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Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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The European Society for Aesthetics

Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: [secretary@eurosa.org](mailto:secretary@eurosa.org)

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# *From Universalism to Singularity, from Singularity to Moralization*

Lev Kreft<sup>1</sup>

*University of Ljubljana, Slovenia*

ABSTRACT. The thesis of this paper is that ahistorical singularity allows for moral appreciation only, and that the artworld atmosphere has become the atmosphere of moralization. Singularity was introduced and widely accepted as a remedy for generalization (for instance, to introduce dominant artistic historical style) and hierarchy (for instance, to install the leading national culture and produce a scale of artistic late-comers, under-developed and primitive artistic cultures) which can still pretend on universality. Moralization is not the same as moralizing about art; moralization is transfiguring the grand narrative of aesthetic modernism into a singular narrative of moral responsibility as the only way to appreciate art, artists and artworld(s). In the past, this kind of approach to art used to be specific petty-bourgeois attitude towards high-brow culture, but is now becoming dominant approach of the artworld and against the artworld. Aestheticization of everyday (Alltag) is accompanied by moralization of its artistic charisma. As much as modernist art belonged to charismatic and extra-ordinary, contemporary art escapes the aesthetic regime and, by taking responsibility for chosen causes, introduces moral criteria as genuine criteria for art's appreciation. While ethical regime of art is necessary to establish Plato's philosophically structured community, artistic regime of moralization is necessary for global regime of pseudo-collectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Email: [lev.kreft@guest.arnes.si](mailto:lev.kreft@guest.arnes.si)

## **1. How to Do Things with Art?**

Long ago now, during preparations for an exhibition, a professor (male) who intended to put some women's work examples on display, asked: »Why have there been no great women artists?« Linda Nochlin who died last year is believed to answer this question:» In the article, Nochlin states that there are no great women artists not because they were forgotten by history but because of the unequal training available to women in the world's art institutions.» That is what we find in the Encyclopaedia Britannica on Linda Nochlin written by Naomi Blumberg. (Blumberg), and it is correct. But this is not the only thing that Linda Nochlin did. Her approach, often misunderstood in women's studies and feminist literature for a sociological one, has been strictly philosophical, even Socratic in questioning the question itself to find out what its presumptions and its tacit knowledge are. She dismissed the temptation to start immediate answering, because that would just mean to name many lost and neglected women artists. Without criticism of the question itself the result still does not reach its purpose: all collected women works cannot satisfy the need for as many excellent female as there are male works of art, and all these arguments for women's artistic merit may not be enough to demasculinize the artworld. Another way to answer is to claim that "there is a different kind of 'greatness' for women's art," (Nochlin, 148) and, in consequence, to build some kind of feminine substantiality expressed in feminine art which has to be evaluated under conditions of female and not male criteria. While it is important to express femininity freely whenever and wherever one wishes to, even in art, this is

still not the crucial answer; but it is the post-modern answer. Postmodernism was not around at a time of writing of her article, but she dismissed the idea to build an artistic “city of women”. “The problem lies not so much with some feminists’ concept of what femininity is, but rather with their misconception – shared with the public at large – of what art is... The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, and free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned, or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation.” (Nochlin, 149) Why have there been no great female artists, then? To get an intellectually interesting answer, one has to question the question itself by dealing with misconceptions about what art is, and with generalizations and universalism which rule the artworld. Universalism, because it turns Western male Christian heterosexual and ultimately modern artistic ‘habitus’ into universal principle of all humanity, and generalization, because from such fake universalism on it organizes all the world’s art around generalized ideas about what art is, and arranges all artistic cultures of all cultures, nations and races into hierarchical scale where, of course, those from the West stand on top, and all the others follow them in a row which sinks deep enough to include all primitives of the earth. All three answers (that women were omitted and neglected by art history; that expressions of femininity are evaluated under masculine terms; and that women could not get proper artistic education) are empirically true, but they cannot eradicate what is implicit in the concept of art as a field of cultural universalism. Even more: opening this universalism to pluralism and



multiculturalism, for instance, by allowing at least one Inuit's artwork to be presented among great works of art, does not solve the problem. The problem is at the same time social and conceptual; therefore it can't be fully resolved by relativization based on social justice: it needs conceptual deconstruction of the aesthetic hegemony over the artistic field.

When we confirm that engagement in art "involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, or free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned, or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation," (Nochlin, 149) we don't just have in mind that women were deprived of entering such systematic learning. The fact that an initiation into moving and changing system is necessary tells that art is a disciplinary institution, i.e., an institutionalization of power.

