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Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of Ethics

Walead Beshty

There are no static things. Everything is dynamic. – Lygia Clark, 'Full Emptiness' (1960)¹

It has become a commonplace observation that over the past forty years artistic production has become increasingly reflexive about its relation to the social conditions that surround it, expanding into the complexities of the commons, and deploying increasingly open-ended and contingent conditions of reception. Such expansions are not only manifest under the umbrella of terms like 'happenings', 'institutional critique' or 'relational aesthetics', but have also affected the way that the most conventionally realized and exhibited object-based practices are understood and enacted. Even painting, perhaps the most traditional of art objects, has been increasingly subjected to an analysis that incorporates systems of distribution and social relations in its assessments. For example, in his contribution to Wade Guyton's monograph *Black Paintings* (2011), the artist, critic and gallerist John Kelsey observes that '[t]he gallery is no longer a theatre of human activity or even passivity, but an activated space where information, bodies and money are rapidly circulated, and where this power of circulation is momentarily frozen in images and objects.' He goes on to comment that Guyton's 'canvases ... are not so much finished, final things as they are a series of interrupted movements'. David Joselit, in his essay 'Painting Beside Itself' (October, Fall 2009), articulates a similar point, noting that artists such as Michael Krebber, Merlin Carpenter and Jutta Koether 'have developed practices in which painting sutures a virtual world of images onto an actual network composed of human actors, allowing neither aspect to eclipse the other'. Each of these statements would have seemed cynically perverse, if not absurd, some twenty years ago, but now they seem, if not obvious, then certainly not outlandish. Such a transformation reflects the culmination of the postmodernist war on aesthetic autonomy, marking the ascent of a dynamic and socially derived formalism that takes not only the significance of both the site of reception and mode of distribution of the work of art as a given, but recognizes this as integral to the meaning of the work itself.

Art as Pact/Art as Social Contract

... artworks not only are products of given circumstances, they also contribute to the existence of these very circumstances. – Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art* (2010)²

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Such a shift in contemporary art is not the subject of this volume, nor this introduction, but suffice it to say that this change is the result of numerous factors, not least of which is the radical transformation of the conditions of labour and production in the post-Fordist epoch, an era that saw the transition of western economies from secondary to tertiary, i.e. from industrially-based production to the ethereal world of finance capital, flexible workforces and the service industry (what has been variously described as ‘late capitalism’ by the Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson, ‘flexible accumulation’ by the social theorist and political economist David Harvey, or as the third ‘Spirit of Capitalism’ by economist Ève Chiapello and sociologist Luc Boltanski). If we think of the avant-gardes as a response to, and assimilation of, the effects of urbanization and industrialization at the dawn of the twentieth century within aesthetic terms, the move toward both socially constituted practices (i.e. those which have no specific conventional art object as their focus) and the socially inflected understanding of conventional artistic forms should come as no surprise, given the mass cultural changes that paralleled them. Numerous essays and books have addressed the social dimensions of contemporary practice (including several volumes in this series), yet despite this recently emergent, widespread critical focus on the social parameters of the work of art, the methodological implications – be they from the perspective of production or that of the art historian or critic – remain largely unexplored.

A full examination of this shift would require at least a book length treatment, thus a more schematic outline will have to suffice here. For provisional purposes the most significant precedents for these recent developments both come from the early twentieth century: Constantin Brancusi’s experimentations with the interdependency of sculpture and its material support, and the eventual dissolution of the barrier between them, and Marcel Duchamp’s invention of the socially contingent work of art – in the form of the readymade; innovations that would quickly come to define the trajectory of art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The significance of the work of these artists is no revelation, yet their reception is at this point incomplete, dominated by an analysis that positions these works as a negation, refusal, or critique of the conventions of art and artistic meaning, thereby limiting the understanding of their importance for the contemporary moment. Rosalind Krauss, for example, describes Brancusi’s placement of the sculpture directly on the floor as a ‘reach[ing] downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from actual place’,³ claiming it as a disassociation of the work of art from its site of reception. Yet hindsight casts Brancusi’s gesture as a step toward sculpture’s merging with its support, confusing the distinction between the work and its frame, and destabilizing rather than reifying the notion of aesthetic autonomy. If it did manifest some form of aesthetic autonomy, Brancusi’s version only managed to hasten its exhaustion, his work having become integral to a trajectory that has slowly and steadily moved further into zones of interdependency and contingency, becoming a key precedent for the works of artists as ideologically and formally disparate as David Smith and Anthony Caro, whose work came to exclude any delineation between object and support; minimalist practices exemplified by works like Robert Morris’s landmark show of polyhedron forms at Green Gallery, New York, in 1964; or any number of light and space practices, where sculptural production was integrated with the architectural frame such that it could not exist without it; to numerous works of Michael Asher, where the institution itself – defined as a complex of social and material supports – is intertwined with, or ‘absorbed’ into the work, just as much as the work is ‘absorbed’ into its context. The works of contemporary artists such as Andrea Fraser and Merlin Carpenter draw this absorption of the context of art production to more extreme, and perhaps perverse, ends. These are but a few of many possible examples, and their diversity alone should indicate that this was not a transformation cloistered within a subgroup of twentieth-century art, but an integral element in the development of contemporary artistic discourse. Each of these endeavours shifted away from discreteness, refusing the possibility of separating the artwork from its context, precipitating a movement from

