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THE SOCIETAL DIMENSION OF ART: ON MARA RAȚIU'S
ART AS SOCIAL ACTIVITY



Rațiu, Mara. *Arta ca activitate socială: avatarurile discursului filosofic asupra artei contemporane* (*Art as Social Activity: The Avatars of Philosophical Discourse on Contemporary Art*). Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2011.

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Those looking for groundbreaking research to fill in the gaps of the Romanian philosophical quest for possible solutions to the current “crisis of aesthetics” need not look any further, as Mara Rațiu’s *Art as Social Activity* is here to put forth and test out a series of tangible answers. The 255-page book mainly argues for the need of adopting the specific methodology of sociology of art in order to overcome some of the problems that part of philosophical aesthetics, sagging on its “autonomous” or even “supreme” status, is still riddled by. These problems include – but are not limited to – deriving a “pure” definition of art out of nothing else but artistic phenomena themselves, establishing values for the latter, and keeping them safe from the “alienation” of mass culture.

The book premises that beyond all the quarrel concerning its definition, contemporary art is what one would call “hybrid art,” viz., the art interested in making use of new technologies, everyday objects, the environment, politics, the public sphere, and so forth. Drawing upon Vera Zolberg’s “externalist” sociology of art which regards the latter as a social activity among others, Mara Rațiu’s book attempts to break through what may be said to be the vicious circle of explaining what art is by simply trying to formally or “internally” account for its existence. As a consequence, the author proposes a non-essentialist, horizontal (or contingent) view on contemporary art, firstly showing how essentialist approaches to artistic phenomena have lost their consistency in the recent past, secondly pointing out that contemporary art has already been integrated in mass culture, thirdly arguing that “art” pertains to certain (social) contexts that confer its status as such, and thus preliminary concluding that, in light of these, the discourse of aesthetics should revise its account of art in depth.

In the author’s view, this has already begun to happen, following the lead of three different ontological, political, and analytical patterns of thought. Applied to French contemporary aesthetic theory, these patterns are found in Marc Sherringham (the *ontological* identification of a relationship between aesthetics and the philosophical approach to being, truth, and beauty), Jean-Marie Schaeffer (the *analytical* dismissal of speculative thought in aesthetics), and in Luc Ferry and Yves Michaud (a *political* account of contemporary individualism and, respectively, the contemporary art crisis as the political project of the modernity).

It is Rațiu’s intention to show that the sociological analysis of art may be both an alternative to traditional aesthetics, and a useful auxiliary tool for contemporary aesthetics. How she understands to do this is by means of colligating developing revisions of contemporary aesthetics such as the aforementioned to four recent sociological theories: Pierre Bourdieu’s relative autonomy of the art field, Raymonde Moulin’s systems of art

theory, Howard Becker's art worlds, and Nathalie Heinich's theory of social representations. Finally, the author applies this conjunction to the case of Romanian contemporary art, which, due to the post-communist perpetual social restructuring of its "conditions of possibility," is a perfect example of how to apply sociology alongside aesthetic theory to today's art.

The book's first chapter is dedicated to showing how what we refer to as "contemporary art" has emerged. The author holds that what has best indicated the passing from modern to contemporary art is the "de-materialization" of the aesthetic object and the increasing influence exhibitions have had in revealing the process-like character of art and the artists' work (page 33). Additionally, aesthetics itself is "de-aestheticized" when mass culture replaces aesthetic experience, which has happened progressively since the year 2000. De-aestheticization rather presupposes *zapping* artistic phenomena than "reading" them and "deciphering" their meanings (pages 58-9). While I understand why the author avoids connecting *zapping* in art with domains of life outside the artistic sphere (but where nonetheless the so-called "zapping" attitude is increasingly present), I do believe that de-aestheticization also occurs in what Hans Belting depicted as the purpose of contemporary artists themselves to eliminate all art criticism with the exception of the one conducted by means of their own work. Although not thoroughly examined, this dimension is nonetheless hinted towards in the book and other such research directions are inchoatively present.

Given these facts, the question is now whether the contemporary discourse on art is able to answer correspondingly to the changes in contemporary art. This may, indeed, seem extremely hard to accomplish, as aesthetics has gained a certain autonomy beginning with the Enlightenment, but for the exact same reason, with the dawn of the 20th century, it has also begun to not correspond to the course of affairs in what was supposed to be its object of study (pages 73 and 78-80). Chapter 2 deals with this crisis quite exhaustively, paving the way for some of the aforementioned ontological, political, and analytical viewpoints on the matter in the book's third chapter. In this context, a nice talk on art as utopia is given (pages 124-133), starting from Yves Michaud's *La crise de l'art contemporain*. I mention this because art as a project of communication and civilization in Kant and Schiller's work may strike us at first as something that would support Mara Rațiu's purpose in her book, that is, to determine some sort of social role of art. The author, however, rejects these projects and deems them "mystifying," as they ultimately fall in the attempt to separate art from everyday social life.

