aestheticisation*, dissecting clashes between classic aesthetics and the avant-garde and Conceptual art's 'antiartistic' and 'contra-aesthetic' programmes; and *Abstraction*, analysing the separation of the artistic from the representational as one of the two decisive turning points (along with the separation of the artistic from the aesthetic) that occurred in the concept of art during the

20th century. The *Conclusion* reflects on the broader implications of the research, emphasising the principal tension between conceptual-ontological and cultural-ethical perspectives on art, and urges a re-evaluation of contemporary art's status in relation to the philosophical theory of art.

This publication presents the Theory volume of Ilya Orlov's doctoral dissertation *Aesthetics, De-Aestheticisation, Abstraction, and Five Efforts in Themes and Methods*, and is also available as an open-access online publication. The full version of the thesis, including all the written components and the image documentation of the artworks, can be accessed in the publications archive Taju.

Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on taiteen ontologian uudelleentarkastelu analysoimalla yhteentörmäystä klassisen estetiikan ja 1900-luvun vallankumouksellisen taiteen välillä. Lähtökohtana on ajatus, että saksalaisen estetiikan sekä avantgarden ja käsitetaiteen ”antitaiteeseen”, taiteen ”epäestetisointiin” ja ”radikaaliin abstraktioon” tähtäävien suuntausten välistä jännitettä ei ole vielä tutkittu tarpeeksi. Tutkimuksessa käsitellään taiteen ontologian kysymystä ajallis-historiallisesta näkökulmasta ja pohditaan siten taiteen luonnetta sen käsitteellisen eron valossa, joka vallitsee nykytaiteen ja menneen taiteen välillä.

Tarkastelun kohteena ovat taidefilosofian eri suuntausten väliset jännitteet ja yhteydet, jotka ovat jääneet vähälle huomiolle. Pyrkimyksenä on myös kaventaa kuilua akateemisen taideteorian ja taiteen tekemisen käytännön metodien välillä. Tutkimuksessa aihetta tarkastellaan sekä teoreetikon että taiteen harjoittajan silmin ja nostetaan taideteoksen ontologia nykytaiteen keskeisimmäksi kysymykseksi. Tutkimus esittää taiteen tekemisessä ajankohtaisen kysymyksen: kuinka taide voi ottaa kantaa yhteiskunnallisesti ja poliittisesti turvautumatta realismin, representaation ja estetismin kaltaisiin konservatiivisiin, avantgardea edeltäviin taidekäsityksiin ja taiteen tekemisen menetelmiin?

Tutkimuksessa on kolme osaa. Ensimmäisessä *Aesthetics* (Estetiikka) -osassa käsitellään saksalaisen filosofian erilaisia estetiikkakäsityksiä. *De-Aestheticisation* (Epäestetisointi) -luvussa pureudutaan yhteentörmäyksiin klassisen estetiikan sekä avantgarden ja käsitetaiteen ”antitaiteeseen” ja ”vastaestetiikkaan” pyrkivien suuntausten välillä. Kolmannessa *Abstraction* (Abstraktio) -osassa analysoidaan erontekoa taiteellisen ja representationaalisen

(esittävän) välillä (sekä taiteellisen ja esteettisen välillä) ratkaisevina käännekohtina taidekäsityksen muutoksessa 1900-luvulla. Päätäntöluvussa pohditaan tutkimuksen laajempia merkityksiä ja kiinnitetään huomiota erityisesti käsitteellis-ontologisen ja kulttuuris-eettisen näkökulman väliseen keskeiseen jännitteeseen taiteessa. Lisäksi korostetaan, että nykytaiteen asema kaipaa uudelleenarviointia taidefilosofisessa mielessä.

Julkaisu on Ilya Orlovin kuvataiteen tohtorin opinnäytteen *Aesthetics, De-Aestheticisation, Abstraction, and Five Efforts in Themes and Methods* (Estetiikka, epäestetisointi, abstraktio sekä viisi teema- ja menetelmäkokeilua) teoriaosa, joka on saatavilla myös avoimena verkkojulkaisuna.. Koko opinnäyte, jossa ovat mukana sen molemmat kirjalliset osat sekä kuvallinen dokumentaatio taideteoksista, on saatavilla Taju julkaisuarkistosta.

Abstrakt

Forskningen som presenteras i denna publikation djupdyker i en ny översikt av konstens ontologi genom en analys av kollisionen mellan klassisk estetik och 1900-talets revolutionerande konst. Med utgångspunkt i hypotesen att det inte har forskats tillräckligt i spänningen mellan estetiken och inriktningarna ”anti-konstnärlig”, ”de-estetisk” och ”radikal abstraktion” inom avantgarde och konceptkonst, djupdyker studien i problemet med konstens ontologi i dess temporär-historiska dimension, och undersöker därmed konstens natur i förhållande till den konceptuella skillnaden mellan samtidskonsten och konsten i det förflutna.

Efter att först ha undersökt försummade schismer och kopplingar i olika verk inom konstfilosofi, försöker studien bygga en bro över lakunen mellan akademisk konstteori och praktiska metoder för att skapa konst. Studien är skriven utifrån såväl en teoretikers som en konstutövares perspektiv, och visar på konstverks ontologi som ett centralt problemområde inom samtidskonsten. Därmed ställer avhandlingen en aktuell fråga om den moderna konstutövningen: hur kan konst användas socialt och politiskt utan en återgång till konservativa, för-avantgardistiska idéer och metoder för att skapa konst som realism, ”konst som representation” och ”konst som estetik”?

Studien är indelad i tre delar och navigerar genom *Aesthetics* (Estetik), där olika modeller av estetik inom den tyska filosofin utforskas; *De-Aestheticisation* (De-estetik), där kollisioner mellan klassisk estetik och inriktningar som ”anti-konstnärlig” och ”kontra-estetik” inom avantgarde och konceptkonst utforskas; och *Abstraction* (Abstraktion), där separationen av det konstnärliga från det representativa analyseras som en av de två avgörande

vändpunkterna (vid sidan av separationen av det konstnärliga från det estetiska) som inträffade inom konceptkonsten under 1900-talet. Slutledningen innehåller en reflektion över forskningens bredare effekter, med betoning på den huvudsakliga spänningen mellan koncept-ontologiska och kultur-etiska konstperspektiv, och uppmanar till en omvärdering av samtidskonstens ställning i förhållande till filosofisk konstteori.

Denna publikation presenterar volymen Theory i Ilya Orlovs doktorsavhandling *Aesthetics, De-Aestheticisation, Abstraction, and Five Efforts in Themes and Methods*, och finns även som en öppen webbpublikation. Avhandlingen i sin helhet, inklusive alla skriftliga delar och bilddokumenteringen av konstverken, finns tillgänglig i publikationsarkivet Taju.

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Introduction

Art theory is not an explanation of art, but rather its highest implementation. This Hegelian thought[1] seems more an expression of the desirable than a description of the real when it comes to contemporary art: neither post-Kantian and phenomenological approaches, nor the various cultural and visual studies that have dominated the field in recent decades, have demonstrated their suitability for dealing with anything other than the representational, sensible and perceptible aspects of today's art, thereby failing to resolve the question of art's ontological status. As Peter Osborne puts it, "there has been an inability to grasp contemporary art philosophically in its contemporaneity and hence in its decisive difference from art of the past."[2]

Art history often serves as the primary lens through which both the avant-garde and Conceptual art are examined in scholarly discourse. However, in spite of the significance of this perspective, it does present certain limitations, particularly when addressing the profound influence that the avant-garde has had on redefining the philosophical concept of art *per se*. At the same time, traditional aesthetics and the philosophy of art, despite being extensively researched fields, are seldom discussed in relation to their 'adversary', the theoretical legacy of the avant-garde and Conceptual art. The present study aims to shed light on these theoretical connections, which may not have been fully explored, while also striving to make this body of theoretical knowledge more readily accessible to artistic practice.

1 "[...] art, far removed [...] from being the highest form of spirit, acquires its real ratification only in philosophy." (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art. Vols 1-2*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 12–13).

2 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 8.

Exploration of the concept of art itself does not appear to be a prevailing trend in current art theory and criticism. Critique of the ontology of art has seemingly been superseded by ideology critique and media theory. Presently, art discourse is primarily anchored in its relation to external subjects, often framed as 'art and ... [something else]', with a focus on the themes and topics of individual works, or alternatively, situated in the context of new media and technologies. While the political agenda of art discourse appears to be advancing at a progressive and genuinely socially engaged pace, art itself seems to be witnessing a significant resurgence of pre-avant-garde and pre-conceptual practices – representational, retinal, aesthetic, object-based – that are placing a renewed emphasis on artisanal methods and the materiality of the object. What was once considered obsolete and scorned in the avant-garde tradition – a 'plastic celebration', painterly beauty, handicrafts, and even mysticism – has been fully rehabilitated and has sumptuously bloomed. We find ourselves in an absurd situation: art is again categorised by media departments, as if we are still in the 1950s: sculpture, painting, printmaking, ceramics (with the addition of a 'new media' department), while what is presented as 'theory' is expected to be handled by artists in terms of 'themes and topics'.

This prompts the question: should we view this as an objective historical revelation of the true nature of art as a 'lower form of the Absolute Spirit' (that is, human consciousness), a form that has lost its connection to truth, as per Hegel's philosophy?[3] Does this imply that art itself is an obsolete form, whose conservative 'gravitational force' serves only to pull any progressive social agenda downwards? If so, isn't it then justifiable that the ontology of art is no longer in vogue?

3 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 11.

Proceeding from the hypothesis that the crux of the matter lies in the under-researched tension between German aesthetics (primarily its Kantian and Post-Kantian lineage) and the 'anti-artistic', 'de-aestheticising' and 'radical abstraction' programmes of the avant-garde and Conceptual art, this study seeks to contribute to the development of a philosophical discourse that is capable of engaging with contemporary art in its ontological aspect.

By challenging German philosophy with the provocative theoretical insights of revolutionary avant-garde and conceptualist theorisation, this study endeavours to offer a novel revision of art's ontology in its temporal-historical dimension, thereby examining the nature of art in relation to the conceptual difference between contemporary art and art of the past.

In this study, the conflict between traditional aesthetics and the avant-garde is interpreted as art's arrival at the *stage of self-criticism* (as per Peter Bürger), and this historical collision is then analysed dialectically. On the one hand, it resulted in an attempt to sublate the representational regime of art, the emergence of abstraction, the sublation of the aesthetic in Neo-Dada, and finally, in Conceptual art, the shift away from a focus on form and materiality toward an emphasis on ideas and language. On the other hand, this collision evoked conservative responses, such as cyclic attempts to restore realism and re-aestheticise the avant-garde in postmodernist art theory and art curating. The aim of this study is to analyse how this historical trajectory shaped today's condition of art, and what methodological outcomes art practitioners can derive from it. These aspects are explored in three *Parts*, which are described in more detail below.

Part I – Aesthetics – tackles the multiple and contradictory uses of the term 'aesthetics' in both academic and cultural contexts, discussing the necessity of separating at least the former from the

latter to avoid the mixed usage of the two. The main part of the chapter is an overview of the four most significant models of aesthetics in German philosophy – Baumgarten's 'science of the sensuous', Kant's 'transcendental aesthetics' and 'aesthetics as a philosophical critique of taste and sensibility', and Hegel's 'aesthetics as philosophy of fine art' – supplemented with remarks concerning their implications for Modern art theory. The concluding remark touch upon the methodological question of applying traditional aesthetics to avant-garde and post-avant-garde art, and point at the necessity of taking a historical dialectical approach to it.

Part II – De-Aestheticisation – focuses on the historical collision of classic aesthetics (in its prevailing, post-Kantian version) with the avant-garde 'antiartistic' programme, as well as the impact that this clash made on both Modern art theory and the subsequent post-avant-garde condition of art. In a virtual conversation with Peter Bürger, Joseph Kosuth, Peter Osborne, Timothy Binkley, Keti Chukhrov, Clement Greenberg, Hans Richter, Marcel Duchamp, Thierry de Duve, Arthur C. Danto, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the chapter discusses the historical avant-garde's 'attack on the institution of art', the 'sublation of the aesthetic' in Neo-Dada, the 'attack on aesthetics' undertaken by Conceptual art, and attempts to re-aestheticise the avant-garde in art criticism and postmodernist art theory.

Part III – Abstraction – examines the separation of the artistic from the representational as one of the two (along with the separation of the artistic from the aesthetic) turning points that occurred in the concept of art during the 20th century. The subject matter of this chapter is not, therefore, abstract art as a particular episode in Modernism, but rather abstraction as a paradigm shift that established the conditions for the subsequent transition – from visual abstraction to a mode conveyed chiefly through linguistic

or ideational expression in Conceptual art. In a virtual polylogue with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Clement Greenberg, Sixten Ringbom, Robert B. Pippin, Jean-François Lyotard, Hans Richter, Peter Bürger, Joseph Kosuth and Peter Osborne, this chapter discusses how art's historical break with its representational function changes the status and function of art. The discussion reveals the main thesis: abstraction was not just a new device or plastic language, but rather an attempt to redefine the relationship between art and society: the rejection of figurativeness and representation does not mean the autonomisation of art from society, but rather a transition to another register in the relation of art to life praxis.

The *Conclusion* summarises the research outcomes, placing them within the broader context of both post-Hegelian and post-conceptualist perspectives on art *per se* as an essentially aporetic form of human consciousness. It introduces the thesis of an unresolvable tension between the conceptualist perspective of the immanent philosophical criticism of art as a form of thinking, and contemporary art's cultural-ethical view of art as an integral aporia that characterises the present condition of art. From the standpoint of art praxis, this aporia inevitably prompts an inquiry into the ability of current art theory to formulate a mechanism for comprehending how artwork can be possible in today's context and what it implies to create it now – after the Hegelian 'end of art', the avant-garde's disavowal of representation as an inseparable aspect of art, and Conceptual art's dissociation from conflating art with its aesthetic dimension. As the theoretical ramifications of this tension become evident, this section underscores the imperative of re-evaluating the status of contemporary art in relation to the philosophical theory of art. The subchapters in this section illuminate particular aspects of the crisis, considering the consequences it has had, and might have, on both academic theoretical work and professional artistic practice.

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A few additional remarks are called for.

First, I address why this study frequently groups the historical avant-garde and Conceptual art together as a unified subject, despite their clear and fundamental differences – an approach that naturally warrants closer scrutiny.[4]

According to Peter Bürger, the historical avant-garde unsettled the Institution of art by challenging conventional notions of what art should be. The advent of abstraction undermined the expectation that art must depict or represent; Dada undermined traditional artistic form, academic mastery, and the belief that art is inherently designed to yield 'aesthetic pleasure'; and the introduction of the readymade disrupted the presumed link between art and individual creation. In exposing the ensuing rift between art and representation – as well as between art, aesthetic sensibility, and artisanal craft – the avant-garde not only repudiated established definitions but also forced a re-examination of the assumptions underpinning classical aesthetics.

Conceptual art picks up this critical impulse at a new historical juncture. Unlike the term 'avant-garde', retroactively ascribed to the art of the 1910-1920s by art historians rather than self-adopted by its practitioners, the term 'Conceptual art' is self-designated. It directly refers to the concept of art by signifying a practice devoted chiefly to scrutinising what art is. In this respect, Conceptual art articulates the critical stance initiated by the avant-garde – challenging conventional societal views on art and classical philosophical aesthetics – which, it might be argued, justifies their frequent juxtaposition in the present study, if not as a singular phenomenon,

4 I am grateful to Assoc. Prof. Jacob Lund for this observation.

then as allied approaches. By extending the avant-garde's subversive reappraisal of art into a more theory-driven endeavour, Conceptual art marks the first instance in which an inseparable link between an artist's theoretical discourse and praxis becomes programmatic.

Yet significant differences and disagreements characterised the relationship between the historical avant-garde and Conceptual art – a complexity further magnified by the inherent heterogeneity of both movements. A notable divergence appears in their disparate approaches to the autonomy of art – the role and status of art within society. Broadly, the avant-garde sought to subvert this autonomy by disputing the notion of art as 'high art' and contesting the ideological frameworks that underpinned it. This critical orientation found forceful expression in Dada – with its overtly subversive tactics – as well as in Soviet Constructivism and early 1920s' Productionism, which endeavoured to integrate art with everyday life and industrial production. In contrast, Conceptual art did not set out to abolish art's autonomy; it reinterpreted that autonomy as the basis for a meta-position conducive to a critical reappraisal of both art and the artist's role. Furthermore, when Conceptual art attempted to revise its stance in pursuit of enhanced political efficacy, this shift may have contributed to its decline in the mid to late 1970s, as reflected in debates in *The Fox* journal.

However, a perspective akin to that of the classic 'analytical' Conceptual art concerning art's autonomy can also be discerned among certain historical avant-garde figures. Duchamp, for instance, did not seek to dismantle art's autonomous status; rather, in a manner consonant with later Conceptualist thought, he appears to have regarded autonomy as a precondition for establishing a meta-position. Beyond producing mere artifacts, his work incessantly introduced novel configurations in the artist-audience relationship – reminiscent of a series of chess studies – while his playful manipulation

of public opinion via the press,[5] his deliberate detachment from prevailing currents, and his persistent questioning of the categories 'success' and 'failure' further illustrate this stance.

The attitude toward art's autonomy was less univocal in Malevich. On the one hand, he conceived of art as a universally significant human practice, imbued with a quasi-spiritual mission; on the other hand, he rejected the Constructivist and El Lissitzky notion of merging art with production, viewing such an integration as utilitarian and ultimately detrimental to art's higher vocation. In this respect, Malevich stands in stark contrast to the Conceptualists of the 1960-1970s, for whom any assertion of messianic or visionary status on the part of the artist appeared dubious and misplaced. More generally, in the historical avant-garde, the artist was often implicitly regarded as a sort of a prophetic figure charged with proclaiming truth – a sentiment that, to some extent, was echoed in post-war Abstract Expressionism – but by the advent of Conceptual art, that self-image had increasingly come under critical scrutiny and been met with irony.

The matter of the abstract is, in this sense, particularly revealing. Whereas the avant-garde conceived abstraction primarily in its visual – at least tangible – embodiments, Conceptual art shifted the focus to the abstract as an idea in itself. This transition severed the traditional link between the artistic idea and its material implementation – a gesture Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler described as 'dematerialisation' (a term whose full adequacy remains contested

5 See, e.g.: Sarah Archino, *Don't Believe What You Read: Marcel Duchamp and the American Press*, ed. Kerstin Krautwig, Lecture Notes 4 (Schwerin: Staatliche Schlösser, Gärten und Kunstsammlungen Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Duchamp Forschungszentrum, 2024).

by Conceptualists).[6] It appears that this shift – from abstraction embodied in tangible form to an engagement with the abstract *per se* – aligns with Ian Wilson's observation that Conceptual art is the transition of abstraction from the visual level to the level of language.[7]

Within Conceptualism, the traditional avant-garde artist becomes a historical relic, sometimes assuming a comical, persona-like quality. This transformation is particularly evident in Eastern European and Soviet underground Conceptual art, where literary techniques such as the creation of heteronyms were transposed to art practice; Ilya Kabakov's 'personages' exemplify how identity – previously marginal to the avant-garde – emerged as a central subject of critical inquiry and an integral element of an evolving artistic language. At the same time, vestiges of this phenomenon can be traced back to the historical avant-garde. One recalls, for example, Duchamp's alter ego, Rrose Sélavy.

The relationship between the historical avant-garde and Conceptual art is thus simultaneously continuous and critically bifurcated. Conceptual art not only underscores the avant-garde's historical significance as a pivotal turn in art history, but also inaugurates an entirely new stage.

6 Lucy R. Lippard and Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999); the critique of Lippard and Chandler's conception of 'dematerialisation' see in: Terry Atkinson, 'Concerning the Article "The Dematerialization of Art"', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 52–58.

7 "[...] conceptual art takes the principles of visual abstraction, founded in the visual arts, and applies them to language. [...] Conceptual art is not about ideas. It is about the degree of abstraction of ideas." (Ian Wilson, 'Conceptual Art', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 414–15.

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Finally, a note on the selection of theoretical literature. In compiling the bibliography, I did not aim to provide a comprehensive survey of the philosophical theory of art – which would encompass a broader spectrum of theoretical viewpoints – but rather, I concentrated on particular issues: namely, the relationship between the aesthetic and the artistic, and between the abstract and representative dimensions of art.

My intention has been to choose those sources that most effectively highlight these concerns. Accordingly, the methodological approach adopted involved selecting texts that present contrasting perspectives, thereby exposing contradictions, identifying differences, and ultimately shedding light on the nature of the theoretical conflicts under consideration. Simultaneously, it was deemed necessary to maintain a consistent epistemological framework so as to preserve the meaningfulness of these comparisons and to avoid reducing the study to a mere collage of mutually incompatible paradigms.

For example, Hegel's understanding of art as the disclosure of its concept is contrasted with Kant's aesthetic framework, which is primarily concerned with perceptual experience and judgements of taste. Next, Jena Romanticism is juxtaposed with the Kantian model, and finally, Hegel's critique of the philosophical aestheticism characteristic of Jena Romanticism is examined.[8]

This contrasting approach is extended to later and more contemporary strands of philosophical and art theoretical inquiry. For

8 This discussion is elaborated in *Part II*, *De-Aestheticisation*, in connection with Peter Osborne's theses on the role of Jena Romanticism as a potential ideological precursor to certain positions within Conceptual art.

instance, against Greenbergian aesthetics, the study juxtaposes both the Institutional theory of art and the neo-Marxist and critical theoretical perspective advanced by the Frankfurt School. Thierry de Duve's Kantian interpretation of Duchamp's readymades is critically examined from Peter Bürger's perspective. Next, the arguments put forward by Keti Chukhrov serve to radicalise Peter Osborne's positions, thereby revealing a rupture between the 'phenomenologically transcendental' approach and the 'ideologically conceptual' one. Finally, as a counterpoint to the iconological approach to the origins of abstract art, the conceptual-philosophical perspective of Robert B. Pippin is introduced.

Another guiding principle in selecting the literature was the inclusion of the perspectives of artists themselves, alongside those of professional philosophers and art theorists. The rationale behind this choice is that the artist occupies a singular vantage point – from within – which is generally inaccessible to even the most astute external observers. Throughout this work, the voices of artist theorists such as Marcel Duchamp, Hans Richter, Joseph Kosuth, Kazimir Malevich, Theo van Doesburg, Francis Picabia, Robert Morris, Ian Burn, Timothy Binkley, and others resound clearly.

It must be acknowledged that the theoretical discussion presented in this study could have been significantly broadened by incorporating additional, equally significant classical perspectives. The discussion could have benefited from closer engagement with, for instance, Henri Bergson's philosophy of perception, Edmund Husserl's foundational phenomenology, the hermeneutic approaches of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the Marxist aesthetics of Lev Trotsky, Georg Lukács, and Galvano Della Volpe. This work could also have been enriched by a detailed examination of other key texts from the Frankfurt School, notably those by Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. Moreover, even within

the selected methodological framework, significant gaps could have been addressed in the bibliography. Chief among these are the works of Meyer Schapiro, which provide a fundamental critique of both Greenberg and Heidegger, as well as the theoretical legacy of Ad Reinhardt, which serves as a crucial link between avant-garde abstraction and Conceptual art. These lacunae clearly underscore the critical areas that require further exploration.

Finally, alternative epistemological perspectives and the latest critical frameworks remain beyond the scope of this study. Among these are novel non-anthropocentric ontological models, such as object-oriented ontology, as well as theoretical perspectives critically engaging with identity and cultural representation, including feminist theories and postcolonial critiques. The essential question these critical perspectives pose concerns the limitations of universal foundations – whether principles of broad applicability can genuinely account for diversity, particularly within art theory. Might key concepts such as 'abstract' and 'representational', 'aesthetic' and 'artistic', or 'technical' and 'conceptual' maintain oppositional tensions within alternative cultural and ontological frameworks, or could they be reconfigured into entirely new constellations and relationships? These questions certainly exceed the scope of the present study's theoretical framework; however, this very limitation underscores their significance.

While the listed omissions leave this research incomplete and somewhat one-sided – falling short of fully engaging with all the theoretical challenges it raises – I hope that it has at least succeeded in outlining these issues and laying the groundwork for future inquiry.

Part I. Aesthetics

Introduction

The word "aesthetics", which was invented in the 18th century to refer to things that are mostly associated with pleasure – enjoying poetry, music, and painting – very soon revealed an ability to cause rifts and generate confusions. This trait was sharply pinpointed by Immanuel Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* contains, among other things, an attempt to sort out the problem with this question:

> The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word "aesthetics" to designate that which others call the critique of taste. [...] it is advisable again to desist from the use of this term and to save it for that doctrine which is true science [...], <or else to share the term with speculative philosophy and take aesthetics partly in a transcendental meaning, partly in a psychological meaning>.[9]

Kant did not succeed in fixing a single 'proper' use of the word "aesthetics"; on the contrary, the evolution of his own views on the subject further complicated the picture, so that the volatility of the term has only increased since then. To this day, "aesthetics" has different meanings for different authors, and the unification of those doctrines under a single university department of philosophical aesthetics is clearly a compromise. In art criticism, the term is normally used as a self-evident concept that does not require clarification. The issue is compounded by the fact that the word was appropriated

9 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, 15th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 156, 173.

by mass culture to denote the codes and visual languages of particular epochs or fashions, that is, it became simply a synonym for style (for example, the "aesthetics of the 1980s", etc.). The problem becomes especially evident when these completely different meanings – academic and everyday – are mixed in a single text, resulting in such expressions as the "aesthetics of the avant-garde" or even the "aesthetics of conceptualism". Here, the term "aesthetics" is obviously being used in a 'cultural' rather than an academic sense, that is, simply to refer to how a certain kind of art 'looks'. This mixture of the academic and everyday meanings of the term results in an oxymoron: for the avant-garde and Conceptual art are built on the critique, or even the negation, of the aesthetic.

The avant-garde, the various forms of post-avant-garde art, and to some extent contemporary art, are fields in which speaking of aesthetics and the aesthetic is as problematic as their relation to traditional aesthetics. How can Marcel Duchamp's idea of the possibility of "art beyond good and bad taste" be discussed from the standpoint of Kantian aesthetics, if it challenges the validity of one of the key concepts of aesthetics, taste? To what aesthetic doctrines are Joseph Kosuth, Ian Burn, Robert Morris, Timothy Binkley and others referring to when claiming the irrelevance of aesthetics to post-avant-garde art? Do they object to classic philosophy of art in general or to a certain tradition of philosophical aesthetics? What exactly does the term 'anti-aesthetic' designate in the postmodern cultural criticism of the 1980s, and how does it differ from the conceptualist critique of the aesthetic? What is the 'philosophical aesthetics' that modern Artistic Research theories appeal to? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to determine what the philosophical traditions in question are and how they differ from each other.

Within the framework of classic German philosophy, there are at least four different takes on what aesthetics is; there are particular

names behind each of them. It is Baumgarten's aesthetics as 'science on the sensuous'; it is the 'transcendental aesthetics' of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*; it is also Kant's later aesthetics as a 'philosophical critique of taste' in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*; and finally, it is Hegel's aesthetics as the 'philosophy of fine art'. In this *Part*, I will consider these four philosophical doctrines by directly approaching the sources: Baumgarten, Kant, and Hegel. It is not my task to undertake a fully comprehensive overview of German aesthetics, as there is special literature on the topic.[10] I will only outline those perspectives of the classic philosophy of art that are necessary for the present study, so as to specify their relation to the avant-garde and post-avant-garde tradition. I also do not claim any indisputably 'true' interpretation of this material, which is extensive, complex and at times contradictory. Rather, I turn to the question for the sake of a 'terminological hygiene' of sorts, aiming to clarify what aesthetics is in its strict philosophical theoretical sense, how the term is used within different philosophical traditions, and what their stances are in relation to both the subject-matter and towards each other.

10 For example: Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

The Beginning of Aesthetics: Baumgarten's 'Science of the Sensuous'

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced the word "aesthetics"[11] to Modern philosophy as an overall denotation of the discourse on the sensuous,[12] and on art in particular. Remarkably, his use of the term has historically proved to be the most tenacious (and in fact the closest to today's everyday use of the word), even though Baumgarten himself, after being sharply criticised by Kant, remained forgotten for a long time.

For its time, Baumgarten's project was innovative and daring, as it was in fact the first attempt to create a systematic philosophical

11 Baumgarten first introduces the Latin term "aesthetica" and outlines the contours of his doctrine in his thesis *Meditationes Philosophicae De Nonnullis Ad Poema Pertinentibus* (*Philosophical Reflections on Some Questions Concerning Poetry*) published in 1735. The new doctrine finds its form in the 1750 treatise *Aesthetica Acroanatica* (*Aesthetics for Lectures*) and further develops in the second part of the work published in 1758. The latter is also considered unfinished. All of the aforementioned works were written in Latin. *Meditationes* was translated into English in 1954 and published together with a facsimile of the Latin original under the title *Reflections on Poetry* (Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, ed. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther, Reprint (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020)). *Aesthetica* is not available in English, but can be found in German, French, and Russian (fragments), and also as a Latin reprint (Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Hildesheim & New York: Georg Olms, 1970)). Hereto I rely on the Russian translation: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, 'Estetika [Aesthetics]', in *Esteticheskiye ucheniya XVII-XVIII vekov [Aesthetic docrines of the 17th-18th centuries],* ed. Vyacheslav Shestakov, vol. II, V vols, Pamyatniki mirovoy esteticheskoy mysli [History of aesthetics. Monuments of world aesthetic thought] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 452–65.

12 The key concept of Baumgarten's aesthetics, signified by the Latin word "sensitivus", is sometimes translated as "sensate" (as in: Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*). There are also variant readings of the German word "Sinnlich": in the most recent English edition of Kant (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000)), it is translated as "sensible" (accordingly, "Sinn" as "sense" (n.), and "Sinnlichkeit" as "sensibility"), while in the classic English edition of Hegel's *Aesthetics* (Hegel, *Aesthetics*. 1975, reprinted 1988) the same German term is translated as either "sensuous" or "perceptible", depending on the context in which Hegel uses it. I will use either "sensuous" and "perceptible" or "sensible" depending on which term is employed in the particular translation I refer to.

theory of the sensuous (and via that, a systematic art theory as well); although Baumgarten's work does not primarily address art, but rather the issue of sensuous cognition in general, of which art is understood to be the highest manifestation.

There are plenty of interesting points in Baumgarten's book; for instance, the concept of the 'world of poets' – a 'synecdochical' designation of the place in which all artistic, scientific and philosophical ideas reside. Generally speaking, Baumgarten's aesthetics is both a product of German philosophical rationalism and an attempt to overcome it: art and science are not strictly separated from each other (this is why the idea of the science of taste does not become a problem[13]); instead, the sensuous and the rational are seen as two different registers in the human faculty of cognition (lower and higher). Over his entire doctrine, Baumgarten constantly revises the border between these two registers, 'sensualising' the rational on the one hand, and rationalising the sensuous on the other. For Baumgarten, aesthetics is the "science of sensuous cognition" and at the same time a "theory of the liberal arts, the lower cognitive faculty, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogy of reason."[14]

This is the very point to which Kant objected. Such a science is impossible by definition, he argued; as judgments of taste are empirical, any estimations of the beautiful cannot provide a solid

13 Baumgarten's drawing together of art and science has recently made his version of aesthetics topical for Artistic Research theories in which both the concept of 'sensuous knowledge' and art/science hybridisation are paradigmatic; see, for example: Søren Kjørup, *Another Way of Knowing: Baumgarten, Aesthetics, and the Concept of Sensuous Cognition*, Sensuous Knowledge: Focus on Artistic Research and Development (Bergen: Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen, 2006).

14 "Aesthetica (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae." (*Aesthetica*, § 1).

foundation on which philosophical science can be established,[15] since science must be based on universal *a priori* rules, that is, laws that are not dependant on a particular experience.[16] Kant's argument seems as obvious as the question of why Baumgarten himself could not, as a philosopher, spot such an incongruity. But the picture is more complex: for in Baumgarten, the very status of cognition and its limits are not as strictly outlined as in Kant. Following Leibniz and Wolff, Baumgarten does not radically distinguish the sensuous from the rational: both are seen as modes of cognition; the former is just less perfect. In this respect, *Aesthetica* is in fact an attempt to recognise the logical within the sensuous, thereby revealing the cognitive aspect of human sensibility. From this point of view, sensuous intuitions and representations also become forms of gaining knowledge that aim to reveal what Baumgarten denoted as 'aesthetic-ological truth'[17] (and this is why art, for Baumgarten, is the pinnacle of sensory cognition). This couldn't but come into contradiction with Kant's distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* principles;

15 Here, I continue the quote I introduced at the beginning of this chapter: "The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word "aesthetics" to designate that which others call the critique of taste. The ground for this is a failed hope, held by the excellent analyst Baumgarten, of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason, and elevating its rules to a science. But this effort is futile. For the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed; rather the latter constitutes the genuine touchstone of the correctness of the former. For this reason it is advisable again to desist from the use of this term and preserve it for that doctrine which is true science [that is, Kant's own "science of *a priori* principles of the sensible," that is, transcendental aesthetics – *I.O.*], <or else to share the term with speculative philosophy and take aesthetics partly in a transcendental meaning, partly in a psychological meaning>." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 173).