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the realization of the interdependency of object and support to the artwork's expansion into the social apparatus that surround it.

In tandem with Brancusi, Duchamp's readymades ushered in the understanding that the artwork was not only materially inextricable from its support (here realized as the social conditions that designated an object as an object of art), but further articulated its existence – and by extension, the existence of all aesthetics – as a form of social contract. Rather than initiating a slowly evolving discourse around the art object, the readymade marked a radical departure, defining the core of the work of art as an agreement located within a group that holds the artwork in common. Duchamp reduced the object at the heart of this agreement to a commonplace industrialized product, which in its initial deployment contained no aspiration for expressive or contemplative function. As a readymade, an object becomes the marker for the social contract, a node around which individuals congregate and transact, and it is this contract and those who are drawn together through it that give the work any possibility for artistic meaning. As the critic Thierry de Duve put it in his seminal treatment of Duchamp, *Pictorial Nominalism*,

Duchamp ... reserved for himself the naked symbolic function, the speech act that would name art ... the pact that would unite the spectators of the future around some object, an object that added nothing to the constructed environment and did not improve on it but, quite the contrary, pulled away from it, bearing no other function than that of pure signifier, the pact itself.⁴

Following de Duve's line of thought, the work is not only dependent on the social constructs that surround it, but is literally constituted by those systems of relations. The 'pact itself' then, is no insignificant matter. Rather than being an assertion of emptiness or aesthetic refusal, a 'pulling away', as de Duve and others have argued, it is in fact an expansion of its boundaries into the dynamic and amorphous territories of the social sphere. Despite de Duve's notion that the readymade retreated from the world (an observation consistent with the dominant interpretation trafficked within the more theoretically fluent arthistorical circles of the seventies and eighties, derived from the writings of Peter Bürger, specifically his 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which situated avant-garde practice as a prolonged negation of bourgeois art), recent art has used Duchamp's insight to unmistakably opposite effect, deploying the social conditions around the art object, or art event, to establish aesthetic meaning, rather than negate it. The pact that de Duve refers to, which establishes both the work of art and the community around it, is what the philosopher Jacques Rancière has described as the 'distribution of the sensible', that 'system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it ... determin[ing] those who have a part in the community of citizens'.⁵ Through the possibility of establishing or revising this network of inclusions and exclusions, art has the capacity to restructure the social field, even if these relations are provisional or fleeting. As Dorothea von Hantelmann observes,

Not only is social reality represented in artworks, but they also constitute it both concretely and categorically. Concretely here refers to processes that are initiated by the production and the existence of the artwork; categorically refers to categories that are intentionally or unintentionally reproduced in the process. Seen from this angle, the artwork is far from powerless; on the contrary – as an integral part of society – it has an inherent agency ...⁶

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The discussion of these impacts requires an excision of the notion of critical or political art as negation – an analysis that often dead-ends in melancholic ramblings and empty revelations of social anomie – and the innovation of a new set of tools for the evaluation of art’s ‘agency’ which is predicated on its connection to, rather than its distance from, the social world in which it operates.

