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"Aesthetics Bridging Cultures"

The Second Modernity of Naturalist Aesthetics[1]

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The situation of aesthetics may be summarised by juxtaposing two recent books on its relation with art, those of Donald Kuspit (*The End of Art*) and Michael Kelly (*Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*). The thesis of Kuspit's book is that contemporary art is an art of the end of art, which means that within contemporary art, called postart following Allan Kaprow, art's end ceased to exist:

> Postart is completely banal art – unmistakably everyday art, neither kitsch nor high art, but an in-between art that glamorizes everyday reality while pretending to analyse it.[2]

When Kuspit discusses whether masterpieces of art can be created within contemporary art, his discussion proceeds in a direction similar to that of Erich Fromm on the possibility of love in the capitalist cosmos of money: yes, in principle, but only where artists are free of financial pressure, free of their own interest in success and popular glory, and free of the entertainment industry and mass taste.[3]

Before he wrote *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics,* Michael Kelly, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*[4], was surprised how many contemporary scholars declined his invitation. Puzzled, he asked himself:

> What is it that you *don't do* when you don't do aesthetics?,

and

> What is it that you *do do* when you don't do aesthetics?[5]

The answers, which mentioned mostly the insistence of aesthetics on universalism and the a-historicism of art and beauty, led him to analyse the aesthetic theories of Heidegger, Adorno,

Derrida, and Danto. When he determined they did not succeed in touching art at all, he sought deeper reasons and found

> *iconoclasm*, by which I mean a combination of *disinterest and distrust in art* that stems from a tendency to inscribe a deficiency into the very conception (or ontology) of art.[6]

On one hand, in Kuspit, we have this disinterest and distrust in contemporary art clearly expressed, and on the other, in Kelly, we are given a possible cause for such a deplorable philosophical image of art. These are extreme positions, of course, but not uncommon, strange, or just a curiosity. What however seems to be uncommon, strange, and just a curiosity is the second modernity of naturalist aesthetics. By calling its developments in our own time the "second modernity", I intend to locate it in the context of the disillusionment with modernist art and aesthetics.

At the XVI International Congress of Aesthetics in Rio de Janeiro (2004), named "Changes in Aesthetics", the presence of naturalist aesthetics came as a surprise. Was this surprise really so unprecedented? The naturalist approach to political, social, and cultural sciences and philosophy reappeared before 2004, more or less at the same time as the "cultural turn" which opened, softened, and deconstructed traditional concepts in the humanities and aesthetics.

New forms of the naturalization of the human and social sciences, together with aesthetics, expressed criticism and the negation of the post-modern "cultural turn" which turned cultural reality into arbitrary construction, and installed unsurpassable fences between nature and culture.

Denis Dutton published "Let's Naturalize Aesthetics"" and "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology" in 2003, presented a paper on "Darwinian Aesthetics" at the XVI International Congress of Aesthetics in 2004, published "A Naturalist Definition of Art" in 2006, and has posted these and some other articles ("The Pleasures of Fiction," a review of Joseph Carroll's book *Literary Darwinism,* and "Darwin and Political Theory," which develops his idea of social and political Darwinism) on his home page.[7] All these writings repeat the same argument. To the already mentioned evolutionary results, Dutton adds two additional ideas: that art forms are found universally (which strongly suggests that art is connected with ancient psychological adaptations) and that art provides people with pleasure and emotions, often of an intense kind (which therefore must have an adaptive relevance according to the postulate of evolutionary psychology). Aesthetically, the most important of Dutton's idea reaches beyond the limits of evolutionary psychology:

While evolutionary psychology may have a capacity to shed light on the existence of art and art's persistent qualities, it cannot pretend to explain everything we might want to know about art.[8]

What escapes evolutionary psychology is the Kantian distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful.

The agreeable are the straightforward subjective sensations of things that we like in direct experience: the taste of sweet, for example, of the colour blue. The pleasurable experience of such sensations, Kant held, contains no intellectual element: it is a brute feeling, often seeming to satisfy a desire (such as hunger), and as such must be carefully distinguished from the experience of the beautiful, in which the imagination combines with the rational understanding in the experience of imaginative object.[9]

Here, philosophical aesthetics demands its own right: the disinterested "pure" aesthetic judgement has to remain out of reach of evolutionary naturalist explanations.
Wolfgang Welsch approached evolutionary aesthetics on the basis of his previous project of transhuman aesthetics, in which he rejected most Western aesthetics as anthropocentric, and not just Eurocentric:

Instead, we ought to conceive of the human in a larger than human context, taking into account, for instance, our place in the cosmic and natural environment, or our primordial connectedness with the world, or the non-human layers of our existence.[10]

One of the possible consequences of the transhuman aesthetic orientation is to embrace the evolutionary approach. Admitting that there is a vast literature on evolutionary aesthetics already, Welsch also argues that all of it has serious shortcomings. First, Darwin advocated the existence of a genuinely aesthetic sense in most animals, while

most contemporary evolutionists reduce the aesthetic to mere survival value.

