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THE TRUTH OF BADIOU'S RETURN TO MODERN ART**V. H. Sorčan**

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The article approaches the French philosopher Alain Badiou and his account of the present-day state of mind in art and aesthetics, turning away from the Lyotardian postmodernity and reaffirming modernity, while taking into account the insights of the last couple of decades. The main topic of the discussion is Badiou's critique of aesthetical and political status of truth in postmodernism, as well as its reaffirmation of crucial philosophical notions, especially a notion of truth. The article continues with an account of Badiou's attitude in view of a broader reflection on aesthetical and ethical aspects of the age we live in, the name of which is in philosophy a constant apple of discord.

Badiou's return to anti-romantic, unphysical and impersonal art, to somehow neoclassical vision, attracted a repulsing debate. Rather than the elimination of author's role, as some french structuralists already had suggested, we can attest a kind of revival of author, even if a writer's attention is just to seem authentic. On the other hand, a lot of contemporary texts are collage of intimate journal and philosophical essay with the expressive tendency to expose an author's existential subjectivity. The mixture of literature and philosophy undermines Badiou's key thesis of the need of separation between art/literature and philosophy.

Key words: Badiou, truth, modernism, postmodernism, existentialism, literature, crisis

Alain Badiou's key thesis on philosophy as a reflection of singular and immanent processes of truth, within the field of aesthetics, especially in the *Little Handbook of Inaesthetics* (1998), implies the claim which affirms the major part of art of the 20th century and onwards: art is immanent and singular thinking. Immanence refers to the following question: does art create its own truth or is it just a means for establishing truth, which is then something external, superior and transcendent, *i.e.* the truth which comes and is determined from the outside? Whereas singularity refers to this question: is truth, as testified by art, absolutely proper only to itself or is it present also in other fields of thought? On this ground Badiou advances his major thesis that art never creates truth other than proper only

to itself. Art is a procedure of truth of its own and therefore can not be reduced to other procedures of creation and disclosure of truth. Truth advocated by art thus essentially differs from scientific and political procedures of truth, as well as that of love. Philosophy doesn't create its proper truths but only reflects them. This Badiou's gesture is a slap in the face to philosophic narcissism and a caress to art. For the 21st century, Badiou demands a new paradigm of the interconnectedness of art and philosophy.

Contemporary philosophy, which attempts to contribute additional relevant reflections on the present-day situation by asking the question of its own whereabouts after postmodernity, sees Badiou as a crucial partner in its debates. He's namely highly critical of the elements of postmodernism as the aesthetical and artistic strand; and in a broader sense, we could describe his ontological, ethical and political views as the revived utopian expectation of the emancipating sting of egalitarian ideas. *Postmodern Condition*,¹ as established by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who grounds his famous thesis of the postmodern decline of modern grand narratives on the downfall of the idea of emancipation, according to Badiou leads to a non-critical indifference and to a resigned acknowledgment of liberal capitalism and parliamentary democracy, as if it is the final and global social and economic system. He sticks to a firm belief that philosophy is meaningful only if it reflects concrete life, politics, science, art and other forms of communications of the present. This is the question of philosophical engagement: what is contemporary is always what is live, and philosophy has to communicate this livelihood and immerse in it, however imperfect its creation is... "As a philosopher I shall respond to the essence of what is contemporary: I couldn't be not responsible for it."² But this is far from saying that philosophy is all about strengthening the prevailing thought. On the contrary, its power is in its subversion, in subtle detection and disclosure of what is coming about; philosophy is on the trail of every new event as the harbinger of the new truth, the coming about of which can only be a matter of contingency. Although truth is not immanently

philosophical, its role is nevertheless more than just of secondary importance; it is rather avant-garde: philosophy can detect and bring to the surface a certain truth. Badiou may acknowledge only immanent reflection to every singular process of truth; but he is nevertheless more inclined to the view that philosophy can help clarify the contingent coming about of a certain truth or even prevent an event from slipping by unnoticed. We can thus easily imagine the philosopher Badiou as a detector of truth on the ground of becoming familiarized with the contingent dimension of the present. Only in this way can philosophy be inventive, since it is after all nothing but the quest for the most relevant concept of reality. However, Badiou warns us of the shallowness of implications that his thought may have on the contingent empiricism, which is likely to disperse the realm of truth.

