

## Art, Philosophy, and Non-standard Aesthetics

Thomas Sutherland

In Laruelle the aesthetic stance is the same as the utopian stance. In the most prosaic sense, non-philosophy describes a kind of non-place where conventional rules seem not to apply.  
—Alexander R. Galloway, ‘Laruelle: Against the Digital’

Reflecting upon the relationship between aesthetics and philosophy, according to which the former typically submits to the aegis of the latter, François Laruelle observes that

[a]esthetics was always a carbon copy of art in philosophy and subsequently art was always understood as a deficient modality of philosophy. It is the phenomena of self-modeling of philosophy in regards to art, where philosophy finds its model in art, but a model which is philosophically pre-formed or pre-decided.<sup>1</sup>

It is precisely this treatment of art, by philosophy, as an inferior clone, even as the latter draws upon its resources, that I examine in this chapter, focusing on the various ways that metaphysicians have internalized artistic modalities of thought. I begin with an investigation of Plato and his expulsion of all artists and poets from his idealized republic (an outright exclusion of art from philosophical discourse which paradoxically guarantees its essential interiority within the structure of this very form of thought), and then, following a brief discussion of the birth of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, move onto the interiorization of an artistic mentality within the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson. I will lastly turn to the place of non-standard aesthetics within Laruelle’s project as a potential remedy to this fraught relationship between artistic practice and philosophical theory, and try to understand the various ways in which philosophy as a discipline risks sidelining specifically artistic modes of experience in its drive toward a totalizing self-sufficiency.

1. François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, Trans. Drew S. Burk. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2012, p. 4.

For Laruelle, we do not need to take it for granted that philosophy, and aesthetics particularly (which in its normal operation is a type of categorization and judgment intimately tied to the philosophical schema) should have a monopoly over art:

[w]e propose another solution that, without excluding aesthetics, no longer grants it this domination of philosophical categories over works of art, but limits it in order to focus on its transformation. It's about substituting for the conflict of art and philosophy the conjugation of their means regulated on the basis of a scientific model.<sup>2</sup>

This so-called scientific model is not so much a means of understanding art (which would in turn mean capturing it as an object of knowledge) as it is an immanent artistic practice, suspending philosophy's categorial boundaries. It does not propose yet another theory of art, but instead emphasizes the possibilities for a non-conceptual, non-reflexive artistic practice that is already given to us, and which would allow us to transform the undecidable coupling art and aesthetics (the philosophy of art) that homogenizes the former in the name of the latter.

#### PLATO AND THE ARTISTS

Plato (and the simulative image of his mentor Socrates that pervades his writings; a form of dissimulation, one might argue, inasmuch as Plato's words are never his own, always blended with those figurative interlocutors between which his arguments are constructed) was certainly not the first to denounce visual representation. The third commandment inscribed upon Moses' stone tablets is quite clear in this respect: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth'.<sup>3</sup> Whilst this aspect of Judaic law is certainly important, it has less specifically philosophical significance in comparison to the Platonic interdiction.

In *The Republic*, Plato denounces artists—painters and poets in particular—as nothing more than frauds, who deal in 'things which are, in fact, two generations away from reality'.<sup>4</sup> The painter, for instance, is merely a 'representer of others' creations', not attempting to craft objects in accordance with the eternal truth of the Ideas, but instead producing simulacra of these Ideas' already corrupted sensorial representations.<sup>5</sup> This is why artists are described as working 'two generations away from the throne of truth'<sup>6</sup>, producing a superficial resemblance to the singular being of these Ideas (good enough at least to fool the ignorant masses, who lack education and are thus easily swayed by appeals to their passions) and yet operating through an entirely separate logic of multiplicity and becoming. A painter, or visual artist more generally, is capable of producing a seemingly endless chain of distinct pieces of art 'only because

2. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, p. 1.

3. Exodus 20.4

4. Plato, *The Republic*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 348.

5. *Ibid.* p. 348.

6. *Ibid.* p. 348.

his contact with things is slight and restricted to how they look?<sup>7</sup> The practical reality, suggests Plato, is that no one who is capable of producing a truly original work (i.e. one that is not merely the distorted copy or simulacrum of another preexisting object) would sully themselves by instead opting to make pale imitations: if the painter ‘really knew about the things he was copying in his representations, he’d put far more effort into producing real objects than he would into representations’.<sup>8</sup>

Plato’s critique of poets, at a time when the orally transmitted poetry of Homer and Hesiod still formed the basis of Greek education, is similarly reproachful, insisting that all the poet really knows is

how to represent things in a way which makes other superficial people, who base their conclusions on the words they can hear, think that he’s written a really good poem about shoemaking or military command of whatever else it is that he’s set to metre, rhythm, and music.<sup>9</sup>

