

Aleš Erjavec
Aesthetics as Philosophy

I

In many respects philosophy is no different from other fields of knowledge, with perhaps one exception which, nonetheless, is of paramount importance. I have in mind the *critical nature* of philosophy or, rather, philosophical activity. No matter how we define philosophy and no matter from which cultural tradition we commence our attempts to determine what philosophy is, we are confronted with the fact that philosophy proper doesn't exist if it doesn't possess this self-reflective strain, i.e. of being not only a thought about the extant reality but also a critical thought about thinking as such.

After knowledge became thoroughly specialized in the 19th century and after Althusser's claims in the seventies that Marx discovered the continent of the science of history, the postmodern turn of the early eighties brought with it not only the end of the belief into the scientificity of philosophical discourse and into its epistemological support but also a thorough reconfiguration of the relationship between the natural and the human sciences, philosophy included. We could view philosophies such as Plato's, late Heidegger's, that of late Merleau-Ponty or the early Lyotard not only as efforts to reduce the difference between reflection and authenticity but – somehow paradoxically – also as philosophical attempts to preclude the loss of this critical edge not by retaining the distance required by critical reflection but instead by collapsing critique and individual or social practice. Philosophy which went the farthest in this direction was that of the young Karl Marx and his »critique of everything existing« with its continuation in the undertakings to materialize theory through historical practice, an effort resulting in a similar failure as attempts of Russian constructivism, Tatlin, and especially productivism, to materialize avant-garde art in utilitarian social practice. In both cases the result was the complete loss of the essence of the primary activity. The failure of such efforts reveals not only the impossibility of carrying out such a project and the need to start the philosophical critique of knowledge and itself as its segment every time anew, but that at the same time the need for the consciousness of the irreducibility of differences between various spheres and realms is required. The collapsing of various

spheres, the dedifferentiation, the desire to attain the undifferentiated self and the primordial unity, are all parts of the same impossible search for a transparency and a transformation without a residue.

One of the causes for such a desire is the very nature of theoretical knowledge, philosophy included. Philosophy is an activity springing up from the Greek preoccupation with vision, from the predominance of ocularcentrism,¹ to use Martin Jay's term, a preoccupation inherent to the Greek thought and revealed, for example, in its language which abounds with visual metaphors. Both features have given rise to the hypothesis that without such an abundance of visual metaphors and, generally speaking, dependence upon vision, theory itself would not come into being, for its emergence was essentially dependent upon vision and the inherent privilege this offers to static entities or immovable essences at the expense of the flux of changing phenomena.

That philosophy emerged within the ocularcentric universe of the ancient Greece signifies, therefore, that the significance assigned to static essences is at the core of philosophical activity, the millennial history of which could also be perceived as a continuous effort to bridge or overcome the gap between such static essences and what was perceived as a dynamic or dialectic flux of antagonisms of history, society, and the human psyche.

2

Although postmodernity and postmodernism have lost much of their previous purport I view these two notions as highly relevant for any contemporary discussion of philosophy and aesthetics. What I have in mind can be illustrated best by quoting two authors, the first being Wolfgang Iser and the other Zygmunt Bauman. In an influential article published in 1988 and titled »Modernity and Postmodernity«, Iser claimed that, »Postmodernity is traversed by the recognition that totality cannot arrive without establishing as an absolute a certain particularity which is then inevitably tied to a destruction of other particularities. [...] Postmodernity begins where totality ends.«²

¹ Cf. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993) and, especially, Martin Jay, »The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism«, *Force Fields* (New York: Routledge 1993), pp. 99-113.

² Wolfgang Iser, »Modernity et postmodernité«, *Les cahiers de Philosophie (Postmoderne. Les termes d'un usage)*, no. 6 (automne 1988), p. 33.

Another equally insightful observation was made at approximately the same time by Zygmunt Bauman. In his opinion, »What has happened in recent years could be articulated as the appearance of a vantage point which allows the view of modernity itself as an enclosed object, an essentially complete product, an episode of history, with an end as much as a beginning.«³ In Bauman's view, which I find very congenial, modernity is not something that has actually *ended* by the advent of postmodernity. Postmodernity is instead characterized exactly by the emergence of the consciousness of a possible closure of modernity itself, of the consciousness of the *possibility* of the end of modernity. Before, modernity was viewed as a project stretching into temporal infinity; now it possesses a beginning as well as a possible ending.

