

Symposium

Aesthetics and Art Education

Jacques Delaruelle

The following remarks are made in the wake of a paper on the same topic read at the 1992 Art Association of Australia conference in Canberra. On that occasion I tried to demonstrate the continuing relevance of aesthetics in a field of activity whose custodians seem to view this subject as a thing of the past, an ideological relic privileging such dubious notions as taste, the primacy of the visual in the visual arts or the unity of the subject and the presumed universality of its judgement. Mostly I sought to do away with the notion that aesthetics is primarily a negation of art history and dared to mention the failure, still too common amongst art historians, to acknowledge that art (or literature) can only become concrete historical processes through the experience of those who welcome the *œuvres*, enjoy them, judge them and, later, remember or forget them. I also endeavoured to demonstrate the falseness of the assumption that aestheticians implicitly defend a conception of art-history as the history of a perpetual present—supposedly that of the aesthetic experience—and showed that the aesthetics of Reception is on the contrary precisely concerned with the historical function of the viewers who actualise the works in responding imaginatively to them. For clearly the phenomenon of reception does not amount to a discontinuous series of subjective impressions but is, on the contrary, a guided perception, one that takes place in relation to previous similar experiences. As Starobinsky puts it: 'the relation of a singular text to the constellation of its antecedents constituting the genre to which the text belongs, depends on an ongoing shifting of horizons. The new text evokes an horizon of expectations and rules with which the reader (viewer) is familiar, but this horizon has been continuously modified and corrected by the viewer's aesthetic perception'.¹ Similarly Hans Robert Jauss, whilst considering the beholder's activity simultaneously critical and creative, makes it clear that when they 'interpret' a work of art, viewers do create new conditions that determine the advent of other works. Finally with reference to the work of Hans Robert Jauss, I concluded my paper with the hope that art historians and aestheticians would at some point realise the necessity of working together.

But for a number of reasons, this does not seem to be happening and in the six or seven art institutions whose syllabus I am aware of, aesthetics simply does not have a place and is not considered a teachable subject. Perhaps in the

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

traditional context of art education which was a technical affair for the most part, this might have made sense. As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics exists, after all, for the sake of knowledge and not as a guide to practice. But in the broader and supposedly liberal context of today's art-education, this is an absurd situation. Though I was for a time allowed to develop and teach a comprehensive introduction to the discipline for undergraduate students at the College of Fine Arts of the University of New South Wales and also to devise several postgraduate seminars on aesthetic themes, the discussion of Plato's, Aristotle's, Aquinas', Kant's, Schelling's, Hegel's, Nietzsche's and Heidegger's contribution to the understanding of art seems, on the whole, barely acceptable as 'cultural literacy'. Yet this prohibition is not primarily to do with the alleged impertinence of the aesthetic theorist invading the artist's domain with an *apparatus* of critical principles and theoretical precepts. It coincides with dogmatic post-structuralist assumptions concerning individual self-consciousness and the hasty demise of the willed subject. Moreover the evaporation of aesthetics is not in the least surprising in a context of disappearing 'great narratives' where the first thing a student learns is that the text has no referent outside itself, or that interpretation has no bearing upon fact as distinguishable from interpretation.

Retrospectively I think that my tenuous licence to teach aesthetics in an art college was linked with a general uncertainty as to what should be taught in a situation where 'no one can say with assurance what a work of art is, or what is not a work of art',² and probably with the even greater uncertainty as to what philosophical aesthetics might well be. But once it becomes clear that it is at least partly to do with the question of value, and more specifically the value of certain visual or acoustic experiences, once it is understood that aesthetics on the whole does not relegate subjectivity to being simply a function of something else, there can no longer be any doubt as to the ideological badness and the need to dispense altogether with the subject. In fact it does at times seem that the history of Modernist art (I was tempted to say its conquests) had effectively freed all those who believe in this grand narrative from the obligation of answering the perennial and as yet unanswered questions of the cognitive value of appearances, the enigma of the truth of art, the aesthetic experience and other such *aporias*.

