

Note e recensioni

Aisthesis

Hubert Locher, *Kunsttheorie. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, 2023, München, C.H. Beck, 592 pp., 58€, ISBN 978 3 406 80011 5

Hubert Locher has published a comprehensive volume on art theory, *Kunsttheorie*. The book was originally conceived as a concise introduction to the subject. The text's approximately 450 pages attest to the profound transformation the project underwent during a decade of study, research, and writing (cf. pp. 453-454); yet, this expansion has by no means diminished its introductory function. Locher has successfully modulated his writing to accommodate multiple readings: the book can thus guide students interested in the topic, but it is also accessible to a general public, and can be profitably used by specialists. Furthermore, this introduction to art theory and its more than 2,500-year history contains, in light of numerous ongoing debates, more than a hint of critical edge.

Firstly, some contours must be outlined. Art theory is approached primarily from a European (and partly North American) perspective, with clear thematic selections (cf. pp. 429-433). These intertwine with the historical developments of art theory but also impose precise choices: a quick glance at the index already reveals that the material becomes increasingly extensive the closer we get to the present day. It is useful to start here because it reflects Locher's understanding of art theory.

The book's main thesis is probably that there is no art without art theory, nor art theory without art. This assertion may seem obvious, but it immediately gains more traction if we consider certain references to reception aesthetics and the specification of what "theory" means here. Locher is, in fact, interested in models of reflective writing on art, which pose the question of what art is (more or less implicitly) – and which, simultaneously, do this with specific relevance for the understanding of a work, or a series of works. This very broad spectrum, yet determined by its close connection to artistic practice, can be summarised by reference to Julius von Schlosser's definition of "art literature" (*Kunstliteratur*, cf. pp. 27-28). It can thus include (to give an idea of the types of discourse addressed) aesthetics and the philosophy of art, as well as art history and *Kunstwissenschaft*, art criticism, artists' writings, and certain institutional discursive prac-

tices that might not immediately be recognised as theoretical: for instance, art academies and exhibitions (the latter especially in the contemporary age) assume a significant role in the history of art theory.

Indeed, it is a characteristic of that dual relationship that if theory needs art – as object and as concept – art, in the same way, needs theory to such an extent that it cannot exist without it: “art [...] depends on the intellectual participation of the spectator. It therefore requires a theory, it presupposes a theory” (p. 10). Locher thus seems to generalise on a theoretical plane an aspect of reception aesthetics (only one of the many approaches considered, it must be re-emphasised) which he introduces into the body of the historical exposition by making reference, among others, to Umberto Eco and the open work (cf. pp. 397-398). This must be read against the book’s background: its objective is not merely to offer a historical-analytical exposition, but to propose a theory of art (cf. p. 10). In the same pages where reception aesthetics appears, the author also stresses that this approach can also be valid for the case of painting, at least insofar as a painting can be “‘read,’ in a metaphorical sense” (p. 399). This passage also allows to highlight that Locher’s primary interest lies in visual art and, more particularly, though not exclusively, in painting. This interest may also explain the keen attention paid to a case of theory particularly close to practice – art criticism, which appears repeatedly throughout the investigation and seems almost to constitute a possible nexus between artistic practice, history, and theory (cf. p. 207).

Historical analysis and systematic impetus become increasingly intertwined as we approach the present day. Locher thus identifies and articulates significant thematic constellations, concretely demonstrating how the practice of art literature implies not only the theoretical level but also demands going beyond disciplinary boundaries. One example appears in the twelfth chapter: after touching on Benjamin and Malraux, Locher traces the emergence of the question of the definition of the “work” in Heidegger’s essay on the origin of the work of art. Critically reading Schapiro’s response, he introduces Derrida’s and Gadamer’s intervention into the developing debate, before returning to the field of art studies or, more precisely, image studies (especially in the German-speaking world) in the era of the pictorial turn. He thus illustrates possible pathways in which the history of the practice of art literature intertwines with the history of art theory, and contributes to the formulation, if not of an explicit systematic theory, at least of some significant emphases.

