

Transculturality, Art and Aesthetic Principles

Eugenio Benitez

Transcultural aesthetics has not yet been appreciated by philosophers, largely because it does not conform to traditional expectations for theories of art, aesthetics and aesthetic principles. These include the expectations that art is to be found primarily in objects, that the evaluation of art objects is the main goal of aesthetics, and that in order to evaluate art objects a set of classificatory principles is necessary, so that appropriate objects may be grouped together for comparative judgment. All of these expectations stand in the way of transcultural aesthetics. It is possible to consider another approach to the philosophy of art which takes art to be found primarily in activity, which takes the main goal of aesthetics to be the appreciation of such activity, and which seeks principles of production that inform such appreciation. I will outline a view of transcultural aesthetics that conforms to these expectations, rather than the others described above. It will only be possible to outline such a view, but I hope that it will be sufficient to show that a change of expectations is both necessary to the future of transcultural aesthetics and fruitful for philosophical thinking about art.

I will begin with a reorientation of some of the most basic terms. I will then show how the question “What is art?” looks different once this reorientation is accomplished, and then I will turn to a re-examination of art and aesthetic principles in terms of the activity of production.

1. Aesthetics, Beauty and the Philosophy of Art

The three terms ‘art’, ‘aesthetics’ and ‘beauty’ are interrelated, but they do not denote the same thing. It has been argued that beauty is a characteristic feature of art. It has also been argued that beauty is

essential to art. But most philosophers have not construed these arguments so strongly as to mean that beauty is a sufficient condition or even a necessary condition for art. And nobody, so far as I know, has gone so far as to insist that beauty just is the same thing as art. Something may be beautiful and not be art in any strict sense; a sunset for example, or a rainbow. And something may be art without being beautiful in any conventional sense, such as the work of the painter Francis Bacon. There are responses to these claims, but if they are right, they would only show that in the end we should treat art as essentially concerned with beauty, not at the beginning. The philosophy of art includes matters that are ostensibly not part of the philosophy of beauty, such as the making and function of art, the mechanisms of sensation, the relation of the artist to the community, the development of culture and so on.

The philosophy of art also differs, though perhaps in less obvious ways, from the subject nowadays called aesthetics. Aesthetics is sometimes defined in a broad way, as the study of the rules and principles of art. If we adopt a broad definition like this one, it will be idle to distinguish the philosophy of art from aesthetics. But the term 'aesthetics' has a narrow sense that is in more common use. Ever since Kant's *Critique of Judgment* Aesthetics has been preoccupied with art *criticism*, that is, with the question, "what makes a work of art excellent?" And even in incautious, inexact popular uses of the term this emphasis on judgment (or preference) is implicit: "Minimalism: that's *my* Aesthetic," says the working class stiff of his bare apartment.

Obviously, however, a philosopher may be interested in art, and write about it, think about it, without wanting to develop a critique of judgment or value. She may be concerned with how art is made, she may be concerned with the place of intentions or emotions in art, she may be concerned with art's functions, with its anthropology, its metaphysics. She may want to develop a theory of art, or she *may* think, for philosophical reasons, that there *cannot* be a theory of art. That is a philosophical position about art, but to arrive at that position is not necessarily to do aesthetics, in the narrow sense. My interest in transculturality has to do with the philosophy of art so described, and although I will speak about transculturality and aesthetic principles in this article, I want it to be understood that when I use the term

‘aesthetics’ I use it in a broad and not a narrow sense. I consider beauty and aesthetics to be *among* the topics essential to a philosophy of art, but they are subordinate to it.

My discussion will depart from aesthetics in the narrow sense in another way as well. Often philosophers doing aesthetics consider only the opinions of other philosophers. My approach aims to be not just transcultural but transdisciplinary, including, under the umbrella of ‘philosophers of art’ poets, painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, architects—in short, anyone with a specific artistic excellence when they comment on art. The sort of comment I have in mind can be found in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, in Poe’s *Philosophy of Composition*, in Tolstoy’s *What is Art?*, in Kandinsky’s *The Spiritual in Art*, and elsewhere. It is not limited, however, to discursive comment. Magritte’s *Return of the Flame* comments on, among other things, the style of impressionism, and Bacon’s *Pope Innocent X* is at least a comment on Velazquez. Indeed, the arts are not even limited to commenting on like art forms, painting can comment on music, music on literature, and so on.