It is, of course, not only the history of aesthetics—or the history of subjectivity—which is either ignored or suppressed in the syllabuses of department of art theory/history of art colleges, as well of those of fine arts in universities. But like 'pre-modernist' literature or art history, aesthetics as a subject clearly does not fit the official picture of an interminable battle fought against the hydra of religious dogma, identity, local traditions, colonialism, Eurocentrism, phallogocentrism, logocentrism, not to mention phallogocentrism

... Less superficially, the reason(s) at the origin of the *de facto* suppression of aesthetics in art education can perhaps best be glimpsed through the history of its paradigms, as it is told by Marc Sherringham in his recent work.³ According to this author, three constitutive moments can be distinguished: the classical, the critical and the romantic.

Classical aesthetics depends on the identification of the beautiful with Being captured in its essence by works of art or natural objects. If such an essence is made responsive to theoretical intuition by the work of art, it is only insofar as the latter duplicates the inner structure of an ideal reality. In the sense that classicism always tends to prefer the model to its copy, artistic beauty is by definition inferior to the beauty of Being.

With Kant's *Third Critique* is established the second paradigm according to which the subject replaces Being as the principal source of the beautiful which becomes, as it were, established at the heart of the subject. The experience of the beautiful is a pure feeling of disinterested pleasure, or disinterested interest. It is but an occasion for the subject to experience the inner finality of its faculties. In other words art is a place where the conciliation between the autonomous Spirit and Nature can take place. But there cannot be a unique place that would be that of the beautiful in the philosophical territory. The beautiful is everywhere one is able see the good and the true. In its essence the classical definition of the beautiful remains separate from art which consequently has to remain an Imitation of Nature. But, according to Kant, the beautiful stands very precisely between Nature and Freedom, and its definition concerns both nature and art. In any case if the classical ideal of beauty involves Being as such, its critical definition mostly concerns the transcendental subject. Beauty ceases to be an ontological attribute to become a subjective feeling, based on the strictly human faculty of taste.

The third possibility of location for the Beautiful coincides with the identification of the beautiful with art itself and therefore, with Hegel's *putsch* in the first pages of his Aesthetics from which is excluded the beauty of nature. 'For our science is *Philosophy of Art*', Hegel declares, 'and more definitely *Philosophy of Fine Arts*'.⁴ Only a work of art can be said to be beautiful because the essence of beauty is spiritual and the Spirit, which is both freedom and subjectivity, goes well beyond the inert objectivity of nature. So living nature which Aristotle thought divine comes to be dismissed in the name of what Marc Sherringham terms 'the spiritual deficiency of the animal realm' and to the whole object of Kant's Critique of Teleological Judgement is denied theoretical legitimacy. Only art can now reveal or 'unconceal', as Heidegger was to write, the essence of the truth of being as Spirit. In opposition to both classical aesthetics and the critical paradigm, Hegel describes art as the most congruous and therefore highest expression of the beautiful.

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

There can be no doubt that the frequency with which the Hegelian assimilation of art with the Absolute recurs in the recent history of Ideas is indicative of its dominance as a theory in contemporary art practices. Yet Hegel saw music—like other art forms—as only part of the prelude to the fully transparent and articulated concept of philosophy, or only as a stage in the realisation of the Absolute. On the contrary, Nietzsche believed that the concept of art had come to supplant the concept of philosophy. In other words, the author of *Zarathustra* believed that the transformation of philosophy demanded the intervention of art. Likewise Heidegger did not at all renounce Nietzsche's notion of 'great art'. He thought that art never merely expresses the essence of a historical period, but constitutes its origin:

Art let truth originate. Art, founding, preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of beings in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being born out of its essential source in a founding leap—this is what the word 'origin' means.⁵

In Heidegger's description of the work as a 'leap to the truth of being', that is as a 'happening of truth', it is suggested that the revelation of a historical truth coincides with the epiphany of art. And the point here is that, as philosophical romanticism from Hegel onwards turns the beauty of art as an expression of 'truth setting itself to work', it articulates the essential opposition in the history of the discipline as one between the romantic paradigm - 'truth needs art to come to being' and the classical paradigm which is so often mistaken for it, but which inversely states that art needs truth for its coming into being. In the process, Criticism, or Kant's hypothesis concerning the transcendental subject, is whisked away and, with it 'aesthetics' understood not as the 'philosophy of art', let alone the 'art of philosophy', but as the philosophy of taste and *sensus communis*.

