

Sense-without-Sign

For an Ethics of Creation

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Abstract

This article is the fruit of a collaboration between a painter and a philosopher. They have previously worked on an experimental documentary on objects and objects of art shot at the Palais de Tokyo, the painter has illustrated, first of all in black and white, fictions of philosophy, writings on the occasion of a festival on lost films organized by UNdocumenta in South Korea, then English translation-by-photographs of oil paintings. This writing on painting and philosophical ethics is their first text in common.

Keywords: philosophy, ethics, paintings, creativity, invention, meanings.

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1. The Impossible Encounter of Philosophies

In 1647, Descartes met Pascal in Paris, in 1676, Leibniz came to find Spinoza in Amsterdam, on 22 March 1911, Bergson and Russell lunched together at a restaurant while Russell came to give lectures in Paris. These encounters have something in common, that nothing had filtered them. Now, it is not anecdotic, two creative philosophers cannot comprehend themselves, this is a constant and specific trait of philosophy. There is an "open secret" of a philosophy, and the cogito of the philosopher remains obscure, in that he cannot comprehend every philosophy. The "contemporary" can be gauged in this incomprehension, in effect philosophies seem to be comprehended or compared only when they are given in a historical frame.

2. How to Recognize a Painting?

We consider three paintings recognized as such: a Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows from the 14th century by Mantegna, a pre-cubist painting by Cézanne from the 19th century representing an apple on a table, and a more recent white monochrome by Robert Ryman. Already, these three paintings have an author, they are the work of a painter. But did this painter only paint them? It is clear that good sense consists in saying that it is indeed Cézanne who has painted this apple on a table, the same for Mantegna (even if, at the time, we can presume that, the canvas being a studio work, some apprentices had to execute parts of the composition), and this is still the case for Ryman. These paintings are attached to a painter, they have a title and exist in the painted corpus of a painter. But here, we have to say that these three painters are only the operators of painting which arrive of themselves from certain conditions posed by the artists. The paintings arrive and the three painters recognize them as paintings. They recognize them first, and it is that which authorizes them to be called the author. These three artists are called painters for the reason that as a function of certain conditions that they put in place (daubed canvas, quality of an oil, rabbit skin glue, tension, clamps, pure pigment cyan, magenta, Van Dick brown, humidity of the air,

glaze, time, movement) certain paintings arrive. Their role qua painter is essentially to recognize paintings and to recognize them first. Their role is to recognize first, things which arrive (in part because of certain conditions which they have organized) and are paintings. This means that they engage others, as soon as they have first recognized a painting, to recognize it as such. And, in general, one must note that those that they recognize are recognized as such next by the art circuit, which is a circuit of integration (that which partly rejoins George Dickie's position¹). The first thing to note is thus this general ontological character, that painting albeit created by the painter is a kind of being that arrives, which relieves of a type of *there is* and detaches from the being of the painter, as being a painting. Can one say that the painting created by the painter is a manifestation of the painter? An expression? Maybe, but in this text, we would want to advance the hypothesis that every painting is a painting of clouds. From this equality generalized to all paintings: any painting whatever = a painting of clouds.

3. A New Philosophy Loses Other Philosophies

There is a paradox proper to philosophy. When a philosopher elaborates a philosophy, when he becomes philosopher, he loses the other philosophies, their particularities become like icons or portraits of philosophies, "I am Leibnizian", "I am Kantian", "I am Sartrean". When one passes from one icon to another, the philosophical moment of truth is not in one or another but just in the instant of passage from one to another and it is the capacity to identify this passage without icon and narration which makes access to philosophy. A philosophy is created as critique, as correction or surpassing of an opinion or posture extracted from another philosophy. It advances by excluding others, it makes alliances by losing other philosophies.