2. *Transculturality and the “What is Art?” Question*

A good place to see how traditional expectations about the philosophy of art adversely affect transcultural aesthetics is with the question, “What is art?” This is not in itself a very clear question, but traditional expectations have treated it as if it were. The question “What is art?” is most commonly treated as a question of *constitution*, about what *makes* something art. Occasionally it is treated as a question of *evaluation*, about what makes something *good* art. These ways of taking the art question are prejudicial to transcultural aesthetics, because they invoke skepticism about a common set of criteria for constitution or evaluation. But the art question can be taken in other ways more favourable to transcultural aesthetics. It can be taken, for example to be a question of *function*, about what art *does*, or a question of *purpose*, about what art is *for*. In these contexts there is no immediately apparent obstacle to considering the art or aesthetics of many cultures at once. There is no apparent threshold criterion for function, as there is for constitution. There is no necessary judgment between purposes, as there is for evaluations.

There is another, deeper difficulty that the art question poses for transcultural aesthetics. The question, “What is art?”, as it is normally understood, presupposes that we have already answered a more general question about what comprises art. That is, it presupposes that we have already established the *domain* of productions, real or intellectual, whose criteria, excellence, function or purpose we are seeking. At first sight this may seem to be just the question of constitution: “what *makes* something a work of art?” That it is not the same question may be seen by the following example. Imagine a new museum has been constructed and you are appointed its curator. You want to know what is supposed to go in the collection and you are told simply, “art”. You would be well within your rights to ask the following questions: “Do you mean objects of art?”, “Am I to include performances?” “What about craft and ritual?” In asking these questions you are not wondering about what counts as a work of art, but rather *what are the sorts of things about which you can ask*, “is this art?” I call this the question of domain. The assumption that the question of domain has been settled makes most transcultural comparisons seem otiose. It makes Minoan temple painting seem not appropriate to consider in the same context as Fauvism. It keeps Medieval tapestries in different galleries from contemporary installations. And while it occasionally places Asian and African art in the same domain (the domain of the *other*) it usually requires them to be distinct.

It would seem that any decision about the domain of art either presupposes principles that establish that domain, or is arbitrary. If it presupposes principles, we seem to invite the sceptical challenge that when thinking about art we are caught in a vicious circle: in order to know what the principles of art are, we need to establish the domain of items in question, but in order to establish the domain, we need to know the principles. Thus, many are tempted to take the other horn of the dilemma and decide the question of domain arbitrarily. This leads to indefinite proliferation of aesthetic discourses. Note, however, that if the art question were about the function or purpose of art, we would not feel obliged to settle the domain question first. Not only would we *not* separate the productions of various cultures, we would positively encourage comparisons, for the sake of the fruitfulness they have for disclosing new ideas about function and purpose.

The reason I have touched on these questions is to indicate the range of ideas that direct, often without the slightest notice, our experience of art. Conceptions of domain, constitution, value, and principle, however obscure they might be, influence the feelings most of us have when we experience art. The fact that we can have so many questions about these conceptions is a sign of how obscure they are. The fact that we inevitably employ them shows how sedimented they are. Transcultural aesthetics threatens to undermine this obscure sediment. It suggests that we do *not* need to know rules of art (if indeed there really are any) before we can do aesthetics. We do, however, need an orientation to art. To refuse to try and organise our thinking about art into a coherent whole, is to be doomed to occasion, to isolated and immediate decision, to an understanding that is even less than partial.