It is the fourth chapter that finally introduces the envisaged sociological approach to contemporary art. Readers may find that it is not

clear to this point whether the author intends to depict “art *as* society,” as page 149 states, or “art as *a* social activity,” as stated in the Introduction of the book and later on (e.g., page 159). The interchangeable use of the two would allow us to draw the conclusion that there is no necessary opposition in the book between art as society and art as a part of society. However, after going through this fourth chapter, readers will understand that whenever “art as society” occurs in the book, the author refers to the societal dimension of art, and not at all to an equation of art to society.

What this means specifically is that, first of all, the sociological approach takes interest in the artistic environment and its actors and relations, beyond the canonically-selected works of art throughout history. It takes interest in art’s public as a socially-differentiated one (based on its age, sex, geographical and social origins, income, and so forth – see page 160), it conducts an examination of how museums help democratize access to art or, on the contrary, help steepen the separations between the initiated and the uninitiated, as Bourdieu puts it (page 161), and, most importantly, it empirically observes contemporary art so as to make up for the deficit of what has been passed down to us as aesthetic theory.

This apprehension of the art field and artistic phenomena may fall into an economical description of the matter. The author makes sure to differentiate in depth (pages 166-76) between sociology of art and economical theory, once again with the help of Pierre Bourdieu’s account of a relatively autonomous art field. As some sort of “counterpart,” the author then methodologically adopts Raymonde Moulin’s position, according to which in contemporary art there is nevertheless a tight relationship between the art field and the international art market (page 177), and the two may intertwine even if they do not coincide.

Overall, the chapter succeeds in showing how the sociology of art contributes to contemporary aesthetics in that it introduces a new viewpoint on the actors within art worlds. The author’s account of Howard Becker’s work, for instance, stresses the need to regard functions such as integrated professionals, mavericks, etc., purely *relational* with reference to an art world. This is to say typologies and hierarchies are no longer sustainable as long as the “actors” within an art world cannot be consistently attributed to a certain role (pages 185 et. sq). Of course, this leads us to another problem, i.e., whether the actors themselves may still be referred to as “actors” in a purely relational context. This, in turn, is an ontological question pertaining to Heidegger’s manner of envisaging man’s existence as transitive, but which the book seems to compress in the explanation of an indirect account (namely, Sherringham’s). This is, again, understandable, since the book’s purpose is not to provide an ontology of art, but the framework for a conjunction of aesthetics and the sociology of art.

The fifth and final chapter presents the results that the author has reached during a previous research endeavor and fully captures the fragmentary and institutionally-unstable contemporary art environment in Romania (the author characterizes it as “traumatized,” page 203). But the main merit of this chapter is the actual application of sociological methods such as interviews and empirical observation to a historically and spatially well-defined context. The author actually manages (pages 234-5) to depict the problems and issues of contemporary Romanian art as stemming from the deluding self-sufficiency of Romanian artists, who have somewhat rejected any mediation on behalf of both theoreticians and art merchants before and even after the fall of communism. In other words, Romanian art was “traumatized” due to its internal focus on itself as its means of justifying for its existence, instead of resorting to the “externalist” point of view presented in the beginning and in the fourth chapter of the book.

Art as Social Activity manages to bring aesthetic theory closer to what in today’s Romania has only been approached partially or not at all, that is, to sociological methods of investigating artistic phenomena in connection to a network of relations from which they draw their meaning for society. Artistic manifestations are no longer sufficient by themselves in order to give birth to theory and therefore cannot be supported anymore by the “idealizing” and unitary interpretations that have sufficed throughout history.

All in all, I highly recommend the book to scholars and non-scholars alike interested in understanding the metamorphoses of contemporary art and in developing a corresponding set of methods to do so. Since tackling emerging problems sometimes means shifting one’s perspective instead of carrying on engaging in pursuits leading nowhere out the ivory tower, *Art as Social Activity* may be regarded as a pragmatic tool for dealing with this kind of problems in aesthetics and philosophy of art. After all, as Shusterman would put it, this *is* a good book’s be-all and end-all.