In his *oeuvre*, Badiou lays particular emphasis on devotedness, particularly to his own philosophical views. This is one of the reasons why he is not ready to give up the idea of political emancipation and absolute equality, not caring a straw for the fact that philosophy decades ago pronounced the epoch-making end of the utopia of hope, progress and meaning. Along this path he has remained faithful to his role models, beside Plato and Nietzsche also to his French predecessors Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, and others. In Sartre's existentialism he recognized his own tendency toward a unified view of philosophical conceptualization and existential choice and decision. He believes that philosophy is not worth a dime if it is not committed to life choices and decision. Lacan proved a decisive support in his own conceptualization of the theory of the subject. And he was primarily influenced by Althusser's thesis that philosophy is without its own reflective object. Philosophy is not a nebulous discourse on the totality or the general interpretation

¹ Compare especially Jean-Francois Lyotard: *La Condition postmoderne*, Minuit, Paris 1979 and *Le Postmoderne explique aux enfants*, Galilee, Paris 1988.

² Alain Badiou: «L'aveu du philosophe», in *La vocation philosophique*, Bayard Editions, Paris 2004, p. 140-141.

of the whole; rather, it must at all times pose itself the limit of specific knowledge. This is where Badiou's major thesis stems from, namely that philosophy is always only medial/mediating reflection of singular and immanent processes of truth which can be generic and universal only within its own singular field. But there is no truth about truth and every attempt in this direction eventuates the fall to transcendence.

The *Little Handbook of Inaesthetics* is a collection of texts published for the first time between 1993 and 1995 in various journals and later edited by the author for the book publication. The treatise on the necessity of a different paradigm of the relationship between art and philosophy in the 21st century is further elaborated in his book *Circumstances*, 2 (2004),¹ especially in the text »Troisième Esquisse d'un Manifeste de l'Affirmationisme« (»Third Outline of the Manifesto on Affirmationism«), in which he introduces the decisive critique of postmodern art and postmodern condition of mind as such. With visionary wrath he turns away from postmodern aesthetics of fragments and infinite deconstruction in the field of philosophy. He rejects postmodern proclamations of the end of art, metaphysic, representation, imitation, transcendence, artwork and spirituality and, contrary to the prevailing opinion, sides with determined proclamation of "the end of all ends, the possible beginning of all there is, as well as of all there was and will be."² He is convinced that philosophy must continue to reflect its main concepts, especially the concept of truth; only if it takes into account the reflection of its grounds, can it be inventive. His *Manifesto* is a modern affirmation of

every monumental construction, in contrast to the postmodern small-scale deconstruction. However, such a swing is only possible on the basis of the reaffirmation of the certainty that we are still "traversed by a truth or a beauty: it is one and the same thing."³

Badiou's critique of postmodernity follows immediately from his theory of truth; as the advocate of universal and generic truth, though only within the framework of a singular field, he rejects the postmodern thesis of particularity: "Postmodern' is what attests to the whimsy and unlimited domination of particularity."⁴ With this he has in mind both the collective particularity (ethnic, linguistic, religious, sexual) and biographical appraisal of the self and its egotistic subjectivism. Here belongs also the exposure of the body: how can one be inclined to the art of Flesh — Badiou here probably alludes to *body art* and its derivatives, which inaugurates art as carnal installation of finitude, when the essence of man lies in the infinite and the immortal?⁵ Does not postmodernism

³ Ibid., p. 86.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In his *Ethics*, Badiou emphasizes that this art form will be able to affirmatively approach the Good only by procuring a positive vision of the possible. This, however, is possible only if man is no longer recognized only in his biology, *i.e.* as a living being which, like animals, follows its immediate interests in order to survive, which can in the end lead, as Martin Heidegger warned, to infinite rapacity and self-supply with goods. The definition of man as a mere human animal could also imply that the procurement and respect of human rights can be reduced to the mere right to life in the face of death and the right to survival in the face of poverty. In contrast to the minimalisation of the human being to mere biological conditions of survival, Badiou suggests that it be defined as immortal and infinite. Such a definition, however, does not lead to a religious foundation of ethics, as for example in Emmanuel Levinas, whose priority of ethics over ontology he explicitly rejects. The crucial difference between the transitory animal and the immortal man according to Badiou lies in that every man, in contrast to animals, is given immortally and infinitely the capability for the real, for the revealing and creation of truth.

¹ Alain Badiou: *Circumstances*, 2, Edition Leo Scheer, 2004.