I will try to outline an alternative orientation that looks to artistic productions and principles of art in a way that is more promising for transcultural aesthetics. But it is only *an* orientation; a point of view, not entirely arbitrary, because (hopefully) well-reasoned, but one point of view among others nevertheless. My aim is merely to bring transcultural aesthetics within the horizon of possible forms of study.

3. *Transculturality and Artistic Productions*

I want to begin with a point about the term ‘work of art’. This term tends to privilege sculpture and painting, two areas where it seems especially apposite. Thus, when traditional aestheticians speak about works of art, their paradigm is usually painting, and usually painting viewed from within a very specific context and history. This way of thinking about art (as comprised of ‘works’), which is as old as Plato and Aristotle, focuses on products rather than activities. It presupposes what I have elsewhere called ‘object-oriented aesthetics’. The focus on objects tends to exclude many kinds of human activity that the transculturalist wishes to study. It is not common, for example, to call a dance, a ritual or a performance a *work* of art. That is because the noun “work” signifies a thing completed, while dances, rituals and performances are activities. Tolstoy favoured the term ‘artistic production’ over ‘work of art’. This term is at least more inclusive. It suggests both process and completion. We often do call a dance or a performance a

production; we speak about production companies and producers and so forth. And it is not a long stretch to call a painting or a sculpture a production. Note, however, how this way of talking about painting and sculpture shifts our perspective: rather than focus on the product, or work, we consider the process that brought the product into being. It is this focus on the process of making that I think provides the orientation to art necessary for transcultural aesthetics to flourish.

There is a second undesirable implication in what most philosophers mean by '*work of art*'. Philosophers often distinguish works of art from both aesthetic experience and aesthetic objects. An aesthetic experience, most generally construed, is just any sensory experience we have. The word 'aesthetic' is here used in its root or etymological meaning, "that which is perceived by the senses". Philosophers puzzle over what it is to have an experience, whether just the body is involved, or just the mind, or the whole mind-and-body, or what. But I am only interested here in the *qualitative* or *aesthetic* side of a sensory experience. I see a bud of lavender. I notice its colour. I catch its scent. Even before I put these qualities into words I encounter them. This is what I mean by an aesthetic experience: the qualitative side of an experience.

Notice that an aesthetic experience is always a *partial* experience of the world. It involves an awareness of some things as opposed to others. It involves "foregrounding" and "backgrounding". A way of making this clear is to go back to my example. I could pull back from the lavender bud and notice that there is a bee hovering over it. I could listen to the buzz. I could pull back further and notice the sea of lavender, and several bees all moving in a kind of dance. I could pull back and notice myself as observer in-the-midst, and so on. But I would have to be superhuman to *attend to* everything. Attention can go in further as well as out, I could focus on the richness of colour, for example, or the pattern of a single leaf. To have an aesthetic experience of the whole would be impossible; it is just as impossible to *attend to* nothing in particular (not the same thing as becoming inattentive). So an aesthetic experience already separates something out of the field, is already selective. But that does not make the thing experienced a work of art, or even, yet, an aesthetic object.

By 'aesthetic object' I mean an object that is removed or *dislocated* from the ordinary context in which it is available for aesthetic experi-

ence. In some of the eccentric collections of Joseph Cornell, for example, there marbles in cups in rings in boxes in glass cases, and we in the collection aspects of these things that we would be very unlikely to see under ordinary circumstances. The composer Dvorak placed in his ninth symphony some of the themes he heard in the “Negro music” of the New World. In so doing he made these themes into aesthetic objects. The wonder of an aesthetic object comes precisely from its being exhibited in unusual circumstances. But artists often exaggerate the importance of context. They sometimes, or used to, speak of “found” objects as works of art: a bicycle wheel suspended from the ceiling, for example, or a urinal exhibited in an Art gallery. Critics and spectators were rightly puzzled by these simple re-presentations. Although they count as aesthetic objects, Marcel Duchamp’s “bicycle wheel” and “fountain” provoke us to ask, “is that art?”

