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NOMINALIST RE-TURN IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Abstract: Hans Blumenberg has shown (*Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*) that the appearance of nominalism in the debates of the Middle Ages had laid grounds for modernity. Nominalism assumes that only individual, concrete objects exist and that common properties are not grounded in any kind of supra-individual properties or relations that would exist independently of what is singular. In Thierry de Duve's interpretation, "pictorial nominalism" of Duchamp puts stress on a particular or a singular name, stops the process of reference and shows its "plastic being". This aesthetic idea opens up a new field that we now call "art", where art becomes a "proper name". I would like to follow his analysis, but also to re-think it the context of the present, to explore the specificity of the nominalist re-turn in contemporary art. The contemporary aesthetic experience of art as such is nominalist in the sense I would like to examine in this article.

Keywords: nominalism, feeling, *sensus communis*, Kant, Duchamp, de Duve.

According to Hans Blumenberg's monumental study *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, modernity originated in the late Medieval tendencies in metaphysics, theory of knowledge, and theory of language that came to be known as nominalism.¹ This first nominalist turn inaugurated a new vision of the world and man, the vision that radically broke with the metaphysical Neoplatonic view of the "great chain of being," and for the price of the feeling of cosmic groundlessness brought new ideas of man's omnipotence and unconstrained creativity. Such was, according to Blumenberg, the beginning of the "modern age". When Jean-François Lyotard writes in his *What is Postmodernism?*: "Let us wage a war

¹ H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, transl. R.M. Wallace, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1999.

on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name”² of course he does not repeat the same gesture of Abelard, Ockham or Duns Scotus, but he touches on the same fragile string that resonates in post-modern times as it resonated at the daybreak of the modern age: that of *nomina*.

Martin Jay observes that we can speak of the “new version of nominalism, which can paradoxically be called magical, fostering the re-enchantment of the world”³ Jay claims the “magic” of such contemporary “nominalism” is deeply rooted in the mystical theory of language (cf. the Kabbalah referred to by Walter Benjamin⁴), but also in Roland Barthes’ idea of *mathesis singularis*, presented in his *Camera Lucida*, Andre Bazin’s writings on photography and film, and Marcel Duchamp’s invention of “pictorial nominalism”.⁵ According to Jay, all those theories enable us to speak of the “counter-assertion of the world, a world more readymade than the product of the human will, a world that somehow stubbornly thwarts all of our best – or is it worst? – efforts to disenchant it. [...] a realism of proper names that paradoxically comes from the world and not the naming subject, a world that has not entirely lost its capacity to inspire awe, wonder and humility”.⁶ In other words: the indexical nature of the photographic image, instead of mustering the power of technical disenchantment in the age of mechanical reproduction, carries within itself, in spite of all, the lost connection between the sign and the thing, the name and its bearer, making possible a language made entirely of proper names. While agreeing with Jay and his diagnosis, I would like to propose another explanation for the strange, unobvious return of nominalism in contemporary art. I call it “unobvious” because such non-conventional, “pictorial” nominalism (as Duchamp called it) can be traced in different artistic tendencies that range from conceptual to relational art. What they have in common is that each time a work of art appears (rather than being re-presented) as a proper, i.e. singular name, a “plastic being”, it evokes a feeling which momentarily creates an aesthetic community. This is the line of argumentation proposed by Thierry de Duve, the author of *Pictorial*

² J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. R. Durand, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 82.

³ M. Jay, “Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Re-enchantment of the World”, *Culture, Theory & Critique*, no 2-3, vol.50/ 2009 p. 166. See also: M. Jay, “Outcast Eyes”, *The Berlin Journal*, no 19, Fall 2010, pp. 44-48; *Re-Enchantment*, eds. J. Elkins, D. Morgan, Routledge, New York and London, 2009.

⁴ On similar analysis presented in the context of the Jewish tradition see A. Bielik-Robson, “The Promise of the Name. ‘Jewish Nominalism’ as the Critique of Idealist Tradition”, *Bamidbar. Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, No. 3 (2012).

⁵ M. Duchamp, *Notes*, Flammarion, Paris 1999, p. 115.

⁶ M. Jay, *Magical Nominalism*, p. 181.

*Nominalism. On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*⁷ and *Kant After Duchamp*. I would like to follow his analysis, but I would also like to re-think it the context of contemporaneity to answer the question of the specificity of nominalist re-turn in contemporary art, that is art which “demonstrates the way in which the contemporary as such shows itself – the act of presenting the present”.⁸ In this sense the contemporaneity of the aesthetic experience of art as such is nominalist in the sense I would like to elaborate below.