Both Welsch and Bauman – as well as a series of other thinkers – viewed in the eighties postmodernity as a positive notion, replete with possibilities offered by the emergence of particularities, the newly attained dignity of which arose from the ashes of the now obsolete notion of totality – a process today visibly on its way and at work already in Foucault's book *The Order of Things* from two decades earlier. Therein the notion of totality was already simultaneously deconstructed and replaced with the new order of discontinuities, with these being closely related to particularities that Welsch mentions.

It is safe to assume that the humanities in general and philosophy and aesthetics in particular fared no different than other fields of knowledge. In all a trend toward particularization developed in the last two decades. If the international congresses of aesthetics can serve as an indication of what those of us who turn our head when somebody calls behind us, »Hey you, aesthetician!«, and find ourselves interpellated into such a subject, do, we see that aestheticians over the world are mainly concerned with issues of art, culture and beauty (probably in this order). Two other facts are that with few exceptions the contemporary postmodern world and its communicational and informational plethora have made us not only to depend upon similar references and often work on related issues, but that the previous global division into what Richard Shusterman has called »philosophical empires«⁴ – but which could just as easily be called »aesthetic empires« – is increasingly becoming a past phenomenon. Globalization has

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 117.

⁴ Cf. Richard Shusterman, »Aesthetics Between Nationalism and Internationalism«, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51:2, Spring 1993, p. 161. Cf. also Aleš Erjavec, »Philosophy: National and International«, *Metaphilosophy*, 28:4, October 1997, pp. 329-345.

affected not only products of mass production and consumption such as the globally marketed material commodities, but also symbolic commodities called theories, authors and visions of the world (of *visions du monde* of which in the sixties Lucien Goldmann wrote about). In the words of Wolfgang Welsch again, »Strictly speaking there is no longer anything absolutely foreign.«⁵

One of the frequent features associated with postmodernity is its purported break with the past. As I sketched above, by using Bauman's analysis, it would be more proper to claim that postmodernity is the end or the *Ausgang* of modernity, although not exemplified by the dedifferentiation,⁶ for this is to an excessive measure dependent upon the early fascination with the purportedly epochal break between modernity and postmodernity. This dedifferentiation of the previously autonomous spheres should not be equated with particularization; the first denotes a disintegration of fixed borders between realms, while the second signals the emergence of a situation which doesn't allow for a totalizing elimination of particularities, for there no longer exist a reductionist and exclusivist common denominator – or if it does, it exists only in the plural form, as well as in a transitory, and hence a relative one.

I find the notion of postmodernity as the present (and perhaps final) phase of modernity of relevance for it allows us to take into consideration what are at the same time global social and historical processes and events and simultaneously those restricted to the much narrower fields of philosophical and aesthetic inquiry.

Among the generally accepted features of postmodernity – this being true also of its philosophical critics – are a globalization of culture, the erosion of the distinction between high or elite art and mass culture, etc. What is less frequently noted is that aesthetics and philosophy too have ceased being pure academic endeavors and are increasingly becoming active ingredients of activities as varied as politics, design, and even forestry. We may well argue that some of these applications of aesthetics may be problematic, but we should nonetheless follow Wittgenstein's dictum that to know what a word means we should look how it is used.

These may be the margins of philosophy and aesthetics. Nonetheless, especially in the realm of what Wolfgang Welsch has frequently criticized as the »aestheticization of everyday life« and its transmogrification into an ingredient of »experience«, hence changing the world into »a domain of

⁵ Wolfgang Welsch, »Transculturality. The Changing Form of Cultures Today« (manuscript).

⁶ Cf. Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), esp. pp. 11-15.

experience,⁷ aesthetics and theories linked to new forms of communication and technological means have helped establish these as radically different from those of the (mostly modernist) past. The so-called »new media« and the euphoria associated with such technical and technological advancements have offered a new field of research, but at the same time heightened expectations that a completely new realm of the aesthetic and the experienced was in the making. Even if this was not the case, it nonetheless helped broaden (in a certain or specialized field, but within the realm of the social nonetheless) the extant notion of aesthetics.

What occurred in aesthetics resembled developments in other realms or areas of knowledge: the notion of aesthetics commenced to encompass theoretical activities of Eastern cultures, the former sociology of culture, semiotics, psychoanalysis and even ecology. Such broadening or extension of the meaning of the word was a positive phenomenon, although it also instigated the current confusion and increased vagueness of the term. At an aesthetics conference one can find today papers on Plato, Schopenhauer's aesthetics, the aesthetics of the stratosphere, soap operas, on Playboy bunnies, Wittgenstein and dress codes in primitive or contemporary societies.

