

## TOWARD AN ETHICAL HERMENEUTICS FOR ART AND ITS THEORIES<sup>1</sup>

There is, very often, a certain misunderstanding, tension, or confusion between theory and art practice. The role of the theorist is on many occasions challenged by the artist on the ground that theory cannot truly understand the nature of practice, simply because theory is not practice nor is it art itself. Vice versa, the artist might feel manipulated by theorists who impose *ways of defining* regardless of the work of art in its particular dimension.

The traditional separation between theory and experience or simply between the one who knows and the one who makes has, as it is well known, been challenged by the postmodern ethos in the form of negation or destruction of the relationship between subject and object. As soon as we realised that knowledge was human, that is to say subjectively or inter-subjectively established in the form of institution, we felt the need to stress how human it was indeed. This could only be achieved by *deconstructing* already established values and by unveiling thus the very human interests involved. The motivations behind the knowing subject(s) were revealed and its categories annihilated in the name of existential freedom. Today, we are left with the postmodern ego, an impossible de-centered subject in search of its non-existent self, reacting from within. Radicalisation of this phenomenon has led, at least in the most economically advanced societies, to naïve intellectual subversion and anarchism. The empty ego has replaced the constituting one. The animal has left its metaphysical cage and is now in the jungle. The art world has not escaped this crisis, or I should say *act of freedom*, which, and this should be stressed, had its historical justification. Categories or forms of knowledge about art that theories of all kinds have established have been de-constituted, or de-framed to be replaced by notions such as becoming, «deferrability», flux or «undecidability». Meaning has lost its ground as much as theorists and authors lose their status as subjects. In its most radical form we arrive at a dead-end: how is meaning possible at all?

There is, it seems, a need to develop an ethical hermeneutics, which overcomes unproductive relativism, when it comes to understanding the relationships

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1. This essay is a revised version of a paper that was presented at the *Ethics Across the Disciplines* Conference, April 2002, Viterbo University, La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA.



between art practice and theory. This is by no means a particular ideology or an interpretative path to follow. It is on the contrary an attempt to bring to light hidden aspects of our relationship with art in order to have a better life with it. There is no suggestion here of using a strategy, but rather of adopting an *attitude* that would clear the way for authentic understanding to take place. More concretely, this hermeneutical project reflects on a plethora of issues such as: What are the implications of using a method that undertakes to define what the work of art is meant to be like? What are the benefits and limitations of attempts to analyse or to explain the meaning of the work of art, as if it was a remote thing thrown against us – viz. an *object*? How should we understand the way this «objective world» and the «art world» relate to each other? What is the degree to which those theories are affected by the *lived* sensuous dimension of practice, which can include perception itself? How should we theorise artistic experience, understood as a particular instance of practice in its lived dimension, without risking a distortion of its nature? Are we to explain, to analyse or to describe this moment during which meaning takes shape? Are we to treat it as a remote object to be defined or to evoke it as if the viewer was *one* with the work of art?

As Merleau-Ponty was well aware, this being at the basis of his philosophical enquiry, nothing «is more difficult than to know precisely what we see»<sup>2</sup>. This statement might well be at the heart of the problem. We have at our disposal a series of preconceived theories that analyse or explain the moment of meaningful form in art. An ethical hermeneutics suggests that one reflects on what is happening when art practice is interpreted in such or such a way, and this precisely in order to become aware of how illuminating or manipulative these theories can be. This is no more than a critique of what may be called *objectifying approaches* in relationship to the phenomenal nature of the experience of meaning in art<sup>3</sup>. Of course, there is in the context of postmodernity an increasing number of objectifying approaches that range from any

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2. Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY in *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, trans. by C. Smith as *Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 58.

