

**Luigi Russo (ed.), *Dopo l'estetica*, Centro Internazionale Studi di Estetica, 2010, pp. 244, gratuito, ISSN 03938522**

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In 2010 the *Centro Internazionale Studi di Estetica* celebrated 30 years since its foundation. To mark the event it issued a volume of essays by several international and Italian aestheticians, aiming at giving an overview of the state of the art of the discipline. *Dopo l'estetica* means “after Aesthetics” or “beyond Aesthetics” and it hints at the possibility that this philosophical discipline may have become a thing of the past or that it may have dissolved into something else. Unfortunately, the volume lacks an introduction, but it seems to me that the very last essay published in it, written by Richard Shusterman, can be seen as working as a kind of introduction post facto (pp.231-39). Since Hegel’s argument on the “end of art” – Shusterman explains – a number of philosophical theories have dealt with the idea that art, as a peculiar product of the modern age, has become a thing of the past. Walter Benjamin famously suggested that works of art had lost their “aura” in the age of mechanical reproduction and that whereas the art of the modern age was meant to generate well-ordered experiences, today we are flooded with information to the point that well-ordered experiences disintegrate into the information flood. Arthur Danto has argued that contemporary art has turned into philosophy, since it is essentially concerned with a philosophical question, the question of what makes something art and why. From an historical perspective, Shusterman notices, it can also be argued that art in the modern sense (best conveyed by the French term *beaux art* and the Italian *belle arti*) cannot survive in post-modern times. Finally, there is a famous criticism addressed by several post-Wittgensteinian thinkers in the 60s and 70s, who claimed that aesthetics as a theory is to be discarded because there is no way we can reach a unified theory of aesthetic judgement, experience, and meaning. To this last objection – Shusterman observes – recent aesthetic theorizing, especially within the analytical tradition, has reacted concentrating on specific art forms and practices, rejecting the conception of aesthetics as general enquiry on the arts and aesthetic experience. To the criticisms concerning the status of art in contemporary world, he argues, contemporary art has

reacted expanding beyond the domain of the *beaux arts*: especially into mass-media and into everyday life (the so-called “aestheticization” of daily life). As we shall see, these two poles figure prominently in the rest of the volume. The book brings together scholars with different sensitivities and philosophical backgrounds. I shall divide the essays it features in thematic groups and comment on them.

Paolo D’Angelo, Fabrizio Desideri, Elio Franzini and Tonino Griffero seem to agree on considering aesthetics essentially a philosophy of experience. According to D’Angelo, aesthetics is an exquisitely post-Cartesian philosophical discipline, in that it is a form of enquiry on the relation between subject and world (p.47). He argues that this enquiry should be conducted within a Kantian background, where aesthetic experience – despite not leading to proper knowledge – is understood as a form of training for those faculties that are necessary to acquire knowledge (pp.43-45). On a similar note, Desideri argues for the necessity of a meta-aesthetics, focussing on defining the boundaries of the aesthetic experience and on distinguishing between aesthetics and other philosophical disciplines. A meta-aesthetics should make it clear that crucial elements of aesthetics as a discipline are, for instance, perception and its non-conceptual content, sense and reference in aesthetic judgement, aesthetic behaviour and intentionality, the ontological relevance of aesthetic facts (p.68). Instead of characterizing only specific experiences (in particular the experience of works of art) – Desideri argues – the aesthetic dimension permeates our whole mental life (p.71). To sum it up with a slogan: it is not through aesthetic objects that we can define what aesthetics is, while it is through the identification of aesthetic aspects of experience. Franzini’s essay puts forward a proposal inspired by the reading of Husserl, where the aesthetic dimension is collocated at the origin of knowledge. Aesthetic experience is the dimension of experience where the world as a whole appears loaded with meaning (p.129). Also Griffero suggests an original characterization within the broad experiential paradigm for aesthetics: he claims that aesthetics should largely be concerned with atmospheres. Aesthetics, namely, should be understood as a form of knowledge based on first impression, concerned with aesthetic, phenomenological, perceptual and ontological (in particular the study of *qualia*) aspects of experience.

An understanding of aesthetics as philosophy of sensitivity

(from the Greek *aisthesis*) lies at the heart of Maurizio Ferraris' approach to the discipline. In his essay he recalls the reasons that have brought him to develop his approach to aesthetics as a way to the ontology of a sub-set of social objects, i.e. art objects, from the perspective of "ingenuous realism". His philosophical fathers are on the one hand Leibniz and Baumgarten, with the idea of aesthetics as *analogon rationis* (a form of reasoning based on habits and ideas which are not clear and distinct, p.108) and on the other hand Derrida, whose notion of trace is connected to the idea that social objects are the result of acts of inscription (p.113).