Despite the criticism aimed at interpretation of postmodernity as a period of dedifferentiation, to a certain extent such a diagnosis merits further discussion. It is true that aesthetics, for example, is a typical discipline of philosophy which came into existence as a consequence of the differentiation occurring within modernity and that current broadening of this notion is also a consequence of the changed circumstances in our organization of knowledge.

That this is possible is furthermore due to the undisputedly increased permeability of the aforementioned »philosophical empires«: a few decades ago certain works of philosophy or aesthetics would patently appear out of place within a different cultural or philosophical empire: these could have been the case not only with Indian works in a Polish environment, for example, but just as well with French works in a British environment or British in a German one and vice versa. Not that many classical works were not a part of the global culture, but they were there either as a part of the philosophical canon or as a marginal phenomenon. This is no longer so: today authors from various countries and cultures employ similar or same references and are treating theories not much differently from cuisine or, to give a more elevated example, literature or the fine arts.

Another reason for such a situation is that aesthetics is increasingly an activity which strives to be to an essential extent related to on-going human

⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 2.

practices. These are not necessarily artistic, but in most cases certainly are cultural ones. The sixties and seventies demolished the barrier between high and low in art. Special import possessed structuralism and related semiotics which effectively relegated to oblivion the notion of art as a paradigm of creativity and its most desired emanation. Art now became a slightly elevated realm within the global sphere of culture, with both these terms often being discarded as obsolete totalizing notions, to be replaced with concrete works and the signifying practices these offered and were the results of. This viewpoint was supplemented by another one, namely that it was (neo)avant-garde art which was acceptable for it avoided capitalist commodification.

When in the eighties and especially nineties aesthetics, art and artwork again commenced to gain theoretical interest, what then appeared as the object of aesthetic inquiry became so broad that it carried almost no definable distinctions. The notion of experience started to seep into the theoretic realm of aesthetics, while art became such an oblique entity that it could acquire almost any form, shape and temporal (and especially transient) status. In such a situation the institutional theory of art started to be globally proliferated. At the time of its formation in the sixties this theory validly mirrored the New York art scene and aptly described the way in which an artwork therein came into existence and the mechanisms by which it earned appreciation. The institutional theory furthermore signaled the demise of normative aesthetics, a process which was strengthened and gained global dimensions as it spread to other artworlds. As Bauman noticed, »the institutional theory of art (as an institutional theory of any other value domain) sounds the death knell to the philosophers' dream of control. What has been put in the place of the absolute principles that only they had access to and only they were able to operate, is this evasive, unwieldy, unpredictable entity of 'consensus'. [...] What is new is not the authority of consensus, but the fact that the kind of consensus which now seems to possess the reputation-bestowing authority is not the consensus of the philosophers.«⁸

Institutional theory of art detected and articulated a change which was in the sphere of art proper engendered mainly by Duchamp and his artistic subversions. It nonetheless, in spite of its lack of normative foundations, described possible artworlds which formed relatively self-contained spheres, peopled by the required inhabitants who together created the consensus mentioned by Bauman. With the advent of postmodernism a new situation developed: art and culture have become so democratized and so widespread that very often consensus is not even attempted. To the authors and their audiences suffices the act of making and then exhibiting or showing their

⁸ Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

artifacts. What is occurring is no longer a process, the executors of which desire to have their artifacts integrated into the extant culture and artworld and do this either by assimilating or tearing down the old norms (a process the Czech aesthetician Jan Mukařovský could in the thirties still describe as the predominant in art), but instead an act which requires no special affirmation from the broader society or its segments which are more artistically or aesthetically inclined. Instead, the act of making appears almost identical to the act of consumption. It is no longer important how the audience will respond to a work, i.e. if, and how, it will communicate with it; instead it is the creative *experience* which authentically represents the purportedly ontological dimension of such a work. We therefore speak of autopoetics which are incommensurable and not subjected to totalizing normative notions and frameworks. It is also for this reason that the border between art and nature is lowered or eradicated: if a work of art can be any human artifact, it can also be any natural artifact, for no spiritual dimension is required for its specific and distinct ontological status.

