

Summer school: University of Antwerp, 25 to 31 August 2021

Title: Arts, Ontology and Politics: Foucault, Levinas and Beyond

Academic Coordinator: Arthur Cools

Organising committee: Arthur Cools, Jan Bierhanzl, Pascal Gielen, Geoffrey Dierckxsens, Leen Verheyen and Sebastian Müngersdorff

Keynote speaker: tba

Course Description

The meaning of art is not obvious in contemporary visual culture. We can no longer take for granted that it is simply about creating beauty. Nor can we say it is about provoking critical reflection, since this fails to explain why art is necessary for this reflection. Since Walter Benjamin's essay on the artwork, it has generally been accepted that the development of reproduction technologies has changed the meaning of art. In an era in which all individuals have become the demiurges of their own images and visibility, the question of how to distinguish artistic creation from this visual production has become difficult to answer.

In the wake of the postmodern theory of art, three concepts are dominant in contemporary art discourses. First, the notion of event: the artwork has an 'evental' character within a situated, social context. Second, the notion of materiality: the artwork draws attention to its own materiality, exposed in all its fragility beyond the familiar horizons or practical uses in the world. Third, the notion of art's singularity or irreducibility: the process of artistic creation can only be designed and evaluated on the basis of choices and criteria that are intrinsic to this process. Needless to say, these three concepts point in very different directions and do not in themselves clarify the meaning of art today.

The aim of this summer school is to explore the social meanings and the critical potentialities of artistic creation today and to discuss the contemporary theories that intend to account for it. The starting point for this exploration is the legacy of Foucault's discourse analysis, which thematises the entanglement of artistic creation in power relations, and Levinas's understanding of aesthetics, which strictly separates the transcendence of a work of art from the transcendence of ethics. We welcome student contributions (Master or doctoral level) that examine how and to what extent this double legacy is still at work in contemporary approaches to the relations between aesthetics, ontology and ethics/politics.

The following perspectives will be discussed in lectures, reading seminars and debate classes of the summer school:

1) The Subversive Element of Artistic Creation

Hate speech, sexual harassment, riots, random violence, terrorist attacks and so on have subversive effects on society and social interactions, yet they are not works of art. One of the main features commonly attributed to contemporary artworks is their subversive dimension, so it is important to define and distinguish this subversiveness as a specific feature of artistic creation. But what makes an artwork subversive and how does the manifestation of the subversive in an artwork contribute to critical reflection? Simon Critchley has drawn attention to a subversive dimension in Levinas's philosophy, linked with the theme of the 'there is' (*il y a*). Levinas introduces this notion in order to reveal the 'elemental' dimension of being, the presence of its materiality after the world has disappeared. Art is especially able to express or manifest this dimension. The notion of the 'there is' can therefore be used to explain the subversive dimension of an artwork. However, the 'there is' is in itself meaningless and cannot explain the meaning of an artwork. According to Levinas, the social

relation to the other is required in order to transform the manifestation of the subversive into a reflection which is fundamentally ethical. Does this imply that the distinctively subversive dimension of an artwork cannot be anything but ethical? How does the artwork establish a relation between the elemental and the ethical? Our aim is to compare this approach with other ways of conceiving the subversive dimension of artistic creation and to examine whether and to what extent this approach is still able to account for manifestations of the subversive in contemporary artworks.

2) The Ethical-Political Meaning of the Manifestation of the Artwork in Visual Culture

Judith Butler questions the radical distinction that Levinas makes between the work of art and the face of the other. She examines the concrete social and historical ways in which the face produces and effaces meaning in contemporary visual art and culture. From this perspective, she is able to thematise and analyse the tension between the reproduction of power relations in visual culture and resistance to these power relations by means of an ethical and political approach to visual culture. Butler shows, for instance, that while photographs can only be made within certain frameworks, including state and military regulatory regimes, some photographs can reveal the frameworks themselves and expose the mechanisms of restriction. In what sense does photography, and the work of art in general, constitute what Foucault calls the ethical-political dispositive, or what Butler herself calls “a disobedient act of seeing”?

3) Is There a Truth of Art?

The “documentarist turn” in contemporary art looks at the old question of the relationship between works of art and truth with new eyes. The question, however, is whether the truth of a work of art can still be understood in the classical sense of mimesis and/or authenticity, or whether it is necessary to reconsider its truth in light of a politics of truth (this notion is from Hito Steyerl, whose article “Politics of Truth” is a key reference here). The way in which Steyerl uses this Foucaultian notion allows for two very different interpretations of the relationship between art and truth. According to the first interpretation, the works of art themselves do not create anything in the proper sense of the word, but they do participate in a certain politics of truth insofar as they are expressions of the dominant power relations. According to the second interpretation, on the other hand, the works of art do represent political actions in themselves, which means that they may become means of resistance to those power relations. According to Steyerl, the political approach towards the work of art is characterised, in its very essence, by precisely this tension. We will attempt to interpret this tension by referring to the three fundamental axes of Foucault’s thought (power, knowledge and subject) and to the autonomy of the artwork and its social meaning in the broader context of critical theory. Besides this double meaning of the politics of truth, we will also discuss a third, ethical dimension of the documentarist turn: the dimension of the artist’s life itself as a means of manifesting truth.

4) The Role of Institutions in Determining Art

New media and technologies create new possibilities for artists to reach potential audiences without having to rely on the traditional art institutions. In the literary field, we have seen the rise of opportunities for authors to publish their work without having to rely on publishers. Musicians and visual artists can promote and sell their work on the internet. These new possibilities have led to a decrease in the importance of traditional art institutions, such as publishing houses and galleries. This decrease raises an important question regarding our contemporary understanding of art, since the emergence of this understanding is closely related to the emergence of today’s art institutions – they are the guardians of the criteria by which we judge works of art. When the art institutions lose their authority, it becomes less clear what the criteria are for determining whether a work can be seen as a work of art. How should we define the social meaning of art when it is no longer situated in an institutional framework?