

Concept Without Difference: The Promise of the Generic

Amanda Beech

Art today reeks of a lack of imagination. It is burdened by its own histories, its tales of emergence, its attachment to contexts, its sick love affair with location and the personal histories of “lives”.

Identifying art as the great social redeemer aids and abets capitalism as does the private self-reflective work of the artwork as personal memoir. Equally, intellectually rigorous art increasingly defends the viability of a labour of the mind. Here, the artist as interdisciplinary “researcher” conducts anthropologically revealing exercises on others, yet the work ends up revealing more about its maker.

In general terms, art today is based on an ethics of making and recognizing differences, the problems of which stand as the defining crisis of art’s good conscience.

The demand for *another* art, a *different* art – one that we long to see – must therefore be taken in distinction to the proliferation of art observing an ethics of difference. It proposes a difference from the proliferation of differences.

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We assert here that all problems of art observing an ethics of difference are manifestations of the condition of *being Duchampian*.

Two currently prevalent examples of art’s “being Duchampian” are:

- immaterial, inaesthetic, experiential modes of practice that claim to manifest the real through the overcoming of mediation; practices that bring us together via art as the social axis of free interpretation and free experience; a reveling in the orgiastic collectivity of sensational ‘feeling’.
- tiresome but still popular “intellectual” word-game art that puns its way towards oblivion, language here being the primary means for signaling some form of finitude: This is the art-game of representing the knowledge of the limits of knowledge itself. It is the work of irony, parody and art as transcendental description of the limits of life and meaning itself.

To be Duchampian is to be in contradiction. On the one hand, art is claimed as a non-hierarchical field of differences: Duchamp’s work itself – especially the readymades – buys into the

assumption that some objects are wholly indifferent (the bottle-rack for example, is chosen for its “arbitrary” status, its anonymity). Yet, on the other hand, such differences are established *against* present-historical-empirical conditions, setting up a hierarchy or *inequivalence* of differences including, primarily, that art is something different than the chosen object. The “anything whatever” of the artwork is eclipsed by the predilection for meaning as art.

Being Duchampian, art has stood as its own measure, defining itself through sets of differential relations from which it can articulate its own existence and specific identity.

This contradiction of art as immanent differentiation *and* as a “superior” result of difference presents the primary task here: favouring immanent differentiation. How then to understand *the generic* without principle, without difference, and without relation? Generic here indexes the Duchampian claim that the artwork can be anything at all. It is non-specific as an object or even as an idea. The Duchampian artwork manifests the force of the generic, of leveling hierarchies towards a yet-more anarchic equality of signs, objects, and meanings as its primary critical moment. What would it mean to capture this promise of the generic away from the politics of difference that has established this genre of the generic?

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To be clear, being Duchampian is to be equivocal with regard to the generic:

1. Duchamp’s leveling of hierarchies relies upon an idea that neutral, everyday, or commonsense languages and idioms are exempt from the hierarchy of categories in the first place. The readymade is appealing as a context free object, and it is this referent to alterity that lends the readymade its critical weight. The critique it gives rise to, including institutional critique, which only prosecutes this program in a particular context, claims this more egalitarian and anarchic basis as the condition for identifying and condemning the “abstraction” of hierarchical languages, institutions, power, etc. The hierarchical distinction from the generic postulated by such condemnations can be captured by noting that their own assumption of neutral forms is predicated on an idealizing claim to the “anything whatever” as an abstraction, or *genre*. The claim to the “anything whatever” manifests the standardized and incorrect assumption that art can access the unknown. This aspiration for radical difference – that art can offer the experience of what is unknown to us - is won by securing the generic as a form of knowledge. This faith in the generic exposes art’s central and defining methodology. Art figures the generic method through its processes that now define its claims. In this methodology of critique art finds itself as genre. It is very much at home..

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2. In contrast to genre, the generic is *immanent* to the artwork, its readings, and its production. François Laruelle's philosophy is preoccupied with the notion of generic immanence and so provides an important guide to addressing the problem for art identified here. Whereas for Duchamp the generic is occasioned in the collision of art and life, concept and practice, critique and habituation, for Laruelle, as will be seen, the generic is immanent to a collision of philosophy and science. Being Duchampian in its radical sense therefore enables an extended apprehension of Laruelle's conceptualization of the generic.

