

Peter Osborne. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London: Verso, 2013, 282 pp. ISBN 978-1-78168-094-0

The book under review is an important contribution to discussions on the nature of contemporary visual art. Peter Osborne has gathered in it the material he has been publishing on various topics pertaining to contemporary art and artists since the beginning of the millennium. However, *Anywhere or Not at All* is far from a collection of topical pieces. Osborne has reshaped seventeen of his articles into seven chapters, and while the seams within the chapters often remain tangible, they mostly do not distract from the larger picture Osborne paints. What unifies the individual chapters, as well as the book as a whole, is a philosophical agenda that can safely be labelled Adornian. Osborne joins the likes of Peter Bürger and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who have tried to apply the principles and strategies used by Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* to art to which he did not have, or could not have had, access.

Osborne's aim is not just to develop criteria for what counts as contemporary art. Instead, he seeks to construct a discourse of philosophical criticism of contemporary art. The success of his venture consists in his persuasive application of the Adornian perspective to the subject of contemporary art. As a result, the perspective comes across as a powerful alternative to other current theoretical approaches to contemporary art despite the fact that its key principles are not discussed at length. Rather than laying out arguments for an Adornian philosophy of art, Osborne prefers to practise it. Consequently, anyone disagreeing strongly with Adorno's philosophical framework will probably find many of Osborne's presuppositions hard to accept. Furthermore, those unfamiliar with Frankfurt-style Critical Theory and its vocabulary may be put off by the layers of jargon and Osborne's unwillingness to explain key conceptions to the uninitiated. In other words, Osborne's book is neither an introductory text nor a sustained philosophical argument for the continuing relevance of Adorno's aesthetic theory; it is an extended exercise in philosophical criticism.

Rather than presenting the content of each chapter in a consecutive manner, I shall outline what I take to be the main features of the Adornian alternative and discuss some of its consequences for assessing contemporary art which are drawn by Osborne. What makes Osborne's approach Adornian, then, are the following philosophical presuppositions he shares with the German philosopher:

(1) Any philosophy of art must start from reflecting on the historical and social nature of the categories used to understand, classify, and appreciate works of art in a given cultural setting. Or, to use Osborne's terms, an ontology of art must be a historical ontology.

(2) One cannot properly understand the situation of art in post-industrial, or late-capitalist, societies without appreciating the continued relevance of the categories and conceptions developed in German aesthetics in the period between the publication of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Hegel's *Berlin Lectures on Aesthetics*.

(3) A philosophy of art cannot be detached from art criticism, that is, from assessing the value of artworks.

(4) Art is one of the privileged means (if not the privileged means) of society's self-reflection. Given the social condition of the present, such art cannot but be critical.

(5) Art is both autonomous and a social fact. The tension between the two characteristics grounds its critical potential.

(6) Art is not the sole domain of the aesthetic, and concepts are not foreign to art. The aesthetic is a necessary but not sufficient condition of art.

(7) The aesthetic singularity of a work of art is mediated by social categories (a 'collective dimension of [artworks'] potential meanings', p. 85).

How do these principles inform Osborne's position? Osborne contends that contemporary art is still best understood as modernist art. Modernism means to him a 'collective affirmation of the modern', that is, an affirmation of the new as something that gives historical meaning to the present. Art remains modernist in so far as it is 'appropriate to the qualitative novelty of the historical present itself' (p. 74). As such, it is a privileged medium of attaining critical distance from the historical present and thus gaining historical consciousness. It is the goal of philosophical criticism of such art to assess to what extent a given work of art succeeds or fails. Osborne, like Adorno, is a distant heir to the Hegelian thesis that art is at its best the sensuous expression of the present state of collective self-consciousness. As Gombrich argued, the modernist obsession with the new was at least in part fuelled by the Hegelian idea of art as a sensuous embodiment of collectively held values: to be up to date artistically meant to be in touch with the substance of the times. Gombrich's general complaint was that to assume that there existed such a historical substance expressed in art was to assume the existence of a common 'spirit' informing the historical present and reducing individuals at best to its mouthpieces, at worst to its blind followers.¹ Gombrich's criticisms of Hegel have achieved the status of accepted wisdom among art historians,² and Osborne's unabashedly Hegelian position (in this specific sense)

¹ Ernst Gombrich, "The Father of Art History": On the Influence of Hegel' (1977), in *The Symbolic Order: A Contemporary Reader on the Arts Debate*, ed. Peter Abbs (Barcombe, UK: Falmer, 1989), 84–99.

