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MARTÍ PERAN & GERARD VILAR

# Art and Aesthetics

## A conversation on Catalan aesthetic thought

The history of aesthetic thought is one of the most glaring gaps in Catalan historiography. The fact that there is no strong tradition in this field makes things even harder. However, although our contribution clearly derives from other contexts, this does not stop one getting an idea of the kind of literature that has accompanied modern and contemporary artistic output. A great deal of data needs to be weighed in pursuing the subject. The following conversation is simply an informal way of raising various themes, which may be explored or altered later on.

→ **Martí Peran:** Gerard, I suggest we conduct this interview-cum-conversation in a very informal way, without following any kind of order so that themes can be discussed as they crop up. With this in mind, before mentioning names and local traditions, perhaps it would be worth commenting on where aesthetic reflection is currently to be found. I believe that in addition to conventional essays (published books, etc.), contemporary aesthetic thought is waxing in fields such as artistic and literary criticism and indeed in all literatures. Of course, this has a lot to do with the way

modern heterodoxy has displaced culture from centre stage. In any case, I think it important to ask to what extent aesthetic thought should respect historic patterns.

**- Gerard Vilar:** It is true that many new forums for aesthetic discourse have sprung up over the last twenty years, while some of the old ones have been abandoned. This is due to the sprawling growth of the Art world, that is to say the sheer range of institutions covering Art today. Two decades ago, there was no IVAM, no MACBA, no CaixaForum, no Reina Sofia. The Art market was very thin, as were the number of Chairs of Aesthetics at universities. There were few Art magazines and the names of Art critics would have fitted on a single sheet of paper. There has been an Art explosion—some might even say too much of a good thing. This “Big Bang” has led to the emergence of new forums and new professions, such as exhibition curator. However, that does not mean we are living in the best of all possible worlds. We have a very poor track record in the aesthetics field and despite a growing institutional framework, our theoretical output remains tiny. Catalonia has given the world some excellent artists but an aesthetic discourse needs the kind of framework, habits and traditions that we lack. This is changing, it is true, but there is very little to boast about.

Another obvious factor in the growth of forums for aesthetic reflection is the change in the nature of Art since the end of avant-garde movements. The frontiers we used to accept—between *high* and *low* art; cultured art and art for the masses; art and fashion; art and design; art and advertising— have vanished. Photography, video, hacktivism and net.art have become accepted as art forms. Thus aesthetic reflection on comics, political discussion on P2P and art criticism of TV ads are now all considered legitimate fields for aesthetic discourse—things that would have been unthinkable until fairly recently. Whilst respecting its roots, aesthetics is opening up to new cultural realities. Hegel’s aesthetics responded to the challenges of his age, as did Adorno’s.

We, however, live in another age and hence the need for a thorough overhaul of the lexicon and arguments we employ.

**- Martí Peran:** Notwithstanding this contemporary cross-cutting approach, I believe that the kind of aesthetic reflection found in Art Criticism—while pretty meagre—is a truer reflection of this reality than the kind of thought that thrives in purely academic circles. What I mean is that the traditional notion of ‘aesthetic thought’ is still all at sea, conceiving Art as if it were “an island entire unto itself” and is still speculating on the nature of Art. By comparison, the heterodox literature on aesthetics that has sprung up in all kinds of forums and formats, steers clear of what art is. Instead, it concentrates on a dialogue with those practices that are considered historically relevant, whether or not they meet fancied criteria as to what constitutes “Art”. Given this disparity of criteria, the question that should be asked in Catalonia is whether one can hope for much given the muddled discourse in such a woolly field as art criticism. The problem is only exacerbated by the lack of an orthodox tradition of academic thought which might be easier to review or renew.

- **Gerard Vilar:** It is best not to lump things together, even though there is some linkage. Foucault was right to distinguish between thought that analyses reality and that which takes an ontological approach. Wondering about the ontology of Art is both legitimate and inevitable. What interests us is another matter altogether. There is no obligation to find

philosophical questions interesting. Most people find speculation on ‘time’, ‘truth’ and ‘art’ deadly dull. The same goes when it comes to Heidegger, Danto or Derrida’s philosophies of art. By contrast, studying contemporary criticism and history is much more exciting, it is down-to-earth and much easier for the man in the street to understand. The problem for those of us who were taught the German classics or Foucault is whether doing one thing means sacrificing the other. In other words, can one philosophise whilst turning one’s back on the present or grasp the present whilst spurning philosophy? The question as to whether something is “Art” may seem humdrum to a critic but it is a better one than many others. It is not a make-believe issue.