However, the closer we get to our own perspective (and Locher also touches on very recent debates, such as those sparked by *documenta 15*), the less clear it seems to find guidance on what “theory” and, above all, “art” should be. In some respects, the art theory whose history is traced in the book might appear completely anachronistic: not only due to internal developments within disciplines concerned with art, but especially due to increasingly profound changes in study

perspectives. Faced with questions arising, for example, from post-colonial or gender studies, what does this form of art theory have to say? A first solution comes from revisiting Locher's proposed definition: if art theory is a reflective form of writing on art, it does not truly disappear from the contemporary landscape, even if it undergoes radical transformation. And there is more: he shows how attempts to transgress the "canon" sometimes employ categories drawn precisely from the history (of theory) of art from which they would wish to distance themselves (cf. pp. 429-452). But what is ever more called into question is the very idea that something like "art," itself a Western and determined concept, exists; or, at the very least, that it still makes sense to speak of "art" in the face of artifacts originating from other historical and cultural contexts or, perhaps, even from the Western one.

While it is not a matter of 'defending' or 'propagating' a Western concept of "art," nor of diagnosing its "end" (cf. p. 11) – let alone proposing a canon for its theory – Locher addresses the problem by returning to certain features of what might be called his theory of art. However much one might try to do without it, art appears inevitable in its capacity to establish a space for dialogue and questions. Not so much – and here there is more than a hint of critical edge – in that it becomes an explicit vehicle for a theory, or for political or other content; but in that artists create art with consciously chosen (sensory) means, and it is in the consideration of the specific power of images that discussions on other planes can develop. The book's strength lies in the questions it manages to raise about the theories historically traversed, and about their interconnections. It is therefore appropriate that it concludes with a reiteration of its central (open) question: "the sensible experience [of art] is surprising, it encourages thought and contradiction, it invites participation and reflective observation – this means it also encourages theory or, more simply put, reflection on what art is" (p. 452). And it prompts the reader to do so, as the history traced by Locher exemplarily shows, across disciplines.

Index:

Vorwort: Die Kunst und ihre Theorie

- 1) Was ist Theorie? Was ist Kunsttheorie?
- 2) Kunsttheorie der Antike: Können und Schönheit
- 3) Die metaphysische Formel: Kunst und Kontemplation im Mittelalter
- 4) Aufwertung der Malerei: Natur, Poesie und Wissenschaft
- 5) Historiografie und Kunstregel
- 6) Die Kunstlehre der Akademien in Italien und Frankreich: Kanonbildung und Doktrin

- 7) Kunstkritik und Kunstgespräch: Geschmack und Urteil
- 8) Die modernen Wissenschaften der Kunst: Kunstphilosophie und Kunstgeschichte
- 9) Der Blick nach innen: Theoriebildung als Selbstbestimmung in Brief, Tagebuch, Lebensbericht
- 10) Kunstkritik als Form moderner Kunsttheorie: Visionäre und Apologeten der Modernität
- 11) Auftritt des Künstlers in eigener Sache: Streitschrift, Programm, Lehrbuch
- 12) Die Frage nach dem «Kunstwerk»: Kunst und Wahrheit im technischen Zeitalter
- 13) Kunstautonomie und Gesellschaft: Kunstwissenschaft, Kunstkritik und die politische Dimension
- 14) Zum Schluss: Entgrenzung (global, postkolonial) – Theoriebildung im vielstimmigen Diskurs

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(Davide Mogetta)

Nicola Perullo, *Aesthetics without Objects and Subjects: Relational Thinking for Global Challenges*, Bloomsbury Academic, 184 pp., ISBN 978-1-3504-9691-0

The notion of relation has become a dominant – some might say overemphasized – theme in contemporary philosophy. This can reasonably be attributed to the clarity with which the consequences of the Western project, long supported by a specific system of thought, are now unmistakably evident. Pinpointing the historical origin and evolution of this degenerative process – at least in its ecological and socio-political aspects – remains a difficult task, and one that has

troubled and divided philosophers for decades. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to say that at least since the post-Cartesian modern age, a strong epistemological impulse has taken hold – one that fractured the world into a knowing subject and an external *res extensa* to be cognitively mastered.

