


Thomas  
Crombez  
*The murder  
of art* 

A  
*historical  
introduction to  
aesthetics*

**letterwerk**

# *The murder of art*

A historical introduction to aesthetics

Thomas Crombez

*Likewise, art is always already there, addressing the thinker with the mute and scintillating question of its identity while through constant invention and metamorphosis it declares its disappointment about everything that the philosopher may have to say about it.*

Alain Badiou, 'Art and Philosophy'

## **Introduction**

The murder of art. It sounds like the title of a thriller. In a sense, that is exactly what the history of aesthetics is. Western philosophical tradition begins with a condemnation of art. The Greek philosopher Plato, often regarded as the founder of philosophy, wanted to banish artists and poets from his ideal society. All they could produce were false shadow images.

The development of the philosophy of art can be read as the movement of a pendulum between Plato's drastic condemnation on the one hand, and the Romantic glorification of art on the other. This second perspective sees art as the privileged bearer of a truth that cannot be translated into philosophical concepts.

The murder of art or the glorification of art. In both cases, art has challenged the philosophers. Its mere existence is surprising. Aesthetics means that art became an object for thought; the murder of art seems an apt metaphor for this phenomenon. The Greek philosophers, especially Plato, were the first to view art *as a problem*. The presence of art in their society was a source of philosophical wonder. That had not been the case in previous civilisations. There are no traces of a philosophy of art in ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, or Persian writings. We have every reason to suppose that they saw art simply as art, an integral part of everyday life.

Because they wondered about art, philosophers have 'philosophised' art. They have turned art into a philosophical object. Even though art, as a common activity of human societies, perhaps had not asked for this translation. To cite the famous one-liner of Barnett Newman, 'Aesthetics is for artists as ornithology is for the birds'.<sup>1</sup>

According to the French philosopher Alain Badiou, when a philosopher refers to an artwork in his writings, he attempts to 'acquire the power of the artwork in order to give a little colour to the production of

<sup>1</sup> Newman quoted in Paul Mattick, 'Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics in the Visual Arts.' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51.2 (1993), p. 253.

concepts'.<sup>2</sup> Philosophy can only embrace art when it carries meaning, when the work of art, adorned with the rich cloth of concepts, has become readable.

This book traces the historical process of how philosophers have given meaning to art. At the same time, it introduces a cross section of Western philosophy. It discusses the major periods of the history of philosophy, and a large number of important thinkers. Each philosopher is presented with a biographical sketch and a review of his central philosophical topics. And then his theory of art.

It was not my intention to produce yet another history of Western philosophy. For that there are others much better qualified than I am. Moreover, it would have been impossible to do justice to every philosopher's full body of work. My ambition was to introduce the main problems of aesthetics as historically expressed, and to make them accessible. I have therefore chosen the background of the history of philosophy, but also of science and the arts, to help me tell the story.

I am convinced of the importance of representing thinkers in their own words. Summaries of what others have written already exist in abundance. I have therefore concluded each chapter with a long quotation from the art theory of the philosopher under discussion, using the existing translations.

My selection of philosophers makes no claim to completeness, but it does aim to be representative. Missing figures include the early Christian philosopher Boethius, and modern thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer and Sigmund Freud. In that respect, it is deliberately an introductory and not an encyclopaedic book, one in which I have chosen to understand the word 'art' as broadly as possible, including literature, painting, sculpture, music, theatre, and architecture.

Previous philosophers themselves did not distinguish between the various branches of art. The awareness of the specificity of artistic media is a modern insight. Moreover, the philosophy of art begins with a strong generalisation, in Plato's suggestion that all art is based on imitation. Today, we no longer hold to this view. The historical insights to be discussed below would now be the subject matter of specialised disciplines, such as music theory, literary studies, art theory, and architectural theory. Consequently, the book contains philosophical reflections on the whole field of the arts, ranging from Greek vase painting to puppet theatre.

An evident lacuna in this book is the contemporary period. The most recent texts quoted are the *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909, and Walter Benjamin's essay from 1936 about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. The first reason for the lacuna is that the co-occurrence of new artistic media (i.e., photography and film) with the artistic

2 Joost de Bloois and Ernst van den Hemel, 'Een interview met Alain Badiou.' In: Badiou, *Inesthetiek*. Transl. J. Beerten, Amsterdam: Octavo, 2012, p. 49.

avant-gardes represents a rupture in the history of aesthetics. The iceberg represented by Marcel Duchamp in the history of art wrecked a whole tradition of aesthetics. The book would consequently have fallen apart into two separate sections. It seemed better to pay sufficient attention to that moment of rupture, but not to its later effects.

The second reason is that the theory of art rapidly expanded after 1900, in every direction. The aesthetics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a topic that deserves its own book. Such a work should make space for very diverse approaches, such as psychoanalysis, ethnography and anthropology (think of Claude Lévi-Strauss or Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*), existentialism (Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre), analytic philosophy (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Nelson Goodman), semiotics (Roland Barthes), and many others.

This book is the result of eight years of teaching the history of aesthetics at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Antwerp) and at Sint Lucas School of Arts. In that period, I have found the history of aesthetics itself increasingly problematic, or rather, one-sided. Almost without exception, the protagonists of this story were all members of a white, affluent, male elite. That is in itself no reason to disregard their ideas. The problem is rather that we do not know anything about what the other 99.9% of humanity thought about the arts of their time. No one has ever written down what Athenian women and children thought while watching tragedies and comedies in the Theatre of Dionysus. Or how anonymous artist monks in the Christian Middle Ages felt about the strict distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge of art. Or how illiterate workers in eighteenth-century factories thought about the new relationship between nature and technology, a topic so central to the Romantic thinkers.

The history of Western aesthetics is not a discredited or useless history. It is rather a canonical history. This means that we still must determine our own attitude to this canon. That has been the motive for this book. But we must remember that it is a story with many gaps, and few have contributed to it. Let this be an incentive to give a more diverse face to the aesthetics of the twenty-first century.

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