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That said, I think the liveliest and most incisive reflection today is provided by art criticism, which is the field where there is real dialogue regarding artistic practices. We philosophers should follow their lead and learn from them to discover new categories, concepts and arguments arising from new kinds of art. By the same token, we should consider the differences and discontinuities in what we call Art, a concept that is used for such a jamboree bag of things that it perplexes rather than illuminates and no longer has anything to do with beauty, happiness or spirituality.

- **Martí Peran:** It is no news that Catalonia lacks a strong modern philosophical tradition. I believe this is due to a historical circumstance: unlike other countries, there was never a middle-class revolution here that turned the bourgeoisie into a social class fostering civilisation and public works. The roots of the Catalan middle class lie more in the countryside than in the towns. With this background, it is easy to understand why philosophy —and by extension, the philosophy of art— in Catalonia lags so far behind the rest of Europe.

- **Gerard Vilar:** This country has never been fertile ground for thought —quite the contrary. It is the old problem of the Peninsula’s lack of enlightenment, the sway of ultra-reactionary Catholicism, a miserable public sphere for rational discussion. This situation lasted four centuries and was compounded by four decades of Franco’s dictatorship. By contrast, thought, science and rational debate flourished on the other

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side of the Pyrenees. Our official, academic philosophy has been out of the historical mainstream. For example, Francesc Mirabent (1888-1952), Professor of Aesthetics at Barcelona University, spent his life seeking an ideal, neo-Kantian definition of Beauty which had nothing to do with the realities of Western Culture or indeed with the local one. Those creative souls beyond academe's ivory towers were off-beam characters like Francesc Pujols

or philosophically inept neo-Classicists like Eugeni d'Ors. This did not begin to change until the 1950s, when José M. Valverde wrote *Cartas a un cura escéptico en materia de arte*<sup>1</sup> and Juan E. Cirlot and Arnau Puig their essays reflecting on Art.

Succeeding generations were increasingly like their Western European counterparts. Yet the historical deficit in this field continues to weigh heavily. Barcelona may be a centre of Art, Design and Contemporary Architecture (though less so than we would like to believe) but when it comes to aesthetic reflection, it is depressingly mediocre.

- **Martí Peran:** At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Catalonia's national reawakening was accompanied by a new aesthetic movement —*Noucentisme*. In this context, one should note the effort made to develop aesthetic thought that could be applied right away, especially through the use of modern tools such as education programmes, the press, and so on. Even so, its ideas were clearly inspired by an idealist, highly conservative class that feared more daring forms of modernism. Modern aesthetic thought in Catalonia suffered as a result.

- **Gerard Vilar:** A stereotype of Catalans is that they bounce between common sense and impulsiveness. Yet when it comes to aesthetics, it was 'common sense' (of the timid petit-bourgeois variety shown by "El Senyor Esteve"<sup>2</sup>) that prevailed. When aesthetics did take a more daring, pioneering line, it was based on conservative or reactionary positions. The most radical aesthetic theory in Catalonia in the 1960s was that espoused by Dalí. His surrealist texts, statements and interviews foreshadowed much of what happened from the 1980s onwards, with the irreversible conversion of Art into business and a key part of the media culture. Dalí just happened to be the brightest of the bunch —or at least in the same league as Andy Warhol. Indeed, he was the first to put Coca-Cola into his works, twenty years before Andy Warhol!

- **Martí Peran:** Maybe there were political reasons for this "prudence". It is curious that unlike what happened in Madrid with people like Valeriano Bozal, here there was virtually no left-wing aesthetic that might have aided opposition to the dictatorship.

To be blunt, Marxist aesthetics were used more as a rhetorical weapon than as a consciously-chosen methodological tool. Alexandre Cirici's work had some followers here but his unceasing output was of a highly impulsive and spontaneous nature.

