

## THE ETHICS OF ARTS

**Guy Cools and Pascal Gielen (eds.). *The Ethics of Arts. Ecological Turns in the Performing Arts*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2014. (ISBN 978-90-78088-87-5)**

Numerous ‘turns’ have been observed and theorized in the social sciences and humanities over the past century. The linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the affective turn, the narrative turn, the gender turn, the relational turn, the educational turn and so on; the quasi-compulsive iteration of which runs the risk of trivializing the very notion of a “turn”. So, does it still make sense to speak of an “ethical” or “ecological turn” in the arts and humanities today?

Each of these turns is actually very much akin to the idea of a paradigm shift. Rather than designating a plot twist in history itself, they challenge us to read or interpret historical events in a different way. At the same time, they indicate a moment of transition, a movement *away* from something, *towards* or *into* something else. A turn is not a historical *fait accompli*, but a gradual process of becoming that is performed by its proponents. For history does not write itself.

We may not be able to pinpoint exactly *why* there has been a revived interest in ethics (is it *really* happening or is it just a matter of framing?) but perhaps that is altogether irrelevant. The question is not so much ‘why?’, as ‘why now?’. By grasping the driving forces behind this turn, we can also start to understand what is at stake and which are the actions we could or should take. This attitude would presuppose a shift from a state of *emergency* to a culture of *urgency* (Rogoff), where an adequate understanding of crucial issues underlying a situation of crisis becomes a driving force in the search for alternatives.

Certainly no coincidence, then, that Agamben’s slightly (and intentionally) hyperbolic statement that we currently live in a permanent, camp-like state of exception, becomes the starting point for sociologist Pascal Gielen’s ingenuous opening essay of the book, titled “Situational Ethics. An Artistic Ecology”. With the nation-state losing its grip on its citizens and politicians abiding by the free rein of global market mechanisms, the nation, along with the *socius* and the psyche become displaced or de-territorialized. Ecology, in this respect, becomes a

much wider and far-reaching issue than is often perceived. Accordingly, following Guattari, its effects need to be understood in a threefold way: environmentally, socially and mentally. And if these ‘pathologies’ take on a physical as well as a mental shape, their diagnosis should be made by referring to the dimension of both space and time. This is where Gielen introduces Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘chronotopy’ to designate the implosion of our current times into a ‘global present’, chiastically described as an “instant bottomlessness” and a “bottomlessness instant”.

This sharp diagnosis of contemporary culture, however, still does not say anything about the “ethics of art” as such. For over a decade, artists have been looking for valuable alternatives or ways out of this pathological situation. And, perhaps more importantly, they can only start doing so by realizing their own implication within that very same system. There has been a remarkable revival of socially engaged practices and community art in the past years. Unfortunately, however, a great number of proponents have been deemed naïve, downright politically correct or even ‘eco-fascist’. But, Gielen argues, despite the fact that the whole idea of ethical art is riddled with ambivalences, this is still not a sufficient reason to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Artists like Michelangelo Pistoletto, Jeanne Van Heeswijk or Jonas Staal demonstrate the importance and urgency of such practices. They are interwoven with more theoretical discourses, as is the case with artist Warren Neidich, who has also written a great deal about the pathological excesses of cognitive capitalism. Also referenced further on in *The Ethics of Art* is Belgian artist Benjamin Verdonck, in whose works imagination is used as a powerful tool. This is, according to Gielen, the exact locus of the ethical power of artists, not by bringing about any real change but by combining “memory and imagination in an affective vision of the future” (32). General as this statement may seem, it points to a utopian tendency in art that is very much in tune with the times we live in.

Gielen’s introductory essay is followed by an intriguing piece by dramaturge, dance critic, curator, scholar and co-editor of this volume Guy Cools. The author deliberately went for a personal account and a subjective, diary like style of writing, which already is quite exemplary of his take on the topic. He specifically

focuses on the role of the dramaturge, analyzing the creative process based on four chronological moments: perception, intuition, articulation and experience. Again referring to Guattari's ecosophical ideas, Cools draws the attention to what he calls "the art of listening" to our subjectivity, social behaviour and the environment. Through the creation process, artists are able to bridge different fields of knowledge in society, developing a 'situational ethics' that is able to push forward concrete alternatives. Another threat is the increasing de-skilling of our contemporary lives, as the influential sociologist Richard Sennett argued before. Sennett even considers the performing arts as a breeding ground for more dialoguing skills.

Much in the line of Cools's contribution, the rest of the volume reads mostly like an empirical account of the relationship between art and ethics. It is divided into two parts: "The Ethics of Art: Ecosophy" and "The Ethics of Art: Caring for the Body", assembling a patchwork of different ideas and experiences on the topic of art and ethics. The tonality of the pieces seems to be very different, resulting in a kind of kaleidoscopic approach. Byttebier and Stalpaert's article, for instance, sketches out the genealogy of the term 'ecology', which was introduced by Ernst Haeckel in 1866. From then on, ecology got contaminated with divergent meanings, both in the visual and performing arts. This historical perspective allows the authors to claim that ecology today needs to be rethought in a radical way, if it still wants to have a future. Artists or -performers can cultivate the "desire to connect", both with human and nonhuman beings, thus turning them into what Bruno Latour would call 'diplomats'. They operate from a fundamentally unstable position, constantly mediating and renegotiating the environment or context they find themselves in. Belgian artist Benjamin Verdonck, whose manifesto is also included later in the book, is a good example of this experimental engagement. This eco-artist (in a broad sense) starts off from an *inter-ested* condition, being *in between* other beings.

Denise Kenney's *The Eco Art Incubator* is an overarching project that intends to bundle the research findings in the field of eco-art and to foster its production and dissemination in interaction with a community of experts. Her article gives an impressive overview of the projects that have been taking place in the past two years.

Much in the same line, the second part of the volume scrutinizes how this approach applies or connects to dance, focusing on the notion of the body. Arne De Boever surprisingly zooms in on Almodovar's film *Hable con ella*, and more specifically on two scenes, at the beginning and the end, from Pina Bausch's choreography *Café Müller*. Also the mother's comatose condition is convincingly related to Foucault's idea of biopolitics and Agamben's state of exception.

Dancer and choreographer Sara Wookey expresses her concerns about dance, as she attempts to understand the recent revival of institutional interest in the discipline and the consequences this bring along. Dance, according to her, is "challenging to remember", using the appealing metaphor of the evaporating trail of a snail. How can the knowledge it generates be captured and transmitted? The 'diplomatic' and collaborative nature of dance performances is further explored in a conversation between Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Lise Uytterhoeven. As Cherkaoui puts it: "It is never just art. For me, it is important that people question certain things and concepts through art. Art is socially relevant and performance can make you question yourself, challenge you, or comfort you". This inspiring book is not a call to arms, but the expression of this fundamental concern, in order to take better care of ourselves.

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