Second, evolutionism addresses human, not animal aesthetics, demolishing the most important Darwinian idea of the continuity between the animal kingdom and the human species. Animal aesthetics challenges our belief that we are unique, and (from an understanding of pre-human aesthetics) opens a perspective on transhuman aesthetics.

How the evolutionary aesthetic approach misses the point, when it treats contemporary art, is evident in Dutton's interpretation of a project by two expatriate Russian artists, namely Komar and Melamid.

In his writings on evolutionary or Darwinian aesthetics, Dutton presents Komar and Melamid's project "The Most Wanted Paintings" and "The Least Wanted Paintings"[11] as a proof for his case.

> The idea of a pervasive Pleistocene taste in landscape received support from an unusual project undertaken by two Russian émigré artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, in 1993. They hired a professional polling organization to conduct a broad survey of the art preferences of people living in ten countries in Asia, Africa. Europe, and the Americas. Blue turned out to be the favourite colour worldwide, with green in second place. Respondents expressed a liking for realistic representative paintings. Preferred elements included water, trees and other plants, human beings (with a preference for women and children, and also for historic figures, such as Jomo Kenyatta or Sun Yat-sen), and animals, especially large mammals, both wild and domestic. Using the statistical preferences as a guide, Komar and Melamid then produced a favourite painting for each country. Their intent was clearly ironic, as the painting humorously mixed completely incompatible elements.[12]

There was also a serious side to the project; for the paintings, although created from the choices of different cultures, tended to share a remarkably similar set of preferences. They looked like ordinary European landscape calendar art, both photographic and painted. It is the calendar industry that has, by meeting market demands, discovered a Pleistocene taste in outdoor scenes. Being a result of evolution inscribed in our aesthetic sense, this taste prefers "savannah", as a safe and nutritious environment for proverbial hunters and gatherers.

Komar and Melamid, the well-known post-socialist artists,[13] certainly did not have in mind an experiment in Fechner's manner, to find universal features of human taste for the sake of evolutionary psychology. Their aim – from Dutton's point of view, the more ironic side of the project – was not to mix incompatible elements. Their ironic idea was to search for people's art through the transition from a totalitarian concept of socialist realism — where the leader decided what people wanted, and addressed the people's demands to artists — to a democratic concept of people's art, which has to be executed as a new kind of populism. Komar and Melamid noticed that the difference between Stalinism and democracy in politics was that democratic leaders followed public opinion measured by the public opinion polls. They thus intended to submit their artistic practice to poll results regarding what people like and what they dislike in order to create a democratic art. Representative polls from different countries, and from the web poll, gave results which were taken by the artists as a commission, and

paintings were made.[14] Figurative painting was preferred over abstract painting (not overall, but still in most countries), and basic ideas about beautiful colours and shapes did not differ very much. Additionally, and missed by Dutton, there were typical national(ist) differences in taste: the most wanted figures and persons were chosen according to national ideologies. On the other hand, it might come as a surprise that some prevailing national traditions were put aside in favour of a more global popular taste, as in the case of Turkey, where a typical Western style landscape was the most wanted, not the local tradition of ornamental painting. Obviously, there were many possible ways of interpretation,[15] not only that of evolutionism. But nearly all interpretations missed the irony of ascertaining the people's wishes by means of polls, as in democratic politics, and similarly ironic criticism of elite art. Erected on positions of elite art, these interpretations offered an explanation for "poor" popular taste, and found it in Pleistocene evolutionary aesthetic traditions.

Why is "kitsch figurality" globally the most popular kind of painting?! We can examine "popularity" as the people's choice through polls, as the method chosen by Komar and Melamid to express a social commission instead of the totalitarian Party, or an Elite Art commission. The method itself constructs popularity as a statistical result. While inclinations to see a "blue sky" or a "savannah environment" as beautiful may be interesting from an evolutionary aspect, this average and prevailing taste includes many other elements which belong to the popular painting which emerged during European and Western art production when new customers outside the elites began to buy art in the past few centuries and transferred its patterns and models to all other new media of image production, starting with photography. Of course, this kind of art is more popular than elite art: it was always meant to be on the market for popular taste. It was also there as Western taste against local taste. Why on earth would, for instance, the Chinese or Japanese masses prefer this kind of art to their traditional mass art? Surely not for Pleistocene reasons, because these Pleistocene reasons, active before colonization and globalization already, cannot explain this post-Pleistocene effect. Their own popular art was not of the Pleistocene kind. On the other hand, Dutton should take into account the oldest still living artistic tradition, that of the Australian Aborigines, which is very far from the paintings executed by Komar and Melamid's. Both in its more abstract and its more figural appearances, this art, some 45,000 years old and thus much nearer to evolutionary genetic origins, is completely different from the results of Komar and Melamid's project. Perhaps they adore similar "kitsch figurality" like everybody else today, but landscape watercolour painting was introduced to Aborigines by their white teachers and civilizers, to make them able to support themselves by selling paintings and other