16 "[...] we will understand by *a priori* cognitions not those that occur independently of this or that experience, but rather those that occur *absolutely* independently of all experience. Opposed to them are empirical cognitions, or those that are possible only *a posteriori*, i.e., through experience." (Kant, 137).

17 *Aesthetica*, § 427.

however, it was Baumgarten's idea of the cognitive function of the sensuous that anticipated Kant's doctrine of transcendental sensible forms, *Transcendental aesthetics*.[18] In this respect, Baumgarten's aesthetics should be considered both a predecessor of Kant's philosophy *and* an independent philosophical project in its own right that cannot be fully and correctly evaluated retrospectively via the Kantian philosophical system and its concepts.[19]

The very idea that art has a relation to knowledge is rather a common assumption; it can be traced back to Greek philosophy. For example, Aristotle's theory of mimesis pinpoints the learning aspect of imitating. However, this relationship might differ depending on what kind of knowledge is in question. As an Enlightenment-related project that makes a claim of universality, Baumgarten's aesthetics is dualistic in this regard: on the one hand, he believes that art is related to truth in the higher sense; on the other, art is understood to be a cognitive practice aimed at gaining knowledge about empirical objects through sensuous intuitions and representations. Yet from a Kantian perspective, the first is not considered, and the second is seen as a delusion (although Kant admits that the *understanding*, which is a rational faculty, is involved in the power of judgement, and therefore in judgements of taste as well). This may in

18 Here, I rely on the analysis of the influence that Baumgarten's aesthetic doctrine had on Kant in: Igor Narskii, 'Filosofsko-Esteticheskiye Idei A. Baumgartena Kak Odin Iz Stimulov Teoreticheskogo Razvitiya Kanta [Philosophical and Aesthetic Ideas of Baumgarten as One of the Stimuli for the Theoretical Development of Kant]', in *Kantovskiy Sbornik: Mezhvuzovskiy Tematicheskiy Sbornik Nauchnykh Trudov [Kant Collection: Interuniversity Thematic Collection of Scientific Papers]*, vol. 1, 1985, 40–51.

19 Stefanie Buchenau's study shows that Baumgarten's reception in the classic aesthetic tradition (as it formed in the 19th century) was largely conditioned by a somewhat inaccurate application of the later (primarily Kantian) concepts; therefore, the first task of any current Baumgarten study should be to identify such retrospective distortions (Stefanie Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment: The Art of Invention and the Invention of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015).

turn give the impression that Baumgarten's aesthetics are similar to Hegelian aesthetics, in which art (at least in its origin) closely relates to truth. However, there is a substantial difference: for Baumgarten, the sensuous (including art as its higher form) still aims to cognise the empirical, despite being a 'lower' cognitive faculty than rational thought; while for Hegel, the truth to which art partakes is not at all the same truth that science deals with. In Hegel's philosophical system, art is located high above science, second only to religion and philosophy, which means that art's relation to the truth in Hegel has little to do with the sensuous cognition that Baumgarten discusses.

Aesthetics as Philosophical Science on Pure Forms of Intuition: the 'Transcendental Aesthetics' of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason

Kant rejects Baumgarten's idea of the cognitive function of the sensible (sensuous) as an analogue of rational thought, putting forward his own doctrine as an alternative: aesthetics as a strict philosophical science based on *a priori* principles of sensibility. This doctrine is introduced in *Critique of Pure Reason* under the name of *Transcendental aesthetics*, which designates the key premise of Kant's objection to the Baumgarten system: for Kant, to make aesthetics a genuinely philosophical science of the sensible, one must put aside both empirical sensations and concepts of understanding, dealing instead with the 'sensible *a priori*', that which is *prior* to experience, that is, transcendental. Therefore, in order to be a philosophical science, Kant argues that aesthetics can only be transcendental. For the sensible is not a "lower faculty of cognition", that is, something similar to logic and rational thinking, but merely less perfect than the latter (as Baumgarten claims, mistakenly bringing the sensible and rational together). Instead, Kant states, the sensible and the rational are *not* two kinds of cognition (allegedly lower and

higher), but rather two related components of the *same* process: the sensible, in its internal forms of intuition, serves as a condition for human cognition as such.[20]

Here comes a striking discovery that Kant made, backing it up with convincing pieces of evidence. He states that sensibility, the sensible in its transcendental aspect, is basically the only way by which the objects of the world are available to us.[21] It is essential to keep in mind that Kant distinguishes the sensible from *sensations*, that is, from the effects of empirical objects on our perceptive capacity[22]. These sensations, Kant explains, would not be possible without that which sets the conditions for them: the pure forms of sensible intuition that we have *a priori*, that is, prior to any experience. He introduces two such pure forms: *space* and *time*. The first is responsible for a general representation of objects; the second provides us with the parameter of their duration. Existing in us *prior* experience,

20 "In the transcendental aesthetic we will therefore first isolate sensibility by separating off everything that the understanding thinks through its concepts, so that nothing but empirical intuition remains. Second, we will then detach from the latter everything that belongs to sensation, so that nothing remains except pure intuition and the mere form of appearances, which is the only thing that sensibility can make available *a priori*. In this investigation it will be found that there are two pure forms of sensible intuition as principles of *a priori* cognition, namely space and time [...]." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 157).

21 "The capacity (receptivity) to acquire representations through the way in which we are affected by objects is called sensibility. Objects are therefore given to us by means of sensibility, and it alone affords us intuitions; but they are thought through the understanding, and from it arise concepts." (Kant, 155). The distinction between the empirical and transcendental has been a key issue in philosophical debates around Kant. In particular, Kant's transcendental aesthetics has been criticised for being conditioned by Newtonian physics. See, for example: Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant*, 506 (München: C.H. Beck, 2004), 117–18. I thank Prof. Mika Elo for pointing out this aspect in his comments on my manuscript.

22 "The effect of an object on the capacity for representation, insofar as we are affected by it, is sensation. That intuition which is related to the object through sensation is called empirical. The undetermined object of an empirical intuition is called appearance." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 155).

they are not conditioned by any concrete objects, events or knowledge that we could encounter or receive a representation of. On the contrary, it is only because of these basic, internal pre-experience intuitions – *space* and *time* – that we are capable of perceiving the world and its objects: it is as if these forms 'calibrate' our sensations, making them comprehensible.[23]

At the same time, they provide our mind with the very capacity to *think* the world, and *by this*, to derive *concepts*. Indeed, while thinking about this, everyone can see that *space* and *time* are not concepts of *the understanding*, because we do *not* deduce them from anything using logical reasoning. At the same time, we do not deduce space and time from sensations either, that is, from the experience of external objects or events, without which we would have no idea about space and time at all. We 'just know' them, we have them as pre-given forms, at a transcendental level.[24] These *a priori* forms or 'pure intuitions' are the subject matter of *Transcendental aesthetics*, which discusses their principles, function, and the role they play in

23 "What may be the case with objects in themselves and abstracted from all this receptivity of our sensibility remains entirely unknown to us. We are acquainted with nothing except our way of perceiving them [...]. We are concerned solely with this. Space and time are its pure forms, sensation in general its matter. We can cognize only the former *a priori*, i.e., prior to all actual perception, and they are therefore called pure intuition; the latter, however, is that in our cognition that is responsible for it being called *a posteriori* cognition, i.e., empirical intuition. The former adheres to our sensibility absolutely necessarily, whatever sort of sensations we may have [...]." (Kant, 168).

24 "Not merely in judgments, however, but even in concepts is an origin of some of them revealed *a priori*. Gradually remove from your experiential concept of a body everything that is empirical in it [...] there still remains the space that was occupied by the body [...]. Likewise, if you remove from your empirical concept of every object [...] all those properties of which experience teaches you, you could still not take from it that by means of which you think of it as a substance [...]. Thus, convinced by the necessity with which this concept presses itself on you, you must concede that it has its seat in your faculty of cognition *a priori*." (Kant, 138).

cognition. This is how Kant deduces the only aspect of the sensible that is actually and undoubtedly gnoseological.

In this sense, *Transcendental Aesthetics* is *not* about art; art is neither discussed nor even mentioned in it. However, it would be unfair to say that Kant's transcendental doctrine has nothing to do with art at all and is not applicable to it; rather, it is as relevant to art as any philosophy that considers cognition, the function of sensibility, and ultimately, theorises *space* and *time*, which are introduced there conceptually as the basic principles of the sensible/sensuous. Nevertheless, the word "aesthetics" in the title should not lead to confusion: *Transcendental Aesthetics* does not contain anything that could be considered art theory in the literal sense.

However, *Critique of Pure Reason* undoubtedly turned out to be useful for both post-avant-garde art and Modern art theory. Kant's distinction of analytic and synthetic judgements[25] (sometimes translated as analytic and synthetic 'propositions'), which was outlined in the *Introduction* to *Critique of Pure Reason* and developed throughout the entire work, as well as the very notion of *judgment/proposition*, took an important position in 'analytical' Conceptual art theorisations. One that should be highlighted is Kosuth's *Art after Philosophy*, in which the very definition of a work of post-avant-garde art proceeds from the Kantian concept of an 'analytic proposition' (albeit assimilated indirectly, via Analytic philosophy and A. J. Ayer's works).[26]

25 "In all judgments in which the relation of a subject to the predicate is thought (if I consider only affirmative judgments, since the application to negative ones is easy) this relation is possible in two different ways. Either the predicate *B* belongs to the subject *A* as something that is (covertly) contained in this concept *A*; or *B* lies entirely outside the concept *A*, though to be sure it stands in connection with it. In the first case I call the judgment analytic, in the second synthetic." (Kant, 141).

26 Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', in *Art after Philosophy and after: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1991).

Aesthetics as Philosophical Critique of Taste and Sensibility: Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgement

In his later work *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant tackles the issue of the aesthetic and taste anew, revising their place in his philosophical system. This should not, however, be understood as a return to Baumgarten's idea of the "science of sensual cognition, the art of the analogy of reason" or an attempt to build another doctrine of that kind. Kant's key premise remains intact, as he still proceeds from the point that both art and the beautiful cannot be the subject of strict philosophical science, as judgments on them are particular and empirical by their very nature, and are not based on solid concepts of reason. However, the very idea that philosophy as a system would be incomplete without discussing these issues – a thought that Kant owes precisely to Baumgarten – is now fully accepted by Kant, and he finds a way of accomplishing this task within the framework of his philosophy. Consequently, Kant turns to the categories of taste; yet taking neither the beautiful nor art as the subject matter of his analysis, but rather the *conditions and principles* of human judgements on them, and ultimately the human subject itself in its encounter with the sources of sensible/sensuous experience.

While reading *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, one should keep in mind that this book is not about art either. It is not that the author focuses on the beautiful in general, the beauty of nature and other undoubtedly aesthetic-related matters, such as the "taste of wine" and "the way in which the table is set out for enjoyment"[27], but rather that the subject of Kant's reflection is not the objects themselves that evoke effects and sensations (such as art), but the *effect* they cause (including the experiences designated as aesthetic), which is accessible through their articulation in judgments. Art is

27 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

taken as merely one of these cases, because in Kant's view, in judgements of taste (for example, judgements of the beautiful), sensory and cognitive abilities function according to the same principles as they do in relation to other objects that are perceived aesthetically – natural phenomena, objects of material culture, and the like. In this, there is the undoubted succession of the 'second' Kantian aesthetics (that is, the aesthetics of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*) from the 'first' ('Transcendental aesthetics' of the *Critique of Pure Reason*): both of these are *not* about objects as such, but rather about our perception and cognition (or the possibility or impossibility of the latter), as the objects are given to us only as *appearances* (that is, as *phenomena*), and only in this way can they be perceived and cognised.

The key difference between the 'first' ('transcendental') and 'second' ('aesthetical') aesthetics is that, in the first one, Kant discusses *a priori* sensible forms that provide the conditions that make cognition possible, that is, the sensibility that precedes experience and is accessed prior to experience; while in his second aesthetics, Kant considers empirical sensations, that is, the kind of sensibility that is related to and caused by experience (but not preceding it). Nevertheless, as in his first aesthetics, the limits of cognitive possibility are clearly delineated, and the two doctrines [two *Critiques* and two aesthetics] do *not* contradict each other. However, his second aesthetics, which is set forth in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* is not a 'science of taste', but rather a science of *judgments* of taste, their possibilities and conditions. In the same way, this is not a "science of the beautiful" either, but rather a *science of the appreciations of the beautiful, expressed in judgments*. For, as Kant says, feelings themselves can in no way contribute to knowledge: therefore, nei-

ther a "science of the beautiful" nor "beautiful science" is possible.[28] However, we can cognise the appreciations/feelings themselves – through a critique of the power of judgement (of them) – and this is indeed the subject matter of Kant's critique/aesthetics.

Thus, in essence, neither the 'first' nor the 'second' of Kant's aesthetic doctrines was intended to be a tool for analysing art; at least not in the sense of analysing art from the standpoint of its *sensible* aspect or the perception of art in its *appearance*; however, they both provide different tools for analysing the sensible *per se* – the sensible as a *condition of possibility for cognition* (in the first *Critique*), and the sensible in *its manifestation in judgement* (in the third *Critique*).

This clarifies exactly what has changed substantially within the Kantian philosophical system between the first and the third *Critique*. It was the very concept of the aesthetic, and consequently Kant's usage of the term (this brings us back to the starting point of this *Part*: the observation that the volatility of the term is its generic characteristic).

In *Transcendental aesthetics,* 'the aesthetic' is used to refer to *a priori* forms of consciousness only, that is, for a purely gnoseological aspect of the sensible; while in *Critique of the Power of Judgement,* the aesthetic, the aspect conditioning the very possibility of cognition (Kant stated that it is the only way to discuss the sensible within the frame of philosophical science) is understood in a manner that is closer to today's sense of the word – namely, in relation to the experience of the beautiful. Therefore, more simply put, one

28 "There is neither a science of the beautiful, only a critique, nor beautiful science, only beautiful art. For if the former existed, then it would be determined in it scientifically, i.e., by means of proofs, whether something should be held to be beautiful or not; thus the judgment about beauty, if it belonged to a science, would not be a judgment of taste. As for the second, a science which, as such, is supposed to be beautiful, is absurd. For if in it, as a science, one were to ask for grounds and proofs, one would be sent packing with tasteful expressions (bons mots)." (Kant, 184).

can say that Kant's *Transcendental aesthetics* is a gnoseological or epistemological aesthetics, while the aesthetics of *Critique of the Power of Judgement* is an 'aesthetic aesthetics', or, 'aesthetics proper'.

Indeed, according to Kant's theory, it is not only – and not necessarily – art that is capable of causing aesthetic experience, but generally *any* object. This provides some authors with a reason to assert that Kant thereby anticipates contemporary art, which allegedly "redefines the boundaries of the aesthetic" [29] (implying conflation of the aesthetic with art). However, if contemporary art is understood as *post-avant-garde art*, that is, the art that is heir to the historical avant-garde and Conceptual art, then such a treatment of Kant's aesthetics is erroneous: first, it is *not* the boundaries of *art* that are undefined in Kant, but rather the boundaries of the *aesthetic*; the aesthetic has in fact no boundaries at all (anything can be perceived aesthetically, as an *aesthetic* experience is indifferent to its actual source; the domain of the aesthetic cannot be outlined in terms of the understanding, but only by the mode of perception: the aesthetic can only be that which is perceptible through the senses); therefore, one cannot redefine what is principally indefinite. Art, on the contrary, holds a strictly definite place in Kant: it is conceived *within* the aesthetic only: art cannot be thought of outside of the sphere of aesthetic, but only within it. The avant-garde, in turn, challenges the very concept of the aesthetic, revolting against it, and therefore in no

29 This misconception is commonplace in both art journalism and cultural criticism, so it is difficult to pinpoint its original source; a classic example is Clement Greenberg's late writings: "Since [Duchamp's readymades] it has become clearer too, that anything that can be experienced at all can be experienced aesthetically; and that anything that can be experienced aesthetically can also be experienced as art. In short, art and the aesthetic don't just overlap, they coincide." (Clement Greenberg, 'Counter-Avant-Garde', in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), 129. as cited in: Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 293).

way "revises the boundaries of the aesthetic": it in principle operates outside the domain of aesthetics, beyond the logic of appearance and perception. Therefore, the avant-garde redefines *not* the aesthetic but *art*. This is also why it is principally incorrect to conflate art with the aesthetic, even from the standpoint of Kantian aesthetics itself.

This indeterminacy of the aesthetic's boundaries, the indeterminacy of its object, is ultimately logical: in Kant, an aesthetic judgment does not derive from *concepts*, that is, from the firm establishments of the *understanding*, but rather relates the latter to the imagination in its "free play".[30] The decision to endow an object with the status of the aesthetic always stems from the (human) *subject* and not from an objective concept – this is a fundamental premise of Kant's 'second' aesthetic theory. This aesthetic experience and the subjective assessment of it do not, of course, execute any cognitive role in the sense of *knowing* an object, as they do not reveal any of its objective qualities. However, the experience relates to the universal in the (human) subject itself.[31] This is why aesthetic judgments can be common and universal, shared by everyone, even though the experience behind them is purely subjective.[32]

30 "[...] the aesthetic power of judgment in judging the beautiful relates the imagination in its free play to the understanding, in order to agree with its concepts in general [...]." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 139).

31 "[...] the aesthetic power of judgment contributes nothing to the cognition of its objects and thus must be counted only as part of the critique of the judging subject and its cognitive faculties [...]" (Kant, 80).

32 Kant resolves this collision by introducing the notion of *common sense*: "If judgments of taste (like cognitive judgments) had a determinate objective principle, then someone who made them in accordance with the latter would lay claim to the unconditioned necessity of his judgment. If they had no principle at all, like those of mere sensory taste, then one would never even have a thought of their necessity. They must thus have a subjective principle, which determines what pleases or displeases only through feeling and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity. Such a principle, however, could only be regarded as a common sense, which is essentially different from the common understanding that is sometimes also called common sense (*sensus communis*) [...]" (Kant, 122).

The key characteristic of aesthetic judgement is indifference, *absence of any interest*.[33] This is an exceptionally important point in Kant's reasoning – and it is undoubtedly just as relevant to art (that is, not only to a widely understood domain of the aesthetic); moreover, it is not only relevant within the framework of Kant's aesthetics, but in a broader theoretical context as well. *Disinterest* means that the subject turns to an object for an aesthetic experience solely for the sake of this experience itself and not for anything else besides it; and that an object is recognised as aesthetically valuable regardless of any of its other qualities and alternate applications, that is, not for the sake of any 'benefit' or external purpose. This disinterest is understood as *ultimate*, which implies that it does not even matter whether an object exists or not.[34] This is one of Kant's most significant discoveries. With this, he formulates the fundamental premise of what is sometimes called the *autonomy of art*, although it would be more correct to call it *aesthetic autonomy*: for it is discussed by Kant in terms of aesthetic experience, not the experience of art alone.

Nevertheless, it should once again be emphasised that this point is essentially *relevant* to art (even to art that calls into question

33 "Taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such a satisfaction is called beautiful." (Kant, 96).

34 "One must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste." (Ibid, p. 91). Also: "The judgment of taste is merely contemplative, i.e., a judgment that, indifferent with regard to the existence of an object, merely connects its constitution together with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. But this contemplation itself is also not directed to concepts; for the judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (neither a theoretical nor a practical one), and hence it is neither grounded on concepts nor aimed at them." (Kant, 95).

the aesthetic itself, that is, avant-garde and post-avant-garde art,[35] which obviously did not yet exist in Kant's time): the absence of any external interest in the aesthetic experience of an object provides us with an idea of art as an entity that is valuable in itself, that is, which has a concept, or at least refers to one. This point of Kant's aesthetics comes close to Hegel's philosophy of art – and it is no coincidence that Hegel marked it as an "important consideration".[36] It must be borne in mind, however, that here Kant understands aesthetic judgment as pertaining to the perceiving subject only (although somehow linked to concepts of the understanding), and thus being true in *this* respect; but he does not address art as something that has (or might have) truth in itself and its existence (Hegel's train of thought is the opposite, as will be demonstrated later).

Hence, another much-cited point of Kant's aesthetics is clear: the beautiful is characterised by the way in which it pleases everyone without a concept, that is, not in the categories of reason and without the necessity for inferences.[37] It is therefore not surprising that Kant does not undertake a philosophical definition of either art or a work of art: for in his view, the truth, the essence, is not in the object itself (for example, in art), but rather in the interaction between the object and the subject perceiving it, which means that

35 I explore this theoretical conflict in detail in *Part II, De-Aestheticisation*. See, specifically, the discussion on Timothy Binkley's 'contra-aesthetic' theory, and his definition of the difference between traditional and modern art by contrasting *appearances* and *ideas*.

36 "[Kant states that] The aesthetic judgement lets the external existent subsist free and independent, and it proceeds from a pleasure to which the object on its own account corresponds, in that the pleasure permits the object to have its end in itself. This [...] is an important consideration." (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 58).

37 "That is beautiful which is cognized without a concept as the object of a necessary satisfaction." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 124). Also: "That is beautiful which pleases universally without a concept." (Kant, 104). And vice versa, "If one judges objects merely in accordance with concepts, then all representation of beauty is lost." (Kant, 101).

such a definition is not the task of aesthetics, and scarcely seems possible.[38] It is not by chance then that attempts to comprehend the essence of art *per se*, to elaborate a definition of it with the help of Kant's aesthetic doctrine, invariably run up against this obstacle, which is well demonstrated, for instance, by both Thierry de Duve and Arthur C. Danto.[39]

The category of the beautiful is central to Kant's aesthetics. In fact, without mentioning the beautiful, it would not be possible to discuss the aesthetic: throughout most of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, aesthetic experience is almost synonymous with "collision with the beautiful," so reasoning concerning the aesthetic and taste cannot but refer to it. This category is not, however, as simple and obvious as one might assume from reading popularised philosophy of art, which usually states either that if it weren't for the category of the beautiful, Kant's aesthetics would be fully applicable to modern and contemporary art, or that Kant's aesthetics is in no way relevant to it precisely because of that category. Neither are completely accurate. First, one should not associate the beautiful with the virtues of salon art and 'kitsch beauty', or with the formal canons of perfection and visual normativity. Kant himself prevents such a misreading by introducing, on the one hand, the distinction between *free beauty*

38 "In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 89); and further on: "There can be no objective rule of taste that would determine what is beautiful through concepts. For every judgment from this source is aesthetic, i.e., its determining ground is the feeling of the subject and not a concept of an object." (Kant, 116).

39 Thierry de Duve, *Au Nom de l'art: Pour Une Archéologie de La Modernité* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1989); Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

(or *self-subsistent beauty*) and *adherent beauty* (that is, beauty conditioned by an end).[40] On the other hand, he distinguishes *beauty* from *charm* – the latter term designates various kinds of secondary aesthetic aspects that are sometimes able to enhance the aesthetic impression, but do not determine its essence; thus, in art, Kant considers drawing as paramount, while colours only complement it.[41] Secondly, it must be kept in mind that within the framework of Kant's aesthetics, a wide variety of objects can be attributed to the category of the beautiful – from natural phenomena to an elegant poetic phrase. However (and this must also be taken into consideration), they would all be assessed only *aesthetically*, that is, outside of any of their actual content and regardless of their genuine essence. This means that it is not possible to 'abolish' the beautiful without cancelling the entire aesthetic regime of perception: this would not be anything but the notorious "extension of the boundaries of the aesthetic" that is mistakenly attributed to the avant-garde, and equally erroneously identified with the avant-garde's de-aestheticising stance. (I will discuss this in more detail in *Part II*.)

Let the beautiful be incompatible with contemporary art, other theorists say; it is not a problem, as there is still another aesthetic

40 "There are two kinds of beauty: free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or merely adherent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it. The first are called (self-subsisting) beauties of this or that thing; the latter, as adhering to a concept (conditioned beauty), are ascribed to objects that stand under the concept of a particular end." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 114).

41 "As for the opinion that the beauty that is attributed to the object on account of its form may well be heightened by charm, this is a common error and one that is very detrimental to genuine, uncorrupted, well-grounded taste [...] In painting and sculpture, indeed in all the pictorial arts, in architecture and horticulture insofar as they are fine arts, the drawing is what is essential, in which what constitutes the ground of all arrangements for taste is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases through its form. The colors that illuminate the outline belong to charm [...]" (Kant, 110).

category, the sublime. Indeed, the sublime (in contrast to the beautiful) is unencumbered by connotations of either the classical ideal of beauty or 'salon' decorativeness, and sounds like a more relevant category for discussing the avant-garde in terms of Kantian aesthetics. This is what Jean-François Lyotard suggests, putting forward the idea of re-defining the avant-garde as an 'aesthetic of sublime painting', which is able to "make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible." With this logic, the avant-garde (and in particular Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism) ceases to be entirely abstract art, becoming instead a "presentation of the unpresentable."[42]

Of course, Lyotard's main intention is in no way to inscribe the avant-garde into Kantian aesthetics, nor to adjust the latter to the avant-garde. Rather, he draws on Kant as an ally in his objection to 1980s postmodern critical revisions of the historical avant-garde and its legacies, which were very much under the flag of rehabilitating the idea of 'realism'. So he borrows the category of the sublime from Kant's aesthetics as a philosophical concept that would reframe the avant-garde as a sort of a *true* presentation (or a representation of a higher degree) – as opposed to realism, whose only definition, according to Lyotard, is that it "intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art, always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch."[43] Here, Lyotard is seemingly compelled to avoid the word "representation", as the term is linked with realism, replacing it with "presentation", and remarking that the avant-garde, understood as a 'sublime painting', "will of course

42 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?', in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 78.

43 Lyotard, 75.

'present' something though negatively; it will therefore avoid figuration or representation [...] making an allusion to the unpresentable by means of visible presentations."[44]

This makes the argument ambiguous. On the one hand, Lyotard pinpoints the conservative theoretical trend of devaluing the heritage of the avant-garde, and notes the delusive nature of both realism and its claims for art's efficiency in bourgeois society. On the other hand, the idea that, even in the avant-garde, it is still art's function to impart some 'third' thing apart from the art itself (whether it be called "presentation" or "representation", and whether what is conveyed is 'reality' or the sublime) in a way that devalues the radicality of the avant-garde's main gesture: its break with the representational, figurative regime of art. In other words, Lyotard's 'aesthetic of sublime painting' still sees art as a means to an end in a certain sense. While the avant-garde's radical abstraction breaks with any 'aboutness',[45] Lyotard brings it back: paradoxically, in the name of defending the very avant-garde itself.

It should also be borne in mind that Lyotard's reading of the notion of the sublime might differ from its strict Kantian sense. Kant himself never defines *art* through its relation to the sublime; he links the latter with experiences of natural phenomena,[46] at the same time stressing that the sublime is indeed not so much something external that can be presented or represented, but is instead a *response of the subject itself* to objects in the external world: "[...] that true

44 Lyotard, 78.

45 I discuss this subject in detail in *Part III, Abstraction*, specifically, in relation to Kazimir Malevich's programmatic rejection of "philistine ideas [...] [of] subject matter," that is, the validity of the representational function of art.

46 "[...] if the aesthetic judgment is to be pure [...] and if an example of that is to be given which is fully appropriate for the critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, then the sublime must not be shown in products of art [...] but rather in raw nature [...], merely insofar as it contains magnitude." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 136).

sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the one who judges [*sic*], not in the object in nature, the judging of which occasions this disposition in it."[47] Generally, I would suppose that Lyotard's sublime refers more to abstract concepts of mind, that is, the abstract *per se,* rather than to the subject's sensory experience as discussed by Kant. This suggests that it would probably make more sense to consider Lyotard's conception of the 'sublime painting' not in direct relation to Kant's doctrine, but rather as an independent theory of the function of the abstract in art. (The latter will be discussed in more detail in *Part III*.)

Meanwhile, it seems that the most essential aspect of Kant's philosophy from the standpoint of the contemporary condition of art begins where he denotes a difference *within* the aesthetic – namely, where the border is drawn between *art proper* on the one hand, and what is still *aesthetic* yet *not* art on the other (natural phenomena, decorative objects, handicrafts, and what Kant calls "mechanical art"[48]). Kant identifies the difference between art and other objects of the aesthetic indirectly, through a dynamic moment, that is, through how a particular type of aesthetic object is produced or manifested. So art is distinguished from nature as *doing* is from *acting* (*facere* and *agere*; their products are also different

47 Kant, 139. See also: "For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground outside ourselves, but for the sublime merely one in ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into the representation of the former [...]" (Kant, 130).

48 "If art, adequate for the cognition of a possible object, merely performs the actions requisite to make it actual, it is mechanical; but if it has the feeling of pleasure as its immediate aim, then it is called aesthetic art." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 184).

and are defined, respectively, as *work* and *effect* – *opus* and *effectus*);[49] art is distinguished from craft as free *play* is from *labour*;[50] while the difference between art and science is formulated as the distinction between *practical technique* and *theoretical knowledge*.[51] Thus, through his distinctions *within* the aesthetic, and in spite of his original intention to discuss only judgment but *not* the objects being judged, Kant comes to need a definition of art as well, at least the concept of a work of art.

Kant creates this definition by introducing the concepts of the 'aesthetic idea' and [aesthetic] 'spirit', which is understood as an "animating principle in the mind" capable of delivering an aesthetic idea.[52] In his other, aforementioned famous aesthetic maxims (his thesis on the principal disinterest of the aesthetic gaze; his thesis

49 "Art is distinguished from nature as doing (*facere*) is from acting or producing in general (*agere*), and the product or consequence of the former is distinguished as a work (*opus*) from the latter as an effect (*effectus*). By right, only production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art." (Kant, 182).

50 "Art is also distinguished from handicraft: the first is called liberal, the second can also be called remunerative art. The first is regarded as if it could turn out purposively (be successful) only as play, i.e., an occupation that is agreeable in itself; the second is regarded as labor, i.e., an occupation that is disagreeable (burdensome) in itself and is attractive only because of its effect (e.g., the remuneration), and hence as something that can be compulsorily imposed." (Kant, 183).

51 "Art as a skill of human beings is also distinguished from science (to be able from to know), as a practical faculty is distinguished from a theoretical one, as technique is distinguished from theory (as the art of surveying is distinguished from geometry)". (Kant, 183).

52 "Spirit, in an aesthetic significance, means the animating principle in the mind. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul, the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end. Now I maintain that this principle is nothing other than the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas; by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible." (Kant, 192).

on an aesthetic object as that which "pleases universally without a concept", etc.), Kant discusses the aesthetic in general rather than art in particular; while the concept of the 'aesthetic idea' refers specifically to art, which, unlike natural phenomena, is created by an artist in accordance with artistic thought. Realised in a piece of art, (which Kant, according to his classification, calls "beautiful aesthetic art"[53]), an artistic thought obtains the quality of a unique entity that is defined as an 'aesthetic idea'. Of course, the aesthetic idea is not yet a definition of art as a concept, that is, it is not a concept in terms of reason, as it is characterised by that which "occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought."[54] However, within Kant's aesthetic doctrine, the aesthetic idea is the closest analogue to what one could consider to be a philosophical definition of art.

Aesthetics as a 'Mere Name' for Art Theory: Hegel's Philosophy of Fine Art

Firstly, the subject matter of Hegel's aesthetics is *art as such* (that is, not *sensuous cognition and art in particular*, as in Baumgarten; nor the *judgement of a sensible experience*, as in Kant). While Kant does not consider either art or the sensible in their historical dimension (in Kant, both subjects are clearly meta- or supra-historical), Hegel

53 "This is either agreeable or beautiful art. It is the former if its end is that pleasure accompany the representations as mere sensations, the latter, if its end is that it accompany these as kinds of cognition." (Ibid, p. 184); "Beautiful art [...] is a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication. The universal communicability of a pleasure already includes in its concept that this must not be a pleasure of enjoyment, from mere sensation, but one of reflection; and thus aesthetic art, as beautiful art, is one that has the reflecting power of judgment and not mere sensation as its standard." (Kant, 185).

54 Kant, 192.

sees art primarily as a dialectical process of becoming in history ("the historical deduction of the true concept of art"): Hegel's take is a theoretical-historical philosophy of art. Thus, Hegel's aesthetics is not just a view that differs factually from Kant's, but is an entirely different perspective on the subject. The usage of the term differs accordingly. While for Baumgarten, aesthetics is a *science of the sensuous* and *science of the beautiful*; for Kant, it is first a *philosophical doctrine of the sensible conditions of knowledge* (as an objection to the very possibility of the idea of a science of the beautiful) and then a *philosophical critique of judgements of taste and their conditions of possibility*; yet for Hegel, aesthetics is merely a term signifying *philosophy of art*, or, as Hegel himself puts it, "philosophy of artistic creativity", *philosophy of fine art*. That is, the word "aesthetics" (which Hegel admits is not a proper but rather a sustained term, and therefore suitable for the object notation) is used by him as a "mere name"[55] for a philosophical theory of art's dialectical historical development.

