

Dialogical Sublime: *Sensus communis* and the Excess of Intersubjectivity in Dialogical Aesthetics

The paper addresses the grounding of Grant Kester's model of a "dialogical aesthetics" sketched in his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), as a recent aesthetic paradigm which would be able to respond to the participatory shift occurred in visual arts the last twenty years and the communitarian arguments used for such a critical model of artistic practice. I will not try to address its validity as a description of a particular artistic set of practices (as a critical theory of art), but rather the very model of a dialogically-based community it relies on by using the kantian aesthetic ground of *sensus communis* in order to point out towards an ethics of otherness and an ontology of dialogue.

This phenomenologically-grounded model of community can be (and is actually) used in order to counter the structural violence at the heart of the identity-based models of a representational community and allow for the representation of marginal or local individuals as excluded communities outside the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion, majoritary/marginalized etc.

I. First, I would like to point out how and why the dialogical model of an aesthetic practice is not only the formal description of an artistic technique, but also the grounding for a particular critique of representation as violence against the other. In other words, the basic assumption I try to reveal by means of a patient reading of Grant Kester's theory is that it can serve as a basis for a critique of the notion of community as based on self-representation and "local" or "marginal" identity.

II. Secondly, I would like to address the very grounding of the dialogical aesthetics, taking into account the fact that it aims to counter Habermas's model of a community based on rational consensus with a community based on a particular reading of the Kantian *sensus communis*. The Habermas-based model of a "dialogical intersubjectivity" is known to offer a communitarian model of dialogue as the constitutive process of founding or grounding a community based on a particular rationale rather than on violence. Its weaknesses have also been repeatedly pointed out, one of the best known ones being that it is unable to between persuasion and argumentation, and uses the kantian "disinterested" discussion whereas argumentation is always a form of violence among the participants involved in that process.

In this respect, I would like to show that the notion of community Grant Kester relies on in order to counter the Habermas-based model of community as intersubjective consensus

relies on precisely on the model of the “inoperative community” sketched by Jean-Luc Nancy – as a particular phenomenological analysis of intersubjectivity, as radical finitude and exposure to the other, as Miwon Kwon also suggested. Such a model can be found in Kester’s own writings (particularly in his reply to Kwon at the end of his book).

III. Further on, I would like to develop a comparative reading of Habermas’s model of “communicative action” and dialogue as a rational process of argumentation with Nancy’s reading of *sensus communis* as a basis for such a community.

Precisely, there are several points that can be addressed by such a compared reading of the two:

- a) The so-called “sensus communis argument” supposes the already limited pertinence for the arguments of any participant in such a dialogue. Therefore, no position can claim to be universal, or better than the other.
- b) The *sensus communis* argument supposes that consensus-based decisions, as the outcome of a rational process of argumentation, would be replaced by the analysis of the pre-reflexive grounding of the dialogue
- c) The *sensus communis* argument replaces, therefore, identity representation with an ethics of listening. This uses a Levinasian ethics of non-violence as “openness” and “listening” to the other (sketched mainly in *Totality and Infinity* and *Par dela de l’essence*).
- d) Since the universality of feeling is also postulated, the universality of the community can never be accomplished but only thought-of.

IV. What I would like to show by means of such a reading of Grant Kester’s arguments and suppositions is that there are several consequences of the dialogical aesthetics paradigm which could eventually lead, paradoxically, to an “aesthetics of excess” paradigm in relation to the representation. My argument uses a rather deconstructive argument. Such an elusion of representation is introduced at the core of *sensus communis* - which gets us back to Lyotard’s interpretation of the Kantian sublime. Here, the main point I want to make is that dialogical aesthetics grounds itself ontologically rather on the kantian sublime as a relation to the realm of morality than on the *sensus communis* as the ground for the theory of the universality, necessity and disinterest of aesthetic judgements regarding beauty.

Frist, I would try briefly to point out how Nancy uses Kant in order to interpret *sensus communis* as a ground for such a paradoxical notion of a “community without essence” in order to make clear, in a second step of my argument, how Nancy’s own reading of Kant is disturbed by Kester’s oblique reading. And this particular reading, which I have exposed in

the previous section, occurs when it is used as a counter-argument against the Habermas-type rational model of dialogical communication.

Given such a reading of a “dialogically open community”, there are several “constitutive excesses” in the construction of the “self-other relationship” which is conceived as being constitutively de-centered towards the other. I would like to point out the following ones:

- (1) The structural impossibility of representation – this follows from (2)
- (2) The elusion of identity as a result of self-representation – a condition to maintain dialogue as an “open process”
- (3) The final demise of “logocentrism” and particularly, of “understanding” as a discursive medium for producing representation and identity. In Gadamer’s sense, there is only the shared understanding that already constitutes a community. But, lacking tradition as a common ground, as one of the major conditions of possibility for a dialogical participation in Gadamer’s theory of ontological hermeneutics, understanding becomes finally a mere postulate of dialogical aesthetics which is never to be actually achieved – just as the common sharing of the “senses” in Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment.

Therefore, the aesthetic understanding which is offered by the “sensus communis” argument as an intersubjective basis for an ethics of dialogue is either too fragile or too general to lead to any discursive consensus among the participants to such a dialogical process.