

Plenary presentation at the XIXth International Congress of Aesthetics in Cracow (July 23, 2013)

### **Aesthetics beyond Aesthetics – reconsidered**

In 1995, at the end of the XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics in Lahti, I delivered a lecture entitled "aesthetics beyond aesthetics". It seems to have been influential because the concept of the XIXth International Congress of Aesthetics in Cracow (July, 21–27, 2013) reflects some of the ideas I developed then. This is why Krystyna Wilkoszewska, the organizer, suggested to reexamine the topic of "aesthetics beyond aesthetics" in a plenary panel. This is what we are going to do in the following.

Let me first briefly explain what the idea was then, in 1995. Afterwards I will consider how we might reformulate it today.

What I had in mind in 1995 was that the discipline of aesthetics should transcend the narrow frame of art and also include considerations on aesthetic phenomena outside of art: in science, politics, economy, design, ecology, the lifeworld, etc. Aesthetics should explore and cover the *complete* range of aesthetic phenomena, give a *full* account of aesthetics.

I was widely dissatisfied with the habitual narrowing of aesthetics' frame at that time. Originally, with its founding father Baumgarten, aesthetics had been designed to cover the full range of aesthetic phenomena (even including, for example, predictions from the flight of birds). Soon after, however – with Kant, Hegel and others – a restriction of aesthetics to the beautiful and to art occurred. This restriction prevailed up to the present day.

What, in my view, was striking and completely disturbing, was, however, that in the meantime – paradigmatically with the avant gardes of the twentieth century – *the arts themselves* had moved in the opposite direction. They had transcended the golden cage of an autonomous art closed on itself and had taken up and pursued relations to the reality outside of art – to politics, ethics, industrialization, the lifeworld, etc.

Therefore it seemed absurd and self-contradictory that the discipline of aesthetics which purportedly wanted to be faithful to art still focused on art alone, as if art were still closed on itself. The champions of this traditional type of aesthetics had obviously missed out on art's shift to an art beyond the golden cage, to an art open to phenomena outside of art.

There were, to be sure, other arguments too for an opening up of aesthetics to aesthetic phenomena beyond art: recent epistemological insights into the role of aesthetic elements in the constitution and shaping of reality, or the increasing relevance of aesthetic styling in the lifeworld – all the phenomena labelled under the heading "aestheticization". This alone would have justified or even imposed an opening up of aesthetics to phenomena beyond the limited sphere of the arts.

But the one and decisive argument that even traditional aestheticians would have to accept, I thought, was the alteration of art itself. Art had become *art beyond art* (i.e. art beyond autonomous art), therefore a shift of aesthetics to *aesthetics beyond aesthetics* was obligatory. Otherwise one would only pretend to speak about art while in fact ignoring it and speaking just about oneself's outdated concept of art.

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Introductory text to a plenary panel entitled "Aesthetics beyond Aesthetics" during the XIXth International Congress of Aesthetics in Cracow (July, 21–27, 2013).

What is the situation like today, almost twenty years later? The arts and artists themselves, it seems to me, have moved even more in the direction of an art beyond art. They are very sceptical about the traditional (western) concept of 'art' which is bound to the idea of autonomy and the production of self-sufficient works. Artists rather try to intervene in non-artistic contexts, or to sharpen our aesthetic sensibility, or to develop new aesthetic practices and strategies.