3

Institutional theory as a theoretical articulation of the then extant art offered an appropriate response to the artistic world of the neo-avant-gardes of the sixties and early seventies. As Bauman observed, it also revealed the fact that philosophers, among others, have lost their position as legislators and were transformed into interpreters. I wish to argue that under the present postmodern conditions, when frequently this same theory is not only proliferated further but broadened and applied indiscriminately, it may become again valid to ascribe to philosophers, aestheticians and others the role of legislators, although this legislature can of course no longer be based on transcendent or ideological foundations. I believe it is high time to do this, for the revolt against the fetish of art has for a long time now been a victim of its own success. The current omnipresent freedom suffocates art and causes it to become irrelevant, for it allows for any activity or object that a certain person wishes to designate as such, to be called art hence effectively denigrating its meaningful signification.

As Michel Foucault observed in 1983, one of the great roles of philosophy »could be characterized by saying that the task of philosophy is to describe the nature of the present, and of ‘ourselves in the present’.«⁹

⁹ Quoted in Michel Foucault, *Politics. Philosophy. Culture. Interviews and Other Writings: 1977 – 1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 36.

The same should be demanded of aesthetics if it is to be a philosophical aesthetics. I interpret aesthetics primarily as a philosophy of art. This it can be allowing and supporting at the same time the existence of other interpretations of aesthetics, such as Welsch's, for example, who argues for an aesthetics which »will do justice to *all* usages of the expression.«¹⁰ While I fully agree with his Wittgensteinian interpretation of the term and of its multifarious usages, it needs to be added that Welsch at the same time elevates aesthetics to a paramount position within philosophy, ascribing »aesthetic character« to cognition¹¹ and ascribing to ethics the role of »a subdiscipline of aesthetics«.¹² What appears problematic is not his broadening of the notion of the *aesthetic* onto various realms of human activity and nature, etc., but his designation of *aesthetics* as a philosophical activity aimed at a similarly broad domain. It is this collapsing of the *aesthetic* and of *aesthetics* that I find hard to accept. Aesthetics as philosophy of art (and perhaps culture) continues a long tradition, reaching back at least to Hegel. The artistic is not necessarily also the aesthetic, for although the two overlap they are not identical. If we limit aesthetics to the broad domain of the aesthetic we lose a conceptual set of tools which may enable us to analyze and evaluate the present-day artistic endeavors, in an attempt to regain the critical and hence necessarily also normative edge of aesthetic philosophical reflection. By opting for such an aesthetics directed towards art I am not propagating aesthetic, philosophical or artistic exclusivism and denigration of everything incompatible with whatever norms are imposed by such an aesthetics; I wish instead to re-establish art as a relatively distinct phenomenon requiring its relatively distinct theoretical reflection. This view is a corollary of a position which has recently been expressed also by Arthur Danto. In his opinion, »there is a kind of transhistorical essence in art, everywhere and always the same, but it only discloses itself through history.«¹³

It would seem that such a criterion proffers a similar relativism as is the one existing in the present »artglobe«. This is not so, for while it is true that the view just described allows for an infinite variety of artistic endeavors, it at the same time does not ascribe to all of them the name and hence the status of art. As stated before, there is no practical or theoretical need to do so, for the current practice in the infinite number of artworlds of the world is such that the »interesting« – of which Henri Lefebvre wrote already in the

¹⁰ Welsch, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, Mass.: Princeton University Press 1997), p. 28; cf. also p. 95.

fifties – has replaced the »artistic«. It is high time to re-evaluate certain traditional values and regain and implement their meaning and function, but this time, retaining also the consciousness of their historical settings and the difference between them and those of the present. Hence a similar consciousness, as that pertaining to postmodern art, could be implemented in aesthetics (and perhaps elsewhere): the consciousness of contingency but at the same time of the need for certain rules and norms, both of which may be relative and transient, not dependent upon essentialist and transcendent foundations, but upon continuously and incessantly renewed similar or related conditions of possibility. The fear of any normativity imposed from above or behind is unwarranted, for it cannot be promoted and implemented under present conditions. This may, finally, be what Wolfgang Iser promulgates in his vision of the aesthetic, for his notion too aspires to a certain universality which is probably but a certain anthropological or human condition, based on the view that »all 'fundamentals' display an aesthetic countenance together. Or, more precisely: non-fundamentalism means just this – that the supposed 'fundamentals' are aesthetically constituted.«¹⁴

It now becomes clear why, according to Iser, aesthetics cannot be limited to art only: if it would have been, it would omit the broader spheres of the aesthetic and would, furthermore, include only those which are artistic but not necessarily aesthetic.¹⁵

4

I want to suggest a solution to the dilemma offered by Iser, i.e. of choosing between aesthetics as a philosophy of art and philosophy of *aisthesis*. My answer would be that we can have the pie and eat it, too. In other words, I opt for an aesthetics understood as a philosophy of art, but at the same time an aesthetics which can legitimately attain and carry other meanings which are in multifarious ways connected and related to this concept and term. I wish to offer two interrelated reasons for such a designation of aesthetics.