This crudely expressed hypothesis does not entirely explain the domination of the two mutually exclusive, but also complementary, paradigms, or the *de facto* suppression of the Kantian model from the discussion about the nature of 'modernity' and 'the end of art'. But a picture begins to form as one remembers that the superiority of artistic beauty coincided, for Hegel, with the fact that it must be born out of the mind and literally *realised* by it. Inasmuch as Spirit and Freedom can be found even in the tritest of 'artistic thoughts', the significance of artistic beauty has to eclipse that of all natural productions. The problem with this view, however, is that if 'the beauty of art' were nothing but 'a sensuous presentation of the idea', art (artistic beauty) would be superior to nature, since more appropriate to its finality, but it would also be hopelessly inferior to science and philosophy. And this, I think, is why Kant insists on the primacy of the differential element—irreducible to the legislative power of the

mind—in the aesthetic experience and describes ‘the aesthetic idea (as) an inexponible representation of the imagination (in its free play)’.⁶ As shown by Luc Ferry in his *Homo Aestheticus*, Kant wished to avoid the reduction of art into a kind of inferior knowledge, a *gnoseolia inferior*.⁷

Moreover, with or without Kant in mind, it is impossible not to observe that whenever ‘art’ tries to communicate a clear and distinct thought, it tends to do so in the least appropriate of manners and becomes illustrative of ideas, in other words merely practical or instrumental. As an experience or as a realisation, Kant thought that beauty could never be based on ‘determinate concepts’. As a given sight triggers the agreement between the faculties, the feeling of harmony experienced by the subject must therefore come from Nature herself. This means that the free play of the beholder’s imagination can not be artificially induced. Were it not spontaneous, such a response would lose its power, its charm would no longer operate. For what intelligence ‘enjoys’ whilst contemplating a beautiful sight is precisely a ‘worldliness’ that allows for the most delightful con-fusion. And in the end the very possibility of aesthetic contemplation comes to depend on the reality of this con-fusion and co-presence between subject and world.

Numerous philosophers—from Spinoza to Merleau Ponty—have in the past celebrated this alliance and affirmed the reality of innate certainties, of virtual convictions that rely neither on experience, nor on other forms of *a posteriori* knowledge. Merleau Ponty notably considered the capacity of distinguishing the whole in the parts as pointing to the existence of a foreknowledge of the ontological realm that prepares us to encounter the object. Since man does not have a separate existence from the world he contemplates—such a separateness being inferred by the Cogito—his thought never proceeds *ex nihilo*, nor as a pure affirmation of some intellectual sovereignty, but as an expression of accord or discord with the world. Similarly the feeling of pleasure which echoes the realisation of a work of art’s specific intelligibility is ‘determined by a ground which is *a priori* and valid for all men ... merely by virtue of the reference of the object to the faculty of cognition’. This common ground, Kant explains, is the capacity for pleasure or displeasure connected with the subjective side of a representation, or in response to the outward form of the object.

The universality formerly ascribed to the aesthetic judgement coincided with the philosopher’s elaboration of the concept of *a priori* in the foundation of his transcendental system, or to put it in the vernacular, with a certain accord between man and world ... not limited to the phenomenon of knowledge.⁸ This accord was not primarily a question of identity or of ‘representations referred to an object according to certain principles’. It was based on indemonstrable aesthetic ideas or ‘intuitions (of the imagination) for which no adequate

concept can ever be found'.⁹ Again, it is important to realise that the description of art as a primarily aesthetic activity—i.e., concerned with the production of non-conceptual truth—does not necessarily imply a purely appreciative (passive) view, and that such an understanding depends upon the postulate of reflective judgement that there is a system inherent in what the theorist can only investigate in a piecemeal way. For Kant, the postulates of reflective judgement were founded upon seeing nature as art,¹⁰ but immediately after Kant natural beauty was dropped from the agenda of aesthetics or more exactly repressed as Adorno puts it¹¹ and aesthetics altogether 'shifted towards the ideological religion of art' which in degraded forms is still with us today.

To illustrate this last proposition, let me briefly mention Thierry de Duve's polemic essay¹² on modern art before and after Duchamp, whose less-than-novel thesis is that the truth of modern art is precisely that it has no truth. To justify this, the author begins with the contention that it has become sufficient to replace the formula of the aesthetic judgement 'this is beautiful' with the formula 'this is Art'. And here once again, we go back to the romantic localisation of 'the beautiful' in art. But more radically, de Duve in his book seeks to explain art as a proper name: 'modernity', he writes, 'is that moment in western history during which art is but a proper name, this moment being one during which aesthetic practice—that of the artist, the amateur or the critic—is regulated by the idea of art as proper name'. Please note that the proper name here is understood as a term whose purpose is not to signify a meaning, but to label or designate, rather, a fixed system of references. Fundamentally, Duve's theory implies that 'art is all that which I name art' and this, of course, entails the complete uselessness of any attempt to define its meaning as idea.