Nicola Perullo's latest work, *Aesthetics Without Objects and Subjects: Relational Thinking for Global Challenges*, aims to sidestep – not simply overcome – this dichotomy. "Sidestep" is indeed the more accurate word here, for if the book were merely replacing dualist metaphysics with a relational one, it could end up being a reiteration of a pattern long familiar to philosophy. Perullo, however, does not seek merely to interrupt the dualist dogmatic slumber by advocating a processual, becoming-oriented paradigm. From the outset, the text rejects any theory that does not remain aware of its own contingent emergence *from* and its vital entanglement *with* what it seeks to describe. As Perullo writes: "I cannot escape self-mockery as the death knell of any theoretical systematization." Yet, to ward off simplistic accusations of irrationalism, he adds: "This does not mean avoiding the effort of concepts, the friction of thought, the frustration of the unfinished, the dramatic nature of a condition. But we have a profound saying in the city I come from, which expresses like a koan everything I wish to convey: 'credici, ma non ti ci fissa'. *Believe it, but don't fixate on it*" (p. 25). This proverbial expression – at once light and profound – functions almost as a transcendental condition from which Perullo's project must be read. To say that the real is relational, as the book repeatedly affirms, is not to claim that this is more true, in an absolute sense, than saying it is dual. These are instead "different orders of experience, various planes of different perceptual densities" (p. 31). The point, then, is not to deny duality as such, but to refuse its ontologization – the move that reifies dualism as metaphysical ground. What makes Perullo's proposal radical – aligning him with process philosophers like James, Bergson, and Whitehead – is its refusal to exempt any premise from the dynamic of relation. Every assertion must circulate within the processual field, dissolving claims to absolute grounding. This leads us, as Perullo argues via a reading of Wittgenstein (filtered through the influence of Aldo Giorgio Gargani, one of his masters) into a kind of *regressus ad infinitum*: "Now, the bedrock is not the unconditioned final cause, the unjustified, absolute foundation [...], but the infinite regress of the groundless relational process" (p. 70).

The direction Perullo's work takes is twofold, as he himself explains: "On the one side, relationality describes the nature of the aesthetic; on the other side it expresses a particular disposition to perceive accordingly" (p. 13). Firstly, AWOS presents a conceptual approach to reality that challenges existing frameworks such as OOO (Object Oriented Ontology) or speculative realism, without ever taking itself too seriously, as is clearly shown by the playful use of acronyms like AWOS and PROO! (Process Oriented Ontogenesis, with the exclamation mark adding

emphasis on the action) which carry a subtle irony *à la* Derrida. However, AWOS is also a call to perceive differently – a shift with political implications, so long as we resist a too strict separation between perception and thought. As Dewey once noted, the power of aesthetics lies in holding together these two movements – thinking and feeling – and in this sense, aesthetic experience becomes not merely a discipline but a way of philosophizing. Indeed, the modal emphasis of AWOS is among its most compelling traits. William James once wrote that “philosophies paint pictures” suggesting that every conceptual system also implies a tone, a mood, a perceptual gesture. Philosophy, then, becomes akin to artistic creation. Perullo – taking seriously Wittgenstein’s dry remark, “Do you think I have a theory?” – does not value AWOS solely for its content, but for its capacity to creatively recombine disparate strands of thought (Wittgenstein, Nāgārjuna, Ingold, among others). This recombination is not only a means of crafting a more “true” alternative to speculative realism (though “true” should be understood in a pragmatist sense), but also a way of articulating a “divergent perceptual gesture that can respond to global needs and challenges that are before us today” (p. 1). Perullo insists that the ecological crisis is also, and perhaps primarily, a perceptual crisis: “Dualism has to do not just with land consumption, resource exploitation, and atmospheric pollution, but also with perceptual consumption, emotional exploitation, consumerism, individualism, and image pollution” (p. 11).

