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Filosofía iberoamericana y aspectos diversos de la tolerancia
Ibero-American Philosophy and Varied Aspects of Tolerance

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Toleration: Ibero-American Philosophy and Varied Aspects of Tolerance
Augusto Castro, Victor J. Krebs (editores)

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Thinking with Images

Toward an «aesthetics of the visible in the visual arts, I argue that the meaning of such a work of art is a function of how, in the interstice between what is visible and invisible, the visual image itself thinks, how it speculates, conjectures, theorizes and opines. More globally, I argue for an approach to the philosophy of the visual arts that multiplies the points of entry into a painting, a group of photographs, an object, video, or film, to generate, and dare to hold together, a plurality of related perspectives risking, in every interpretation, losing itself in the plurality of related perspectives without ever losing its way. This aesthetics thrives on works of art generally thought to be «difficult», in the sense a child is said to be «difficult», unruly, having a mind of her own.

The title for this paper is taken from the title for the Introduction to a collection of essay I am hoping to see in print soon. It is also, of course, taken from an expression introduced by Gilles Deleuze in his comments on film making; more about that in a moment. The volume I have assembled was originally conceived as a place to collect several essays about philosophy and the visual arts. Some of the essays were already written. Some were projected to fill divisions of the visual arts drawn, not altogether arbitrarily, along lines laid out by the work already in print. I had no more ambition, at first, than to expand the fields I had begun to explore in my reflections on painting, photography, film, and the installations of Marcel Duchamp. What I'd like to explore with you, today, is whether what I've written in these expanded fields has come to something more, something that connects the otherwise individual essays and my various thoughts about philosophy and art, something greater than the sum of its parts, something I would venture to call an «aesthetics of the visible»¹.

If there is something connecting my thoughts and these essays, this aesthetics turns up on two different levels. Locally, observations about what is visible and invisible in particular works or groups of related works of visual art lead to reflections about the complicity between thinking and the creative process at that locale. The point is not to say what the works of art in question mean. The idea is to show that meaning is a function of how, especially, in the interstice between what is visible and invisible, the work of art itself means, how it thinks, speculates, conjectures, theorizes and opines. More globally, this aesthetics of the visible argues for an

¹ The concept, which is taken from the title of the volume I have collected, «Aesthetics of the Visible in the Visual Arts», compares nicely with that proposed in a recent volume by SHAPIRO, Gary. *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003. What Shapiro uncovers in the itinerary of the human faculties I locate in the objects themselves.

approach to the philosophy of art that multiplies the points of entry into a painting, a group of photographs, an object, or a film, to generate, and dare to hold together, a plurality of related perspectives offered as an interpretation. This approach thrives on works of art generally thought to be «difficult», in the sense a child is said to be «difficult» —unruly, hard to pin down, having a mind of her own— and it risks, in every interpretation, losing itself in the plurality of related perspectives without ever, or so I am prepared to say, losing its way. For the hedge against getting lost in the multiplicity of meanings rendered is a commitment to selecting perspectives or points of entry suggested by the works of art themselves rather than by the demands of a theory or theories these art works are supposed to illustrate.

This last point, especially, flies in the face of much that has been practiced as aesthetics or the philosophy of art up to the present. It challenges the principle assumptions of every aesthetics that takes particular works of art as exemplary of art in general and philosophy of art as a general theory of art as such. As it is ordinarily conceived and practiced, aesthetics or the philosophy of art regards works of art, insofar as they are works of art, as the sites of something entirely and generally ineffable (Heidegger) or transformative (Adorno) or exemplary (Greenberg). An aesthetics that accounts for the relevance of properties discounted by the dominant philosophy of art (Danto's, perhaps) advances on the traditional model of aesthetics, but it falls back into this tradition when it generalizes these properties across different works and derives claims about the art of commonplace objects from its own theory. But what can it mean to give an aesthetics of a particular work or a particular group of related works of art, as I am proposing, here? Do the works in question share no features with ostensibly unrelated works that could be relevant to a theory that accommodates them? Does the theory in each case, assuming for the moment that something so particular could count as a theory, admit of no generalizations that would make the interpretation of one work relevant to the interpretation of another?

