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NEUTRALIZATION AND AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

I read Gerard Vilar's *Desartización. Paradojas del arte sin fin* soon after it was published in 2010. Since then I have come back to it both for my teaching and research work because it deals with a wide range of issues, some of them very relevant for understanding contemporary art and the reactions which it provokes, and so it is a very helpful book for reflecting on the role of art in our society. That role would be none other than a significant, privileged way of thinking about the world; art would constitute a critical and dissonant voice, although it has shown itself as radically plural and apparently messy. This would be in fact a very good thing since artistic pluralism represents "a sort of polytheist view"; a sane counterweight to the unifying and totalized point of view aspired to from science and technology, and also from the normative culture of law and morals. It will be "an antidote against any pretension of eliminating the disagreement and the sovereignty of the individual" (Vilar 2005: 172). Therefore, it represents a democratic guarantee, because the polyphony that emerges from pluralism would help to strengthen the procedures of social democracy, threatened in many ways.

For some time now then Vilar has been defending this view of contemporary art and continues here again with moderate optimism because he is well aware of the many problems and challenges which contemporary art faces. These are the "paradoxes" of contemporary art, as he names them, and are the central questions addressed by Vilar in this book. He shows as paradoxical the processes of de-aestheticization and de-artification and therefore of the de-definition that pushed art to constant and on-going re-definition. He shows as paradoxical too the role of art when it aims to enter life taking the risk of becoming indistinct to it, and so stopping being art, because it is art and not life. He shows the paradox of art that many claim to have ended or be dead in the age when art seems to be doing better for itself, if we think about the great demand for art from museums, centres and foundations that, along with a powerful network of galleries, support and encourage artistic production as well as its social presence, not to mention art's market prices. Finally, he shows as paradoxical the situation of art when producing a critical and even subversive discourse, aiming to have an impact on reality, this vanishes in a short time and soon gets lost, becomes impotent, or is neutralized,

immersed in a vast and open cultural world, ruled by the powerful production and distribution mechanisms of the market. With this diagnosis, Vilar is not joining the pessimism of those apocalyptic views that proclaim the death of art, nor the nostalgia of old hierarchies and functions ascribed to art. It doesn't mean either that he celebrates complete relativism, that of the "everything goes" which makes art look like as a sort of discourse that is not rational nor reasonable. Art is facing a lot of problems and difficulties in the world of today but it is there where art must play its role, with its own reasons, re-defining and adapting itself to it, without utopias or false hopes, but a significant critical role after all; a role which philosophy is obliged to address.

That said, I will focus my comments on the last paradoxical phenomenon, namely, that of the neutralization of the critical and disturbing power of artworks which is particularly worrying for Vilar as he describes it as "the ghost that goes right through the world of contemporary art...transfiguring Art into art"¹. Neutralization would also connect the other paradoxes in some way since the de-artification and de-aestheticization of art have historically much to do with the avant-gardist purpose of bringing art back to life and transforming art from a reign of beauty and aesthetic contemplation into a powerful instrument that helps to transform society; this so-called political art, turned into a commodity, or exhibited in artistic institutions, would be then the main victim of neutralization. Consequently, the analysis of neutralization should help us to understand the origins and the possible solutions of these tensions and paradoxes with which Vilar offers an accurate diagnosis of some of the most important challenges faced by contemporary art.

I. Postmodernism and the aestheticization of the anti-aesthetic art

Vilar admits that in fact neutralization would be the fate of contemporary art. From the very moment that it is created, he says, "the phenomenon of commercialization, reification, triteness, trivialization and the several varieties of weakening make very difficult nowadays, paradoxically, to produce political, critical and subversive art" (Vilar 2010: 170). And he is right that this is a paradox for contemporary art, because much of contemporary art claims subversion and political commitment as its goals even being aware of the difficulties of having a real political and social effect. For this reason Yves Michaud argues that a weak politicization, or even a "mere facade" of politicization, is one of the features that constitutes the ethnography of contemporary art.² The perfect integration of current artistic practices in the cultural, social and economic network would turn them politically inoffensive. Marc Jimenez also characterizes contemporary

¹Vilar 2010: 167. My translations into English of all the quotations of this book.

