

# The 'event' in Art: Inaesthetics?

by Edia Connole

When we speak about the 'event' in its relation to art, when we speak of the 'event' *in* art, we do so primarily in the language of philosophy. Philosophy allows us to speak of the 'event', it allows us to identify it, to expose it, to expound it in terms that show it as it is. But philosophy itself cannot think the 'event': the 'event' thinks itself, further: philosophy cannot produce effective truths because every truth, as such, originates in an event<sup>1</sup> and eventual generation is proper to only four categories independent of philosophy - art, politics, science and love. And so it is then, in employing these categories, and in conceiving of art as a singular regime of truth, that when we come to speak of art, of its relation to the 'event', we do so principally in the terms and in the language of Alain Badiou, the philosopher who holds the consummate position in contemporary art discourse around the 'event': inaesthetics.

In Badiou's *Being And Event* (1988), philosophy of ontology and appearance, he develops a thesis of change, of how change occurs through events and post-evental truth procedures. In *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (2005) Badiou posits the implications of this thesis of change in relation to art, this thesis of change, according to which art is a truth procedure *sui generis*, proposes an absolutely novel philosophical position in relation to art, a new schema that takes art to be both immanent and singular.

*What does it mean for art to be both 'immanent' and 'singular' ?*

In Badiou's conception of truth procedures as amorous, political, scientific and artistic, art is conceived as a singular regime of thought irreducible to philosophy. Which is to say, that it is not philosophy's task to think art - art thinks itself through the works that compose it. These works, as the thought of art, are the Real, and are not reducible to an 'effect' or sensible form of the 'Idea'. Further, the truth that the work generates, as the thought of art, is not reducible to other truths - amorous, political or scientific. This suggests that art is simultaneously Immanent: Art is rigorously coextensive with the truths it produces, and Singular: These truths are given nowhere else but in art.

All previous conceptions of arts relationship to truth have been either Immanent *or* Singular, and the link between art and philosophy has been symptomatically tumultuous, oscillating between one of severe control in Didacticism to one of ecstatic allegiance in Romanticism, with a not necessarily temporal moment of peace or settlement in between - Classicism. These three schema: Didactic, Romantic, Classical, are the forms that arts relationship to philosophy has taken. Each schema represents a knot that ties another term into the arrangement - pedagogy. What is at

---

<sup>1</sup> Badiou leaves this assertion in its axiomatic state, see Badiou, Alain (2005) *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p.11.

stake in each schema and “common” to all of them is art’s relationship to truth. From the outset then we can say that what constitutes each schema Didactic, Romantic or Classical *is* arts relationship to truth, and as such, it is that which in turn designates, or dictates arts pedagogical function within that schema.

In the Didactic Schema - from Greek *didaskhein*: to ‘teach’ - art is conceived as Singular but not Immanent: art has a singular pedagogical function as a didactics of the senses but the truth art teaches is extrinsic to it. According to the Didactic thesis, which comes to us from Plato, art is mimesis - not simply in the sense that art is an imitation of things, but rather in the sense that art is the imitation of the effect of truth itself. The Platonic polemic is such that it acknowledges that art presents itself as truth, and further, it sees that this truth is charming, like a child at a party in fancy-dress, or better still, just child’s play in general - playing the pirate, playing the princess...playing the ‘dinosaur’ under the table: art is the pure charm of a semblance of truth. But ultimately, like the rationalising adult, philosophy will reject this truth on the very grounds of its semblance: for how can truth exist as charm and be rigorously coextensive? Or, how can truth be simultaneously immediate and coextensive: how can truth exist as such, when this truth is unlaboured, non-discursive, and unfounded? Plato will then argue that the immediacy of arts truth is dangerous, that it diverts us from the *roundabout route*, from the slow process of reasoning systematically in support of the Idea. It follows that art must be placed under surveillance and treated in a purely instrumental fashion, as a means to an end and never as an end in-itself. In the Didactic schema the essential thing is the control of art which is possible as long as arts truth comes to it from outside - from the ‘rational’ adult - i.e. the state, or philosophy. Art is accordingly a didactics of the senses whose aim must not be abandoned to Immanence, and whose ‘good’ essence is conveyed in its public effect - effects that are regulated by an extrinsic truth that controls art as the transient charm of its semblance.

The educational order imposed upon art in the Didactic schema runs counter to the position assumed in Romanticism. The romantic schema subsists in the assumption that art *alone* is capable of truth, that art is the literary absolute, that art *alone* accomplishes what philosophy can only point toward; ‘philosophy might well be the impenetrable father’, notes Badiou, but in this schema ‘art is the suffering son - Jesus - who saves and redeems’. (2005, p. 3) In the Romantic schema we can say then that art is Immanent but not Singular, we can say this because we know that what we find in this schema is art as the exposition of the finite descent of the Idea; and although the truth of the Idea is immanent to art: as in, art thinks it; it is not singular to art, because in saying that arts truth is *the* truth, arts truth is not attuned to the possibility of other truth procedures.