² Alain Badiou: «Troisième Esquisse d'un Manifeste de l'Affirmationisme», in *Circumstances*, 2, Edition Leo Scheer, 2004, p. 83.

with this tendency evince its affinity with Romanticism?

Badiou is bothered by the fact that contemporary art doesn't possess the critical sting in its relating to the world, which is the source of its inspiration. Art is romantically unwilling as long as it passively withdraws into sophisticated vegetation, which is none other than postmodern nihilistic delight in powerlessness. On the other hand, the numerous artists of the 20th century created true artistic configurations with which they entirely renovates the thinking of the previous century: "Pessoa for poetry, Picasso for painting, Schonberg for music, Brecht for theatre, Zadkine for sculpture, Chaplin for cinema, Faulkner for fiction, Cunningham for dance..."¹, and we could go on and on. The essence of their artistic configurations is supposed to be their rejection of romanticism through the critical affirmation of this world.

Already in the *Little Handbook of Inaesthetics*, the determination of artistic configuration plays a key role. The main issue of the 21-century aesthetics — or better inaesthetics, insofar it sets aside old paradigms of the relationship between art and philosophy on the ground of a different (ontological) approach to the category of truth, which is already implied in the art of the 20th century — for Badiou begs the following question: if art is immanent, that is the production of immanent truths, what then is the appropriate unity of what is called art? Is it the artwork, artist or something else?

According to Badiou, the answer must be sought for in the relationship between the infinite and finite, since truth is infinite multiplicity. It is infinite, because it cannot be reduced to a certain and already established knowledge, and is always an open horizon for the new. The artwork, on the

contrary, is in its essence finite: art is the creation of finitude. What then goes on in the truth within art? If we are to really avoid the romantic paradigm, we cannot claim that art is a finite representation of the infinite Idea. Badiou seeks the solution for this ontological dilemma in the event as the source of truth. It is unimaginable to invent anything new outside the event dimension, and truth is exactly invention, a discovery. Otherwise we would be thrown back to the idealistic conceptualization of invention, to the divinely inspired genius. But it is on the other hand also impossible for the artwork to be both truth and event as the source of this truth. If they were mixed up, truth would become the eventful self-disclosure of itself. Badiou thus concludes: the individual artwork is not an event (*l'événement*), but an artistic fact (*le fait*); artwork is not yet truth itself, but rather something broader, an artistic procedure occasioned by an event. But this procedure consists in artworks only. And truth as infinite multiplicity is not manifested as a totality in any artwork. The artwork in this sense is a localized resort of a truth or a finite fragment of the infinite truth. Even though the being of truth doesn't differ from that of artwork, it is impossible to capture the particular, since there is potentially an infinite number of artworks. Contrary to the particularity of an artwork, the artistic truth is singular, revealing itself in a particular artistic configuration (say in the novel as the artistic configuration for prose, the initiation event of which is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*), occasioned by an event (usually a group of artworks).

To return to the initial question as to what makes possible the unity of reflection on art as immanent and singular truth, we could infer from the *Little Handbook on Inaesthetics* that it is neither the artwork not the artist, but rather the artistic configuration that is occasioned by a certain event-

¹ Alain Badiou: «Troisième Esquisse d'un Manifeste de l'Affirmationnisme», p. 94.

ful rupture. Only in this way can we enter the relationship with a singular truth, which, however, cannot be accurately delimited and determined, since we have no knowledge of the truth about truth. From this perspective, artistic configuration is neither a form of art nor a specific epoch in the history of art; rather, it is a sequence of a kind, consisting in a succession of a virtually infinite complex of artworks. Despite innumerable attempts at artistic overcoming in seeking something new, we cannot say that any configuration can be finite, because it is liable to come back, even though in a renewed form.

What is in this sense the role of contemporary philosophy in the field of aesthetics, more precisely in aesthetics? Philosophy is supposed to be on the track of artistic configurations in that it conceptually grasps them by exploring their status of truth(s). To reflect the truth in its historical coming about therefore means to reveal artistic configurations of a certain period. And indeed we often tend to imagine the general configuration of a certain period by linking the actual process of art with its philosophical interpretation. However, even the artistic configuration itself reflects its own creativity in its artworks. Every artwork is inventive exploration and creation of (artistic) configuration as well as its immediate experience. Art is thus a self-governed creation and reflection of its own truth or truths. However, philosophy is often the one that proclaims, keeps track of and points to the truth of art. But philosophy doesn't create it. Art and philosophy are mutually responsible for their own time; the former because it creates and reflects the truths, and the latter because it reveals and thinks them over.