The subject of Hegel's aesthetics is *solely* art; the beauty created by humans, but *not* that created by nature. He claims that the beauty of art is superior to the beauty of nature: even a "useless notion that enters a man's head" in this sense surpasses all of the beauties of nature, even though the former is fleeting and may soon vanish without a trace.[56] However, Hegel explains, "higher" or "superior" in no

55 "We will therefore let the word 'Aesthetics' stand; as a mere name it is a matter of indifference to us, and besides it has meanwhile passed over into common speech. As a name then it may be retained, but the proper expression for our science is *Philosophy of Art* and, more definitely, *Philosophy of Fine Art*." (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1).

56 "[...] the higher the spirit and its productions stand above nature and its phenomena, the higher too is the beauty of art above that of nature. Indeed, considered *formally* [i. e. no matter what it says], even a useless notion that enters a man's head is higher than any product of nature, because in such a notion spirituality and freedom are always present." (Hegel, 2).

way refers to a particular scale of relative values in which, say, there is an ascent from a beautiful natural phenomenon to weak art, then to mediocre art, and finally to art of the highest standard. What is implied is a completely different principle: art is participial to the spirit (which is understood, in Hegel, not in a mystical or religious sense, but as a certain ideal horizon of human thinking,[57] a concept being disclosed in history), while the beauty of nature can only be a "reflection of beauty that belongs to spirit", that is, a phenomenon of a different kind.[58] With this, Hegel in fact essentially rejects Kant's fundamental concept of the sensible (*Sinnlich*), in which the beauty of nature and that of art (like any other experience of the beautiful) are conflated, sometimes to the point of indistinguishability.

Another of Hegel's objections is directed at the Kantian premise by which an experience of beauty is principally subjective, making it impossible to work out a universal philosophical concept of art and the beautiful. As discussed above, this premise is fundamental for Kant's aesthetics, which he understood as a philosophical critique of aesthetic judgement, but *not* as a 'science of art'. Hegel's counterargument is that a work of art is still a product of thinking, albeit

57 See more about the principally secular content of Hegel's notions of 'spirit', 'divine', etc., in: Robert B. Pippin, 'What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)', *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (2002): 1–24.

58 "[...] spirit is alone the *true*, comprehending everything in itself, so that everything beautiful is truly beautiful only as sharing in this higher sphere and generated by it. In this sense the beauty of nature appears only as a reflection of the beauty that belongs to spirit [...]." (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2); also: "[...] the ordinary way of looking at things took easily to the notion that the human art-product ranked below the product of nature; for the work of art has no feeling in itself and is not through and through enlivened, but, regarded as an external object, is dead; but we are accustomed to value the living higher than the dead. That the work of art has no life and movement in itself is readily granted. [...] But this aspect – external existence – is not what makes a work into a product of fine art; a work of art is such only because, originating from the spirit, it now belongs to the territory of the spirit [...]. Therefore the work of art stands higher than any natural product which has not made this journey through the spirit." (Hegel, 29).

in a sensible (sensuous) form; therefore art, among other things, is still a self-comprehending of spirit (that is, human thought) in its sensible (sensuous) form, encapsulating both itself and its 'other' incarnation, that is, a self-knowing of thinking; this in turn makes art participle to philosophy, which becomes essential for art as the highest implementation of art's reflection and self-reflection.[59]

Opposing both the aesthetics of the early German Enlightenment (Wolff/Baumgarten) and Kant's aesthetics, Hegel pinpoints the limitedness of considering art in terms of the sensory effect it produces in the (human) subject, that is, from the perspective of sensation and perception. The essence of art is far from being confined to its ability to evoke feelings: there is nothing particularly specific to art in this ability, as other objects (that are not necessarily artistic) are also capable of evoking feelings; therefore, it is wrong to define art in terms of feelings or sensations. Moreover, the sensory, perceptive, affective aspect, despite being one of the qualities inherent in art, is itself indifferent to the content of the latter, Hegel remarks.[60] It is precisely this limitedness of the sensory dimension for comprehending art that made it necessary to invent the concept of (artistic)

59 "And even if works of art are not thought or the Concept, but a development of the Concept out of itself, a shift of the Concept from its own ground to that of sense, still the power of the thinking spirit lies in being able not only to grasp itself in its proper form as thinking, but to know itself again just as much when it has surrendered its proper form to feeling and sense, to comprehend itself in its opposite [...]. And in this preoccupation with its opposite the thinking spirit [...] comprehends both itself and its opposite. For the Concept is the universal which maintains itself in its particularizations [...]. Thus the work of art too, in which thought expresses itself, belongs to the sphere of conceptual thinking, and the spirit, by subjecting it to philosophic treatment, is thereby merely satisfying the need of the spirit's inmost nature. For since thinking is the essence and Concept of spirit, the spirit in the last resort is only satisfied when it has permeated all products of its activity with thought too and so only then has made them genuinely its own. But art, far removed [...] from being the highest form of spirit, acquires its real ratification only in philosophy." (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 12–13).

60 "Feeling as such is an entirely empty form of subjective affection." (Hegel, 33).

taste as a special criterion for evaluating art. However, taste reveals an equal inability to penetrate the essence of the work, because it is not associated with the concept (of art).[61] It is hard not to see how Hegel's consideration in some way makes a philosophical premise to the distinction between the aesthetic and conceptual aspects of art that occurred subsequently in the avant-garde and obtained its theoretical shape in Conceptual art (and partly, in the Institutional theory of art).

The section *The Aim of Art*[62] focused on defining art through its functions, and is of particular interest. Here, Hegel builds his argument apophatically, considering such functions attributed to art as the "imitation of nature", "awakening and vivifying slumbering feelings", "crying one's eyes out", a "mitigation of desires", a "purification of the passions", "instruction, and moral improvement", and discerning the same trait in all of them: art is not necessary for executing them. Art is indeed capable of performing these functions (and sometimes does), but the concept of art cannot be based on

61 "Yet the depths of the thing remained a sealed book to taste, since these depths require not only sensing and abstract reflections, but the entirety of reason and the solidity of the spirit, while taste was directed only to the external surface on which feelings play and where one-sided principles may pass as valid. Consequently, however, so-called 'good taste' takes fright at all the deeper effects [of art] and is silent when the thing at issue comes in question [...]." (Hegel, 34).

62 Hegel, 42–55.

them, since the same tasks can be carried out without resorting to art.[63]

Art can be used as a means to superficial ends: as amusement, adornment, decoration – but they do not exhaust art's essence. For science can also serve practical purposes, which does not make it merely a means for their implementation; science maintains its independent nature of the pursuit of knowledge *per se*. The genuine aim of art then is the ascent to truth. This aim of art can only be found in *art itself*, not outside of it; in this, art is akin to religion and philosophy.[64] However, unlike philosophy, art is not capable of implementing the truth in concepts of reason, but rather in sensuous (sensible) form. Nevertheless, this engagement of art with truth makes it *intellectually conceivable*, that is, a necessary and relevant subject for philosophical analysis. Another case is the beauty of nature: here, we cannot find clear criteria for the truth, and this is

63 "[...] we must in the first place get rid of the perverse idea which, in the question about an end, clings to the accessory meaning of the question, namely that it is one about utility [of art]. The perversity lies here in this, that in that case the work of art is supposed to have a bearing on something else which is set before our minds as the essential thing or as what ought to be, so that then the work of art would have validity only as a useful tool for realizing this end which is independently valid on its own account outside the sphere of art. Against this we must maintain that art's vocation is to unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, [...] and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honour, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature." (Hegel, 55).

64 "[...] it is of course the case that art can be used as a fleeting play, affording recreation and entertainment [...] But what *we* want to consider is art which is *free* alike in its end and its means. The fact that art in general can serve other ends and be in that case a mere passing amusement is something which it shares equally with thought. For, on the one hand, science may indeed be used as an intellectual servant for finite ends and accidental means, and it then acquires its character not from itself but from other objects and circumstances. Yet, on the other hand, it also cuts itself free from this servitude in order to raise itself, in free independence, to the truth in which it fulfils itself independently and conformably with its own ends alone." (Hegel, 7).

why hardly any attempts have been made to create a philosophical science of the beauty of nature (separated from the beauty in art), Hegel points out.[65] Thus, from Hegel's position, Kant's statement that "there cannot be a science of the beautiful" is fair as regards nature, but not art.

Hegel's assertion of art's inherent connection with truth inevitably comes up against an obvious counterargument concerning another of art's generic traits: its link with fantasy and illusion, that is, ultimately to untruth, deception. What, then, is the function of this fictitious side of art, is it really fair to oppose art to reality as untruth to truth? This is how Hegel puts the question, and he answers it by saying that reality is often deceptive and full of injustice, while art, due to its ability to create an illusionary world, "liberates the true content of phenomena from the pure appearance and deception of this bad, transitory world, and gives them a higher actuality, born of the spirit."[66]

At the same time – and this premise is fundamental for Hegel's aesthetics – the depth of truth that art can reach is limited. The reason lies in the nature of art itself, as it is bound to its sensible form, which is both an integral trait and a limitation. Religion and

65 Hegel, 2–3.

66 Hegel, 9; however, Hegel emphasises: "But appearance itself is essential to essence. Truth would not be truth if it did not show itself and appear [...] If in this connection the pure appearance in which art brings its conceptions into existence is to be described as 'deception', this reproof first acquires its meaning in comparison with the phenomena of the *external world* and its immediate materiality [...] But it is precisely this whole sphere of the empirical inner and outer world which is not the world of genuine actuality; on the contrary, we must call it, in a stricter sense than we call art, a pure appearance and a harsher deception. Only beyond the immediacy of feeling and external objects is genuine actuality to be found. For the truly actual is only that which has being in and for itself, the substance of nature and spirit, which indeed gives itself presence and existence, but in this existence remains in and for itself and only so is truly actual." (Hegel, 8).

philosophy are not limited by form, and are therefore capable of penetrating more deeply into the essence of the world.[67]

There is also another aspect to the issue – its historical dimension – and here comes Hegel's famous maxim on the 'end of art'. Art's historical break with religion, the secularisation of art, also signifies art's loss of its (directly) societal function: the presentation of socially significant values, the 'truth' that unifies people. Art stops being sacred and instead becomes an object of reflection; worshipping gives way to intellectual analysis and judgement. This is a fundamental change in the very function of art, in which reflection now becomes a part of its essence.[68]

Another highly important assertion of Hegel's aesthetics, and closely connected to his maxim on the 'end of art' (that is, that art "remains for us a thing of the past"), is that aesthetics (in the sense of 'philosophy of art') is not merely art theory, or an 'explanation' of works of art and the principles or artmaking, but rather the highest implementation of art itself, its superior realisation. *Concept* is central to Hegel's philosophical system; consequently, the aim of philosophy is to unveil, to unfold it. The same goes for Hegel's aesthetics: it is built as a disclosure of the concept, principles and essence of art, which are merely expressed in the individual and particular, but

67 "Art shares this vocation with religion and philosophy, but in a special way, namely by displaying even the highest [reality] sensuously, bringing it thereby nearer to the senses, to feeling, and to nature's mode of appearance." (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 7–8); and further: "But while on the one hand we give this high position to art, it is on the other hand just as necessary to remember that neither in content nor in form is art the highest and absolute mode of bringing to our minds the true interests of the spirit. For precisely on account of its form, art is limited to a specific content. Only one sphere and stage of truth is capable of being represented in the element of art. In order to be a genuine content for art, such truth must in virtue of its own specific character be able to go forth into the sphere of sense and remain adequate to itself there." (Hegel, 9).

68 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 10–11.

not vice versa (that is, analysing the individual and particular in search of the common and universal) or, in Hegel's words, a grasping of the "concept of art in its inner necessity".[69] Accordingly, in the analysis of art, counterexamples cannot be regarded as a decisive argument: the discrepancy between a particular case and a universal concept works in favour of the universal concept, because if a particular case contradicts the universal concept, this only reveals the case's untruth or irrelevance.[70] This is probably why Hegel's aesthetics are not easy to reconcile with the approach taken by art historians – the latter's way of thinking is precisely the opposite: any conclusions are always preceded by the accumulation of as many 'cases' as possible. However, this does not mean that Hegel refutes the empirical approach: on the contrary, he emphasises that the best disclosure of the subject matter is to be achieved by combining these two opposing paradigms of research in such a way that they complement one another.[71]

Concluding Remark

In closing this *Part* about questions of art and the aesthetic in German philosophy, I will raise a few points concerning the methodological principles of my handling of this material hereinafter.

The classic philosophy of art is historical: it inevitably bears the traits of its epoch, as even the abstract concepts with which it operates are *both* universal and the products of historical circumstances

69 Hegel, 55.

70 This train of Hegel's thought is illuminated by a Russian Hegel scholar, Yury Perov, in: Yury Perov, 'Foreword', in *Lektsii po estetike [Lectures on aesthetics]*, by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1st ed., vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2001), 16–17.

71 For Hegel's reflections on method, see the section *Scientific Ways of Treating Beauty and Art (*Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 14–22).

and societal relations.[72] This in no way means that classic philosophy should be understood merely in terms of its historical context; and it also does not mean that it is relevant only to the art of its time and useless in relation to avant-garde and post-avant-garde art. However, this undoubtedly means that classic philosophy of art cannot be applied to the contemporary problems of art as a universal meta-historical lens without taking into account the way it was challenged by the revolutionary art of the 20th century. To this end, I will share the historical-dialectical approach formulated by Peter Bürger: the avant-garde, as the point when art transitions to the *stage of self-criticism*, for the first time reveals art categories as *historical* ones.[73] Therefore, it is the avant-garde that can help us to properly reveal and comprehend art of the past, and not vice versa (that is, interpreting the avant-garde by means of art of the past).[74] Consequently, classic philosophical theory of art should not be considered a stand-alone (and sufficient) body of literature *in itself,* and from whose standpoint one can grasp the condition of art today, but rather when it is viewed *in its clash* with the avant-garde. Here, I will also add that in the avant-garde, re-defining the concept of art became an integral part of artistic practice, which thereby cut the distance between art and philosophy, opening the way for artist work to be equated with the production of theory.

72 "[...] even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations." (Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York, 1973), 105. as cited in: Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Theory and History of Literature 4 (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984), 16).

73 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

74 Bürger, 19.

Part II. De-Aestheticisation

Introductory Remarks

'Contra-aesthetic', 'aesthetic withdrawal', 'art beyond the aesthetic', 'de-aestheticisation' – all these are just different names for essentially the same theoretical programme/position that was elaborated within the avant-garde and Conceptual art by a number of artists-theorists, sometimes independently of each other, sometimes developing the thoughts of a predecessor. Even though this theoretical stance/programme is clearly universalist, if not 'totalising', in nature (as it claims a universal relevance and validity for art *per se*, art as a concept), it is essential to note the context of this theorising in the avant-garde and Conceptual art in order to correctly understand and use these terms.

In this regard, it is particularly important to distinguish the concept of *de-aestheticisation* from the implications of the term 'the anti-aesthetic', which belong to a completely different train of theoretical thought. Introduced in the context of 1980s postmodernist cultural criticism, specifically by Hal Foster, 'the anti-aesthetic' signifies a tendency to programmatically 'neglect form' in favour of the political content of a work of art. The underlying premise is that the defining characteristic of (thus understood) contemporary art is 'anathema to beauty', which in the context of this theoretical

tradition, is seen as art's positive intention to demonstrate some kind of 'harsh truth of reality' for which all artistic beauties are worth sacrificing.[75]

In opposition to the aforementioned theoretical stance, the avant-gardist and conceptualist counter-aesthetic position, better defined as *de-aestheticisation*, will hereafter be considered as a programme in which artistic thinking transitions from the register of the aesthetic to the register of the conceptual, that is, from an understanding of art as aesthetic to an understanding of art as a form of idea. This is equally distant from both the idea of 'anathema to beauty' and the idea of sacrificing form to content. Both takes are simply irrelevant here, as the issue is de-aestheticisation as a deduction of the concept of art – via the separation of the aesthetic aspect of art from art itself.

Introduction

It is scarcely possible to determine exactly when and where the ideas of 'art beyond the aesthetic' and the 'separation of art from the aesthetic' first emerge. They appear to grow organically and spontaneously within the avant-garde movements of the 1910s, sometimes unconnectedly and spread over different countries. However, this testifies to its historical conditioning, not so much in the discoveries of individual artists, but more in art's historical development process, in Hegel's words, the "historical deduction of the true concept of art."[76] Along with overcoming the representational mode of

75 The concept of the 'anti-aesthetic' can be traced back to Hal Foster's doctrine of the same name in the early 1980s (Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 1st ed (Port Townsend, Wash: Bay Press, 1983)), and continues to inform academic publications. See, for example, James Elkins and Harper Montgomery, eds., *Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic*, The Stone Art Theory Institutes 4 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2015).

76 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 55.

art and a transition to abstraction (as a rejection of not only figurativeness itself but also of the 'art conveys meaning' regime), the idea of 'art beyond the aesthetic' constitutes an essential element in the historical avant-garde's 'antiartistic' programme – a subversive attempt to undermine the very foundations of the common idea of what art is by challenging the main characteristics of what is traditionally considered 'art'.

The 'antiartistic' programme is primarily associated with the international Dada movement. Its origins can be traced back to Zurich and New York, and also to Barcelona, Petrograd, Berlin, and Paris. "Where and how Dada began is already almost as hard to determine as Homer's birthplace," writes Hans Richter. "The dates and facts of those years, the pronouncements, denials, the theories and the works of anti-art: these are the signs by which the living Dada movement is known for what it was, an artistic revolt against art. [...] Dada is not an artistic movement in the accepted sense; it was a storm that broke over the world of art as the war did over the nations."[77]

There are few written manifestations of the 'antiartistic' and 'contra-aesthetic' stances of the 'heroic' period of the historical avant-garde: in Dada, the 'artistic revolt against art' often took the form of life praxis overtaking theoretical self-reflection. However, to mention a few, the earliest is probably Duchamp's short note dated 1913: "Can one make works which are not works of 'art'?"[78] Although at first glance no more than an elegant paradox, this thesis constituted a revolutionary idea of how the practice called 'art' could be debunked and then redefined from the ground up. This was the

77 Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, Repr (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 11, 7, 9.

78 Marcel Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 74. First published in 1966 under the name of *A l'Infinitif* (*The White Box*; New York: Cordier and Ekstrom, 1966).

invention of readymades. As art's alleged relation to the aesthetic formed the kernel of the common idea of art, this relation naturally became the main target. Then comes Francis Picabia's manifesto stating that "Art must be unaesthetic in the extreme, useless and impossible to justify"[79]; and again, Duchamp's working notes, written between 1912 and 1923 for his long-running project *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (Large Glass)*, setting forth, in his dense and slightly mysterious manner, the idea of the very possibility of finally leaving all aesthetics behind:

> *Possible*
> The figuration of a possible.
> (not as the opposite of impossible
> nor as related to probable
> nor as subordinated to likely)
> the *possible* is only
> a *physical "caustic"* [vitriol type]
> burning up all aesthetics or callistics.[80]

However, the significance of readymades was not recognised until much later, with the arrival of Neo-Dada, when the antiartistic devices of the historical avant-garde had been 'legitimised', that is, taken *aesthetically*. Hence, it was once again necessary for Duchamp to highlight – this time for the general public – their essentially contra-aesthetic nature. In a speech delivered at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1961, Duchamp stated:

79 Quoted as in: Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 76.
80 First published in 1934 (*Green Box*. Paris: Editions Rrose Selavy). Quoted as in: Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 73.

> The point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these "readymades" was never dictated by esthetic delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste ... in fact a complete anesthesia.[81]

Later published in the journal *Art and Artists*, this text stands out as probably Duchamp's only writing typed entirely in uppercase, which probably designates the author's intention to emphasize the programmatic significance of the statement.

The idea was indeed picked up by the next generation of artists. In 1963, Robert Morris issued his *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal*:

> The undersigned, ROBERT MORRIS, being the maker of the metal construction entitled LITANIES, described in the annexed Exhibit A, hereby withdraws from said construction all aesthetic quality and content and declares that from the date hereof said construction has no such quality and content.[82]

By signing and executing the document before a public notary,[83] Morris made the gesture of "aesthetic withdrawal" an integral part of the work itself.

With the formation of Conceptual art (after circa 1966), de-aestheticisation was pushed even further by this movement. Radicalised into what become known as Conceptual art's 'attack on aesthetics',

81 Duchamp, 141.

82 Cited as in: Harold Rosenberg, 'De-Aestheticization', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999).

83 Rosenberg.

the idea obtains its theoretical form in Joseph Kosuth's 'Art after Philosophy':

> It is necessary to separate aesthetics from art because aesthetics deals with opinions on perception of the world in general. In the past one of the two prongs of art's function was its value as decoration. So any branch of philosophy that dealt with "beauty" and thus, taste, was inevitably duty bound to discuss art as well. Out of this "habit" grew the notion that there was a conceptual connection between art and aesthetics, which is not true. This idea never drastically conflicted with artistic considerations before recent times, not only because the morphological characteristics of art perpetuated the continuity of this error, but as well, because the apparent other "functions" of art (depiction of religious themes, portraiture of aristocrats, detailing of architecture, etc.) used art to cover up art. When objects are presented within the context of art (and until recently objects always have been used) they are as eligible for aesthetic consideration as are any objects in the world, and an aesthetic consideration of an object existing in the realm of art means that the object's existence or functioning in an art context is irrelevant to the aesthetic judgment.[84]

In other words: if an aesthetic consideration is applicable to any objects of the outside world (to nature, for example, or decorative objects – which is exactly how the aesthetic is understood in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*), then this means that the aesthetic cannot be regarded as a dimension *specific* to art, that is, a dimension through which a true definition of art could be elaborated. Or, to put

84 Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy'.

it in a slightly different way: the aesthetic is neither the primary nor a sufficient aspect to determine what art is.

This stance was then nuanced by Timothy Binkley in his 1977 article 'Piece: Contra Aesthetics'. As this text is considerably less famous than Kosuth's, I will recount its key points here in slightly more detail. Aesthetics, Binkley argues, being originally invented in the 18th century as a doctrine to deal with perception and beauty in general, does not necessarily fit art at all:

> Although frequently purporting to be a (or even *the*) philosophy of art, aesthetics so understood is not exclusively about art; it investigates a type of human experience (aesthetic experience) which is elicited by artworks, but also by nature and by non-artistic artifacts. The discrepancy is generally thought to be unimportant and is brushed aside with the assumption that if aesthetics is not exclusively about art, at least art is primarily about the aesthetic. This assumption, however, also proves to be false. [...] aesthetics has never been strictly a study of artistic phenomena. The scope of its inquiry is broader than art since aesthetic experience is not an experience unique to art. This fact has not always been sufficiently emphasized, and as a result aesthetics frequently appears in the guise of philosophy-of-art-in-general. As aesthetics and the philosophy of art have become more closely identified, a much more serious confusion has arisen. The work of art has come to be construed as an aesthetic object, an object of perception. [...] The first principle of philosophy of art has become: all art possesses aesthetic qualities, and the core of a work is its nest of aesthetic qualities. This is why "aesthetics" has become just another name for the philosophy of art. Although it is sometimes recognized that aesthetics is not identical to the philosophy of art, but rather a complementary study, it is still commonly assumed that all art is aesthetic in the sense that falling

> within the subject matter of aesthetics is at least a necessary (if not a sufficient) condition for being art. Yet [...] being aesthetic is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being art.[85]

Therefore, Binkley argues, if a work of art constitutes an idea (as in an avant-garde piece of art), rather than being composed of its perceptive and visual qualities, it is irrelevant to consider it an "aesthetic object, an object of perception." Binkley introduces three key examples to prove this argument: Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q* and *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*, and Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. In *L.H.O.O.Q*, a moustache and goatee are drawn onto a cheap reproduction of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, and when read in French, the caption "L.H.O.O.Q" made "a very risqué joke on the Gioconda".[86] Binkley points out that Duchamp's piece demonstrates a fundamental difference between traditional art and art after the avant-garde: *L.H.O.O.Q* manifests a condition (of art) in which an artwork can be fully conveyed through a written description (as it was, in fact, executed above); while in the case of Leonardo's original painting, it is impossible to describe it in a similar way, as it requires a *looking* experience.[87] This leads Binkley to formulate one of the key points of his 'contra-aesthetic' theory – a definition of the difference between traditional and modern art by contrasting *appearances* and *ideas*:

> Some art (a great deal of what is considered traditional art) creates primarily with appearances. To know the art is to know the look of it; and to know that is to experience the look, to perceive

85 Timothy Binkley, 'Piece: Contra Aesthetics', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 3 (1977): 268.
86 Binkley, 266.
87 Binkley, 266.

> the appearance. On the other hand, some art [modern art, avant-garde art] creates primarily with ideas. To know the art is to know the idea [...][88]

This is illustrated by another Duchamp piece, *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*. The work is made from the same 'cheap chromo' of Leonardo's painting, but this time devoid of the moustache and goatee drawn on Gioconda's face in the previous version. That is, the piece demonstrates no difference in its appearance from the *Mona Lisa* reproduction: "their aesthetic qualities are basically identical [...] This is due to the fact that Duchamp's piece does not articulate its artistic statement in the language of aesthetic qualities",[89] Binkley points out. Another piece of evidence demonstrating the irrelevance of aesthetics to art is delivered by Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, a piece that was actually made by erasing the aesthetic qualities of another work. Indeed, the drawing was literally erased by Rauschenberg (with de Kooning's permission). This example once again brings forth the aspect of 'looking' (as well as an understanding of art as a visual, 'retinal' practice), which is one of the key targets for Binkley's criticism:

> No important information about Rauschenberg's piece is presented in the way it *looks*, except perhaps *this* fact, that looking at it is artistically inconsequential. It would be a mistake to search for aesthetically interesting smudges on the paper.[90]

88 Binkley, 266.
89 Binkley, 267.
90 Binkley, 265.

It is clear from Kosuth's and Binkley's arguments that what was invented by Duchamp as an intellectual trick, a sort of a device to make works that would be unlike anything of the past (in which Duchamp succeeded), became, in the 'second avant-garde' of Conceptual art, a theoretical platform with a claim to an ultimate universal validity for art *per se*: art (after Duchamp) can either be 'beyond aesthetics' or it is not worthwhile at all.

But what about philosophical reflections on the avant-gardist and conceptualist contra-aesthetic stance? What is the theoretical status of de-aestheticisation from the standpoint of modern philosophy and the history of concepts, and how does this position change (if it indeed does) the current status of the aesthetic? Finally, how does considering the conflict between the aesthetic and the conceptual deepen our understanding of art as such, and, specifically, in terms of art praxis?

As the aesthetic take on art is primarily based on the model of aesthetics that is set forth in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, the contra-aesthetic stance naturally proceeds from a criticism of Kant's doctrine. Some key examples of such dialogue will be discussed in the following section. But first, it should be noted that the most capacious term, 'de-aestheticisation', will be used; apparently first introduced by Harold Rosenberg.[91] The authors discussed below also use various other terms, such as 'art versus aesthetic', 'art beyond aesthetics' and even 'anti-aesthetic'[92] (Osborne), the 'distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic' (the Institutional theory of art), 'post-aesthetic art' (Lippard,

91 Rosenberg, 'De-Aestheticization'.

92 In Osborne, the use of the term 'anti-aesthetic' should not be confused with that of Hal Foster (Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*).

Chandler[93]), and 'contra aesthetics' (Binkley), or even describe the issue as a "disagreement between Protestants and Catholics" on art (de Duve) – nevertheless discussing the same subject, the same stance, which consists of opposing the conceptual dimension of art to the aesthetic one.

De-Aestheticisation as the Heir to Jena Romanticism: Peter Osborne on the Premises of Conceptual Art in German Philosophy

This issue is a subject of lasting interest for Peter Osborne, primarily in connection with the genealogy and historical role of Conceptual art. According to Osborne, the 'anti-aesthetic' plot is by no means new, and arose long before Modernism: it originated in the collision of Kant's aesthetic doctrine with the philosophy of Jena Romanticism, partly inheriting Kantian philosophy, partly opposing it. The chapter of Osborne's book *Anywhere or not at all* is entitled, correspondingly, *Art Versus Aesthetic (Jena Romanticism contra Kant)*.[94]

Osborne traces the evolution of Kant's views on the notion of the aesthetic from the *First Critique* to the *Third.* (I offered my own analysis of this in *Part I.*) He then sets forth the thesis that identifying aesthetics with philosophical discourse on art was a result of the somewhat inaccurate reception of Kant's doctrine by subsequent generations of theorists and artists. Finally, Osborne outlines the Romanticist concept of art, essentially determined as a kind of historical-ontological amendment to Kant's 'art as aesthetic'.[95]

93 Lippard and Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', 47–48.

94 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*. There are variations of this discussion in Osborne's other writings, but I will mostly consider the aforementioned source.

95 Osborne, 37–46.

Osborne's main thesis is that, in itself, Kant's doctrine neither makes it possible to formulate a concept of art *per se* nor provides grounds for art's autonomy, as an aesthetic judgement in Kant is conditioned by principal indifference to the "cognitive, relational, historical and world-disclosing dimensions of works of art"[96], which in Osborne's opinion, constitutes the essence of art. One can agree with this: as discussed in *Part I*, the concept of art is actually not introduced in Kant's aesthetics – for Kant's doctrine simply does not imply such a task. As for *art's* autonomy, it is not considered in Kant either; rather, what *is* discussed is the separation of the aesthetic from other kinds of sensory experience. By mentioning "indifference", Osborne obviously refers to Kant's well-known maxim on the disinterest of aesthetic judgement, that is, a principled absence of any interest that is external to the object of aesthetic reflection in aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure). To illustrate this, in Kant's train of thought, if, for instance, an apple is considered to be an aesthetic object and is recognised as aesthetically beautiful, it is not because it can taste good, and that there is a desire to eat it; on the contrary, a judgement is *aesthetic* only if such considerations are set aside. Here, Osborne nontrivially brings Kant's thesis of disinterest closer to another, no less famous one – the thesis that there is evidence of genuine art when it appears "as if it [a piece of art] were made by nature"[97] – and turns it against Kant. In Osborne's interpretation, such a drawing together of art (in its 'highest manifestation') with nature only exposes a "conceptual gap between art and aesthetic that cannot be adequately bridged within the terms of Kant's thought. [...] For Kant readily acknowledges that 'aesthetic'

96 Osborne, 42.

97 "Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 185).

itself cannot distinguish art from nature."[98] Osborne's argument is this: these assertions remove everything from the concept of art that makes it such, as it excludes "most of what has always been and continues to be of most significance about art: the difference from nature marked by its metaphysical, cognitive, and politico-ideological functions, qua art."[99] And furthermore, "In identifying the 'aesthetic' significance of objects with their affect upon the subject in its purely reflective judgement, Kant simultaneously expanded 'aesthetic', giving it a central role in the metaphysics of the subject, and cut it off from any possible metaphysics of the artwork as a self-sufficient or 'autonomous' entity."[100] Hence, Osborne comes to the conclusion that "Kant's work cannot, in principle, provide the conceptual ground for an account of the autonomy of the artwork, since it has no account of (nor interest in) the ontological distinctiveness of the work of art."[101]

Osborne finds a proper understanding of art's ontological distinctiveness in Jena Romanticism. First, he points to a critique of Kant's model of 'art as aesthetic' and 'the aesthetic as a discourse on art' by Friedrich Schlegel, who in *Critical Fragments* (1798) states that "aesthetic is a word which notoriously reveals an equally perfect ignorance of the thing and of the language"[102] (as Osborne explains, Schlegel's poisonous remark on "ignorance" refers directly to Kant). Then Osborne draws attention to a reinterpretation of Kant's aesthetic theory in *Kallias Letters* (1793) and *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) by Friedrich Schiller, who remained, however, in

98 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 42.
99 Osborne, 43.
100 Osborne, 43.
101 Osborne, 43.
102 Friedrich von Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 5. Cited as in: Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 38.