Between Didactic ‘surveillance’ and Romantic ‘exaltation’ there is a not necessarily temporal moment of peace in between - Classicism. Classicism is said to ‘dehystericize’ art: providing a middle ground for the oscillation between bipolar theses. The Classical thesis which comes to us from Aristotle, agrees with Didacticism

that art is incapable of truth, that its essence is mimetic, and that its regime is one of semblance; but it says that this incapacity does not pose a threat to philosophy, to the Idea, because art is innocent. Which is to say that art may well believe itself to be the truth but the purpose of art is not cognition, art has a 'cathartic' function not a cognitive one; art pertains to the ethical and not to the theoretical. Aristotle's prescription places art under the sign of something entirely different from knowledge and thus releases it from suspicion. It follows that in the Classical schema philosophy's only relationship to art is qua aesthetics, qua "liking", which implies the success or failure of art as catharsis. What 'liking' relates to is not truth, but that which is extracted from truth as a 'resemblance' that is required only for the purpose of the spectators "liking", for the deposition of their passions. This 'imaginarization' of the truth that is relieved of any instance of the Real, is what Classical thinkers call 'verisimilitude'. It follows then that in the Classical schema arts is not Immanent, but Singular - it is a 'public service' whose truth does not function amongst other work-producing thought, but is exercised only in the domain of the imaginary.

Accordingly in the last century - a century of ruptures and breaks, a century of the 'new' - we did not witness the introduction of any 'new' schema, but instead only the saturation of existing ones with the synthetic coupling of didactico-romanticism, which Badiou attributes to the avante-garde. The synthetic coupling of the didactico-romantic schema failed to succeed in leading its conscious objective: a united front against classicism, against the assertion that arts function is not a cognitive one; against the assumption that its singularity persists in its 'public service' whose truth functions solely in the domain of the imaginary. It follows that in this synthetic schema the truth art produces remains merely allegorical ( Badiou notes of Marinetti's fascism, the communism of Breton). For Badiou, we are today, witnessing the closure of every effect produced by the synthetic coupling of the avante garde; and the fact that art subsists *ex post facto* in the saturation of the three schemata results pure and simply in the collapse of the pedagogical theme that had circulated between them.

In this situation, a situation of saturation and closure, Badiou deems it necessary to propose a new schema, one in which arts relationship to truth would assume the novel position of being both Immanent and Singular. In this proposed schema according to which art is an immanent producer of truths - truths that are given nowhere else but in art - arts pedagogical function is renewed in the simple fact that we can only ever learn *by* truths and without truth there can be no new knowledge. He notes ' Art is pedagogical for the simple reason it produces truths and because "education"... has never meant anything but this: to arrange forms of knowledge in such a way that some truth may come to pierce a hole in them.' (2005, p. 9)

According to Badiou's schema the work of art is not the pertinent unit of enquiry however: because a work of art, generally speaking, is not conceived as an 'event', nor as a truth in itself. A work of art is but a fact of art, and truth is not consummated in the *artifact* but in the artistic procedure. It is the artistic procedure itself that bears

witness to an 'event', and it is the 'event' that indexes a gap or void in the previous situation - forms of knowledge, recognition or community. Badiou notes that in the final analysis the pertinent unit for thinking of art as both Immanent and Singular, which we must take to be *Inaesthetics*: is an enquiry into 'neither the work nor the author, but rather the artistic configuration initiated by an evental rupture..' (2005, p. 10)

*What is inaesthetics?*

So far we can say that Inaesthetics is, in the first instance, an 'enquiry' into the artistic procedure, and in the second instance, it is an enquiry that aspires to 'identify' the evental rupture, and subsequently then the 'subtraction' in the previous artistic configuration that it springs forth from. An artistic configuration is the truth procedure of art, it is conceived as a generic multiple, a multiple which subsists neither by proper name nor contour but by abstract definition: the tonal, the tragic, the novel etc. It is not made up of one work but many, and not one author but many, that deemed successive constitute the subject points or localised actuality of a situated enquiry that in turn forms the subject of a truth procedure; this truth procedure bears witness to an 'event', and all truth in this instance originates from that event. Which is to say, in the third instance then: the 'event', and art, as an immanent producer of truth, is not an "ingenious" or idealistic conception of invention, where one can invent anything even if nothing has taken place but the place; the 'event' is always the index of a gap, or central void, in the previous situation. For example, the configuration of art identified as 'tragedy' bears witness to an 'event': the event "Aeschylus"; further, the event "Aeschylus" indexes a gap or void in the previous situation of art as a form of knowledge - choral poetry.

