

aesthetics of the differends

Good evening,

I'm currently working on an "aesthetics of the differends" and I'm here to explain you what does that mean.

introduction

First I will introduce my main idea about the definition of the aesthetics and the position of the artist as a specific aesthetician. I will then introduce the concept of "differend" which comes from Lyotard and, to finish this introduction, I will tell you about my interest in an aesthetics of the differends in order to understand our current era, that we can call post-modernity to say it quickly.

Once that - the definition of the term "aesthetics" from my own point of view, the definition of the concept of "differend" which is from Lyotard, then the importance of a possible "aesthetics of the differends" for the current art - will be done, I will define what is a work of art as a fight between two tendencies: analytical and synthetic. When that will be done, we will be in the presence of what is at stake with the creation of a body of works, and we'll see the risks of analytical art on the one hand and the risks of the synthetic art on the other hand.

In the in-between of these two tendencies we will see the specific position of my work "aesthetics of the differends" which is both analytical and synthetic, both a system of concepts and a visual arrangement of affects. We will then understand my "aesthetics of the differends" as a tool, a tool to take care of the main problems of the art field. For the moment I work on three main different problems, which are:

First: the severed finger pointing at the transcendental

Second: Giacometti's nose verifying the true hole of the Real

Third: the child of a whore as genealogy without a beginning

I will introduce these three main problems, but I will resolve just the second one with the first principles of my "aesthetics of the differends", which is not an object of investigation but rather a way of dealing with problems.

the word "aesthetics"

* the weight / the burden

So first of all, I should introduce a key concept about aesthetics, which is the weight. Does that mean something to you expressed like that? The weight of something is expressed in kilograms;

the weight of a human body is around 70 kilograms for example. So the weight, that we can also call “the burden” is my key concept about how I define the term “aesthetics”.

My idea is based on an analysis of classical writings, and especially on the third critique by Emmanuel Kant, where can be found a specific definition of the field of aesthetics with the sublime —the feeling of the sublime is explained as being an affect that exceeds the idea of the measure. So for Emmanuel Kant, aesthetics can be defined by that feeling, this affect of being exposed to an over-measured-event.

And that event is the pass-by, the pass-through a transcendental field, in the way that a transcendental is precisely what is immeasurable.

* the “in-between of the conceptual object”

So my idea is that a transcendental is not an object, like an object that can be perceived, but it is a field, it is a large field that a subject can pass-by, and by passing-by, the subject —the one who perceives, but that acts by this perception— loses a bit of weight from himself, the weight he acquired by being confronted, by being faced to boredom and so on to all metaphysical questions, that are precisely questions without answers, and this because these questions are the formalism of what I call the “yet non-answered” but there is still the weight of the question, a weight that cannot be left on the ground, so aesthetics take care of this weight by merging the subject with the affect of the “yet non-answered” that, precisely, is beyond the measure, to make possible through the encounter of the transcendental field, the “let on the ground of the weight”.

To summarize, “aesthetics”, in my own idea, is a domain of perceptions that make possible the transferring of the weight (which is from the metaphysical level of questioning) to others places rather than the heart of the subject. So to me “aesthetics” has to be understood like a fluid mechanism where the weight circulates between several people and is mediated by objects and experiences.

* the object “the fabrics of the Cyclops” becoming a concept

The second point about the aesthetics I want to insist on is (what I call) the “in-between of the conceptual object”, that can be quickly expressed as if (in the aesthetics I’m working on, my working aesthetics i.e.) sometimes an object can take the place, that is to say, that this object can function in the place of a concept (I mean a written meaningful concept).



This is for example the case with this piece of Perspex, which is called “the fabrics of the Cyclops”, it is in my “aesthetics of the differends”, a sculptural object but it is going to become a conceptual object in the next steps of my enquiry.

So the “in-between of the conceptual object” has to be understood as a becoming in itself. The concept becomes an object and vice versa, the relation of becoming is made possible because these are concepts and objects that give the opportunity to the subject “to let on the ground the weight” —these concepts and objects are facing the void of the pure “yet non-answered” and so, as their perceptions are made possible by an affect over the idea of the measure in itself, there is no criterion inside the language to judge their qualities. Both these object and concept are on the void, and can be perceived through a “corpus” (a network) of affects that are not yet measurable *in letters* I should say, not meaningful in a linguistic way.

So the “aesthetics” in the expression “aesthetics of the differends” is a transfer of weight between human subjects mediated by a becoming of concepts and objects (concepts becoming objects, and vice versa, objects becoming concepts).