² The story is reconstructed in Jason Gaiger, 'Hegel's Contested Legacy: Rethinking the Relation between Art History and Philosophy', *Art Bulletin* 93 (2011): 178–94.

may strike some as reviving the spectres of free-wheeling speculation. Yet despite the obvious drawbacks (namely, the necessarily speculative nature of isolating the historical present and the heavy metaphysical burden put on 'expression'), this position allows Osborne to interpret 'contemporary art' as a normative concept: art that is in critical contact with the historical present is contemporary.

Osborne opposes his brand of philosophical art criticism to other approaches which in his view fail to capture the critical aspect of contemporary art (if they take it seriously at all). While he welcomes the recent aesthetic revival in art theory (to a large extent indebted to the influential work of Jacques Rancière), praising it for rehabilitating the question after the specificity of art (pp. 7–8), he criticizes it for conservatively tying this specificity to the aesthetic and for neglecting the historical and conceptual aspects of art's autonomy (p. 10). This criticism also prevents him from endorsing the work of his fellow Adornian philosopher of art, J. M. Bernstein (pp. 10, 46). Given that developing critical concepts for evaluating recent forms of visual art is an aim of his book, it is hardly surprising that Osborne also has little time for approaches of visual culture studies, which generally substitute evaluative art criticism for a descriptive or sociological discourse. But he also distances himself from Thierry de Duve's reinstating the question of judgement at the centre of art theory. For de Duve, 'this is art' has, in the post-Duchampian context, taken the place of the traditional 'this is beautiful'. As Osborne rightly points out, this artistic nominalism liquidates the medium-based modernism of the Greenbergian variety, but does not provide any other (historically and socially grounded) mediating categories that would place the individual work within the realm of art (pp. 81–84).

The philosophical core of Osborne's approach is to be found in his twin interpretation of Conceptual Art as a romantic art and of the Early Romantic idea of art as conceptualist.³ The Jena Romantics (especially Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis) saw the work of art as the place of an infinitely actualizing totality. A work of art had, for them, the character of a fragment rather than an accomplished whole. On Osborne's reading, a work of art thus understood has the nature of a project where the stress is on the process, not the outcome, on the idea, not its materialization, of which there can be infinitely many. Thus interpreted, the Early Romantic idea of art indeed looks very similar to Sol LeWitt's vision of Conceptual Art as laid out in his 'Sentences' and 'Paragraphs'. Osborne sketches a genealogy of the Romantic legacy via Hegel's socialization and historicization of the conditions of art production, Soviet Constructivism, Conceptual Art, through contemporary

³ A possible relationship between conceptualism and Romanticism was first suggested by Boris Groys who in 1979 characterized Moscow Conceptualism as Romantic. Osborne offers a brief critical overview of more recent curatorial exploitations of the link (p. 229n46).

postconceptualism. He traces in this tradition the emergence of the idea of art as a self-conscious illusion of an autonomous production of meaning. Art's autonomy is mediated by heteronomous social categories and thus is illusionary. Yet it is not illusionary in so far as it distances itself from these social determinants. This 'dialectical' tension between art's autonomy and heteronomy is the source of art's critical potential (a core Adornian postulate). The tension must not be resolved within the realm of art lest art become merely affirmative and lose its critical function; the resolution must remain a horizon to which art infinitely approximates (the Romantic legacy). As an essentially critical practice, art can only succeed by failing to overcome the tension.