That dealing with power of and in art calls for historical and social analysis, and at the same time for conceptual deconstruction of the aesthetic understood as the dominant function of (modernist) art was confirmed by postcolonial and decolonial studies. Postcolonial studies in the field of culture initiated by Edward Said (Said, 1979; Said, 1993) had to confront questions like "Why there are no great Arab poets in world literature?" One could, and it has been done already, easily find many excellent poets in the Arab language throughout centuries. One could, and it has been done already, argue that the world literature is organized to accept what white Christian male finds great. One could, and it has been done already, prove that colonialism devastated Arab culture and is still doing it. All these

answers are true, but they do not touch the most relevant point: what kind of concept is literature? – a question which takes into account that literature as a concept is a machine organizing inclusion and exclusion, evaluation and devaluation, and universal hierarchization like so many other machines of modernity. It may be that this concept, or the concept of art get changed into direction of multiculturalism, including the expression of “Arabness” on equal terms with the other expressions of particularity, but among these particularities which are all accepted there is always a hint, and usually more than a hint of universality and hierarchy which organizes multiculturalism into dominant (in relationship with previous monoculturalism) but still dominated field (by criteria of literature evolved and prevailed in the West during second half of the nineteenth century). (Williams, 1983, 182-188; Eagleton, 2003) Relationship between culture and empire produced Imperial Western culture and promoted it into the universal culture as “the elevated area of activity...which seemingly had nothing to do with imperial violence.” (Said, 1994, xiv) Similar questioning of art as a system with hierarchical structure, relationships of domination and especially selective inclusion/exclusion procedure established in favor of an abstract figure of Western heterosexual male arose in other domains and fields, art being no exception. Universal concept of art enforced by colonial imperial power promoted non-Western communities into ‘natives’ and ‘primitives’ and ‘barbarians’. In nineteenth century their artefacts were put in the final room of museums of natural history, later they re-emerged in ethnographical collections and only recently they were accepted in art museums – especially contemporary ones where hierarchical principle

invented by enlightenment disappeared. “What art is?” was transformed from search for definition of art into attack against universalism. Instead of looking for philosophical scrutiny which could relocate universality from its Western radical particularity, multicultural relativism became esthetically, artistically and politically acceptable approach because it seemed to be the only sure way to avoid any universality and get rid of any kind of the Whole, or totality. This tendency is an aspect of re-Westernization, as its results prove. Decolonial aesthetics started in a radically different way: what has to be examined is the place of aesthetics in the colonial matrix. To be able to critically analyze it, one has to break away from European aesthetic distinctions and hierarchies established by generally accepted definition of art (done by Batteux in 1747) and inauguration of aesthetics as philosophical discipline (done by Baumgarten, 1735 and 1750). Decolonial aesthetics does not aim for a new, opposing generalization but it introduces views from ex-colonized locations as positions from where those characteristics of modernity and its art which are invisible from the position of the West as the provider of cultural and epistemic resources come into focus. Decolonial aesthetics makes the position of the colonial subject a universal position from which the Whole of the world system is taken into account. That is how *delinking* (initiated as *déconnexion* by Samir Amin, accepted by Walter Mignolo as *delinking* and became quite near to Situationist *détournement*) from the colonial matrix of power on the epistemic level becomes possible. (Mignolo, 2014) Such delinking was not applied with multiculturalism and its relativization machine. Consequently, into evaluation of art was instead of the hegemonic aesthetic introduced –

singularity of artworks and artistic events, because such singularity seems to be the end of universality, but accepted really because singularity allows for power relations of inclusion and exclusion to be active after the aesthetic modernism together with autonomy of art lost its power.

## **2. How to Do Things with Post-Modernism?**

When post-modernism crossed the Atlantic from the U.S.A. to continental Europe, European left intellectual and artistic circles reacted in unison with their American colleagues: post-modernism is reactionary ideological invention which honest leftists should deny any right, not even a proper name. It was not until Fredrick Jameson introduced post-modernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1984, 53-92) that these Marxist and post-Marxist circles accepted to use a notion of post-modernism and enter the discussion on post-modernism without an attitude of angry rejection. Nowadays, when many scholars decided to put post-modernism in past tense, introducing contemporary art as the newest label in most of these cases, and when there are more and more museums of contemporary art growing like mushrooms (how many museums of post-modern art are there?), Jameson intervened again, and once more in the favor of post-modernism as still useful tool for understanding of such contemporaneity. (Jameson, 2015, 101-132) In the text from 1984 Jameson insisted on necessity to think post-modernism from the point of view of Marxist dialectics of history against merely stylistic understanding: “The conception of postmodernism outlined here is a historical rather than a merely stylistic