Osborne's words, "at the epistemological level of aesthetic *appearance*, that is, *illusion* – the illusion of self-determination of the object of aesthetic judgement; at his best, at the level of an aesthetically modified practical reason."[103] Finally, Osborne refers to Novalis, who came close to an ontological concept of art as a "distinctive form of presentation of truth"[104] by reworking Fichte's ideas, and to Friedrich Schelling's "metaphysically invested" conception of art as the 'organon of philosophy'.[105] This is how Jena Romanticism's philosophy of art overcomes Kant's 'aesthetic regime of art' in favour of art as a "supra-aesthetic artistic regime of truth."[106] (Osborne does not disclose what the term "supra-aesthetic" means, but proceeding from the general logic of the text, one can assume that it implies a regime that both remains aesthetic and is *above* it.) Romanticism therefore worked out, in Osborne's terms, an "at once *transcendental*, *metaphysical* and (unlike its later, Heideggerian version) *concretely historical*: historical-ontological theory of art."[107]

Romanticist criticism did not impede the Kantian line of 'art as aesthetic' from developing into a paradigmatic tradition in the 19th and 20th centuries, but rather resulted in splitting philosophical reflection on art into two coexistent trains of thought. As pictured in Osborne, these are two "parallel and competing, though to some extent overlapping traditions [...] The first runs from Kant through nineteenth-century aestheticism (Baudelaire, Pater, Wilde), via Roger Fry and Clive Bell, to Greenberg's later writings [...]. It rests upon an aesthetic theory of the arts, with its distant origins in Renaissance naturalism and the new science of optics and its

103 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 43–44.
104 Osborne, 44.
105 Osborne, 45.
106 Osborne, 44.
107 Osborne, 45.

mainstream in an empirical reduction of Kant's transcendentalism to a psychology – at best, a phenomenology – of perception [...]. The second tradition runs from philosophical Romanticism through Hegel, Duchamp, surrealism and the revolutionary Romanticism of Constructivism, to conceptual art and its consequences in what has been called the 'postmedium condition', but which I prefer to think of as the transmedia condition of postconceptual art."[108]

Critical Remarks on Osborne's Theory from the Standpoint of Hegel's Critique of the Jena Romanticists' Philosophical Aestheticism

In the historical and theoretical narrative proposed by Osborne, the Romanticist philosophy of art obviously acquires exceptional weight: it anticipates Duchamp and even the Soviet Constructivism of the 1920s, which Osborne characterised as a 'Romanticist' movement, as well as Conceptual art as the peak of the Romanticist line of artistic and art-theoretical thought on contemporaneity. At the same time, with Romanticism being deduced as the main counterpoint to the Kantian aesthetic tradition, it seems to push the Hegelian philosophy of art into the background, as Osborne only mentions it in a passing.

Indeed – as Osborne demonstrates – Romanticism "ontologises" art, making the latter virtually central to its entire philosophical system, thereby opposing itself to the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which is rooted in morality and universalism, and in particular to the philosophy of Kant (although Osborne primarily sees this as an objection to Kant's 'aestheticism'). Furthermore, it is also known that a number of theses in Schelling's philosophy of art anticipate some later premises of Hegel's *Aesthetics*: for instance, both German philosophers share an understanding of philosophy and art as forms

108 Osborne, 46.

of absolute spirit; both are critical of the mimetic idea of art as an imitation of nature; both put the beauty of art above the beauty of nature and see *concept,* first and foremost, to be the subject matter of the philosophy of art. Their positions on several issues coincide to a certain extent, which could even make one consider some theses of Hegel's philosophy of art to be not solely his invention.[109]

Nevertheless, by presenting Romanticism as the primary criticism of the Kantian model of 'art as aesthetic', Osborne shifts the focus from the fundamental characteristic of Romanticism, namely, it being part of so-called Philosophical Aestheticism. Philosophical Aestheticism, an ideological paradigm of theoretical thought from the turn of the 18th–19th centuries, considered art to be the key issue of philosophy, seeking to replace theology and the moral preconditions of the Enlightenment with it, in other words, undertaking a kind of *aestheticisation* of philosophy.

As one researcher of German philosophy, Yury Perov, points out, it is precisely this aestheticisation of philosophy, this Philosophical Aestheticism of Romanticism (paradigmatic for Schelling's philosophy in particular), which becomes the object of implacable criticism from Hegel. The main premise of Philosophical Aestheticism – the idea that beauty overcomes the rupture between the ideal and the real, between subject and object; as well as the idea of art as the "universal organon of philosophy" (Schelling), a higher implementation of the divine absolute – is understood in Hegel as totally delusory. Art is indeed a form of absolute spirit, Hegel believes, but it is the *lowest* form, as art is by nature 'thinking of imagery', which means it is not capable of reaching the level of logical philosophical thought.[110]

109 Perov, 'Foreword'.
110 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 9.

> Hegel overcame Schelling's ontological and epistemological aestheticism [*sic*] through the very construction of his philosophy of spirit (which was also applied in *Aesthetics*), in which art appears as the first and lowest form of absolute spirit, preceding the religion of revelation, and philosophy – which enabled Hegel, having made a reservation about the inappropriateness of "speaking here" (that is, in the text of *Aesthetics*) about this form of aestheticism, to direct the spearhead of his criticism against the Romanticist concept of the 'aestheticisation of life'. Hegel regarded Romanticist aestheticism, which proceeded from the principle of subjective irony, as an extreme manifestation of subjectivism and the loss of one's serious attitude towards the content of life and reality.[111]

And the main point: for Hegel, art is a form of absolute spirit whose historical vocation is *exhausted*. Art is a "thing of the past", yet remains in the present, albeit in a sublated condition, and whose significance we are to rethink.[112] This fundamental thesis of Hegel's naturally undermines the Romanticist idea of art as the "universal organon of philosophy."

In this regard, Hegel's criticism of Philosophical Aestheticism makes one take a different view of the historical and theoretical narrative proposed by Osborne. For instance, the avant-gardist view of art as a hopelessly 'decrepit thing' that must be left behind seems more consonant with Hegel's aforementioned position than with the ontologisation of art in Romanticism, with its take on art as a potential philosophical model of human society. The original momentum for the historical avant-garde was the idea of going 'beyond art' rather than absolutising it: such were Dada's 'antiartistic'

111 Perov, 'Foreword', 24–25. (My translation from Russian - I.O.).
112 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 11.

manifestos; the same idea is voiced in Duchamp's question about whether it is possible to create works that are "not 'art'."[113] (Malevich pushed this even further, stating that the "[...] artist themselves is a delusion of the past."[114]) Let alone Duchamp's assertion about the overvalued social significance of art,[115] which in turn barely corresponds to the Romanticists' totalising idea of a 'republic of art'. Furthermore, it should be also recalled that Soviet Constructivism, which Osborne also interprets in a Romanticist key, historically developed into (and, in fact, obtained its ultimate realisation in) Productivism (Proizvodstvennichestvo), whose claim was something more radical than a break with the aesthetic: namely, the entire sublation of art through its dissolution in (or merging with) both industrial production and everyday life (but *not* vice versa, as it was viewed in Romanticism).[116] Finally, the fundamental claim of Conceptual art – to redefine art through a kind of 'ridding art of itself' – cannot be overlooked. Considering this, the line drawn by Osborne from Romanticism to Duchamp, Constructivism, and Conceptual art does not seem entirely convincing.

In light of Hegel's criticism, the premises of the Romanticist philosophy of art do not appear to be that much of an objection to Kant's aesthetic line (as Osborne strives to present them, and which is the title issue of his text), but rather a radical aestheticisation.

113 "Can one make works which are not works of 'art'?" (Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 74).

114 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka [Suprematism: 34 drawings]* (Vitebsk, 1920).

115 "[...] I doubt it's [art's] value deep down. [...] People who talk about art have turned it into something functional by saying, "man needs art to refresh himself". [...] I don't believe in the essential aspect of art. One could create a society that rejects art; the Russians weren't far from doing it. It isn't funny, but it's a thing to be considered." (Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), 100).

116 Boris Arvatov, *Art and Production*, ed. John Roberts and Aleksei Penzin, trans. Shushan Avagyan (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

Apparently, Osborne himself understands the problematic nature of this aspect, and stipulates that although the Kant's project of 'art as aesthetic' is "ignorant" from the standpoint of Romanticism, the alternative 'Romanticist' project of "art as a historical ontology" does not reject the aesthetic at all; on the contrary, Osborne stresses that "As the registration of the feeling associated with presentations to the intellect, aesthetic is an ineliminable [*sic*] aspect of the early Romantics' ontological conception of art."[117] According to Osborne, the difference between Romanticism and the Kantian model is that the aesthetic is not regarded as the *defining* aspect of art in Romanticism. In other words, Romanticism objects not to the concept of the aesthetic as such, but to defining art *solely* in terms of the aesthetic. The misplaced emphasis on the aesthetic is, therefore, the only problem: after Kant, some artistic and theoretical traditions mistakenly accept the aesthetic as a key concept of philosophical discourse on art.

As to the contra-aesthetic position of Conceptual art, Osborne believes that the theoretical significance of its stance should not be overrated, as from his point of view, it was not in fact a genuinely philosophical attitude, but rather a *strategy* employed by the new generation of artists in their struggle against the hegemony of art critics, and was only 'wrapped in theoretical packaging'. Indeed, professional art critics, and especially Greenberg, saw Kantian philosophical aesthetics as the most fundamental discourse on art, and it was precisely because of this that it was attacked by the conceptualist generation; the very fact that the artists presented themselves

117 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 45.

as theoreticians and philosophers was important, that is, they took a position of intellectual power.[118]

Osborne argues that, in reality, the aesthetic dimension of art remains intact and unshaken in Conceptual art, too: for even in reducing the 'materiality' of artworks to a bare textual form, the conceptualists could not completely break with the aesthetic, as the

118 "The crisis of Greenbergian criticism (essentially a crisis in its medium-based conception of the artwork, its 'specific' Modernism) thus simultaneously registered a crisis in the ontology of the artwork and established the conditions for the resolution of this crisis through the renovation of the romantic ideology of artistic intentionality in a radically new, critical-discursive guise. Philosophy was the *means* for this usurpation of critical power by a new generation of artists [i.e., the 1960s' conceptualists – I.O.]; the means by which they could simultaneously address the crisis of the ontology of the artwork (through an art-definitional conception of their practice) and achieve social control over the meaning of their work." And further: "For Kosuth, along with others of his generation, lacked a pre-established artistic persona, such as Duchamp had derived from his period of infamy as a painter. Their practice of self-curation was thus faced with the additional task of constructing an artistic persona from scratch. Hence the importance of the critical, self-legitimating philosophical writings of the first generation of Conceptual artists to the status of their work as 'art': as guarantors and guardians of their right to nomination. The authority of philosophy was used to establish a right to nomination. Without this critical supplement, their nominations are unlikely to have been able to sustain their claims to legitimation." (Peter Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy', in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 49–50, 60).

fonts used in their works still retained an aesthetic quality[119]. The point is only that the aesthetic should *not* be regarded as the *main* aspect of art, although it is still an integral, inseparable part of it.[120]

The conclusion that Osborne comes to somewhat relativises his discussion of 'art beyond aesthetic':

> It is [the role of the aesthetic], however, ontologically both partial and relational. More generally, the artistic significance of aesthetic must be judged in the context of the historically shifting relations between aesthetic and other – cognitive, semantic, social, political and ideological – aspects of artworks. And the balance and meaning

119 Here, in my view, Osborne somewhat problematically conflates the notion of the sensible in general terms (that is, that which refers to all that which is perceptible through the senses) with the aesthetic as referring to art and taste (probably mixing it up with Kant's early definition of the aesthetic, which has nothing to do with either art or taste; see *Transcendental Aesthetics*). As a result, such aspects of both Kosuth's and Art & Language's works that are just (and inevitably) perceptible visually (such as fonts) are misinterpreted as 'aesthetic': "Kosuth's work attacked the aesthetic definition of the artwork in the name of linguistic meaning. [...] his [*Kosuth's*] own work functioned largely by placing language *within* the visual field. How can visual representations of language be purified of the pre-aestheticized structures of handwriting and typographical design? [...] it [*the aesthetic*] is an irreducible [*sic*] dimension of the logic of the artistic field to present visual form, however attenuated or seemingly irrelevant."; "[*with Art & Language*,] the problem of the visual dimension of public display, which vitiates Kosuth's self-understanding, was to arise again as soon as the Art & Language project moved out of the spaces of its own community dispatches into the international art world. Like Kosuth, Art & Language rapidly acquired a 'look', which conveyed a quite different social meaning to the one they intended." (Osborne, 61–62, 64). A good counterargument is provided by a remark from Ian Burn (Art & Language) back in 1970, that is, during the period in question: "The presentation of art writing "as art" does not mean that the form of the words is aesthetically significant." (Ian Burn, 'Conceptual Art as Art', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 190).

120 "It is the ironic historical function of theoretical or strong Conceptualism, through its identification with philosophy, to have reasserted the ineliminability of the aesthetic as a necessary element of the artwork, via a failed negation. At the same time, however, it also definitively demonstrated the radical insufficiency of this element to the meaning-producing capacity of the work." (Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy', 65).

> will be different in different kinds of art. Furthermore, these relations between the aesthetic and other aspects of artworks derive their critical meaning from their relations to the equally historically variable aesthetic dimension of other (non-art) cultural forms – today, predominantly but by no means exclusively: commodity design and display, advertising, mass media and communications technologies – the whole non-art aspects of the apparatus of visual culture.

I in no way mean to say that Osborne's general scheme is wrong. On the contrary, I completely agree with the basic idea of distinguishing the aesthetic from the conceptual. At the same time, one cannot fail to notice that Osborne's argument is ambivalent. On the one hand, the opposition of 'art as aesthetic' to 'art as conceptual' is introduced as the key theoretical conflict, the 'bone of contention' between the Kantian aesthetic tradition and the Romanticist 'ontological and conceptual' take on art. On the other hand, it is argued that the aesthetic aspect of art is generic to art *per se*; that is, the aesthetic is inevitably present in both 'art as aesthetic' and 'art as conceptual'. In other words, "Art Versus Aesthetic (Jena Romanticism contra Kant)", which is put into the title as a key theoretical conflict, turns out to be rather a secondary disagreement. If, as in Osborne, the aesthetic is *not* a defining aspect of art, it raises the question of how it can simultaneously serve as a truly fundamental separator.

Either Art or the Aesthetic: Keti Chukhrov on the 'Aesthetic Schism' in Modern Art Theory

Like Osborne, Chukhrov sees the philosophical prerequisites for the avant-garde's contra-aesthetic stance in German philosophy, though her perspective is slightly different. Once art reached its

abstract, non-figurative, non-mimetic mode, Chukhrov says that this immediately posed the question of whether art still retained its aesthetic dimension; in other words, whether Modernism could still be included in the domain of [Kantian] aesthetics. Theoretical reflections on this major 'iconoclastic turn' in the art of the 20th century revealed a deeper rupture between the 'phenomenologically transcendental' approach (conventionally, the Kantian-Husserlian) on the one hand, and the 'ideologically conceptual' one (that is, the Hegelian one) on the other. The first tradition was initially represented by Clement Greenberg and his disciple Rosalind Krauss; later, this line was partly joined by George Didi-Huberman and Jacques Rancière. The second (Hegelian) tradition has concurrently been developed by Theodor Adorno, Peter Bürger, and (partly) Alain Badiou.[121]

The heirs to the first, 'Kantian-Husserlian' line – Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss – still place Modernism within the domain of aesthetic consideration by means of revising Kantian aesthetics through a kind of phenomenological lens. In their adjusted model of Kantian aesthetics, Kant's concepts of sensibility and the 'disinterested' aesthetic gaze remain, but the focus shifts to the function of perception and consciousness itself. Such is, for instance, Rosalind Krauss' concept of the 'grid', which stems from the phenomenological idea of the transcendental laws of optics. As in Husserl's phenomenology, the logic of perception precedes what is perceived: Krauss' 'grid' – a retinal pattern of perception, conditioned by the physical structure of the human eye and mind, precedes the image. Consequently, there is no such thing as

121 Keti Chukhrov, 'Estetiki nikogda ne bylo ili Adorno vs Krauss [Aesthetics Has Never Existed: Adorno Versus Krauss]', *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal [Moscow Art Magazine]* 97 (2016). (All of the quotations are translated from Russian by me – I. O.)

a depiction of reality; what we see in art is nothing but variations of that phenomenological 'grid'. From this point of view, even the avant-garde and Conceptual art, in spite of all their 'counter-retinal' and 'contra-aesthetic' manifestos, are just particular modes of the representation of phenomena – the human perceptive psychophysiology, conscious or subconscious (rather than a material form of idea or a realisation of concept). For example, Duchamp's *Fountain* is then understood not as a conceptual object, meant to re-define art *per se*, but as a visual realisation of an 'image' from the artist's subconsciousness. For Krauss, image is conceptual, concept is visual.[122]

Chukhrov states that, in the Greenberg/Krauss tradition, Modernism is understood as no more than a renewal of aesthetics, in which new artistic approaches and methods are merely a means to the end of maintaining the *status quo*, which is the idea of an artwork as an aesthetic object. That is, from the Greenbergian perspective, art after abstraction is still optical, 'retinal', sensible; the only difference from traditional art is that it now reflects on the transcendental laws of perception *per se* rather than on 'reality' itself. The separation between traditional and Modern art, between the figurative and the abstract, can therefore be eliminated, as the epistemological status of art, along with the institution of aesthetics as a theoretical discourse on art, remains intact.[123]

The 'Hegelian-Adornoian' take on Modern art is quite the opposite: "what is fundamental is the idea, the concept, the re-writing of the previous principles of art, as well as the historical Subject itself, who generates the idea. The perceptive, sensory parameters are secondary," says Chukhrov. Art is therefore understood as a realisation of thought, an objectification of concept, a formalisation of the "idea

122 Chukhrov.
123 Chukhrov.

of truth or that of the absence of truth", but *not* as a reflection on the transcendental laws of perception or a representation of unconscious processes.[124]

Here, Chukhrov turns to the historical philosophical background, showing that it was not Modernism that suddenly split art and art theory into 'phenomenologically transcendental' and 'ideologically conceptual' paradigms, but rather that Modernism has actualised certain contradictions within the philosophy of art, making the existing conflict apparent. For instance, Chukhrov says, while the *sensible* in Kant's aesthetic doctrine is linked to perception and judgements of taste, the *sensible* in Hegel concerns a "sensuous ability to penetrate what is taking place in the material world or that which was thought over by a speculative mind" (that is, the issue of truth). Similarly, the category of the beautiful, which in Kant's doctrine is linked to aesthetic 'pleasure in absence of any interest', in Hegel deals with the faculty of accessing the ideal (regardless of the fact that the latter is impossible in material reality). Unlike Kant's philosophy, Hegel's aesthetics (even though 'aesthetics' is, for Hegel, a 'mere name' for the philosophy of art) sees art as undergoing a dramatic historical change, that is, losing its ability to express the truth of the time, while simultaneously continuing to exist, and thereby obtaining *negativity* as its genuine new foundation. This is the very line in Hegel's aesthetics that was inherited and developed by Adorno, for whom (despite certain irreconcilabilities with Hegel's understanding of the relation of art to truth) negativity becomes the kernel of radical Modern art, its inner motor. In the 'Hegelian-Adornoian' perspective, "art can exist only on the level of a total, negative, constant radicalisation, leading to its self-destruction [...]

124 Chukhrov.

a total *ex nihilo*, an attempt of creating something 'out of nothing,'" Chukhrov concludes.[125]

Critical Remarks on the Ideologisation of the Contra- and Pro-Aesthetic Positions

What Chukhrov brings to the analysis is the political dimension of the separation of art from the aesthetic. For both Chukhrov and Osborne, the division of art into conceptual and aesthetic modes is fundamental; but while Osborne considers the issue of the aesthetic to be somewhat overrated (for example, the conceptualists' 'attack on aesthetics' was more of a strategy to gain theoretical legitimisation than a genuine philosophical stance), this issue is of exceptional importance for Chukhrov: understanding art as aesthetic is not just a delusion, but rather a counter-progressive tendency; art today can be either aesthetic or 'art proper'. Thus, the opposing principles appear as irreconcilable antagonists, and they are antagonists in the ideological sense: while an understanding of art as aesthetic is linked to the conformist and conservative in art and theory, the criticism and negation of the aesthetic is deduced to be a Leftist, progressive political vector opposing the reactionary one.

Chukhrov's arguments, although they sound fair and convincing, make it necessary to outline some reasonable limits on how applicable political judgments are to the issues surrounding art and aesthetics. A political polarisation of art does indeed take place, which is well reflected in the canonical art history of Modern art: the historical avant-garde (with the apparently sole exception of Italian Futurism) is strongly associated with the Left – either with leftist anarchism or with the Leninist version of the Soviet project; conceptualists of the 1960s are known for being left-wingers, critics of

125 Chukhrov.

capitalist institutions and opponents of the Vietnam War (unlike some of their antagonists – the painters who were "waving stars and stripes").[126]

However, the political connotations of the avant-garde with the Left, and 'conservative modernism' with the Right and reaction, should not be regarded as an automatically established reference. As a number of studies show, the picture was more complex: it was not only Italian Futurism that willingly entered into an alliance with the Right; for example, sympathy for the ideas of the 'conservative revolution' can also be found within the Russian avant-garde, surprisingly coexisting with the Bolshevik ultra-leftist cultural context of the first years of Soviet power.[127]

Individual empirical cases and exceptions will not, however, be material if the analysis is predominantly speculative and correctly formulated at the level of concept (although one should bear in mind that no theory can be completely politically neutral[128]). Yet it is another matter when the relevance of a particular theory to the

126 See, for example, Charles Harrison's remark: "it's important to remember that part of the motivation behind the split that was going on in America — to a certain extent mirrored in England — was one between the Left and the Right at the time of the Vietnam War. Those who identified with postmodernism and Conceptual art in America were often members of the Art Workers' Coalition, opponents of the American strategy in Vietnam, the invasion of Cambodia, and so on. They were picketing museums with placards saying "Against War, Racism, and Oppression," and had a strong contingent of feminists. Hard-line modernists, post-painterly abstractionists, were mostly defenders of the American policy in Vietnam. I remember Greenberg saying at the end of an interview, when he was off the microphone, "I know what we should've done: we should've sent in another 20,000 troops and held them off the Vietnamese coast." Artists like Ken Noland were putting up American flags outside their lofts." (Zdenka Badovinac et al., 'Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part I - Journal #40', *E-Flux*, no. 40 (December 2012), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/60277/conceptual-art-and-eastern-europe-part-i/).

127 See, e.g.: Anatolii V. Rykov, 'Nikolay Punin's Views on Art and Politics in the Early Soviet Period', *The Social Sciences* 11, no. 19 (2001).

128 The classic work on the topic is: Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1936).

subject of research is questionable. This is close to what happened with cultural criticism in the 1980s, which, impacted by the then-influential academic trend of 'visual studies', tended to redefine discourse on art by largely replacing art theory and art history with the theory and history of representation. The issue surrounding the distinction between art and the aesthetic was therefore placed within a system of binary ideological coordinates: there is either the leftist, emancipatory art that gives voice to the oppressed; or the right-wing, colonialist one that speaks on behalf of the ruling classes. Consequently, 'anti-aesthetic' art is the former and 'aesthetic' art the latter (the manifesto of this still-influential position was Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic*[129]). This division naturally gives us the impression of clarity. However, this kind of 'either/or' polarisation was established through the very lens of representation itself, resulting in a conflation of the aesthetic/conceptual dichotomy with the categories of *form* and *content*, and consequently confusing these concepts of art with the meanings of individual works; this in turn made it possible to directly correlate individual works with particular social groups or political positions that art, either voluntarily or involuntarily, supposedly 'represents'. But even more critically, it enabled a highly problematic link between the aesthetic and the formal. For instance, the rejection of figurativeness in Modernism became regarded as an opposition to social engagement, that is, as an opposition to the progressive. If the function of art is the 'representation of cultural forms' (as Foster claims in *The Anti-Aesthetic*), the avant-garde cannot be regarded as anything other than a detour from art's genuine vocation – because its kernel is clearly a break with any existing cultural forms. Consequently, the only possible

129 Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

counterpoint to 'art as aesthetic' is provided by realism (regardless of the fact that the latter is an essentially aesthetic mode of art).

The binary logic of ideology cannot be transferred to the level of a philosophical concept (in this case, an art-theoretical concept) other than dialectically, that is, one cannot simply label the aesthetic take on art as 'right-wing' and the anti-aesthetic as 'leftist'. A philosophical look at the history of the avant-garde instead shows that the relationship between the aesthetic and the conceptual is not akin to a static confrontation between good and evil; these two modes of art are instead contextual, like virtual 'buttons' on today's electronic devices. In this sense, Walter Benjamin's much-quoted maxim about the opposition of the leftist politicisation of art to the fascist aestheticisation of politics successfully demonstrates the contextuality of these categories: the aesthetic becomes 'right-wing' when linked to the political – linked as a *predicate*, not as a subject. Further discussion of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the avant-garde* will show that the condition of possibility for the avant-garde as a *self-criticism of art* arose from aestheticism. Therefore, an unambiguous assessment of aestheticism as a static 'reactionary' phenomenon is incorrect; it is necessary to see this process in its dialectical development. Considering art as inextricably linked to its social and political context, Bürger nevertheless warns against generalisations based on superficial connotations, such as interpreting the avant-garde and the self-criticism of art as the manifestation of a "crisis of bourgeois society" (the latter should instead be viewed as a "synthesis of the nonsynchronisms in the development of the various subsystems", one of which is art).[130] In this regard, Bürger's thesis can serve as an objection to an overly generalising negative assessment of the 'aesthetic' stance: "Attempts to annul what is contradictory in the

130 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 23, 24.

development of art, by playing off a 'moralizing' against an 'autonomous' art, miss the point because they overlook both what is liberating in autonomous and what is regressive in moralizing art."[131]

The Revision of Kantian Aesthetics in Postmodern Art Theory: Thierry de Duve's Re-Aestheticisation of Readymade

Of great interest are both Osborne and Chukhrov's remarks concerning the tendency to 're-aestheticise' the avant-garde in art theory, which largely stems from the Greenbergian tradition of art criticism and is quite common in postmodern French philosophy.

Frequently, the re-aestheticisation of the historical avant-garde takes the form of a mere non-mention of the contra-aesthetic stance – just leaving out de-aestheticisation altogether; the latter seems to slip out of sight, suggesting that it is not regarded as a relevant theoretical position. When raising the question of philosophical aesthetics in relation to contemporary art, this is not untypical even for the works of 'big names' in the philosophy of the last decades. For instance, neither Duchamp's 'anaesthetic' theses, nor their reception and theoretical re-framing in Conceptual art, are considered by Jacques Rancière in his influential theories of the 'aesthetic unconscious' and 'aesthetic regime of art'.[132] The same can be said of the equally influential 'inaesthetics' of Alain Badiou,[133] who undertakes to revise the issue surrounding the relation of art and philosophy to truth, but seems to be uninterested in the avant-garde and

131 Bürger, 40.

132 Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009); Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes', *New Left Review*, no. 14 (2002): 133–51. As Peter Osborne sarcastically puts it, the 'aesthetic regime' is that by which "Rancière appears to believe art is still governed" (Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 9).

133 Alain Badiou and Alberto Toscano, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005).

Conceptual art's criticism of aesthetics, which makes his work an innovative version of traditional aesthetics rather than overcoming it – and therefore its relevance to the (post) avant-garde tradition is questionable.[134]

It is also worth mentioning that the current focus of aesthetic debates is clearly drifting towards 'ethics versus aesthetics'. Obviously, the content of such discussions is ethical and political questions in relation to art. That is, what comes across under the name of 'aesthetics' is clearly just *art*, so that the former is simply conflated with the latter. It would just be an ignorant omission, were it not to lead to a certain ideological distortion. Shrouded in a dignified ethical pathos, this smuggles in a tacit, conservative idea that art is some kind of untouchable, a-historical form that has never been challenged to its core. It is as if neither the avant-gardist antiartistic programme nor the conceptualist de-aestheticisation ever happened; the avant-garde tradition turned out not to be an ontological self-criticism of art and a 'rebellion of art against itself', but rather the mere passing of a 'style', just one of the many; the difference between traditional art and 'art after the avant-garde' is only to be found in the specific *topics* and ethical questions that art faces in one or another historical period, or – at best – in the artistic media and devices employed. As the very notion of the aesthetic remains unquestioned, the avant-garde and Conceptual art fit into the default aesthetic tradition. There is clearly no substantial theoretical countercriticism in this position towards avant-gardist criticism of aes

134 "Badiou's 'inaesthetics' [...], while apparently the opposite of aesthetics, is actually just a paradoxical, alternative formulation of the radically singularizing vision of aesthetic as the philosophical truth of art. As the description of 'the strictly intra-philosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art', inaesthetics is *precisely* what has traditionally been designated by 'aesthetics' as the discourse of the aesthetic conception of art." (Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 9).

thetics, but rather a form of ignoring the opponent, an omission of it. I would call this 'ideological re-aestheticisation'.

Of much greater interest are the attempts to re-aestheticise the avant-garde and conceptualism *theoretically*. The key author to be mentioned in this regard is Thierry de Duve, whose books *Au nom de l'art* and *Kant after Duchamp* demonstrated a large-scale effort to return both Duchamp and the 'art after Duchamp' to the bosom of Kantian aesthetics, while simultaneously aiming to remain faithful to the avant-garde gesture of the inventor of readymades.[135]

Duve's central premise is twofold. On the one hand, he clearly sees Duchamp's readymades as a historical challenge to the classic philosophy of art. On the other hand, he believes that the gap between art and the aesthetic that was formulated by the conceptualists as an imperative for all the 'art after Duchamp' (reinterpreted *by* Duve into the radical "either art or aesthetic") is a "false antinomy" that "needs to be resolved."[136]

Duve's assertion that the contradiction between 'art as aesthetic' and 'art as conceptual' does require any resolution is disputable – should it not be developed and deepened instead? However, the author finds a solution within the framework of that task: to wrest Duchamp's subversive gesture from the hands of the conceptualists of the 1960s with their declaratively de-aestheticising stance,

135 Duve, Thierry de. Duve, *Au Nom de l'art*; Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.

136 "[...] either aesthetics, in Greenberg's sense, or art, in Kosuth's sense; either taste or concept. Unless this contradiction, or antinomy, is resolved, we are forever caught in the following double bind: either we believe, together with Kosuth, that Duchamp's readymades "changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function," and that "all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually."[Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*] Or, we don't believe that the nature of art has been changed in any way or that the judgment of taste, as it applies to works of modernist painting and sculpture as well as to the whole of ancient art, has lost its rights." (Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 300).

redefining it in such a way that the contradiction between Duchamp and Kantian aesthetics would be eliminated (and consequently, the conceptualists' claim for abolishing the aesthetic regime of art would appear groundless).

Predictably, Duve then targets Kosuth and his assertion that Duchamp's readymades irreversibly changed the very nature of art by eliminating the aesthetic regime, so that art has only been able to exist conceptually since then.[137] The weak point in Kosuth's manifesto, Duve believes, was the fact that its actual agenda was to set out a counter-discourse on art capable of undermining Greenberg's theoretical positions. As the latter was known for his Kantianism, Kosuth first attacks the category of taste and the idea of art as aesthetic.[138] Consequently, Duve defines Kosuth as a dogmatist, his manifesto "irksome and self-serving,"[139] and appeals to the late Greenberg, who believed that Duchamp's invention only proves that art coincides with the aesthetic.[140]

Duve's key thesis is that Duchamp's readymades are a modern form of Kant's *aesthetic judgment*. That is, it is the kind of aesthetic judgment (a sort of 'performative' judgment) in which the subject of the aesthetic is not beauty, but *art per se*. To create 'art after Duchamp' therefore means to make a performative judgment on

137 Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy'.

138 In other words, Duve, just like Osborne, sees Kosuth's theses as a weapon in the conceptualists' struggle against the usurpation of art discourse by "writing professionals", rather than as proper theorising: "*Concept* was Kosuth's reply to *taste* and *beauty*, and the *separation between aesthetics and art* was his alternative to Greenberg's total overlapping of art and the aesthetic." (Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 295–96).

139 Duve, 247.

140 "Since [Duchamp's readymades] it has become clearer too, that anything that can be experienced at all can be experienced aesthetically; and that anything that can be experienced aesthetically can also be experienced as art. In short, art and the aesthetic don't just overlap, they coincide." (Greenberg, 'Counter-Avant-Garde', 129., as it is cited in: Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 293).

what art is – by exhibiting a particular object and naming it "art". Accordingly, Duve suggests a rereading of Kant's *Third Critique*, replacing the word "beautiful" (namely, the category of the beautiful) with the word "art".

The argument proceeds as follows. What Kant divides into two different faculties – *judgment of taste*, which lies in the competence of beholder; and the function of "establishing a new rule" of art, which lies in the competence of *genius* (in Kant, the latter is not, of course, a Romanticist-style figure, but rather a model for an ideal artistic faculty) – are, in 'art after Duchamp', merged into one: the creation of a work of art becomes identical to making a judgment about what art is, and this is the key competence of an (avant-garde or conceptual) artist, as established by Duchamp. Duve states that art is a "proper name", and is produced by performative naming. Thus, he believes, the antinomy of "either art or aesthetic" (as well as that of "either taste or concept") is resolved:

> There is no other way of doing it [resolving the antinomy] — and no other way of accounting for the readymades' existence as art in continuity with both its past and its future — than to suppose that "this is art," the sentence through which the readymades were produced, expresses an aesthetic judgment, in the Kantian sense, and that the antinomy in question is none other than Kant's antinomy of taste, rephrased as the antinomy of art.[141]

> [...] with the readymade, estimating and producing art are condensed into one and the same act, we are led to suppose that "taste" and "genius" also merge into one and the same faculty. And since Kant defines genius as "the faculty of aesthetic Ideas," we are led

141 Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 301.