items, and make them thus appear as civilized as any other human being. From this, and from the proposal that they paint in an abstract and symbolic way as their ancestors had, two kinds of Aboriginal tourist kitsch developed, one which belongs to figurality and another which belongs to an amalgam of symbolic and abstract painting. Whoever has visited Australia has collected something from this visual menu. Which part of it is connected with Pleistocene taste, and its genetic consequences? To project contemporary popular taste to the beginnings of humanity is a gesture which cannot account for what is contemporary in popular taste. You cannot get "genetically conditioned" results from polls. What you get are results conditioned by historically produced taste in the arena of a cultural industry, with a prevalence of models of beauty taken from the average popular taste of the dominant cultures of the West. The taste shown through this project and its painted results is not "natural", even if some of its psychological elements may originate from much older layers. With the same reasoning as in evolutionary aesthetics, we could say that the emotional genres of the melodramatic or of the comical in our popular culture can be explained by the original hunters' and gatherers' situations in which these emotions were useful for survival.

All this put aside, we are still confronted with the artistic project of Komar and Melamid, which is completely misunderstood and misinterpreted by the evolutionary naturalist interpretation. In such an interpretation, it appears as if these paintings were painted by "the people" as a kind of ethnology of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, a proverbial collective creativity of folk art. Quite the contrary, this is a typical contemporary art project with its special features, such as those connected with the Soviet politics of art, with the elitist ideology of the Artist, and with the public opinion management typical of democracy. To put its artistic existence completely aside and see in it an illustration of genetic taste is a mistake that is neither unique, nor typical of evolutionary aesthetics only. Project and its results have more in common with Swiss Army Knife than with Pleistocene survival kit of genetic aesthetics: they are both products of contemporary taste, and not of pre-historical necessity. As Michael Kelly proves, this disneteressnest and distrust in art are something which bursts out even from the most sophisticated and seemingly "iconodulic" philosophies of art.

With all due respect for the aesthetic evolution of mankind, and as much respect for transhuman cosmic visions, there is no hope for aesthetics if it does not start to respect, and even before that, to enjoy contemporary art, postart, or whatever art you wish to call it.

For aesthetics, art is its only certainty.

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[1] This is a shorter version of a text which appeared under the same title in *Filozofski vestnik*, Vol. 28, No. 2/2007, pp. 83-98

[2] Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 91.
[3] Donald Kuspit: "Postscript: Abandoning and Rebuilding the Studio", *op.cit.*, pp. 175-192.
[4] *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Ed. by Michael Kelly), 4 Vols., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 5.
[5] Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in* Aesthetics, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 5.
[6] *Ibid*., p. xi.
[7] Denis Dutton, "Let's Naturalize Aesthetics", *ASA Newsletter*, Vol. 23, No .2 (Summer 2003), pp. 1-2; "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology", *The Oxford Handbook for Aesthetics* (Ed. by Jerrold Levinson), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003; "Darwinian Aesthetics", paper presented in the XVI. World Congress of Aesthetics, Rio de Janeiro, July 20, 2004; "The Pleasures of Fiction", *Philosophy and Literature,* No. 28/2004, pp. 453-466; "Darwin and Political Theory", *Philosophy and Literature,* No. 27 /2004, pp. 241-254; all these texts are available also at http://denisdutton.com. For those with a further interest in the more general ideas on evolutionary aesthetics, see *Evolutionary Aesthetics* (ed. by Eckhard Voland and Karl Graumer), Heidelberg, Springer Verlag, 2003.
[8] Denis Dutton, "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology", http://www.densidutton.com.
[9] *ibid.*
[10] This and the next quotation are from Wolfgang Welsch's "Animal Aesthetics", see his home page at http://www.2.uni-jena.de/welsch .
[11] Their project is available on the web; see http://www.diacenter.org/km.
[12] Denis Dutton, "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology", http://www.denisdutton.com. Text published in *The Oxford Handbook for Aesthetics* (Ed. by Jerrold Levinson), Oxford University Press, New York 2003.
[13] Among other writings on their pre-emigrant work in the Soviet Union, see Boris Groys, "The Other Gaze. Russian Unofficial Art's View of the Soviet World", *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism"* (Ed. by Aleš Erjavec), University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2003, pp. 55-89.
[14] All of these paintings are also available on the web at: http://www.diacenter.org/km/painting.html .
[15] Some of them can also be found in *Painting by Numbers. Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art* (Ed. by J. Wypijewski), Ferrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 1997.