Here is where some philosophers think the term “work of art” comes in handy. We think of a work of art as something *original*, something that has been *worked over creatively*, not just something that is intelligently, ironically, or strategically placed. The work of art differs essentially from a found object in that it is made fresh by the artist. There are clearly difficulties here (e.g. how are we to understand new complex relations of familiar things?), but they are all of the “slippery slope” variety. The notion of a work helps to identify a feature we normally expect to find in art.

We can firm up the distinction between aesthetic objects and works of art further by requiring that a work of art bear the producer’s “signature”. By signature I don’t mean just or even necessarily the name of the artist appended to the work. I mean the unique style of the artist, including features that are often unconscious. The idea of signature is familiar to most people in music, whether in composition or in performance. The signature is what makes it possible to distinguish a Mozart symphony from one by Haydn. It is what allows a listener to tell whether a Chopin impromptu is being played by Horowitz or Rubinstein. Painters, too, have signatures like this, and poets and architects, and virtually all artists. A few have tried to overcome their own signature (Magritte is one of them, the poet Fernando Pessoa another), but in general, even across the longest period with the greatest

development and widest interest in diversity, we find a unique personal trace of the artist appearing again and again. By attaching the idea of signature to the notion of a work of art, we can exclude most ordinary cases of found objects. And the ones that remain, which bear the signature of the artist, like Cornell's boxes, may be the ones we want to count as works.

In some ways I am attracted to this way of thinking about works of art. But the whole series of steps by which we reached our present conception, from aesthetic experience to aesthetic object to work of art, suggests a false view of the *process* of production. For now it seems as if a work of art begins outside of the artist, in something of the world, which "dis-closes" itself to us, or manifests, or shows-itself-forth, or just appears (since that is a perfectly good word for it) and that in response to this aesthetic experience, the artist rends the material from its environment, or copies it in some way, and merely works it over in her own style to make it art. But the process of production, though it *may* go like this, just as often begins entirely within the artist, in imagination, or in dreaming, or in creativity. These internal processes are perhaps of greater interest to the transculturalist than the external ones assumed in the idea of a work of art, because of the relation they have to aesthetic principles. Traditional aesthetics seeks objective principles of art, in the ontology of a work of art, and in the aesthetic properties it bears. These principles can be used to define various arts and to classify works as belonging to one sort of art or another. Within the several arts there will be subordinate objective principles, that can be used to discriminate one work from another, and these subordinate principles might ultimately be useful in the evaluation of a work of a specific type, belonging to a specific class, as a good or excellent instance of that type. These sorts of principles thwart transcultural aesthetics because of their emphasis on the separation of arts, and the comparison of specifically like objects. Transcultural aesthetics is more interested in the subjectivity of artists, and the potential that lies in human intersubjectivity. Thus, the sorts of principles that a transculturalist will seek are not principles in the sense of objective rules that allow determinations about what counts as art or how excellent a work is, but principles in the sense of subjective starting points for creative processes of artistic production. Thus, transcultural aesthetics requires not only the idea of different sorts of art principles,

but also the different application of principles to art. I will try to explain this briefly in the next section.

4. *Transculturality and Aesthetic Principles*

Many philosophers have argued that a theory of art must be based on principles. But although they often recognise different kinds of principles (e.g. formal, transcendental, psychological or ontological principles), they do not often stop to think about different applications of principles to art. I'd like to consider two different applications, involving *principles of classification* on the one hand and *principles of production* on the other, to show the difference they could make to a philosophy of art. I have provided a graphic for principles of both kinds in *Figures 1-2*, found at the end of this article. In *Figure 1* I have tried to represent a more or less traditional scheme for the classification of arts, though I have taken the liberty of making the most general principles ontological ones, according to the inclinations of a philosopher. *Figure 2* may seem somewhat more arbitrary, as I have drawn entirely on my own experience of and reflections about art to construct it, but that is not necessarily a defect, since the aim of productive principles is merely to assist the spectator in appreciating the activity of art.

