

THE REVIVAL OF AESTHETICS: IN A FEW WORDS

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The immediate reason for choosing the theme of this international issue of *Filozofski vestnik* was the forthcoming XVII International Congress of Aesthetics (Ankara, July 2007). The other motive was to discern some of the issues in contemporary aesthetics.

Where do we stand in aesthetics today? What does aesthetics denote and connote? Should it be concerned with cognition, beauty, or art? Is it – or should it be – artistic, the philosophy or theory of the aesthetic, of art and/or culture, should it be relegated to oblivion or resurrected? Did the advent of Duchamp's ready-made signal the demise of traditional art and has art, with the emergence of postindustrial society and the decline of modernism, lost its previous "overvaluation"? Why is it that so often, when referring to aesthetics, we speak only about art? May we thus agree that, "aesthetics refers to a special regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts?"¹

Would it be proper to say that with great or fundamental changes in our societies and their internal relations, art and culture are transformed too, and that each time anew a novel "essence" of art emerges, thereby fundamentally changing the notions and the phenomena designated as art? Do we thus need different aesthetic theories to grasp these different facets of the entity called art or is art a convention and not something whose essence can be legitimately sought? And, on the other hand, is there art that transgresses the historical and cultural confines and is factually universal, with this universality being erected upon a common human condition and/or the common biological foundations of our species? Is a prerequisite of art its autonomy? Furthermore, are the two other continuous topics of aesthetics – cognition

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 10.

and beauty – still objects of aesthetic scrutiny or have they been relegated to the archive of past knowledge, culture, and psychology? And finally, if the question of meaning has replaced the classical question of truth,² what consequences does this have for art and cognition and, thereby, for aesthetics?

The title “The Revival of Aesthetics” was intended partly as a stimulus for discussion, with pro and contra expected in about equal quantity or number among the contributions. Surprisingly this did not happen: for the most part, the contributors implicitly or explicitly hold the view that aesthetics is alive and well – with the question of whether this is a consequence of a revival, stubbornness, or inertia, remaining an open one. Still, the quest for the answer to the question – aesthetics: transformed, revived and renewed, or obsolete and passéist? – lingers on and is being posed and asked over and over again. Also in this volume.

What may be deemed surprising is the plethora of answers to the question as to the contents and the *enjeu* of aesthetics. A glance at the history of the discipline (if today it remains a discipline at all, instead of being a separate realm of knowledge, a theory of the aesthetic, or it exists under some other designation) reveals that it has, as a term and notion arising from the European enlightenment and romanticism, spread from the western cultural centers across the globe, in this respect following a similar globalization³ as that undergone by philosophy and culture. In spite of some authors remaining skeptical about the universal and the global value of aesthetics, in recent decades the latter appears to have mostly lost its previous predominantly and sometimes exclusively Eurocentric signification and has been transformed into an increasingly polysemic notion and term, in this respect following the practice of some other areas of the humanities and the social sciences – and especially of philosophy understood in its present-day plenitude of meanings and designations.

At first glance a discussion about the contemporary relevance of aesthetics, whether we designate the latter as great or small, and a matter of revival, continuous import, or decline, appears to be related primarily to this theoretical and philosophical activity proper. While this holds true, it remains crucial for aesthetics to continue to develop notions and concepts, and to theorize about our experiences, be they artistic or aesthetic, and to establish links between the theoretical knowledge of which it mostly consists, and the

² See Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 35.

³ See Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Globalization as/and Aesthetics. Yearbook of the International Association for Aesthetics*, Vol. 8 (Ljubljana: ZRC Publishing, 2004).

artistic and quotidian reality. Thus, aesthetics, its import or lack thereof, often carries consequences for the object(s) of its inquiry, with this being so also vice versa and in spite of numerous examples to the contrary. These prove that aesthetics can exist quite well without entanglements in immediate and concrete artistic, curatorial, and cultural practices and issues and questions arising from social, political, and creative frameworks and demands addressed at the philosophy of art and culture, requesting it to take sides. On the other hand, aesthetics also often finds itself within a certain tension, be it in relation to philosophy, to art, or both. (This tension today appears of lesser importance when aesthetics refers to beauty or cognition.) In this respect the continental tradition is different from the analytic; that of smaller cultures or those more distant, from what today still remain world cultural centers; and the situation in countries and cultures which have become thoroughly globalized and postindustrialized, from environments where this did not yet occur. In postindustrial environments life has for the most part become aestheticized, industry has been transformed or eliminated in the form in which we knew it in modernism, and art has ceased to represent an ideal form of creativity when compared to manual labor under the not too distant predominantly industrial conditions. In such environments the dominant art has changed accordingly: it no longer strives to express the "truth," but represents facets of reality that it creates itself. The avant-garde gesture of provoking the public still persists, but it rarely carries the impact it did a century ago. "It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply."⁴