Nothing is compromised for the alternative view I am proposing by answering the last question in the affirmative so long as what is generalized is a resistance to elaborating a theory in advance that can be applied, with only slight variations, to various, however «difficult», works of art we might find. And, following that very general proviso, there is much to be gained by allowing works of art to direct our interpretations of them, taking as clues answers to questions about the medium, the subject matter, or the formal properties of each work, the social and historical context in which they were created and in which we find them, their provenance, as well as the theories and practices relevant to the production, exhibition, appreciation and evaluation of the particular work in question, and so on. It is, precisely, by exploring, in every case, the number of different interpretive possibilities for a single work and the possible interpretations of several different works of art that, on my view, something generalizable and provisional as a theory of the visual arts begins to take shape and make a background against which to figure new interpretations of the same, related, or quite different works of art.

Moreover, by restricting my studies and my claims to the visual arts, I believe I am able to take advantage of the shared material qualities of the works considered, the manifestly visible forms from which these paintings, photographs, films, and installations are composed, to draw real connections between these works of art and their interpretations. At the same time, I contend, attention to these visible forms reveals what is more profoundly shared by these works, namely, what is invisible in them, what, for the sake of the visible, is not seen or seen only in its absence, by the connections formed or indicated by what we do see. On the one hand, then, an aesthetics of the visual arts of the sort I am proposing gives an interpretation of the convergences (connective, disjunctive, conjunctive syntheses) of the constituent features of a particular work of art, an account of how, for example, the medium and the specific qualities of this particular pigment covered canvas and the conditions of its becoming covered give meaning to the forms that take shape on it without recourse to an overarching theory or philosophy of art. And so far this is nothing extraordinary. It is a variation of the formalism or neo-formalism that has dominated modernist art criticism for over a half century (in the U.S. at least). On the other hand, this «aesthetics of the visible» connects the features of this particular painting, say, to other works of visual art, other paintings but also other photographs, installations, and film, that all, in their own way, ambiguate the field of visibility and invisibility in them and, by doing so, think, that is to say, posit and defend some belief about the function and value of representation in art. There's a lot to clarify here. What I mean by «fields of visibility and invisibility», what it means to «ambiguate» those fields, and how ambiguity can be a form of productive thinking, a form of thinking capable of positing and defending beliefs rather than the sort of metaphoric rambling that begs, precisely, to be disambiguated. I promise to repay your patience with examples that demonstrate concretely what I have in mind if you will indulge a brief discussion of the context for these thoughts, a short account of what has prompted my turn to thinking with images.

What I've described as an aesthetics, so far, could be most generally characterized as a logic of sensuous experience. But that's probably too broad to be very helpful. What counts as sensuous experience, whether that's even the way to describe the phenomena, what counts as logic, and what might possibly link the two are all debatable. Beyond that, whatever this logic or these sensations might be, aesthetics has a history, and I am convinced that history must be accounted for in any aesthetics or philosophy of art. I have not come to this way of thinking in a vacuum. It has not been demonstrated (to my satisfaction) that there is a God or a Form of Art or the Beautiful or a «sending» of Being or beings that could communicate a Truth to us beyond the truths we have come to by our own devices. For better or worse, and if we would truly love our fate, as Nietzsche recommended, it must be for the best, indeed, what we think when we think about aesthetics has been formed by indeterminate histories of «art» (a term whose current meaning owes to a 200 year history that overlaps the history of the term «history») and philosophy (a much older term with many more histories). For this reason, it will be well worth the short detour I will take to retell the history that brings me to the aesthetics so far schematized above.

In an Article for *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Arthur Danto recounts some of the history of aesthetics that's important for my purposes, tracing, there, a subtly Hegelian arc «From Aesthetics to Art Criticism and Back»². More specifically, Danto writes as art critic for *The Nation* against Hilton Kramer, the critic at *The New Criterion*, by attacking Kramer's mentor, Clement Greenberg. Danto shows how the major principles supporting Greenberg's view, the purposivelessness and universality of taste, tenets derived from Kant's aesthetics, fail in the face of «art after the end of art», art from 1960 forward, art inspired by Duchamp, exemplified by Warhol, art of the sort I have described above as «difficult», art discussed in the bulk of the book I am shamelessly promoting. Kantian aesthetic theory, Danto says, was worked out over a period of art history that was remarkably stable «in its practice and conception». And so stabilized it could support an aesthetics that even fit Duchamp under its description. It reduced the readymades to rare and beautiful accidents of the relation between form and content. And it dismissed as non-art —work by Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Robert Morris, and others— anything lacking such «aesthetic quality». Against this view, Danto recommends an art criticism that can «put into words» the «meaning of beauty» in works of art³.