principles of classification

Principles of classification are designed to define and demarcate the several different arts, and to a lesser extent expose the relations between different arts. The kinds of questions that it helps to answer are questions of essence. What is distinctive about painting, for example, and what makes it the same as or different to literature? Many people who devise a philosophy of art based on principles of classification use *ontological* principles. A familiar classification based on ontological principles is seen in *Figure 1*. Architecture, sculpture and painting are there grouped together as arts of *being*. That is, they are the arts of completed objects. Naturally these objects decay or may be modified over time, but that doesn't represent a problem for this classification of arts *per se*, it only requires the stipulation of a point at which the building, statue or painting is taken to be complete. By contrast, music,

performance and dance are arts of *becoming*. Their actual objects are instantiated diachronically and do not persist, as the arts of being do. A plan for multiple instantiations in these arts may exist, but that plan, insofar as it is an art object, is a form of instruction *for* becoming, not a becoming itself. The instantiations are each different, though more or less control can be gained over them through the art of instruction. Finally, literature, poetry, and instruction are arts of *non-being*, that is to say, of *invention*. In these art forms are ultimately entirely artificial (there being no requirement in imagination to comply with laws of logic, physics, or nature). Rules for specific arts within the category of non-being may specify, though arbitrarily, that a naturalistic framework be adopted, but the necessity involved here is unlike the necessity a sculptor has of using real materials.

One can readily see connections between the three main categories of art illustrated here. I have already suggested a connection between instruction and exemplification in theatre and music. Just as easily one can “free” an architect, by imagining an analogous art of non-being, in which building materials have impossible strengths, properties, and relations. Additionally, one can readily see how slightly different ontological principles might be applied to generate a similar taxonomy. For example, it is often said that architecture, sculpture and painting are arts of *space*, music, performance and dance are arts of *time*, and literature and poetry are arts of *energy*. The fact that multiple classifications can be made of the same arts in the same way tips us off to the contingency of such classifications. Perhaps we group them in this way as a result of our anthropology. For my purposes here, however, it is important to note how difficult it is to imagine a grouping that puts, say, architecture together with poetry and dance, on the one hand, and painting together with performance and literature on the other. What sort of principles would make for a grouping like this? What this shows, I think, is that when we apply principles of classification, we tend to presuppose that the groupings are not completely *ad hoc*. We look for ways “to carve reality at the joints”, as Plato suggested in his *Phaedrus*, and we hope that by applying the principles of classification we will arrive at essential differences between the arts.

The reason this way of applying principles is so prejudicial to trans-cultural aesthetics is that, whichever general principles we begin with,

as we move down the tree, cultural principles are employed at some point to *distinguish* art forms from one another. This may be done at different levels in the tree, depending on the exact principles to be used, but inevitably Aboriginal bark painting will be distinguished from the illumination of manuscripts as a distinct and separate form of art. The whole tendency of principles of classification is to separate art forms that the transculturalist wants fruitfully to bring together.

principles of production

By contrast, someone applying principles of production is interested in what drives or governs the artist, or, sometimes, what drives or governs the art (in cases where the artist isn't aware of or denies any particular motivations). These may be abstract principles that are religious, or formal, or symbolic, or they may be practical principles that are economic or scientific. I have illustrated a schema for principles of production in *Figure 2*. Ideally, instead of a schema, I would illustrate these principles by an original work of art, without lines of demarcation, perhaps even without words; it would appear as a sun, radiating energy outwards in all directions from the creative heart of the artist. There would be swirls and vortices of energy overlapping one another, spreading outward without chaos or separation. Although that illustration would, I think, be truer, it would obviously not be as clear or instructive as the current figure. It is important, nevertheless, to understand the artificiality of the boundaries here depicted.