So to finish our introduction we should say now what does the word “differend” mean in the expression “aesthetics of the differends”.

the concept “differend”

*≠ conflict

This word is not the word “different” with a “t”, but “differend” with a “d”, which can be translated by the English word “conflict” but as this concept has been developed by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1983 essay, this concept is now stronger and so its translation by “conflict” is less meaningful. His book titled in French “le différend” is not translated, so the English version is simply titled “the differend”, so it is like a new word, and a new concept, more vast and precise than the “conflict” or “disagreement” translations.

So if a differend is not just a conflict or a disagreement, what is it exactly?

*on judgment

For Lyotard, a differend is a linguistic concept linked to the problem of judgment, he said: “As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for a lack of rule of judgment applicable to both arguments”. Indeed, Lyotard framed the core problem of his book as that of the possibility of judgment after philosophy’s linguistic and relativistic turn.

So our interest within this book and within the Lyotard’s concept is based on the fact that after his “Rapport on knowledge” in the 70’s, where Lyotard introduced the main idea about post-modernity as an era without meta-narratives, he worked on a concept that tries to give a shape to a problem of judgment in our time, which is the same structural problematic on which Kant was working two centuries before. And Lyotard in his book reenacts the Kantian sublime as a way of bridging the abyss between incommensurable phrases.

Because if there is a lack of judgment between, at least two parties, or two phrases —because these phrases are heterogeneous, and even if working on the same object— the critical measurement is out of order, and then we just keep affects and weight, and the aesthetics (as a tool) points toward this hole in the language, to make a distinction even if not a judgment.

*post-modernity

So this explains my current interest in the concept of differend, I guess there is a possible aesthetics for our post-modernity based on the idea that art is a vast stage where multiple voices occur via objects, experiences, written texts, screens, etc... and rather than being able to judge the objects (the core problems) of these voices (and if I'm saying "voice" rather than "human expression", it is to deal with the idea of the "face" brought from Agamben and Levinas) we should interpret them within a structure without a structure —which is to me hermeneutics— and interpret them with non-positivist concepts even linguistic ones like the void and the weight.

I mean that speaking about contemporary art, the art that artists do today, should be understood with some new concepts that can appear by a *differend* reading of them, so by being attentive to some concepts of the "aesthetics of the differends" that I'm in the process of building.

So before telling the definition of the "œuvre", the "work of art", I'll expose 3 main problems and I will resolve one, because the "aesthetics of the differends" is a body of questions with answers. But the answers, and their weight come before the questions.

In one word, the weight of the question is in the answer and comes first even if this is not clear, then the question raises up the answer and finishes the process of the fluid transfer of the weight of the answer.

So I should confess that the "aesthetics of the differends" works exactly like a work of art.

The work of art

*2 tendencies:

- the analytical
- the synthetic

So now we should define a work of art. In "the birth of tragedy" published in 1872, Nietzsche defined two notions to characterize the romantic art: Apollonian and Dionysian. These two notions are not concepts, but rather two tendencies that confront themselves in each work of art and in each creator. According to Peter Sloterdijk, the Dionysian and the Apollonian form dialectics, they are contrasting, and Nietzsche doesn't value one more than the other. A work of art is in this way a mixture of these two tendencies going from one point to the other of the two boundaries of this dialectics. I guess that this dialectics inherited by Nietzsche from the Greek philosophy is particularly on purpose to square, to define, Romantic art. The art Nietzsche was looking at, the art of his time.

The idea to define the work of art by a new dialectic came to me a long time ago. Now, when I look at the art of our time, that can be quickly called “post-conceptual”, the two tendencies are the analytical and the synthetic, and they define the way artists do art in the postmodern time, at the stake of two risks, that we are going to state now.

- Analytical art is defined by an artist that is obsessed by a question or an object whatever these objects or questions are, it can be the theory of perception for Falke Pisano, it can be archeology as a methodology for Marianna Castillo Deball or the relation to time for the curator Raimundas Malasauskas, or even the skateboard and the eighteenth century’s astronomers for Raphaël Zarka. These are what I call “the object of obsession” of these different artists, and their work can be compared to a dive into this object.

Which is not without a risk, the one of incomprehension the deeper the diving gets.

So the risk of analytical art is in one word its specificity. And that is one way of making post-conceptual art. And “post-conceptual art” is the generic name for contemporary art.

- The other tendency, the synthetic one is not a diving into an object, it is a way of linking different objects, and it is made possible by finding questions that can fit the links between these objects.

Let’s take an example: The work of Tino Sehgal can be understood as a synthesis, naming the links between different objects which are here different names of analytical artists.