> to project this definition onto that of taste, that is, the faculty of "merely reflective aesthetic judgments." [...] to reread Kant after Duchamp, replacing the judgment "this is beautiful" by the judgment "this is art," is to consider that the word "art" conflates genius and taste and refers both to an "inexponible" aesthetic Idea and to an "indemonstrable" rational Idea.[142]

If Duve's notion of 'judgment' were synonymous with Kosuth's term 'proposition', this would not contradict Kosuth's thesis that a work of art is a definition of art. However, they are not synonymous in Kant either (as previously demonstrated in *Part I*). Duve, meanwhile, is certainly committed to the Kantian three-fold conceptual apparatus of 'the *judgment*, the *aesthetic* and *art'*; so for Duve, Duchamp's gesture does no break with the aesthetic (as Kosuth insists), but rather *expands* the aesthetic to objects that have not previously been included in the domain of the aesthetic. Thus, it appears as if the essential rupture did not occur, art was not fundamentally changed, and did not cease to be what it was before – only its domain (as *aesthetic*) has been radically expanded, so that from Duchamp onwards, it can be extended to any object (in the spirit of Joseph Beuys or Clement Greenberg – it's a matter of *taste*).

The argument compels Duve to disavow Duchamp's programmatic thesis that his readymades are based on the idea of a "total absence of good or bad taste ... in fact a complete anesthesia."[143] Duve suggests that Duchamp's statement should not be taken seriously, arguing that abandoning the judgment of taste in no way means abandoning the aesthetic: "That would be simple if we could only believe him, but we can't [sic!]. Absolute visual indifference is

142 Duve, 313–14.

143 Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 141.

something impossible, and Duchamp left in his writings many clues showing that he was aware of that."[144]

Here, Duve refers to a letter published by Hans Richter in his seminal book on the history of Dada. In this letter, Duchamp (or Richter through Duchamp's mouth) sneers that the Neo-Dadaists (the then-name for pop art artists) aestheticise his invention, which was initially conceived as a challenge to aesthetics:

> When I discovered the readymades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my readymades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle rack and the urinal in their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.[145]

It is known that the attribution of this letter is doubtful, and its author is most likely Richter himself (Duve points this out too),[146] but this does not seem to be that significant for Duve, as the quote convexly denotes the main point that serves Duve with an argument: a resentment on the part of the pre-war generation of artists belonging to the historical avant-garde, whose efforts at establishing 'anti-art' ended up with art being returned to the aesthetic framework of the past. In this sense, it is no coincidence that Duve refers specifically to Richter, who is very focused on this resentment.

It is worth taking a closer look at the Richter excerpt. Apart from an understandable scepticism among avant-garde veterans

144 Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 294.

145 Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 207–8.

146 See: William Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's Fountain' Aesthetic Object, Icon, or Anti-Art', in *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve, 2nd printing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992)., p. 179 n. 53 (as mentioned in: Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 295).

towards the post-war generation of artists, Richter's book offers one of the first attempts to analyse why, in Neo-Dada, the Dadaist idea of anti-art has lost its subversive power. The reason, Richter argues, is that the intention behind Dadaist works, such as Duchamp's readymades, was fundamentally distinct from that behind traditional art objects; their very nature was completely different. They were not meant for contemplative enjoyment of form, artistic skilfulness, or 'content'; they were, instead, thrown as a challenge to art itself and its system, and when this role had been played out, they simply lost the initial meaning conferred on them by the artists; they became themselves again – a urinal, a shovel, a bottle drying rack. They were essentially 'disposable' objects, so admiring them in their material perceptivity as physical objects is nonsensical, and any attempts to repeat the idea behind them can only bring a kind of a 'lowered' aesthetic pleasure instead of the subversive effect of the originals. That which was directed against the system is now accepted by the latter with aesthetic delight; the subversive impulse turned into kitsch: instead of rebellion, one gets 'garden gnomes', Richter concludes.[147]

This loss of subversive content in the post-war neo-avant-garde, as described by Richter, can indeed be interpreted in favour of Duve's Kantian revision of the avant-garde as follows: Dada would

147 "They [readymades] were not intended by Duchamp to stimulate meditation or artistic emotions, they were intended to shock - to tear the beholder away from the stagnant meaninglessness of his habitual attitude to art, his conventional artistic experience. Such a shock is not repeatable. [...] They no longer have any anti-aesthetic or anti-artistic function whatever, only a practical function." (Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 208); and then Richter's criticism of Neo-Dada: "The anti-aesthetic gesture of the 'ready-made', and the blasphemies of Picabia, now reappear in the guise of folk-art – as comic strips or as crushed automobile bodies. They are neither non-art or anti-art but objects to be enjoyed. The feelings they evoke in the beholder's mind belong on the artistic level of a garden dwarf. The pleasure offered to the public is plain infantilism [...] Uncompromising revolt has been replaced by unconditional adjustment." (Richter, 205); and further: "This [Neo-Dada] is not a rebellion, but the opposite: an adjustment to so-called popular taste, a deliberate return to the garden-dwarfs." (Richter, 209).

then appear as an analogue to Kant's *genius*, who establishes a new rule for art (rejecting the old one). This new rule then receives appreciation and recognition: the next generation of artists adopts it (instead of establishing their own new rule), but it is no longer able to produce its past innovative and subversive effect – this is why Neo-Dada (pop art) "does not work".

The expense of projecting such a Kantian scheme onto the avant-garde is a relativisation of the aesthetic. It is as if its borders are disappearing: for in Duve, 'after Duchamp', anything can be recognised as aesthetic, and thus (following Duve's logic), anything that can be the subject of a 'performative aesthetic judgment' can also be appreciated and recognised as art. This conclusion is logically problematic: for if 'anything could be art', strictly speaking, nothing could be art. Here we run into a dead end, as the place where the concept (of art) should be found turns out to be empty in Duve. But Duve bypasses this problem by putting forward the thesis (and this is one of his key points) that there is indeed *no* concept of art in terms of a strict and universal philosophical definition of 'what art is', but instead there is a notion of art as a "proper name" (and this is, in a way, the 'nominalist' concept of art Duve coins). Consequently, the act of producing art is the act of enunciating "this is art" (an example of which is the readymade).

Duve's revision of the avant-garde from the standpoint of Kantian aesthetics is conditioned by the deliberate absence of a universal concept of art in Kant. This makes it necessary to look at Duve's arguments from the standpoint of the opposing philosophical tradition, in which the concept is central, and the aim of both art and art theory is regarded as a disclosure of the concept of art – namely, from the standpoint of a Hegelian philosophy of art. As the key empirical material discussed here was the subversive gesture of the historical avant-garde and its consequent transformation in

the neo-avant-garde, this suggests turning to Peter Bürger, in whose *Theory of the Avant-Garde* the issue is thoroughly examined from the Hegelian and Marxist positions.

The Avant-Garde's Attack on the Institution of Art, and its Impact on Art and the Aesthetic: Peter Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde

Bürger's main thesis is as follows. With the advent of the avant-garde, the "social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism."[148] This should be understood, however, not as the struggle of one doctrine against another, that is, as an inter-systemic or *system-immanent* criticism within an institution, such as the criticism of Protestantism against Catholicism within the institution of religion, but rather as a criticism aimed at an institution itself, a demand for

148 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

a radical revision of its very foundations.[149] In Bürger's terms, such a demand is formulated as an "attack upon the institution of art." Here it is necessary to look not only at this concept in more detail, but also at Bürger's scientific apparatus in general.

Bürger uses the concept of the 'institution of art' (or 'art as institution'), which was coined by Herbert Marcuse, to designate the informal instance of power that establishes the prerequisites for the existence of art in bourgeois society. The non-formalised nature of the institution of art makes it difficult for a researcher to access, unlike the institution of jurisprudence, for example, which is implemented in a set of written laws. Therefore, the concept of the

149 "Marx makes a distinction between self-criticism and another type, such as the 'critique Christianity levelled against paganism, or also that of Protestantism against Catholicism' (Grundrisse, p. 106). We will refer to this type as system-immanent criticism. Its characteristic is that it functions within a social institution. To stick to Marx's example: system-immanent criticism within the institution of religion is criticism of specific religious ideas in the name of other ideas. In contrast to this form, self-criticism presupposes distance from mutually hostile religious ideas. This distance, however, is merely the result of a fundamentally more radical criticism, and that is the criticism of religion as an institution. The difference between system-immanent criticism and self-criticism can be transferred to the sphere of art. Examples of system-immanent criticism would be the criticism the theoreticians of French classicism directed against Baroque drama, or Lessing's of the German imitations of classical French tragedy. Criticism here functions within an institution, the theater. Varying concepts of tragedy that are grounded (if by multiple mediations) in social positions confront each other. There is another kind of criticism and that is the self-criticism of art: it addresses itself to art as an institution and must be distinguished from the former type. The methodological significance of the category 'self-criticism' is that for social subsystems also, it indicates the condition of the possibility of 'objective understanding' of past stages of development." (Bürger, 21–22). *A propos*, the difference between *system-immanent criticism* and *self-criticism* in art seems to slip out of Duve's sight: in his *In the Name of Art,* he ironically characterises the conflict between the 'aestheticists' and 'anti-aestheticists' of the 1980s *literally* as a dispute between Catholics and Protestants (Duve, *Au Nom de l'art*).

'institution of art' is not derived directly from empirical sources, but rather from the analysis of functions and relationships.[150]

The function of the institution of art is twofold: on the one hand, it is the "productive and distributive apparatus"; on the other hand, it is the social status of art – "the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works" in society. The avant-garde attacks both of these aspects: challenging the category of a work of art on the one hand, and the status of art in bourgeois society, characterised as *autonomy*, on the other.[151]

The autonomy of art must be understood as an unstable, internally contradictory product of bourgeois society; it bears the "taint of ideological distortion", combining an "element of truth and an element of untruth": on the one hand, its content is the isolation of art, its independence from the praxis of life; on the other hand, autonomy itself is a product of the historical development of bourgeois society, and its very existence is conditioned by it.[152] Thus, the ruling class can at any time deny art its autonomous status (examples include

150 "Marcuse's definition of the function of culture in bourgeois society does not relate to individual artistic works, but to their status as objects that are set apart from the struggle of everyday existence. The model provides the important theoretical insight that works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works. When one refers to the function of an individual work, one generally speaks figuratively; for the consequences that one may observe or infer are not primarily a function of its special qualities but rather of the manner which regulates the commerce with works of this kind in a given society or in certain strata or classes of a society. I have chosen the term "institution of art" to characterize such framing conditions. It might be that the relationship between the institution of art and the actual commerce with works must be examined as a historically changing one. Here, however, the difficulties inherent in the term "actual commerce" must be clearly understood. For the term generates the illusion that this "commerce" as such is accessible to the researcher. Anyone who has been seriously concerned with historical reception research knows that this is untrue. What we analyze are mostly discourses about the contact with literature." (Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 12–13).

151 Bürger, 22.

152 Bürger, 35, 47.

the fascist politics of art, as well as legal proceedings against artists on charges of the "immoralism" of their works),[153] and therefore the autonomy of art means only a relative independence; on the other hand, there might be certain political content within autonomy that contradicts the autonomy itself, "militate against the autonomy principle of the institution."[154] Furthermore, the avant-garde project to destroy art's autonomy is ambiguous too: "For the (relative) freedom of art vis-a-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life, but wholly absorbed in it, will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance."[155]

In Aestheticism and *l'art pour art* ideology, art reaches a stage in which its contents lose their political character, so art becomes isolated from the praxis of life.[156] This isolation should *not* be interpreted unambiguously: on the one hand, it means that artists lose their social role; on the other hand, it separates art into a domain radically detached from the means-ends rationality of bourgeois society: in Bürger's words, "The break with society (it is the society of Imperialism) constitutes the center of the works of Aestheticism."[157] And most importantly, having discarded connections with the praxis of life, aestheticism thereby distinguishes art as an *independent phenomenon*. Thus, Aestheticism creates the *conditions of possibility for the self-criticism of art*, which is what the avant-garde then executes.[158]

153 Bürger, 25.
154 Bürger, 27.
155 Bürger, 50.
156 Bürger, 27.
157 Bürger, 33.
158 Bürger, 17.

The relationship between the avant-garde and Aestheticism is not, however, linear. On the one hand, the avant-garde seeks to sublate art by destroying its autonomy. On the other hand, it inherits Aestheticism's rejection of the means-ends rationality of bourgeois society; this latter type of praxis (means-ends rationality) is obviously not that what the avant-garde sought to connect art with: "The intention of the avantgardiste may be defined as the attempt to direct toward the practical the aesthetic experience (which rebels against the praxis of life) that Aestheticism developed. What most strongly conflicts with the means-ends rationality of bourgeois society is to become life's organizing principle."[159] Therefore, a radical reorganisation of society becomes a condition of possibility for implementing the avant-garde project. Correspondingly, unbacked by this vital socio-political change, the avant-garde therefore fails (the Soviet Constructivism of the 1920s, and its successor, Productivism, managed to go farthest in carrying out this 'sublation of art',[160] but the project was then rapidly curtailed by Stalinists).

The next stage was the institutionalisation of the avant-garde, its absorption by the institution of art. This should not, however, be understood as a "betrayal of the avant-garde", but rather as a consequence of the historical process. Neo-Dada (pop art) marks the 'post-avant-garde stage of art', which is first defined by a rehabilitation of the *category of work of art*, and secondly, by the use of the "procedures invented by the avant-garde with antiartistic intent" for *artistic* ends.[161] During the avant-garde, the content of these procedures was an attack on the institution of art, while at the post-avant-garde stage, these procedures, being institutionalised, lose

159 Bürger, 34, 49.
160 Arvatov, *Art and Production*.
161 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57.

their initial meaning, or even acquire an opposite meaning: "If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it"[162] (here Bürger obviously shares Richter's sarcastic scepticism); "And the efforts to sublate art become artistic manifestations that, despite their producers' intentions, take on the character of works."[163]

However, Bürger stresses that the avant-garde's attack on the institution of art did not pass without consequences: it made art "recognizable as an institution and also revealed its (relative) inefficacy in bourgeois society as its principle." Consequently, any claims of social significance (or of inheriting the avant-garde agenda) that are made by today's art can only be illusory: "All art that is more recent than the historical avant-garde movements must come to terms with this fact [of its inefficacy] in bourgeois society. It can either resign itself to its autonomous status or "organize happenings" to break through that status. But without surrendering its claim to

162 Bürger, 52.

163 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 58. The assertion that, in bourgeois society, any attempt to challenge art as an institution by rebellious artistic methods alone, without affecting the very foundations of society, invariably ends up with the acceptance of these artistic methods within the arsenal of the bourgeois art tradition was well-formulated by Leon Trotsky in his criticism of the Futurists in *Literature and Revolution* (1924). In this, Trotsky first sees the inconsistency of the avant-garde position itself, namely, its inability to overcome the autonomy of art. Interestingly, proceeding from this assertion, Trotsky both supported and criticised LEF journal and Productivism. See: Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).

truth, art cannot simply deny the autonomy status and pretend that it has a direct effect."[164]

Critical Remarks on Duve's Theory from the Standpoint of Bürger. Preliminary Theoretical Conclusion

Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* enables us to see Duchamp's gesture in relation to the historical process of the development of art as a social subsystem, tracing connections that would otherwise have remained unclear. In Duve, Duchamp's readymades appear as a sudden 'find' that only a (Kantian) 'genius' could accomplish (what exactly does Duchamp undermine, and why does his gesture arise at *this* particular historical moment?), while Bürger reveals both the conditions of possibility and the essence of Duchamp's invention – through problematising the category of a work of art, and with help from the concept of the institution of art:

> [...] the production of the autonomous work of art is the act of an individual. The artist produces as individual, individuality not being understood as the expression of something but as radically different. **The concept of genius testifies to this**. [...] In its most extreme manifestations, the avantgarde's reply to this is not the collective as the subject of production but **the radical negation of the category of individual creation**. When Duchamp signs mass-produced

164 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57. Subsequently, Bürger revises and considerably further specifies his position on art's claims to truth, taking into account Hegel's thesis of the 'end of art'. He reaches the conclusion that the post-avant-garde stage of art, understood as the "state of art after the end of art" (to which contemporary art also belongs), is defined, on the one hand, by art retaining both its historicity and its supra-historical concept; on the other hand, by art having lost its relation to truth. See: Peter Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', in *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics; [Philosophical Forum]*, ed. Andrew E. Benjamin and Peter Osborne, ICA Documents 10 (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1991).

objects (a urinal, a bottle drier) and sends them to art exhibits, he negates the category of individual production [...], because all claims to individual creativity are to be mocked. Duchamp's provocation [...] radically **questions the very principle of art** in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.

[...] **this provocation of art presupposes a concept of what art is**: The fact that he signs the Ready-Mades contains **a clear allusion to the category 'work.'** The signature that attests that the work is both individual and unique is here affixed to the mass-produced object. The idea of the nature of art as it has developed since the Renaissance – the individual creation of unique works – is thus provocatively called into question. The act of provocation itself takes the place of the work. [...] **Duchamp's provocation addresses itself to art as a social institution**. Insofar as the work is part of that institution, the attack is also directed against it.[165]

This constitutes the key objection to Duve's theory (though notably, Bürger's text historically preceded it). The very concepts in terms of which Duve attempts to fit Duchamp into the Kantian aesthetic perspective – *aesthetic judgement*, the category of *work* (as an individual creation) and the notion of *genius* – are, as it follows from Bürger's quote, precisely those aspects of the pre-avant-garde status of art at which Duchamp's critical 'provocation' was aimed in the first place.

These three – *aesthetic judgement*, the category of *work*, and the notion of *genius* – comprise the core of the social *status of art*, produced and consolidated by the *institution of art*. The latter presents

165 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 51–52, 56. (Highlighted in bold by me – I. O.)

a power that is clearly *aesthetic* in character, as its function of determining the status of art in society is precisely and inextricably linked with *assessment*, that is, *aesthetic judgement*. Correspondingly, what Duchamp submitted to such assessment was the object devoid of what there is to assess, the aesthetic qualities, while its 'vulgar' industrial character clearly confronts both the concept of *genius* as a unique creative individuality and the category of *work* as the idea of an inimitable authenticity.

By sending a 'mass-produced object' to an exhibition, Duchamp does *not* enunciate: "the urinal is *Art!*", as Duve asserts (here, "*Art*" is, of course, purposely capitalised). Quite the opposite, says Duchamp: "art is a urinal." That is, he does *not* "push the boundaries of the aesthetic" so that they would be capable of including even a mass-produced item of plumbing. Instead, he merely mocks the institution of art, lowering the "high name of art" by giving it to an 'inappropriate' object. This is precisely what the realisation of his idea of a "work that is not 'art' "[166] is.

Here comes the obvious contradiction between the Kantian line, on which Duve relies, and the Hegelian understanding of art, supplemented by a neo-Marxist concept of the institution of art. If one is to stick to the second (Hegelian) perspective, it implies the following: 1) art itself is essentially historical; 2) (however) there is the true concept of art, which is essentially universal and therefore *not* historical; 3) the historicity of art is a process of disclosing its concept; 4) the institution of art *does* exist, it is also historical, and one of its functions is to denote the status of art in society, which is, at this particular stage – the idea of art as *aesthetic*. If this is the case, Duchamp's defiant gesture is a step towards the historical disclosure of the true concept of art; disclosure here means *separating art*

166 Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 74.

from the aesthetic (that is, from what the institution of art considers the key characteristic of art). This implies that Duchamp's gesture is *not* an 'aesthetic judgment', and thus Duve's theory is wrong. If, on the contrary, Duve is right, and Duchamp's gesture is indeed an 'aesthetic judgment", this means that there is no concept of art but only a proper 'name of art', and consequently, therefore is nothing to 'historically disclose'. Hence, the institution of art is a Marxist fantasy, and the role of the historical avant-garde is merely 'expanding the boundaries of the aesthetic'.

Thus, at the level of philosophical theory, it was an analysis of the issues surrounding the relation of the aesthetic to 'art after Duchamp' which first demonstrated that the *aestheticisation* of the avant-garde by redefining it in terms of Kantian aesthetics is inevitably limited by the Kantian lens itself (this does not come into contradiction with Kant's own assertion that, in *thinking*, any conclusions can be valid only within the coordinates set for thinking[167]). Therefore, the theoretical legitimacy of the de-aestheticising position put forward by the avant-garde, as well as the claim that is necessary to separate art from the aesthetic, *cannot* be considered refuted. Secondly, it shows that an examination of the conflict between the two opposing stances necessarily leads to a dispute at the level of major philosophical doctrines – Kantian aesthetics on the one hand, and Hegelian philosophy of art on the other; the stake in this 'big match' is an assessment of the role played by the historical avant-garde in terms of universal validity.

167 Immanuel Kant, 'What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?', in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: And Other Writings*, ed. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3–16.

The Neo-Avant-Garde and the 'Sublation of the Aesthetic': the Viewpoint of Art Praxis

In his later article 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', Peter Bürger revises his earlier analysis of the aftermaths of the avant-garde's 'attack on the institution of art', and introduces some new aspects to consider. Foremost, he pinpoints a specific perceptive effect which unambiguously indicates that a certain change in the status of the aesthetic dimension of art occurred with the emergence of Neo-Dada:

> A garden gnome is no longer a garden gnome. This is the dilemma facing contemporary art that is circumscribed by the unhappy concept of postmodernity. Up to a certain point (let's take 1969, the year of Adorno's death, as a marker) a garden gnome was still a garden gnome. [...] But a garden gnome is no longer merely an object used to advertise one's petty-bourgeois taste. It has lost this neat quality of self-evidence now that the ironic appropriation of kitsch has been discovered as a sophisticated and effective means of distancing oneself from the most advanced forms of aesthetic consciousness. These days one cannot help suspecting a garden gnome of being an ironic quotation, which is particularly confusing given that a garden gnome in quotation marks is pretty much indistinguishable from what one might call the real thing. [...] So what's happened? A border has disappeared that as late as Adorno had the unquestionable status of a metaphysical principle guaranteeing the possibility of art: the border between art and the culture industry and, simultaneously, between art and non-art. If one and the same garden gnome, as a piece of kitsch, signifies the total aesthetic incompetence of its owner, but as quotation testifies to an artistic sensibility so sophisticated as to be perverse, then the basis for Adorno's aesthetic value-judgements has become deeply problematic. [...] Here

> we come up against what I want to call the dialectic of the boundary. Borders such as those between art and non-art, or fiction and reality, do not disappear as easily as the theorists of the postmodern suppose. They exist, instead, constantly under the sign of their own disappearance.[168]

Bürger's choice of the garden gnome as an example is presumably not accidental: it is hard not to spot a reference to the sarcastic comparison of Neo-Dada (pop art) works with garden gnomes in the previously quoted book by Hans Richter.[169] At the same time, the example of a garden gnome – an artefact of mass culture – signifies the scale of the change that has taken place: doubt about the relevance of the category of aesthetic taste seems to extend beyond the narrow circle of artworld experts, making itself felt at an everyday level.

This effect of indistinguishability that Bürger captures suggests that art has reached a historical stage in which its aesthetic dimension ceases to function, at least in the way it used to. In other words, such objects of art have been produced for which the aesthetic gaze is no longer relevant (or rather, the aesthetic gaze *alone*), since this gaze is unable to identify whether the works belong to the domain of art (albeit their attribution to art is in no way disputable, as it was 'stamped and sealed' by the institution of art, as in case of pop art

168 Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', 3–5.

169 Richter characterises Neo-Dada as a "deliberate return to the garden-dwarfs", considering that "The feelings they [Neo-Dada works] evoke in the beholder's mind belong on the artistic level of a garden dwarf." Richter even puts this in the title of his chapter on pop art: "Garden Dwarfs". Given that Richter's book was first published in 1964 and soon became an influential source on the history of the avant-garde, it was likely familiar to Bürger as well. (Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 209, 205, 203–6)

works).[170] Does the indistinguishability that has been detected mean that the aesthetic regime of art has been cancelled?

Let us take a closer look at Bürger's argument: "Here we come up against what I want to call the dialectic of the boundary"; and further: the borders "between art and non-art, or fiction and reality, do not disappear as easily as the theorists of the postmodern suppose. They exist, instead, constantly under the sign of their own disappearance." "They don't disappear as easily as the postmodern theorists believe" is an objection to the idea of relativising the status of art (via conflating the latter with the aesthetic); in other words, precisely an objection to the postmodernist idea of "expanding the boundaries of the aesthetic" that I discussed earlier. Bürger says that what happened to the aesthetic is not a relativisation of boundaries, but rather its transition to a regime of "existence under the constant sign of its own disappearance" – and this should be understood dialectically (it is not by chance that Bürger mentions the "dialectic of the boundary").

A "constant existence under the sign of its own disappearance", which has a dialectical character, is called *sublation* in the language of philosophy (in the Hegelian sense, *Aufhebung*). The aesthetic has *not* 'disappeared' and has *not* been eliminated but rather *sublated*. In other words, the aesthetic dimension of art remains, but precisely in this new, 'neutralised' condition: it continues to exist, as Bürger

170 This same effect (of dropping the aesthetic's relevance) is demonstrated by Timothy Binkley using Duchamp's later work as an example: "Duchamp sent out invitations to preview the show called "Not Seen and/or Less Seen of/by Marcel Duchamp/Rrose Selavy 1904- 64: Mary Sisler Collection." On the front of the invitation he pasted a playing card which bears a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*. Below the card is inscribed, in French, "L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved." This piece looks like the *Mona Lisa* and the *Mona Lisa* looks like it: since one is a reproduction of the other, their aesthetic qualities are basically identical." (Binkley, 'Piece: Contra Aesthetics', 267)

puts it, "in quotation marks". This means that the aesthetic aspect is *still* present, 'remaining in negation'.

This, in turn, means that it would be rather inaccurate to understand Conceptual art's de-aestheticisation programme in terms of "either aesthetic or art".[171] Turning to the most famous 'manifesto' of de-aestheticisation – 'Art after Philosophy' – makes it clear that Kosuth does not call for the 'abolition' of the aesthetic as such, but rather for the necessity of *separating* the latter from art, pointing out instead, much in line with Hegel's thought, the incapability of aesthetic considerations in grasping the essence of a work: "[...] the notion that there was a conceptual connection between art and aesthetics, which is not true. [...] Aesthetic considerations are indeed always extraneous to an object's function or "reason-to-be." [...] aesthetics [...] are conceptually irrelevant to art."[172] Comparably, in Hegel: "Feeling as such is an entirely empty form of subjective affection. [...] Yet the depths of the thing remained a sealed book to taste, since these depths require not only sensing and abstract reflections, but the entirety of reason and the solidity of the spirit, while taste was directed only to the external surface on which feelings play and where one-sided principles may pass as valid. Consequently, however, so-called 'good taste' takes fright at all the deeper effects [of art] and is silent when the thing at issue comes in question [...]."[173] This reveals the reason for the 'myopic' effect exhibited by the aesthetic gaze when it encountered neo-avant-gardist works, as grasped by Bürger and Binkley: it is unable to distinguish an avant-garde work

171 "[...] either we claim the name "art" for what we do, but then at the expense of the aesthetic; or we claim the aesthetic, but then under a name that is not "art." [...] either aesthetics, in Greenberg's sense, or art, in Kosuth's sense; either taste or concept." (Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 296, 300).

172 Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', 16, 19.

173 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 33, 34.

from a non-artistic object, because it is indifferent to the actual function of the former, to the 'thing at issue'.

But it is precisely this 'myopia' of the aesthetic gaze, its inability to grasp the function and idea of art, that is thematised, or rather *conceptualised,* in Conceptual art. The thesis "all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually"[174] is first of all a negative reference to the aesthetic itself: for "only exists conceptually" refers precisely to the aesthetic as a subject of negation, the opposite of the conceptual.

In this sense, the separation of the aesthetic from the artistic, the sublation of the aesthetic (remaining in negation) should also be understood as one of the *methods* of Conceptual art: to produce a conceptual work means to arrange the conditions in which art and the aesthetic clash. Metaphorically speaking, the friction between idea and appearance is the impetus that sets the motor of the work in motion. In this collision, the aesthetic reveals its dysfunction, thereby creating a kind of cathartic effect: a 'recognition', 'purification' of idea behind appearance. A classic example is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*: a piece made by literally erasing the aesthetic qualities of another work.[175] Obviously, this

174 Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', 18.

175 See: Binkley, 'Piece: Contra Aesthetics'. Of course, Conceptual art is not necessarily built around this conflict *alone*; the issue of the relationship between word, image and object often comes to the fore, but the tension between the conceptual and the aesthetic remains an underlying principle in those kinds of works as well.

sophisticated philosophical trick would not be possible without this sort of (negative) appeal to the aesthetic.[176]

The ultimate goal of this 'orchestrated collision' is not a negation of the aesthetic itself, but rather the dual effect produced by the clash. On the one hand, it is a 'cathartic' effect of recognising the difference (between aesthetic and conceptual, between idea and appearance), the effect of realising that the aesthetic is not equal to art. On the other hand, it is the (certainly comic) effect of identifying what is presented as 'high art' using a deliberately 'lower' object – banal, kitschy, 'indecent', etc. As they say, there is only one step 'from the sublime to the ridiculous', and the avant-garde's trick is, not least, to show one the easiest way. Understood using the judgement "a urinal is Art!" (Duve), Duchamp's *Fountain* would hardly serve this purpose, but as "art is a urinal!" it certainly does.

Remarks on Distinguishing the Aesthetic from the Artistic in the Institutional Theory of Art

The emergence of artworks that were *aesthetically* outwardly indistinguishable from non-artistic objects began catching the attention of theorists in at least the early 1960s (that is, right from the moment that the institutionalisation of 'antiartistic' avantgardist devices appears in pop art, Neo-Dada). The first to pinpoint this change was apparently Arthur C. Danto, who, however, saw in them

176 This makes one reconsider Peter Osborne's remark that the aesthetic aspect inevitably remains in Conceptual art as well, and therefore the contra-aesthetic manifestos of the latter should be understood as merely part of the conceptualists' institutional strategy. De-aestheticisation might indeed be called a 'strategy', but it is certainly an *artistic* strategy, not an institutional one. The aesthetic indeed remains, but not because it is allegedly "inseparable from art" and therefore inevitable, albeit "not essential" (as Osborne believes), but rather because it *remaining in negation* is the very condition of art 'after the readymade', and at the same time, a method by which this art is produced.

not so much a separation of the aesthetic from art, as a growth in the influence that discourse had on the art market. In his article 'The Artworld',[177] Danto, who was particularly impressed by Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*,[178] comes up with the opinion that, as pop art pieces do not differ much in their appearance from a regular industrially produced commodity, it is the theoretical 'explanation' that plays the decisive role in lending them the status of art:

> Never mind that the Brillo box may not be good, much less great art. The impressive thing is that it is art at all. But if it is, why are not the indiscernible Brillo boxes that are in the stockroom. Or *has* the whole distinction between art and reality broken down? [...] What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it *is* (in a sense of is other than that of artistic identification). Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art [...][179]

This serves as an argument in Danto's theory of the 'artworld', which is understood as the only instance capable of distinguishing between art and non-art; consequently, art theory is seen as a means of 'licencing' an object as *art*.

Danto's concept of the 'artworld' provided the basis for the Institutional theory of art coined by George Dickie, in whose works

177 Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964).

178 Peter Osborne's apt footnote cannot be omitted: "Danto's sense of twentieth-century art history is profoundly distorted – indeed, rendered incoherent – by his identification of Andy Warhol's 1964 *Brillo Boxes* as the decisive break with what he thinks of as 'historical' art, rather than Duchamp's readymades, fifty years earlier." (Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*).

179 Danto, 'The Artworld', 581.

of the 1970s, the question of the advisability of separating the aesthetic from the artistic arose perhaps for the first time in the academic theory of Modern art. However, this proved to be undoable within the framework of Dickie's doctrine, as the issue of the 'appreciation' that the artworld – as an institution – gives to the 'artefact' (work of art) remained central, but not the question of the concept of art itself.[180] In this sense, Ted Cohen's remarks on Dickie's proposals are indicative, as they demonstrate both academic theory's perplexity concerning the artistic status of the avant-garde, and a pressing need to revise the normative concept of art in this regard.[181]

The idea of separating the aesthetic from the artistic receives a controversial continuation in the works of Dickie's disciples. While Carolyn Korsmeyer utilises this idea for the analysis of classic fiction without connection to its avant-garde origin,[182] Marsha Eaton turns the division between the aesthetic and artistic against Conceptual art itself. Fully agreeing with the conceptualists that their works have nothing to do with the aesthetic, Eaton simply refuses to consider them artists or their works art on those grounds:

> What has been called "conceptual art" further emphasizes the difference between the aesthetic and the artistic. [...] Although there is something to be seen, in such cases, the "seeable" matters little or not at all. [...] Even more radical is so-called art that is entirely

180 George Dickie, 'Defining Art', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1969): 253–56; also: George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, 1st ed. (Ithaca; London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974). See also Timothy Binkley discussing George Dickie's theory: Timothy Binkley, 'Deciding about Art: A Polemic against Aesthetics', in *Culture and Art: An Anthology*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen, Eclipse Books (Nyborg: Atlantic Highlands, N.J: F. Løkke; Humanities Press, 1976).

181 Ted Cohen, 'The Possibility of Art: Remarks on a Proposal by Dickie', *The Philosophical Review* 82, no. 1 (January 1973): 69.

182 Carolyn Korsmeyer, 'On Distinguishing "Aesthetic" from "Artistic"', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 11, no. 4 (1977): 45.

