

**JEAN-MARIE SCHAEFFER: *La vie des arts (mode d'emploi)* [The life of the arts (A user manual)]**

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What are the origins of the arts? What exactly does the notion “contemporary art” mean and how has its usage evolved in French and other languages? Can artificial intelligence create works of art? Is there a European (artistic) culture? These questions and many more are explored by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, a specialist in philosophical aesthetics and art theory, in his latest book, *La vie des arts (mode d'emploi)* (2023).

Schaeffer is a researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) and the director of studies at École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris, whose long-term research draws on knowledge from the philosophy of mind, cognitive science and anthropology. One may wonder why he discusses art in the plural rather than in the singular. Obviously, art and the arts do not mean the same thing for him: while art is perceived as the effect of interactions between arts (9), the arts refer to various manifestations and relations of art, not only in terms of ties between particular works of art, but also with regard to their connection with science, politics, economy, and other forms of social life. By briefly looking at these apparently self-evident notions in the introduction, Schaeffer gives a hint of how his book should be approached – as a manual (“mode d'emploi”) that invites reflection, yet allows for going beyond expectations.

The book is divided into four sections, each of which is composed of several chapters and dedicated to different aspects of the life of the arts. Part I, entitled “En compagnie de l'œuvre” (In the company of the work),

primarily focuses on the reception of works of art. The key term of Schaeffer's thinking is the term “aesthetic experience” – developed especially in his previous book *L'expérience esthétique* (The aesthetic experience, 2015) – meaning on one side the content (Erfahrung), i.e. the result of our interactions with the world, on the other side the way we experience these interactions (Erlebnis). It is directly related to the type of attention we pay to a work of art characterized, in the words of psychology, as a divergent cognitive style (“le style cognitif divergent”) as opposed to a convergent one (standard attention). According to Schaeffer, aesthetic experience is an attentional activity based on hedonic calculus, more exactly on “experienced utility” (the activity itself is more important than its result) and regulated by the satisfaction or dissatisfaction it causes (27). The reflection on the specificity of aesthetic experience necessarily touches upon the never-ending debate on whether the appreciation of artworks is rather subjective or objective. Drawing on Marcel Proust or Immanuel Kant, Schaeffer assumes that neither of the opposing positions adequately describes the situation since the appreciation is always linked to the objective properties of the work and depends on individual preferences and attentional abilities of the recipient. He therefore characterizes the appreciation as relational (30).

Since aesthetic experience has an evaluative dimension, it goes without saying that a critical discourse is an inseparable part of the social life of all artistic activities (42), even though its role differs depending

on a particular type of art. In this regard, Schaeffer's observations on the upcoming replacement of professional criticism by amateur criticism (in particular in case of popular music or movies displayed on YouTube) are particularly relevant.

Part II, "Sept questions à propos de la création artistique" (Seven questions about artistic creation), deals with the character of art and the origin of the arts, tradition vs. innovation, high art vs. low art, art(s) and science(s), contemporary art and artificial intelligence with regard to artistic creation. Schaeffer departs from the analysis of some basic terms related to artistic creation, such as "culture(s)", "art(s)", "world(s) of art", and points out numerous difficulties in terms of their definition. Nevertheless, his description of cultural practice as artistic practice defined as such only if it can achieve its ultimate social function through its appropriation by appreciative attentional conduct, either sensitive or intellectual, or both of them (66), stands as an example of Schaeffer's philosophical thinking about some common notions, which we often use somewhat mechanically without recognizing their meaning. The same goes for the term "the origin of art", often associated with the paintings of Lascaux Cave, which he does not consider as appropriate, because the beginning of art should not be perceived as a single event but rather as a process. That is why Schaeffer prefers to use the term the "birth" or "genesis" of art instead of the origin.

The fact that "art was not invented once, but many times" (92; all translations from the French are by the reviewer) partially explains why Schaeffer repeatedly refuses to apply the notion of "progress" to artistic practices, which is generally associated with innovation. Insight into the opposition between tradition and innovation in the history of arts shows that what we consider innovation is in fact the result of a strangeness effect, simply because an "innovative" artwork does not correspond to our horizon of expectations (97). While the idea of perfection or improvement is proper to science, artistic inno-

vation should be appreciated rather in terms of "the expansion of creative possibilities it produces" (104).

An interesting viewpoint is offered on the highly discussed and controversial Nobel Prize in Literature awarded in 2016 to the American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan. According to Schaeffer, the debate which revolved around what is literature and what is not in fact implied the question of the hierarchy of arts (112). The distinction between high art and low art, practiced in one form or another since ancient times and replaced at the beginning of the 20th century by the dichotomy "true art" vs. "kitsch", is gradually fading. This shift is driven by social changes, among others the democratization of individual tastes and the advancement of technology.