In the figure I have reduced the most general principles of production to two: beauty and truth. I do this as a way of suggesting what can be responsible for motivations in different directions, but also to hint that, at the most general level, there may be something transcendental that serves as a single, universal principle of production. All art is drawn towards this, from ever so many initial directions. For the sake of simplicity I have reduced these initial directions to four: metric, design, function and alterity. The idea is to show that the principles guiding production might seem to be opposite: metric, for example is primarily concerned with quantification, whereas design is concerned with appearance, quality, aesthetic properties. Function is concerned with self in that it has to do with a relation of the art to *us*, whereas alterity

concerns the relation of art to something *other*. At the next level out, however, it can be seen how these principles begin to overlap. Design, for example, is divided into gadgetry and fashion, to show that at one end of the spectrum, the aim of design is to craft something in terms of a function (though not necessarily a *useful* one), while at the other end it may be concerned with the exhibition of properties that have no function for us whatsoever. For example, the design of a new clasp for a piece of clothing may be motivated *primarily* by interest in the aesthetic properties and hence, although functional, appear as a form of gadget; but a design of a haute couture fabric enclosure may simply be for the sake of exhibiting the other in a medium of fashion.

Similarly, alterity in the form of ritual is hard to distinguish at its boundaries from fashion *simpliciter*. Likewise the symbol, which, in its pure form represents the other, overlaps with the pure abstraction found in metric works of art. The triangle is an example: as abstraction it is a mysterious presence, as symbol it is the token of absent real Trinity.

Instrumentation, too, lies close to the sort of functions that are useful for life (which I call economic functions), instruments measure and reveal quantities available for economic applications (though on the other side, the pure revelation of quantity is closer to abstraction). And, while economic functions are more instrumental, those that are motivated just by a desire to instantiate a working (which I call ergonomic) are more like gadgets. At the next level out, the boundaries become even more indistinct. The makings that have to do with function and the functional aspects of metric and design are pulled towards truth; there is a kind of specificity in them. The makings that have to do with otherness, and the useless features of metric and design are pulled towards beauty; there is a kind of generality in them. But at the next level out (not pictured), even these boundaries would become indistinct. Thus, it can be seen that the principles of production are principles designed not to separate and distinguish the various makings, but specifically to show their ultimate unity.

These sorts of principles are much more congenial to transcultural aesthetics. There is no ultimate division of different cultures as the principles proceed outwards, nor even at the level of the first or second circles. Ritual, symbol, fashion, instrument, etc. are features found in art

making of multiple cultures. Thus these principles provide an avenue through which transcultural aesthetics might fruitfully operate.

I have tried to show in this article how adverse the traditional conditions of aesthetics are for transcultural studies, but I have also tried to show how taking a different attitude to aesthetics, artistic productions and principles of art might be more conducive to transculturalism. The future of aesthetics may hopefully include greater exploration of these different attitudes.

Figure 1: A Schema for Principles of Classification

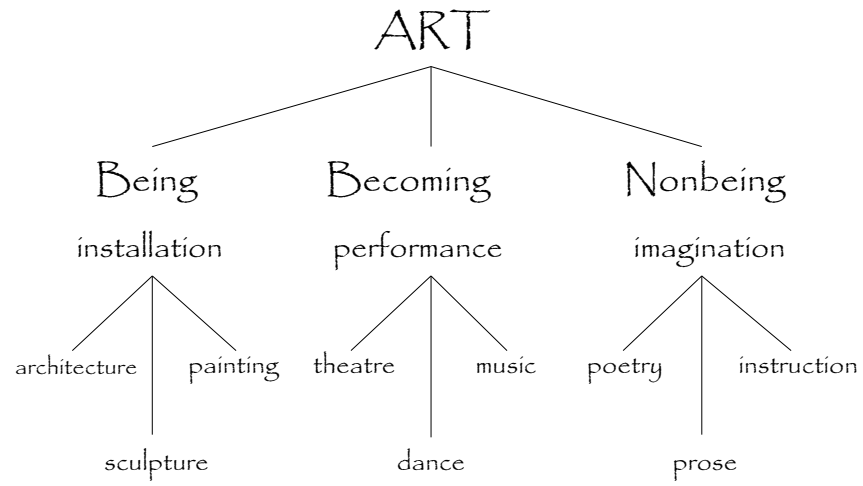


Figure 2: A Schema for Principles of Production

