Always More Than One Art: Jean-Luc Nancy's "The Muses"
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“Why bother philosophizing about works of art at all? Barnett Newman suggested that artists need art theory like birds need ornithology.”\(^1\)

Jean-Luc Nancy begins *The Muses* with an essay entitled, “Why Are There Several Arts And Not Just One?” It is an ambitious essay, one which calls into question not only the specific aesthetic theories of Hegel and Heidegger, but essentially the entire Western aesthetic tradition. While Nancy provides some interesting discussions of the problem as he considers some of the more prominent aesthetic theories in Western philosophy, to what extent does it matter that we know (or do not know) whether art is singular or plural in essence, or what “art” is at all? What is the purpose of philosophizing about art?

Nancy’s claim in “Why Are There Several Arts And Not Just One?” is that the arts cannot be subsumed under a common heading of “art”; there is essentially nothing that ties them together to a common ground. He gives two basic ways in which this question has been altogether avoided (for the most part) up until now. “First way: One is content to affirm that plurality is a given of the arts.”\(^2\) Usually, that there are several different arts is taken for granted; we have observed and classified them, yet Nancy points out that these classifications and hierarchies have changed over time. This seems to suggest that there is an unasked question underlying this assumption. “Second way: One may also rely on the affirmation that there is one art, an essence of art.”\(^3\) This refers back to the idea of a Concept or Essence of art, of which the individual arts are mere manifestations—like the Platonic Forms. Here, perhaps the problem is just as Aristotle envisioned—how is Art (or the Form of something) related to its manifestations? Nancy states, ‘Not only does art not reside essentially in the diversity either of its ‘modalities’ or its ‘works,’ it does not even reside any longer in art. Its singularity is still just around the bend,

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3. Ibid., p. 3.
all the more dignified by being less perceptible as ‘art’ and even less as the multiplicity of artistic practices.”⁴ In fact, Art gains status by remaining out of reach; what is it? Where is it? How is it related to, or how does it give rise to, specific works of art? In *The Fragmentary Demand*, Ian James puts it clearly and succinctly when he says,

…Nancy does not take the existence or the definition of art for granted; he does not presuppose what art or the division of the different arts might be and then go on to think how each art form functions. Rather, the whole concept of art is rethought in terms of his wider philosophical thinking of existence and his rereading and reworking of existential phenomenology.⁵

And again,

…for Nancy, the existence of a plurality of arts is inseparable from the question of the essence of art itself…Nancy’s essay, therefore, aims neither to interrogate the empirical plurality of artistic production nor to pose the question of the essence of art in terms of a single governing principle. Rather, it aims to think the existence of art in terms of its plural origin or to think the plural as its origin.⁶

In many ways, it is a reiteration of Heidegger’s project in *Being and Time* (except with respect to art rather than Being) in that it seeks to think what has hitherto been taken for granted and unthought in philosophy until now.

And of course, in dealing with the idea that the arts are, in essence, plural, Nancy reminds us that certain things must be kept in mind, most importantly, that we not turn plurality into Plurality, the singular essence of plurality. He states, “What might one mean by a principle (or a reason or an essence) that would not be a principle of plurality, but the plural itself as principle? And in what way must this properly belong to the essence of art?”⁷ He seems to want to avoid the likelihood of his comments on the plurality of the arts turning into a new foundation or system for the definition or essence of art.

In “Why Are There Several Arts and Not Just One?” Nancy primarily considers the aesthetic theories of Hegel and Heidegger in order to try to address this question. With respect to

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⁶ ibid., p. 214.
Hegel, Nancy discusses the fact that Hegel had thought of the arts as separate from one another, their separation and difference correlating to the separation and difference between the five senses. Hegel also held that art, like everything else, was historical, and would eventually be overtaken by philosophy. Nancy rejects both of these notions, that 1) the different arts correlated to the senses and 2) that art becomes at some point an inadequate form of expression and must be superseded by philosophy. Nancy essentially says that Hegel’s lines of division are too simplistic, and that philosophy is really no more adequate than art in its ability to communicate. James claims, “…for Nancy at least, both art and philosophy are inadequate forms for the content they propose. They enact, or are, the presentation of something which exceeds any possibility of presentation, an excess which is irreducible to dialectical resolution or sublation, and thus irreducible to the work of reason or absolute knowledge.”

There is always something left over in art, something that theory and language itself are incapable of capturing. So, Nancy keeps from Hegel the idea of the arts being distinct and separate, but rejects the other points. He basically does the same thing with Heidegger. The subtitle of this essay is, “Conversation on the Plurality of Worlds.” Thus, it is announced from the beginning that worlds will play a part in art, and like Heidegger, Nancy, too, will see art as revealing a world—

Art forces sense to touch itself, to be this sense that it is. But in this way, it does not become simply what we call ‘a sense,’ for example sight or hearing: by leaving behind the integration of the ‘lived,’ it also becomes something else, another instance of unity, which exposes another world, not a ‘visual’ or ‘sonorous’ world but a ‘pictorial’ or ‘musical’ one.

