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ASAGE: Questions of art, and of the philosophy of art, have been a recurring theme in your published work. Has it always been so? A sort of original relation between philosophy and art? Or was there a point, or a period, in your philosophical development where you realized that meditation on art provided you with the philosophical resources to express what you wanted to express philosophically?

ANDREW BENJAMIN: That's a very good question. In one of my very first books, a book called *Art and Mimesis and the Avant Garde*,¹ there are papers on a range of artists -- Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Kitaj, Anselm Kiefer -- working on art, or painting, has provided something, for me at least, through which it has been possible to think philosophically. Because one of the most interesting questions is how does one think philosophically about something that is not automatically philosophical. While there are clearly questions that are internal to philosophy, there is something interesting and challenging when the project is a philosophical thinking about that which is external. And that, in some sense, presents a challenge to philosophy. So I've always thought that the question of art's comprehensibility, and, more recently, about art's historicity or art's historicity, have been questions that push philosophy, that make philosophy have to think. I've always found that working on art renews, in me at least, the philosophical. And also, just historically, it's very interesting to note that in the Continental tradition so many philosophers have engaged with the specificity of specific artworks -- and, therefore, art in general -- which doesn't originate, but certainly has a point of beginning, with Kant's engagement with the aesthetic. And then that vanishes in Hegel's engagement with the particularity of artworks. So there is a field that opens up, and an engagement with the work of art can take you straight to Hegel, or straight to Heidegger, as a way of thinking about their work.

A: What do you take as a sort of aspiration for a philosophy of art? As you pointed out, it's been a source of inspiration for many philosophers. Is there a fundamental resistance in the artwork that makes philosophy of art into something like a 'sharpening of knives' in your philosophical toolkit? Or is the aspiration to say something more fundamental about art itself and the task of art?

AB: I think it's a combination of the two, isn't it? It seems to me that part of a philosophical approach to art should be to ask of the work of art how does it work *as* art, where that's no longer a historical question, or can't be answered by a recourse to the history of the object. But rather it demands a recognition that meaning -- the artwork's meaning -- is an after-effect of the way it works. And that drives you towards a concern with particularity. Now, for me, sitting behind that is what I would call the metaphysics of particularity. Sitting behind my engagement with specific artworks is a much more abstract philosophical position about particularity, about meaning. So there's something about the work of art that sharpens, or provides a focus, for my more general thoughts about particularity and meaning.

¹ Andrew Benjamin, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

It's also, I would say, critically, against Heidegger and the Heideggerian tradition: what Heidegger doesn't seem to be concerned with is how art works as art. He's interested in the way that art discloses something that is true about being. But, in that act of disclosure, it could be argued that what is effaced is the particularity of the artwork. Hence, Heidegger is driven to use expressions like "for example" where a logic of exemplarity is what calls him to talk about Van Gogh rather than a genuine interest in the real particularity of the painting. Because it's an example, it could be replaced by another. Now, in order to resist a logic of exemplarity, one has both to take particulars, but equally to think what it's like to privilege particularity: and that involves what I have called a metaphysics of particularity. So, for me, my personal interest in art history and in art allows me to sharpen what I think more generally.

A: Among the art forms you've written on, architecture has emerged as a particularly notable source of fascination. In reference to this metaphysics of particularity, how would you relate your work on architecture -- how would that fit into the puzzle? (One thing I was thinking about: the Heideggerian notion of being as dwelling: the philosophy of architecture could be a way to start thematizing some of those notions.)

AB: Yes and no. I mean, there are two things at stake here. One is the philosophical concern with the particularity of architecture, which has its own field of investigation in terms of what counts as the philosophical, or the theoretical, within the space of architecture. The other thing, which is related, but is a separate thing, is the way in which what I would call being-in-place, or the placedness of the being of being human, is something that's true about human Being (not human beings, but human Being). As Aristotle makes so clear: we're always already in place. For him, it's the polis, but it could be something else. Place defines the being of being-human -- not as a humanistic claim, but as an ontological claim.