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The generic in this sense promises a complex condition of equality that cannot be obtained or captured by already existing designations, including that of art. Yet this is what is blocked and revoked in the restitution of the everyday object as *art*, by being Duchampian qua genre. The latter rescinds the promise of art's self-estrangement – its alterity, its value, and its name "art" – with a notion of difference that takes art to be determined in *the relation* that the generic has to difference rather than in the generic itself.

Being Duchampian subordinates the generic of art to difference.

By contrast, the generic promises the real unbinding of differences required for meaning and, on the other hand, re-instates the standard and inherited systems of difference that are the mainstay of art's critique. The promise of the generic is to evacuate the standard forms of a politics of difference that have been captured and sedimented in post-Duchampian art *without* reinstating extant institutions. The difficulty is in how to conceptualize and obtain the generic without the standard politics of difference that is today's artistic commonplace.

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The generic as a concept is a means by which art divests itself from the paradigms of the claustrophobic *isms* that have regimented its production and reception.

Now difference is inherently tied to the concept of the generic and vice versa.

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The demand for *another art* traverses the problem of how to disengage itself from the all-encompassing and all-permissive system of art being Duchampian – a problem that can be cast in terms of the difference between generic art and art as a genre.

The target here is the system that misidentifies the generic as a genre.

We must traverse this problem without underscoring or falling back into the mistaken logic of elevating difference over the generic.

The idea that the generic can be art is to be supplanted by an art that must be generic.

We cannot be held back by empirical constraints or by any sense of redemption that idealises thought over matter/image. The challenge here is to conceive an art that no longer imagines that it can act as the difference-agent or hero of the political event.

The generic is to be the condition of *our* aesthetic paradigm. It is to be the paradigm for art's modes of production, what it is as a product, its aesthetic dimension, and the rhetorical affect of the image.

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To fully expunge art as a genre we must also identify the real limits set by an art that tries to outmanoeuvre the constraints imposed by the ethics of difference; that is, identify the art that looks to surpass the limitations of genre's neutrality by re-instantiating *itself* as becoming different, and even in understanding itself through a theory of its own edicts by *becoming the thought of difference* and, in either case, escaping representation.

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The specter haunting our inquiry is the perennial myth that escaping representation provides a comprehension of a real or of objective reality as it is.

Our difficulty is that philosophical or artistic critique is today habituated in paradigmatic and ideological formations, and this is art's dominant formation in neo-liberal culture.

In this condition, art spontaneously formulates an operation called "critique," rejects representation, assumes its own language is free from power. The stipulation of another

determination of art's critique than this ideologically supine condition requires us to overcome this condition.

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Louis Althusser's description of the "circle of decision" as the defining *practice* of philosophy is instructive here. For Althusser the crisis is that ideology and science are at risk of collapsing into one totalizing milieu. Philosophy must intervene in order to produce a distinction between a corrupt manifestation of ideology, "a culture that cultivates," and real science as the advancing of facts.¹ The "circle of decision" philosophy draws up in response to this danger is in fact "not a circle at all" but a practice without co-ordinates that nevertheless *leads somewhere*:

I entered the necessary circle deliberately. Why? To show even crudely that whilst it is indispensable to leave philosophy in order to understand it, we must guard against the illusion of being able to provide a definition – that is, a knowledge – of philosophy that would be able to radically escape from philosophy or a "meta-philosophy"; one cannot radically escape the circle of philosophy. All objective knowledge of philosophy is in effect at the same time a *position within* philosophy. ...There is no objective discourse about philosophy that is not itself philosophical.²

The formulation is instructive in that Althusser assumes that while philosophy is part of this "whole" it is nonetheless un-free to establish a speculative relation to knowledge, and is implicitly bound to its spontaneous form. Philosophy does not seek to become science but instead to effect its discipline at the highest level, policing and producing correct science.

This is not a practice of looking back. It is rather the exacting power of philosophy itself.

This is a rendering of decision as the drawing of a line between science and ideology that grasps their difference *and* remains philosophy in doing so.

This is philosophy *as* difference: a processional method that seeks to overcome any requirement for a comparative distinction between those naive habits and the "correct" path.

¹ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, trans, Gregory Elliot (Verso, 1990), p.95.

² *Ibid.*, p.102.

Philosophy is then privileged in that it draws the “circle of decision” as a *practice of power* even as it embosses that circle as *the figure of thought*.