**- Gerard Vilar:** Yet this problem is not limited to Aesthetics, Art Criticism or Art History. Neither our left-wing intellectuals nor left-wing politicians were up to the mark. Marxism in particular was superficial, doctrinaire and uncritical. The ideology was so shallow that it was wiped off the map. There has never been a left-wing aesthetic stimulating genuine free thought. However, this is a deep-rooted problem with left-wing thought in Spain in general and in Catalonia in particular. Even so, there have been signs that this is changing, MACBA's initiatives being an obvious example.

**- Martí Peran:** All things considered, I think the positivism of the period is an interesting aspect despite the attempt to use Art to enshrine national character. In this respect, *Noucentisme* was paradoxical in that it was an idealising, class-inspired movement driven by a highly specific notion of culture. This paradox is a kind of historical stigma. Certain periods of the avant-garde are read from this standpoint. For example, it is revealing that many exhibitions are still held abroad with the aim of showing off Art that supposedly embodies 'the national character'. This applies as much to the murals of Joaquim Torres-García as to Tàpies' informal works.

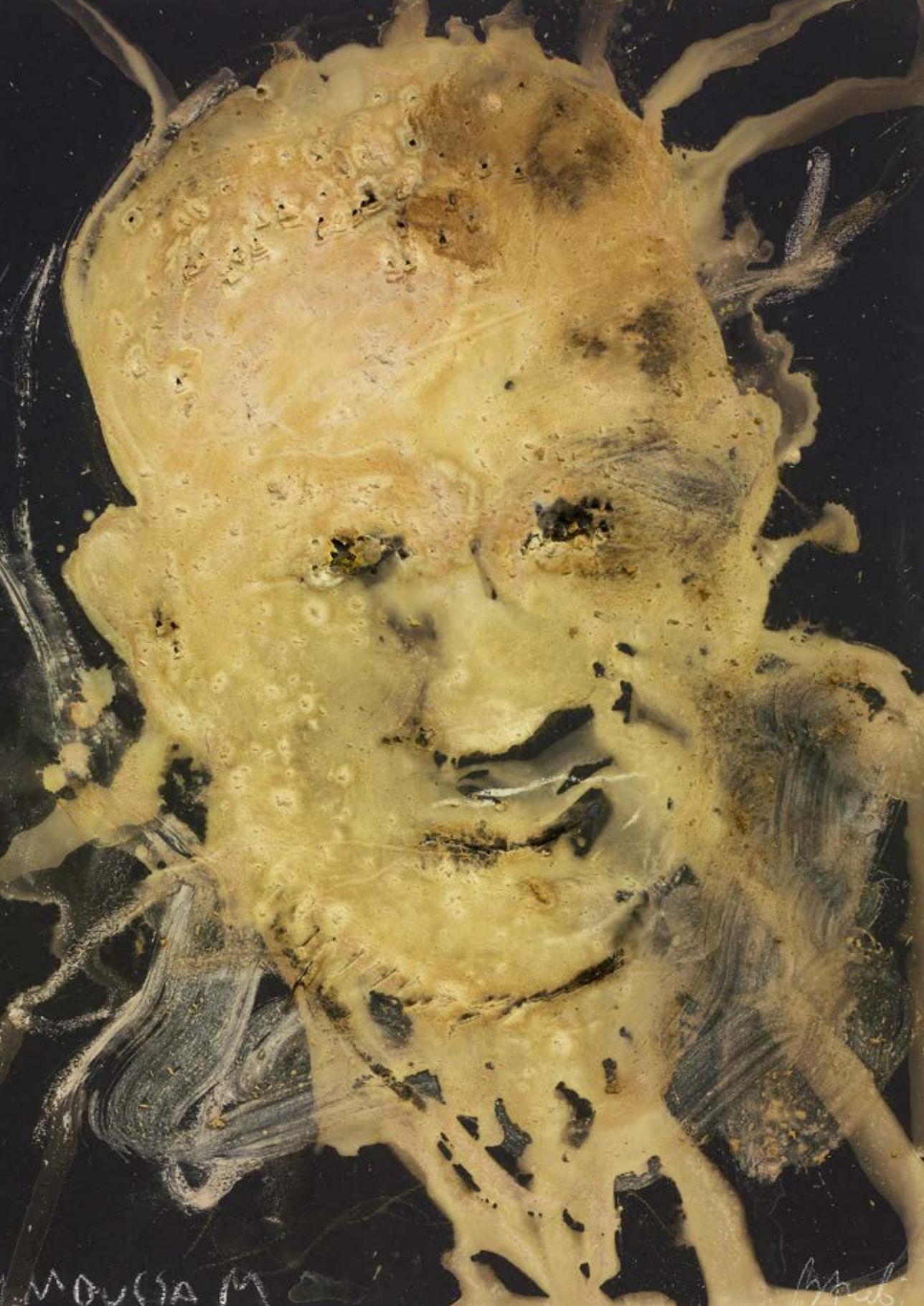
**- Gerard Vilar:** This has been a Catalan obsession for over a hundred and fifty years and, from what we have seen over the last three years, the issue of what defines the nation will haunt us for a long time to come. There is no post-national era on the horizon. The latest exhibition in New York on Catalan Art and the events surrounding the Frankfurt Book Fair speak volumes. It is just a fact of life that we have to live with. For many people in Catalonia, recognition of their national/cultural identity is a key theme and Contemporary Art cannot ignore that. Even so, we should be highly critical for, in a globalised world in which there are kids from fifteen countries in a classroom, the nationalist discourse no longer makes any sense.