one. I cannot stress too greatly the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism: the two approaches in fact generate two very different ways of conceptualising the phenomenon as a whole: on the one hand, moral judgments (about which it is indifferent whether they are positive or negative), and, on the other, a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History.” (Jameson, 1991, 45-46) In 2015, defending his position from 1984 in the same journal (which, however, went in the meantime through as many schisms and changes of opinion as possible on the left), he insists on post-modern singularity as a key notion and concept. To bring what he developed in 1984 up to date, he says that postmodernism needs elaboration of globalization as a process which was not taken into account enough, and elaboration of singularity. His description of singularity goes from introductory notes to historical relations in the economy of derivatives as founding space of singularity, and finally gets at examination of artistic singularity.

There is a difference between individuality and singularity. Individuality is in opposition to distinctive, perfectly adequate representations which are not sensitive and therefore – not aesthetic but conceptual and scientific, wrote Baumgarten when he used the term *aesthetics* in its modern sense as a discipline for philosophical research of the logics of sensitivity and preception. (Baumgarten, 1985, 14-15) Individuality is where poetic function of language can start because it is determined by unending chain of sensual properties; take one away, and

individuality is not just divided but – dead. Singularity is in opposition to plurality as that something which escapes inclusion into multitude of phenomena or events, but can still be conceptualized as literally “one of a kind”, i.e. as a genus with just one and only species. That is why Jameson himself characterizes singularity as “unique”. (Jameson, 2015, 115) In art, singularity means that artwork is born from singular idea which is repeatable to infinity without building collectivity or conceptual unity. Repeating lasts until art starts to signal artist’s name as its proper content. There is a concept, but it is singular, says Jameson. This is undoubtedly a paradox, if not contradiction, even if it is explained as postmodern nominalism. Singularity is temporal in a way of its own, because it comes after modernity which “in the sense of modernization and progress, or telos, was now definitely over,” (Jameson, 2015, 104) which consequently brings about “the notion that singularity is a pure present without a past or a future.” (Jameson, 2015, 113) It comes as another paradox that this unique entity without a future is something alike to – futures, or as they are called now, derivatives. Derivatives, beside their singularity, are produced by decomposing which turns attributes of unity into independent processes, and then play a game with these processes taking into account their random variables. Jameson explains relationship between derivatives and post-modern singularity using Marxist dialectics. One could, however, also introduce a stylistic way of connectedness in the manner of moral judgements, positive or negative, which treat derivatives as speculation and (un)moral game played for uncertain gain, or, as a free play of creativity. Morality of “Anything goes!” could be interpreted then as de-composing of

unity (the Whole, totality) into a game free of rules enforced by grand narratives. Singularity produces unique examples unleashed from unity and universality, exemplifying an excess of meaning which does not allow for inclusion into any concept with more than unique or singular application. Evaluation of such singular specimens from the point of view of grand narratives is not possible because of their randomness, but can use morality for evaluation of events without need for any absolutes, universals, or foundation. For moralization it is typical not moralizing which turns any event into morally suspicious event, but its random choice of judgement between moral sin and moral glory. Typical for moralization are stored samples of body liquids which, at any time when it becomes possible, may decide that heroic winner was in reality a doping villain. Another typical example comes from art itself: artist as genius on the other side of normality has been excused of multiple sins, and his or her artworks were highly appreciated in spite of their sinful lives. In modernity, of course. Now, when an artist (or any other supposed celebrity) is accused of sexual harassment he or she is destroyed by public opinion functioning as moral police before legal process and its possible sanctions take place, and his or her artworks are thrown out of museums where they were included beforehand with a glory. The principles of moralization are not the principles of Magna Charta but principles of “zero tolerance” and of “war on sin”. As a singular gesture or event, artwork remains so tightly connected to its author that it rises and falls together with his or her moral excellence or sinfulness. Discourse on singularity is strikingly similar to a person who would, abhorred by all atrocities of humankind claim that humans are not a species. Reducing time

into everlasting present (which includes past and future into its derivative game as something which is happening just now) brings afore post-modern sort of artwork: “Today we consume, not he work, but the idea of the work...and the work itself, if we can still call it that, is a mixture of theory and singularity.” (Jameson, 2015, 114) More of a stochastic process than aesthetic one, art “produces no future out of itself, only another and a different present – but it is not a continuity: it is a series of singularity events. (Jameson, 2015, 122) Finally, Jameson calls for Utopia to end such state of affairs: “I myself feel that, for the moment and in our current historical situation, a sense of history can only be reawakened by a Utopian vision lying beyond the horizon of our current globalized system, which appears too complex for representation in thought.” (Jameson, 2015, 121)