What kind of art and philosophy does Badiou advocate for future? His theses in the *Third Outline of the Manifesto on Affirmationism* are unbending: art should first of all be withdrawn from every par-

ticularistic approach. This withdrawal is “the modern method of a holistic affirmation of the universal.”¹ The artistic will should turn to anti-romantic, unphysical and impersonal composure and strictness. Badiou's first thesis in the *Manifesto* evinces the affirmation of the artwork, but not its author, since the latter is transitory and subject to particularity, while the artwork as the creator of a new artistic configuration despite its being finite carries within itself specific infinite subjective possibilities. Despite his severe critique of particularity, Badiou thus somewhat shifts the emphasis from artistic configuration as singular multiplicity of artworks to a particular unit of the artwork. Artist is from now on only a medium of truth and its universal message rather than its cause; so that from the moment when the artwork becomes reachable, we are supposed to leave its creator out of account. The only true subject of the artistic truth is therefore the artwork, because this is the only way one can tend towards its universality. If, on the contrary, the artist would be placed to the forefront, especially when he installs himself or performs as the artistic act, we would be forced to treat art — because of its short duration — only as consumption goods. Only when art gets freed from collective and biographical particularities, will it truly become the impersonal and disinterested creation of truth by communicating itself to everyone, to the community, and not only to a limited, particular audience.

Badiou's aesthetical thought also has its limits. The paradigm of the relationship between philosophy and art that he passionately stands for opens up a number of serious issues. This is all the more important because Badiou strives for a balanced, non-patronizing attitude of philosophy towards art, while on the other hand he primarily advocates the

¹ Ibid., p. 96.

politically engaged art inclined to the new ways of making sense of the world. Although numerous contemporary artists and philosophers are willing to appreciate his ideological critique of the West, they are rather embarrassed by his rejection of the so-called collective and biographical particularism. They may even have developed an especially ambiguous attitude with Badiou criticizing the role of the body in contemporary art.

Even though Badiou's philosophy of mixing various elements taken from the history of philosophy (from Plato through Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx to Heidegger, Deleuze and onwards) may seem properly postmodern, it does attest to the fact that the postmodern state of mind, at least that with Lyotardian signature, is coming close to an end, no matter how postmodern this may sound. One only needs to remind oneself of how far Lyotard is with his degradation of Marxism (Leninism) as one of grand but outlived modern narratives. In Badiou's philosophy everything that seemed outlived rises from the dead. It seems that philosophy today tends to go back to certain features of modernity, of course with all the insights gained in the last decades considered.

Perhaps we should first of all ask ourselves whether philosophy is still capable of or allowed to give the world promises of any kind?¹ Is the devotedness to a certain truth sufficient for its ontological, ethical, political or aesthetical differentiation from the simulacrum, and therefore a promise of a better tomorrow? Badiou's philosophy promises a great deal and proves with its encouraging attitude highly attractive: although man is subject to transience, he is more than the animal (and nature in general) in that he is capable of thinking and

yearning for infinity and immortality; and it is in this Kantian greatness that lies human *differentia specifica*. According to Badiou, infinite and immortal is also the existential hope for the meaning of human existence, which can be encouraged and strengthened only by the devotedness to a certain truth, regardless of its manner of disclosure. In this sense the devotedness to a certain truth is even more primordial than the quest for truth. This, however, can be perilous for philosophy (a contemporary cynic might have retorted what on Earth isn't perilous in this world), because it may become rather vulnerable and susceptible to every ideology. Devotedness to truth has a correlative in personal commitment. Badiou himself says: "As we know, Nietzsche claimed that creation, the work of philosophy itself is a kind of a portrait, biography of its own author."² In this view every philosopher deconstructs — to put it in Badiouian terms — their own particular biographical traits. Nonetheless philosophical reflection is more than just the articulation of one's own biography, and it is absolutely no doubt that this quest for the possibility of descending from particularity to singularity is the core of Badiou's *oeuvre*.