I want to point out just two possibilities. 1) Artists less create works in the traditional sense but tend to intervene in processes. For this, artists can either initiate new processes (as Joseph Beuys did, for example, with his *7000 oaks* action during Documenta VII in 1982), or they can intervene in already existing social processes (micro-invasive strategies). In such cases, art surrenders itself to processes which finally will take their own route. After a while one will no longer know or be able to recognize that art had at some moment a finger in the pie. Contemporary artists often just transform what is at hand, or produce contingent and ephemeral things that ultimately realize themselves by disappearing or becoming invisible. The felicitous phrase coined by Lucius Burckhardt with respect to design that "good design is invisible" is equally valid for such interventionist types of art.<sup>1</sup>

The broader context of this shift to processes is a general transition – in epistemology, philosophy and many other strands of cultural orientation – from trying to understand the world in terms of substances to perceiving it as a bundle of processes. In everyday thinking substances still are to the fore, but in scientific and philosophical thinking, and also in our cultural self-understanding processes are gaining priority. We are performing a transition from substance to process ontology – a transition to a kind of Whiteheadian worldview. I consider this a very important change – in many, epistemic as well as practical and political regards (which I cannot explain in detail here) – I just wanted to point out this larger context of artists' turning to processes.

2) Another widespread tendency today consists in drawing inspirations from advanced science, especially from digital technologies and from the life sciences. This is again to be seen in a broader context. We are today undergoing a deep transformation of our self-understanding and our conception of how we humans relate to the non-human entities surrounding us. We are shifting from an oppositional to a more holistic worldview.

For centuries – since the Early Modern Age and fully fledged in modernity – a dualism between man and world had set the agenda. The world was seen as consisting just of matter (*res extensa*) – as being just a spatial, temporal, mechanic, and, above all, spiritless entity. (In this, the modern worldview differed considerably from earlier views to be found in Greek antiquity or in Christianity according to which with spirit was an inherent principle of the world.) While the world was now taken to be just spiritless matter, the human, on the contrary, was still considered to be essentially a spiritual (rational) being (*res cogitans*). From this resulted a fundamental difference between world and man. They were on principle heterogeneous, incongruent and incompatible.

That rationality is not something mundane, was in addition supported by the belief that rationality is an exclusive characteristic of man – that no other animal, not even the ones closest to us, possess rationality. This seemed to bear witness that rationality is not of mundane origin, for otherwise it would be completely unintelligible why rationality should not have developed in other beings around us as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Welsch, "At Point Zero of Creation", *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, Volume 14, 2010, 199–212.

From this constellation resulted the man-world-dualism so typical of modernity. There was no conceivable way leading from the world (pure spiritless matter) to spirit – and likewise no way leading from spirit to the world. Hence man, as a spiritual being, was thought to be unable to recognize the world as it is but only to construct a world according to his epistemological equipment (the doctrine of Kant, Nietzsche, Sapir and others up to the present constructivism in the humanities).

During the last decades, however, we have recognized that the two pillars on which this modern position rests are untenable.

First: Man's rationality is not a supra-natural gift but has evolved quite naturally – it arose continuously from animal rationality. There exist many and impressive instances of rationality in the animal kingdom, reaching from pigeons' capacity of abstraction to chimpanzees ability to understand the intentionality of conspecifics, to recognize themselves in mirrors, and even to do problem-solving through mere deliberation.<sup>2</sup> So there is *continuity* between the non-human and the human.

Second: Nature in general is not contrary to spirit. From very early stages on (already in cosmic evolution) nature is characterized by self-referentiality. This one is the great driver for the formation of galaxies or the constitution of organisms and finally also for the emergence of consciousness and thinking.<sup>3</sup> So spirit is not something alien and incongruent to the world. Rather it is inherently affine to the world. It is a product of the world's development and a manifestation of its innermost organizing principle.

This means that nature is not opposed to spirit but open to it, with spirit being an emergent of nature. Correspondingly, the human is not something supra-natural but a natural product of evolution. Even our turn to cultural evolution was a result of natural evolution, and cultural evolution still rests on and profits from the achievements of natural evolution. So there is convergence (instead of opposition) from both sides.

Hence the new agenda in thinking is to explore the fundamental commonality and continuity between the human and the non-human, and spelling out its – conceptual as well as practical – consequences. The human cannot be understood – as modernity would have it – exclusively in human terms. Rather one has to take our evolutionary provenance and animal heritage into account.