Once again, his arguments regarding art are grounded in a distrust of ordinary citizens (and non-citizens, who of course formed the majority within the Greek city-state), and an unwavering belief that it is the philosopher exclusively who is able to discern the ontological gap between the turbulent flux and multiplicity of the empirical realm that constitutes everyday perceptual experience (and which is not only perpetuated, but amplified by the creation of artistic objects, the misguided moralities of the poets, and the shonky word-games of the sophists and rhetoricians), and the transcendent clarity of the Ideas. ‘Philosophers are those who are capable of apprehending that which is permanent and unvarying, while those who can’t, those who wander erratically in the midst of plurality and variety, are not lovers of knowledge’.<sup>10</sup>

Plato makes a separation or cut between two terms—the ideal and the sensible; that which is merely coming to be and that which is; the One and the Indefinite Dyad—in order to then both valorize the philosopher in their recognition of this division, and laud the ontological primacy of the former term in each instance, which binds these contraries under the sign of the Good. This is why he so eagerly wished to expel all painters and poets from his hypothesized and idealized city-state. Their works are mere simulacra: not even just copies, but copies of the copies; not merely distorted, corrupted imitations of the Ideas, but representations totally divorced from that ideality. They create an image of the world that he, as the philosopher, must denigrate and dispatch in order to uphold the unity-of-contraries that, according to Laruelle, constitutes the basis not only of his philosophy, but of all philosophies. Plato attempts to think the One, in the form of the Good, but can only do so in a unitary (rather than unified) manner, conceiving of the reciprocal duality of the Ideas and their baneful imitations (since the former are posited as the a priori conditions of the latter, the necessity of the latter is implied), whilst also, at the very same time, elevating

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7. Plato, *The Republic*. p. 348.

8. *Ibid*, p.349.

9. *Ibid*, p.352

10. Plato, *The Republic*, p.203.

the Ideas to the position of transcendental unity through which this reciprocal relation is given. Such a unity is at once immanent and transcendent to this relation—internal and external. The philosopher, in the Platonic account, is consequently torn between thinking the purity of being in itself, and thinking the mixture of being with the aesthetic realm he despises, in order to demonstrate his superiority over it.

Art is, for Plato, a deficient modality of philosophical discourse: it is a distraction, whose representations and manipulations garble the truth contained within the Ideas, and detract from the masses' ability to comport themselves in a manner appropriate to the position of philosopher. The paradox of this, however, is that Plato's philosophy needs art. One of the invariant characteristics of philosophy, argues Laruelle, is its auto-position, where the aforementioned mixture of immanence and transcendence, empirical experience and idealized abstraction, given and givenness, is posited as determinative and exhaustive when it comes to thinking the real, thus placing philosophy 'in a state of overseeing in relation to itself'.<sup>11</sup> This is illustrated clearly in Plato's strange (and yet within the disquisitions of philosophy, utterly normal) equivocation, where the real is thought not in the blinding purity of the Ideas themselves, but in an empirico-ideal mélange that gives the philosopher a privileged view of the relationship between the Ideas and the various representations (both copies and simulacra), that are divorced from them and yet able to be judged by them. We have here a truth that claims to transcend the world (even whilst conditioning it), and yet nonetheless exists seemingly to legislate over and pass judgment upon it.

This is, extrapolating from Laruelle's account, the fundamental problem when art is incorporated into philosophy: the subordination (or outright dismissal, as in this case) of artistic practice is a characteristic component of philosophical discourse (keeping in mind of course that both Xenophanes and Heraclitus dismissed the rhapsodic epic poetry of Homer, even prior to Plato's sustained attack), and in particular, a constituent element of philosophy's auto-position, situating itself as superior to all regional disciplines and knowledges; yet at the same time this dismissal is required for said positioning. Artistic practices and products, as we see in Plato's description, are pre-given within the strictures and structurations of his philosophy. Integrating this purportedly mimetic, degraded exteriority into his philosophy in order to then denigrate it, art becomes an exteriority that is always already an interiority, insofar as it is already homogenized under the spatialized representation of the philosophical decision (the schism between the empirical and ideal, immanent and transcendent which only the philosopher in her or his wisdom may suture). This is what Laruelle calls the auto-givenness or auto-donation of philosophy. Whereas auto-position designates 'the dimension of ideal transcendence, of objectifying activity over itself, of auto-formation, auto-production, of Philosophical Decision', auto-givenness by contrast signifies that 'philosophy is, in a way to be determined each

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11. François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, Trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 68.

time, its own presentation, its own offer and givenness<sup>12</sup> such that only it is able to fulfil the necessity that it gives itself within the world (noting that for Laruelle, the ‘world’ must be understood as an object that is inherently philosophizable). In other words, the givenness of the philosophical decision is posited by itself, such that regional knowledges, disciplines, and practices (in this case the arts) are always already contained within this decisional form and structure, making any external access to or analysis of it seem impossible.