> conceptual, not perceptual at all. [...] If conceptual art genuinely is art and if the aesthetic is essentially tied to the perceptual, then, again, the aesthetics and the artistic must be distinct. [...] But is conceptual art really art? If the answer is no, then support for the total divorce of the aesthetic and the artistic disappears. I'm going to take a very strong and admittedly controversial stand on this issue and argue that conceptual art is not art – that at most "conceptual artists" are artists only metaphorically.[183]

Closing this succinct remark on Institutional theory of art, it should be noted that the latter's main problem was its programmatic negation of the necessity for a concept of art, which led to a logical circle: if the status of something as *art* is determined by the 'artworld' alone, one inevitably ends up with no evaluation criteria other than references to precedents. Dickie attempted to solve this problem by using the concept of the 'artefact' together with the condition of the 'medium' as an allegedly indispensable characteristic of art,[184] but this made it impossible to, for example, consider the conceptualists' 'dematerialised' works as art. Danto eventually arrived at a quasi-metaphysical concept of art by conflating the Kant's 'aesthetic idea' with the Hegelian notion of 'spirit', paradoxically believing at the same time that the generic characteristic of art is that it is supposedly always "about something",[185] for which he was criticised by, among others, George Dickie.[186] It should also be noted that the Institutional theory of art is unrelated to the Frankfurt School's concept of the *institution of art,* which I discussed earlier.

183 Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'Art and the Aesthetic', in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy, 2nd ed., Blackwell Philosophy Guides 15 (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 69–70.

184 Dickie, 'Defining Art', 253–56.

185 Danto, *What Art Is.*

186 George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven, 1984).

Concluding Remarks

1. The avant-garde's attack on the institution of art created the prerequisites for a separation between the two modes of art's function, art's two dimensions – aesthetic and conceptual.

2. This dichotomy does not coincide with the division into *form* and *content*, nor with the *signifier*/*signified* dichotomy. In contrast to the categories of form and content, and the signifier and signified (which are applicable in other fields as well), the aesthetic/conceptual division is specific *solely* to art; therefore, the identification of this division is a historical stage in the disclosure of the concept of art. At the same time, neither the category of the aesthetic, nor the category of the conceptual, are specific to art when taken separately (alone, each of them is applicable in other areas as well; the aesthetic dimension is also relevant to non-artistic objects, such as natural phenomena, artefacts of material culture, etc.; 'conceptual' is a general term referring to *concept*).

3. This division is the condition of possibility for the production of conceptual artworks, while not simultaneously being the condition of possibility for its perception/appreciation (this is due to the fact that the division is more accessible *from within* artistic practice, since it is directly related to the latter. From the point of view of art's reception, the division is not obvious, since the conceptual can take a sensible form as well, which in turn can be interpreted aesthetically. Hence the resistance of art theorists who are not artists themselves to the validity of such a division).

4. The division between the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of art did not, and does not, mean a complete abolition of the aesthetic

regime of art (as Kosuth's manifesto is often misinterpreted to claim by its critics).

5. This division in itself was not the goal of the avant-garde, but rather became a result of setting its 'de-aestheticising' agenda in motion.

6. The division was not completed in the avant-garde, as the condition for such completion would have been at least partial entry of this division into the commonly shared idea of art, the institutional status of art. This is what happens at the next stage – in the neo-avant-garde (pop art).

7. At the post-avant-garde stage of art, the avant-garde's antiartistic techniques (in fact, de-aestheticising techniques) themselves become part of artistic language, while the category of work has been rehabilitated.[187] This stage is characterised by the *sublation of the aesthetic*, the abolition of the validity of the category of *taste* coupled with a necessary remaining of the concept of taste (in 'sublated' form). A manifestation of this was the artistic appropriation of kitsch in Neo-Dada (pop art), which made it impossible to distinguish between kitsch objects and Neo-Dada works within the framework of the aesthetic gaze alone (kitsch objects and works that intentionally take the form of kitsch look the same).

8. This set the conditions for a theoretical claim that it is necessary to separate the aesthetic from art – which was practically implemented in Conceptual art. This rethinking of the concept of art took the form of a new attack on the *institution of art*. This attack was of a dual nature, engaging with both theory and praxis. This

187 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57.

time, the institution of art was not only understood as a primarily *aesthetic* institution, but also *articulated* as such. However, the aim of the attack was *not* to dismount art's autonomy (as in case of the historical avant-garde), but rather for the radical autonomy of artists from the institution of art (which is, by definition, a conservative system that changes more slowly than actual changes in art occur). In its attack on the institution of art and its simultaneous call for autonomy (albeit redefined), Conceptual art is paradoxically an heir to both Aestheticism and the historical avant-garde.

9. The institution of art's response to Conceptual art's 'revolt' was, on the one hand, the inclusion of the conceptualists' de-aestheticisation in the status of art as another *artistic device* (that is, in the same way that the avant-garde's antiartistic techniques were 'normalised' in Neo-Dada as artistic); and on the other hand, attempts to *theoretically* neutralise Conceptual art's claim for a separation of the aesthetic from art. The latter is served by (re-)aestheticising conceptualism's predecessor – the historical avant-garde – by theoretically redefining the avant-garde's antiartistic devices (first of all readymades) as *aesthetic*, thus inscribing them into normative aesthetics (and thereby undermining the grounds for their directly opposite interpretation in Conceptual art). At the same time, the divide between the contrasting positions became reformulated *not* as an issue of separating the aesthetic and the conceptual, but as a question of the validity of the category of the aesthetic as such. Because of this, the theoretical arguments of Conceptual art also turn out to be focused on lowering the theoretical status of the aesthetic (as, for example, in Binkley), rather than on identifying the necessity of creating a division between the aesthetic and conceptual aspects of art as being a specific characteristic of art *per se*; as a result, this fundamental task remains *incomplete*.

10. Conceptual art's attempt to establish a separation of the aesthetic from art can be considered as the second stage of art's self-criticism (after the historical avant-garde). As in the case of the historical avant-garde, this new 'attack on the institution of art' ended in failure, resulting in a strengthening of traditional positions, and ultimately expressed in the growing aestheticisation of art discourse, that is, the *aestheticisation of art theory itself* occurs.[188] At the same time, the *ethicisation* of art is set forth as the only counterpoint to this aestheticisation: discussion on art is reformulated in terms of 'ethics vs. aesthetics' (instead of the 'conceptual vs. aesthetics'), displacing the question of the concept and ontology of art with the question of the ethical content of individual works.

188 This is the point from which, I suppose, the question of the historical reasons behind the emergence of such a phenomenon as so-called International Art English (IAE) should be addressed. As pinpointed by Alix Rule and David Levine (the authors of the term), IAE is characterised by the *aesthetic* usage of theoretical concepts, that are thereby turned into some sort of obvious markers of belonging to the artworld: "The word *dialectic* has a precise, some would say scientific, meaning, but in IAE [International Art English] it is normally used for its affective connotation: It means good. [...] IAE channels theoretical influences more or less *aesthetically*, sedimented in a style that combines their inflections and formulations freely and continually incorporates new ones." (Alix Rule and David Levine, *International Art English* (Triple Canopy, 2018).

Part III. Abstraction

Introduction. The Question of Abstraction: the Relation of Art to Life Praxis

What, in fact, impedes the academic philosophical theory of art (sometimes defined as philosophical aesthetics) from grasping non-classical art – the historical avant-garde, Modernism, Conceptual art – in its "decisive difference from art of the past"? Answering this question, Peter Osborne points out that the "first [reason] is a continuing conflation of 'art' and 'aesthetic'; the second is an inability to think the concept of art at once philosophically and historically with any kind of futurity."[189] While this first point of Osborne's can hardly be challenged in its essential relevance to art's specificity, the second appears slightly too broad to be immediately grasped in terms of its relation to art's specifically *artistic* rather than culturally-historical dimension. Indeed, in Osborne, the disclosure of that second point led to a spatial discussion that was reminiscent of both Jean-François Lyotard's Postmodern reflections on cultural periodisation and Reinhart Koselleck's classic 'conceptual history of terms', bringing to the fore such questions as "what contemporaneity is, and when it starts", which while being genuinely universally valid are not specifically *art-related* (which was sadly conditioned by the problematic idea of considering a culturally-administrative term, "contemporary art", to be a theoretical concept that requires philosophical reflection or disclosure).[190] Meanwhile, a second essential division (apart from the separation of 'art' from

189 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 8.

190 See the section *The Fiction of the Contemporary* (Osborne, 15–35).

'aesthetic'), which constitutes another rupture between the classic philosophical aesthetic and art 'after philosophy', appears to deserve slightly more thorough attention than Osborne devoted to it: the separation of 'art' from the 'representational', that is, the issue of *abstraction* (not in the sense of a period or a movement in Modernism, but rather as a paradigmatic direction that runs from a gradual break with figurativeness in Cubism to Conceptual art's 'abstraction of language').

Hence the main premise of this *Part* of the study. Art's break with the representative, mimetic regime, and the separation of the aesthetic and artistic – the two tectonic shifts produced by the historical avant-garde movements of the 1910s–1920s, which were then revisited and deepened in the Conceptual art of the late 1960s – constitute two key characteristics that distinguish art 'after philosophy' from art of the past, and therefore they should be considered as critically important prerequisites for a philosophical reflection on 'art after the avant-garde and Conceptual art'.

This provides a clearer understanding of the springboards behind the subsequent historical trajectory of art. The latter can thus be viewed as a dialectical process that was set in motion by the aforementioned changes. De-aestheticisation and radical abstraction, after having gradually achieved the status of 'the state-of-art of art' by the 1960s, were critically revised circa the mid-to-late-1970s, and, as the outcome of the existential-political crisis of Conceptual art, were finally dropped by the (former) conceptualists themselves. This resulted in a major comeback of the representational and aesthetic, which had become fully rehabilitated by the mid-1980s, and which were eventually mixed with the abstract and conceptual in the postmodernist 'everything goes' of the 1990s and onwards. The latter was naturally accompanied by dropping the agenda of critically redefining the concept of art altogether, making this tacit rejection

of questioning the nature of art an integral ideological element of what was to become the cultural institution named international contemporary art. This, in my view, explains the reasons behind the ongoing gap between contemporary art and philosophy that Osborne perspicaciously pinpoints.

Part II was focused on the first aspect, de-aestheticisation. *Part III* will be devoted to the second aspect – art's historical, paradigmatic shift towards abstraction, understood here as a liberation of the concept of art from its traditional tie with the representational function. The subject matter is thus not abstract art as a particular episode in the history of Modernism – for outlining the history of painterly or sculptural abstraction is not the aim of the present study – but rather abstraction as one of the key changes that occurred in the concept of art during the 20th century, setting a paradigm for its consequent development in Conceptual art, no longer bound with painting, sculpture or whatever medium and its particular problems.

Here comes the central thesis of this *Part*: the shift in art that came about with the invention of abstraction signified a historical redefinition of the relation of art to life praxis. Art's break with the representational function does bear traces of *autonomy*: as once the 'themes', 'plots' and 'topics' have gone, art's link to the concrete imagery of the world has indeed been interrupted. However, this break fundamentally differs in nature from the programmatic autonomisation of art found in Aestheticism and the ideology of 'art for art's sake'. Being part of the same process as the de-aestheticisation of art that was initiated by Dada and Duchamp, and which reached its highest implementation in the 'analytical' Conceptual art of the 1960s, the separation of the representational function from art did *not* mean its de-politicisation (as in the case of Aestheticism's autonomism in the 19th-century); instead, the relation of art to life praxis

and society transitioned into a different register, so it was no longer associated with a direct 'image' and representation. Presenting a radical break with the earlier idea of art, abstraction reformulates *the political* in art as *form*, instead of as the content of individual works.

As with any historical phenomenon, art's break with the representational function, which the invention of abstraction introduced as a major redefinition of the concept of art, is, however, historically and politically ambivalent. On the one hand, it led to a kind of 'turning inwards' in the avant-garde's fixation with purely formal problems of artistic media in the 'painterly Modernism' affiliated with Greenberg's theorisation – which, of course, presents a historical realisation of the autonomist potential of abstraction (but which in fairness produced plenty of prominent art as well). On the other hand, mediated via Ad Reinhardt's 'art-as-art' and Kosuth's 'art-as-idea' theories, it grew into an entirely different model of art in Conceptual art and conceptualism, understood here as a radicalisation of avant-garde abstraction. It is *this* radicalisation of abstraction, its transition from the level of the visual to the level of language (in which the question of the relationship between art and life praxis was posed anew), that appears to be the most historically and ontologically significant.

Finally, what it is that is *so* important about abstraction? What is at stake, for art, in this issue? I suppose that the historical significance of the emergence of abstraction for art *per se* is that it redefines one of the central questions of art – its relation to the external. If art, to be *art*, does not necessarily have to be 'about' anything, that is, does not have to refer to something else (which, with abstract art, became self-evident), does this mean that art is autonomous by nature? Or does abstract art establish some *other* kind of relation to the world and life praxis? This is what is at stake. Therefore,

from an art-theoretical perspective, abstract art should not be considered as an isolated episode in the history of art, but rather as a turning point (and perhaps even a point of no return). The fact that the invention of abstraction challenged (if not entirely re-defined) the concept of art is hardly disputable. But what was the essence of that change, and what consequences did it have in terms of the subsequent development of art, and how does this understanding of abstraction alter the entire picture in terms of the philosophical theory of art? These are the questions that the analysis of this *Part* will attempt to undertake.

Abstract Art in Terms of Form and Content

In art discourse, both professional and colloquial, the question of art's relation to the external world and life praxis is usually discussed in terms of 'form and content' – whether in relation to 'art as such' or individual artworks. Hence it might make sense to look at whether the emergence of abstraction in art has challenged the traditional form/content structure of a work of art, whether these categories are still relevant to 'art after abstraction', and whether abstract art should be discussed in terms of 'form and content' at all. For this, however, it is first necessary to look at what the categories of form and content are.

The notions of form and content came from German philosophy and have concrete authorship. It was Hegel who first introduced them in his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* as the central categories for analysing art (but not only art). Here is what he says about form and content:

> The essential point to keep in mind about the opposition of Form and Content is that the content is not formless, but has the form in its own self, quite as much as the form is external to it. There is

> thus a doubling of form. At one time it is reflected into itself; and then is identical with the content. At another time it is not reflected into itself, and then it is external existence, which does not at all affect the content.[191]

Thus, when speaking about the relationship between the duo 'form and content', Hegel points at not only the content's generic engagement with form ("the content is not formless"), but primarily to a specific characteristic of form – *doubling*, that is, to its ability to simultaneously be involved in the *content itself* whilst also being *external* to it. This is the main point of the quoted passage. This duality constitutes the key characteristic by which the form, being inseparable from the content (as it follows from the quoted passage), nevertheless appears to be an *external* entity, therefore allowing us at times to see it as a kind of indifferent 'packaging' of the supposedly more significant 'message' contained within it. It is important, however, to understand this duality correctly, without taking the definition of form to be merely an empty 'appearance' (Hegel does not mean this at all). That is, here he means not "either, or" but "*both* this *and* that". For the form is *both* inseparable from the content, *and* at the same time *is* an essence that does *not* affect the content (however, only in its "non-reflected" aspect), and this is what allows one to perceive the form as a 'package', 'wrapper'. That is, there is indeed no 'appearing', but rather an actual autonomous aspect of form, which does not nevertheless interfere with the form being 'contained in the content'. (This partial indifference to the relationship between form and content conditions Kant's 'disinterestedness

191 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. William Wallace (Pacifica, Calif.: Marxists Internet Archive, 2009), 294.

as a condition of taste judgement'). As follows from Hegel's passage, with regard to the duo of form and content, what seemed to be the more obvious concept, that is, form, now appears to be a complex entity whose most essential characteristic becomes *doubling/duality*.

Continuing Hegel's passage from where it left off, the author himself then goes on to comment on the excerpt quoted above:

> We are here in presence, implicitly, of the absolute correlation of content and form: viz., their reciprocal revulsion, so that content is nothing but the revulsion of form into content, and form nothing but the revulsion of content into form. This mutual revulsion is one of the most important laws of thought.[192]

In this passage, Hegel introduces another characteristic that is common to *both* form and content: the *dynamic* aspect – the aspect of transition, becoming, transformation (of content into form, and form into content): a mutual revulsion/revolution. This is important, firstly in the sense that form and content now cease to be presented as static units, and are revealed as *transitions* themselves; secondly (and this follows from the first), that the work itself (if the form and content are considered in relation to a work of art) now appears as a *dynamic* entity, that is, as a "place where something happens" or "something has happened"; it is thus presented as the kind of environment in which a certain *operation* becomes possible and takes place – a *change*, a certain addition to the world. However, it would be wrong to understand this characteristic of form and content in a relativistic way, as some kind of endless inversion of one into the other (form into content and vice versa), because then the very existence of these concepts as a pair of opposites would no longer make

192 Hegel, 294.

sense. Thus, form and content are *opposite*, yet are simultaneously *transitions* from one to the other. To further establish this idea, let us continue with an excerpt from Hegel:

> [...] Form and content are a pair of terms frequently employed by the reflective understanding, especially with a habit of looking on the content as the essential and independent, the form on the contrary as the unessential and dependent.

Hegel is clearly returning to criticism of a vulgarised understanding of this pair of categories as a dichotomy: of a less important 'container' or 'package' and an essential 'filling' or 'message'. As a counterargument, Hegel once again cites his thesis concerning the impossibility of "formless content":

> Against this [against the idea that the content is essential, while the form is unessential and dependent] it is to be noted that both are in fact equally essential; and that, while a formless *content* can be as little found as a formless *matter*, the two (content and matter) are distinguished by this circumstance, that matter, though implicitly not without form, still in its existence manifests a disregard of form, whereas the content, as such, is what it is only because the matured form is included in it. Still the form still suffers from externality.[193]

By introducing this example of *matter's* "disregard" of form, Hegel juxtaposes it with the relation of content to form in *thinking*, which is characterised as the opposite of disregard, since it presents a kind of 'kinship': in *thinking*, content is determined by form ("the matured form is included in it"). Thus, form and content are shown

193 Hegel, 294.

to have the character of 'transitions', or in Hegel's words, 'revulsions' – as a dynamic and dialectical interaction. If the latter reaches the identity/unity of the two, it constitutes a 'true work of art', which in this case means a work of classical art. This is why, in deriving a definition of 'true work of art' from the dialectics of form and content, Hegel refers to the Iliad:

> A work of art that wants the right form is [...] no right or true work of art: and it is a bad way of excusing an artist, to say that the content of his works is good and even excellent, though they want the right form. Real works of art are those where content and form exhibit a thorough identity. The content of the Iliad, it may be said, is the Trojan war, and especially the wrath of Achilles. In that we have everything, and yet very little after all; for the Iliad is made an Iliad by the poetic form, in which that content is moulded.[194]

It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that Hegel introduces this classical work of art as an ideal model, in order to demonstrate that, although it is possible to define a work of art through content *alone* rather than through the *dialectical unity of content and form*, such a definition would be unsatisfactory from an analytical point of view, bringing nothing to our understanding of art, and ultimately leading away from art *per se* to an external object. Indeed, the theme, main motive or subject of a work (the Trojan War, in the case of the Iliad) is sometimes mistaken for its content – and in that, we do "have everything", that is, it does correctly denote what the work is *about*. Although at the same time, we have "yet very little", because this 'aboutness' is in no way able to speak of the work as a *work of art*. The fact is, this 'about' is a mere designation, not an expression

194 Hegel, 295.

of *what* the work actually *does*, and what kind of *proposition* it executes (after all, the Iliad is not a mere description of the Trojan War). Therefore, when speaking about the content of a work, one should consider its form, poetic form.

This is a highly important point for further reasoning. Here, Hegel points out the fluctuation in the meaning of the term "content": there is both "content" as a philosophical category (that is, *content* understood in its dialectical interaction and mutual correlation with *form*) and "content" understood in a shallow way, as the plot, subject matter or theme of a work. In a sense, the ambiguity of this term is a kind of trap that surely lies in wait for us as soon as a discussion turns to the 'form and content' issue; this trap can be avoided only by keeping in mind that the philosophical analysis of a work implies 'form and content' as necessarily paired, interconnected concepts. Thus, without understanding this correlation of form and content, the analysis of the "content" of a work is inevitably incomplete, that is, in Hegel's words, it brings "yet very little."

From this, we can draw another conclusion. *Content*, understood as a philosophical category, that is, as a category that is necessarily correlated with *form*, presupposes (as demonstrated above) the 'regard' [as opposed to the 'disregard'] of the *content* towards the *form*. When taken in accordance with its colloquial use, that is, as a mere synonym for the topic, theme or subject matter of a work, 'content' loses its correlation with form, and is therefore seen as having 'disregard' towards it. This 'disregard' means nothing more than the absence of any 'kinship' between that 'content' and the work as a *work of art*. Therefore, if the 'content' 'disregards' the form, there is no need for the work of art as such. For example, this is the case when what is being said can be said without any involvement from art.

To summarise, there are two main points. Firstly, *form* and *content* are in *absolute correlation*. This means (in the case of a work of

art) that there cannot be something wrong with a work because, for example, its form is not quite as good as its content. For if there is something wrong with the form, this means that the content is also faulty. Secondly, *content* should not be confused with the topic or subject matter of a work. There is a colloquial use of the word "content" that simply implies 'topic', 'plot', 'subject matter'. And there is *content* as a philosophical category. As a philosophical category, content, like form, is a purely abstract concept. These two usages should not be conflated. The widespread everyday notion of the content of a work of art often leads to an erroneous identification of the actual artistic content of the work with the topic it addresses, or with the author's biographical background, a variety of external contexts, and the like. Therefore, when it comes to form and content in terms of theory, the everyday use of these words must be excluded. Otherwise, one would consider, for example, instrumental music to be "contentless", because there are no lyrics to tell us about something specific.

Thus, there is nothing in Hegel's form/content dialectics to suggest that art, to be *art*, should necessarily be 'about' something. Consequently, there is nothing in Hegel's form/content dialectics that is strictly incompatible with the idea of art being *abstract* either. What, then, has the invention of abstract art changed? How does it challenge the form/content structure of a work of art? From the perspective of Modern art theory, the issue of the content of abstract art was perceived as a stumbling block, resulting in a dilemma between two distinct trains of thought, which can be rephrased as two options:

Option 1. In abstract art, a work of art no longer has content, only form remains. That is, with abstraction, the very idea of art having

a connection to the world and life praxis is abandoned, and the artists' task becomes some sort of 'free creation', a never-ending play on forms, structures, lines, colours and surfaces.

Option 2. There *is* still content in abstract art, but this 'content' is 'content of the second degree' – a kind of symbolic representation of either abstract philosophical and scientific concepts, or 'spiritual' ideas, a 'superior metaphysical reality', etc.

Considering *Option 1*: with abstraction, art simply abandoned content as an aspect, so that the form itself became the content; they are identic. This stance, first formulated by Clement Greenberg,[195] infiltrated literature criticism, where it was pushed even further by Susan Sontag who, in her sharp (and apt) critique of the 'interpretative' approach to art, claimed that the category of content is overestimated and must be abandoned altogether in favour of form.[196] The conclusions this suggested were, however, rather problematic: if there is no content in a work of art,[197] or at least if we no longer have our former firm idea of what can be considered 'content', then our only remaining tools for theoretical analysis are a combination of formalism with some sort of intuitivism. This is what Sontag calls for: on the one hand, the search for 'content' must be abandoned in favour of an analysis of form; on the other, 'hermeneutics' must

195 "Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself." (Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 6).

196 "The best criticism [...] is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form." (Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 103).

197 "Abstract painting is the attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content; since there is no content, there can be no interpretation." (Sontag, 101).

give way to some kind of "erotics of art"[198] (the idea was, however, praised by a leading theorist of philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer[199]).

Meanwhile, from the standpoint of the previously analysed passage by Hegel, it is clear that what Sontag calls 'content' is not really *content*. For, in Hegel's dialectics, content does not equate to a narrative plot, the image depicted, an ethical/political stance, or a reference to something external (which is what Sontag tends to mean by 'content'). What, then, is the content of an abstract work of art? A free play of shapes and colours? This brings back the widespread idea in modern art criticism that, in abstract art, the form itself becomes the content, so they are the same thing. But from the standpoint of Hegel's form/content dialectics, this also appears problematic, for abstract art would then simply be decorative 'lesser arts', like wallpaper patterns – a pure 'aesthetic form'. However, abstract art is certainly something else. Moreover, viewing abstract art in this way would mean regarding it as aesthetic, which in turn contradicts the historical fact that abstraction and de-aestheticisation came hand-by-hand: in Cubo-Futurism, Suprematism and Dada it was something other than mere exercises in aesthetic forms. (There is, of course, plenty of decorative abstract art as well, but this does not constitute a counterargument if one can see the difference between the *concept* of abstract art and individual examples). This leads to a dead end: if abstract art cannot be regarded as contentless solely on the grounds that it does not have 'subject matter', and if it is not

198 Sontag, 104.

199 "The well-known polemic by Susan Sontag certainly does put its finger on the sore point when one speaks of most modern scholarly interpretation of poetry and art. Basically scientific methodology used in such interpretation does not allow a work of art to appear in its own light. It has to 'over-illuminate' it." (Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Artworks in Word and Image: "So True, So Full of Being!" (Goethe) (1992)', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 1 (January 2006): 77–78.

true that its content is identical to its form, what, then, is the content of abstract art?

Apparently, this is a major issue for the Formalist approach as such (at least in the version that is informed by the Kantian aesthetic tradition). Having *appearance* as the point of reference, and thus being essentially *aesthetic*, it gets stuck when it encounters incompatible ontological concepts. In the case of abstract art, it faces art that is thought and devised in terms of concept (reaching furthest into 'art as idea', in which the tradition of abstraction arrived with the emergence of Conceptual art), while in Kantian aesthetics (as discussed in *Part I*), art is never a concept, but is instead discussed from the opposite standpoint: perception, judgements of taste, aesthetic appreciation.

This suggests that it is not so much that Hegel's categories of form and content are inapplicable to abstract art (on the contrary: as demonstrated earlier, there is nothing in Hegel's form/content dialectics that is incompatible with abstract art); rather, it is the way they used by aesthetic Formalism – detached from their initial dialectical nature of mutual/reciprocal 'absolute correlation' – that makes them so problematic when analysing abstract art. However, it should be stipulated that, as Hegel's categories were obviously in no way designed for analysing abstract art, their somewhat retrospective 'clumsiness' towards the latter is not surprising – for to use them correctly, one should always be both extremely conscious and explicit about their inner logic and interrelation. It is no surprise then that, in Modern art, 'form and content' were often used rather rhetorically in critical discourse, without any links to their philosophical origin.

Let us now consider *Option 2*: Abstraction still has content, which is a representation of some kind of 'superior metaphysical reality' (or, in a slightly different version, a symbolisation of abstract

concepts of that kind). This is the key assumption for another tradition of explaining abstract art – less established than the Formalist one, though becoming more and more influential with time – the tradition of deriving the invention of abstraction from the varied para-scientific and quasi-religious 'spiritual' ideas of the 1910s that may have influenced artists. This standpoint does rest on firm historical ground, and the influences in question are well known. However, theoretically speaking, the 'spiritual' tradition constitutes a sort of a paradox in itself. Although obviously aiming to justify abstract art, it at the same time undermines its key idea by treating abstract art as not entirely abstract. This point needs to be expanded on, which will be done in the following section.

Abstract or Still Representational: 'New Painterly Realism', the 'Fourth Dimension' and the 'Spiritual'

Emerging in 1908–1915 as a radically new phenomenon, abstract art challenged not only conventional ideas about art; professional critical reflection on art turned out to be equally unprepared for such a large-scale shift as the general public: discourse on art was inevitably 'falling behind' art itself. The new had to be comprehended on the basis of the concepts and categories of the past, so initial attempts to theoretically substantiate abstract art seem rather conservative in comparison to the subject they examine. New doctrines of various sorts were often invoked as legitimising props – mostly from the then highly fashionable frontier between para-science, quasi-religious searches, and the philosophy of perception – which constituted the characteristic 1910s cocktail of positivism, philosophy, and mysticism.

This set the main directions of early theoretical reflection on abstract art, and can be reduced to three lines. The first derived much from traditional art discourse and its categories, where

realism was considered the most advanced concept. Accordingly, critics who advocated Cubism and early abstract art tried to present it as a kind of radicalisation of the realist paradigm. This was the main line of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, the first theorists of Cubism, who saw the genealogy of the art of Picasso, Braque, Delaunay, and Le Fauconnier in the realism of Courbet (via the intermediates of Manet and Cezanne), and declared that realism should be split into 'superficial realism' (that is, the art before Cubism) and 'profound realism' (that is, Cubism and after).[200] The latter was understood as a depiction not of 'apparent' but rather 'genuine' reality, or, in the words of Maurice Reynal, depicting "intellectual conception and not visual appearance, encapsulating what is known rather than what is merely seen."[201] A related concept was put forward by the Italian Futurists, declaring the principle of 'simultaneity' – the idea (appropriated, via French Cubists, from Bergson's philosophy of perception) of representing reality from different perspectives simultaneously, thus taking into account not only the

200 "Picasso does not deny the object, he illuminates it with his intelligence and feeling. With visual perceptions he combines tactile perceptions. He tests, understands, organizes: the picture is not to be a transposition or a diagram, in it we are to contemplate the sensible and living equivalent of an idea, the total image. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis – the old formula undergoes an energetic inter-inversion of its first two terms: Picasso confesses himself a realist." (Jean Metzinger, 'Note on Painting', in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 178); "From now on we are justified in saying that between this school [Cubism] and the previous manifestations there is only a difference of intensity, and that in order to assure ourselves of the fact we need only attentively regard the process of this realism which, departing from Courbet's superficial realism, plunges with Cezanne into profound reality, growing luminous as it forces the unknowable to retreat." (Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, 'Cubism', in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 189).

201 Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 33.

spatial extent of the objects but also their temporal dimension.[202] Generally, references to the then-fashionable scientific and para-scientific reflections on non-Euclidean geometry, the 'fourth dimension', etc., together with generous use of various 'scientific' metaphors, become a highly important part of the critical discourse of the 1910s in its attempts to substantiate the legitimacy of this new art. Both can be well exemplified in the lectures and articles of Apollinaire, who first enthusiastically picked up these 'fourth dimension' ideas,[203] simultaneously claiming that the "new painters are in a sense mathematicians without knowing it [...] Picasso studies an object the way a surgeon dissects a corpse."[204] This is an interesting point deserving a separate remark: early attempts at theorising Cubism and early painterly abstraction are characterised by being the first to start using the language of science as a means to justify art in the eye of the public.[205]

The second line, essentially Symbolist in its irrational-mystical perspectives, was proposed by Kandinsky, who theorised abstract art as a kind of a visual embodiment of an artist's personal 'spiritual' experiences, and through them quasi-religious concepts inspired by

202 Altshuler, 33.

203 Guillaume Apollinaire, 'The New Painting: Art Notes', in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 181–82.

204 Guillaume Apollinaire, 'On the Subject in Modern Painting', in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 180.

205 Ten years later, the same strategy was used on a grand scale by Kazimir Malevich, who not only put forward the idea of a "research institute as a form in art", but also managed to convince the Bolshevik cultural administration of the need to organise The Institute of Artistic Culture in Petrograd as a "clinic for the dissection of art [...] a bacteriological institute of painting or art [...] which conducts research on various types of bacteria and embryos, explaining the reasons for the change in the behaviour of the organism." The "old concept of the artist disappears, and in its place appears the scientific artist", Malevich claimed. (Irina Karasik, 'Our Contemporary Form in Art Is the Research Institute...', in *Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia, 1920s-1950s*, ed. Yevgenia Petrova (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2000), 103).

occultism and 'oriental religions' (his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is supported by references to Helena Blavatsky, Theosophy, Rudolf Steiner, spiritism and mesmerism).[206] Being explicitly anti-materialistic, Kandinsky's doctrine did not, however, seriously contradict either the 'realist' line of advocating abstract art or its 'scientistic reinforcement', instead developing (or even supplementing) their para-positivist discourses in its own quasi-religious key – in keeping with the spirit of the cultural atmosphere of the 1910s.

Indeed, in spite of their differing nuances, these two lines of early theorisation in abstract art – 'Realist/scientistic' and 'Symbolist' – had a common feature: a sort of a tacit premise that art is inseparable from the representational function, implying that even an abstract work is still if not a 'depiction' then at least an 'embodiment' of something – if not of physical objects as they appear to the eye, then at least the objects that are being imagined or symbolised – a kind of visual representation of abstract concepts themselves. For instance, Kandinsky theorised colours in their alleged correspondence to various emotions, which is reflected in his book as a sort of 'phenomenological' typology of colour.[207]

The third line, which developed in parallel, provides some contrast to these two positions. Its central idea was that visual art's shift towards abstraction should be understood as an approximation to music, with its undeniable status of freedom from direct references to outward reality. This line was also put forward by Kandinsky, alongside his 'spiritual' programme. Kandinsky was fond of 'synaesthesia', and saw an analogue to his own artistic searches in Scriabin's idea of the correlation of colours with musical tones

206 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dover Fine Art, History of Art Series (New York: Dover Publications, 1977).