One way of rendering the tension between autonomy and heteronomy is to understand it as a tension between aesthetic particularity and conceptual generality. This was the tension that Conceptual Art in the 1960s tackled, though it favoured conceptual generality against aesthetic particularity. Osborne treats the Conceptual Art of the 1960s 'analytical' variety associated with Joseph Kosuth and the Art & Language group, and characterized by its absolute demand for de-aestheticization and dematerialization, as both a failure and an artistic success. Its failure, according to him, rests in the impossibility of carrying out the programme: art necessarily requires some form of materialization. But the failure is at the same time its success, because it has – despite the intentions of the artists – demonstrated the irreplaceable character of the aesthetic dimension. This does not mean that the conceptual has been driven out of art practice; quite the contrary: it has achieved a new visibility alongside the aesthetic. As a result, art after Conceptualism can ignore neither the aesthetic nor the conceptual (and in this sense is destined to be 'postconceptual'). Conceptual Art must be re-assessed as an 'experimental investigation of a particular anti-aesthetic desire', which in the end discovered the erosion of Duchamp's 'aesthetic indifference' (p. 49). The legacy of Conceptualism rests therefore in the irreplaceability and at the same time insufficiency of the aesthetic dimension for art.

One problem with this argument is the way Osborne treats the concept of the aesthetic, which for him includes both of its Kantian meanings: that of the aesthetic power of judgement from the third *Critique* and that of the spatiotemporal forms of the sensuous intuition from the first *Critique*. But while in the former case the power of judgement employs the mind's conceptual abilities (aesthetic pleasure accompanies the harmonious interplay between imagination and understanding, that is, the conceptual apparatus of the mind), the latter case involves only the temporal and spatial dimensions as transcendental conditions of our sensuous perception. Osborne is well aware of the difference, and he proposes that neither of the two meanings is able to capture 'the ontological specificity of "art"' (p. 49).

Nevertheless, more often than not (as we saw in his interpretation of the failure/success of analytical Conceptualism) he associates the aesthetic with its transcendental meaning, which in his interpretation is reduced to the sensuous, material anchoring of art. Consequently, the question of aesthetic judgement is largely missing from his discussion, and the aesthetic dimension of art appears in stark opposition to art's conceptual components. This then prevents Osborne from pondering the option that at least some forms of conceptualism – indeed the non-analytical, drawing on Sol LeWitt's work, which he favours – could be exploiting the proto-conceptual nature of the aesthetic.⁴

If Osborne is to live up to his ambitions, he must show in what respect contemporary art is a privileged epistemic means of gaining insight into the historical newness of the present. Osborne's strategy is to focus on the concept of the contemporary. For him, the contemporary is not just synonymous with the present; it is rather an 'inherently problematic but increasingly inevitable' 'way of referring to the historical present' (p. 22). The reason for its inevitability is the cogency with which it is able to capture the 'temporal quality of the historical present' (p. 17). This quality is presented as the awareness of the *contemporaneity* of distinct temporal experiences in the globalized world in which geographical distances play an increasingly insignificant role. Contemporaneity has the character of a disjunctive unity of different socially conditioned experiences of time. It is a postulated rather than an actually integrated unity, but it is nevertheless a precondition for the idea of the new and its corresponding expression to make any sense on the global scale. It is therefore also a necessary condition of the notion of global modernism that for Osborne is the frame of contemporary international art.

What is controversial about the concept of the contemporary for Osborne is that the postulate of a universal unity of temporal experiences may lure us into believing that there is a real, conjunctive global temporal unity, propagated in fact by global capitalism (a branch of which is the international art trade). According to Osborne, this illusion is implicit in the way the term 'Contemporary Art' is increasingly being used in the art world today. The label Contemporary Art helps to legitimize international art exhibited at various biennials, art fairs, and other grand-scale global art events, serving as a periodic category that comes after Postmodern Art (which in turn came after Modernism and the avant-gardes). For Osborne, art that wants to maintain its critical distance in such an environment

⁴ This direction has been followed by Diarmuid Costello. See, for example, his 'Retrieving Kant's Aesthetics for Art Theory after Greenberg: Some Remarks on Arthur C. Danto and Thierry de Duve', in *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice*, ed. Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Tony O'Connor (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 117–32.

must confront this simplistic idea of the contemporary with the idea of the irreducible disjunctive contemporaneity of socially determined spacetimes. Only thus can contemporary art be art critical of the contemporary.