Were we to get back to the Kantian terminology, it could perhaps be argued that the judgement 'this is art' is a reflective judgement whose postulates are founded upon seeing anything as art. Yet only the particular is given. No longer is there any concept of art under which any subsumption can be effected. There is only the play of the faculties of the mind around unfathomable referents and art once again becomes an instance of a universal rule that is nowhere to be fathomed, let alone identified. It has been argued that such a theory has the merit of showing that the romantic tradition stands 'guilty of a very specific form of transcendental illusion: that of believing in art as a rational idea that one can know and re-present'.¹³ In any case its main proposition is that at the origin of modernity in art lies a productive misunderstanding, a confusion between Criticism which initiates the practice of art as play or as difference, and the romantic determination to establish the meaning of Great Art. According to de Duve, the Duchampian *Ready Made* unconceals the equivalence of the proper name and the 'anything goes' thus forcing the romantic discourse apropos the meaning of art to confess, as it were its 'nothing to say'.

Consequently the normative idea of art as proper name becomes the categorical imperative of today's self-conscious artists. They have to do anything, in the sense that only 'anything' as opposed to 'something' can be said to be art. Hence also the paradoxical obligation now implemented in virtually all art colleges and universities. There it is possible to witness the ritualistic seriousness of a teaching without content other than 'anything goes' under the name of art.

I could give numerous examples of this disastrous trend. But let me just provide one: a new postgraduate subject introduced in the syllabus of the art theory department of the College of Fine Arts at the University of NSW, dealing with 'art and the culture of everyday life'. Now the 'spirit' of this subject was—the lecturer *dixit*—encapsulated in the following brief statement of the Dutch artist Jochin Gerz: 'what I'm doing is not important because it is art or literature, it's important because I'm doing it. The prerequisite for what I am doing is not art, it is life'. But if it is only important because 'it is life', why make art? The same connection between art and everyday life was also recognised by Elle McPherson who, in the course of an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, stated that 'the only books she would ever read would be the books that she herself would have written'. What matters here is that the fashion model was not only speaking for herself but was making explicit the position of the many who, like herself, believe 'art' to be important only because they themselves are doing 'it'.

To conclude, let me just point out the irony inherent in the situation where Kant's axiomatic notion of reflective judgement is simultaneously suppressed as a scholarly reference and resurfaces as one of the most important principles of the contemporary *doxa*. Indeed Marx's well-known warning that those who ignore history are by definition condemned to repeat it finds a near perfect illustration in the field of art theory and art education. There one can see the most radical theories, the most libertarian stances concerning the *Other*, *Differance*, *et al.*, reveal as their secret truth the suppressive bent of all panicky orthodoxy and a firm allegiance, not to Reason, Justice, or Autonomy, or to art as the product of human freedom which is the object of aesthetics, but to the magical ring of a proper name.

Notes

- 1 Jean Starobinski, Preface to H. R. Jauss, *Pour une Esthétique de la Réception*, Paris, 1978, p.13.
- 2 Harold Rosenberg, *The De-definition of art*, Chicago, 1972, p.12.
- 3 Marc Sherringham, *Introduction à la Philosophie Aesthétique*, Paris, 1992.
- 4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, p.1.

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

- 5 Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Basic Writings*, San Francisco, 1972, p.187.
- 6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement), Remark 1, trans. Meredith, Oxford, 1952, repr. 1989, p.208.
- 7 See Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus, L'invention du goût à l'âge démocratique*, Bernard Grasset, 1990, pp.161-91.
- 8 Cf. Mickel Dufrenne, 'The a priori and the philosophy of nature', in *In the Presence of the Sensuous*, Atlantic Highland, N.J., 1987.
- 9 Kant, p.210.
- 10 Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetic and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche*, Manchester, 1990, p.35
- 11 T. Adorno, *Aesthetics Theory*, London, 1984, pp.91-92.
- 12 Cf. Thierry de Duve, *Au nom de l'art*, Paris, 1989.
- 13 Sherringham, p.285.