So the synthesis in Tino Sehgal is first made by a huge synthesis of names:

- Jeff Koons for the money relation to power and society
- Xavier Le Roy for the choreography aspect
- Yves Klein for the dematerialization
- Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman for the relation to the body in the exhibitions

Then, the other synthesis of Tino Sehgal is between the time of the object and the time of the event, so by the repetition, the time of the event becomes the time of the object, that makes possible the institutional objectiveness of his dematerialized work.

So that very quickly exposes how a synthesis can function in post-conceptual-art, and I guess Tino Sehgal is a very brilliant synthetic artist.

But in my own terms, in my “aesthetics of the differends”, I could also say that Sehgal is an analytical artist, and the object he is obsessed with is the screen (like Liam Gillick indeed). Sehgal is obsessed with the screen and wants to break it. But here the critic (me for instance) has to be creative to describe Sehgal’s work as analytical art. The main idea, that should be developed is that with a piece that Dorothea von Hantelmann describes very precisely in her “how to do things with art” – his “Instead of allowing something to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things” which is a work according to von Hantelmann that inscribes the way Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman used their bodies in some works that become video in museum’s shows.

As von Hantelmann says: “In contrast, Sehgal introduces the choreographed body as choreographed body —not as a video image— to the context of visual art”. So from my point of view by that, Tino Sehgal breaks the screen of the representation and generates a situation in which the viewer is a part of.

So with this counter-example, we can clearly see that there are analytical artists and synthetic artists, but that the boundary is not clear, and that there are analytical and synthetic procedures at stake in each artist’s work. But these are still two tendencies to define a current work of art indeed and this is the hypothesis the aesthetics of the differend is working with.

So now that this introduction is done, we know more about my definition of:

—“aesthetics”: as a fluid mechanism of weight circulating between the perceivers, and a becoming of the objects into the concepts and vice versa.

—“differend”: more than a conflict, a lack of judgment in post-modernity, and its importance about post-conceptual art.

Then now, as we know more about a work of art as a tension between the analytical and the synthetic tendencies, we can go deeper in the main problems of the “aesthetics of the differends”, as part of the first chapter of my aesthetics as an ontology of the “there is”, which are for now:

First: the severed finger pointing at the transcendental

Second: Giacometti’s nose verifying the true hole of the Real

Third: the child of a whore as genealogy without a beginning

I’m just going to give you the initial weight of this field then we will enter the second one, in that way, we will deal with the “aesthetics of the differends”.

the 3 main problems of the first part of “aesthetics of the differends” (ontology of “there is”)

First

The severed finger pointing at the transcendental is based on a synthetic relation that we can make between the famous “John-the-Baptist” painted by Leonardo da Vinci and the new new concept of transcendental indexation in Alain Badiou’s “Logics of the Worlds”.



To say it clearly, there is a smile on John-the-Baptist's lips, he is answering a question by pointing his finger towards the sky, he is mentioning the transcendent, but something like a positive doubt is at stake in this pointing, something which is a link for the spectator with a "yet non-answered" item. And this is exactly the same impression, the same sensation of transferring of weight in the Badiou's book, when he is speaking about his transcendental indexation, which is like a scale of size for the elements that appear in one world. There is an invisible smile in the book and this is the first point that the "aesthetics of the differends" should investigate. I have done that in sculpture, in several fragmented texts, but not in a communication like the one I'm giving actually, that should be clear, I hope...

Third

In the third field, the genealogy without a beginning, we should investigate the concept of history and try to link it to a contemporary representation of Narcissus, and we should investigate and link the question of the existence as a non choice, especially for the child of a whore, to the question of the debt and the relation to the art predecessors in the heritage. But all of this is not clear right now.

Second

So we are going to spend more time with the second field of weight, which we can call the burden too, and this burden is phrased as follows:

Only the nose of Giacometti resists the "there is".

And it is axiomatised in the sentence:

The nose of Giacometti verifying the true hole of the Real.