²Michaud 2007: 43. My translations into English of the quotations.

art as “institutionalized art” that should be differentiated from the wider category of “the art of today”.³ Both French philosophers also see contemporary art as the art that has generalized and so trivialized the use of the procedures of Duchamp’s ready-mades turning them into the most current artistic practice. If modern art broke up with traditional artistic values, academic canons, and the bourgeois conventions with which the avant-garde wished to bring art back to life, contemporary art changed the meaning of transgression, and subversion became and end in itself (Jimenez 2010: 22). Natalie Heinich defines contemporary art as a kind of “experience of the limits” that tries to push any boundaries or cross any limit (Heinich 1998a and 1998b), but the accumulation of “subversive” works of art will certainly make it difficult to see which limits exactly are transgressed. Since subversion became the necessary condition of artworks, subversion became, by jurisprudence, the norm and that normality would neutralize it. According to Michaud and Jimenez, with total freedom, artists would have abolished the boundary between art and life not only making artistic fraud easier, but also promoting the triumph of the aesthetics. Anything can be turned into art and so become aestheticized. This not only means that suddenly we are able to appreciate aesthetic qualities, even if they are not beauty or other qualities traditionally associated with good taste, but also that the context of reception has been manipulated and is somehow inappropriate. In particular, aestheticization points to the distance between reality and representation, it makes the object or issue in question a matter of contemplation and therefore it is a way of to trivialize and weaken any subject. This process of aestheticization that neutralizes art would satisfy nonetheless the demands of the market and the society of consumerism and spectacle. This is also the view of Hal Foster and Donald Kuspit, the two authors who along with Adorno are analyzed by Vilar when addressing the issue.

In spite of the differences of their proposals and the context in which they are framed, according to Vilar, Kuspit would share with Adorno the pessimistic diagnoses of the end of art in the age of the commercialization of culture to which both will oppose a normative concept of art and the moralism of a romantic notion that links art to redemption. From a theory based on psychoanalysis, Kuspit attacks contemporary art, officially identified with the postmodern *everything goes*, due to its lack of commitment with an interpretation and understanding of the present time and its null aesthetic power, which he proposes to compensate with a return to painting.⁴ I think that Vilar would agree with much of Kuspit’s demands, but he clearly rejects that part of Kuspit’s view that would go against artistic pluralism. Vilar defends artistic autonomy understood as the capacity of art for ongoing re-definition and re-invention as the best way of fighting the forces of neutralization, aestheticization and weakening (Vilar 2010:

³Jimenez 2010: 23, 37. My translations into English of the quotations.

⁴Vilar focuses his analysis on Donald Kuspit’s *The End of Art* (Kuspit 2004).

295-296). For Vilar, neither is art obliged to change the world; it is also autonomous in this way (Vilar 2010: 296). However, he would not deny the right of artists to try to make a difference offering a critical view on reality since he states that art allows us to think about the world, in its plurality and complexity, and then change it too to a certain extent. From this perspective, Vilar's proposal will be closer to Foster's strategy of resistance.

After the acclaimed failure of the avant-garde project, the neo-avantgarde that institutionalizes avant-garde as art, would deny the authentic avant-gardist intentions of transgression and social change (Bürger 1987). But avant-garde would not be dead, although its principles of transgression and social liberation are dated. The authentic lesson of the avant-garde, Foster argues, was to show the historical nature of any art, contemporary art included, and now, due to the changes, both in the institution and life, and particularly immersed in a non-revolutionary *ethos*, artistic criticism has to change, acting in a more subtle and strategically punctual way.⁵ The strategy now must be to deconstruct our environment of cultural meanings and so re-evaluate, re-codify in order to re-interpret and re-direct our mechanisms of symbolization. Vilar would support this as part of his defence of pluralism through which art has expanded its modes of symbolization and so its chances of offering a new look on reality, altering and subverting the ordinary way of viewing things. Once again, the autonomy of art leads to the independence that allows the questioning of the automatisms of ordinary language and perception, and that will make art become more than autonomous, sovereign. Artistic sovereignty means for Vilar the irreducibility of art to the normal rules of communication and representation of reality. To say that art is sovereign is to admit that it cannot be domesticated in this sense and to recognize its possibilities of offering a heterodoxical experience (Vilar 2010) However, for Foster, this task would have been the job of what he helped to label "anti-aesthetic" art.