Nominalism and contemporaneity

To say that nominalism is a concept central to all contemporary art would be an oversimplification, but it is certainly among the main characteristics of at least some contemporary artistic and theoretical tendencies. Apart from Thierry de Duve's “pictorial nominalism”, borrowed or “received” from Marcel Duchamp (which by the time of the publication of *Pictorial Nominalism*⁹ had evolved into a new form) one could name a few other approaches in which nominalistic point of view plays an important role. I would like to investigate the relation between some form of nominalist thinking in aesthetics and a certain way of thinking about the contemporary in which multi- or even dyschronic perspective plays a crucial role. To a certain extent this would repeat, but on a different level, the often-cited statement by Derrida from his *Specters of Marx*, in which he puts stress on the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present”. According to Derrida, such non-contemporaneous contemporaneity would be conditioned by “that which secretly unhinges it, (...) this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, or those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living”.¹⁰ However, the specter that would haunt the contemporary would be that of a peculiar category – emotion.

Nominalism assumes that only individual, concrete objects exist and that the common properties are not grounded in any kind of supra-individual properties or relations that would exist independently of what is singular. In

⁷ Th. De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism. On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, transl. D. Polan, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2005; Th. De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1996.

⁸ B. Groys, “The topology of contemporary art” in: *Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Th. Smith, O. Enwezor, N. Condee, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2008, p. 71.

⁹ For example see Th. De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* and also “This Is Art’: Anatomy of a Sentence”, *Art Forum*, April 2014.

¹⁰ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf, Routledge, New York, London 2006, p. XVIII.

other words, universals are not more real than the particulars which are believed to participate in them for example by the whole Neoplatonic tradition. In fact, Neoplatonism may serve here as the best possible example of the metaphysical vision of an eternal, all unifying hierarchy that suddenly collapses and gives way to modernity. Depending on personal judgment, one may say either that the project of modernity was established on the ruins of an ancient forgotten order, or finally on a firm ground. Hans Blumenberg, the author of the *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, tries to oppose Karl Löwith's historiographical thesis that can be seen as a kind of variation on Carl Schmitt's political thesis, pointing out that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of history are secularized theological concepts".¹¹ Contrary to this, Blumenberg states: "Instead of secularization of eschatology, secularization by eschatology".¹² And one of the most important steps in this process is the nominalist revolution that occurred in the philosophical debates of the 13th century, whose most famous proponents are Pierre Abelard and Ockham with his razor. The paradox of the so-called nominalist crisis is that it follows from theological debates concerning the omnipotence of God. Blumenberg writes: "the interest in the rationality and human intelligibility of creation cedes priority to the speculative fascination exerted by the theological predicates of absolute power and freedom".¹³ In other words, the celebrated Ockham's razor has cut away the idea of any kind of law that could restrict God's omnipotence and prevent Him from miraculous intervention into natural order. If anything is possible, then there are no given, permanent rules, which both deprives the human conduct of any metaphysical assurance and frees it from subordination to the cosmic order. From this follows the idea that humankind is also able to construct rather than merely to find the rightful order on Earth. This had huge consequences for the problem of artistic creation, introducing the idea of artistic freedom, unconstrained by any kind of preexisting form. Scholastic integrity, clarity and the proportionality of the object suddenly evaporate in the change of aesthetic norms and, as Umberto Eco puts it, "all that remains is the intuition of particulars, a knowledge of existent objects whose visible proportions are analyzed empirically (...). As for artistic inspiration, this consists in an idea of the individual object which the artist wants to construct, and not of its universal form".¹⁴

¹¹ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, transl. G. Schwab, trans. Cambridge, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1985, p. 36.

¹² H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of Modern Age*, p. 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁴ U. Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, transl. H. Bredin, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut 2002, p. 89.

In a way, the medieval nominalist crisis, laying grounds for what we call modernity and triggering what Blumenberg calls the “self-affirmation of man”, is relevant for us today since it has instituted our notion of historicity defined by infinite progress, but also the concept of instrumental rationality. The problem that medieval nominalism has left us is the question of the rules that human creation would abide by. As Blumenberg notes: “Rather than helping man to reconstruct an order *given* in nature, the principle of economy (Ockham’s razor) helps him to reduce nature forcibly to an order *imputed* to it by man”.¹⁵ This diagnosis, I believe, resonates in Adorno’s writings, where he condemns “vulgar”, “philosophical nominalism” for reducing language to the tool of instrumental reason, and at the same time diminishing sensory particularities to the status of empirical sense data.¹⁶ There is nothing pre-given, there are only givens and they are also finally realized to be the outcome of mere conventions. This approach returns in the current problematisations of nominalism in the context of the contemporary.