The same holds in aesthetics: Artists no longer take human exclusivity and alterity as guiding-line. They no longer follow the perspective of man standing as a special entity in opposition to world and nature. Accordingly, they no longer try to create an autonomous world through artworks – with artworks standing opposed to the real world. They rather try to bring to view the deep commonality of humans with other things – living and non-living. This commonality is the big agenda today. And it obviously is not just romantic fantasy but a completely realistic perspective. Every cell phone user knows that matter bears intellectual potentials. He makes quite naturally use of the similarity between silicon-based and human-based intelligence. He has long-since left behind old-modern dualism.

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<sup>2</sup> This has become evident already in 1917 when Wolfgang Köhler published the report on his later on famous experiments in Teneriffa: Wolfgang Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes* (London: Routledge 1925). Cf. also Konrad Lorenz, *Die Rückseite des Spiegels. Versuch einer Naturgeschichte menschlichen Erkennens* [1973] (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1977), 165–167.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. on this in more detail: Wolfgang Welsch, *Homo mundanus* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2012), 876–886.

Let us now take a closer look at the various forms how contemporary artists proceed within this framework of thematizing the human-nonhuman-relationship.

Some, like Pierre Huyghe for example, create bio-culture-topes where it is hard to distinguish any more between human and nonhuman elements (*Untilled*, 2011-12; Documenta XIII, Kassel 2012).

Others pursue projects of Artificial Life where determinants of natural evolution (like mutation, selection, variation, chance, population etc.) are transferred into algorithms that regulate the evolution of images. Natural processes serve here as models for artistic processes.

A third possibility is Bio Art. It goes beyond a mere parallelism of natural and artistic evolution (as is characteristic of Artificial Life). It rather creates – through artistic as well as scientific procedures – new real objects, i.e. not just art objects, but living things that sometimes are even able of replication and reproduction.

Here we clearly have a case of an art practicing aesthetics beyond aesthetics – an aesthetics open to science, nature, life-world, technology. And I am very happy that we have one of its main representatives on this panel: Eduardo Kac. I will present him to you in a minute.

Besides artist Eduardo Kac from Chicago, I invited aesthetician Peng Feng from Beijing. Many of you know Peng Feng from previous congresses and from his writings. He is an aesthetician not of the old-fashioned type, but is very innovative and above all: he is open to the arts. He was the Chinese curator for the Venice Biennial in 2011. He has also worked as an artist, writing, for example, a musical. He deserves all kinds of interest and respect.

Inviting a contemporary artist and an aesthetician affiliated with art is, of course, a kind of programmatic gesture. I consider it important and necessary for aestheticians to have closer and more manifold contact with the practitioners of aesthetics, the artists. And I am very happy to see that this idea coincides with the view of the organizers of this congress. We have here in Cracow more artists invited and more artistic presentations during and around the congress than ever before.

Finally I want to present Eduardo Kac. I restrict myself to explaining why I consider him a perfect match for a panel on aesthetics beyond aesthetics. Let me mention just one work. It is entitled *Edunia* and was created from 2003 to 2009 (illustration 1). *Edunia* is a hybrid flowering plant which originated through the combination of the normal genome of Petunia with some specific genes of Eduardo Kac. Eduardo introduced genes which in himself are responsible for the redness of his blood into the genome of Petunia so that this gene now produces red veins in *Edunia*. And Eduardo obviously likes his with his relative in the plant world (illustration 2).

This is a typical example of "transgenic art" – a term Eduardo coined in 1998 (as he introduced the term "bio art" since 1997). *Edunia* thematizes the commonality and continuity between human and nonhuman I spoke of before. And it certainly represents a type of artwork that has moved beyond aesthetics and art in the traditional sense: it has linked up with science, anthropology, engineering, and it is not only an artwork but a new living being as well. Here, it seems to me, aesthetics beyond aesthetics is fully put into practice.