

on the contrary, be submitted to the experience (experimentation) of a composition to be ordered infinitely. If we consider this aspect, moreover this is exactly what had already begun to happen with Kant, like a strong jolt even within theory. From Kant onwards, there would no longer be a normative philosophy of art. There would only be essays of writing on that which straightaway puts into play an extreme infinity of meaning.

Thus, the effect of the essay on art is to open art, neither onto an explanation, nor to a signification, but to its own specific condition of essaying that I would call ‘cosmographic’ in the sense one would like to understand the term. But this can be so only to the extent that the essay opens its discourse — its writing — to the otherwise spoken of the art which the speaking about art should symbolise.

I shall conclude by referring to another writer on art, Jean-Louis Schefer, whose quotation adequately summarises and fully clarifies the significance of the essay: “With regard to texts [or paintings] I can neither prove nor show whatsoever, I can only stir them with water.”⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Musil, R., *Essays*, translation into the French by Ph. Jacottet, Paris: Seuil, 1984.
- 2 “La Surface profonde,” in *La Fin de l’Hymne*, Paris, Bourgois, 1991.
- 3 The article “Phrase” in *Dictionnaire de la musique*, edited by Marc Vignal. Paris: Larousse-Bordas, 1996.
- 4 Correspondence general, Paris, Bibos, 1990, II, pp. 744-745, quoted and commented upon by Jean-Clet Martin, *Van Gogh. L’œil des choses*, Paris, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, Institut Synthélabo, 1998, p. 79.
- 5 *Choses écrites*, Paris: P.O.L., 1998, p.7.

of a general symbolicity, which renders possible the language but which is not mixed up with its meaning. Between language and art, there is always an abyss (that which exists between the intelligible and the sensible meanings) and a contact: that of the symbolic or of the composition.

It may be asked what then is this symbolicity symbolic of: it is that of nothing, for it refers to nothing other than its own possibility. The 'symbolic', here, refers to nothing, represents nothing: it composes, it puts together, it involves organisation. What renders it possible is that which creates in us something like the thought or the *art* of a world: thought or meaning — the sensibility or the craft for the composition of a *cosmos*, for a *symbolon* which would be also its *tonos* and its *melos*, its *pathos* and its *logos*. (A *cosmos* is, to begin with, nothing other than an arrangement or an ordering.)

This quite singular 'meaning' is itself an endless essay: it is essaying the opening of a world, the sending of a world, if one may say so, under conditions incessantly displaced by the events of the world itself. And particularly, it attempts to create, ever since the creator God is no more, what is still left of the creation of the world. It is neither a matter of dubious contortions, nor of the divinity of the artist, nor of a religion of art. But it is indeed a matter of constituting a symbolicity specific to our own time, for this time is henceforth expressly concerned with its own composition (or decomposition) of the world. Our time symbolises a world that is vanishing or being reborn. Art is the technique of access to the inaccessible composition of a world, and its attempted opening (or its tearing apart).

The essay on art which is not just an accidental by-product of modernity, brings to light such an endeavour and such an attempt: in the place of an art which is straight away meshed up with the symbolic, and in the place of the harmonious imaginations of the mythologies and the theologies, in the place of an abundantly present meaning, it has become necessary to be exposed to the essay with a diminished symbolicity, with a constant reduction of signification and imagination. It has become no longer possible to legislate on art or to codify it. One must approach the point of touching the technique of a world: and this would involve from now on, to go back to the words of Bailly, entering upon "that mobile territory where the power of recollection of connections can resonate within the interior of a universe which has abandoned nature." The essay on art has been invented as the other of the treatise or the theory because the theory can no longer proceed from a given order, but must

with this *logos*, this other speaking which is not the utterance of a meaning, but the technique, the *ars* of an arrangement (*ars* means “articulation”), of a composition or of an ordering. Between one and the other speaking (or rather between such terms as *logos*, *melos*, *harmonia*, *mythos*, *epos*) one could propose an “interface,” or rather a zone of touching, of collision and grazing, a point of contact and exchange as in a composition or an assemblage, with its articulations and tensions, with its own value attitudes, its equilibria and its vanishing points. This composition (an old term from a mainly decorative vocabulary) itself can belong to one of the several registers: that of a well-defined art form, a genre, a style, a mode, an artist, or an oeuvre. It composes lines and colours, rhythms and tones, chunks and grains, movements and frames, depths and surfaces, speeds, luminosities, forces, humours, codes, gestures, strokes, etc. Perhaps it ends up in the possibility of deciphering a meaning, but it is certain that it always proceeds from one meaning to another meaning: from the meaning, exactly, of the composition, from meaning of the relation, of the contrast, the proportion, the difference, incompatibility, reciprocal action, the design, the texture, and the coherence and the incoherence.