According to Frederic Jameson, the nominalist tendency is identified with vain and merely feigned resistance of the philosophical currencies of post-structuralism to any form of so called globalization and any form of historical thinking in terms of “totality”. Jameson describes this as “the attempt to see whether by systematizing something that is resolutely unsystematic, and historicizing something that is resolutely unhistorical, one couldn’t outflank it and force a historical way at least of thinking about it...”.¹⁷ According to Jameson, nominalism is thus only an empty, formal, and ultimately futile strategy to bypass the question of universality by reducing “us to empirical present (or to use empirical present as the sole pattern for imagining other situations and other temporal moments”.¹⁸ Jameson concludes that “Contemporary thought and culture are in this sense profoundly *nominalist* (to expand Adorno’s diagnosis about the tendencies of modern art), Postmodernism more thoroughly so than anything that preceded it”.¹⁹

The charge of empty linguistic reductionism that ends up with the opposition of the systematic and the radically unsystematic, of language and the ineffable singularity of empirical facticity is echoed within contemporary art theory by

¹⁵ H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 154.

¹⁶ Th. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. E.B. Ashton, Continuum, New York, London, 1973, p. 312.

¹⁷ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1991, p. 418.

¹⁸ F. Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*, Verso, London 2006, p. 249.

¹⁹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 127.

Peter Osborne. Nominalism becomes here “the structural libertarianism of contemporary art”.²⁰ Putting stress on the individuality of a work of art, it destroys any possibility of collective meaning. Works of art are quasi-subjects with their own “internal world” that presents itself as an enigma. Their “unsocial sociability” can be “wise”, i.e. can be conscious of the necessity of mediation as the only possible way to enter the realm of what is common, or it can be radically individual – *bourgeois*, defending only their own self-interest. In his recently published *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* he stigmatizes, with reference to Adorno, this unreflective tendency to erase socio-historical mediation, even the medium itself, in favour of individual work, described as a “negation of ontology, a negation of ontology by naming, or a negative ontology of naming”.²¹

Martin Jay’s recent project can be placed on the other pole of the contemporary discussions concerning the status of nominalism in art. Working on the concept of “magical nominalism”²² he suggests another way of thinking about singularity that wouldn’t be excluded outside the mere conventions of linguistic practices. Such “non-conventionalist” nominalism is grounded in the kabbalistic theory of language and certain mystical linguistic ideas of Johann Georg Hamann traceable in the early writings of Walter Benjamin. Here, the linguistic reference to the world is not described in conventional terms, but as an act of creation that repeats the creative act of God. Everything that has been created bears its name – a proper name, and thus language does not articulate meaning, but the singularity of each being: “The proper name is the communion of man with the creative word of God”,²³ writes Benjamin. Such “magical nominalism”, according to Jay, should serve us as a tool of re-enchantment of the world in the struggle against instrumental rationality. Paradoxically, or not paradoxically at all, if one defends the indexicality of the photographic medium, the modern tool of such re-enchantment is photography. A photographic image is able to reflect the facticity of each being, according to the rules of *mathesis singularis* that Roland Barthes was writing about.²⁴

We have then at least two versions of nominalism: negative, according to which nominalism ends up empty-handed, with no meaning and no referent,

20 P. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London 2013, p. 87.

21 Ibidem, p. 82.

22 M. Jay, *Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Re-enchantment of the World*.

23 W. Benjamin, “On Language as Such an the Language of Man” in: idem, *Selected Writings vol. 1 1913-1926*, ed. M. Bullock, M.W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England 2002, p. 69.

24 See R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. R. Howard, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2010.

and affirmative, according to which nomina - names are natural signs that express the individual essence of each being.

Pictorial nominalism

“Pictorial nominalism” (*nominalisme pictural*) is a term coined by Marcel Duchamp which appeared for the first time in his notes from 1914 published later as a *White Box* to accompany his work *The Bride Stripped by Her Bachelors, Even*. The note simply says: “A kind of pictorial nominalism (Check)”.²⁵ Another note is more elaborate; it says e.g. that “literal nominalism” assumes “no generic specific distinction between words”, “no physical adaptation of concrete words”, “no conceptual value of abstract words”, and no “musical value”. In consequence, Duchamp claims that the term is “only readable by eye and little by little takes on a form of plastic significance; it is a sensorial reality, a plastic truth with the same title as a line, as a group of lines”.²⁶