In an account that attempts to marry his avowed essentialist convictions about the universality of art to his declared historicist commitments to the variability of the necessary and sufficient condition for art, Danto offers what he calls «a few reckless words» about the relation of beauty in art to the eroticism of symmetry in the processes of natural selection. He adduces, from Schopenhauer, the example of ruins, whose beauty is not symmetrical, to suggest that artistic beauty surpasses beauty that is only natural by asking us to consider the meaning of the beauty we respond to in relation to the «means of presentation» of the beautiful in art. «The mistake of Kantian art criticism», Danto concludes, «is that it confuses form with content»⁴. Beauty, he argues, is part of the content of the works Greenberg and Kramer prize, and the mode of presentation of beauty in those works asks us to think about the meaning of the beauty in them. By going back to Hegel, Danto proposes an aesthetics that can be the basis for the kind of art criticism that finds Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of its own Construction* (1961) «brilliant and inspired».

Much about this view is attractive. Once it's conceded that the controversial phrase «art after the end of art» describes the passing of a form of art that is art by virtue of having been all we knew of art until very recently, that is, art as representation, it's clear that Danto is applying his considerable abilities to understanding art that interests me for something of the same reason as it interests me. Danto describes

² DANTO, Arthur. «From Aesthetics to Art Criticism and Back». In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59, 1996, pp. 105-115.

³ This kind of criticism has been taken up in a volume titled *Beauty Matters* that includes a preface by Danto where he echoes these same ideas. See ZEGLIN BRAND, Peggy (ed.). *Beauty Matters*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.

⁴ DANTO, Arthur. «From Aesthetics to Art Criticism and Back», p. 114.

contemporary art and what modern art critics think about the meaning of the work of art in terms of the mode of presentation of it. The example of the ruin, a metaphor for the ruination of art as representation and, in the same stroke, an example of the art Danto convicts Kantian aesthetics of failing to explain, suggests that contemporary art, if it doesn't yet think for Danto, compels us think about it as much as we appreciate it for what it means. What's nonetheless troubling about Danto's view, for my purposes, is his commitment to beauty with its affinity for a concept of quality that may not be aesthetic but that threatens to be as «odious and chauvinistic» as it was, and still is, in the criticism of Greenberg and his followers. In the name of beauty, Danto dismisses as «an unforgiving sort of relativism» the *cultural* criticism art criticism, shorn of its protective aesthetics, became to counter the attempts of modernist art critics, like Greenberg to reduce culturally diverse forms of art to the «rightness of form» that had been realized by modern, western, abstract art.

In *The Anti-Aesthetic*⁵, Hal Foster collects some samples of the unforgiving relativism and cultural criticism Danto said made him «no happier, as an art critic, [...] than I was with Greenberg»⁶. In his introduction to that volume, Foster explains that the designation anti-aesthetic «is *not* intended as one more assertion of the negation of art and representation as such»⁷. Foster and the writers collected in this volume (with the notable exception of Jürgen Habermas) take negation as the fundamental principle of the art theory and cultural theory they oppose. Against it, and against the emancipatory ideal modernist critics use to justify it, these «postmodernists» (twenty years ago the term was still meaningful) point to reactive and exclusive forms of politics, social and cultural disenfranchisement, and practices of sexual, gender, racial, ethnic, and economic abuse as signs of the persistence of an order of representations Danto said died with Warhol. And they seek, by the art they study and the critical studies of art and culture they fashion, to «destructure» and «reinscribe» the modernist order of representations that serves as a standard of truth for these exclusive and abusive politics and practices⁸.

Foster Envisions these anti-aesthetics as «a practice of resistance» that can move beyond the captivating but romantic idea that art and the aesthetic could function subversively as «a critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world»⁹. The idea is to fashion an alternative to the modern order of representation that does not depend on that order even for the manifest content of a dream about the end of the exclusive politics the order underwrites. In an «Introduction» to a collection of his own essays, Foster locates this practice of resistance in minimalist and conceptual art and in criticism that, by «a complex relay of anticipation and reconstruction»,

⁵ FOSTER, Hal. *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983.

⁶ *Ib.*, p. 112.

⁷ FOSTER, Hal. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, p. xv.

⁸ *Ib.*, p. xv.

⁹ *Ib.*, pp. xv-xvi.

produces the present as different and the past in a different focus¹⁰. The theoretical touchstones for Foster, in this context, are Freud's concept of deferred action and Foucault's genealogy of the present. The artistic starting point is Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). Anti-aesthetics is not relativist but perspectival and pragmatic. Its greatest shortcoming is a temptation to think of its practice as the solution to the modernist impasse and, correlatively, its greatest failure is to present resistance as little more than a refusal to play by the rules of the game¹¹.