## THE EMERGENCE OF AESTHETICS

Of course, Plato is perhaps a bad example to choose for this topic insofar as his outright exclusion of both *aísthēsis* (from which we get the copies of the Ideas encountered in our everyday experience) and the more deliberately artistic forms of *tékhnē* (from which we get the phantasmic representations of representations that he so despises) is, with quite good reason, never really replicated by any other philosopher. With the exception of Aristotle who, in defiance of his former teacher’s dogmatism, wrote an appreciable quantity of material on the judgment of beauty in the arts, especially poetry and rhetoric (defending techniques of imitation in his *Poetics* as essential to human nature), art is not of much interest to ancient and early modern philosophers. It is predominately viewed as too mundane, too technical (in the aforesaid sense of *tékhnē*), and contributing little to the far loftier concerns of the philosophical elite. Saint Thomas’ description in the *Summa Theologiæ* of the arts and crafts as ‘regulation by reason of the making of things’<sup>13</sup> is instructive in this regard, bearing little resemblance to the championing of artistic autonomy and inspiration we tend to take for granted. This exclusion (as opposed to a dismissal, which is what we get from Plato)—as Umberto Eco describes it, ‘a sort of devaluation of artistic as opposed to theoretical knowledge, from the idea of imitation of an imitation to the idea of a *gnoseologia inferior*’<sup>14</sup>—is perhaps most pronounced during the Age of Enlightenment, when philosophers on either side of the English Channel saw little intellectual value in these practices which seemed to contribute little to a rapidly expanding body of scientific and technical knowledge.

It is only in the eighteenth century, at the summit of Enlightenment thought (and thus also the precipice from which it would subsequently tumble) that aesthetics proper, as a distinct field of study, emerges. The term itself, which in its Greek origin refers primarily to sense perception, comes to refer specifically to the judgment of taste and beauty in the writings of the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, one of many at the time working to fill in the gaps left by Christian Wolff, the preeminent German-language philosopher of the age. Hoping to develop a science of aesthetics, Baumgarten was convinced that he could discover universal rules of beauty via individual judgments of taste. His great philosophical innovation, outside of mere nomenclature, was his

12. Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, pp. 234–235.

13. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ: A Concise Translation*, Trans. Timothy McDermott, Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1989, p. 376.

14. Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, Trans. Alastair McEwen, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1999, p. 32.

conviction that such judgments, and the feelings of pleasure and displeasure that come along with them, were not merely inferior substitutes or imitations of rational thought (a line of argument that persisted through the Enlightenment, assuming that aesthetic judgment was something to be passed through and transcended, rather than encouraged or analysed), but were a viable alternative to the intellect: the beginning, we might say, of a new expression of philosophical discourse, with art as a necessary component of its operations. ‘Without art, philosophy lacks sensitivity and without philosophy, art lacks thought’.<sup>15</sup> It is at the origin of aesthetic theory in the mid-eighteenth century that this imbrication is directly explicated, rather than occluded (as it is in Plato).

With this development of aesthetics, a new emphasis upon the importance of subjective judgment—and the pitfalls of the oft-corrosive rationality that characterized Enlightenment rationalism—gradually arises:

[a]s the validity of this knowledge was gradually questioned, and limited to highly circumscribed universes of discourse, there gradually emerged the possibility of an area of certainty that would definitely come very close to the Universal but through a quasi-numinous revelation of the particular.<sup>16</sup>

With the first signs of a nascent romanticism (or counter-Enlightenment) emerging, we begin to witness the contingencies of individual experience lauded as not only a complementary form of knowledge, but one that is actually superior, over and above the universals of natural science and its philosophical correlates. A new aesthetic modality of perception and thought springs up within philosophy, seen in the work of the British philosopher and politician Edmund Burke, who sought to catalogue ‘those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts’<sup>17</sup>, hoping to locate the root causes of all of such judgments within the human psyche. Likewise, the French philosopher Charles Batteux developed the notion of the fine arts as a realm of inherently beautiful objects, created by great talents, which is conspicuously separate from technical practices, and hence also autonomous of all quotidian concerns.

Perhaps most important though is the work of Kant—another follower of Wolff, and one who also relied greatly upon the writings of Baumgarten as the basis of his metaphysical research—who in his third Critique argues that judgments of taste ‘lay claim to necessity and say, not that everyone does so judge—that would make their explanation a task for empirical psychology—but that everyone ought to so judge, which is as much as to say that they have an a priori principle for themselves’.<sup>18</sup> Kant perceived the work of Burke, in particular (from whom he borrows and augments the notion of the ‘sublime’), as too focused upon the crude empiricisms of psychology, and sought instead the transcendental basis of such judgment. In the first Critique, Kant is also somewhat critical

15. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, p. 4.

16. Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, p. 32-33.

17. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 13.

18. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 39.

of Baumgarten, declaring that his project is founded upon the ‘failed hope ... of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason, and elevating its rules to a science’<sup>19</sup>, and suggesting that, like Burke, he is trapped within the confines of empirical research, unable to determine the a priori rules that must direct our aesthetic judgments.

It is this constant desire on Kant’s part to identify and philosophically schematize the conditions of possible experience that provides Laruelle with the arche-example of philosophical decision, for in the Kantian model ‘[t]he transcendental withdraws from experience ... only in order to better return to it’, attempting to identify the basic conditions of empirical thought in order to then judge this thought under the authority of a unified, transcendental subject according to which the empirical and ideal components of experience are synthesized as objects of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Kant ‘understood that perpetual war was the essence of ancient philosophy, what he called metaphysics, and that philosophy was being eaten up from the inside by a drive to auto-destruction’.<sup>21</sup> The irony of the Kantian project, however, is that as much as it wants to limit traditional philosophical hubris (exemplified by both Wolff and Baumgarten’s dogmatic conviction that all fundamental truths could be derived through the testing of analytic a priori definitions via the principle of non-contradiction), and its propensity to speak on matters like the existence of God or the immortality of the soul (topics that Kant regards as little more than the fanciful flights of a reason constantly driven to extend beyond its boundaries), it still retains a decisional schism between an empirical datum (studied through the transcendental aesthetic) and an a priori factum (likewise through the transcendental logic), with the former effectively subordinated to the latter.

It is only following Kant, who understands art as a purposively purposeless mode of representation—and thus incorporates art within his already-developed transcendental schema—that aesthetics becomes a distinct and crucial component of philosophy. In regard to Eco’s comments, it is interesting that he views this growing interest amongst eighteenth century philosophers regarding aesthetic judgment and taste as a (momentary) surrender of philosophy to the forces of artistic practice. Its ascendancy weakened, philosophy retreats to a position in which its attempts to rationalize and systematize thought are tempered by the subjective judgment of a different, more artistic mode of thought. Is this actually the case though? Baumgarten was, of course, an unrepentant rationalist in the Wolffian fashion, emphasizing the need to develop a truly objective, scientific field of aesthetic theory, and Burke was convinced that ‘the standard both of reason and taste is the same in all human creatures’.<sup>22</sup> Even Kant, who is so critical of what he perceives as these authors’ vulgar empiricism, suggests that

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19. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* p. 156.

20. François Laruelle. *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*, ed. Robin Mackay, Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012, p. 145.

21. François Laruelle, *Intellectuals and Power: The Insurrection of the Victim*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith, Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2015, p. 21.

22. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p.11.

the power of judgment first makes it possible, indeed necessary, to conceive in nature, over and above its mechanical necessity, a purposiveness without the presupposition of which systematic unity in the thoroughgoing classification of particular forms in accordance with empirical laws would not be possible.<sup>23</sup>

In all of these cases, what we see is not so much the surrender of philosophy to art as simply a change in the nature of philosophical ideality, shifting the terms of critique whilst still preserving art as a regional object and practice subordinated to philosophical categorization and legislation.

‘What is standard within aesthetics, is that philosophy alone would be able to justify art attaining the real and that philosophy alone can provide its proper description’.<sup>24</sup> Aesthetics is, from this perspective, the means by which philosophy perpetuates its hegemony: the explicit incorporation, rather than dismissal of art does not mitigate its subordination within the basic philosophical decision, for it still appears as a supplement used to prop up the superiority of the philosopher’s transcendent categories (in Kant’s case the transcendental subject, forming the condition for all possible experience). Art is shrunk-to-fit, so to speak, within an already-delineated categorial schema. In the case of Kantian aesthetics, the free play of the faculties of the imagination and understanding that defines the judgment of beauty is still preformed by the faculty of intuition (i.e. of sensible space-time) and the transcendental aesthetic by which these a priori forms are studied. Art is thus still thought in philosophical terms, as a philosophy of art. ‘Taken as a whole, aesthetics is a market of theories about art supported by the art market itself’.<sup>25</sup>

## NIETZSCHE, BERGSON, AND THE PROBLEM OF TECHNICAL AÍSTHĒSIS

Perhaps the apogee of this gradual inclusion of art, and of aesthetics as a legitimate philosophical field of study, occurs within the work of Nietzsche, who attempts to not merely think art as an object of philosophical study, but to transform thought into an artistic, creative mode of practice. For Nietzsche, ‘the real is fictional and the fictional real’.<sup>26</sup> This goal traverses his corpus. It begins with his distinction between the Apolline and Dionysiac aims of art, as synthesized within the tragic form, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and his claim that the only real purpose of art is ‘the conquest of subjectivity, release and redemption from the “I”, and the falling-silent of all individual willing and desiring’,<sup>27</sup> making clear parallels between such artistic practices and the broader aims of his philosophy (which in its emphasis upon contemplation as a means for transcending the boundaries of the subject still evinces the Schopenhauerian sympathies that he would soon disavow). It continues through to his later emphasis upon the will

23. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, pp. 21-22.

24. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, p.13.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

26. Laruelle, *Philosophy*, p. 228.

27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Trans. Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 29.

to power as a dynamic and productive affirmation of the power of being, contrasted against the ascetic, nihilistic, and scientific will to truth, which he describes as a ‘logicizing, rationalizing, systematizing’ mode of thought, which seeks truth as an end in itself, and in doing so reifies it as a stable, external, metaphysical entity.<sup>28</sup>

Nietzsche effectuates a thorough internalization of artistic practice within philosophical thought, incorporating the former into the latter whilst maintaining its subordinate or inferior position by establishing the superiority of an aesthetic philosophy over any specific objects of aesthetic judgment or contemplation. We can perhaps understand this distinction more clearly by looking briefly at Schopenhauer, who generally hews quite closely to Kantian transcendentalism, arguing that:

[t]he artist allows us to look into the world through his eyes. The fact that he has these eyes, that he has cognition of the essential aspect of things lying outside of all relations, is precisely the gift of genius, and it is innate; but the fact that he also can lend this gift to us and allow us to use his eyes: this is acquired, it is the technical aspect of art.<sup>29</sup>

For Schopenhauer—who views art as the means toward a contemplative state wherein the empirical specificities of the artwork itself dissolve so as to reveal the Ideas that lie at the foundation of thought—the artistic genius is not a philosopher, but contains within herself the ability to attain (at least partially) such a state of contemplation, and in doing so, to impart this unto others through the production of art. What is unique to the philosopher then is the ability to systematize and articulate this process. ‘In regard to knowledge of truths,’ argues Nietzsche by contrast, ‘the artist possesses a weaker morality than the thinker; he does not wish to be deprived of the glittering, profound interpretations of life and guards against simple and sober methods and results’<sup>30</sup>: the philosopher is now actually able to outshine the artist in this regard, preserving a clear-headed solemnity that the latter lacks.

In this way, Nietzsche internalizes the precepts of both aesthetic theory and practice so that he, the philosopher, may declare himself equivalent to artists themselves. Given what we have already seen though, this should not be interpreted as a philosophical colonization of terms once the sole domain of artists; rather, we must keep in mind that aesthetics has always been a means of thinking art in philosophical terms. Philosophy, as Laruelle notes, is not at all homogeneous in its aims and approaches, but it nonetheless ‘possesses a homogeneous limit that is its auto-encompassing or auto-specular drive: philosophizability.’<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, therefore, is not appropriating terms once foreign to philosophy (for

28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books, 1967, p. 299.

29. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Vol 1*, trans. Judith Norman, Alastair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 219.

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 80.

31. François Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Anthony Paul Smith, Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2012, p. 111.

they originated within this discourse), but merely turning their direction inward, such that they are now virtues of philosophers themselves. The same could be said for Bergson, whose strict dualism between a spatialized, discretized, and externalized intellection and the continuous, temporal, intuitional interiority that precedes it effectively projects categories that since Kant had been deemed the domain of aesthetics (e.g. novelty, originality, etc.) onto thought itself. This means that the intuition, which is constantly oriented in its non-mechanistic causality toward a non-predictable future—its *durée* being ‘that in which each form flows out of previous forms, while adding to them something new’<sup>32</sup>—is an aesthetic mode of thought, inasmuch as we understand aesthetics as aiming toward, in Kant’s words, an awakening of the artist’s ‘own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his [sic] art in such a way that the latter thereby itself acquires a new rule, by which the talent shows itself as exemplary’<sup>33</sup>: the production of the genuinely new and original.

This aestheticization is framed as an attempt to bypass the stifling homogeneity of conscious thought:

Plato was the first to set up the theory that to know the real consists in finding its Idea, that is to say, in forcing it into a pre-existing frame already at our disposal—as if we implicitly possessed universal knowledge. But this belief is natural to the human intellect, always engaged as it is in determining under what former heading it shall catalogue any new object; and it may be said that, in a certain sense, we are all born Platonists.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless Bergson, like Plato (and like Nietzsche also, whose aforementioned distinction between the will to power and the will to truth can be understood primarily as a critique of an increasingly positivistic mode of logico-mathematical scientific thought) is not always kind when assessing the new forms of artistic representation and mediated transmission that were appearing during his lifetime. In particular, Bergson is highly skeptical of both photography and cinematography, viewing them (like language as a whole) as technical instantiations of a preexisting psychological and philosophical tendency to divide experience up into discrete, homogeneous chunks: ‘we end in the philosophy of Ideas,’ he claims, ‘when we apply the cinematographical mechanism of the intellect to the analysis of the real’.<sup>35</sup>

Both Nietzsche and Bergson agree that one of the problems with Platonic Idealism is the essential immutability of the Ideas. On this point Bergson writes that Plato’s theory

starts from the form; it sees in the form the very essence of reality. It does not take form as a snapshot of becoming; it posits forms in the eternal; of this motionless eternity, then, duration and becoming are supposed to be only the degradation.<sup>36</sup>

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32. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, Mineola, NY: Dover, 1911, p. 362.

33. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 195-196.

34. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, pp. 48-49.

35. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 315.

36. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 318.

As a consequence, they are entirely divorced from the continuity of one's internal duration. And for Bergson, cinema in particular is just the return of this mentality under a new guise, or in a new technical manifestation: it proffers a false image of time, convincing us that movement is just composed of series of still images played in front of our eyes one-after-another, and in doing so distracts us from any possible encounter with that primal, originary time contained within us, and which forms the foundation of all time-consciousness. Bergson, in other words, falls right back into art as tied to explicitly moral judgment: although he has little time for photography and cinema, at least within a specifically philosophical context, he has a much greater fondness for music (especially Beethoven), because its perceived temporality tends to fit more closely with his concept of duration. 'A melody to which we listen with our eyes closed, heeding it alone, comes close to coinciding with this time which is the very fluidity of our inner life'<sup>37</sup>, Bergson writes, whilst also noting that even a melody—which appeals to him because it cannot be comprehended as just a series of individual notes; it only makes sense as a melody when in motion—is not fully analogous, for the simple reason that there is still too much discontinuous differentiation between intervals.

So this is the problem then, if we once again extrapolate from the perspective of Laruelle, who describes aesthetics as 'the claimed domination of philosophy over art by which philosophy claims to unpack its meaning, truth, and destination after the event of art's supposed death'<sup>38</sup>: Bergson internalizes characteristics once confined to aesthetics within his broader psychology and metaphysics, but he does so in order to reinforce (rather than undermine) the auto-position and auto-donation of philosophy. Rather than treating art as an autonomous knowledge or practice, it still remains a regional discipline, which philosophy claims to both condition (insofar as Bergson views philosophical thought as synonymous with the duration that acts as the foundation of such thought) and legislate over (insofar as Bergson uses his dualistic ontology in order to judge and classify forms of art and media). It would seem that there is no genuine artistic thought here; rather, what we see is still a philosophical thought situating itself both under and above art, even whilst assimilating certain characteristics from it. Bergson reduces art, so that his judgment in relation to it becomes a question of the extent to which it conforms to his chosen categories, the transcendent a prioris of intuition, duration, continuity, and so on and so forth.

One might observe that this is not dissimilar to one of Alain Badiou's critiques of Gilles Deleuze: reflecting upon Deleuze's clear fascination with the filmic medium (in sharp contrast to Bergson, who he attempts to reshape into a form more amenable to such interests), Badiou argues that 'in the volumes on the cinema, what one learns concerns the Deleuzian theory of movement and

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37. Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity*, trans. Leon Jacobson, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965, p. 44.

38. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, p. 1.

time, and the cinema gradually becomes neutralized and forgotten',<sup>39</sup> effectively criticizing him for only using this medium in order to illustrate preconceived categories of thought. Laruelle would surely agree with this, but he would also go further, for he views this mode of categorial exchange—the way in which the philosophical decision does not and cannot think the One in itself, but only by projecting various attributes upon it, such as 'Being, God, Thought, Reason, and other humanistic and anti-humanistic fetishes'<sup>40</sup>—as an invariant component of philosophical discourse. If, as Alexander Galloway puts it, Deleuze's aesthetics are grounded in 'the productive capacity of matter', revealing a vitalism that effectively subordinates art itself to life, and in doing so raises the latter to the position of an abstract universal, Laruelle's by contrast are founded upon 'the immanent and generic logic of the real' which necessarily forecloses all such abstraction through the impossibility of thinking it as an object of knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

### TOWARD A NON-STANDARD AESTHETICS?

What is it then that Laruelle offers instead, outside of what he views as the domineering and presumptuous sufficiency of philosophical discourse? In a general sense, the aim of his project of non-philosophy (or non-standard philosophy, as he has come to refer to it in recent years) is to think according to or alongside the One (which is, in non-philosophical terms, the ordinary human individual or ego, stripped of all attributes other than a simple, wholly positive sufficiency)—noting that the immanence that is proposed by philosophers 'always corresponds to models, and so they are always somewhat transcendent, and never sufficiently radical in order to determine a thought according to immanence'<sup>42</sup>—and in doing so, to thus think philosophy as a transcendental material or object, rather than as a truth or unquestioned authority. To think philosophy in such a fashion is to understand it as 'the aesthetic form and transcendental logic that posits and gives the World',<sup>43</sup> rather than that which conditions and legislates over the world.