Nominalism in its aesthetic, “Kant after Duchamp” de Duve’s version, is not just a mere *flatus vocis*, or in terms of plastic arts, *flatus pictus*. Neither is it some magical or mystical way of overcoming alienation through an unmediated contact with the *ding-an-sich*, as Martin Jay would suggest. In my opinion, Paul Rabinow uses the phrase that is the most adequate to this position, when he writes of “nominalist sensibility”. Rabinow elaborates this intuition, writing that it is “the sensibility to constant change, and a certain pleasure in it and feeling of obligation to grasp and participate in the transformations, constitute one mode of modernism. [...] sensibility that seeks to shape itself in accordance with a world experienced as contingent, malleable, and open”.²⁷

But since the name of Kant has been mentioned here, one should remember that the act of such naming, that is the judgment of taste, is certainly not an intellectual operation (it does not subsume sensory data under concepts), and neither is it a mode of thinking of what is particular according to the universal principle, but it rather confronts us with the particular in order to find such a principle. And it does this by “dint of feeling”.²⁸ According to de Duve’s reading of Kant’s “Analytic of the Beautiful”, each time he instances the aesthetic judgment “This is beautiful”, we can replace “beautiful” with “art”. “This is art” is

²⁵ M. Sanouillet, E. Petreson ed., *Salt Seller. The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1975), p. 78.

²⁶ M. Duchamp, *Notes*, p. 115.

²⁷ P. Rabinow, *Anthropos Today. Reflections on Modern Equipment*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2003, p. 67.

²⁸ Th. de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, p. 312.

the modern version of the judgment of taste.²⁹ As such, it is subjective – it is based on a feeling of pleasure that originates from the free, harmonious play of two faculties: imagination and understanding, but it also claims universality. This universality is not empirical and it is also problematic, as we will see, if it is describable in anthropological terms, but transcendental: the validity of aesthetic judgment rests on the autonomy of the subject, who, judging something beautiful, believes to be speaking in a “universal voice”. Such subjective universality is not grounded in any kind of schematism – it is not conceptual, but it is an Idea of the reason which does not determine its object, but is merely regulative. To claim that the judgment “This is art” is subjectively universal is to claim (to quote Kant), that taste is “what makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable without the mediation of a concept”.³⁰ This faculty of estimating Kant calls *sensus communis*, the transcendental foundation of judgment which is, as he writes, “a ground common to all”. And this leads us to the proclamation of aesthetic community, based on the Idea of “supersensible substrate of humanity”. Judging something as beautiful, we expect that any rational subject in our place would not only do the same, but ought to judge similarly. According to Kant, “the feeling in the judgment of taste comes to be exacted from everyone as a sort of duty”.³¹

Within the artistic reformulation of the judgments of beauty as judgments of art we also find a quasi-moral obligation to the name-giver. As one can read in *Kant After Duchamp*: “every woman, every man, cultivated or not, whatever her or his culture, language, race, social class, has aesthetic Ideas which are or can be, by the same token, artistic Ideas. This cannot be proven but has to be supposed”.³² We have to put aside here all the nuances of historical reflections concerning modern and postmodern art and briefly return to the act of artistic naming. Just as “beautiful” is not a concept, but a reflexive judgment originating from the unique interplay between the two faculties, so “art” is described by de Duve as a “proper name” – analogical to the “rigid designator” from Saul Kripke’s causal theory of reference.³³ To give the name of art to an object is to feel that

²⁹ To quote de Duve explaining briefly the core of his theory: “Suffice it to say that in the sentence ‘this is art,’ used as an aesthetic judgment, the word ‘this’ is a pointer referring to some object, and that the word ‘art’ is also a pointer, referring to the collection of objects the speaker has already baptized as art in previous aesthetic experiences. Hence my little one theorem theory: art is a proper name.” Th. de Duve, *Mary Warhol/Joseph Duchamp* in: *Re-Enchantment*, p. 88.

³⁰ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, transl. J. Creed Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1911, p. 41 (§ 40) <http://rci.rutgers.edu/~tripmcc/phil/kant-c3-meredith-part1.pdf>.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Th. de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, p. 316.

³³ See S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1990. The idea of the causal theory of reference can be simply explained by the example of baptism: “An initial ‘baptism’

it is art and to assume that “every woman, every man” would agree: “The name is transmitted and repeated, but the baptism is renewed each time the named thing comes up for trial before a new occurrence of the feeling”.³⁴

Aesthetic feeling is singular and so is aesthetic judgment. From this follows that “aesthetic baptism”, so to speak, is contextual – it belongs to concrete time and space and within this space-time it points to the object, which is not a thing, but according to Kant an appearance, i.e. “the undetermined object of an empirical intuition”.³⁵ That is why the aesthetic judgment is irremediably deictic – it is conditioned by the pointers *I, here, now*. “Art” then has no meaning, it only has reference, and we happen to live in the times when we can refer to anything as art.