Yet, just as Nancy rejects aspects of Hegel’s aesthetic theory, he will also reject aspects of Heidegger’s. Here, he rejects Heidegger’s seperation of art and techne, which has become the most common division: “Art and technics are so distinct for us that the title ‘art and technics’… is necessarily understood as the assertion of a problem and not as a tautology.” Later in the essay he adamantly asserts,

Thus, the arts are first of all technical. They are not technical ‘first of all’ in the sense that they comprise an initial part, procedure, which is capped by a final part,

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8 James, Ian. *The Fragmentary Demand*. P. 211.
10 ibid., p. 5.
‘artistic’ accomplishment….The arts are technical in a sense that means they may well be indissociable from what one would call, at least provisionally, the ‘essence of technics’ and by virtue of which the couple ‘art and technics’ would form, in our age, the internal rift and the problematic utterance that we began by remarking. Technique means knowing how to go about producing what does not produce itself by itself.\textsuperscript{11}

So, like Heidegger, Nancy asserts that art “exposes or touches a fragment of the world,”\textsuperscript{12} but diverges from Heidegger in making art and techne inseparable from and necessary to one another.

In the end, we can see Nancy’s position essentially summed up as follows:

Plurality exposes or expresses unity in the sense in which it puts unity outside of itself at birth, in the sense, consequently, in which the One of unity is not One ‘once and for all,’ but takes place ‘every time for one,’ so to speak. Each one of the arts exposes in its way the unity of ‘art,’ which has neither place nor consistency outside this ‘each one’—still more, the unity of a single art is exposed in this sense only in its works one by one.\textsuperscript{13}

What he comes to in this essay is the notion that the oneness of art, its unity, is not something that exists prior to the division of the arts as its foundation or essence, but rather is expressed through its plurality—the unity is seen only in the individual works of art and does not exist outside of it.

This idea is a very interesting one, and is certainly one that goes off in its own direction by addressing the points that other aesthetic theories lack. However, a question must be asked, not only with respect to Nancy’s particular discussion of the arts, but with respect to any aesthetic theory at all—why is any of this important? In \textit{The Art Question}, Nigel Warburton makes a statement worth considering:

…it is surely wishful thinking to suppose…that a satisfactory answer to the question ‘what is art now?’ will also be a satisfactory answer to the question ‘what \textit{has}...
art been?’ and ‘what will it be?’ Art is not a timeless category, but one which evolves as the societies in which works of art are created evolve.\textsuperscript{14}

This seems obvious when we consider the evolution of aesthetic theory over time, that it has continually changed to accommodate the appearance of works that challenge the traditional definitions of art (of all of the arts). For the Greeks and the Romans, art was primarily in service to the state and thus its requirements and style corresponded to the ideas and ideals that those in power wanted to promote. The Greek pottery that we so cherish was a craft, not one of the fine arts. As Christianity became popularized, much of the art from the Classical period was destroyed and the style and subject matter of art changed drastically. The Renaissance revived the Classical style, and was then challenged by the Baroque and Rococo. Caravaggio, whom we now consider to be a standard in the artistic canon, was rejected to a large extent during his own time and presented a great challenge to traditionally accepted painting style. Mozart, too, was not popularized until his challenges to classical music became standard in composition and then overaken by Beethoven and Chopin. It is not until Romanticism that the idea of the freelance artist, the idea of art for art’s sake, comes about, and this signifies a major change in the conception of art, the essence of art, and what constituted art. Here, art comes to be seen primarily as a mode of expression—the expression of the feelings, ideas, and emotions of the creator—rather than as a vehicle for religious or political ideas. This opens the way for the movements of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries by giving the underpinning of personal expression to works that would not traditionally have been considered art at all, such as the paintings of the German Expressionists, or the novels of James Joyce, or Dada performance art. One can now create pieces that make no reference to the tastes of the public and still have it considered great art. Duchamp’s \textit{The Fountain} forces us once again to think of art in a new way, to formulate a new “essence” of what art is: it has now become defined by its context. If something is meant to be viewed as art, then it is art, whether or not the “artist” actually created any aspect of it, whether or not the artist is trying to express anything at all.

So as Nancy asks the question of why there are several arts and not just one, and rejects the idea of some unified “essence” of art, this could only come about as a result of the previous theories of what constituted art, and what Nancy came to see as missing in the context of our current views of art. And what is left unthought in Nancy? What future work will challenge his

\textsuperscript{14} Warburton, Nigel. \textit{The Art Question}. P. 37.
notion and require an even broader conception of the arts? As it seems apparent that it is the case that not only theories of art, but all of philosophy in general, is constantly changing based on the new ideas and situations faced by humanity, why do we bother? And when we do, why do we have the tendency to want to put forth an absolute system? Admittedly, this tendency has waned with Nietzsche and the move to postmodernism, but thinkers still theorize about a constantly changing world. Have these aesthetic theories in any way affected artists themselves? Well, yes, certainly—for the most part, aesthetic theory determines what will be accepted, rejected, popularized, etc. It plays an undeniable role in determining the reception of a particular artist’s work. And does aesthetic theory determine what the artist creates? Again, the answer would have to be yes to a large extent—all art is for the most part either seeking to fit in with or to challenge the prevalent conception.

For whom, then, does Barnett Newman speak, when he “suggested that artists need art theory like birds need ornithology”\(^\text{15}\)? In his view, based on the above statement, it sounds as if aesthetic theory actually has very little to do with the work of the artist, and the artist’s experience or conception of art. Does he speak only for himself? From the above consideration, it seems that aesthetic theory is important in the sense that it, too, like the arts themselves, always have an excess that is not captured. The science of ornithology, as far as I know, has no effect whatsoever on the creatures about whom it theorizes. However, it seems that the evolution of aesthetic theory, by continually being unable to totally capture an essence of art or the arts, actually does effect those about whom it theorizes: the artists and their works. How could the ready-made movement or atonal music have come about if they did not seek to represent that which was not contained in previous aesthetic theory? Or at least to challenge and broaden those theories? So perhaps aesthetic theory really is important to someone other than philosophers, but Newman certainly raises an interesting question to be considered more thoroughly.

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