The situation is not as dismal as Danto claimed; art lives on, although perhaps not equally visibly and devoid of the import it possessed in the European past. It thrives in new locations, where in the more recent past it was either absent as an autonomous realm or it existed as a sheer copy of its European relative: in China, India, and Latin America. The same therefore goes for aesthetics.

We should all take a hint from those western countries where aesthetics is primarily an academic discipline and has been such for a long time. Is this our future too and if so, is it a future that we want to share or not? In small cultures or those that have not yet thoroughly crossed into the postindustrial age, art and reflections upon it still carry a social, theoretical, cultural, and existential import that would often be hard to find in the economically

⁴ Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art," in Berel Lang (ed.), *The Death of Art* (New York, N.Y.: Haven Publications Inc., 1984), pp. 34–5.

most developed parts of the globe. All this is also true of aesthetics, which in the above mentioned parts of the world is interpreted predominantly as a philosophy of art.

Whether aesthetics is to art what ornithology is to the birds or whether it sets the stage for more profound artistic and cultural effects, varies from one cultural situation to another. In this volume we find arguments supporting the former and the latter views, with the latter by coincidence or by actual relevance outweighing the former. This choice may have to do with the fact that many contributors to this volume share a globalized approach to aesthetics and are intimately familiar with various national, international, and transnational traditions. Although cultural and philosophical empires persist and develop further (losing on the way some of their rough edges and becoming more porous), this does not prevent a plethora of local and global approaches and those taking into consideration cultural, artistic and theoretic variety from becoming increasingly common. Both the trends and the tension they produce are productive and desirable as long as within them the desire for universality is retained. What this means is described well by what Richard Shusterman wrote about philosophy as well as aesthetics more than a decade ago:

Philosophy, conceived as an inquiry into the most basic features and meanings of experience, seems at once to transcend national borders and to maintain certain national characteristics. It claims to deal with universal truths, yet it obviously emerges from particular social contexts and national traditions. Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, reflects this tension between the international and the national.⁵

Today it also has to reflect the tension between the local and the global and the infinite variety of particularities that are only partly articulated through the distinction national/international.

The purpose of this volume of *Filozofski vestnik* is thus also to offer a reflection of such tension in “theoretical practice,” to use an almost forgotten Althusserian phrase, and to lay down before its readers the prisms or facets of a mirror which reflect, transform, embellish, and at the same time reveal in a new light this field of theoretic inquiry which is simultaneously part of a long academic and international tradition, a personal endeavor, and a form of personal belonging.

⁵ Richard Shusterman, “Aesthetics Between Nationalism and Internationalism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:2 (Spring 1993), p. 157.

In the first section, devoted to *The Philosophy of Beauty, Art, Culture, and Nature*, some of the central philosophical issues of aesthetics are addressed. Wolfgang Iser (some of whose ideas are also discussed in Lev Kreft's essay) reactualizes one of the essential aesthetic notions, namely beauty. In his view, in modernism beauty has remained a crucial, albeit often conceptually transmogrified phenomenon. He opts for beauty as an essentially universal entity, the import of which should be reappraised – especially in its form of breathtaking beauty. In the essay “The Post-Duchamp Deal” Thierry de Duve discusses art in the circumstances (which have been with us for some time) wherein it is both possible and legitimate to make art from absolutely anything whatever. De Duve's theory of art, thoroughly and forcefully presented also in this essay, represents a persuasive attempt at erecting an aesthetic theory on the basis of Kant's philosophy, with the help of which, argues de Duve, we can explain also contemporary art and its significance.

Mario Perniola discusses the relationship between art and culture in relation to aesthetics and anti-aesthetics, taking as his starting point Michael Kelly's *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*. Yrjö Sepänmaa, on the other hand, offers a glimpse into environmental aesthetics and presents arguments for its practical relevance. This aesthetics, essentially related, or belonging to applied aesthetics, is an example of the way in which aesthetics can be employed for practical social purposes, with these extending far beyond environmental art and reaching into landscape aesthetics, forestry, or nature conservation issues, with these achieving greatest results when theoreticians and practitioners work together.