But Foster's anti-aesthetic is not a complete failure. In fact, I have fastened on some of the themes Foster and those writing with him had targeted in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, not as a blanket endorsement of the politics of the oppressed articulated there but, rather, as an indication of a shared interest in the root issue of representation¹². In my case, rather than charge representation with crimes against women, gays, and the disenfranchised in general, the aim is to show where and how representation fails to hold its own, where it is falling into ruins. Because this is what, on my view, images are thinking and artists, some artists, the difficult ones, are thinking with images in the visual arts. They're thinking with images «the ruin of representation» in art¹³. Danto has jumped the gun. By announcing «the end of art», he declares only that the «truth» of art has been realized, that representation is art's «truth», and that the truth of representation is conformity with status quo reality. But as his beloved *Brillo Boxes* (1964) show, that «reality» is a consumerist facsimile of a world no longer open to competing claims about its truth. What «difficult» art represents (Warhol's installation for the Stable Gallery included) is the ruination of healthy competition about what is «real» and «true». What is needed to understand this art is neither a theory of «art after the end of art» nor an anti-aesthetic (the term is unfortunately misleading) but an aesthetics of what otherwise would remain invisible in works of art — meaning, thinking, believing — that is taking shape in the arrangements of images and in the relations of images to one another in works of art. This is what I want to make visible in an aesthetics of the visual arts.

As stated at the very beginning of these remarks, the expression «thinking with images» was introduced by Gilles Deleuze. He invoked it, in the first place, to describe the case of film-makers who, he said, think with images, with variations of what he calls «movement-images» and «time-images»¹⁴. But the point was, arguably, already realized by Michel Foucault in his ekphrasis on Diego Velázquez's

¹⁰ *Ib.*, pp. xii-xiii.

¹¹ Cf. DE DUVE, Thierry. *Kant After Duchamp*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

¹² See my «Repetitions: Appropriating Representation in Contemporary Art». In *Philosophy Today*, 35:4, 1991, pp. 307-324.

¹³ See OLKOWSKI, Dorothea. *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

¹⁴ DELEUZE, Gilles. *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam; *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 1989). See also DELEUZE, Gilles and Felix GUATTARI. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Las Meninas (1654) in the opening pages of *Les mots et les choses*¹⁵. There, one meaning of Velázquez's painting is shown to be a statement, a thought, about a decisive shift in the very structure of representation that is not accomplished in the visible content of the painting but is seen, rather, in the perspective and the formal arrangements of the figures from Ferdinand's court that Velázquez uses to compose this image and question, on Foucault's description, the saliency of the classical model of representation itself.

Deleuze Might add to Foucault's accomplishment the insight that, while philosophers have labored for so long to satisfy a certain «image of thought», a picture of thinking as earnest, governed by the ideal of common sense and the model of recognition, guided by an honest pursuit of the truth and the avoidance of error, for the purposes of producing representations as solutions to the difficulties besetting like minded individuals¹⁶, artists thinking with images make a monument of sensations that extends their finite compositions to infinity, to the ends of the earth, on a plan that recommends, for philosophers thinking with concepts, an alternative to the «image of thought»¹⁷. On this plan, the proximate goal of a philosophy of art or aesthetics would be to multiply the possible interpretations of selected works of visual art and to extend them, if not to infinity, to the point where we can see what they are trying to think, conceive, conjecture, opine, and, most of all, question about the claims of representation and the claims of representational thinking to tell the truth about the world and our experience of it. And, following this plan, I am proposing to enhance our understanding of selected works in the visual arts and to give an example, no doubt provisional, of thinking philosophically outside the image of thought.

To that end, I draw, for my interpretations, on the art of Velásquez, da Vinci, Sherrie Levine, Duane Michals, Jean Cocteau, Jean-Luc Godard, and Marcel Duchamp. I contrast Velásquez with Cézanne to highlight senses of the visible and invisible that are featured in all my interpretations¹⁸. I emphasize that these terms do not stand exclusively for what can and cannot be literally seen nor, especially, do they establish an opposition suggesting that what is visible needs to be supplemented by what can only be drawn from an invisible register, in other words, that what is «truly» visible in the visual arts, what paintings, photographs, installations, and films «mean», is invisible until somehow rendered visible by a specialized theory applied to each concrete case. Rather, as much in evidence in treatments of Renaissance Annunciations as in interpretations of French new wave cinema, what is «invisible» in these arts is what becomes «visible» in the map of particularities

¹⁵ FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Order of Things*. Unidentified collective translation. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971, 3-16.