207 Kandinsky.

and Schoenberg's atonality. The connection between music and (abstract) painting was also referred to by Francis Picabia, and later by Henry Valensi, who theorised his own artistic style as 'Musicalism', implying the use of "color and form as a composer uses notes."[208] Picking up this idea, Apollinaire proposed that the works of Picabia, Delaunay and Valensi should be designated as 'Orphism', referring to the synthesis of the arts. Pushing this line further, Apollinaire perhaps got closer than the others to understanding the emergence of abstract painting as a radical break with the representational regime of art: he soon coined the concept of 'Orphic Cubism', meaning "the art of painting new structures with elements which have not been borrowed from the visual sphere, but have been created entirely by the artist himself, and been endowed by him with fullness of reality," referring in particular to the early works of Picasso, Delaunay, Leger, Picabia, and Marcel Duchamp,[209] as well as the first purely abstract compositions by František Kupka.[210]

Although there is an undeniable genealogical link between abstract art and Cubism – all the early abstract artists came from Cubism one way or another – there is definitely a conceptual rupture between the two. While Cubism might still be considered a representational art, as it referenced the imagery of the outside world, the emergence of pure abstract art could be seen as putting an end to all representational considerations. However, the rupture that had occurred was barely articulated in the theoretical reflections of contemporaries: elaborated in Cubist theorisation, the rhetoric

208 Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 39.

209 Guillaume Apollinaire, 'From "The Cubist Painters." (Chapter VII)', in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 182. See also: Virginia Spate, *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-Figurative Painting in Paris, 1910-1914*, Oxford Studies in the History of Art and Architecture (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1979).

210 Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 39.

of 'profound realism', 'superrealism', 'new realism', the 'spiritual' and the 'fourth dimension' is largely retained in the transition from Cubism to pure abstraction. But other voices began to be heard in parallel: Paul Klee spoke of "autonomous painting, living without a natural motif, with an entirely plastic existence"[211]; Malevich proclaimed that the "artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have nothing in common with nature [...] and when we free all art of philistine ideas of subject matter"[212]; a deep thought was expressed by the poet Pierre Reverdy, who was close to the Cubists, and saw an attempt to establish a more genuine connection with life in the new art's refusal to "reproduce the objects of life".[213]

Apparently, the very 'event' of inventing a completely non-objective art ('event' is in quotation marks as the invention was not instantaneous) appeared to be such a radical change in the concept of art that not only the critics and first theorists of abstract art, but even the soon-to-be abstract artists themselves turned out

211 Paul Klee's remark originally referred to the first of Delaunay's *Fenêtres* paintings (Spate, *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-Figurative Painting in Paris, 1910-1914*, 35. Cit. as in: Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 37).

212 "In repeating or tracing the forms of nature, we have nurtured our consciousness with a false conception of art. [...] The artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have nothing in common with nature. [...] Only in absolute creation will he acquire his right. And this is possible when we free all art of philistine ideas and subject matter [*there is a mistake in translation in Bowlt. The correct: "philistine ideas OF subject matter" ("лишим все наши мысли мещанской мысли — сюжета") – I.O.*] and teach our consciousness to see everything in nature not as objects and forms, but as material, as masses from which forms must be made that have nothing in common with nature." (Kazimir Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism', in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. John E. Bowlt, Documents of 20th Century Art (New York: Viking, 1976), 122–23.

213 "[...] one creates works that, by detaching themselves from life, enter back into it because they have an existence of their own apart from the evocation or reproduction of the things of life" (Reverdy, Pierre. 'On Cubism.' Nord und Süd (1917). Cited as in: Ross Hair, *Avant-Folk: Small Press Poetry Networks from 1950 to the Present*, 1st ed. (Liverpool University Press, 2017), 202.

to be somewhat unready to recognise abstract art in its essential 'abstractness'; speaking aphoristically, to accept the *concreteness* of abstraction: its uncompromised *negativity*, its 'zero of form'. According to memoirists, Kazimir Malevich, the author of perhaps the most radical abstract work of the historical avant-garde, said that after completing *Black Square*, he could neither eat nor sleep for a week, being unable to comprehend his own achievement.[214] This is probably why, in the brochures accompanying his 'Suprematist' exhibitions, Malevich referred to the 'new painterly realism'[215] and the 'fourth dimension,'[216] while simultaneously insisting on the programmatic 'non-objectiveness' of his art.[217] This is how – even within

214 Anna Leporskaya, 'The Beginning and the End of Figurative Painting and Suprematism', in *Kasimir Malewitsch: Zum 100 Geburtstag* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978), 65. As referred in: Ekaterina Kudryavtseva, *Kazimir Malevich: metamorfozy 'Chernogo kvadrata' [Metamorphoses of Black Square]*, Ocherki vizual'nosti. (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017). See also: Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

215 "I have transformed myself in the zero of form and through zero have reached creation, that is, suprematism, the new painterly realism – nonobjective creation." (Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism', 133).

216 These 'fourth dimension' ideas are referred to in the titles of some of Malevich's paintings of the period, for example, *Painterly Realism of a Football Player – Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension* (1915) and *Lady. Colour Masses of the Fourth and the Second Dimensions* (1915). During the period, Gleizes, Metzinger and Apollinaire's key texts on Cubism, including those referring to ideas of the 'fourth dimension', were promptly translated and published in Russian. It should be mentioned that Charles Howard Hinton's controversial works on the aforementioned topic were also available in Russian translation (Charles Hinton, *Chetvertoye izmerenie i era novoy mysli [The Fourth Dimension and the Age of New Thought]* (Petrograd: Novyi chelovek, 1915); Charles Hinton, *Vospitaniye Voobrazheniya i Chetvertoye Izmereniye [Nurturing the Imagination and the Fourth Dimension]* (Petrograd: Trud, 1915)), along with the works of Hinton's Russian populariser, the Theosophist Peter Ouspensky (Peter Ouspensky, *Chetvertoye Izmereniye: Opyt Issledovaniya Oblasti Neizmerimogo [The Fourth Dimension: The Experience of Exploring the Realm of the Immeasurable]* (St. Petersburg: Trud, 1910); Peter Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: Klyuch k Zagadkam Mira [Tertium Organum: The Key to the Mysteries of the World]* (St. Petersburg: Trud, 1913)).

217 Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism'.

a single text by a single author – the event of inventing abstract art appears to be more of a polyphony of contradictory voices than a clear and unanimous articulation of the rupture.

Summing this up in terms of the Hegelian perspective, the main thing about early attempts to theorise abstract art is perhaps that, historically, they were the first to expose the crisis of art as a fundamentally 'weak' form, which was therefore in need of external justification for its very existence. Though paradoxically, these justifications arose in response to art's very attempt to overcome its own (past) form. Nevertheless, it is no coincidence that, in search of legitimising arguments, both theorists and artists turn either to art of the past, or to analogues outside of fine art (music), or seek support from 'stronger', more socially legitimate forms – in science and religion.

However, by the end of the 1910s, both the 'Symbolist/Mysticist' and 'Realist/scientistic' lines of self-justifying the early avant-garde gradually begin to fade away: Theo van Doesburg, one of the leaders of De Stijl, demanded a radical break with any idea of representation,[218] later pushing it even further in his 1930s conception of 'concrete art' – a radicalised programme of abstract art that would not have "any meaning beyond 'itself'"[219]; simultaneously, Soviet

218 "The artist no longer embodies his idea by indirect representation: symbols, slices of life, genre scenes, etc.; he gives form to his idea directly and purely by the artistic means available for the purpose. The work of art becomes an independent, *artistically alive* (plastic) organism in which everything counterbalances everything else." (Theo Van Doesburg, 'From "Principles of Neo-Plastic Art" (1919)', in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 281.

219 "[...] A work of art [...] shall not receive anything of nature's or sensuality's or sentimentality's formal data. We want to exclude lyricism, drama, symbolism, and so on. [...] A pictorial element does not have any meaning beyond "itself"; as a consequence, a painting does not have any meaning other than "itself"." (Theo Van Doesburg et al., 'Concrete Art Manifesto', *Art Concret*, no. 1 (1930): 352. Cited as in: Lorenza Saitta and Jean-Daniel Zucker, *Abstraction in Artificial Intelligence and Complex Systems* (New York: Springer, 2013), app. 1.

Constructivism and Productivism sought a complete fusion of art with production,[220] in which the rudimentary concepts of art of the past, such as figurativeness, mimesis, and representation, no longer made any sense.

Almost completely forgotten, and supplanted in the post-war years by Greenbergian Formalism, the 'Symbolist' interpretation of abstract art as a somewhat 'mystical figurativism' gained new life and a fresh revision in the mid-1960s, thanks to the efforts of the Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom. Inspired by the discovery of some previously unpublished pieces of evidence of Kandinsky's connections to esotericism, Ringbom presented his research as an objection to the "general tendency to belittle the role of occultism in the early theory of abstraction [...]"[221] However, the discovered documents serve as rather minor additional evidence in Ringbom's argumentation, which is mostly built on a comparative analysis of Kandinsky's best-known opus, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* with a number of Theosophical and 'occult' writings by authors such as Steiner, and Besant and Leadbeater. Based on the similarities he detected in the ideas and argumentation of the two, Ringbom states that occultism had a decisive influence not only on Kandinsky's self-theorisation, but also on his art itself. Certain (though somewhat questionable) similarities in shapes and colours between Kandinsky's early abstract works and the illustrations accompanying 'occult' writings, which were done by amateur artists "according to instructions of the clairvoyant authors", serve as

220 Arvatov, *Art and Production*.

221 Sixten Ringbom, 'Art in "The Epoch of the Great Spiritual": Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29, no. 1 (1966): 386–87.

proof.[222] Pushing these ideas further, Ringbom speaks of the "occult elements of abstract painting", referring to Marc, Klee, Kupka, Mondrian, and even Hugo Ball's connections with Theosophy and similar quasi-religious doctrines of the period.[223] Met with scepticism and achieving little recognition in its time, Ringbom's work elicited renewed interest in the early 1980s[224] after the publication of Linda Dalrymple Henderson's study *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, which cited the Finnish art historian's research.[225] Thus, the two early self-descriptive lines for abstract art in the 1910s – the 'Occult/Symbolist' and the 'scientistic' – meet once again, reuniting in the Postmodernist revision of Modernism. Furthermore, as two adjacent (and overlapping) subjects of study, they appear in Henderson's subsequent publications,[226] as well as in the works of other authors, albeit remaining a rather marginal line in studies of Modernism.[227]

222 "In fact the representations of the aural phenomena and Kandinsky's abstract paintings, if set side by side, provide a most interesting study. Both the shapeless patterns of Kandinsky's early compositions, and the sharply defined planes and pseudo-organic forms of the later works have their analogies in his occult sources." (Ringbom, 406).

223 Ringbom, 408–15. Similar ideas were further developed in: Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Acta Academiae Aboensis. Ser. A. Humaniora (Åbo: Åbo akademi, 1970).

224 The fate of Ringbom's controversial theoretical legacy has been well-tracked by a sociologist of religion, Massimo Introvigne: Massimo Introvigne, 'The Sounding Cosmos Revisited: Sixten Ringbom and the "Discovery" of Theosophical Influences on Modern Art', *Nova Religio* 21, no. 3 (1 February 2018): 29–46.

225 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, Revised edition (London Cambridge: MIT press, 2013). See also, Henderson's doctoral dissertation: Linda Dalrymple Henderson, 'The Artist, "the Fourth Dimension," and Non-Euclidean Geometry 1900-1930: A Romance of Many Dimensions' (Yale University, 1975).

226 See, for example, *Art Journal* 46, no. 1 (1987) – the journal issue focused entirely on the topic of 'Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art.'

227 See, for example, John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult*, 1st ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

The works of Ringbom, Henderson and other researchers in this tradition reveal an important methodological problem. Namely, a certain mismatch between the research lens of traditional art history on the one hand, and the specific nature of abstraction in art as a subject of study on the other. The approaches used by both Ringbom and Henderson are basically art-historical, devised for representational art, and thus essentially *iconographic*. Meanwhile, as abstraction is by definition *not* representational, the question that naturally arises is whether iconography is applicable to something that is, in fact, an iconoclasm of sorts – a programmatic rejection of 'image' as such, a 'zero of form', in Malevich's words. This question is epistemological, as it concerns the limits of scientific verification. This suggests that it is necessary to separate two essentially different aspects/subjects of research: the influence of non-artistic ideas on *discourse* about art on the one hand; and the influence of such ideas on *art per se* on the other. And while this influence can certainly be either proved or refuted in the first case, rigid scientific verification appears somewhat improbable in the second, as abstract art is devoid of any imagery that could be unquestionably correlated with discourses.

A certain distortion might also arise from that specific research perspective in which one particular aspect of the material under study constitutes the only subject of interest, which, besides the researcher's will, might make it seem as if *that* particular aspect is of exceptional significance. The main virtue of a historian – conscientious work with sources and a proclivity for examining as vast an amount of material as possible – cannot prevent but rather constitutes this effect: the more archival research that is done, the more proof of the original assumption is found. Broadening the temporal framework of a study cannot help either, as it only increases the distortion by introducing more sought-after facts. "Historical

facts, even the most insignificant ones, depend on the historian who calls them into existence," Lucien Febvre remarked, stressing that first the problem should be posed correctly.[228] This is where history cannot get along without philosophical theory. Philosophical theory does not proceed from sources and data, but rather from the essence of *concepts*; in this case, the central concept should be that of abstraction. From this standpoint, the very assumption that abstract art is still a depiction of something (a mystical experience, the 'fourth dimension', or whatever) appears problematic, as both 'representational abstraction' and 'abstract representation' are *contradictio in adjecto*.[229] Philosophical theory does not consider contexts, but rather concrete subject matter; so if one looks at abstract artworks themselves, one is unlikely to discover anything in them

228 "«Scientifiquement conduite», la formule implique deux opérations, celles-là mêmes qui se trouvent à la base de tout travail scientifique moderne: poser des problèmes et formuler des hypothèses. [...] Les faits historiques, même les plus humbles, c'est l'historien qui les appelle à la vie. Les faits, ces faits devant lesquels on nous somme si souvent de nous incliner dévotieusement, nous savons que ce sont autant d'abstractions – et que, pour les déterminer, il faut recourir aux témoignages les plus divers, et quelquefois les plus contradictoires – entre qui nous choisissons nécessairement." (Lucien Febvre, 'Propos d'initiation: vivre l'histoire', *Mélanges d'histoire sociale* 3, no. 1 (1943): 8–9). English translation: Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

229 An example of the problematic nature of this approach – at least in terms of its inherent incompatibility with the perspective of the philosophical theory of art – is provided by the debate surrounding the legacy of Hilma af Klint. On one hand, the artist is proposed as the founder of abstract art; on the other, it is contended that her works were created under the influence of the author's mystical spiritual experience. However, if Hilma af Klint's works are, as claimed, the visualisation of certain spiritual phenomena, they cannot be considered abstract art, for abstraction cannot by definition simultaneously serve as representation. Conversely, if Hilma af Klint's works are indeed abstract, then any discourse on them as representations of spiritual experience is difficult to regard as relevant. Thus, clarifying this issue emerges as a central problem upon which the decision of whether to view Hilma af Klint in the context of abstract art depends. This is a dual challenge – a task for both art-historical and art-theoretical approaches – and progress can only be achieved once these two perspectives converge on an internally coherent and unified standpoint.

that could serve as scientific proof of the presence of *that* kind of content. Rather, the suggested conclusion is that the search for representational content in abstract art stems from a problematic understanding of art as a supra-historical phenomenon that does not change over time: after all, from this point of view, art seems to automatically mean 'image' and representation, which is not entirely consistent with an understanding of art as a historical form, and consequently subject to change. This in turn inevitably relativises the artistic revolution of abstraction, actually equating the latter with pre-avant-garde art: if art only shifted from depicting real objects to representing mystical and para-scientific concepts after the invention of abstraction, this means that the historical break with art's figurative regime has been exaggerated, or may not even be of historical significance at all.

Putting aside the controversial idea that para-scientific and quasi-religious doctrines had an impact on the invention of abstract art (and hence constitute its 'content'), it should be admitted that the aforementioned studies significantly contribute to what could be deemed the 'conceptual history of Modernism' (a historiography of concepts and terms) or the 'history of discourses about Modern art': these studies present a great job of collecting and systematising certain kinds of intellectual and cultural interventions in the modernist language of early Modern art theorisations, whose influence definitely lasts beyond Modernism. In this sense, it is worth mentioning some other discourses that developed to theoretically legitimise early Modernism, and which could also constitute a promising research subject. First of all, the discourse on 'realism', which (as discussed earlier) was widely used to legitimise Cubism and early painterly abstraction. It would be particularly interesting to trace, for example, how an apparently obvious contradiction between the idea of a 'realist' (that is, 'objective') representation of visual images

of the external world on the one hand, and the idea of the 'non-objectivity' (that is, radical abstractness) of artwork on the other, seemingly went unnoticed, if not ignored, in these theorisations. A paradoxical idea (that albeit seemed convincing to contemporaries) came to the fore: there is a more genuine reality that somehow surpasses the usual visual means of image, and can therefore be expressed precisely in the non-objective. Another 'legitimising' discourse generated in the early theorisation of Cubism and abstraction – the 'scientistic'/positivist discourse, destined to happily outlive not only the avant-garde but all the subsequent phases of Modernism and Postmodernism, and to finally take a firm foothold in the vocabulary of contemporary art and remain in artistic lingo in the form of the metaphors of 'experiment', 'research' and 'laboratory' – presents more interesting material for the conceptual history of art or the history of art concepts and terms, and deserves a separate study.

Abstract Art as 'Presentation of the Unpresentable': Jean-François Lyotard's Conception of 'Sublime Painting'

A discussion on either the 'content' or 'contentlessness' of abstract art can hardly go by without mentioning the conception of the "avant-garde as 'sublime painting'", as coined by Jean-Francois Lyotard. This conception first appeared in his article *Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?*[230], whose key argument was that the postmodern is not an overcoming or negation of the modern,

230 Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?' Lyotard continued discussing the sublime and its applications to Modern art and culture in his books *The Inhuman* (1988) and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1991) (English translations: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: (Kant's 'Critique of Judgment', §§ 23-29)*, Meridian (Stanford, CA: Stanford Uniersity Press, 1994)). However, I will focus only on the aforementioned article in which the initial idea of bringing together the sublime and the avant-garde was first drafted.

but rather a continuation of, and at the same time a condition of possibility for, the latter (to be genuinely *modern*, one needs to get ahead of modernity, thus becoming 'postmodern', says Lyotard).[231] This article came out in 1983, at a time when the 'second avant-garde' of Conceptual art was finally losing ground, largely due to its own internal crisis, and giving way to what would soon became known as international contemporary art. The key theoretical imperatives of the avant-garde and conceptualism – de-aestheticisation, 'dematerialisation', the primacy of idea above appearance – were then relativised or abolished; painting – figurative, expressionist, or whatever – was rehabilitated, various kinds of eclectic 'aesthetic' and 'realist' artistic discourses triumphally returned to both the art market and international exhibitions. Being an integral part of the same process, critical discourse on art similarly changed: consequently, the avant-garde and its legacy ceased to be a 'sacred cow'; for the first time, they were subjected to harsh criticism not from the Right and conservativism as before, but from the (at least declared) leftist positions of postmodern philosophy and cultural criticism.[232] It is these attacks on the avant-garde that Lyotard's article was aimed at. The

231 "What, then, is the postmodern? [...] It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. [...] A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. [...] *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)." (Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?', 79, 81).

232 See, for example: Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Attacks on the avant-garde from 'leftist' positions had been attempted earlier as well. It was, on the one hand, Soviet criticism of Western Modernism from the Socialist Realist standpoint (see, for example: Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop-Art*, trans. David Riff (Haymarket Books, 2019), originally published in Russian in 1968). On the other hand, a strong anti-avant-gardist stance also arose from within Conceptual art in response to the movement's inner crisis in the late 1970s (see, for example: Ian Burn, 'The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (or the Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 392–408).

basis of his key argument is the familiar opposition of 'avant-garde vs. kitsch' (implying 'realism' by the latter), which undoubtedly brings to mind Clement Greenberg. As the situation had changed since Greenberg's eponymous article was penned in 1939, the emphases had also shifted: "when power assumes the name of a party," it (the same as in Greenberg) chooses realism (aka kitsch); but "when power is that of capital", this time it prefers not the avant-garde but kitsch again (which, Lyotard remarks, is essentially realism too: the eclectic "realism of anything goes", that is, the "realism of money").[233] Thus, in early 1980s postmodern culture (or at least in the version that Lyotard opposes), it was as if the avant-garde were forced out on both sides of the Iron Curtain – not only from Soviet culture but also from Western bourgeois culture. By facilitating it, postmodernist critics of the avant-garde literally pour water on the same capitalist mill, says Lyotard.

Since the primary criticism levelled at the avant-garde by these critics (for whom the issue of *representation* was practically central) concerns its 'abstractness,' understood as a lack of social content, Lyotard, in defence of the avant-garde, proposes the idea of abstract art as a form of 'higher-degree representation,' or in his own words, a "presentation of the unpresentable."

Lyotard's elegant paradox obviously originates in Kant's aesthetics, which contains, in addition to the category of the beautiful, the category of the *sublime,* which refers to that which exceeds the ability of human experience and perception – "the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful." The seemingly impossible task of delivering artistic reflection on this kind of experience is, for Lyotard, solved in the avant-garde by presenting the sublime 'negatively', as the 'sublime painting' of avant-gardist abstraction, which in Lyotard's words

233 Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?', 75–76.

"enable[s] us to see only by making it impossible to see [...] making an allusion to the unpresentable by means of visible presentations."[234]

Lyotard explicitly avoids the word 'representation', instead using 'presentation'.[235] Nevertheless, interpreting the avant-garde as even a 'negative [re]presentation' (of the sublime or whatever else) is hard to view as anything other than bringing back the idea of art as a representation of some third thing, that is, a return to the concept of art with which (as discussed earlier) advanced art had already broken away from by the end of the 1910s. In this, Lyotard's concept of "presenting the unpresentable" is not that far removed from the justification of non-objective art developed back in the days of Cubism and early abstraction, by inscribing ideas of a 'fourth dimension' (or alternatively, mystical and quasi-religious concepts) into it: in Lyotard, the latter is merely replaced by the Kantian *sublime*, and 'representation' with 'presentation'. In other words, if one still understands the avant-garde as a break with figurativeness and the mimetic regime of art, that is, if one sees the emergence of non-objectiveness and non-figurativeness as a radical change in the very concept of art, then bringing back the idea of art as 'presentation' (even if negative and brewed on the *sublime*, and even for the sake of defending the avant-garde) is hard to regard as anything other than as a step backwards, as an anti-historical gesture.

However, it should be noted that Lyotard's use of the category of the sublime is not strictly Kantian. In Kant, although the sublime "cannot be contained in any sensible form", that is, cannot principally

234 Lyotard, 78.

235 It may be that Lyotard's idea of seeing abstract art as 'presentation' (as an opposite to realist 'representation') also originates in early Cubist theorisation. Pierre Reverdy, a French poet who was close to Cubists, wrote in his 1918 essay "Some advantages of being alone": "A work of art cannot content itself with being a *representation*; it must be *presentation* [...]" (Reverdy, Pierre. 'Some advantages of being alone.' (1918). Cited as in: Hair, *Avant-Folk*, 202).

be presented, there are objects that definitely serve "for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind".[236] In classical aesthetics, the objects that usually serve as such examples are spectacular and frightening natural phenomena – "the wide ocean, enraged by storms," as in Kant.[237] In other words, classic art and literature have ways and devices for conveying a sublime experience – from poetry to painting, from Greek tragedy to Caspar David Friedrich. Even such an ultimate experience of the sublime as death has an extensive iconography, especially in religious art. Therefore, it is not in the avant-garde, but rather in traditional art where a "presentation of the unpresentable" should be sought. While moving in reverse, that is, from the concept in question to a particular avant-garde work, we must ask whether, for example, Duchamp's *Fountain* presents the sublime, and what, then, is that sublime? Given the artist's well-known taste for elegant humour and sexuality, this line could constitute a certain perspective – for was not Lyotard himself explicitly against mixing the Kantian category with the Freudian 'sublimation' (and reproaching Habermas for it)? Finally, it is

236 "But from this one immediately sees that we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some object of nature sublime, although we can quite correctly call very many of them beautiful; for how can we designate with an expression of approval that which is apprehended in itself as contra purposive? We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy, which does allow of sensible presentation. Thus the wide ocean, enraged by storms, cannot be called sublime. Its visage is horrible; and one must already have filled the mind with all sorts of ideas if by means of such an intuition it is to be put in the mood for a feeling which is itself sublime, in that the mind is incited to abandon sensibility and to occupy itself with ideas that contain a higher purposiveness." (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 129).

237 Kant, 129.

needless to say that the sublime is an essentially *aesthetic* category, while avant-garde abstraction was anything but aesthetic art.

Robert Pippin: Abstract Art as Part of the Development of the Human Self-Consciousness in History

Robert B. Pippin's 'What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)'[238] is above all remarkable in its fresh take on contextualising Modern art in relation to classic philosophy. In this regard, Pippin's text constitutes one of the rare attempts at bridging the gap that Peter Osborne pointed out – the lack of theoretical discourse that would enable philosophy to grasp nonclassical art "in its decisive difference from art of the past."[239]

For Pippin, the emergence of abstract art signifies, historically, an "accelerating and intensifying self-consciousness." As this concerns not only particular issues of form or perception, but also a motion of thought in general terms, Pippin points out that the subject is very relevant to Hegel, "for whom the link between modernity and an intensifying self-consciousness, both within art production and philosophically, about art itself, is the most important."[240] Moreover, the very idea of linking abstraction to Modernity can largely be traced back to Hegel's philosophy and corresponds to it:

> We owe to Hegel the fairly natural idea of abstraction as a kind of logical culmination of modernist self-consciousness itself. More broadly, the very existence of abstract art represents some kind of accusation against the entire tradition of image-based art, involves some sort of claim that the conditions of the very intelligibility of

238 Pippin, 'What Was Abstract Art?'
239 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 8.
240 Pippin, 'What Was Abstract Art?', 1.

> what Hegel calls the "highest" philosophical issues have changed, such that traditional, image-based art is no longer an adequate vehicle of meaning for us now, given how we have come to understand ourselves, have come to understand understanding.[241]

Here is Pippin's central point: as the emergence of abstract art is linked with the intensifying of human self-consciousness, the disclosure of the essence of art will follow the same logic. As the development of human thought means moving towards thinking in concepts, that is, abstract thinking, the unfolding of the essence of art will likewise inevitably be a transition from the figurative to the abstract. Therefore, figurativeness and literal 'depiction' cease to be satisfactory in art: they become inadequate for the current level of human self-consciousness ("[...] human beings require, less and less, sensible, representative imagery in order to understand themselves"), and hence the idea of abstract art arises.

Here, Pippin nontrivially brings together the emergence of abstraction with Hegel's thesis on art as an 'exhausted form', a 'thing of the past', that is, the form of absolute spirit, which is no longer able to fulfil its past function. Pippin therefore interprets the invention of abstract art as art's response to, or in other words, an attempt to overcome what Hegel calls the 'end of art'. For Pippin, the latter is not, therefore, the end of art as a form altogether, but rather the end of a particular way in which art had been related to human consciousness in its quest for self-understanding:

> It is within this narrative that we hear the final, famous Hegelian verdict that artistic expression in Western modernity, tied as it ever was to a sensible medium, could no longer bear a major burden of

241 Pippin, 1.

> the work in the human struggle towards self-understanding, was no longer as world-historically important as it once was, no longer as necessary as it once was to the realization of freedom. Hegel's claim is thus not about the end of art, however much he is associated with that phrase, but the end of a way of art's mattering [...] the question at issue for Hegel is not the end of art making and appreciating, but something like a shift in its status and social role.[242]

With the emergence of abstraction – faced with the dilemma of either accepting its new, diminished social role or changing its status to become an entirely autonomous entity – art (in Pippin) chooses the latter. Consequently, the development of art towards abstraction means a transition from the external world as a subject of representation to the disclosure of the nature of plastic (that is, plasticity-related) issues as the essence of art: while art used to be focused on external objects (and depicted them), the advent of abstraction makes art "about, exclusively and purely, its formal properties and potentials, perhaps by being about opticality as such, or perhaps about purely painterly experiments as the final assertion of the complete autonomy of art [...]"[243]

This point of Pippin's is ambivalent. On the one hand, with the emergence of abstraction, the plastic/aesthetic properties of art finally became apparent in their pure form – which stands in good agreement with, for example, Peter Bürger's reasoning that it is the avant-garde that first reveals the artistic categories of art of the past. On the other hand, Pippin's conflation of plastic qualities with the concept of art *per se* makes his reasoning on abstraction cling paradigmatically to the logic of *appearance* rather than idea: it reads

242 Pippin, 3.
243 Pippin, 4.

as if art, after refusing to represent external objects, switches to 'depicting its own self' in some manner, reaching a point where the "relationship between shape, plane, and a sense of weight – actual components in the density of objects and so their very objecthood – can be now thematized as such."[244] Such a reading of abstraction does not seem very Hegelian, but rather more Kantian (and indeed at this point, Pippin himself refers to an "extended post-Kantian aftermath"[245]), as the matter is viewed not as a *conceptual* turn in art, but rather as some sort of crystallisation of art's aesthetic properties: abstraction is deduced to be art's ultimate *formalisation* in itself, a historical revelation of art's purely aesthetic/plastic characteristics (although not in any way viewed as technical, but rather as purely formal in a higher sense).

The most interesting part of Pippin's study is probably his substantiation of abstraction through Hegel's premise of the absolute superiority of the beauty in art over the beauty in nature – the point that constitutes a fundamental difference between Hegel's philosophy of art and Kant's aesthetics. If Hegel's premise were not taken into account, the emergence of abstraction would seem like some sort of betrayal of the 'true beauty' revealed to human beings in nature – as abstraction presents an entire rejection of depicting the outside world, and therefore the objects created by nature, the negation of image as such. Hegel's amendment is essential: that even the most ordinary 'depiction of the world' is by no means 'secondary' in relation to the depicted, but in fact surpasses it, for it was created by 'spirit', the human consciousness.[246] This thesis breaks the

244 Pippin, 22.

245 Pippin, 22.

246 "[...] even a useless notion that enters a man's head is higher than any product of nature, because in such a notion spirituality and freedom are always present." (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2).

seemingly indisputable connection between the depiction and the depicted, leading to an understanding of the former's autonomous status in relation to the latter. Figurative, image-based art should not, therefore, be viewed in its relation to nature, but in its link to human history and self-consciousness.

Here, Pippin undertakes the essentially important task of purifying Hegel's thought from any possible religious connotations, and emphasising the importance of having a secular understanding of the notion of 'spirit', *Geist*, as a *collective subjectivity, and its development*. The same goes for the notion of the 'divine', which in Hegel is often linked with art, and in this context should be understood as some kind of innate essential function of art:

> The first and most peculiar is how Hegel ties art ubiquitously, in all cases, to the divine. [...] All art, no matter the subject matter, from still life to portrait to landscape to historical scenes, is understood as an attempt "to portray the divine." This ought right away to alert us that this sweeping reference is, to say the least, nonstandard and will require considerable interpretation. Art is called "one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of spirit *[Geist]*" (A, 1:7). This set of appositives appears to gloss the divine *as* "the deepest interests of mankind and the most comprehensive truths of spirit" rather than vice versa, and this quite radical humanism (or divinization of the human) is prominent elsewhere in the lectures [*Hegel's lectures on aesthetics*], too.
>
> [...] Art in other words is treated as a vehicle for the self-education of human being about itself, ultimately about what it means to be a free, self-determining being, and when Hegel calls that dimension of aesthetic meaning divine, he seems to be rather flattering the

> seriousness and finality of the enterprise (its independence from sensual need, utilitarian interest, and so forth — in other words, its "absolute" importance) than in any sense worrying about the God of revealed religion.[247]

In other words, when Hegel refers to the 'divine' in relation to art, Pippin says that it is *not* about God or religion, but rather some sort of synonym for 'content' in a higher sense, a kind of radically humanistic take on art's function. Pippin points out that Hegel's take on the appreciation of a piece of art as a *presentation of the implementation of the spirit to the spirit itself in a sensible form* contrasted greatly with Kant's concept of the 'disinterested gaze'. Thus, even in image-based art, such as figurative painting, a depiction of reality is not just a depiction, but rather something that very much surpasses its source – because it was 'besouled' by the human spirit. This is what the 'divine' effect of art actually is, not being essentially religious at all – reality, when depicted, therefore becomes something else:

> [...] in a painting, the object "does not remain an actual total spatial natural existent but becomes a reflection [Widerschein] of the spirit." The "real" is thus said to be "cancel[led]" and transformed into something "in the domain of spirit for the apprehension by spirit" (which natural objects are not) (A, 2:805).[248]

By removing traditional image-based art from the Kantian context, and thereby the persistent collation of the experience of art with the experience of perceiving nature, Pippin leads us to the idea that the rupture between figurative art and abstract art lay

247 Pippin, 'What Was Abstract Art?', 7–8.
248 Pippin, 10.

in a totally different plane. Namely, this rupture must be comprehended not in terms of the relation of the beauty of art to the beauty of nature, but rather in the context of the development of human self-consciousness towards the disclosure of the concept. From Hegel's perspective, the development of art towards abstraction can be seen as a process of gradually freeing the spirit from its dependence on nature, Pippin says:

> [...] fine art, and especially its history, Hegel claims, should be understood as a *liberation from nature* [...] we have broken free of dependence on such sensible images not so much because of their inadequacy as because of our having made ourselves independent of them, and art must be understood as part and parcel of that work.[249]

Speaking about Pippin's work in terms of Osborne's claim that it is necessary to find adequate philosophical discourse that would enable us to grasp nonclassical art in its "decisive difference from art of the past"[250], it should be noted that the methodological idea of Pippin's article is to analyse Modern art from the standpoint of classic philosophy of art. This is probably why a later theoretical point, such as the separation of the aesthetic from art (which originated in the avant-garde and is central to 'analytical' Conceptual art), is sadly entirely missing from Pippin. Although it might be the author's personal art preferences that were behind this omission: Pippin explicitly states that he does not appreciate Conceptual art, considering it an insignificant episode in art history; even though he is definitely familiar with, and even sympathetic to, international contemporary art (with a particular appreciation for video and photography, due to

249 Pippin, 10, 11.
250 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 8.

their continuity with the traditional aesthetic qualities of painting).[251] It is also noticeable that Pippin avoids mentioning either 'the avant-garde' or 'Modernism', instead using the term 'abstract art' – and with that heaping together the historical avant-garde and Abstract Expressionism from the outset, even though it is essential to distinguish between the two. In Pippin, the emergence of abstraction therefore appears to be a natural stage in the development of art rather than a revolt against it. This largely Greenbergian attitude corresponds with the methodological idea of Pippin's text: to analyse the new with the help of the old. Here, one can see a contrast with Bürger's approach, which puts forward the premise that it is not the avant-garde that needs to be evaluated with the help of the past's aesthetic categories, but vice versa – it is the avant-garde that for the first time reveals the historicity of these aesthetic categories (therefore, it is with its help that one can understand what preceded it, and not vice versa). Following this logic, it would probably make sense to reformulate the question as: "What was Hegelian aesthetics from the point of view of abstract art?"