3. I draw here on Merleau-Ponty's notion of «objective thoughts» in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Cf. the introductory part called «Introduction: Traditional Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena», (*ibid.*, pp. 3-63). Merleau-Ponty strives to challenge approaches that are concerned with defining what the world is meant to be like: these are what he calls «objective thoughts». He criticises both empiricist and intellectual accounts of things, which correspond respectively to realism and idealism. The former seeks to explain things in terms of causal relationships, whereas the latter attempts to reconstruct things according to mental models. In both cases Merleau-Ponty talks about «traditional prejudices» that distort the true nature of things. He argues therefore for a «return to phenomena», and this by means of unprejudiced description of the «lived world», and not through explanation or analysis.



attempt to use perspectives as varied as gender, form, the structural, the political, the unconscious, the historical, to preconceived methods such as logical positivism, dialectics, or empiricism. Paradoxically this also includes—when art practice becomes the victim of the *deconstructing deconstructed subject*—a negated form of objectivism on which its *raison d'être* fundamentally depends. The purpose of an ethical hermeneutics is therefore nothing more than to understand what is involved when artistic meaning is established as a distant object of science or theory, an object to be found, defined, mastered, or destructed. It is to show what these approaches can and cannot grasp in our encounter with art by unveiling their interests, anticipations and desire to recover some-thing.

There are at the same time attitudes that tend to be more faithful to the phenomenal nature of the moment of meaningful form, to the point that any distinction can hardly be established between the perceiver and the work, or the artist and the world, or simply between subject and object. Such an intimate relationship is precisely what constitutes the essence of artistic experience itself, to which corresponds a particular mode of communication in the name of phenomenological description. The latter is here understood as a way of externalising the experience of the moment of meaningful form in its phenomenality, i.e. when meaning is in the process of appearing. In this sense, the very artistic element in the making of the artist or in the perception of the spectator can be defined in terms of phenomenological description. And the intimacy or faith involved makes such an experience being uncontrolled by the will to power, unexplained by preconceived frames of mind and untouched by *subjectifying subjectivity*, typical of radicalised deconstruction, viz. deconstructionism.

Attitudes that do justice to the experiential nature of meaning must also be appraised by ethical hermeneutics and, just as a useful critique of objectifying approaches cannot be operated without taking experience into account nor can this type of reflection on phenomenological attitudes be developed without referring to the external objective world. In the meantime what is revealed in such an undertaking is the vital complementary difference between the moment of meaningful form and its potential or anticipated objective dimensions. As soon as one begins to reflect on an event or a happening, one pulls out from it. Consequently, the only way to understand the nature of a phenomenon is precisely to bring to light that from which it differs, viz. those objective data that theories of all kinds strive to recognise in the practice itself. It ensues that there is no question here of opposing the objective to the phenomenal, or even explanation and analysis to art. The point is to reconcile them, to show their complementary relationship, by highlighting their different spatiotemporal nature. In this light there is no choice to make between objectifying approaches and descriptive phenomenology, or between distance and event, or theory and



practice. However, it should be clear that to show how these are in need of each other cannot be achieved by means of systematic subversion of traditional hierarchical dualities. Artistic experience transforms the already existing objective world, renews it, enriches it, or just renders possible any further distancing objectification. In this sense and paradoxically, the very idea of complementary difference comes close to that of disruption.

The aim of ethical hermeneutics cannot therefore be confined to a simple methodology of theories of art. In so far as the latter are understood in terms of perspectives, they cannot be worked out without considering that of which they are the modes of interpretation, that is to say the disrupting nature of the phenomenon of meaning. In fact, the project should be comprehended as a perspectival methodology, which by seeking to bring to light the benefits and limitations of theories becomes affected by what it depends on, i.e. disruption. In other words, for explanation and analysis to be possible, informative and useful the degree to which they differ from the event of meaning in art must be brought to light. One ought to acknowledge that the nature of art practice is *actual* for theory to develop adequately its power of *realisation*. The sphere of knowledge is in need of the unexpected and vice versa, depending on which side of the event one stands.

It follows that there are ethical implications: to be aware of the spatiotemporal dimension of our relationship to art could well prevent us from falling into the wrong attitudes such as overpowering preconceptions, speculative ideologies or blind dogmatisms. In other words, what might be called realisms and subjectivisms should all be used as objectifying *tools* in so far as we bear in mind that they are particular constituents of a set of perspectives. Their distancing nature conditions what they seek to find in artistic practice itself, as much as the latter gives them an opportunity to discover from the yet-to-be-known. As a result theory should be aware of the implications that stem from drives to master our encounter with art in its unexpected, immediate and intimate dimension. To clarify the differential nature of such attempts is precisely the role of ethical hermeneutics, and this for theory and practice to have a better common life.