This composition can be rightly designated as *symbolic* (in spite of the extreme over-use of this word...) in the most general sense of the term: the fact of its symbolising..., the combinatorics of elements, the convention, the code, the encounter and the recognition. It is in the symbolicity considered for itself, independently of the reference to some signification, that the speaking on art touches art itself. It is symbolic in the sense that (the original) speaking must try out the speaking about art, it must *compose* (with) it, and eventually it must compose or symbolise only with it. The speaking on art which would not agree in certain ways with the speaking about art would lose the meaning of its object — here again, I am not referring to the signified meaning, but to the composition, the technique and the skill, the tact and the calculation, which make it possible to sense, that is to come in contact. In the contact, the essay and the art about which the essay is, symbolise — or if you will, *compose* — mutually : they thus compose with respect to each other a figure which is that of neither.

Here, the essay on art is in some ways bound to become an essay of art [an art essay]. It is not that the former tries to copy the modes of art, but on the contrary, it must be the case that from the moment it knows its object, “art”, it is already present in its discourse and in its speaking, indeed within its signifying layer, within language as the broader register

speaking which neither says anything nor does it keep silent: an intense speaking, without any intention, a syntax of force without any message, but about which it is not useless to make an attempt at meaning.

In a certain sense, the essay engenders this speaking, which is nothing other than its effect. But in another sense, it is faced with the original speaking whose limit it discovers. But on this limit, there is a give and take. Speaking and speaking otherwise touch each other, and as per the law of touching, there is contact as well as separation, advance and retreat, approaching and distancing, distance and proximity, all these infinitesimally present: it is indeed an infinite exchange that is played out in this mutual essaying. (That is moreover the reason why the essay on art may have contrasting effects of revelation and of lost labour, or of truth and powerlessness.)

If it is really a matter of contact, it is because it involves speaking of one part as well as of the other. In hastily concluding that art “says something” (or “narrates something”), we are not entirely wrong. Perhaps we also recognise something of the speaking that lies buried under the signifier of speaking, a speaking which speaks otherwise a meaning which is itself otherwise experienced.

When we are captivated by the gaze and the lips of Mona Lisa or the *Man with grey eyes* (by their “expression” as one would say, or by their “mystery” as it is also said), when we understand a type of declaration or a conversation in the first *Goldberg Variation*, playful but well thought out, we are not merely in the domain of metaphors. We are also in the dimension of a certain metonymy: The signifiers that belong to the linguistic sphere establish a point of contact with the arrangement of the strokes of painting or with the notes and the tempos of music.

It is first of all a matter of arrangement and ordering before one can begin talking about meaning. What is (the first) speaking, if not showing or disclosing something in its correct arrangement (*discere* comes from the Greek *deiknumi*, to show, to which is related *diké*, justice). It is the demonstration (*index*, *indice*, and also the Greek *phrasis*) of an arrangement, or an articulation (of a *harmonia* or even a *melos*, each of the terms concerned with articulation and tension, *tonos*). Speaking is more than signifying: speaking does not consist in — or not only in — the remoteness of the signifying reference, but also in the proximity of the thing shown, displayed and demonstrated according to its order, in a manner appropriate to it, and even according to its *logos*.

In letting art speak, in speaking about art, the essay comes in contact

for complete reproduction (as in the case of the “live portrait”), we should recognise that the phrase “it lacks only” tends to suggest also the unfolding or the emergence of a speaking. In the case of painting, it must indeed lack language, so that it can be what it is: but it must also be the case that it cannot exist without appealing to language or without evoking it in an altogether-different-speaking to which, at the same time, it is summoned.

