



# Transversality as Medium: On the Profound Being of Human and Non-Human Objects

*“But we see the actual movement of moving figures, and moving pictures give us something equivalent to this, where the need for explanation is circumvented by the technologies of representation [...] we always have to infer what others are feeling on the basis of cues furnished in expression and behavior [...] If there was something effectively equivalent to feeling their feelings, that would be an example of this sort of representational progress.”*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> DANTO, 88.

The work of art philosopher Arthur Danto is among the most influential bodies of thought in the field of art. In his works “The Artworld” (1964) and “The End of Art” (1984), Danto focuses on what makes art into art. In the former text, Danto frames the field of his research by means of two dominant modes of art creation. In the first mode, the telos of art consists in imitating nature, or *mimésis*. In this mode, the quality of the visual work is evaluated on account of how the work corresponds to reality. The dominance of mimetic representation in art has persisted throughout the Renaissance, up until the dawn of modern art, after which the theory of art-as-*mimésis* became inadequate. Within the context of representational theory, the works of Impressionism, action painting, Malevich’s Black Square, Reinhardt’s “Ultimate” Paintings, but also the happenings and performances of Joseph Beuys or Marina Abramović would all be considered a failure, or at most a Dada curiosity. Although Danto affirms that art-as-representation carries a number of advantages – as we can fairly objectively assess art’s development towards increasingly accurate representation – this theory of art ultimately reached its apex before the advent of the new media of photography and film, which can both be considered as representational art par excellence. Representational theories also carry other problems. For example, they cannot explain the limit cases, such as Duchamp’s ready-mades or Warhol’s Brillo boxes.

That is also why Danto, along with Vít Neznal<sup>2</sup>, considers the re-presentation of the world’s phenomena by means of some finite conventional art medium as inferior to the generation (presentation) of new artistic shapes, states, as well as new strategies of seeing the world. These new shapes and ways of seeing the world cannot be immediately considered as art objects all of their own. Not every urinal or Brillo box has the status of an artwork, although their material form might be identical to Duchamp’s urinal and the Brillo boxes which Warhol exhibited in the gallery. On what basis are we then to distinguish art works, objects and performances from everyday objects and interactions with other people?

<sup>2</sup> NEZNAL, 78.

Danto offers a possible solution. For Danto, art is art only when there exists an art theory which can interpret and contextualize it from within art history and integrate it into what Danto calls “The Artworld”. From an ontological perspective, the artwork is thus subject to art theory (philosophy) as, in the last instance, only it can imbue the things of the world with the ontological status of an artwork. That is why in his Hegelian essay “The End of Art,” Danto assumes that the philosophy of art will finally consume art production, because the historical development of art is a history of methods, theories and approaches to a reflexive definition of what art is. Although artworks will continue to be produced even after the end of art, from the perspective of art history these will be like echoes frozen in time which will have failed in understanding that the problems they attempt to frame and resolve have already been resolved within philosophy.

This theory of Danto’s is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, we notice that Danto conflates actual art production with thinking about art production, which means that all artistic methods which create new forms and ways of seeing must be reducible to verbal propositional utterances about art works. But this brings Danto back to where he started from: he rejected



a representational theory founded on the correspondence between an artwork with the real world, and instead invents a new representational theory in which all artistic works are re-mediated to the one meta-medium of human language, and so, with enough wit and intelligence, everything which we can see and express can, be transformed to its original word form.