¹⁶ See DELEUZE, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 129-169.

¹⁷ DELEUZE, Gilles and Felix GUATTARI. *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 169-199.

¹⁸ See my «The Visible and Invisible in Merleau-Ponty and Foucault». *International Studies in Philosophy*, 25.3, 1993, 35-46.

and partial elements drawn on the already visible surfaces of the works of art in question. Da Vinci's representation of the Annunciation to Mary (1472-75), for example, faithfully repeats all the particulars of the subject —Mary on the right, angel, a staff of lillies between them— repeated in endless renderings from the 14th to the 16th century. And, yet, a subject Leonardo distinctively captures the middle ground of Mary's sexuality, a reflective space between the competing claims of orthodox celibacy, represented by Simone Martini (1333) or Sandro Boticelli (1489) and heterodox passion for the entreaties of a spiritual father and carnal lover, represented by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1344) or Alesso Baldovinetti (1467)¹⁹.

But the Principle demonstration of what it means to think with images would have to found in the art of Marcel Duchamp and in the difficulties posed not so much by his readymades as by his large installations, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1917-23) and *Given: 1. The waterfall, 2. The illuminating gas* (1946-66). Clearly, issues of visibility and invisibility dominate these works. *The Large Glass* as the first is also know, is to be seen and seen through from all sides. To see the *Given*, the later work, you walk into a small room at one end of which is a door with peep holes which you peer through onto a n-dimensional tableau. Were I inclined to follow Deleuze strictly at this point, I would say Duchamp's late installations think by managing the convergences of several different, already heterogeneous series by highlighting an «empty space», the «invisible», that both conditions their convergence and is the effect of their having converged²⁰. The works are by themselves «heterogeneous series» because they conjoin apparently different elements, in the case of *The Bride Stripped Bare*, for example, the fact that it is painted but not a painting, that what is seen through the *Glass* is also seen in it, the n-dimensionality of the work, it's having been left «permanently incomplete» by the artist, the accidental intentionality of its having been shattered in transit and painstakingly reassembled, and so on. All these elements come together in a sense that is «invisible» and must remain so even as I draw it out by setting alongside these conjunctions —seen through *and* in, complete *and* incomplete, shattered *and* assembled competing theoretical claims about framing and framework, margins and marginal forms of life.

But I'm not convinced I have to go that far, or let's say I'm willing to go that far only to the extent that, by so construing the point, the weaknesses in the model of representational thinking and the image of thought are made more pronounced

¹⁹ The competing claims of repetition and representation turn up, again, in close attention to the photographic techniques of Sherrie Levine who literally copies the work of known artists, including Edward Weston's images of his own son as a classic Greek kouros [SLIDE], (mis)represents it as her own art, and remakes the subject an object of (illicit) desire. This theme of (illicit) desire turns up as well in Duane Michals's photographs which make visible the gay pleasures otherwise invisible (because they cannot be shown) and non-representational (because they does not reproduce the social norm) in his images.

²⁰ DELEUZE, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. xx.

and more transparent to those who do not yet see things this way. Above all, it is important, on my view, that whatever way the point is put, it does not give in to the romantic notion that it can do anything to hasten the demise of representational thinking, that it will solve anything or save anyone, at the same time as it advances on Danto's resignation in the face of art and theory that left him «no happier». That said, to get a truly robust aesthetics from the trajectory I have plotted here, following a suggestion by Joseph Margolis²¹, I want to be guided by successful strategies for interpreting art works that do not help us revision philosophy so much as they support creative understanding of human experience, innovate interpretations of human life not yet imagined. This will not be accomplished by insisting that experience, any more than art, is in principle indiscernable or undecidable. We should start, rather, by daring to grasp the meaning of human experiences, as the meaning of a work of art, in relation to the specific practical situations in which we find them. If our appreciation of art can serve as a model for understanding human experience, we must give up, on the one hand, our slavishness to a model of representation whose passing Danto prematurely laments and, on the other hand, our dreams of a non-representational future *à venir*, as it is now fashionable to add. We must focus, instead, on how images are arrayed to make representations visible and how images think when they become difficult, when the empire of the visible in them is challenged by what is invisible in that visible regime. When we are guided by what images are thinking we can begin to let go of the image of thought that still today depreciates the value of art and of life itself.

²¹ See MARGOLIS, Joseph. *What After All is a Work of Art?* University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1999 and *Selves and Other Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.