Artistic configurations cannot be exhausted as truth procedures, they can only be badly described: not constitutive of a decisive or self-reflexive enquiry; reach saturation point (which is not exhaustive, or indicative of a finite multiplicity); or be rendered obsolete by a novel evental rupture and supplementary truth procedure, or to put it another way: an artistic configuration can be rendered obsolete by another artistic configuration as the subject of a situated enquiry into a novel 'evental rupture'. For example, it happens that in the event "Aeschylus" choral poetry as an artistic configuration is rendered "obsolete"; and 'tragedy' itself continues as a self reflexive artistic configuration until it reaches saturation point in Euripides, but this does not indicate the finity of this or that artistic configuration, merely its dormancy; as Badiou notes: ' a configuration may always be seized upon again in epochs of uncertainty or rearticulated in the naming of a new event.' (2005, p. 14)

Badiou concludes his proposition for a new schema in art, and an accompanying intraphilosophical position with three pressing questions which he fails to answer substantially, all that can be gathered in summation to each point respectively is as follows:

*What are the contemporary configurations in art?*

Contemporary thinking is full of enquiries into artistic configurations that have distinguished the last century: from dodecaphonic music to abstract art. At the last instance it is not the job of the philosopher, or inaesthetician, to think the artistic configuration: artistic configurations think themselves in the works that compose them: ‘The configuration thinks itself through the test posed by an inquiry that, at one and the same time, reconstructs it locally, sketches its “to come,” and retroactively reflects its temporal arc.’ (2005, p. 14)

*What becomes of philosophy as conditioned by art?*

It is the inaestheticians duty to identify truth procedures or configurations in art, and to expound them contemporaneously; it is the inaestheticians duty to make truths manifest: which is not to say that it is the inaestheticians duty to *generate* truths in art, eventual generation is, as we have noted, proper to only four categories independent of philosophy: art, politics, science and love. To say it is the inaestheticians duty to make truths ‘manifest’ is to say that it is the duty of the philosopher conditioned by art to distinguish artistic truths from opinion, and to make truths in the other domains *compossible*. Badiou notes:

‘Philosophy’s relation to art, like its relation to every other truth procedure, comes down to showing it as it is. Philosophy is the go-between in our encounters with truths, the procurer of truth. And just as beauty is to be found in the woman encountered, but is in no way required of the procurer, so it is that truths are artistic, scientific, amorous or political, and not philosophical.’

(2005, p. 10)

*What happens to the theme of education?*

If all education is an education *by* truths, the inaesthetician must learn from arts truth without which its own philosophical category of truth is empty, and ‘the philosophical act nothing but an academic quibble’; in order to learn *by* truths, in order for art to educate us, we need only *encounter* its existence, and think through art as a form of thought. (Badiou, 2005, p. 15)

*Conclusion:*

There is an admirable, albeit obviously political, impetus behind the *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, and one cannot help but notice several discrepancies within it, not least of all in its naming of an event qua inaesthetics: a new schema in art according to which arts truth would be both immanent and singular. This proclamation of a new schema

in art renders Badiou's own philosophical prescription paradoxical and open to contradiction; i.e one cannot name an event. One can only conclude that Badiou's schema is not a supernumerary affair in itself, rather it is required to constitute, and work through, his own philosophical position. Badiou's eventual philosophy necessitates the naming of a new schema whether such a schema is axiomatic or not, it requires it immanently: in its conception of all truths as amorous, political, artistic and scientific, and it requires it singularly: in its conception of all such truths as immanent and singular.

The *Handbook* unfolds in the first instance as a type of manifesto: the proposition of a new schema in art, in its relation to philosophy, and the accompanying valuation of an intraphilosophical position vis-a-vis the dominant discourse of aesthetics. In the second and final instance, having posited the implications of this intraphilosophical position (against 'the speculation of aesthetics') as 'identification' and 'enquiry', *Handbook of Inaesthetics* subsists in attempting to nourish the readers conviction as to the existence of 'truths' as opposed to mere 'opinion'. The supposition of 'opinion' is at best unclear in this context but if we locate this conjecture more broadly in Badiou's political project, we can surmise that: a thesis of truth is a thesis of change, and a thesis of change in the current political climate suggests the possibility of more than mere 'opinion', which in the last instance Badiou conflates with our so-called 'democracies'. Badiou's attempt to nourish our conviction as to the existence of truths qua inaesthetics is ultimately a conviction to nourish our belief that we are worth more than such 'democracies', and that no matter how stifling the situation at hand: change is possible.

That today the three schemata are saturated only mirrors the socio-political reality at hand, a reality that bears witness to a situation of saturation and closure itself - the saturation of appearance, and the closure of any gap or void: any possibility for the supernumerary; the unaccounted for; the 'event'. It is this gap, or void, that Badiou is trying to reclaim in his discourse on *Inaesthetics*, so that we may be able to step back *in art* to a place unfettered by limits, by the figure of the 'Master', whether that master be 'Philosophy', the 'State', or our so-called 'Democracies'. In this light, one must conclude, that the proclamation of a new schema in art is absolutely imperative, because it is only in its immanence and singularity that art could constitute a void, a 'bare place', into which we could slip untrammelled, in order to use our 'wit' at a distance, and be able to assess the situation at hand. (Badiou, 2005, p. 46 - 56)

### *Bibliography*

Badiou, Alain (2005) *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