In the field of media theory, Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan in his later years developed a similar theory of grasping the mediality of artefacts. According to McLuhan, all human artefacts, including art works and genres, “each of man’s artefacts is in fact a kind of word, a metaphor that translates experience from one form into another” and that it does not matter whether we analyze material artefacts like media technologies, or more ephemeral systems, or artistic tendencies in painting, poetry, theater or music, as all of them exhibit a verbal structure.<sup>3</sup> McLuhan’s media theory then places emphasis on the fact that employing new media is never a passive or neutral event, but that media, as an extension of man, have an inherently descriptive and transformational effect on our consciousness, and they thus create new modes of perception and new modes of Being, which frame the spectrum of answers to the fundamental questions of human existence, ontology and noetics: analytic geometry and linear perspectives (which can be considered as cognitive technologies in themselves) have depicted a world which can be framed within a mathematical matrix, finding their apotheosis in Newton’s physics and the theological vision of God-the-geometer. Digital technologies, the internet, and instant communication present a vision of the world as discrete units of data, where the parameters of time and space are absent and the only thing we notice is an apt interface providing us access to data. McLuhan’s own example from 1964 points to the fundamental influence of the adoption of the phonetic alphabet in classical Greece, which then played a large role in the habituation of the individualist, analytic and deductive thinking within the Western mind – thanks to the alphabet, a person could get used to separating the sound of a verbal utterance from its visual form, and gradually also to the separation of form and meaning which, for McLuhan, decoupled the individual from the totalizing collective tribal consciousness.

<sup>3</sup> MCLUHAN AND MCLUHAN, 3.

If we compare Danto’s understanding of the absorption of art in philosophy and McLuhan’s media theory, we see that both privilege the word. On the other hand, the fact that for McLuhan all human artefacts, including art works, have an underlying verbal structure does not mean that we can reduce each artefact to an intellectually transparent, clear and detailed philosophy, as in Danto’s framework. Quite the contrary, for McLuhan each human artefact has two dimensions which he terms, following gestalt psychology, the ground and the figure: the *figure* is a surface, a perceivable aspect of the artefacts, while he considers the *ground* of the artefacts as a largely invisible layer, one which is phenomenally inaccessible despite the fact that it affects us. And it is this invisible, artefactual environment which primarily transforms and determines the bodily, psychological and social milieu of humanity and society. *This inaccessible, yet transformational background of artefacts is a source of great trepidation for McLuhan.* The media background is invisible to us, and so the average person has a minimal chance of resisting the effects and logic of media, insofar as it is forced upon us, thus, following McLuhan, “amputating” all alternative sensorial and perceptual possibilities of seeing the world and the people in it. McLuhan warns us that we shouldn’t try to observe these effects of media through the lens of technical determinism. People always have the option to act otherwise. Media are however never wholly passive and are subject to socio-cultural influence. Media have the force to influence us and to show agential features also because the materiality of media cannot be reduced to mere discourses and the ways people talk about them. McLuhan defines media as everything which can extend our mental and social environments, and he writes that they always leave a surplus in



their ontological layer to which people will never gain direct access, neither by direct perception nor through some form of representation.

Here, McLuhan departs from Danto who (see opening quote) retains the naive phenomenological idea that the being of objects or people can be exhaustively described by a fitting medium of representation (film, hologram, performance, dynamic model), which thus eliminates the need for subsequent interpretation or reflection. Danto for example writes that in the perception of figures, “*moving pictures give us something equivalent to this, where the need for explanation is circumvented by the technologies of representation.*”<sup>4</sup> Although Danto mentions in this excerpt that “*we always have to infer what others are feeling on the basis of cues furnished in expression and behavior*”,<sup>5</sup> he believes in a “technological fix” which will allow heretofore non-existent types of future media to mediate the emotional states of others: “If there were something effectively equivalent to feelings, that would be an example of this sort of representational progress”.<sup>6</sup> We cannot rule out that a technology will appear which will be able to represent electrical signals from the brain of feeling the emotions of one person for another, as Danto would most likely wish to have it. But it would tell us about the emotional states of a given person about as much as looking out the window and seeing someone cry or laugh on the street. We only see the outside “figure” of the person experiencing the given emotion, or perhaps a future electrical signal which will evoke in us the figure of laughter or sadness without any deeper context. The whole complexity of emotional experience, all the relevant life events which have led, in this particular example, to laughter or to crying, remain in the undisclosed depths of a person’s being. The question is whether we will ever have, at least in theory, access to them, or whether we are left only with indirect access, as McLuhan would have it.

<sup>4</sup> DANTO, 88.

<sup>5</sup> DANTO, 88.