The book is structured in five chapters. The first introduces the ecological crisis and seeks to unveil its conceptual and perceptual underpinnings. Perullo argues that foundational assumptions of Western philosophy – such as the search for ontological grounding or the compartmentalization of knowledge – have become so crystallized that they impede the development of a genuinely ecological thinking. In their place, he proposes a radical eco-aesthetic paradigm rooted in a “syncretism without method.” Chapter two, arguably the densest, introduces the crucial notion of “planes of reality,” using different descriptions of a stone by physicist Carlo Rovelli and anthropologist Tim Ingold. Here, Perullo engages with the relational turn in quantum theory, not as scientific validation of his framework, but as a striking example of the failure of a thinking that treats its own conceptual tools as ontological features of reality. This chapter also develops a central concept: consciousness – not as subjective interiority, but, following James and Deleuze, as an immanent field of *withness* that precedes (albeit not chronologically) any separation. Chapter three directly engages thinkers such as Timothy Morton and Quentin Meillassoux. While Perullo shares certain premises with these figures, he diverges sharply on key points, clarifying his position through contrast. Particularly memorable is his remark: “Merely objectifying subjects does not diminish our anthropo-hierarchy, as it perpetuates a Ferris wheel within the grand amusement park of ontology” (p. 64). From this critique arises the need for further radicalization, rejecting post-humanism in favor of the idea of a *condominium*, moving

from “intentional agency” to “attentive agencing,” and even toward a non-dualist rethinking of animism. Chapter four addresses a longstanding interest of Perullo: haptic perception. The haptic is not merely a sensory register but the tool through which he enacts a perceptual shift from objects and subjects to processes. At the beginning of his work, he describes the haptic as “another way of naming the aesthetic relation” (p. 17). But it is precisely in its departure from conventional aesthetics – understood as the evaluative process of a subject-governed experience – that the originality of the haptic lies. If aesthetics has been reduced to a knowledge apparatus under subjective control then, Perullo provocatively suggests, “we could easily live without aesthetics today” (p. 116). In contrast, haptic aesthetics functions as a “call of consciousness” – consciousness understood not as an egoic position but as a task within the field of relational withness. The final chapter, “Artisanal Intelligence,” reflects on craftsmanship and quality – concepts that Perullo opposes to the dualistic cult of innovation. This holds true both in artistic practice and philosophical work. Perhaps the book’s richest and most open chapter, it hints at the future trajectories of the project: from aesthetic education “in a minor key” to the cultivation of a “haptic wisdom, aesthetic life.” It is not accidental that the last of the book’s sixty-six short chapters returns to the aesthetic, nor that the title invokes “Aesthetics” rather than a more generic “Philosophy Without Objects and Subjects.” To read AWOS only within the confines of disciplinary aesthetics is to miss its broader ambition. Aesthetics, for Perullo, is the modality through which philosophy might be saved from the triumph of *sophia* over *philia* – from a thought that reflects on the real while forgetting its co-emergence with it. Repairing this rift – which, although provisional and instrumental like every conceptual creation, has nonetheless taken on extremely convincing ontological appearances – is the task of the haptic as a call of consciousness. In this sense, AWOS offers an affordance, a compass, a way not to lose ourselves in the grand amusement park of ontology – always knowing, of course, that we are never truly found, and that the wandering will never end. Yet, must we go.

(Pietro Bertino)

Bertrand Prévost, *L'élégance animale*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2025, pp. 176, ISBN : 978-2-7073-6545-1.

«Se gli animali ci riguardano nella nostra umanità, non è certo perché con loro condivideremmo una comune natura di esseri viventi, ma piuttosto perché in loro si avvolge un mondo, un cosmo che insieme ci accoglie nelle sue pieghe e ci resta estraneo». Così si conclude il volume *L'Élégance animale* di Bertrand Prévost, edito dalle Éditions de Minuit di Parigi (2025). Un elemento centrale delle tesi sviluppate dall'autore consiste infatti nel mettere in luce il legame tra

cosmetica e cosmologia, allo scopo di ripensare le forme animali superando la prospettiva utilitaristica del darwinismo. In questa prospettiva, un argomento ricorrente nei diversi capitoli della pubblicazione è quello del *camouflage* e dei processi mimetici adottati dagli animali in natura: dal tradizionale esempio del camaleonte, le cui squame cornee mutano colore per adattarsi al cromatismo ambientale, fino ai casi più specifici delle meduse trasparenti o alle complesse danze di accoppiamento di diverse specie di uccelli. Sono fenomeni, questi, grazie ai quali gli animali sfuggono agli sguardi, contraddicendo così i tradizionali meccanismi adattativi della selezione naturale per obbedire a un altro principio, «che in realtà non è affatto meno essenziale per la sopravvivenza della specie».