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The drawing of the curve of this circle – philosophy for Althusser, critique for us – as a ceaseless mark of an inaccessible extra-philosophical reality is now repetitive indoctrination, a stamp of the circle as philosophy itself in a yet more spontaneous form.³

Althusser’s demand for a non-spontaneous drawing up or generation of differences returns us then to *another* spontaneous philosophy. This is a problem that Althusser identifies but also re-inaugurates.

To be Duchampian in art is to be Althusserian in philosophy.

Processes and methods of “difference” figure critique in Duchampian art and Althusserian philosophy. These processes risk another spontaneous philosophy for Althusser as well as a spontaneous artistic critique for Duchampians. Since the majority of art today inherits and practices this critical method, we see disaster for contemporary art as we know it.

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François Laruelle’s non-standard aesthetics and non-standard philosophy acknowledge the paradigms identified here and the apparently intractable problems they present, and no less look to overcome them by subjecting them to the power of a *universal* science (distinct in this from the “everyday” science pre-occupying Althusser).

³ Pierre Macherey presents the *final* problem latent of the circle: “[Althusser’s] intervention consists in tracing the lines of demarcation, which in reality only retrace the lines already traced, and demand to be retraced again, with no assignable issue, in so far as the conflict of forces that it brings to light cannot emerge as a definitive division that would once and for all isolate all its manifestations. One might see in this approach the index, not so much of a vulgar theoreticism, as of a mystique of the philosophical, which would fundamentally be the last word of Althusserianism, a last word which no ‘autocritique’ would succeed in rescinding” (“Althusser and the Concept of the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists,” trans. Robin Mackay, *Parrhesia*, 6, 2009; pp.14-27). What Macherey here identifies as the “mystique of the philosophical” is here the ever-yet-greater spontaneity of philosophy.

Laruelle leans into the Althusserian problematic by tackling what might be called “a spontaneous philosophy of philosophers.” Where for Althusser vigilant philosophical intervention prevents the collapse of science and ideology into one another, for Laruelle critique is charged by the destruction of these relations. In *The Concept of Non-Photography* Laruelle argues that the circle of decision need never be entered in the first place. The idea that we should think that we are always already in the circle, and that a philosophy need work through it in order to overcome it is evidence of yet another spontaneous philosophy.

In fact, all philosophy is for this reason spontaneous.

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Being Duchampian, being Althusserian, philosophy or aesthetics or critique or art are *inadequate* to the real.

How then might we think the adequacy of thought or aesthetics or art to the real?

In *Photo Fiction, An Essay in Non-Standard Aesthetics* Laruelle writes that the “photo-fictional camera” of non-standard aesthetics “is no longer indexed to or inclined toward philosophy...; it does away with the pretensions of philosophy, without denying it completely.”⁴ As Laruelle concedes, philosophy enters into photo-fiction as “an essential ... materiality,” and in doing so is deprived of its “pretensions of the absolute.”⁵

And what is the photo-fictional camera? It is

a new type of object, ... adding fiction to the photo according to a precise logic, without imitation or dialectics, and then elucidating this structure. This photo-fictional theoretical apparatus will be an aesthetic impossibility, a non-aestheticizable or non-philosophizable impossibility, and it is as such that it will realize a non-aesthetics of the photo. This photo-fictional apparatus ... is made only for generating fictions that are like “theoretical captions” that eventually accompany [the viewing of] photos.⁶

⁴ *Photo Fiction, An Essay in Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Univocal 2012), p.20; translation modified.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12.

In short, and to return to the considerations above, the construction that is “photo-fiction is a generic extension of the photographic apparatus, which is to say that it is neutralized in its philosophical or aesthetic pretensions.”⁷

If the aesthetic/philosophical regime of the image is temporal, unnatural, and unreal, the image as photo-fiction is by contrast a *generic matrix* – the matrix here being the extended “box” of the photo-fiction apparatus, to photo-fiction what a camera is to a photo.⁸

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This solution is however only an apparent one.

The lingering incompleteness of philosophy/aesthetics within the generic matrix together with the invitation to identify a hierarchy between non-philosophy and philosophy, and between non-standard aesthetics and aesthetics, risks re-inscribing the relational problems we outlined in the Duchampian paradigm. The problem here is that the generic is mistaken for a genre, establishing a difference – between aesthetics and non-aesthetics – to which the generic must be subordinated.