Now, the question is how do these things relate to each other? How does the architectural (where one is concerned with a specific building, or urbanism, etc.) relate to what, for me, is true about the being of being human? Namely, what I call being-in-place? And that's a field of research. There isn't a sort of straightforward answer (dwelling, or this, or that). And the reason is that implicit in the notion of being-in-place is a theory of value. Namely, there are modalities of placedness that you wouldn't wish on anybody. So there is something proper to the notion of the placedness of being-human that allows us to be critical of the way people are forced to live. Now that opens up a site of evaluation within the realm of, say, urbanism. But how those things get to be articulated together is, I think, a complex question that doesn't have a simple answer.

A: How you would approach the question of an art object, say, a painting or a sculpture, versus a structure, which you be immersed in: is there something about dwelling in the structure, or finding yourself immersed within a building, that militates against this metaphysics of particularity? Because it doesn't seem that you can make that attempt in the same way, as you can with a sculpture or a painting, to orient yourself or to uncover that particularity.

AB: I think you're right when you say "not in the same way." That's true, by definition. But what that opens up is the fact that architecture has something specific to it: namely, that every architectural object functions in some way. It's a house, it's an apartment, it's a hospital, it's a field, a park, a museum -- whatever you want. Every architectural work always already functions in order for it to be architecture. That's why, for example, it's not sculpture -- it has an architectural impact. And what's interesting at that particular point is how is function being enacted by a particular architectural object? So you could say, for example, how is it that the Art

Institute works as a museum, addresses its particularity? Now you could go to another museum, the Jewish Museum in Berlin of Daniel Libeskind, and you could ask how does it work as a museum? And you'd end up with differing sorts of answers. But what we're addressing is both its functional particularity, and the way that particular building enacts its particularity. So we could say: the way in which the Art Institute is a museum, is in the following way... The way in which you could understand Renzo Piano's addition to it, is in the following way... But every time what you would have in mind was the presence of the object as a museum. For art, for a public, in North America, in Chicago... That's quite different to the presence of a Jewish Museum attached to the German historical museum, in Berlin, in Germany, in Europe... So they're different entities even though they're assimilable, as it were, under the heading of the realm of architecture. So the questions one would take to it are going to be different. Equally when it comes to a work of art the questions one are going to take to it, in order to address its particularity, are going to be different.

I just want to make it clear that in emphasizing particularity I again want to address this larger philosophical project that sits behind it: namely, that, for me, a particular is the after-effect of a network of relations. So I believe that there aren't two particulars that come into a relation; a particular is an after-effect of a network of relations and any particular is open to new modes of relationality. And so therefore when one talks about a particular museum, part of the network of relations in which it's situated is, banally, the history of museums; is the way in which art has always already been displayed; is the way it negotiates the public. There are whole series of things that allow it to be present as a particular -- so it's not the notion of particularity that you may find in empiricism where the particular *is* that particular object that is empirical and can be perceived as such. For me, a particular is an after-effect of a network of relations and those relations have a virtual presence within the actuality of particularity.

A: That virtual presence brings to mind some of your discussion of the embodied eye;² to take a perspective on a sculpture, for example, we need to be situated in a certain space, and that's both going to open up a perspective on the sculpture, but also conceal a part of the narrative, as it were, of the sculpture, place part of the narrative out of reach, and require the viewer to enact the narrative through circumspection.