The Problem of Evaluative Criteria

... the correct political tendency of a work extends also to its literary quality: because a political tendency which is correct comprises a literary tendency which is correct. – Walter Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’ (1934)⁷

As art production bleeds into the dynamic world of the social, reflecting its participation within open-ended circulatory systems, the meaning and significance of the *work* of art is increasingly difficult to discuss within the object-based discourses of art history and criticism, which favour discrete, easily delineated and predominantly static objects of investigation. Change over time is particularly difficult for such discourses to describe, often resulting in an indeterminate and vague terminology that dead-ends in buzzwords such as ‘interactive’, ‘contingent’, or ‘open-ended’, without producing much clarity about the nature of the variables at work in each instance. In light of such shortcomings, the question arises as to what criteria ought to be applied to works that make active use of their dependence on systems of distribution and social traffic. One strategy has been the application of activist, public health or social work criteria to ascertain the efficacy of the art object, thereby skirting the attendant problems of instrumentalization, while also eschewing the line of critique that dismisses art as elitist, bourgeois, or simply vacant décor for the wealthy. The trouble is that social efficacy is in no way the same as artistic efficacy; not only is the former much easier to define in fixed terms, but also a successful social project can easily have little or no aesthetic value. Yet often social efficacy becomes the primary justification for a certain form of participatory political art, often applied regardless of its actual ability to be viable within the public sphere, thus failing both as art and as social work. As Rancière points out, such practices ‘... generally take for granted that the politics of art can be identified with a certain type of efficacy. Art ... is supposed to be political because ... it is wrested from its own specific realm and sites to be transformed into a social practice.’⁸ The implications of this conflation do not only affect the deployment and reception of activist or socially-based art practices. The more detrimental effect is felt when one examines the anaemic concept of aesthetics and politics it implies. When social efficacy is equated with the politics of the art object, the political implications of aesthetics are ignored (aesthetics here is taken to refer to the Greek origin of the term, relating to the perceivable or sensate, rather than the German Romantic understanding, relating to the beautiful). Such sidestepping of the political complexities of aesthetics ultimately imposes severe limitations on the discussion of an artwork’s life within a broader social context, and excises it from any meaningful relationship to the history of art.

In *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), the curator Nicolas Bourriaud identifies this problem, referring to exhibitions as ‘arenas of exchange’. Bourriaud proposes that works of art ‘must be judged on the basis of *aesthetic criteria* ... by analysing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the “world” it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it’. Despite

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Bourriaud's compelling methodological outline for an approach to aesthetic analysis that incorporates human relations, he fails to demonstrate how such an approach might actually be deployed in specific terms, leaving the proposition only partially realized. Since his text was published in English in 2002, several thinkers, most notably Claire Bishop and Grant Kester, have turned to this question. Bishop, who became noted as the most robust critic of Bourriaud, similarly calls for the development of a critical apparatus by which such socially constructed works might be analysed, in her text 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' (October, Fall 2004), providing a more comprehensive theoretical armature for what aesthetic criteria might be brought to bear on such practices. She asks:

how do we measure or compare these relationships? The quality of the relationships in 'relational aesthetics' is never examined or called into question. [...] I sense that this question is [for Bourriaud] unnecessary; all relations that permit 'dialogue' are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does 'democracy' really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?⁹

These queries as to the concrete political effects of these works in aesthetic terms open up a territory that Bourriaud leaves relatively untouched. What Bishop goes on to offer is the integration of a notion of the democratic proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe with a version of Bürger's model of avant-gardist artistic critique, praising disjunctive or alienated experiences (such as those occurring in the work of Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra) as reflecting the discord implicit in democracy, and leaving the affirmative dimension of social practice at best sidelined, if not dismissed out of hand. Kester, who has publicly taken issue with Bishop's formulations precisely for this reason, points to the dominance of post-structuralist theory, with its emphasis on distance, alienation and critique, as the reason for the lack of a developed discourse on socially-based practices. Yet Kester focuses primarily on practices which have far less visibility or prominence in the field than those analysed by Bishop, implying that these concerns are at the periphery of art discourse and not a factor in mainstream artistic production. Each of these formidable contributions to the discussion develop the invaluable groundwork for a methodological approach to the social dynamics of art, yet surprisingly Bishop and Kester restrict their focus to works that overtly incorporate the viewer within them and make use of indeterminate, socially contingent sites of reception. By doing so they exclude the even more dramatic implications this understanding has for art production in general. Thus, despite the frequency with which socially derived practice is called up as a new paradigm for art that requires urgent attention, the theoretical inroads remain at an early stage, and those invested in understanding the broader methodological implications for the fields of art history and criticism as a whole remain relatively few in number.

Why Ethics?