"Anti-aesthetic" ... signals that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question here: the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, without "purpose", all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world at once (inter)subjective, concrete and universal – a symbolic totality. Like "postmodernism", then, "anti-aesthetic" marks a cultural position on the present: are categories afforded by the aesthetic still valid?[.....] More locally, "anti-aesthetic" also signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic (e.g., feminist art) or rooted in a vernacular– that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm (Foster 1983).

This famous quotation illustrates how its critical character and its political intentions defined the postmodern anti-aesthetic in opposition to the aesthetic, which

⁵ Foster 2001: 30. This view connects with the doubts that Foster also has about the mediatic inefficiency of shock and scandal when they are not anymore "strategies against conventional thought", but they have become "conventional thought". See Foster 1998.

it would alienate from political action. The postmodern then left behind not only the avant-garde and its utopian project of emancipation but mainly, and as the concept itself points to, modernism and aesthetic theory of artistic value, which lacked ethical and political content and it was so seen as ethically and politically regressive. It was argued that aesthetic modernism blocked the critical analysis of artworks, sustained cultural elitism, traditional authority and the market and therefore it became the main target for the attacks of the postmodern (Costello, Willsdon 2008: 8). From the 1970s, the rejection of the aesthetic, which was even claimed had nothing to do with art, was the tune sang by the prevailing artistic practice and theory which nevertheless, and as it has been pointed out earlier referring to Michaud and Jimenez, gained substantial institutional power and constituted the norm in contemporary art discourse for decades. No wonder then that, as Vilar also concludes, Foster acknowledges that the strategies of resistance do not always work and they end up subsumed and institutionalized under the discourse of art or fashion, ready to feed the market. Thus, the anti-aesthetic ends up politically neutralized or, paradoxically, aestheticized, and Foster would also join the pessimism of a tragic philosophy of history that Adorno or Kuspit sustain and that Vilar is not happy with. In spite of the difficulties, he is still confident in the power of resistance of an endless art capable of exercising its autonomy and offering what the great artists, and contemporary great artists, always achieve indeed, that is: they “have made us see what we haven’t seen before, or they have shed new light on that which we knew little about, and so they have extended the possibilities of our experience” (Vilar 2010: 189). As I would like to argue, the success of his proposal wouldn’t rely just upon the virtues of pluralism and artistic freedom, but also on the rediscovery and return to the aesthetic dimension of art.

II. Aesthetics and the transformative power of art

Sure enough, although the voice of the anti-aesthetic can still be (strongly) heard, we can confirm both a rediscovery of aesthetics and even a return to beauty.⁶ Particularly, as Michael Kelly notes, from the 1990s aesthetics and beauty are receiving more attention in art practice and especially in art theory, where their alleged end was more prominent, and real. In fact, Kelly argues, aesthetics has not just been rediscovered but regenerated “because rediscovery may sound like restoration of the status quo ante” and this is not the case since the aesthetic has been subjected to severe

⁶Many important works have been published on the matter, among them: Scarry 1999; Zangwill 2001; Danto 2003; Elkins 2006; Nehamas 2007; Hickey 2009.

critiques that sometimes are justified (Kelly 2009). Thus, restoring aesthetics means rethinking the nature and range of the aesthetic and its relationship to art.⁷

As a strand of modern art and culture, the critique of the aesthetic reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century, to what Arthur Danto has labelled the “intractable avant-garde” and from the beginning has shown political intentions. The intractable avant-garde dethroned beauty, earlier prime for the definition of art, due to its traditional moral weight as source of pleasure and consolation, and so the abuse of beauty became a device for dissociating the artists from the society they held in contempt, turning “beautifiers” into “collaborationists” (Danto 2003: 118). It was generally believed that beauty inevitably leads to deception, trivialization or escapism, and this “kalliphobia” extended to aesthetics in general. The so common identification of beauty with pleasure and aesthetic value provoked that the stigma of beauty extended to the aesthetic in general as if it were a sort of incompatibility between paying attention to aesthetic qualities and treating seriously certain socio-economical issues. As recalled earlier, the modernist tradition of art for art sake helped to do the job and later postmodern avant-garde took on the role of social criticism assuming the moral and political responsibility of producing “anti-aesthetic” artworks. But the move didn’t delete aesthetics in art nor render it irrelevant to its meaning and value. However, it substituted beauty, or any other pleasant features, with ugliness, obscenity, outrageousness or disgust, better representatives of contemporary art but aesthetic qualities after all. This is how aesthetics has survived into the era of artistic pluralism, the postmodern era that Danto has called “The End of Art”; the era of radical openness and transgression in which everything is possible as art is also the era when pluralism extends to aesthetics itself.⁸