4. Every Painting is a Painting of "Clouds"

It is thus important to consider that a painting of Cézanne representing an apple on a table, a painting of Mantegna representing a Saint Sebastian crossed by arrows, or yet a white canvas of Ryman are paintings of "clouds" (cf. Damisch 1992; Maire 2017). So, although none of these paintings assert the cloud as its subject, from an ontological point of view, they are "cloudy". There is the appearance of a forcing, but only the appearance, since the identity proposed for being valid should be comprehended at another

¹ George Dickie's so-called "institutional" theory consists in defining the ontology of the work by the recognition of a milieu authorized to legislate on the being of works of art. An object is instituted as a work of art because it is recognized as such by an authoritative community on the matter. A weak ontology of objects of art which are linked to the institution validating their status and which is not considered in-itself but in relation to a punctual authority (cf. Dickie 1974, Beardsley 1976, Yanal 1994).

distance from the point of view. Often when one looks at a painting one is placed at a meter from it or a little more as a function of its size. In fact, one is placed at the right distance of iconicity. But have you never seen a painter look at a painting? He looks at it very closely since he wants to know if he is second in the recognition of the arrival of a painting and will not accept the distance of iconicity.

What is more, he places himself beyond the legitimating institution which says in the museum or gallery, "attention there is a painting, it is certified!" – which has the defect of not authorizing anyone to recognize them second. He, the painter, comes to lay his eye much closer, he comes to see the details of the material and the painter's touch and he looks where he does not see the motif, since he is indeed attracted by another thing: the cloud. So, it is not about saying that Cézanne's red apple would be a sort of flamboyant cloud and that the table would be another kind of a little brown cloud, and the space around would be vaporous clouds. It would be about, in the case of recognition in second, not recognizing the iconicity of the representation "apple on the table", simply because one comes to recognize the painting according to the modality of another distance. That Mantegna be obligated to a certain religious iconicity, that Cézanne be obligated to figuration, even reduced to the poor vestige of dead nature, and that Ryman be obligated to the modern primacy of the *all over*² surface, are historical particularities. The iconicity of their work is historic, contextual, linked to a given epoch, we would dare say that this iconicity, the visual and signifying sense³ of these paintings, is anecdotic. Thus the ontological character of these paintings is elsewhere, outside their signified sense and to be conceived by the exercise of another distance.

5. Philosophy as an "X"

This paradox conducts us to treat philosophy as an "X", as a phenomenon which is not completely known. We cannot comprehend it by making a list of its authors, Plato showing the Sky and the Aristotle the Earth, this would be knowledge as formed from the outside, from a historical and not philosophical objectivity. This list, is however what the philosophers do, when they see themselves from a rather Platonic (the "X" of dignity) or rather Aristotelian (the dignity of each "X") lineage. And yet the Sky and the Earth are like the horizons of philosophy.

6. The Conceptual Paradigm as Anecdote of 21st Century Painting

At the beginning of the 21st century, a start well underway since we are, at present, writing this text in 2017, the major contemporary anecdotic paradigm is that which relates to the conceptual statement. The art of

² [trans.]: "*all over*" in English in the original.

³ [trans.]: "Sense", in this text, should be understood in terms of meaning before in those of sensation.