... the rigid isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations ... – Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer'¹⁰

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All of this necessitates continued reflection on the specific quality and nature of the social field the art object constructs and of which it is simultaneously a part, an endeavour to which the discourse of ethics is particularly well suited. Here we might be best served by turning back to Bourriaud, who, despite his emphasis on practices that include a participatory dimension, neither limited himself to artists who exclusively produced events nor eschewed traditional object making, instead describing artistic practices that were concerned with ‘learning to inhabit the world in a better way’, a notion which encapsulates in lay terms what the discourse of ethics is chiefly designed to discern, i.e. a description of a mode of inhabiting the world. As the philosopher Alain Badiou writes,

ethics designates today a principle that governs how we relate to ‘what is going on’, a vague way of regulating our commentary on historical situations (the ethics of human rights), technico-scientific situations (medical ethics, bio-ethics), ‘social’ situations (the ethics of being-together), media situations (the ethics of communication), and so on.¹¹

Thus the evaluation of the aesthetic condition of ethics (the barometer by which we ascertain the value and quality of interpersonal relations) has become one possibility, if not the only possibility, for the discussion of the aesthetics of the social field. As Kester notes,

the relatively undeveloped status of reception theory in art history is particularly evident in research associated with contemporary art practice. This is due in part to the tendency in much recent scholarship simply to import generic reception models taken from the traditions of post-structuralist literary and critical theory into the analysis of contemporary visual art.¹²

Ethics provides one viable option which may offer a solution to the blind spots in contemporary aesthetic theory. To clarify: rather than an ethics of aesthetics, which despite being a worthy endeavour, has been undertaken numerous times before, and further, invariably resolves itself in a discourse external to that of art, the question examined here is: What might it mean to speak of an ‘aesthetics of ethics’? That is, what is an aesthetics (again, from the Greek root pertaining to the perceptible, the appearance of things) of social relations, and how do ethical relations create aesthetic form? This distinction is key to understanding the spirit behind this volume and the specific conditions it seeks to address.

Ethics versus Morals

Before moving onto the question of what an aesthetics of ethics actually is – the broad question that the texts within this volume collectively begin to address – it may be useful to distinguish the term ethics from the term it is commonly associated with: morals. Even in some scholarly contexts, the term ethics is conflated with morals, which I will provisionally define as a fixed set of rules or laws that prescribe how one ought to live one’s life regardless of circumstance. Ethics, in the philosophical sense developed by Aristotle, contains no fixed parameters. Instead, ethics describes a dynamic system in which the common good is maximized, this common good being characterized as the living of a virtuous life. As Badiou describes it, the ‘ethical principle [refers to] immediate action, while morality is to concern *reflexive* action’. He goes on to state that ‘rather than link the word [ethics] to abstract categories (Man or Human, Right or Law, the Other

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...), it should be referred back to particular *situations*¹³, meaning that ethics always refers to the particular rather than the abstract. Ethics and morals are conceptually antithetical. For example, while a moral claim would argue that to kill another human being is wrong in all circumstances, ethics provides no absolute rule but rather establishes a basis for analysis that *arises from the circumstance itself*. This is not to say that ethics equates with relativism, but simply that there are no *prima facie* criteria other than the maximization of the common good, and that the common good is increased by acting in a virtuous manner (thus, a killing that saves lives would not necessarily be ethical, for the true ethicist would also maintain a belief in the individual's right in the face of the many, and furthermore, would not assert one or the other position without an evaluation of the specific circumstance in question). In the context of a situation, the ethical conditions of a particular event or site are a means to describe the sort of interaction that is created by that event or site. While moral criteria are always external to the circumstances to which they are applied, the ethical is immanent to the site of its deployment. A turn to ethics is a turn to the affirmative question of art, not art as negation, allegory or critique, but the description of an art that operates directly upon the world it is situated in; it is a definition of art that is not at all premised on representation. This turn is parallel to Agamben's assertion of an affirmative definition of life, in contrast to Michel Foucault's notion of the power over life being defined in its denial or negation, i.e. by death. Agamben situates life in the affirmative conditions of thought and of communicability, as he does in his text 'Form-of-Life' (1993) for example. Thus it is a notion of life that is not governed by the juridical or repressive functions of the state, but one constituted in affirmative terms as actions rather than as a quality that is defined tacitly by external prohibitions. Similarly, we could imagine a discourse on art that does not define art simply as a reflection or revelation of repressive forms, i.e. that defines art's efficacy in negative terms, as the pointing out of 'bad', or politically regressive forms of aesthetics, but the establishment of new aesthetic parameters for social relations.