Baldine Saint Girons focuses on aesthetic acts, which – she argues – lie at the intersection between theory and practice (p.220). Simplifying greatly her proposal – indebted with Jacques Lacan's remarks on art and, at times, written in a rather obscure prose – we can single out three points: 1) An aesthetic act cannot but include and put into question the subject who performs it (p.221); 2) There is an element of inspiration to aesthetic acts: they physically change the subject who performs them – for instance, when a certain music affects one's movements (p.224); 3) When one deals with aesthetic objects (be they artefacts or natural objects), there is always an element of fiction at work (p.224). Aesthetics, then, is not only about the representation of the world, whereas it is mainly interaction with it and it is, therefore, an essentially hybrid discipline (pp.228-29).

Several essays also make an effort to define what aesthetics today *is not*: there is a shared scepticism towards hermeneutical approaches to the discipline (D'Angelo, Ferraris, and especially Pietro Montani, with his critical remarks on Gadamer), as well as towards the recent fashion of neuro-aesthetics (D'Angelo and Jerrold Levinson); D'Angelo is also critical towards the conflation of aesthetics and cultural studies and, together with Montani, he expresses scepticism towards the analytical aestheticians' attitude of identifying aesthetics with the philosophy of art. Levinson, a pre-eminent exponent of analytical aesthetics, prefers to focus on the question of what the aesthetician should do and can do better than other figures that populate the aesthetic realm: conceptual analysis, elaboration of a synthetic vision and communication to the general public are tasks that can be better carried forward by the philosopher when it comes to aesthetic matters.

Another kernel of the volume consists in the individuation of crucial topics for aestheticians today. Four main elements of novelty emerge: the relevance of the body; the relation between art, media, and entertainment culture; the urgency to understand creativity; and the need for an understanding of aesthetic culture in cultures other than the Western (this last topic is briefly explored by Mario Perniola, who considers aesthetic elements in the culture of three countries – Japan, China, and Brasil – which came into contact with Western culture and developed autonomously from it).

According to Roberto Diodato, new technologies and their role in creating a post-human dimension open up a space of new opportunities for aesthetics. Typical aesthetic concepts (such as beauty, taste, genius, creativity, originality) are crucial for the understanding of post-industrial capitalism and, as a consequence, have deprived aesthetics of its traditional object. In order for aesthetics to survive as a discipline, it should concentrate on what is new to the human condition, thereby the attention to enhanced bodies. Franzini brings back the issue of the centrality of the body to aesthetics to an Husserlian foundation of the discipline, whereas Griffero's science of the atmospheres presupposes an embodied subject who feels them. On a similar note, Shusterman briefly mentions his researches into what he calls "somaesthetics".

Other essays deal with the question of the relation between aesthetics and contemporary culture. According to Giuseppe Di Giacomo, it is crucial to keep in mind Walter Benjamin's analysis of the present situation of artworks: they have lost the "aura" romanticism attributed to them, but they can regain an "aura" in a negative way, since they can retain their capability of referring to something outside themselves in a peculiar way. Namely, the paradigm of art-making has shifted from the realm of representation to that of testimony, in order to avoid the identification of art with entertainment. Also José Jiménez concentrates on the relation between art and entertainment: art – he argues – is collocated within a global continuum of representation, although it cannot be reduced to the purely aesthetic dimension of ads, design, and the media. It resists assimilation by means of differentiation, breaking chains of signs and introducing discrepancies.

Giovanni Matteucci critically engages with John Elster's theory, according to which creativity can be understood avoiding

reference to private language, by means of descriptions of the procedures artists adopt, and it can be defined as the ability to maximize aesthetic value under constraints. Matteucci is sceptical towards this understanding of aesthetics in terms of propositional knowledge and claims that we should privilege a knowing-how and non-causal understanding of actions in the aesthetic domain, concentrating on the dialectic between the artist and a sort of kernel from which everything blossoms, which seeks to impose obedience and against which the artist fights while realizing his work (p.177).

The main element of continuity with traditional aesthetics in the volume is the relevance given to the concept of beauty, a concept that has reappeared in recent literature, despite its somehow troubled history in much XX century reflection on the arts. Hans- Dieter Bahr argues that we should make an effort to reshape contemporary aesthetic sensitivity to recognize what is truly beautiful in what is tremendous. Arthur Danto claims that instead of abandoning beauty tout court contemporary art has abandoned beautiful *objects*. Those aspects of objects that please the senses are something we need to get rid of today, if we want to feel the *internal beauty* of a work of art, which is connected to the dimension of the good and the truth (p.60). Beauty, then, is a value that we should preserve, even if this requires discarding external beauty.

*Dopo l'estetica* is a valuable book because it brings together a large number of first-level scholars with different research profiles and it is very up-to-date. The main directions of contemporary philosophical reflection on the arts are well represented. At the same time, however, the broad variety of the material and the lack of an introduction make it difficult for the reader to go through the volume and to identify key concepts. Modernism may be well behind us, but Mies van der Rohe's motto "less is more" remains a valuable advice.

**Website**

<http://www.unipa.it/~estetica/download/DopoEstetica.pdf>