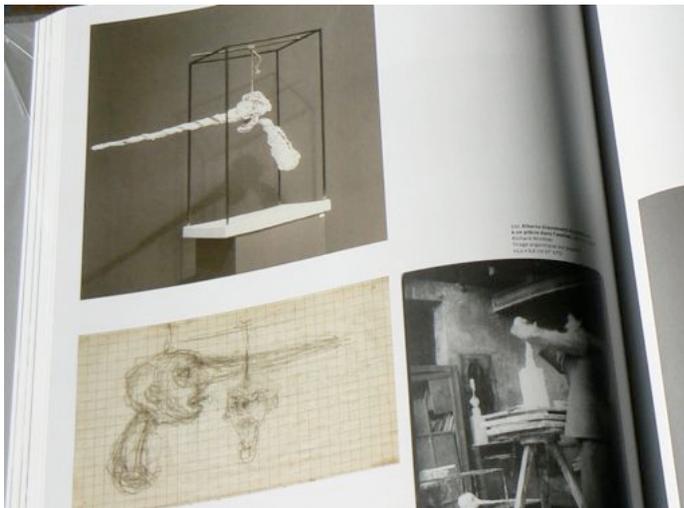
First at all, I should confess that the question of the "there is" is the main problem of the beginning of the "aesthetics of the differends" and probably the first three burdens are each focusing on a specific type of "there is", linked to three thinkers: Lacan, Lyotard and Badiou, and my intention is to deal about the "there is" in Lyotard's philosophy within an investigation

upstream about Jacques Lacan then downstream with Alain Badiou. And the investigation about the “there is” in these three philosophies will specify an ontology of the presentation which will be the first part of the “aesthetics of the differends.”

So this precision to say that here, with the nose (that some of you may recognize as a phallus, the father law) we will deal with the Lacan’s “there is” which is very specific.

So I’ll proceed in two times, first I will explain the main concepts of my axiom and of my question in a Lacanian context of thinking. Then in a second time I will demonstrate that the nose is verifying the true hole of the Real.

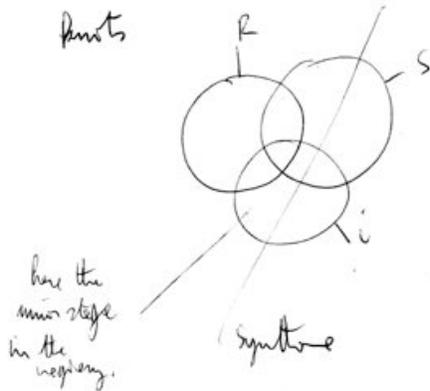
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* Lacan’s concepts

The philosophy of Lacan is shifting, he is Freudian in the 30’s and he invents the mirror stage, he is really Freudian, but his reading of Freud is so inventive that he gave shape to a group of new concepts to approach the human psychology. For what we need in our investigation we should focus on the theory of the RSI scheme, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, which form a new order in the place of the Freudian ego / id / super ego which is different from the “I”. In the 60’s, Lacan talked about the RSI with the recourse to the Borromean knots, and later, when he analyzed the work of Joyce, he invented a fourth term which is the “synthôme”, which can be represented by a line, and this synthôme is a building relation between the three circles, and Lacan notes that this relation forms the Real in itself.

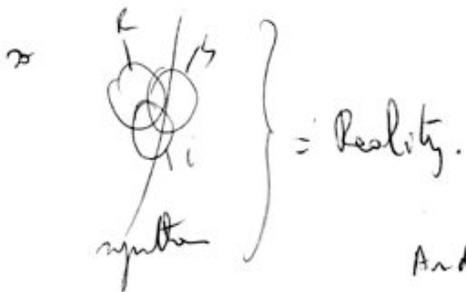
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So that is the first paradox: there is the Real, which is the relation with the imaginary and the symbolic order, and there is the "synthôme", which is a creation by the subject, which is called the reality.

And this Real (the second one) is the place of the "there is" of the subject, it can be understood as the enunciation to the third —the concept of the third is a person who is outside of the structure, but who is not the other— of the viability of the subject as a whole.



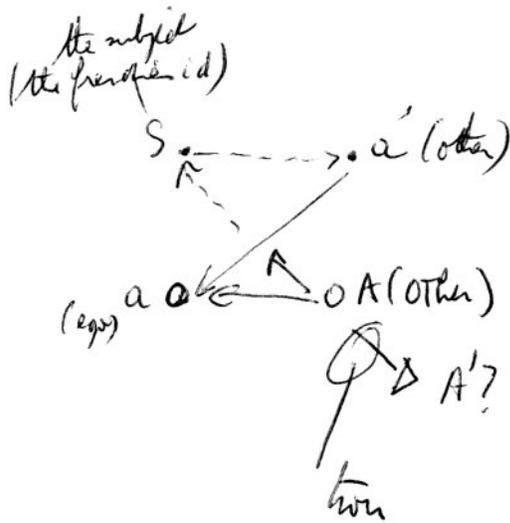
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For Lacan the subject is in the world in touch with the imaginary, the symbolic, the Real, and when he produces something (his synthôme); he makes the "there is" happening. Which is quite different from the Freudian subject, which is more linked to Husserl's phenomenology in a certain Cartesian genealogy as a subject that perceives the world from a specific location. With Lacan, the subject is within the world and creates the reality by a making of knots.