<sup>6</sup> DANTO, 88.

Contemporary authors influenced by phenomenology, such as Graham Harman, Dan Zahavi or the Czech philosopher Alice Koubová, either directly or indirectly agree with McLuhan and his belief in the inaccessible depth of the being of objects. But contrary to McLuhan, who worked in the context of media theory and human artefacts, Koubová and Zahavi apply this inaccessibility also to the intersubjectivity of human relationships and to the question regarding the possibility of knowing the mental content of other people. According to Koubová and Zahavi, the impossibility of having direct access to minds and mental states in intersubjective relationships is not something which we need to struggle against. Quite the contrary, it is the very condition for establishing communication and human interaction. According to Koubová, a certain form of alienation is a necessary condition for expression. In order for us to be able to establish interaction with someone else, we need to reduce their being to something which the average person’s human mind and perceptual apparatus is able to comprehend. In other words, just as narrating one’s life story cannot present all the experienced events at the same time, we need an interface which presents to us the other person in a complex enough fashion to avoid slipping into caricature, while remaining simple enough to be able to process the perceptual data. Despite the being of an other remaining hidden to us, “this differentiation is not the problem of our inability and inferiority, but rather a *constitutive aspect of a relation to another person*: only in this way does an Other become a real person to us.”<sup>7</sup> Koubová and Zahavi quote Levinas, reminding us that a human *in its inaccessibility, otherness, absence becomes present as the other*. In the context of performance analysis, Koubová adds that another person is “visible in their expression when they are in a certain sense invisible, when they are inaccessible, when we do not grasp it immediately, but yet we somehow understand their expression.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> KOUBOVÁ, 26.

<sup>8</sup> KOUBOVÁ, 26.



Apart from McLuhan and Heidegger, the contemporary philosopher and speculative realist Graham Harman considers the American art theorist Clement Greenberg as a proponent of ontological depth, and he builds on his work in order to develop his Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). He holds that the ontological layers of surface/depth can be applied not only to media and the intersubjectivity of human relation, but that we must apply the dialectical relationship of surface/depth or visible/hidden to all objects we encounter – from atoms to black holes, from personal relationships to artistic works. In his essay “The Third Table,” Harman argues that there previously existed two methods through which we grappled with the inaccessible depth of objects. In the first instance, they were reduced “downward” to the smallest possible elementary particles, also through the description of their characteristics and interactions. In the second case, Harman speaks about reduction “upward”, which he ascribes to the human sciences, which study the effects of objects on the human mind from the perspective of everyday existence.<sup>9</sup> This dichotomy between natural and human sciences is not new. Harman himself mentions the famous concept of “two cultures” of C. P. Snow and builds on Edison’s parable of two tables: where the natural sciences say that the table consists of elementary particles and empty space, for the humanities the table and its effects on people and other objects is just as real, if not more, than the scientific table. Harman believes that both versions of the table are equally wrong. Instead, he speaks about a third version of the table which exists directly between the original two. Objects cannot be reduced neither to physical laws, nor to the social relations and functions ascribed to them by the socio-cultural context in which they appear. For Harman, as well as for McLuhan, Zahavi and Koubová, objects exist in their autonomous register and announce their presence to us through their “face-interface” in the form of facial grimaces, materiality, social function, and so on. Because the two preceding versions of the table are firmly connected with their given cultures, Harman asks what culture corresponds to the third version. He reaches the conclusion that it is the culture of *art* and *philosophy*. These fields are not trying, according to Harman, to present a clear answer about objects, but rather approach objects indirectly and through various metaphorical strategies. Yet they manage to say something new and important about objects. What might that be?