Thus, the reality of art would appear as what is known by its name. When one says the essay on art is an essay on the meaning of art, it should be understood in two related senses of the term: an essay on the meaning of the thing and an essay on the meaning of the name. Ever since there has been “art,” in the modern sense of the term, there has also been the question of this meaning itself. Consequently, ever since there has been essay on art (that is, as if by chance, almost at the same time) there has been attempts to find a meaning for the word “art”, whether it is spoken or not. The essay on art is always a manner of trying out another writing of a word whose meaning seems to consist — or ending up — in this perpetual re-essaying of its name.

The name of art is a name deprived of any meaning of its own, ever since it was detached from the “fine arts”, and ever since the “fine” was obliterated resulting in the suspension of the signification of “art” as “technique.” It is a word which would have a referent — in fact, a multiplicity of referents belonging to a variety of practices — but not a signification. From this point of view, the effect of the essay on art can only be located between the two poles: establishing a meaning for the word, and thus of bringing together its referents under a common signification, but at the same time affecting the retreat of a meaning which absents itself in the referential multiplicity as well as in the alterity of language (the former depending on the latter, and vice versa, etc.)

This double postulation is that with which the essay makes its attempt: it essays a dual posture where it would play out the articulation and the tension between the presence and the absence of meaning, just as it forever pushes art farther and farther in its retreat even while it comes closer to its signification.

But this is possible only because art itself is at stake in this delicate articulation. It is art, neither unnameable nor properly named, which articulates this possibility, oscillating between the two poles. It articulates it as if it is a name still being essayed, like a language constantly repeated and always fleeing from a speaking which delivers utterances both beyond and within itself. The essay on art awakens this attempted

submerged within it.

The essay on art is always at least in certain respects an attempt to speak its meaning. It is an essay on the meaning of art. But since this meaning is in no way explicated by the work of art, there must be an essay on the meaning of art: it must essay, try out, an utterance which is capable of as referring to art itself. It must make it say what it wants to say, what it means. It must make it speak, or lend it its own voice.

This implies first of all that it should speak in a certain manner. It implies that art is “language”, or that it exists in a certain definite and privileged relationship with language: a relation of homology or analogy, a relation of imitation or of intent. This presupposition about the subject of art has been almost canonical in the entire history of art (at least in the West and especially for Christian art, which requires to be studied in greater detail, and which is talked about in our context only by an occidental.) About art in general, it seems that we often keep saying: “It only lacks a language.” But this well-known formula can very well be seen as an overwhelming stereotype, with regard to the art of portrait, since the Renaissance.

In contrast to this formula concerning the excellence of a visual representation, and parallel to it, one might list a plethora of linguistic terms used in the description of music: its “language”, its “sentence”, its “vocabulary”, its “grammar”, and finally its “meaning” (thus, for example, as per this definition it is said: “a musical sentence [...] by itself presents a complete and coherent meaning,”³ where that the word “meaning” clearly does not have its linguistic sense. But one may also tend to affirm simultaneously the strangeness and the kinship between the one and the other kind of saying, as Van Gogh would say: “the colour expresses something on its own.”⁴

After going through periods of superabundance, if not an excess, of metaphorisation, or rather the linguistic identification of diverse arts (the latest in this respect has been the discourse on cinematographic “language” and “writing”), it has now become common to challenge this sort of assimilation and to insist on the difference between the arts and language: to the extent that there is nothing surprising to ask, for example, if poetry is or is only the “art of language.”

But this reserve, following a general scheme of thought as per which the order of meaning should be submitted to a questioning, if not a suspicion, cannot just stop with that. If art lacks only the capacity to speak, it is not solely because it is beyond discourse, but it is also because it is on the verge of speaking. If one removes the trivial motif of an urge

The primary effect of the essay on art, thus, would be this touching which affects it in return. Since the discourse of the essay itself is affected, it would be different from a treatise on art: different from a theory or a philosophy of art. For the treatise, art remains an object. But it is art as a subject — a subject speaking differently — that the essay happens to touch. But it must be immediately clarified that we can distinguish the essay from the treatise only on the basis of the marks or the traces of this contact, and not from the codes of genres or the titles. These marks or traces, in their turn, do not have to be, as would be the case for romanticism, the manifestation of an ecstasy or an aphasia in the face of the unspeakability of art. It is just a matter of what the discourse has attempted, what has been essayed by it, what cuts it up in the two senses of the term, that is, what dissects it and what slices it, what folds it up in writing. For the rest, one could show how one of the effects of the discourse on art in modern times (that is to say, in the modern destiny of art) would be to end up in the progressive delineation — if not determination — via Diderot or Baudelaire, and Proust or Benjamin, among many others, not of a genre, but of a specific register of writing, what Jean-Christophe Bailly, himself a renowned essayist, speaks while referring to Baudelaire, of the “grand essay, this free prose, in turn evocative and theoretical, which is, undoubtedly, always posterior to what it describes of modernity, and [which is] the result of a movement which restitutes the works to their future” (*La Surface Profonde*, 1991).² But this register spreads through the whole of our culture the effects of the essay on art like those of a specific attempt, “resolutely modern” and necessary, for the advance of speaking towards another speaking from which the former becomes inseparable.