The first concerns the concept of transculturality as suggested by Iser

¹⁴ »Transculturality«.

¹⁵ It should be noted in passing though, that the aesthetic – as implied by Walter Benjamin, for example – may be a much more problematic notion than the artistic, for the autonomy and therefore the consciousness of the value of the artistic is related also to the tradition of the Enlightenment, while the notion of nature and the aesthetic as proffered by romanticism or Michel Foucault, for that matter, i.e. as the making of the perfect self, both carry with them numerous dilemmas known from history.

in the afore quoted essay. The author draws our attention to a curious fact related to the reasons for his introduction of this concept. He writes: »The diagnosis of transculturality refers to a transition, or to a phase in a process of transition. It is a temporary diagnosis. It takes the old conception of single cultures as its point of departure, and it argues that this conception – although still seeming self-evident to many people – is no longer descriptively adequate for most cultures today. Instead, the diagnosis of transculturality views a present and future states of cultures which is no longer monocultural but cross-cultural. The concept seeks to conceptually grasp this transition. [...] The process of transition obviously implies *two* moments: the ongoing existence of single cultures (or of an old understanding of culture's form) *and* the shift to a new, transcultural form of cultures. With respect to this double character of the transition, it is conceptually sound and even necessary to refer to single cultures of the old type *as well as* to point the way to transculturality.«¹⁶

Why couldn't we make a similar claim – with a slight twist, perhaps – concerning aesthetics? Aesthetics could then be interpreted as a broad notion – encompassing all phenomena to which the adjective »aesthetic« could be assigned – *and*, at the same time, retain or ascribe to aesthetics the meaning of philosophy of art. It would then be the tension between these (and other tentative) interpretations of aesthetics which would – and in fact do – together form aesthetics as such. It would be this *difference* which would be essential, a difference arising also from the historical situation in which it now comes into being, a situation exemplified by this enormous reconfiguration of traditional taxonomies. Aesthetics also is in a temporal transitional stage, allowing for reinterpretation and the investment of new meanings. It is currently an empty signifier akin to Fredric Jameson's »vanishing mediator«, offering an opening in the otherwise firm and homogenous membrane of discursive and symbolic reality. It currently denotes what it has been in the past and what it could denote in the future – if we decide to influence the course of events.

My second argument for such a line of reasoning is related to contemporary events and processes in art and culture. I claimed before that the present situation in art and culture is one of normative vacuity. I cannot offer here extensive arguments for such a statement, suffice it to say that in my view the purportedly »central« artistic events – ranging from the Documenta exhibitions in Kassel, through some of the Venice biennials of this decade, to the 1997 »U3« exhibition in Ljubljana curated by Peter Weibel – as well as certain philosophical critiques of such events, such as that of

¹⁶ Welsch, »Transculturality«.

Paul Crowther, for example, in his most recent book,¹⁷ all reveal the present intermediary nature of our global art and culture, akin to the notion of postmodernism and postmodernity as previously analyzed by Welsch and Bauman. Could we not claim that the present normative vacuity is in fact created by the transitional nature of this very art, where old forms are acquiring new contents and where in a new reality we are in search of new concepts? Could we not claim that the present apparent artistic uniformity, arising from the freedom to assign the title or label of art to any phenomenon whatsoever, offering the impression of a spent nature of the art events just mentioned, arises from the old modernist scheme or interpretation of avant-garde art which was aimed – according to Adorno and the Habermasian tradition which was then appropriated by the artistic, curatorial and theoretic elite of the last two and a half decades – at defending and promulgating avant-garde art because of its authenticity within the inauthentic capitalist world? Could it not be argued that the current cultural and artistic situation/s in the world arise, on the one hand, from their propensity to multiply infinitely (hence requiring and acquiring local character and »local« evaluations) and, on the other hand, from their continuous global and hence general or even uniform presence and existence? In short, from their transitory nature, the accrual of which exceeds that of the modernist past? That this is so attest not only the mentioned demise of concepts such as alienation and reification, but also requests for new cognitive mappings within which art would again acquire its place.