251 "My own view is that great art is now happening in photography, in the creation of large photographs that serve as the inheritors of the conventions of easel paintings, and in some extraordinarily powerful video art that has emerged. I do not find it happening in installation art, or conceptual art, which died out almost as soon as it appeared. It became stale and repetitive in a way that indicates it was untrue to the non-conceptual, integral nature of aesthetic sensibility to begin with, and now it just seems boring and trite. Who can go to a museum, see a Joseph Beuys piece scattered all over the floor, and find it interesting anymore? It is a one-off deal. But if you see a video by Douglas Gordon or Anri Sala, I believe you are seeing great art alive in a way that is going to be alive 150 or 200 years from now. I think it is alive, not because it is drenched in the ideals of political activism, but precisely because it is not – and because it is not, it is." (Omair Hussain, 'An Interview with Robert B. Pippin', *Platypus Review*, no. 36 (2011)).

Conclusion

Introductory Remarks

Two critical instruments of the philosophical theory of art, de-aestheticisation and radical abstraction, which were conceptually extracted in this study from the polyphony of mutually contradictory discourses and positions that constitute the form of 'art' undoubtedly do not exhaust the concept of art. Yet, as critical, philosophical, and ontological tools, I suggest that they provide a *territory of (theoretical) clarity*, a critical counterpoint to the inherent discord of all other 'voices'. These tools are distinctive in that they are rooted in avant-garde theories and, notably, in classical, 'analytical' Conceptual art. The creation of these tools within the avant-garde and Conceptual art was essentially an endeavour to navigate the chaos of 'art in a broader sense', 'art as a proper name' – a testament, perhaps, to their historical significance. The opposition under scrutiny is inevitably that of 'art as analytical Conceptual art' versus 'art as a proper name', where the latter is a cacophony of exclamations and mutterings, forming a shared landscape, but not a shared truth, while still asserting a claim to it.

I venture to propose that this approach allows us to outline a specific theoretical toolkit for the immanent philosophical critique of contemporary art. The focus here is specifically on 'international contemporary art', as this is the broad framework that encapsulates this multitude of mutually contradictory discourses. This situation is, however, peculiar, as 'contemporary art' is not a concept in a philosophical sense, but rather a cultural-administrative construct and institution, that is, essentially another 'proper name'. Its ontological distinction from the proper name 'art in a broad sense' lies

solely in its exclusion from the canon of classical art. In relation to the philosophical theory of art, it is characterised by its withdrawal from self-criticism[252].

It is well known that, in contrast to conceptualism and the avant-garde, which were essentially anti-systemic movements, contemporary art has achieved a robust status of political and cultural normativity over recent decades, at least in democratic countries. The mere presence of international contemporary art structures – biennials, museums, funds – in a given country is seen as an indicator of relative freedom and democracy. However, this 'normativity' of contemporary art has a flip side. The aura of freedom and democracy that bathes contemporary art, turning the mere presence or absence of its infrastructures into a sort of political barometer, seems to default to it being considered an a priori *good* form, a *good* institution. Consequently, the primary task for good, that is, leftist criticism, is not to challenge this form, but only to identify errors, misguided approaches, violations, and even abuses (not only in the present but also in the past), which distort or compromise its essential goodness.

Indeed, looking at recent debates, it becomes apparent that the subject of public criticism of contemporary art is either the institutional and administrative flaws of the system (such as unfair distribution of resources and symbolic capital, a lack of transparency in decision-making, conflicts of interest, excessive bureaucratisation, etc.) or ethical and political-ideological issues. These issues are primarily driven by an agenda of social and gender justice, anti-racism,

252 Here I would refer, once again, to Peter Bürger's (after Marx) distinction between self-criticism and inter-systemic or *system-immanent* criticism. The latter is criticism within an institution, such as Protestantism's criticism of Catholicism within the institution of religion, while the former is criticism aimed at an institution itself, a demand for a radical revision of its very foundations. For Bürger, the historical avant-garde is art's arrival at the stage of self-criticism.

and the elimination of the consequences of colonialism and Nazism, as exemplified by the endless series of scandals surrounding dOKUMENTA. This criticism, while for the most part fair and absolutely necessary, seldom calls into question contemporary art itself as an *institution of art*, let alone criticises contemporary art as a form of artistic thinking (whatever that means). It appears as if the last two questions are considered to be 'beyond the scope', as criticism from the standpoint of the philosophical theory of art is not deemed necessary. As a result, the very idea of *self-criticism* of contemporary art, that is, a criticism of art on its own terms, seems to be removed from the realm of feasible options; instead, it is handed over to the 'bad guys' — from conservative art critics and 'religious aesthetics', to various kinds of neo-reactionaries and 'prohibitionists' from the cultural administrations of modern autocracies.

The prerequisite, or rather, the condition for the emergence of this 'impossibility' of *self-criticism* was largely the dual process of institutional appropriation on the one hand, and on the other hand, the theoretical neutralisation of the most critical tradition that preceded the formation of the institution of contemporary art – the conceptualist tradition. By the turn of the 1980–1990s, the latter had practically been absorbed by the new normative institution

of international contemporary art as an important yet no longer so relevant historical predecessor, and was safely archived.[253]

By the 2010s, a new wave of re-politicisation of art led to a growing trend of transforming artists into 'cultural workers'. Subsequently, the pre-avant-garde dilemma of 'ethics versus aesthetics' (or 'politics versus aesthetics') returned to the forefront of discussion, and questions concerning the nature and function of art – key to conceptualism – almost entirely disappeared from the discourse. Simultaneously, craft practices, quasi-religious animist motifs, and ideas of intuitive 'aesthetic art' were rehabilitated; a discourse on art in terms not of ideas and concepts, but of artistic mediums and themes was re-normalised. In this sense, after the surrender of Conceptual art, contemporary art, in spite of the progressive and emancipatory agenda it declares, appears like a happy engagement of neo-Greenbergianism with Socialist Realism – as if Art & Language's *Portrait of V. I. Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock* turned from an elegant joke into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But can progressive goals be achieved by reverting to archaic and pre-avant-garde practices when the agenda appears more progressive than art itself? What the avant-garde artists dreamed of – the dismantling of art's autonomy in bourgeois society – seems to

253 As Paul Wood recently noted, Conceptual art, acting as a sort of 'hinge between Modernism and contemporary art', has proven to be a difficult subject for contemporary art critics and art historians. It is either omitted from the discourse or appropriated into the mainstream at the cost of significant misinterpretations. One side effect of this was the inflation of the term 'conceptual art': it seemed to become unanchored, losing its historical connection, at least in Britain, where 'conceptual art' has become practically synonymous with contemporary art, and sometimes serves to name almost everything that is not Sunday painting. (Paul Wood expresses this idea in the book *Biting the Hand: Traces of Resistance in the Art & Language Diaspora*; the issue was also discussed with the participation of Paul Wood at a seminar on the occasion of the book's release at the Helsinki Academy of Arts in May 2024). See: Paul Wood, ed., *Biting the Hand: Traces of Resistance in the Art & Language Diaspora*, 1st ed. (Helsinki: Rab-Rab Press, 2024).

have finally been achieved – at the cost of the ever-increasing *culturalisation of art*. But is the rapprochement of art with an essentially conservative institution to which art has (at least since the times of the avant-garde) been traditionally opposed – culture – a 'good deal'?

Cultural criticism – which appears to be the dominant position in contemporary art discourse – is, by its very nature, unlikely to raise these kinds of questions. In this regard, it seems necessary to formulate a certain meta-position in relation to contemporary art, creating a condition of possibility for not only cultural, ethical-political or institutional criticism (that is, partial criticism), but also a substantial, ontological criticism that would be analogous to the *self-criticism of art* that was undertaken by the avant-garde towards traditional art. In this sense, the idea of speculatively removing the critical conceptualist tradition from the historical archive of modern art, again contrasting it with the latter as an unfinished alternative, seems fruitful: it could be suggested that the tools of the avant-garde and analytical Conceptual art, as conceptually delineated in this study, might lay the groundwork for such a constructive theoretical meta-position. This might represent a modest, yet positive, outcome of my study – if not an expansion of knowledge as such, then at least the unveiling of a promising and clear critical perspective that holds the potential to contribute to knowledge in the future.

However, it should be kept in mind that 'contemporary art' is a construct that is not universally applicable or relevant. It is also, as hopefully demonstrated, historical, and thus inevitably temporary and particular. Furthermore, its contemporaneity is not beyond dispute. The administrative-cultural framework is unlikely to indefinitely harness the aforementioned 'host of voices' that constitute the 'name of art', even if it is confined to the realm of 'contemporary'. While the proposed idea of utilising the theoretical instruments of the avant-garde and Conceptual art to critique this framework may

be fruitful, it is acknowledged that this is merely a partial critique. Indeed, despite contemporary art's claims to universality, neither it nor its criticism can fully address the inherently problematic nature of art as a form. Neither by situating art within an administrative-cultural framework, nor by contrasting it with any theoretically coherent immanent criticism, can one escape this 'host of muttering and screaming voices',[254] a chaos claiming truth, but incapable of achieving it.

In this sense, it might not have been the most appropriate choice for me to conclude this study in the traditional academic manner, enumerating formal outcomes and results of analysis, as is customary in the social sciences. I therefore avoided this formal approach, and completed this manuscript in a way that I believed to be more relevant to both the subject of the study and its modest results. This decision was suggested by precisely this figure of a 'host of voices': it seemed that the response it required from both the researcher and the artist (and above all from the artist!) was the acceptance of this complexity, this inconsistency, the aporetic 'impossible possibility' of art as the only fundamental basis and reliable point of reference.

While considering what form the concluding part of this study should take to align with these points, I found myself frequently referring to the fact that in parallel with the actual academic work, that is, the work on the main text of this study, I regularly took notes for myself, which usually took the form of short essays. Their shared starting point was precisely this idea of art as a fundamental aporia, and their consistent method was the imitation of various kinds of

254 I am referring to Ilya Kabakov's expression describing his experience (and creative method) of having in his head a 'host of voices', imaginary commenters of sorts, every time he looked at an image. See: Ilya Kabakov, *On Art*, ed. Matthew Jesse Jackson (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago press, 2018). University of Chicago Press, 2018.

'voices' in this chaotic multitude, or my personal responses to these real or imaginary voices. For the most part, these were the voices of other artist-theorists, but also the voices of philosophers and art critics; and my choice of one or another voice from this 'host of voices' was inevitably subjective, although it was naturally determined by the theoretical positions I held. These short essays constituted a kind of parallel text to the study, a sort of alternative version of it — a more 'unleashed' take on essentially the same problems, as if converting it into individual practice, that is, creating its own kind of 'praxis of theory' and thus, in a sense, the practical result of my theoretical study. A few of these short texts eventually became sections of this *Conclusion*.

On a Work of Art[255]

A work of art is a sensible form of idea. But it is not sufficient to say that a work of art is an idea embodied in a perceptible form. For it is not that every thought realised in a sensible form is, automatically, a work of art. Therefore, 'idea' here means an idea of a special kind, that is, an idea built in a certain way. Such an idea can be designated as 'proposition', 'utterance', 'judgment', 'statement'. These words, of course, possess different shades of meaning, but in this context, they are interchangeable; for example, when Foucault uses the term 'utterance' (Fr. *énonciation*), discussing the conceptual structure of Magritte's works,[256] *énonciation* is close to the term 'proposition' as it used by A. J. Ayer and Joseph Kosuth.[257]

But it also will not be sufficient to say that a work of art is a sensible form of such a special kind of idea ('proposition', 'utterance',

255 Previously published as *Fragments on Art* (Ilya Orlov, 'Fragments on Art', *Shy Plumber* 1, no. 1 (2020): 15–18).

256 Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

257 Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy'.

'énonciation'). Indeed, in this definition, there is no indication of why and how, in a work of art, a thought turns into a sensible form. It also remains unclear what exactly the peculiarity of the thought is that provides it with the opportunity to be *realised* in a work of art; more precisely, to *become* the latter; that is, what distinguishes it, in this case, from any other kind of thought. In other words, from this it is still not clear what exactly causes art to be manufactured from this operation of the 'realisation' of thought.

The condition that would make the definition more complete is the following. The thought embodied in the perceptible form of a work is not just a 'proposition' ('utterance', 'énonciation'), but the kind of proposition that includes – as an integral, inseparable part – this sensible (perceptible) form *itself*, that is, the very form of the work. In other words, a work of art is a statement that cannot be made without the participation of a sensible form (regardless of what this form is – a material object exhibited, a poem, a physical gesture, an event, or even a 'dematerialised' form).

The well-known maxim of the Moscow Conceptualist artist Vitaliy Komar – that a work of conceptual art is a "work of art that can be told by telephone"[258] – does not at all mean that the sensible form (whether physical or 'dematerialised') is secondary or even extraneous to (conceptual) art. For the fact that the work can be "told by telephone" does not cancel out the form as the realisation of thought, and does not turn an idea into something that needs no form. The point is that what "can be told over the phone" is nothing

258 "I remember Vitaly Komar saying once that true conceptual art should not be visual; one should be able to describe it over the telephone." (Boris Orlov, 'You Cannot Give an Account of Ivan Chuikov's Art over the Phone', in *Ivan Chuikov. Labyrinths. Exhibition Catalogue* (Moscow: Regina Gallery, 2010), 307). Komar's maxim could be inspired by Walter de Maria's work *Art by Telephone*, presented as part of the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (Bern, Switzerland, 1969).

more than a description of the sensible form, which can only be realised as an indivisible unity of the idea and its embodiment in a work of art — and this is the only way it can be told.

In other words, the form is an integral part of the work of art, and how it is "told by phone" is an aggregate of idea and form, regardless of whether a work of art has already been made physically or exists only as a mutual fantasy of the author and their interlocutors. The condition of the inseparable unity of sensible form and thought in a work of art leads to a practical principle. This principle is that a work of art is such if the idea embodied in it cannot be realised otherwise than in this particular sensible form.

This principle can be formulated as a direction for practice: a work of art must be done in such a way that what it says could not be said otherwise than by creating such a work of art. For a work of art does not make sense if exactly the same thing can be expressed in another way even more clearly and directly; otherwise it would be a work that adds nothing to our understanding of the world and is not itself a valuable statement, that is, a work that failed to become a work of art. This is especially obvious if what was said to be a work of art could be expressed without losing meaning, by non-artistic means (for example, through an academic article, political statement, journalism, etc.).

This does not mean, however, that artwork cannot discuss a subject or problem external to art; on the contrary, this is common. A work can, of course, pose questions that are completely unrelated to art itself or to its ontology; but in this case, the answers are also not within the competence of art – and one should not expect or demand them from the work that posed them.

A work of art is not a means to search for answers, but rather the answer itself. Not in the sense that a work of art is capable of giving or should give (contrary to what has been said above) answers to

questions about objects that are external to art and its ontology, but in the sense that the work of art is an answer to the outside world *within* the domain of art, but not beyond it.

The domain of art will, of course, be re-defined each time by a particular work of art (this constant redefinition is its innate characteristic and function, at least for the avant-garde and conceptualism), but the border between art and non-art, though changing constantly, continues to exist – as a condition of the possibility for art as such. To destroy this border would mean to abolish art *per se* (a similar task, to radically emancipate art all the way to its complete merging with everyday life and production, was set by the ambitious Productivist art of the early Soviet avant-garde, although it remained incomplete).

Art's claim for autonomy does not mean that a work of art is conceived as an 'aesthetic object' as it was in 19th-century Aestheticism. This would be a misconception. Here it is necessary to clarify the relation of contemporary art – if understood as 'art after the avant-garde' – to aesthetics. (Perhaps, though, this issue requires constant clarifying and re-thinking). The subject of contemporary art (in terms of art after the avant-garde) cannot be considered within traditional aesthetics (more precisely, 'aesthetics' in terms of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*), because since the avant-garde, the work is conceived and created as a challenge to the aesthetic, and that is to aesthetics as a concept and doctrine.

On Split Personality, Theft, and Freedom

An ideal creative personality should consist of two artists in one. The first is, as it were, an artist-animal, completely captivated, even 'stupefied' by the picture they work on, obeying either an unconscious instinct or mystical intuitions; they have neither the time nor the desire for unnecessary reasoning, reflection, and especially doubt.

The second is a detached critical spectator; their job is to impartially judge what the first produces, commenting, making suggestions for improvement, and most importantly, raising questions. This duality is especially useful for an artist who produces 'pictures with words', that is, works in which words and image function on an equal footing (which, it seems to me, is the most difficult task for an artist, a kind of aerobatics in art). This splitting of the artist into two different characters works as a kind of internal division of labour: the first produces a 'picture', while the second analyses it, comments, criticises, etc. Furthermore, the interaction becomes more complicated, namely, dialectical: having made a sarcastic comment, the second gives the first the task of incorporating this judgment into the picture, and then there is a synthesis, constituting a third thing.

Like most of what one can see at my exhibitions, these are not my ideas, but rather borrowed ones, that is, someone else's. For example, the above was a retelling of thoughts expressed by Ilya Kabakov quite a long time ago.[259] Yet in my case, this internal dualism of the ideal creative personality works a little differently. If the second half – the artist-critic, commenting, making judgments and suggestions, and asking questions – is still in place, then the first – the artist-animal, artist-intuit fully absorbed in their picture, passionately stirring the colours and reverently contemplating their work – seems to die in me for a time (though they do resurrect themselves when instructed, for example, to make craquelures that exactly mimic those on hundred-year-old canvases, etc.). Instead of them, there is a strange compiler character (if not a plagiarist, even) that has grown within me, who shamelessly collects the ideas of other artists, then offers them to their inner counterpart as material for the actual

259 Ilya Kabakov, 'Tekst kak osnova izobrazitel'nosti [Text as the Basis of Figurativeness]'.

work, that is, for what I, as a biographical personality, eventually present as 'my' artwork or exhibition.

Thus, for example, one part of a show could be made entirely of Malevich and Lissitzky. The other part could be built from a small Dürer drawing; or after a painting by some forgotten baroque artist. Or it could be made of a vintage print after another forgotten artist, an Italian engraver of the early 20th century, assisted store-bought spirit levels. Or from the imitation of a painting by some Art Nouveau or Symbolist 'unknown artist' (supplemented, however, with the small yet necessary addition of Hanne Darboven and Edward Kienholz). Another part could then be made by marrying the reverse perspective of Byzantine icons with the utopian axonometry of Constructivism. Or from Duchamp's idea of a work of art as a hallucinating machine (*Large Glass*, *Chocolate Grinder*, *Bottle Drying Rack*, *Bicycle Wheel*). It can also be made from Gustav Klutsis' 'propaganda machines', or Sol LeWitt's conceptual geometric structures. Or out of the idea of catharsis-purification, which can be traced back to the inaccessible depths of history, the invention of *deus ex machina* attributed to Sophocles – rescuing the characters of tragedy, and sometimes comedy, from a dead-end situation with the help of a wooden crane and actors portraying gods.

And finally, the insightful idea of treating politics, ideology and religion as a form of psychedelic hallucination – the invention of The Inspection Medical Hermeneutics, a Moscow/Odesa/Kharkiv art group (unthinkable today, this amazing collaboration toured numerous Kunsthalles in the late 1980s and early 1990s throughout Europe!) – can be happily stolen.

I should also mention other borrowings and the outright theft of ideas – from Stanislav Kolíbal, Olga Rozanova, Luis Camnitzer, Hanne Darboven, Hercules Seghers, Vladimir Nabokov, Hans Bellmer, Lee Lozano, Gottfried Wals, Fernando Pessoa, Goran

Đorđević, Semyon Motolyanets, Tedi Holm, Matthew Cowan, Maxi Mahler (etc., etc., etc). I did ask for permission from some of them (and received it), but I did not have the opportunity to ask the rest, so I will leave it as it is. If they make claims, I will try to answer before the moral, ethical and artistic court (an aesthetic court, I believe, will hardly ever threaten me, as I hope I deal with ideas rather than aesthetics).

However, this extensive plagiarist praxis (euphemistically disguised for references, allusions, homages, etc.) constitutes a significant benefit for the audience, the ultimate recipient of my work. This benefit appears not only as a justification, but perhaps even as a virtue provided by taking this approach to the production of exhibitions and artworks. To explain what this encompasses, I must bring up a somewhat unpleasant but critically important point: at least 95 per cent of the art shown is bad, boring, and failed works – which, however, should not be understood as a problem in need of a solution, but on the contrary, as a norm and fair routine, if not as an integral part of the definition of art *per se* (the latter is probably the very essence of the point). This is, of course, not my thought either, but a remark by the conceptualist Nikita Alekseev.[260]

In this regard, the extensive – if not overwhelming – plagiarism in a sense represents a positive alternative to the widely criticised condition in which we find contemporary art. Indeed, instead of showing some crap that claims to be exclusive, while ultimately losing the battle with even its more- or less-successful contemporaries,

260 Seroye Fioletovoye, 'Domashnyuyu Vystavku, Po Kotoroy Dolzhny Byli Begat' Tsyplyata, KGB Nakrylo Za "Gomoseksualizm" ["The Apartment Exhibition Where Chickens Were Supposed to Run Was Closed down by the KGB for 'Homosexuality'"]. Interview with Nikita Alekseev, a Classic of Moscow Conceptualism.', *Knife Media*, n.d., https://web.archive.org/web/20171025010101/https://knife.media/feature/conceptual-art/alekseev/ (Archived October 25, 2017, via Internet Archive's Wayback Machine).

exhibitions of the kind described above bestow on the viewer good-old, time-proven (at least from the 1700s to the 2020s) works in the form of homages and reminiscences, references, or at worst, unobtrusive nods.

Some might suspect cowardice in this, a fear of actual accomplishment, or simply a mere inability to achieve, that is, creative impotence; or even both. On the other hand, who said this? Whose voice was this? Was it an art critic? Of course not. Art critics are, for the most part, generous and benevolent people: if something is wrong, they would rather remain silent, pretending they merely did not notice. Let's stop beating around the bush: this was indeed my own voice; namely, the voice of one of my two inner artists (I guess it is clear which one). Yet I am in a difficult situation: the imperative of fidelity to the method leaves me no choice but to integrate this critical remark in some future work.

Indeed, there is no hint of freedom here. Yet, it is only for outsiders that art is a domain of freedom. Artists know that it is a realm of constant damnation from which there is no escape. Granted, this was not my thought, either.[261]

On the Stupidity of the Artist and the Truth of Art

This is a short note on art theory, written by an artist. But what exactly is art theory, and why is it needed? Moreover, for an *artist*? Besides, written *by an artist*.

To commence with, I will quote Hegel – this is a proven way to show that the author is smart and highly educated, intimidating readers so that they will no longer have any desire to object. So,

261 Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics'.

Hegel says that the task of the philosophy of art is not to provide artists with rules, but rather to reveal *what* art is.[262]

But since I am an artist myself, and therefore by definition a stupid creature (even if trying to come across as smart), I will begin by disagreeing with the greatest philosopher of all time. After all, there is always a selfish interest in gaining something from theory that will be beneficial for practice, that is, at least some tips, even if Hegel categorically denies it can deliver any.

In general, stupidity as an innate trait of an artist has been repeatedly noted by the artists themselves (at least those who could write). This tradition is especially strong among conceptualists. Marcel Duchamp used to quote the French proverb 'stupid like a painter';[263] Joseph Kosuth obviously enjoyed referring to this passage;[264] Sol LeWitt, before moving on to theory, cited a letter sent to him from an editor, where the latter mentioned that he was in favour of avoiding "the notion that the artist is a kind of ape that has to be explained by the civilized critic."[265]

Art critics and theorists, who are professional and knowledgeable people, are of course well aware of this trait of artists. Therefore, it is not surprising that artists are treated accordingly: on the one hand, they invariably make allowance for their limited analytical abilities; on the other hand, by not taking the artists at their word.

262 "The philosophy of art has no concern with prescriptions for artists; on the contrary, it has to determine what the beautiful is as such, and how it has displayed itself in reality, in works of art, without wishing to provide rules for their production." (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 18).

263 Francis Roberts, 'I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics (Interview with Marcel Duchamp in 1963)', *Art News*, 1968, 46–47.

264 Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', 25.

265 Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 12.

The philosopher Thierry de Duve would hardly have been able to "re-read Kant through Duchamp"[266] if he had believed even for a second the latter's words that readymades are "completely anaesthetic" and are "based on a total absence of good or bad taste."[267]

Art historian Piotr Piotrowski, while participating in an art journal discussion (about a completely different matter), and being asked if the artists talked about some particular topic, casually replied: "[...] They [artists] did not, but *intellectuals* did"[268] [*my italics – I.O.*]. This, of course, is merely a curious slip of the tongue, but clearly indicating that artists, of course, are *not* intellectuals.

Even a great friend of Conceptual art such as Peter Osborne is quite convinced that the body of theoretical texts produced by the conceptualists of the 'analytical' Conceptual art generation (especially in terms of their 'attack on aesthetics') was not so much a *real* theory as a strategic tool in the artists' struggle for the power that had been usurped by art critics, professional art intellectuals.[269]

Let alone Clement Greenberg, who genuinely believed that theory cannot in any way precede art, but can only follow it *post hoc*.[270] Which means that an artist's work never stems from theory. That is, theory is definitely not required either *from* or *for* artists.

Let me put it bluntly: either artist or theory. If suddenly there is an 'artist with a theory', then the theory must necessarily be under suspicion. After all, the stupidity of an artist is not just an accidental trait, but something innate; this is a demarcating line that separates

266 Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.
267 Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 141.
268 Badovinac et al., 'Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe'.
269 Osborne, 'Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy', 49–50, 60.
270 Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2018). See also: Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900-1990* (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 3.

artistic work from theoretical work, and therefore, to some extent, the line that separates art from thought. And this is an indication of a fundamental, ontological division.

I swear, I am not joking, and I am not at all trying to refute the idea that the artist is stupid or prove the opposite. On the contrary, I completely agree with it, there is nothing to object to. Just look at press releases written by artists, their 'artist's statements', and finally artists' websites. Even references to philosophy and 'clever' quotes from fashionable theorists manage to look desperately stupid there. Though, why blame others: looking back at my own artistic career, I see only a heap of mistakes, misconceptions, and yes, simple stupidity.

But what *is* stupidity? First of all, stupidity is outrageous. We are accustomed to considering it something not worthy of existence. "How can they be so stupid?" we say. There should not be any stupidity, because this is a mistake in the universe, a failure in the system.

Actually, it is not like that at all. A counterargument is given by the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who reverses the classic interpretation of the myth of wise Prometheus and his stupid brother Epimetheus. The main character here is not actually Prometheus, but his brother, says Stiegler. After all, if Epimetheus, while distributing divine benefits among living beings and endowing animals with the means of survival, had not forgotten about people, leaving them naked and defenceless, Prometheus would not have had to steal fire, and people would not have had to invent crafts. The stupidity, or, in Stiegler's words, the *idiocy* of Epimetheus, is by no means a mere deviation from the norm, or an accidental defect. On the contrary, it is an essential and integral part of human nature; after all, if it were not for the idiocy of Epimetheus, technology simply would not

have been invented, and human history would never have begun.[271] Thus it turns out that stupidity is a fundamental condition and the hidden force behind history – which, incidentally, is precisely what history convincingly proves.

Ultimately, the question of stupidity is also a question of truth. Hegel's thesis about the 'end of art' does not mean that the days of art are numbered and that it will soon run out like water in a tap. The latter, of course, is also not entirely excluded, but Hegel's thesis still means something different, namely, that art has lost its connection with truth. The point is not that art can no longer 'express' or 'represent' anything essential, or bring us any knowledge or a fair judgment about something external. In fact, this was never the purpose of art, so nothing has changed here. Neither is this about the truth of science, social or humanist knowledge, or any specific knowledge or field for which art is *not* a necessary condition, mediator, or tool. Rather, this is about the truth of art itself as a 'form of absolute spirit', that is, about its correspondence to the horizon of human consciousness in a high sense, as an integral, essential part of it.

Simply put, the condition of "art after the 'end of art'" means that there is no longer anything 'divine'[272] left in art; this is now a solely human matter. On the one hand, the generic involvement of art as a 'form of absolute spirit' with truth has not disappeared without trace: yet in art we can still see a glimpse of a somewhat sublime albeit illusory freedom, which it of course cannot bestow on us (artists know about this better than others). This is why art continues to claim a weak societal function. On the other hand, no matter what stupid nonsense is done today as art, and no matter

271 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1. The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

272 As discussed earlier in *Part III*, *Abstraction*, Hegel's concept of the 'divine' should be viewed as a secular term, as interpreted in: Pippin, 'What Was Abstract Art?', 7–8.

what stupid nonsense is written about it, there is no way to refute it or recognise it as false. This does not mean there is no longer truth, and everything is relational or conditional. Rather, this means that art is an aporia, like humans themselves, which owe their present 'human condition' to both the resourcefulness of Prometheus and the short-sightedness of Epimetheus.

Therefore, art theory, conceived as art's *ontology*, should probably be axiomatic. For its goal is to reveal what art is. Can this be expressed otherwise than in the form of a claim to broader relevance, to a general validity? This is the only thing left in art from its previous form of the 'divine horizon', and this premise is fair, therefore there can be no doubt that art as a form has been fully implemented, and therefore, as a completed project, it must be comprehended in its entirety. From this point of view, theoretical reflection is indeed the ultimate and highest realisation of art. However, art continues to exist in its detachment from truth, therefore no claims to the universality of analytical judgments about art are possible any longer. From this, Hegel's thesis, which at first glance might seem contradictory, becomes clear: on the one hand, the goal of the philosophical theory of art is to understand *what* art is (that is there *is* truth), on the other hand, it is not the job of theory to give artists rules (that is, there is no truth).

This equal coexistence of truth and untruth, understood as the state of "art after the 'end of art'", perfectly rhymes with my role as the author of this text: after all, I am an artist who has attempted to engage with theory. In other words, a fool who got involved in a business that requires intelligence.

I have already said that I would describe my own path in art as a series of delusions, mistakes and stupidities. The only thing I can console myself with is that the nonsense that I was originally going to write might have been more stupid than what I eventually wrote.

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Reflections on the Philosophy of Art After the Avant-Garde and Conceptualism
Ilya Orlov

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Art theory is not an explanation of art, but rather its highest implementation. This Hegelian thought seems more an expression of the desirable than a description of the real when it comes to contemporary art: neither post-Kantian and phenomenological approaches, nor the various cultural and visual studies that have dominated the field in recent decades, have demonstrated their suitability for dealing with anything other than the representational and sensible aspects of today's art. Proceeding from the hypothesis that the crux of the matter lies in the under-researched tension between German aesthetics and the 'anti-artistic', 'de-aestheticising' and 'radical abstraction' programmes of the avant-garde and Conceptual art, this study seeks to contribute to the development of a philosophical discourse that is capable of engaging with contemporary art in its ontological aspect.

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