Then, the new accounts of the aesthetic have insisted on the aesthetic dimension of art as ineliminable and always relevant even for those stronger forms of conceptualism which claim aesthetics as secondary for art at best.⁹ But the thing is that even those most politically committed artists would have never disregarded the importance of the aesthetic dimension of the artworks. As Harrison and Wood say about the “committed” art of the 1970s in which the task of the critical artist was to stop the flux of representations that we inhabit, diagnose and show their mechanisms: “work of this kind clearly operates with a different sense of the task of art than aesthetic contemplation, which is not to say that compositional devices are not knowingly deployed as means to the end in question” (Harrison, Wood 1993: 170-256). Similarly, in “the return of the art of engagement” that Costello and Willsdon describe as a tendency in the most recent art, “the aesthetic as such is no longer at issue ... [since] a

⁷ This restoration would have been made on different basis and with different goals. I explore and confront some of the most recent and relevant ones in Carrasco-Barranco 2014.

⁸ “If everything is possible as art, everything is possible as aesthetics as well” (Danto 2004: 24-35).

⁹ See for instance, Costello 2008 and Costello 2013.

range of aesthetic strategies are mobilised in order to investigate how regimes of representation operate” (Costello, Willsdon 2008: 12). However, aesthetics here is not seen as embellishment, something superficial and false, somehow inessential or epiphenomenal that trivializes whatever it is about, but as a matter of rhetoric understood as an intentional activity that constitutes the meaning of artworks.¹⁰ Artistic creation of aesthetic appearances, which display unique interpretations of the world, engage the mind and not just the senses and they don’t mean to abandon the viewers to their mere contemplation, but lead them to grasp the thought of the work.

Besides, aesthetics has not only been seen as important to artistic meaning but also to art’s relevance or significance. The different aesthetic modes connect feelings with the thoughts that animate works of art, helping to explain why art is important in human life. For this reason, Danto, who nevertheless remained reluctant to accept aesthetic properties as a necessary condition for art, admitted that aesthetics might itself explain why we have art in the first place. The account of the aesthetic as a matter of rhetoric encompasses both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of the aesthetic in our engagement with art. The aesthetic affords our feelings to be enlisted toward what art is about and, certainly, this can make art dangerous because its methods are open to the representation of dangerous things. Going back to Plato, rhetoric –Danto said– aimed at the modification of attitude and belief, and that can never be innocent, and it’s real, because minds are so (Danto 1992: 192, 194). But artists do not always falsify their works’ subject and so lie to us. After all, things *are* that way (beautiful, charismatic, insipid or loathsome), and the artist would be causing the viewer to feel an appropriate emotion about them. At the end of the day, as he admitted, “the power of art is the power of rhetoric” (Danto 1992: 194) which can turn art dangerous indeed but it would not detract from its actual effectiveness. Therefore, far from seeing it as trivializing art’s content, aesthetics has much to do with what Danto thinks is “art’s transformative power”, namely, the “effect that art has on those who encounter it” (Danto 2003: 131). Of course, it is difficult to say how many people, individually or collectively, have been actually transformed by art, but anyway this impact that can make us change our view of things and even makes us quite different persons would not be enough to satisfy the goals of much of contemporary political art which aims to enter the stream of life in a much more direct way.

Following Danto again, we can say that contemporary art has significantly changed our way to think about art. As a means of advancing social and political agendas, the purpose of art is calling us to action. Politically committed art demands from the viewers not just that they look at what the artists do but help them to change the world. This way of thinking about art belongs to the spirit of the intractable avant-garde and its

¹⁰Costello, Willsdon 2008: 13. The conception of aesthetics as a matter of rhetoric has been developed by the last Danto, that is, from the publication of *The Abuse of Beauty*.

long legacy but, it has been said, inevitably faces the challenge of neutralization. As mentioned earlier, the first strategy for preserving critical power in order to move to action is de-aestheticising artworks in the sense of abandoning traditional aesthetic qualities. As a mode of resisting commodification and looking for an impact on society art becomes to a great extent indistinguishable from life and this has been reflected in the following discussions on art's definition since the 1960s. However, when there was no need to produce beautiful art, other aesthetic qualities were employed to disconcert, shock, disturb, and enrage in order to change things. Nonetheless if the intended effects never took place it is probably because art is not supposed to play the role of transforming the world in such direct ways. I think then that, so understood, de-aestheticization should not be blamed for the neutralization of art's critical power, that is, it shouldn't be blamed for its paradoxical aestheticization, but a much deeper way of de-artification should.