'If philosophy already claims to fulfil a transcendental task,' Laruelle writes, 'the issue now is to define a generalized transcendental thought, equally "for" philosophy itself reduced to the state of a priori, deprived of its proper "real" claim by a more "powerful" thought, capable precisely of a "transcendental reduction" of the philosophical posture itself'.<sup>44</sup> In order to achieve this, he relativizes the previously discussed Kantian division between the transcendental aesthetic and the transcendental logic, such that these categories (unlike in the Kantian mode) precede the subject: the former studies philosophy as material

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39. Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 16.

40. Laruelle, *Struggle*, pp. 3-4.

41. Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 167.

42. Laruelle, *Introduction*, p. 45.

43. Laruelle, *Principles*, p. 282.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

(which gives the world) and the latter studies it as a formal object (with a specific position in relation to this world). Attempting to avoid the disjunction between the sensible and ideal, he argues that rather than the latter conditioning and legislating over the former, they are both in their own rights equal and autonomous, interacting only in the last instance, as identical according to the One. The outcome of this is that there is no longer an external, extra-philosophical world or given—‘that of idealizations destined to be philosophically seized again’<sup>45</sup>—over which the philosopher may demonstrate her mastery; conversely, the world is now seen as given through philosophy as an inert material. This is the beginning of a process of creation that Laruelle refers to as philo-fiction, which is the ‘conjugation of disciplines outside their disciplinary incarceration as terms in themselves’, defining the parameters for ‘a new space for thought’.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, the non-standard view of philosophy is congenitally aesthetic, giving the world rather than the dominating it: ‘every philosophical project would have its own style that could individuate it.’<sup>47</sup>

Another upshot of this then is that non-standard philosophy, by virtue of its attempt to establish the relative autonomy of regional practices and knowledges, is determined to enable other types of thought, outside the aegis of philosophical sufficiency. It affords the opportunity to challenge the presumption that ‘philosophical aesthetics is the lone possible theory of art, especially if it considers itself as fundamental to the works rather than being merely descriptive of the works, styles, and historical and artistic codes.’<sup>48</sup> What Laruelle wishes to create, in short, is a non-standard aesthetics—an artistic thought; a thought according to art, rather than a mere philosophy of aesthetics (i.e. Kant or Hegel) or an aesthetic philosophy (i.e. Nietzsche, Bergson, or Deleuze)—and in doing so, to release art from its domination by philosophy. This is not simply the quest for yet another theory of art, which would in turn instantiate yet another philosophical form of aesthetics (thus perpetuating philosophy’s constant warfare against itself); instead, it is the question of whether art can engender its own aesthetics, and in addition to this, whether we can produce an art of philosophy, rather than a philosophy of art. This would be a truly immanent art—that is, art as an immanent act, or more precisely, an act that is immanent to itself, neither representative nor expressive. A non-conceptual form of art, that does not need to extract concepts from elsewhere, nor to have such concepts impressed upon it, for it is an art that is already aestheticized, already given. An art that does not exist for the purpose of engendering a new ‘concept of function or of sensation’,<sup>49</sup> for we already have enough concepts (and can say with some certainty that the font of philosophical decision will continue to produce them).

The purpose of a non-standard aesthetics in regard to such art would be specifically to render it intelligible, ‘producing a science of it instead of a philos-

45. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

46. Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, p. xxiii.

47. Laruelle, *Dictionary*, p. 76.

48. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, p. 5

49. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, London and New York: Verso, 1994, p. 199.

ophy',<sup>50</sup> science in this context referring not to a positivistic or mechanistic determination of a preexisting truth or essence, but instead a practice of relativization (or 'generalization', as it is oft-referred to in Laruelle's writings), proffering 'a science of essences each time determined in the final instance by real lived experiences, and codetermined by means and supports drawn from the World.'<sup>51</sup> This would not involve the outright exclusion of philosophy, but the recognition of its relative autonomy in relation to the arts, such that we are 'only deprived of excess of philosophy's pretensions of the absolute'<sup>52</sup>: a science (rather than a philosophy) of aesthetics, in other words, would be the means by which an immanent form and practice of art might be extracted from the supposed shackles of philosophical homogeneity. In doing so, what can be achieved is not the radical autonomy of these disciplines (a unilateral duality reserved for the relationship between the One and its clones), which would ensure their utter disavowal and thus incommensurability; rather, it is the reciprocal determination of art and philosophy, and their identity in-the-last-instance. The potential here, as Laruelle sees it, is to effectively make an art out of philosophy, and given that the arts 'have a more obvious relation to the lived included in their procedures'<sup>53</sup>, we might come closer to a modality of thought that operates according to the lived finitude of the One, cloned through philosophical materials as the ordinary human subject.