contemporary painting, except to qualify what is particularly pompous – and which will be brought outside of historical inscription –, is conceptual. Ryman was not conceptual, neither was Cézanne nor Mantegna. What makes a conceptual painting is still a relationship to iconicity, not to painting. It should not be mistaken and believed that I disqualify iconicity; no, it is a necessary shell, but it is not in iconicity that the being of the painting resides, it is in its non-signifying expression. This non-signifying expression, *sense-without-sign*, is firstly recognized by the painter and the recognition of this arrival permits the painting to be saved and presented to a third party, the model of an integration circuit. It is important that a painter knows to finish a painting even without knowing why. We can consider that finishing is recognizing it in its being as an arrived painting. Whether a painting is good or bad stems from another question, that of a qualitative judgement, but whether a painting is one, stems from an ontological judgement. So, the painter can like certain paintings less than others and consequently deduce that some are better than others, but this does not take away the ontological status of being a painting from those that are less liked. We can thus see why I first made paintings of clouds. I made cloud paintings to recognize that what came to me in the studio were paintings. I did not yet know how to recognize them, so this conceptual strategy posing an identity allowed me to recognize my paintings of clouds as arrived paintings, since a painting is always a painting of clouds according to the conceptual identity that I have posed. But over time, becoming a painter as I had already been between 1996 and 2002, a period when I made many paintings, I knew how to recognize my paintings otherwise than conceptually. You would tell me: So why not have painted something other than clouds in this case? Since you then knew how to recognize a painting without having to qualify it conceptually as being a painting? I believe that by continuing to paint clouds, I was doing double paintings, each painting was a painting twice, conceptually recognized (by its conceptual iconicity) and also otherwise, by this way that we do not know to say when we stand at the right distance.

7. Autonomous Usage of Philosophies in Another

Among these limits, the philosopher makes an autonomous usage of other philosophies in his and without this gesture there would only be isolated philosophical works. An autonomous usage takes the philosophy of the other as the thing itself in its proper discourse. So the other philosopher speaks in himself, as if he had transformed his voice and his music into a counterpoint [contrepunt], but “without” encounter [rencontre]. In this “without”, we recognize something of philosophy which escapes from the icon, a principle of generosity – it is the opening, one can pass from one philosophy to another –, and a principle of non-exclusion – it is the secret of the negation against loss, there is a multiplicity of right of philosophies, invisible in the lists or series. Ethics for philosophy consists of manifesting in this open secret the multiplicity of right and generosity,

therefore of no more being altogether in philosophy, but outside of it, with it. It is an ethics for a new philosophical style.

8. Sense without Sign

Ryman, Mantegna, and Cézanne did not meet, but every painter or spectator of the 21st century has seen their paintings. Their paintings have met since then in the appreciation of every spectator. The paintings of Ryman, Mantegna, and Cézanne, and these are absolutely random examples, meet by also composing in most contemporary paintings. But what is the quality of this encounter? Past, arrived paintings are mixed in the following paintings, in the new paintings which arrive, according to a particular modality. Ethics is here the encounter of the incommensurability of the arrival, it is a sky composed of clouds. This sky, a plane of encounters, is void, it is a zero, and what manifests there is not stable, a lieu of formation [prise de form] in continual change. What is fixed in this sky, the lieu of formation of clouds, is no more iconicity, that we have defined as a plane of vision dependent on a certain distance of perception. What is frozen in this sky is designated by a finger, it's a child who points their finger at a cloud, it's an adult who tells their friend to look there, it is such form, etc.... The frozen clouds are indexed clouds, they are not said, but pointed out [montrés du doigt], they are anterior to the access to nomination, clouds like paintings are pre-said. So, paintings are said by indexation, on the condition of the impossible of their nomination. Then the gazes cross after having seen the unnamable, and in the eyes which are rejoined after having seen a non-said painting, one sees a new sky, a new lieu of formations and phantasms. The void perceived in the juncture of these eyes is the ethical condition of the composition of an unspoken encounter, that of another painting without-sign.

9. Conclusion

There is no interdiscipline, given passage, or known between the philosophical work and the painting. The philosopher cannot imitate the recognition of the painter, nor the painter repair the philosophical non-encounter. What can ethics do in this nonsymmetrical space? Rather than being a product of philosophy, it is what organizes this space between recognition and the non-encounter. It is an ethics for philosophy, rather than the inverse. Ethics forces to greet other philosophers without the grudge of the loss necessary for invention and allows the painter to know the distances which make him experience recognition. This ethical space is unknown, cannot be recovered by the philosophy of access or the artist's pre-nomination by indexes. It is this unknown which is ethics: sense-without-sign. The moral treatment of given situations escapes ethics, since it is without said-rules but an indexation process and acceptance of loss.

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