AB: I think in the case of the Bernini (the one we're talking about is the *Apollo and Daphne* at the Galleria Borghese in Rome) what was interesting to me about that is that it doesn't have a front. There are so many sculptures that are dominated by what one may want to call 'frontality'. You stand in front of it; you can walk around the side; but, really, you are meant to stand in front of it. What's so interesting about Baroque sculpture (and Bernini is going to be at the very end of a whole series of sculptors), is that -- with someone like Giambologna (and the earlier Berninis) -- you see the twist of the bodies. There is no way of mastering it through a single view. And so there is something about the way that sculpture makes demands of the body, something that painting does not. In order to see a painting, I stand in front of it. But there are many sculptures that I can't stand in front of because there is no front. So part of sculpture's particularity is that. And in the case of the Bernini (and others) what's of interest to me is the way in which the demands of the body yield a certain understanding, or experience, of the sculpture, which is

² Andrew Benjamin, "Matter and Movement's Presence: Notes on Heidegger, Francesco Mosca, and Bernini" *Research in Phenomenology* 42, (2012), 343–373.

different to that of painting.

A: So if what is particular, or unique, to sculpture is this demand for, or allowance of, this perspectival view -- do we lose anything in sculpture, for example, when it's submitted as part of a larger ensemble (I'm thinking of a tomb, say, where sculpture has a place, but it may be placed against a wall and you can't get a full view of it)?

AB: Well, I think, on a more mundane level that anything that is a three-dimensional object has the potential for one to circulate around it. Now, it's clearly the case that in certain instances that's not going to work, and therefore one would need to address that. But I want to go back -- I'm not really talking about perspectivism. I don't think there's one perspective (and then another perspective, and then another perspective...). I think that what I'm trying to capture is the way that sculpture makes a demand on the body in a way that's different from the way that a painting makes a demand on the body. That the painting allows, if you like, a sedentary or a seated body to have a single view. What's interesting about sculpture is that not only *can* you walk around them -- in the case of certain Baroque sculptures, and also some contemporary sculptures, you *have* to walk around them. They're unmasterable within the idea of a single view. Therefore there's something interesting about those sculptures in terms of what you then want to say about their material presence, which has to do with differing views that are taken on them. So it's not simply perspectivism. It's more that that's how they work as material objects. They resist the totality of a single view, which a painting or a drawing may encourage.

A: This theme of resistance, and the inability to master the artwork -- would you take this as an essential estimation of art, that it's a spatio-temporal presencing that still yet resists reduction?

AB: Yes, that's right, but I would extend this and say, look, this is what we learn from a philosopher like Levinas: that you cannot reduce (or you shouldn't reduce) the other to the same, to a version of yourself. There's always something about the other person that is unmasterable, and that is their otherness. So it's not that someone is other -- that's a phenomenon that's interesting -- but what's more interesting is the unmasterability of the otherness of the other. And in some sense one's relations with people are often utilitarian. You know, I go to the shop and I buy a newspaper -- a very limited exchange (for me, a very important exchange every morning, but a limited exchange). But what haunts that exchange is the always already present nature of the otherness of the other person with which I am not engaging because I'm reducing that other person to someone who sells newspapers. So there's something about the unmasterability which is always present, which is always a caution, if you like.

Now, I think that could be a way in which one could begin to talk about the ethical, partly in relation to Levinas, partly not. Equally, I think, it relates to works of art, though works of art and people are fundamentally different. But the ontological claim is that there is something about any particular, whether it's a human or a work of art, that brings with it its unmasterability. Namely, how it will exist in the future. Something particular about it that can't be grasped. Something elusive that's there. And I think that's a claim about objects. The way in which it's true about human beings is quite distinct from the way in which it's true about a painting, or a forest, but nonetheless it's always true of objects that there's more to them than their pure objectivity. So what sits behind my writing on art is (as I said before) this larger, more general philosophical claim about particularity, about unmasterability, about thinking about what it means for an object to be what it is.

A: Having now broached both the ethical and the aesthetic, it might be a good time to ask a

question about the philosopher's responsibility to the work of art. Is there any conflict of interest between the philosophical interpretation as opposed to all the other interpretive senses -- religious, or otherwise cultural? Is there a danger of philosophizing *over* the work of art?