Let us present the problem differently and in a broader context. To say that we do not fully assess the cultural and ecological dangers of any excessive consumerist and technological orientation is not new. Neither it is new to recall the ravages caused by dogmatic ideologies and destructive beliefs, in what appears to be at the dawn of the third millennium, the bloodiest century in the history of humanity, (i.e. the twentieth century). But it is indeed striking to make a parallel with the way artistic practice is approached. This parallel is, relatively speaking, not remote. Our relationship with Earth could well be reflected in our attitude towards the art world. The work of art's obedience to explanation, to the will to control, to the desire to know this otherness whose



As paradoxical as it might sound, could not Merleau-Ponty himself be accused of creating a category of the «lived world»? And hasn't his theory of the «phenomenal field» understood as the foundation of existence, precisely established a preferential dichotomy of the kind that justified metaphysical categories to be deconstructed<sup>5</sup>? Merleau-Ponty's criticism of «objective thoughts», should we recall it, lies in the fact that it cannot do justice to our lived experience of the world, where what is perceived cannot be separated from what is real. According to him, explanatory and reconstructing accounts of things, i.e. empiricism and intellectualism respectively, draw a line between what is perceived and what is real. On the contrary, with the experienced world, there is no such separation anymore. But what is the extent to which we should be suspicious of objective thoughts? The lived world is in need of the objective world precisely in order to be detached from it, in order to take place. It goes without saying, that existence cannot be confined to the lived world, that it cannot only depend on our perceptual experiences. The task of science is to provide the means by which we have access to that invisible reality, whether it is concerned with explaining natural phenomena or the human subject. This in turn constitutes the background, or the place for future meaningful experiences to come. In that sense objective thoughts are as «foundational» as perceptual experiences. The two paradigms are different and therefore complementary. As a result they ought to relate to each other in a non-hierarchical way. After all, aren't scientific discoveries of the laws of nature in part relying on lived perceptual experiences? Even Husserl's transcendental idealism confirms a complementary difference of some kind between experience and the object of knowledge (consciousness). As we know, his phenomenological method aims at giving a faithful account of the structure of the subject's consciousness, but finds its point of departure in what is perceived. This is what is invoked when, in *Cartesian Meditations*, he declares that consciousness is always «consciousness of something»<sup>6</sup>. And even if our knowledge of the world is ultimately to be found in the «transcendental ego», one can only become aware of it by means of perceptual experiences. Of course this transcendental idealism falls short as soon as one considers the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between the objective and the experiential. The known world takes shape in the way it relates to the lived world, and vice versa, the latter takes place in the way it relates to the former. «The return to the phenomenal», to use Merleau-Ponty's expression<sup>7</sup>, is certainly a necessity, but in so far as we understand it in its non-

5. Cf. MERLEAU-PONTY, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-63.

6. Cf. HUSSERL, E. Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge, in *Husserliana*, Edmund Husserl *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. I, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff 1950, transl. by D. Cairns, as *Cartesian Meditations*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1977, p. 33.

7. Cf. MERLEAU-PONTY, *op. cit.*, p. 57.



hierarchical relationship to the objective world.

The same applies to the relationship between art and theory. The particular nature of artistic practice has obviously already constituted a proper *object of study* in various fields. Whether they have attempted to explain it in order to reach the promised land of the general, whether they analyse it according to pre-established models or whether they approach it in a fragmenting fragmented way, they very often implicitly fail to take on board the fact that theory and practice are in need of each other. Ignoring this has either led to *extra-subjectivity* with all its (modern) over-powering drive, or else to *intro-subjectivity* with its tendencies towards a new (postmodern) form of self-centeredness. These have been the excesses.