With ten years of distance we can approve Badiou's attention toward critical dimension of art, not only in a social and political sense, but also in its existential dimension. When the world is in crisis, philosophy and art tend to (re)present existential problems from all points of view: ethnical, national, cultural, including different religions and civilisations, with or not explicit biographical intentions. Badiou announced properly that romantic paradigm of art shouldn't be the art of future. Existential art, founded in times of crisis, was never romantic in a larger sense, except in intimate writings. Although not romantic, art today, f. ex. litera-

¹ This is the main topic of the essay collection *La philosophie au risque de la promesse*, Bayard Editions, Paris 2004, the authors of which are among others Jacques Derrida in Paul Ricoeur.

² Alain Badiou: «L'aveu du philosophe», p. 135.

ture, is very frequently personal, even when it's not really autobiographical. Readers like to recognise real experiences in literature, even though we can doubt about this naive empirical approach to the real. From this point of view, Badiou's return to anti-romantic, unphysical and impersonal art, to somehow neoclassical vision, attracted rather a repulsing debate. Rather than the elimination of author's role, as Roland Barthes already had suggested, we can attest a kind of revival of author, even if a writer's attention is just to seem authentic. On the other hand, a lot of contemporary texts are collage of intimate journal and philosophical essay with the expressive tendency to expose an author's subjectivity, no matter to the modernist problems of the limits of conscience and of unconscious mind. The mixture of literature and philosophy undermines Badiou's key thesis of need of separation between art/literature and philosophy: is a philosophical essay with literary elements creative or just representative? In fact, already the question itself seems absurd. It's interesting that Badiou's predecessors, neither in the period of existentialism (Camus, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty), nor structuralism (Barthes, Deleuze) or later (Derrida, Lyotard), no one of them disapproved a close liaison of philosophy and literature. We can understand Badiou's indignation about philosophical use of art as illustration of its own ideas, but it is hard to agree with his radical degradation of philosophy to a tracking of others truth. When Badiou announces the engaged art, he demands at the same time its impersonality: how one could be, especially as an artist, engaged in that way? Did Avant-garde artists have an impersonal attitude? Even when someone like Brecht wrote about dialectical materialism as a collective idea, he was personally affected by the dilemmas of his living times. So, when Badiou stands up, once again, for modern art, not postmodern any more, his statement is

quite nostalgic, while there was no impersonal modern art, while art is not impersonal at all. Perhaps, it is time to admit how personal is philosophy itself, too.

When criticising the present, it is risky to return back to future, in Badiou's case, to criticise postmodernism with attention to return to modernism, with adding some contradictory attributes. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe existentialist tendency in contemporary art. There are a lot of similarities: we live in the times of global crisis which opens to the questions concerning a meaning of life, of existence, which provokes feelings of fear and anxiety. Like between and after the First and the Second World War, we are touched by the global problems, connected to terrorism and wars in which participate soldiers from the West countries. Every war opens the questions of respect of human rights, of justice to crime, posttraumatic feelings, etc. In the crisis of nowadays we occupy also with similar problems of poverty, of worker's rights as in the middle of 20. century. In spite of all these similarities our times are deeply different of those times and, once again, we can compare the philosophy of existence (Camus, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) of the 50ies of 20. century with the actual demands in philosophy, and, of course, in art, but with intention to find not only analogies but also differences. Can we imagine today a success of Sartre's project of freedom, of the existence as a result of our proper choice? It sounds too easy, to naive to our contemporary ears! It is quite similar with the optimistic end of Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*. We are not prepared to imagine Sisyphus happy any more! On the other hand, it is so tranquillizing, so pleasant to read such solutions in existentialist philosophy of 20.th century! It would be really seducing to simply return to the concepts of existence and essence of that time, but, I prefer to suggest a prudence while comparing different peri-

ods with similar — at least apparently — problems.

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ИСТИНА ВОЗРАТА БАДЬЮ К ИСКУССТВУ МОДЕРНА

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Автор обращается к работам французского философа Алена Бадью и его оценке современного умонастроения в искусстве и эстетике, отходя от постмодернизма Лиотара и вновь обращаясь к модернизму, принимая при этом в расчет идеи, возникшие в последние два десятилетия. Основной темой является критика Бадью эстетического и политического статуса истины в постмодернизме, а также новое обращение к ключевым философским понятиям, в первую очередь — понятию истины. Дается оценка установкам Бадью в контексте широкой рефлексии эстетических и этических аспектов нашего времени, название которому в философии — постоянное яблоко раздора.

Ключевые слова: Бадью; истина; модернизм; постмодернизм; экзистенциализм; литература; кризис