This hierarchy operating across both the science-image and the philosophy-image dislodges the truth of the generic because what is claimed is impossible: that some images are more generic than others.

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In order to settle this, we have to pay closer attention to Laruelle’s careful articulation of the non-relation between standard regimes and the non-standard axis of the thought-image.

To achieve the overcoming of specific regimes, Laruelle invites an almost pragmatic trust in the nature of things, whilst at the same time promising that a “scientific attitude” can effect a new formation of thought *out* of philosophy. What Laruelle calls the photo-fiction represents the extinction point – rather than the suppression or destruction pure and simple – of philosophy or World-thought, an extinction that is effectuated through the

⁷ Ibid., p.14; translation modified.

⁸ Ibid., p.15.

infra-photographic “objective lens” of the scientific stance in regard to the real. It testifies just as much to the manifestation as such (the explicit manifestation) of science and to its refusal of the World, as to the resistance of the latter and of the old thought – philosophy – of which it is the element.⁹

Philosophy then, is to die a death through evolutionary means. It will be asymptotically extinguished.

It is a death effectuated through “the scientific stance” taken “in regards to the real.” It seems that this death requires no relation *between* philosophy and non-philosophy.

In Althusserian terms, it is the struggle between the life of a real force and the death of the false.

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Laruelle's philosophy then marks the reality of philosophy's death (and therefore its own) and holds the truth of science to come.

Yet, even at this point of philosophy's demise, two things happen that once again recover a conditional relation between philosophy and non-philosophy:

- First, Laruelle's *description* of philosophy's extinction serves to re-enter the circle as another form of spontaneous photo-fiction. Whilst photo-fiction is not claimed to be philosophy but its extension by science, that claim is nonetheless made on philosophy's behalf and so, as Althusser notes, remains distinctly philosophical.
- Consequently, and second, philosophy is reawakened as a *real enterprise* because the hitherto categorized unreal philosophical-aesthetics now actually turn out to tell *true stories*: the story that evidences their demise.

The act of “bearing witness” to the evolutionary extinction of our bad regimes *reinforces* the circle as the obstacle and remainder of a weak ideal, won as a booby-prize through another tale of self-transcendence.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., Laruelle, *Non-Photography*; 91

¹⁰ As Ray Brassier remarks, non-philosophy *cannot* give up on its determination of philosophy as the axiom against which it determines itself. Brassier argues that Laruelle's concept of adequation

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We must then carefully distinguish between the false claims to comprehend realities through (the production of) difference qua neutral genre and, on the other hand, the real materialism that thinks the real as such.

Following Laruelle, science qua universal is the paradigm for a real materialism.

The counter-risk, however, is to spontaneously assume or neutralize scientific thought itself, be it a “natural” or ‘universal” science; that is, to assume that any scientific thought transcends the language that manifests its articulation, however abstract and technical that language may be.

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It is the scientific stance that does *not* naturalize scientific thought that provides the clue for how art can effectively surpass the confines of our initial aesthetic paradigm, which constrained the generic to difference, as a genre of the arbitrary or neutral sign or concept.

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What is advanced here is an interdisciplinary project of a new scientific realism.

Such a scientific realism challenges the ethical paradigm of art as it is presently established. It requires thinking art in a truly generic way as much as a truly generic art, overcoming our predilection towards a genre of aesthetics, leaving behind of the category of the uncategorisable. To not be Duchampian.

Not being Duchampian: we are *not* seeking a modification of art under the name art, but rather an

reproduces certain strictly *philosophical* problems because “while it may be perfectly coherent to claim, as Laruelle does, that I am identical-in-the-last-instance with radical immanence, or that I think in accordance with the real and that my thinking is determined-in-the-last-instance by it, it does not follow then that I am the real qua One” (*Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007), p.136). That is, Laruelle confuses thinking with an identity that fixes both the real and the human as category form and, in doing so, risks a “transcendental individualism” (ibid., p.137).

interrogation, traversal, and a leaving behind of art as a name for difference.

And also, crucially, the overcoming of the fear of aesthetics towards a greater understanding of how we operate with and through aesthetics, not as stable and established entities but rather as systems of force.

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These are the central challenges for art made through and with science.

At issue is whether art can take the risk of annihilating its own identity.