How can this be achieved? Art must express this disjunctive unity by constructing its own distributive unity. In the course of the book, Osborne discusses several effective strategies, but for the purposes of this review it should suffice to demonstrate his approach by focusing on just a few interconnected examples. According to Osborne, the productive tension between the heteronomy of the social categories making possible the practice of art and art's claim to autonomy reveals itself in the need of contemporary art to produce art-spaces as non-places, that is, as spaces that enable it to stand out as art all the while remaining attached to its environment, which is most often urban (p. 140). With the increasingly apparent absence of intrinsic criteria for distinguishing art from non-art, the notorious white cube of the modern art gallery has become the major convention sustaining art's autonomy. Osborne contends that the white cube as a universal non-place isolating an art-space from the spatiotemporal axes of the everyday has run its course and can by itself hardly serve as a productive site of art; as such it only serves the illusion of a unified global spatio-temporal experience. Osborne insists that contemporary art, in order to remain critical, must go beyond just affirming the white cube as the autonomous art-space and seek ways of distancing itself from this institutional convention. He argues that one of the aims of contemporary art is to produce its own non-places, thus securing its autonomy.

One strategy for doing this, in Osborne's view, is the 'architecturalization' of art. Architecture, as one of the least autonomous of the traditional arts, is of necessity linked to the social demands of the day, and in this sense harbours a potential of privileged access to the historical present. Furthermore, the idea of architecture as the 'material organization of social space in the present' (p. 142) is located halfway between pure concept and its materialization. It is related to the conceptualist prioritization of the idea over its embodiment, yet adds to it a spatial dimension, thus compensating for the anti-aesthetic bias of conceptualism. Architecturalization – prefigured in the sketches of LeWitt and Mel Bochner, and developed in the art projects of Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, and Gordon Matta-Clark – amounts to the creation of ideal spaces determined by specified relations, but unrestrained by a single site, thus realizable in potentially infinite series. The conceptual as well as the material (spatial, 'aesthetic' in the problematic sense) nature of contemporary art are secured. One way Osborne offers of understanding a work of contemporary art is to treat it as a postulated unity of potentially infinite materializations, which is held together by a spatial configuration. It is on this ground that he criticizes the contemporary tendency to

'aestheticize' site-specificity, that is, to tie an artwork's identity to just one site of realization and thus to suppress its potential for creating a proper non-place that is always potentially plural and held together by a concept (pp. 109, 145).

As we have seen, Osborne's general approach is to take a phenomenon that describes a major feature of contemporary art practices and to discuss its most artistically (and thus also critically) effective use while criticizing its regressive or merely affirmative application. Generally, the criticism concerns the failure of the given art practice to be contemporary and postconceptual. For an artwork to be postconceptual it must be constituted by a concept that grounds its ontological identity across its instantiations. That does not mean that those instantiations do not matter; what it means is that their experience is radically insufficient for the appreciation of the artwork. Consider one example that Osborne uses, important also because it manifests another feature of contemporary art he stresses, that is, its 'transcategoriality', meaning that a work's realizations can cut across media boundaries. Matta-Clark's famous *Splitting* (1974) is not just the actually split house in New Jersey, but also its photographic documentation, photomontages, and collages of prints that came into existence at different times, all instantiating in some way the idea of cutting through an urbanized space (p. 145). In order to appreciate the work, all of these have to be taken into account as singular materializations of a concept. The work is a series, a project; it could either potentially take place any time and anywhere, or not exist at all (hence the title).

Osborne covers many other topics, which I have not discussed here and could not do justice to within the space of a review. (These topics include an innovative classification of modernisms; an argument for the centrality of photography to contemporary art and for constituting the digital image as the material medium of postconceptual art; a dialectical account of constructivism; and a critical discussion of the role of memory and history in contemporary art.) Suffice it to say that throughout the book Osborne shows an extraordinary sensitivity to the burning questions haunting contemporary art and an ability to ask the right questions about them. At such moments, Osborne's often convoluted prose is suddenly transformed into a strong beam of light shed on a vaguely familiar yet obscure artistic phenomenon that suddenly gains sharp contours. It is reasonable to predict that anyone wishing to engage philosophically with contemporary art will for years to come have to grapple with this difficult but ultimately rewarding book.

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