La domanda sorge allora spontanea: in che senso si dovrebbe parlare di *eleganza* per descrivere i piumaggi e le pelli animali? Queste forme dipendono da un mero principio estetico comune, o producono anche un nuovo modo per pensare la soggettività e l'espressività animali? L'argomento cardine sviluppato da Prévost potrebbe essere formulato nei seguenti termini: i *modes d'apparence*, ovvero le informazioni esteriori che gli animali comunicano attraverso le loro apparenze, dipendono da una specifica *cosmetica animale*. La potenza espressiva di questa cosmetica, che emerge dagli effetti prodotti dall'interazione tra forma e superficie, contribuisce a costituire un mondo. Tre temi principali consentono di esplicitare questa nuova concezione delle apparenze animali: cosmetica, espressione e cosmologia. Queste ipotesi, il cui orizzonte si colloca in una riflessione di natura metafisica, permettono di emancipare l'eleganza animale da un'estetica limitata alle sole apparenze.

In *L'Élégance animale*, la cosmetica si configura come un piano di intesa tra l'uomo e l'animale. A sostegno di tale ipotesi vi è l'idea secondo cui le forme cosmetiche non assolvono unicamente a una funzione estetica: le apparenze non si lasciano infatti ridurre alle sole superfici a cui sono convenzionalmente associate. Questa concezione della *cosmétique* può essere ricondotta a una tradizione artistica che ha il suo punto di riferimento in Manet, negli impressionisti e nel principio aereo della trasparenza. Già in quest'ambito, il soggetto del pittore non concerne tanto il volto del modello, quanto piuttosto il velo di polveri che lo ricopre: ciò che conta è il *maquillage*, quel «polline di carne più che qualsiasi attrazione umana», come scriveva Mallarmé. In questa direzione, Jean Clay, nel testo di presentazione al catalogo della mostra *Bonjour Monsieur Manet* (1983), arricchisce il principio della trasparenza aerea come nuovo dispositivo pittorico, richiamando gli unguenti, i fard e i pollini che caratterizzano le opere dell'artista. Questi elementi, che appartengono tanto alla superficie quanto a una certa idea di superficialità—poiché il trucco femminile è tradizionalmente considerato segno di frivolezza—veicolano in realtà una profondità: quella propria della pittura ancorata al suo tempo. In questa prospettiva, anche l'eleganza animale non può essere ridotta a un principio finalistico, spesso associato a necessità riproduttive, né

semplicemente ricondotta a dinamiche percettive di ordine estetico. L'intuizione secondo cui gli animali si esprimono attraverso le apparenze consente al biologo e zoologo svizzero Adolf Portmann (riferimento centrale nel saggio di Prévost) di sviluppare la nozione di *Présentation de soi* (*Selbstdarstellung*): la capacità degli esseri viventi di manifestare se stessi attraverso la propria forma visibile, esibendo un'apparenza esteriore che non si limita a garantire la sopravvivenza, ma esprime una presenza autentica nel mondo.

Un'altra ipotesi sviluppata nel volume, che permette di riconfigurare il ruolo delle apparenze animali, riguarda il luogo stesso dell'apparire: non solo come superficie, non più come semplice esteriorità, ma come punto in cui interiorità e esteriorità si incontrano per diventare espressive. Per questo l'autore parla dell'interiorità come di un rapporto con lo spazio, riferendosi al celebre passaggio di Valéry, secondo cui «la peau est ce qu'il y a de plus profond», nella misura in cui essa è concepita come una superficie intensiva. L'esempio del paradisiero superbo (*Lophorina superba*), le cui sembianze sono completamente trasfigurate all'acme della sua danza nuziale, risulta particolarmente significativo. La sua facoltà trasformativa è talmente potente da rompere radicalmente con le proprie sembianze di uccello, rendendolo irricognoscibile, somigliante alla forma stilizzata di un volto umano. Un'espressività che presenta però la peculiarità di non essere necessariamente destinata allo sguardo. Al contrario, essa si sviluppa in funzione di una critica dell'otticalità, opponendosi all'idea di un occhio onniscente assunto come modello intellettuale. Per questo, l'obiettivo dell'autore è proprio quello di individuare modalità di visualità che si collochino al di fuori non solo della visione, ma soprattutto dell'esistenza stessa dell'occhio. «Se le apparenze animali sono espressive, scrive Prévost, è perché portano in sé il paradosso di non essere necessariamente fatte per essere viste.» Tra i numerosi esempi a riprova di ciò che si trovano in natura, si può citare quello della seppia (*Sepia officinalis*). Le striature naturali sul dorso di questo invertebrato evocano i movimenti della sabbia sui fondali marini, invisibili ai nostri occhi. L'espressività delle sue apparenze suggerisce qualcosa di più: che la seppia porta su di sé il mondo da cui proviene, a indicare che la cosmetica animale genera una vera e propria cosmologia.