Fighting generalization with singularity makes moralization powerful; fighting moralization with critique of political economy of financialization makes utopia necessary to re-introduce a sense of history. Read it as you like it, Jameson suggests that without utopian understanding of time there is no history. Such remedy (together with post-modernism) for contemporary troubles of the Western definition of art and aesthetics needs its own medicine: delinking.

### **3. Conclusion**

After it lost its autonomy and position of power in the grand narratives of modernity, the artworld had to introduce another kind of power to enable



inclusion and exclusion process to go on. Artworks cannot be judged as beautiful or not, as novelty or tradition, or as true or false because these once intrinsic parameters do not apply on contemporary art. They have to be judged as singular events by application of criteria external to art. Prevailing kind of criteria are coming from the field of popular morality which measures the acceptability of art's causes, these causes being external to art itself, or, in the same manner as in any other show business with celebrities, scrutinizing the artist as a moral or immoral person. There are so many cases of moral censorship that it is useless to start naming one after another. But that artworks are victims of immoral life of their makers is news. Richard Meyer was accused of sexual harassment, and Sotheby decided to close the exhibition of his works in S2 Gallery in New York; web site informing about his artistic career disappeared as well. The same accusation against Chuck Close caused that Seattle University withdrew his auto-portrait. When each artwork is singular, it invents another definition of art as a reason for its existence, but this definition is activist and moral. Many other interesting cases happened just in the last period of one year, and may be followed at *Artnews* web page: every argument for or against artworks is a derivative of moralization, and the sharpness of their point is not deciding between successful or unsuccessful artwork but about its moral right to be shown and exposed in public, or not. Just to give a direction, I can name the case of Xu Bing which involves live insects and other animals, or, Omer Fast who profiled Chinatown's identity. In all of these and many other cases, I did not find a word about artistic merit of these works, but there was a multitude of moral arguments. Moralization is a product of public opinion

which now, instead of proverbial nostalgic cafés inhabits virtual space of new media where massive and engaged presence of public gives birth to new moral police, new moral judiciary and new moral state of law. What is going on is not that a public machine promotes, on one side, new celebrities, and, on the other side, new culprits. It produces celebrities to turn them in the next moment into culprits. To be famous for 15 minutes means that everyone can become a moral monster the very next moment, and the outcome deletes his or her artworks from the public and even private space. This kind of production I call moralization. That art(ists) are participating in these processes means that art has really become part of culture without any discernible distinction between art and other cultural regions. It is not philosophy now which disenfranchises art under terms of aestheticization. Art is judged under terms of moralization which enable the artworld, or the field of art to remain a field of power after its own autonomous power has left the field. The result is that now curators don't have the first and the last word about it but members of boards who represent managerial community or state apparatus, but in the first place – public opinion of the new media, and do not want to lose their face for the sake of morally questionable activist purpose of the artwork, or because of morally suspicious artwork of morally guilty artist being exhibited.

Is there another power of art which can replace aesthetic modernism and contemporary moralization? Alice Koubova proposes to use Donald Winnicott's "so called transitional space of play as a space where art and one's self get constituted in a complex game of powers." (Koubova, 2018). This space is collective space of art and culture, in-between purely objective

reality which we cannot bargain with, or, following Kant, even do not have access to, and purely subjective intimate self. (Winnicott, 2005) Herbert Marcuse, independently from Winnicott, stated that “Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance.” (Marcuse, 1978, 73) Long before Marcuse or Winnicott, Karel Teige’s last statement of *The Fair of Art* is: “Longing for liberation of poetry, dream, phantasy and love has to take part in the reconstruction of history as well.”<sup>2</sup> (Teige, 1977, 7) Moralization is killing poetry, dream, phantasy and love. It petrifies the world disabling its longing to speak, sing, and perhaps dance. And contemporaneity is a time charged with need to reconstruct history. Philosophy of art, while discarding theological aesthetics of artistic modernism, cannot but fight artistic moralization. Not in the name of utopia but for the sake of poetry, dream, fantasy and love.

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by L.K. Original: »Touha po osvobodzení básněá, snu, fantazie a lásky musí být také účastna na rekonstrukci dějin.« (Teige, 1964, 60)

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