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Before we proceed further, let us take a new point of departure here.

There are two ways of speaking about art, which we shall see are somewhat incompatible, but nevertheless mutually necessary. The first is that of describing it (its technique, its craft, its history, its style and its matter.) The other is that of speaking its meaning or its truth: not only the meaning of its signifying intentions, be it political or religious, mythological, symbolic, pedagogical, etc., but its meaning as art.

On this meaning, art is silent. Science, religion, or philosophy provide their meanings, or their own truths with the help of their specific activities and discourses: they are straightway and necessarily reflected and somehow or other explicit about their reflection. But art offers nothing of the kind. Its meaning is contained within the work itself, it is

is a well known, even hackneyed question (in any case since romanticism: it is basically a romantic question), and it has served as the alibi for long developments as well as for endless chattering. The question does not remain there as such, but only as an effect that it has produced.

It is seldom (or only very rarely) asked if we can speak about stones or plants, whose strangeness to discourse is not less (at least) than those of the plastic, musical or choreographic work. Moreover the question is asked even about poetic works, which are not thought to be outside the domain of language (and this is true even for the cinema ever since it became the talkie, which moreover was not possible, without engendering the resistance of a number of cinema artists).

If the question is asked, and if it embarrasses — if the theorist always feels obliged to explain it — it is because art, apparently slips away from the grasp of language. Not only this property is obvious, but it is a defining and constitutive part of the manifestation of art. “Art” always means “non-discourse” or “outside-discourse.” But just as it slips away, art is also proposed or allowed to be viewed as another language.

The difficulty is of speaking about something which, without speaking, somehow seems to deal with an *anologon* of language or better still, a form or a manner of speaking which is not exactly another language, but rather the *other* of all language.

For this reason, whoever speaks of art should be required to let it speak. But this “letting to speak” runs the risk of not being understood. Can we then adopt the idiom of silence? This question is in a way ‘idiotic,’ but it is this singularity, this idiosyncrasy which persists as soon as one tries to speak about art.

For that is how it must be essayed: the essay on art would be able to say nothing about its object, it would not be able to submit it to an essay, that is, analyze it, if it cannot itself be submitted to an essay, if its capacity to attain this other of language cannot be analyzed. Since it cannot attain the mode of art itself, it must somehow be able to approach or touch it: this contact cannot allow it to remain intact, and that is why there cannot be an essay on art which has no effect on the main discourse, on the original “speaking” and even on the language of the essay. An essay on art cannot but have its feedback or backward action, returning towards itself to be transformed (an essay is always ready to be transformed). From an “essay on art” it becomes an “essay of art” (“artistic essay”). It goes not only as far as to touch the mode of art, but it is bound to go beyond that. This is what I wish to examine here.

Speaking about Art

Jean-Luc Nancy^{*}

“The essay is something which introduces a slackening in a domain where exact work is possible [...] or the extreme rigour attainable in a domain where exact work is impossible.” “From science [the essay] takes form and method. From art, the substance.”¹ (Musil, 1984)

Abstract

One of the fundamental questions in philosophy is possibility or impossibility of a field of knowledge. This question can be asked in philosophy of art too: is it possible to speak of art, theoretically? The present paper discusses this problem. In general, there are two ways of speaking about art. The first is that of describing it, its technique, its history, its matter and The other is that of speaking its meaning or its truth. In this way, we can speak of political, religious, symbolic, etc. mains of art. We will argue that the effect of the essay on art is to open it and it's language should be symbolic.

Keywords: *art, object, subject, syntax, articulation, silent, symbol*

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How does one speak of art? Is it even possible to speak of art? Does language, discourse or speaking have an access to what is called art? This

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