In the second set of essays, devoted to the past history and the present role of aesthetics in different settings, some views on the past, on the present issues of aesthetics, and on the ways in which aesthetics should be developed in the future if it is to retain significance for our understanding of contemporary art and other themes it scrutinizes, are offered. In the first contribution, by Curtis L. Carter, the history of the development of the American Society for Aesthetics since the 1940s is presented, although topics appertaining to the development of aesthetics in other parts of the world are discussed as well.

In his article devoted to naturalist aesthetics and the “second modernity” Lev Kreft critically discusses some current attempts to explain aesthetic preferences and pleasure in terms of evolution. He believes that most of the arguments in favor of such views are in fact construed on hypotheses arising from contemporary social settings and practices. Ernest Ženko begins his essay by offering a critique of contemporary aesthetics, and suggests that

it should be replaced by what he calls “Mode-2 Aesthetics”, thereby applying theories arising from the “hard” sciences onto aesthetics, all with the aim of developing an aesthetic theory that would be capable of persuasively explaining and theorizing upon contemporary artistic practices. Eva K. W. Man starts her article by discussing the notion of aesthetic experience, using as her basic reference the aesthetic theory of Richard Shusterman. Recalling also the views of John Dewey, she argues that aesthetic experience is crucial for aesthetics. She ends her contribution by claiming that neo-Confucian aesthetic models could provide assistance in understanding this key notion.

The next series of articles focuses on the “revival of aesthetics” in a direct sense. The first is that by Richard Shusterman, who presents the key issues of his aesthetic and philosophical theory of “somaesthetics” and also offers an overview of the decade long process of its development as it arose from his work on pragmatist aesthetics. Shusterman regards his somaesthetics as one of the venues for the revival of aesthetics. The second article is by Arnold Berleant. Like Eva K. W. Man, Berleant too focuses upon the notion of experience, which he considers to be a crucial concept in any aesthetic theory, whether its object is natural or artistic beauty. Anthony J. Cascardi points in his article to the extraordinary role of visibility and hence images in our contemporaneity and argues that they represent a key factor in our culture. He suggests that images have ceased to be only a part of the world that is produced, and instead themselves play a key role in production, for production too, has undergone a transformation. Devin Zane Shaw discusses a debate between two key contemporary philosophers, namely Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. He starts with a presentation of Badiou’s notion of inaesthetics and defends it against Rancière’s criticism. He furthermore analyzes and presents Badiou’s statements and comments on art and questions his explanation of the relation between art and truth.

The last group of essays contains four articles devoted to what may appear to be specific issues of aesthetics understood as philosophy of art and culture, but which are frequently revealed as instances of theoretical and practical cultural situations found in many different environments.

In the first article Gao Jianping follows the history of four terms in recent Chinese cultural history, revealing the way in which the change in the translation of these terms and phrases relate to the domains of art, aesthetics, and philosophy, and effected crucial changes in the realms of aesthetics and national cultural politics. He demonstrates that what appear at first glance to be but neutral theoretical terms purportedly of only academic interest, may under specific social, historical, and political conditions, have enormous theoretical and cultural repercussions. Gao furthermore reveals

how in China also events and processes of semantic transfiguration have led to the establishment of an increased autonomy of art.

Ken'ichi Iwaki bases his arguments on the philosophical views of Kyoshi Miki and claims that some interpretations of western painting have been uncritically accepted in Japan, thereby ignoring or disregarding visual representational practices that did not arise from the European renaissance perspectival tradition. Patrick Flores offers an intricate and elaborate presentation of the genealogy of aesthetics in the postcolonial setting of the Philippines, taking as his starting point a painting by Juan Luna, and, from a postcolonial perspective, also criticizing the universalizing function of the aesthetic.

In the closing article Tyrus Miller discusses the notion of time as artistically conceived by the "retro-avant-garde" movements that exist in the post-socialist contexts of Eastern and Central Europe. Employing Deleuze's distinction between "movement images" and "time images," Miller claims that the retro-avant-garde symptomatically shows the import of movement in the classical avant-gardes and its desire to artistically shape time within the framework of modernity.