The moral and the ethical are often practically at odds. An individual who asserts a morally acceptable, i.e. normatively correct or just, position can deploy unethical means to achieve it. Within aesthetics, consider the use of propaganda: the message of propaganda may be morally 'correct', seeking to promote positive action, but may also be unethical, in that it subordinates a viewer, addressing her or him in a coercive or threatening manner, or by appealing to fears or prejudices. This is the paradox of political art that deploys propagandistic forms. While such a work might call for freedom from repression, it deploys a mode of address that assumes self-validating authority nonetheless, a reification of the very powers it claims to usurp. In semiotic or representational terms, the message may align itself against power but in practice use this very power to assert its position, in effect reifying that form of power. An aesthetics of ethics offers the possibility of distinguishing between means and ends by enacting a shift from a hermeneutic approach, which emphasizes decoding, to the study of the means by which that thing being examined comes into being and is circulated, in short, how the work creates conditions of reception, how it makes whatever its message is perceivable.

The central concern of an ethical analysis is not whether the work can be evaluated positively or negatively in ethical terms, but instead resides in the more complex question of the aesthetic manifestation of the ethical dimension of the work of art, i.e. its proposal of a modification to the social contract, with the artwork acting as the signification of this modification. So, if an artwork is understood as affecting or generating relations among viewers, how is this negotiation with the ethical dimensions of an artwork manifest in aesthetic terms (i.e. how are these aspects of its social existence manifest in the appearance of the work itself)? Even if it is participation-based, the core question is not whether an artwork initiates a successful social programme (there is already a well developed discourse on social efficacy, which has little bearing on the history of art), but what are the aesthetic implications of an action that modifies social relations. This would

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be the fundamental reason for asserting such an action within the frame of artistic practice, rather than simply within the social field alone.

We could turn to Duchamp for some clarity in this regard, for if art consists of a kind of social pact amounting to a collective decision to discuss something in a certain way (i.e. as art), ethics proposes how we could address those aesthetic implications in more than experiential or anecdotal terms. Ethics, then, is not a criterion by which one can justify a work; it is, rather, a methodology. Much as the discourse related to apprehending ‘beauty’ within an artwork does not require it to be beautiful to be significant, but exists as a set of tools to approach the work’s discussion, ethics can likewise function as a methodological approach which can address the aesthetic conditions of an artwork in light of the effects it produces on the social field of which it is a part.

This is a more radical proposition than it might seem initially; when one asks what the aesthetics of ethics are, one redefines the condition of aesthetics, for if aesthetics chiefly deals with the conditions of perception, negotiating what is perceivable, knowable, or sensible (in Rancière’s terminology: the ‘distribution of the sensible’), a definition of artistic practice that accepts its social foundations as a raw material for its production radically expands the notion of what can be made perceivable and seeable. We then might ask, if contemporary painting necessarily incorporates a consideration of the broader social implications surrounding its making, such as the various modes of distribution – i.e. the network of magazines, dealers, critics, and so on, as Kelsey or Joselit have argued – does it look markedly different from a painting which does not arise from a consideration of these forces? We could easily answer in the affirmative, but the more complex question is how it looks different. Such an answer lies beyond the means of contemporary critical discourse, and it is this question that an aesthetics of ethics would allow us to answer.

A Note on Editorial Methodology

The excerpts included here are often brief but they point the reader to provocative locations where the issues of ethics and art are being played out with complexity, offering a map for expanded research. While spatial constraints and the desire for inclusivity often necessitated the excerpting of texts, sacrificing some of the context in which assertions have been made, this also has some desirable effects. What were once discrete, declarative texts can become porous utterances, forming an imagined conversation across disciplines, a collage of interests and conflicts, taking writers and thinkers who may or may not be in dialogue, may or may not even be aware of each other, and drawing them, if only provisionally within these pages, into discussion. Thus the impulse was to include a wide range of approaches, so that this book and the imagined dialogue it contains presents the maximum number of open possibilities for the reader to pursue.

Notes

1 Lygia Clark, ‘O vazio-pleno’, *Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro) (2 April 1960) 5; trans. in *Lygia Clark* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1998) 111–13; translation revised.

2 Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010) 151.

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3 Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October* (Spring 1979) 34.

4 Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 115.

5 Jacques Rancière, 'The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics' (2000); trans. Gabriel Rockhill, in Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) 12.

6 Dorothea von Hantelmann, op. cit.

7 Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' (1934); trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin, Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 221.

8 Jacques Rancière, 'Paradoxes of Political Art' (2005); in *Homeworks III: A Forum on Cultural Practices* (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2008) 44.

9 Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004) 65.

10 Walter Benjamin, op. cit., 222.

11 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (1993); trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2002) 2.

12 Grant Kester, in 'Questionnaire on "The Contemporary"', ed. Hal Foster, et al., *October* (Fall 2009) 8.

13 Alain Badiou, op. cit., 3.

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