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The Postconceptual Present: A Review of *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* by Peter Osborne (Verso, London & New York, 2013.)

Most readers of *Anywhere or Not at All* will come away feeling that their previous understandings of contemporary art – whatever they might have been – were distinctly *under*-theorized. For the sheer magnitude of its theoretical reach and dialectical tenacity Osborne’s book is extraordinary. There is perhaps no other writer in English today who sustains such philosophical ambition and unrelenting conceptual precision in dialogue with a genuinely engaged grasp of contemporary art. The stakes are high indeed. Osborne’s critical revisions of so many major themes here (including: a crucial confusion at the heart of Kant’s aesthetics; the argument that art must be understood as divorced from aesthetics; the link between Schlegel’s insistence on the importance of the fragment and conceptual art; retooling Kant’s neglected notion of distributive unity to develop “a way of grasping the insecurely bounded… relational totalities of historical forms” [p.122-3]; thinking photography as such a distributive unity; the special urgency today of the question “What is constructivism?”) constitute substantial interventions that will resonate across future contestations of their respective problematics.

That said, the book is not without its disappointments. Its central proposition sounds scandalously banal: “Contemporary art is postconceptual art” is the repeated refrain. One has to grasp why this statement constitutes information at all, in Bateson’s sense of the difference that makes a difference – especially since it sounds like a truism that replays a consensus position. For Osborne it is not an empirical claim but a claim of “historical ontology”. It quickly becomes prescriptive in disallowing artworks that fail to be postconceptual. As condensed in the words of the book’s title, postconceptual works for Osborne must be works that are distributed across space-time, such that it should be hard to say exactly where they are located in space and time, rather than being spatio-temporally unique, like a conventional painting or sculpture. Thus what matters is more the underlying architecture of the claim than its sloganistic phrasing. Osborne offers an elaborated theoretical scaffold for the becoming-normative of his truism. Crudely, the core assumption is a realist one: that artworks must operate as spatially dispersed, temporally deferred distributive unities in order both [1] to be structurally adequate to the distributive (dis)unities of capital, as in its reproduction of social relations it constantly uproots and disembeds lives and splices, defers and destroys stabilized threads in space and time, and [2] to evade the threat of a reifying foreclosure at the hands of capital. The book’s artistic preferences and art-critical distillations are almost entirely orthodox. Which is not to say they are wrong. The positing of Robert Smithson, for instance, as the privileged figure for postconceptual practice is plausible. Osborne’s critical asides too are often spot-on (witness his dismissal of Rachel Whiteread or his account of how institutional critique allows the institution to survive.) But it does mean that *Anywhere or Not at All* feels a lot like a grand theoretical underwriting of already institutionalized postconceptual values.

More fundamentally there’s a suspicion that deeper premises remain unspoken. The book nowhere provides a constitutive definition of art. Despite its plethora of taxonomies, it avoids any such criterial definitions. This might be tactically astute but it creates faultlines. Osborne occasionally invokes an art/non-art distinction: “following Adorno, one can associate the… non-art element of modernist art with that constitutive moment whereby it secures a critical autonomy by breaking with the illusion of autonomy” (p.93). He applauds Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* on the grounds that only there, and not in his later paintings, does Richter stage a confrontation between art and non-art. Osborne invokes non-art to bolster the critical separation of art from aesthetics, since aesthetics is posed as grist to the mill of non-art (“commodity design and display, advertising and mass media … – the whole non-art aspects of the apparatus of visual culture” (p.46)). But how do we know that these are non-art rather than art?

When Osborne then lists the “insights” of postconceptualism, it’s hard to avoid the fact that they apply equally to advertising: necessary conceptuality, necessary aesthetic dimension, the expansion to infinity of possible material forms, a “radically distributive unity… across the totality of multiple material instantiations” (p.48). Advertising seemingly shares these “insights” (later called “features”). It might appear that advertising cannot partake of Osborne’s “anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials”. However, this item does not make sense in the light of Osborne’s critique of the received misunderstandings of Kantian aesthetics. The larger unspoken premise is of course that contemporary art is and must be the critique of capital. By not quite expounding that presumption explicitly, Osborne evades the thornier problem of the foreclosure of critique/criticality, in relation both to its recuperation by capital and the question of its ennunciative distance. Osborne’s reader is left to reconstruct a rationale for what distinguishes art from non-art. We’re told that artworks are distinguished by a “lack of self-evidence”. Yet while that might be empirically true, the empirical is methodologically insufficient for Osborne. It’s hard to see how artworks could be specified as constitutively lacking self-evidence without threat of circularity. I suspect that as one undoes the complacency of the under-theorized art/non-art dualism here the larger prescription of the postconceptual is also weakened.

*Anywhere or Not at All* signposts the decisive stakes of contemporary art’s historical ontology more perspicuously than perhaps any other current text. Nevertheless, one should perhaps read Osborne as he reads Kant: more as wondrous box of conceptual tools than as unheralded prognostic intervention.

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