Within such a context it would of course be erroneous to require, as Welsch does, aesthetics to restrict and »link the concept of the aesthetic exclusively to the province of art and [to] want to fence it off completely from daily life and the living world *partout*, practicing [thus] aesthetic-theoretical provincialism.«¹⁸ Aesthetics – or, rather, aestheticians – should become involved in art, practicing aesthetics in relation to and in connection with art and culture and not exclusively isolate themselves within the towers of the academia, a practice often carried out in the past¹⁹ and implied in the statement just quoted from Welsch. Aesthetics as philosophy of art and also of culture should develop as a relatively distinct theoretic activity, although

¹⁷ Paul Crowther, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Welsch, »Aestheticization Processes: Phenomena, Distinctions and Prospects«, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 13:1, February 1996, p. 11.

¹⁹ Symptomatic for such a situation within aesthetics was the fact that only in the late eighties did aestheticians at the international congress of aesthetics find the concept of postmodernism, for example, at all relevant for their discussions.

still remaining a part of aesthetics, the whole of this forming the same big family, usually possessing the necessary family resemblances. Such a permeability of concepts has been in the humanities occurring for a few decades at least, ranging from history and art history to philosophy.

Which reasons should prompt aesthetics and aestheticians to acquire such an activist role within the realms of art and culture?

First among these, since it is the most obvious, is the present obsolescence of strict divisions among various social practices. Staying aloof in aesthetics or philosophy is today possible only if we completely and consciously retreat from our everyday life which is globalized as never before and influenced by global and local events and information to an equal if not greater extent.

The second reason is the evaluative vacuity of contemporary art scene and the preponderance of watered-down, simplified and nicely packaged philosophical and aesthetic theories by theorists who drop names, pick up artists and discard criteria, all in the name of combat against the obsolete danger of fetishization and autonomization of art. A reason for such a course of events was also the self-critical stance of philosophy, its decomposition into various theoretical currents, and the general adversity towards normativity.

The third reason is that art cannot be anything and everything. If it wants to be something, be this some-thing contingent as other phenomena, us included, are, some semblance of criteria have to be articulated. A relatively recent attempt in this direction was that of the »re-enchantment of art«²⁰ or of Richard Shusterman in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) for example, while the others that I am familiar with, are mostly continuations of the mentioned combat against the presumed danger of artistic fetishization and autonomization. The strength of such arguments rests on the weakness and absence of any aesthetic theory attempting to argumentatively offer different or opposed views – or even strengthen the one that I here criticize. A possible argument against this third reason could be that art requires no criteria and can actually be anything and everything. Such an argument is not hard to dispute: every term, applied too broadly, loses its significance. Even in anarchist aesthetics the concept opposed was not that of art, but of institutionalized art, of art locked in museums and galleries, of art as an object in contrast to art as an event. It is the current »anything goes« slogan which contributes to the current anaestheticization and which causes numerous contemporary works to remain expressive devices only, with no actual aesthetic or artistic value which both are directly dependent upon the

²⁰ Cf. for example Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson 1991).

social response of the audience, be it small or large. The resulting void, besides being filled by mass culture, is also being compensated by traditional or classical art which is an object of increased public interest.

The fourth and final reason, or even *causa finalis* maybe, is that art matters, or can matter. If we are to retain the notion of art for a specific and special realm of human activity which enables us to establish a specific form of human intersubjectivity and, at the same time, enhances our self-awareness, be it in a conscious or corporeal way, art can retain its tentative role in human society and in individuals. This role can also be played by other social acts and activities, but not equally well. It is – or *it could be* – up to aesthetics to develop these notions, concepts and normative frameworks, not as something to be imposed *upon* art – this is not only undesirable but impossible – but as something to be worked on together *with* art. It now becomes clear that any relevant aesthetics today must be linked to and involved with art.

In the present transient period, characterized by a transculturality, a plethora of reconceptualizations, with the search for new notions and mappings with which to grasp our present – with profound philosophical questions and challenges – a renewed place should be found for aesthetics too. I opt for an aesthetics which is strongly linked to philosophy, on the one hand, and to art, on the other. Other options are viable, valuable and valued. If, though, we ascribe to art an existential role exceeding that of quotidian aestheticization and of randomly feeding the Imaginary, aesthetics has to accept art as its relevant, if not necessarily privileged object. Should we decide to ascribe to art such a place, we should then also accept as one of the essential ones the interpretation of aesthetics as a philosophy of art and culture.