Following Adorno's words, de-artification causes the "neutralization of art transformed into a cultural good that is consumed without the perception of the aesthetic content that forces us to go beyond it".¹¹ De-artification means that art has become something different, not because it has lost its traditional aesthetic appearance, but because it doesn't work as art any more. As a result of the new way of thinking about art as objects of knowledge that call for action, our attitude towards artworks has changed too. Nowadays, Danto says, when visiting museums, two options seem open, on one hand, we could try to appreciate the objects in their own right, noting their formal features, but, on the other hand, we mostly relate to artworks as if they were mere cultural products, documents or means to knowledge of a culture (Danto 2003: 105, 125-126). This has to do with the disconnection of aesthetics from the professionalized body of discourses of art, and it is thus particularly the case of contemporary art, including those works which shocked and disturbed the most at the time of their creation, although the model of art as a cultural product has extended to the museums of the art of the past as well, and so nowadays artworks enter life through the tourist cultural package, the gift shops, publicity and fashion. Art becomes not much more different from life indeed, and the transformative power of art gets lost. To sum up, Danto's reticence against making aesthetic a condition for art have then to do with the fact that many artworks, having little aesthetic value, are artworks nonetheless and could even be prominent in the history of art and have a secure place in our museums. This status must be explained by something else, so Danto would rightly understand that aesthetic and artistic values are different things. But following Danto's own arguments, artworks with very little aesthetic value would be powerless, almost pointless, a serious problem particularly for political art. For this reason I think that

¹¹Quoted by Vilar 2010: 174.

Danto's criticism of current artistic policies leads to a vindication of the (regenerated) aesthetic.

On the other hand, when Vilar declares that contemporary art seems condemned to neutralization, he claims that this wouldn't be an inevitable destiny. He states that in fact the works of Goya, Picasso, Otto Dix, Dennis Hopper or Francis Bacon resist the passing time and preserve fresh their power and critical strength, although he wonders why (Vilar 2010: 169). The answer might be that we are ready to encounter and value those works not as means to learn about a culture, but differently. If, as Danto says, artistic excellence is connected with what art is supposed to do, when dealing with contemporary political art then one should judge a work's artistic excellence by its effectiveness, that is, by its actual success in making people change and change the world (Danto 2003: 107-108). Not being the case, contemporary political art would certainly face a tragic fate. But maybe we should stop thinking about art as a means to learn about our society in order to change it. As Vilar argues, art is mostly interpretation and he is right when he states that those who want to transform the world without interpreting it are wrong, because instead of art we have blind activism (Vilar 2010: 296). However, as Danto suggests too, we should value art primarily according to what Hegel called its "highest vocation", that is, as a form of expression and self-knowledge of our own deep reality. And this is what Vilar also vindicates: art seen as "a privileged mode of thinking about the world" (Vilar 2010: 295). Great artworks, including great contemporary artworks, are excellent in this way and that too is what should match people's expectations. But art is as an aesthetic way of thought, which has explored and will continue exploring multiple practices, probably an endless list of mechanisms where thoughts are presented to human sensibility. Hegel felt though that art was inferior to philosophy as it was dependent upon having to put its content into some sensory medium or other, and so proclaimed the end of art. However, for Danto, the end of art just welcome artistic and aesthetic pluralism since art would not have been superseded by philosophy or any other manner of thought. In fact, given the way we are, Hegel's end of art would mean the end of a certain sort of humanity (Danto 2003: 122). Thus, when in our societies the forces that lead to neutralization of art are always present as a real threat, the defence of artistic autonomy by Vilar is also correct. Art's autonomy makes it different from life and affords a sort of reflection on reality, which maybe can help to change it too. But the fact that we often don't act consequently even to the actual changes produced in our views by an artwork doesn't refute its artistic value, neither its ethical nor political value. The aesthetic component is nonetheless what mainly differentiates art from philosophy, what connects artistic meaning to its transformative power explaining the important role that art plays in our life and so, what can help art to resist neutralization.

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