Artistic creation can also be approached from the perspective of its relation to science – a work of art can either apply knowledge, or knowledge represented by a work of art can interact with scientific knowledge (132). Schaeffer also analyzes differences between the two forms of knowledge, scientific and artistic. While he admits that a work of art has a cognitive dimension, he points out that its modalities of knowledge differ from those in which philosophy and science operate. Artistic cognition is, according to Schaeffer, experiential, affectively invested and singular, i.e. embodied in a concrete work (142). Among major changes in the actual life of arts stimulated by scientific progress, the author distinguishes a gradual hybridization of arts and sciences due to the use of technologies (e.g. conceptual art), migration of technological programs into art (e.g. Hiroshi Ishiguro), or the creation of genuine collaboration between scientists and artists (AI).

Special emphasis is placed on the analysis of the terms "art contemporain" (Eng. contemporary art, Ger. *Gegenwartskunst*) and "modern art". Schaeffer argues, based on data from Google Ngram Viewer, that these terms are not equivalent in English, French and German due to national specificities in their usage. Likewise, the question

of the role of artificial intelligence in artistic creation is highly discussed in the book, covering such topics as the difference between robots and AI programs (DALL-E 2, Midjourney), the specificity of generating images by algorithms and the difficulty of distinguishing them from the images created by humans. In this regard, Schaeffer points out, among other things, the possibility of future replacement of human artists by AI algorithms and the problematic legal ownership of artistic production generated by an AI algorithm. However, while the author admits repercussions of IA algorithms on certain categories of artists (e.g. illustrators, designers), he is much more skeptical about the possibility that a text generated by ChatGPT, which he designates as an “unintentional pastiche” (182), could ever become a literary narrative.

Part III, “Les arts dans la société” (Arts in society), deals with the role of politics on artistic creation, the biological age of artists, sex, gender, and the place of women in art, cultural transfer and artistic practices, or European identity. While illustrating the place of art in different political regimes, Schaeffer highlights the extreme resilience of artistic practices (189) even under autocratic and totalitarian regimes and a close link between access to arts and democratic political regimes. As Schaeffer states, the life of the arts is possible only when the freedom of a creative act meets the freedom of the public. This freedom is, however, being nowadays again threatened in some parts of Europe by a revival of characteristics typical of Stalinist totalitarianism (Schaeffer refers to the politics of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz and to the report issued by the Artistic Freedom Initiative in March 2022).

With regard to the place of women in art, Schaeffer analyzes the female nude in the history of painting, which has been in majority of cases represented as an object of erotic desire of men, while the male nude and the nude in general reflecting a female desire has been quasi absent. The philosopher also reflects on “queer art” which, despite its di-

verse forms, is characterized by the blurring of boundaries, the emphasis on the body, and the use of multiple modalities, media, and locations.

Art can also be viewed as a means of cultural dialogue, playing a role in cultural transfer. The forms of the transfer are various and inevitable in the development of all human communities, so “there is no such thing as a ‘pure’, unmixed culture” (246). A cultural transfer equals a dialogue only under the condition that all the partners are active (all the participants must be “affected” and “transformed” by the exchange; thus, some transfers are unilateral) and equal (one culture can accept or refuse what is offered by the other one; 250). Long-distance transfers and counter-transfers constitute a special case. The question of cultural dialogue also includes other phenomena, such as the globalization of arts, world literature, universal art, cultural unity within the EU, etc.

Finally, Part IV, “Arts et économie” (Art and economy), exposes the issues, such as the relationship between art and money, the unstable situation of contemporary artists, or financial speculation with art articles. Schaeffer also raises the question whether a true work of art is compatible with economic success (represented e.g. by Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons or Takashi Murakami). As Schaeffer convincingly explains, transition from a demand market to a supply one, vocational system (based on inner motivation of an artist) and need for originality and novelty are the factors that have made art market risky and uncertain. Schaeffer also mentions other aspects of the economy of arts, such as the digital economy (NFT – non-fungible tokens, blockchains), copyright, securing artworks, etc.

Schaeffer’s book covers a wide range of topics from essential but still thought-provoking questions about the nature, history and place of art(s) in culture through tricky and burning issues (e.g. the impact of modern technologies on art) to the questions addressing readers’ own aesthetic experience. The author enters, in an erudite and

reader-friendly manner, into a dialogue with sociologists (e.g. Howard S. Becker, Nathalie Heinich), philosophers (e.g. Arthur Danto, Joëlle Zask), and economists (e.g. David W. Galenson), while analyzing various, classical as well as more recent works of art (Herrad of Lansberg's illuminated encyclopedia *Hortus deliciarum*, Nescio's poem "Dichtertje", Rose-Lyn Fisher's photo series *The Topography of Tears*, etc.). Far from being (and aiming to be) exhaustive, the publication primarily broadens readers' perspectives on the life of the arts, and the plurality of their forms, functions, social and historical context, which the author expresses hope for in the introduction (12). The decision to start the book by the examination of aesthetic experience and critical evaluation is justified by the fact that most humans participate in the life of the arts precisely by means of these two activities. That is why the book has the poten-

tial to appeal to not only to specialists in art, but also to a wide public. The chapters can be read on their own, regardless of their position within the book. What is more, they are all followed by a short bibliography entitled "Pour aller plus loin" (For further information), providing suggestions for further reading. *La vie des arts (mode d'emploi)* is a useful and necessary book providing inspiring excursions into thinking on known and less known aspects of the exciting adventure that is the world of art.

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