AB: I think that every work of art makes a demand on the viewer. That viewer is more or less informed in relation to the demand it makes. The uninformed viewer who knows nothing about the history of religion, or the history of the early church, or anything like this, can still look at Renaissance painting and derive an enormous amount of pleasure and satisfaction without being informed of what's going on. The art historian may know precisely what's going on, but not derive any pleasure from looking at a Renaissance painting. So there are always going to be different modalities of response.

What's interesting is that if the philosopher's gaze has to address the question of how it works as art, then it's incumbent upon the philosopher to have knowledge of the history of art in order to understand what's at stake. However, the philosophical argument is always going to be that what works within the work is not reducible to its presence as a historical document. So the art historian, who sees the work merely as a historical document, is not really addressing from a philosophical perspective how it works as art. All they're addressing is how it works as staging a certain moment of history. There's nothing wrong with that, but I think it's different from a philosophical dimension. Not that one is right and one is wrong, or one is better and one is worse -- they're just different ways of engaging with the work.

What's hidden within all that is (what I think is the really interesting philosophical point): how is it that the work of art allows itself to be contextual (i.e. to account for something, or stage something that's going on, at a certain historical moment) *at the same time* that it allows for itself to be radically de-contextualized? Answering that question -- of both the contextual specificity and the work's potentiality for a radical form of de-contextualization -- addresses the truth of the ontology of the artwork. And that's a philosophical claim about the artwork. The art historian may say 'I'm not interested in that'. And that's perfectly fine. Because the art historian, or certain art historians (not all), are interested in the way in which a particular work stages its moment in history. Someone who comes in and knows nothing about philosophy or art history can still derive an enormous amount of pleasure, or frustration, or inspiration, from the artwork; whilst knowing nothing about philosophy or art history, the viewer can still be enchanted by colors, by figures, by whatever. But that's not a philosophical response to the artwork. And I'm not saying that the philosophical response is the only right one, I assure you. But what the philosopher is concerned with is: how is it that this object does all these things? That's an extraordinary question. Philosophy has to recognize that description, history, naiveté....none of this exhausts the work. And that's a philosophical claim about the ontology of the artwork.

A: The artwork as a source of wonder?

AB: Well, it is a source of wonder. But *how is it* that it is a source of wonder? I take it your reference is to Aristotle. It's not simply, as Aristotle says, that with wonder the philosophical begins. And what Aristotle does, if you go to that passage where he says this, is then forgets wonder and merely starts being philosophical. (I've written about that particular moment -- it fascinates me.) But what's the incorporation of wonder within the philosophical? It is to make a claim that no object is reducible to its pure objectivity. It remains a source of "wonder" precisely because it keeps giving itself in a way that's almost inexhaustible. So, what is wonder-ful about a

person, an object, a work of art, is its capacity to continue to give itself in new and unpredictable ways even though it's the same object. That's why you can have a friend who can continue to surprise you. They can continue to surprise you because, in some sense, it is the same person but that person is in a constant state of transformation. Therefore what's wonderful about them is their capacity to surprise you. What I'm trying to insist upon is that objects are not reducible to anything that would exhaust them. Really what I'm interested in (and that's why I'm taking up your word: 'wonder') is the wonderful, or the inexhaustible, where that becomes an ontological claim about the being of an artwork, a person, an object. In every time it's different, but the difference is explicable in terms of the general claim of a founding irreducibility.

Andrew Benjamin is Professor of Critical Theory and Philosophical Aesthetics at Monash University and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. His books include *Architectural Projections*, *Writing Art and Architecture*, *Of Jews and Animals*, *Place, Commonality and Judgment: Continental Philosophy and the Ancient Greeks*, *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance*, *Disclosing Spaces: On Painting*, *Philosophy's Literature*, *Architectural Philosophy*, *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism*, and *The Plural Event*. The interview was conducted during Dr. Benjamin's recent post as Visiting Professor at DePaul University in Chicago.