<sup>9</sup> HARMAN

In the past, McLuhan called artists “antennae’s of the race,”<sup>10</sup> as because of their training focused on the senses makes them uniquely equipped to see better and farther than a non-artist. For McLuhan and the context of media, this means that artists are able to see through established stereotypes and clichés which dominate the given epoch and society, while most people consider the way things *are* also the way they *must be*. According to McLuhan, one of the major strategies artists use for this purpose is the creation of an *anti-environment*. By this he means the creation of situations and contexts in which a regular person with untrained senses might be able to recognize a realer state of existence for objects, and reflect on the contingency of the established orders, systems and hierarchies. In the anti-environment, media are stripped of the mask given to them by the automated and unconscious everyday, allowing even regular people can instead gain a more honest and authentic relationship to objects through processes of defamiliarization and a “transversal” crossing of contexts. If we agree with Koubová and Zahavi, they can also relate better to other people without assuming complete knowledge of them, as the capacity to be seen and universally understood by the human mind and its cognitive operations is predicated on the existence of the hidden remainder.

<sup>10</sup> MCLUHAN AND MCLUHAN, 6.

In this context, I equate properly generated anti-environments with the transversal strategies of Aleš Čermák. By creating unusual situations, he constructs encounters among diverse, heterogeneous and socially disparate individuals in non-familiar spaces. The meeting of



the participants which actively engage in the performance's construction does not attempt to represent pre-defined meanings or situations. Instead, Čermák works within a tradition which seems similar to what Alice Koubová defines in the book *Myslet z druhého místa* (To Think from an Other Place), where she uses the quote from German phenomenologist and philosophical anthropologist Max Scheler regarding an *expressive phenomenon*: "A phenomenological treatment of the expressive phenomenon also has to do with the topics of dramatic expression, the existence of visibility on the scene, the experience of acting and performance. The expressive phenomenon combines the visibility and invisibility of the human in specific ways. Invisibility here does not assume the negation of visibility, its absence, but rather an aspect of visibility."<sup>11</sup> The concept of an expressive phenomenon places more emphasis on the way people express themselves through their external properties, perhaps giving it more import than they themselves thought. The core of the individual's human being is not accessible to others but, according to Koubová, as well as other authors focused on the cognitive, phenomenological or psychoanalytic discourse, we must take stock of the fact that our internal being is not accessible to us either, as our unconscious always contains more than we are able to consciously describe in explicit verbal expressions. The expressive phenomenon thus says nothing less than that our expression, our facial expressions, our embodiment are *constitutive* features of intersubjectivity, as they uncover parts of our internal world to other people and, through feedback looping the reactions of others, recursively co-constitute the expression of what we are and what we can become. Goffman's theory that we are all playing theater should in no way be understood in the negative sense, but rather should be taken as an unavoidable fact where, by means of expressivity and performance, we open ourselves to others so that they might help us co-define ourselves. That is the consequence of intersubjectivity in phenomenology and the embracing of the thesis that we will never be wholly transparent, neither to ourselves nor to others, but rather that we, other people, media and objects in general contain a surplus which can never be fully represented, but which must be accessed indirectly. In the case of McLuhan and Harman, this role is filled by artists and their creation of anti-environments. In the work of Koubová and other phenomenologists, the constitutive aspect of the expressive phenomenon is also considered to be powerful, and thus a potential source of danger. That is also why the transversality of established intersubjectivities which can truly disrupt our phenomenological understanding of ourselves and our relationship to others presents an ethical challenge. It thus requires the necessary trust that it is safe to experiment with alternative modes of personal expression in heretofore invisible depths of one's inner world, and in the gradual alienation and the finding of new expression of one's 'I'. This is a challenge for experienced artists, one which requires enough empathy, but it also constitutes a fertile ground where performative art and philosophy can further explore their given philosophical, phenomenological and psychological modalities and determine whether it might be possible to achieve what Graham Harman terms "Philosophy as rigorous art."<sup>12</sup> If philosophy will never gain direct and complete access to the being of objects, it must find a fitting method for indirect contact. And artistic practice seems to be the better alternative in comparison to verbal propositions which only play at science. This would thus constitute the exact opposite of what Danto speculated upon: art in Harman's ontology is wholly complementary with philosophy and, under certain conditions, is in fact able to comprehend it.

<sup>11</sup> KOUBOVÁ, 37.

<sup>12</sup> HARMAN



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