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■ <sup>1</sup> Letters to a priest sceptical of Art [translator].

<sup>2</sup> A well-known character in a play by Santiago Rusiñol (*L'Auca del Senyor Esteve*, 1910) [editor].



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Art here plays an ambivalent role because it is both a form of community cultural expression and a critical, revitalising way of thinking about the world. Tàpies defends modern, progressive art but one of his outsize canvases is used as the backdrop in the Catalan Government's conference room. One day, there will be

works by Muntadas, Plensa, Expósito and Perejaume<sup>3</sup> as manifestations of Catalan Culture. Those of us who are not on this institutional gravy train must ask searching questions — a task we will no doubt be saddled with for the rest of the century.

- **Martí Peran:** In reconstructing the centres of aesthetic thinking over the last few decades, two that stood out in Barcelona were Xavier Rubert de Ventós' circle in the School of Architecture and José María Valverde's circle in the School of Philosophy (Félix de Azúa, Eugenio Trías, Rafael Argullol, Antoni Marí). This generation showed a certain interest in aesthetic reflection and set the pace in this field until the late 1980s (covered by the magazine *Saber*, directed by Josep Ramoneda). Here, I think one can say that the German Idealist School was in vogue and one could maybe link this with local current throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Outside these circles, contributions in Catalonia have been sporadic and lacking in continuity. A shining exception is J. F. Yvars, who without a shadow of a doubt is one of the best art historians Catalonia has ever had.

- **Gerard Vilar:** You are right. I belong to a later generation but I began my academic career as an assistant to Xavier Rubert de Ventós just as he was taking up politics and leaving the philosophy of aesthetics behind him for ever. German Idealism, with its links to *Noucentisme* conservatism and academic philosophy, is the thread linking all the people you mentioned. Trias, who might seem to be an exception because he was initially strongly influenced by French structuralist and post-structuralist philosophers, was basically a Neo-Hegelian at heart. Indeed, he even developed a systematic philosophy (the Philosophy of Limit)<sup>4</sup> drawing on his own disciplines: ethics, politics, aesthetics. The influence of Romantic Idealism is clear in all three. Perhaps this should come as no surprise. After all, children often take after their parents, whether for good or ill. Likewise, our field often spawns ideas that bear the marks of their forerunners. One should also note that Catalan works were largely sundered from what was going on in aesthetics in the rest of the Western World.

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■ <sup>3</sup> Antoni Muntadas, Jaume Plensa, Marcelo Expósito and Perejaume are artists working today in Catalonia [editor].

<sup>4</sup> See <http://easy.bibref.com/PUV-0005-AAA> [translator].

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linguistic twists in philosophy and hence of Art aesthetics and philosophy fell on stony ground. It was a missed opportunity. Maybe it is because Valverde was not a philosophical heavyweight and it was hard to follow the thread of the argument he was then weaving. Perhaps it is because we have always given more weight to *logica utens* than to *logica docens*<sup>5</sup> when it comes to aesthetics. Just consider that most, if not all, of the big names in Catalan aesthetics over the last few decades were writers as well as theorists. All of them had written at least one novel or book of poems. They are essay writers rather than writers of tracts or aesthetic criticism.