So the relation between the Real and the reality should be explained. As Lacan said: “the real is the impossible”, it cannot be symbolized, and it’s unspeakable and so the reality is a determined but doomed effort to symbolize the Real.

So in a spatial vision, the Real is what the subject tries to speak about, it is always a part that is outside of him even if he makes knots with it, the process is without an end. And so the reality is a subject fighting with the Real and making it happen in the category of the “there is” with the two other orders (imaginary and symbolic). The “there is” is a mode of representation that is addressed to a third, not to the other or the Other (the big one).

But there are many holes in the RSI scheme, in “the synthôme”, Jacques Lacan explains that, for example, the symbolic order is specialized in the hole, that is to say that the symbolic order is waiting for meaning, and so that it is a vacuum place. But that is not the true hole, the true hole is that there is no other of the other.



In this scheme, we can note that the true vacuum is part of the constitution of the reality of the subject. There is no other of the other, which is the question that Hölderlin raised with the silence of God.

And in my opinion, the Christians called God “YAWHE” especially letters that cannot be expressed, a name that cannot be said. So it is a word that resists representation, and resists the “there is” logic.

So the true hole is in the RSI scheme, so inside the Real, so inside what a subject constitutes, but because it is a hole, it is precisely that part which is missing inside the subject, a total outside from the inside in itself. A part that resists the “there is” of the Real.

*the nose of Giacometti verifying the true hole of the Real

And when I saw the nose of Giacometti, the sculpture, I identified this sculpture immediately with a problem about representation, the “there is” logic, the ontology of representation.



*the nose *head on stem

In his book simply entitled “the nose”, Jean Clair says something about the face that is really important for Giacometti, I give here a translation: “The face is precisely what cannot be measured, what’s make the human a non-thing, a non-object, without limits, a no-thing (he says that in English), all that made that the existence of the other, face to face, is not in the “there is” order, neither in the “that”, neutral, anonymous, measureable, but in the order of the “he is someone”, a “you”, who questions, who defies me, stops me, surprises me, suspends my attention.” That sentence by Jean Clair corroborates my feeling, and he also used the “there is” notion, which is the French “il y a” or the German “es gibt”.

At the beginning of his book, Jean Clair tells that the nose is with “head on stem”, a work that should be interpreted with the understanding of an experience Giacometti lived in 1921, but told in a text “Le rêve, le sphinx et la mort de T” in 1946. It is the experience of the death of his spiritual father in a hotel room. Giacometti tells in this text that it is the experience that decided his artistic career.

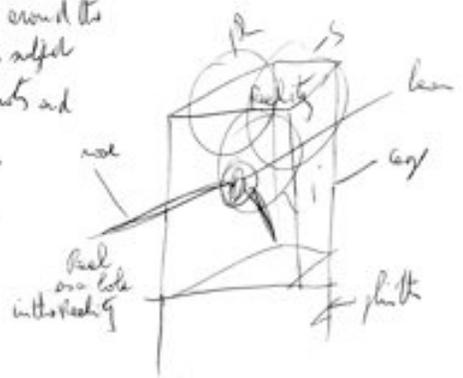
It is interesting to note that Jean Clair says this man was the “ideal father” of Alberto Giacometti, and we can exactly understand that what Giacometti discovered through this lived experience is that there is no other of the other, no permanence, that the man—that Giacometti places at the place of the father law— died like any insect.

The burden that Giacometti found here is that there is no big other (his ideal father) radically stated by the fact of the hole in the Real.

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By applying the theory of the Borromean knots to the Giacometti sculpture, we can advance that
 the head with a cry or a smile is in a cage. The space defined by this cage is around the head, it is
 the reality of the subject formed by a rhizome of knots and the nose points at something that is
 outside this specific space, something that the subject can touch or point with his long nose, but
 no longer see with his eyes, or hear with his ears. Something that is outside the space defined
 around the head, and something that is also outside the space defined by the plinth. And I call that
 "a point that the subject cannot end to write", which is the true hole in the Real.

Benoît Maire, transcription of the talk held in Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, March 12, 2010. As part of
 the series of lectures about "the aesthetics of the differends", first held in Milan within the context of Peep-Hole, at
 the Instituto Swizzero, in October 2009, then in London within the program double agents, at Central Saint-Martins,
 with philosopher Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, in November 2009.