Per questo, la forza espressiva delle apparenze apre a una dimensione cosmologica, secondo cui la cosmetica animale porta con sé – o per meglio dire porta su di sé – un mondo. Una cosmologia che si afferma a scapito della biologia, poiché, come sosteneva Portmann, l'apparire diventa anch'esso una funzione vitale. Ricordando il titano della mitologia greca, «gli animali, a modo loro, fanno come Atlante: portano il mondo, non sulle spalle, ma direttamente sulla loro pelle.» Al contrario della tradizionale concezione della *physis* come fondamento, qui la natura ha una stratificazione: minerale, biologica – del vivente – e simbolica – dell'umano. Se il naturalismo impedisce di pensare le ibridazioni, l'eleganza ani-

male permette invece di teorizzare i fenomeni di mimetizzazione, come espressioni dell'aderenza dell'animale al mondo. Il pappagallo che vive nella foresta amazzonica, porta su di sé il cromatismo del suo ambiente. Ma per comprendere questo, bisogna strappare il colore verde alla sua assegnazione fisica e biologica per renderlo espressivo di un mondo tropicale. In questo senso, l'animale porta in sé un mondo, trascina con sé il divenire verde del mondo. Ciò che prevale, è lo sradicamento, legato ai processi di territorializzazione e deterritorializzazione di matrice deleuziana. Il verde perde la sua sola qualità cromatica di semplice colore, e il pappagallo perde la sua sola qualità di animale per trovarne delle altre. Queste zone di vicinanza cosmologica rinviando ancora una volta alla questione del portare, dell'avere e del vestire. Gli animali configurano esteticamente il proprio mondo costruendo una territorialità specifica: il fatto di comporre una nicchia possiede, negli animali, una dimensione tanto semiotica quanto estetica, che si ritrova poi nell'arte. L'artista prolunga questa capacità e fissa tali meccanismi di territori e affetti in forme di rappresentazione che conferiscono una forma di eternità a questi modi di esperienza.

E dunque, imitando l'animale, un'artista come Louise Bourgeois costruisce le sue *Tanières*, che sono al contempo corazze e luoghi di rifugio. In questo gesto creativo, l'artista si esprime, nel senso pieno del termine: esprimere significa infatti, al tempo stesso, esteriorizzare e avvolgere. Tale facoltà nasce dal divenire animale dell'umano, un divenire possibile proprio in virtù dell'eleganza animale, là dove la cosmetica si riconnette alla cosmologia. L'artista prosegue questo gesto, lo prolunga, trasponendolo nel mondo umano: come l'animale abita lo spazio e porta su di sé il mondo da cui proviene, così l'opera d'arte diventa un luogo espressivo, che manifesta un legame originario tra corpo, ambiente e apparenza. «Sperimentarsi come una casa, come un dominio: gli animali, forse più facilmente di noi esseri umani, accedono a questa esperienza singolare proprio perché fanno coincidere comportamento (abitudini), dimora (habitat) e apparenza (abito).»

Indice del volume :

Introduction

Chapitre I. Nudités et modes animales

Chapitre II. Formes expressives

Chapitre III. Les animaux sans animalisme

Chapitre IV. La vitalité des apparences

Chapitre V. Subtilités cosmétiques

Chapitre VI. Camouflage élargi

Chapitre VII. Habit, habitat, habitude

Chapitre VIII. Les apparences inadressées

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ticelli, le manège allégorique* (2011); *Au cœur des pierres* (2020); *Marqueterie
générale, Hubert Duprat* (2020).

(Carolina Sprovieri)