The people mentioned never attended international congresses on aesthetics nor were they ever invited by the Tate Modern or *Documenta* to give lectures. That generation was largely cut off from international currents. Fortunately, that is less true of those of us who follow in their footsteps.

What does surprise me is the total failure to capitalise on Valverde's legacy in the field of aesthetics. His defence of

- **Martí Peran:** That is true. Although the dichotomy may be a little overstated, the German model is particularly marked in the most hidebound sector. That is precisely why the most heterodox reflections on aesthetics and a cross-cutting approach to contemporary culture are to be found as spin-offs from the French model. However, in both cases, the frame of reference is largely based on literary theory, whose application leads to very mixed results.

- **Gerard Vilar:** Historically speaking, Catalan aesthetic reflection on art has always been less important in both quantity and quality than reflection on literature. I believe our visual culture is much greater and well-established than our literary tradition. Yet judging by the amount of critical reflection dedicated to the latter, one could be forgiven for thinking it was the other way round. The first Catalan aesthete of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mila i Fontanals, was —along with today's aesthetes— trained more in literary theory (especially French) than in the theory of the arts. This has meant that with a few honourable exceptions, Catalan Art Historians have been less interested in theory, interpretation and criticism and much more to classification, archive study and dry description. Those of us who study aesthetics find little joy in reading the country's Art Historians whereas poring through the works of Literature Historians is much more fun. Here, I am thinking of works by the likes of Maravall or Guillén.

■ <sup>5</sup> See <http://easy.bibref.com/PUV-0006-AAA> [translator].

- **Martí Peran:** Turning to something much closer to home, I wonder if you could give me a brief self-portrait. I see your work as highly unusual in the Catalan context in two respects. The first is your interest in and possibly identification with figures like Adorno —a philosopher who has largely been ignored here. The second is your belief in the need to establish links with contemporary artists through ventures such as MACBA's publishing projects or the Master's programme run with the Miró Foundation. I know it is a bit of a tall order but I am interested in pinning down the role played by these kinds of initiatives.

- **Gerard Vilar:** Well, I am a Post-Marxist trained in Germany and who studied with Manuel Sacristán and Jürgen Habermas but without becoming a disciple of either. I believe that Critical Theory, in its broadest sense, continues to be as applicable today as it was in Marx's time. That said, Marx's, Adorno's or Habermas' categories may or may not be applicable to the present. My aim is to make a small contribution to a long tradition of intellectual rigour and philosophical creativity in approaching problems from emancipatory, libertarian and egalitarian standpoints. Adorno —a little-known thinker in Catalonia— has always interested me as a philosopher who defended differences, liberty and memory, a thinker who held up aesthetics to the arts so that he could grasp whither the latter were bound. It is true that he was a bit of a moralist —something that is anathema for the contemporary world— but that does not invalidate his most fertile intuitions and concepts.

I am highly critical of Adorno, Benjamin, Marx, or Habermas but I have learnt much from them even though sometimes it is more on the relationship between ethics and politics (a field I have moved in all my life) than on aesthetics. I have also learnt from Sacristán and Habermas that dialogue with the analytical philosophy of the English-speaking world can be highly productive —a point on which I differ greatly from Adorno. Unlike him, I do not believe in unintelligible philosophy.

With regard to more practical, pedagogical projects, I have tried for years to redress the lack of a sound theoretical base for aesthetics and the theory of art in Catalan academe. In fact, there are also gaps in the history of contemporary art. When I set up the Master's Degree in the Aesthetics and Theory of Contemporary Art at the Miró Foundation, many students wanted us to tell them what was happening on the Contemporary Art scene. That is because their university programmes ended with Surrealism or Abstractionism. Setting up the Master's programme —now in its 9<sup>th</sup> edition— involved working from the ground up to remedy the defects of our current education system. I only hope things improve and that the needs we identified will be met. That would allow me to concentrate on what really interests me, namely: fostering small, top-notch research groups. There seem to be fair prospects of achieving this aim. In any case, I think the future of critical theory is assured when one looks at the way the world is going. We need to think about Contemporary Art more deeply and renew our terminology. We should also adopt a transformational, questioning approach to both ethics and politics in the process ||