By reflecting on the old theoretical contexts on which art practice throws its light, we prepare the ground for a renewed world-view of theories to come, which in turn awaits to be seen in a new light<sup>8</sup>. It is this temporal differing that constitutes the complementary relationship between theory and practice – a relationship whose nature ought to be understood for art and its theories to have a better common life.

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8. These are of course essential themes in Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. Cf. H. GADAMER, *Warheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen, Mohr, transl. by J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall as *Truth and Method* 1960, London, Sheed & Ward and IDEM, *Kleine Schriften*, 1967, Siebeck, Mohr, transl. by & ed. by D. Linge, as *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Berkeley, California University Press, 1976.



## ΠΡΟΣ ΜΙΑ ΗΘΙΚΗ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΥΤΙΚΗ ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΤΕΧΝΗ ΚΑΙ ΤΙΣ ΘΕΩΡΙΕΣ ΤΗΣ

### Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Υπάρχει πολύ συχνά, μιὰ κάποια παρεξήγηση, ένταση ή σύγχυση ανάμεσα στη θεωρία και την εφαρμογή της τέχνης. Ο ρόλος ενός θεωρητικού δέχεται πολλές φορές προκλήσεις από τόν καλλιτέχνη, με τή δικαιολογία ότι ή θεωρία δέν μπορεί νά κατανοήσει πραγματικά τή φύση της πρακτικής, απλώς και μόνο έπειδή ακριβώς ή θεωρία ή ίδια, δέν είναι ούτε πρακτική ούτε τέχνη. Αντιστρόφως, και ό καλλιτέχνης μπορεί νά αισθανθεί ότι χειραγωγείται από θεωρητικούς, πού επιβάλλουν τρόπους προσδιορισμού, ανεξάρτητα από τήν ιδιαίτερη διάσταση ενός έργου τέχνης.

Αυτό τó άτυχές φαινόμενο παρουσιάζει άνησυχητικά αύξητική τάση, κυρίως με τó ρεύμα του μετα-μοντερνισμού και τίς πολιτισμικές του διαφοροποιήσεις. Υπάρχει μιὰ πληθώρα θεωριών πού ποικίλουν από τήν προσπάθεια χρησιμοποίησης προοπτικών τόσο διαφορετικών όσο και τά είδη, οί φόρμες, ή δομή, ή πολιτική, τó άσυνείδητο, ή ιστορικότητα, μέχρι και τή σύλληψη προκαθορισμένων μεθόδων όπως ό λογικός θετικισμός, ή διαλεκτική ή ό έμπειρισμός. Παραδόξως, αυτό περιλαμβάνει, όταν ή πρακτική καθίσταται θύμα του άποδομητικά άποδομημένου ύποκειμένου, μιὰ αποφαιτική μορφή αντικειμενισμού από τόν όποιο βασικά έξαρτάται ή αίτία της ύπαρξής του.

Τό άρθρο αυτό επιχειρηματολογεί υπέρ της ήθικης έρμηνευτικής, ή όποία δέν είναι τίποτε άλλο παρά ή προσπάθεια κατανόησης του τι συμβαίνει όταν ή ουσία της τέχνης καθίσταται ένα άπόμακρο αντικείμενο της έπιστήμης ή της θεωρίας, ένα αντικείμενο υπό αναζήτησιν, υπό καθορισμό, υπό κατασκευή ή άποδόμησιν. Σκοπεύει νά καταδείξει, αποκαλύπτοντας τó σκοπό τους, τίς προσδοκίες τους και τήν επιθυμία τους νά ανακτήσουν κάτι, τί μπορούν ή τί δέν μπορούν νά συλλάβουν οί προσεγγίσεις αυτές, κατά τήν έπαφή μας με τήν τέχνη. Δέν είναι βέβαια σέ καμιά περίπτωση μιὰ ειδική ιδεολογία ή ένα έρμηνευτικό μονοπάτι πού πρέπει κανείς νά ακολουθήσει. Σχετίζεται περισσότερο με μιὰ προσέγγιση, ή όποία θά αποκαλύψει κρυμμένες όψεις της σχέσης μας με τήν τέχνη πού έρχεται στο φώς, με σκοπό νά βελτιώσει τήν ποιότητα της ζωής μας.

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