A quite consistent theme running through Laruelle's oeuvre is the notion of a mystical indifference to the world (the latter of course being viewed in its inherent philosophizability as equivalent to philosophy itself), and as a corollary to this, a certain detachment from the empirical or ontic content of philosophy or its regional phenomena. Non-standard philosophy is, he states, 'not a worldly engagement even if it constantly busies itself in the world or if it takes worldly engagement as its materials'<sup>54</sup>—focusing instead upon the decisional schism between such content and the categories to which it is subordinated within the formal structure of philosophy. The practical consequence of this is that he rarely speaks of either philosophy or art in terms of their empirical objects of study, remaining at a potentially quite alienating level of formal or axiomatic abstraction. 'Can aesthetics become a second power of art itself,' Laruelle asks, 'can an art engender or determine its own aesthetics instead of suffering it as being philosophically imposed upon it?'<sup>55</sup> This is the provocation that he offers us, in straightforward terms: it is not that we should cease discussing art through philosophical concepts, but that we should acknowledge that such concepts do not monopolize the possibilities for theories of art. It is possible, he surmises, that we can unleash an aesthetics constructed upon artistic, rather than philosophical concepts.

Yet in making such an assertion, is there not a risk that this non-standard aesthetics merely falls back into yet another form of post-Idealist irrationalism—

50. Laruelle, 'First Choreography: Or the Essence-of-Dance,' *Qui Parle*, 21.2, 2013, p. 143.

51. Laruelle, 'First Choreography: Or the Essence-of-Dance', p. 147.

52. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, p. 18.

53. Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, p. 124

54. Laruelle, *Intellectuals*, p. 25.

55. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, p. 5.

the reduction of aesthetics to a form of incommunicable, internal truth? ‘In that Laruelle is interested in the performance of philosophy, while also rendering it non-representational,’ contends John Mullarkey, ‘he comes close to Henri Bergson’s idea of non-symbolic intuition.’<sup>56</sup> This silent intuitionism—characterized in this particular case by an essentially non-worldly conception of art which, although drawing from the inert (philosophical) materials that give the world, does not actually take place within the world, but is instead an immanent act of creation that is able to transform our thought of the world—is terribly abstract, evincing very little correspondence with artistic practice as we would normally conceive of it. In this respect, it shares features with the Laruellian understanding of science, which also does not bear much resemblance to either the natural and formal sciences or the structuralist conception of a self-sufficient theoretical practice, although it does borrow from the latter a marked disinterest regarding empirical phenomena. Non-philosophy sometimes gives the impression of a borderline-solipsism reliant upon a ‘lived experience—that of the immediate self- and vision-application, the very passion or affect of vision’<sup>57</sup> which is not in itself ineffable (insofar as the One can be described, but this description will never actually affect or determine it in any way), but nevertheless cannot be conflated with any form of empirical (and thus philosophical) experience as we would normally understand it.

In the typically biting words of Ray Brassier, the Laruellian project can be situated within a tradition of increasingly radicalized post-Heideggerian phenomenological reduction, endlessly seeking the conditions of conditions of experience, the result being that ‘the deeper it digs towards the pre-originary, the greater its remove from “things themselves” and the more impoverished its resources become’, burrowing deeper and deeper into its own reflexivity ‘in order to unearth the pre-reflexive, exacerbating abstraction until it becomes reduced to plying its own exorbitant vacuity.’<sup>58</sup> This, I would suggest, should not indicate the inherent futility of a non-standard aesthetics (or a non-standard philosophy more broadly), rather, it is indicative of the need to take the insight of such a method as a starting-point, instead of as an end in itself, and to utilize this in order to produce new potential conceptualizations of art which challenge, rather than reinforce the auto-position and auto-giveness of philosophical sufficiency. This is exactly why Laruelle speaks of creating ‘an artistic fiction out of aesthetics’<sup>59</sup> for the indifference to the world that he proposes is not an escape from the world (in the manner of the neo-Platonists or gnostics, although he draws resources from both of these traditions), but an attempt to relativize or generalize the materials through which this world is given so that they might be transformed through an artistic practice of thought: art thinking philosophy,

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56. John Mullarkey, ‘Film Can’t Philosophise (and Neither Can Philosophy): Introduction to a Non-Philosophy of Cinema.’ *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*. Eds. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 90.

57. Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, p. 13.

58. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 254.

59. Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction*, p. 2.

rather than vice-versa. What this approach emphasizes is the relative autonomy of the arts, insofar as they contain a non-reflexive kernel of immanent practice irreducible to and independent of all philosophical conceptualization and regionalization.