I would say with respect to “pictorial” or “sensible” nominalism, that through the act of aesthetic naming objects are being named so that they enter the realm of the community, and with those objects that we call works of art, our feelings from which those acts originate are shown as concurrent with them. Art makes us possibly equally free to judge (i.e. to give a name) and to create (which is also give a name), however such possibility is not empirical, but is supposed to be a transcendental regulative idea. As we can see, Kantian Idea of *sensus communis* is a way of rejecting Jameson’s previously mentioned accusation of bypassing the problem of universality that would allegedly reduce us to the empirical present.

I would like to emphasize that such contemporaneity is constantly disrupted because the *tempus* attributed to the works of art, i.e. history of art, and the *tempus* of the feeling (if there is such) are dyschronic. The Kantian subject appears to be an “empirico-transcendental double”, as Michel Foucault famously noted, that is united only by the “dint of feeling” that can “induce much thought”, as an aesthetic idea, but no cognition. The question now is simple: to which order does this feeling belong? Is it the anthropological order of culture or the transcendental order of the universally communicable community? This is where, I think, the problem of art as a proper name, of “sensible nominalism” is structurally connected to the question of contemporaneity. That is why the essence (if there is such) or peculiarity of contemporary art is attached to the nominalist re-turn. It is important to differentiate between the conceptual

takes place. Here the object may be named by ostension, or the reference of the name may be fixed by a description. When the name is ‘passed from link to link’, the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it” (p. 96).

³⁴ Th. de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, p. 69.

³⁵ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. ed. P. Gyuer, A.W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 155 [B34 A20].

nominalism of Joseph Kossuth, who would stress that “every picture is a sentence” and the “sensible” or “pictorial” nominalism claiming that “every sentence is a picture”. This second version is focused on singular objects, events that cannot be conceptually generalized and in order to communicate constantly require new relations or new constellations – such is the condition of our “liquid modernity”, as Zygmunt Bauman would say.

We should contrast Adorno’s remark made in his *Aesthetic Theory*, that “Unchecked aesthetic nominalism ... terminates in literal facticity”³⁶ with Duchamp’s note “A kind of pictorial nominalism (Check)”. Whether such “pictorial nominalism” had been already “checked” by the time of writing or was to be “checked”, we cannot be sure. What is important, and I think that Thierry de Duve points it out exceptionally well, is that Duchamp’s move towards nominalism as the essence of the creative act loses lots of its alleged conventionalist appearance, often described in aesthetic theory as the “institutional theory of art”. This sociological approach stresses the importance of such social institutions as museums, galleries and the whole artistic discourse in the process of mediation between the world of ordinary objects and the world of art. An object becomes a work of art when it is baptized by one of the representatives of the world of art.³⁷ This is the “ascetic” side of Duchamp’s move observed by de Duve. This means that the artist dispossesses himself or herself of all traditional artistic craftsmanship, of all talent, and acts as the modest founder or designator of the works.

Duchamp stresses the lack of the referential function of the word. The word is deprived of meaning-intention; “the dictionary, linguistics, phonology, and aesthetics can all be abolished”, writes de Duve.³⁸ What remains is not a linguistic sign, but a proper name.

“Pictorial nominalism” puts stress on a particular or singular name; it operates as a kind of subversive *détournement* stopping the process of reference and showing, as Duns Scotus would say, *haecceitas*: the “thisness” of an object or its “thingness”, a factuality of what is and has always been already there in the world. This view can be interpreted in terms of a radical conventionalism: there are no singular objects that would be graspable by our cognitive faculties. To gain knowledge or to have meaningful experience is to create certain

³⁶ Th. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, The Athlone Press, London 1997, p. 220.

³⁷ A.C. Danto, „The Artworld”, *Journal of Philosophy*, LXI 1964, pp. 571-584. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1974.

³⁸ T. De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism. On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Ready-made*, p. 127.

conventions according to which one can operate. On the other hand, viewed as if “from the inside” of any kind of representational system, for example a linguistic system, this nominalistic view shows that words are “pictures” that cannot be read, i.e. they cannot be translated as usual into a different symbolic code because there is no “different code” apart from language itself. Such a “plastic being of a word”, to use another Duchampian phrase, opens a zero degree of language; it points to the realm where language (what is made of consonants and vowels that are readable), and non-language (what has been deprived of any intentional meaning), meet.

To suggest a slightly naïve thought experiment, one could imagine a hypothetical equation: “plastic” is to “readable” as “imagination” is to “understanding”, then “pictorial nominalism” would describe the free play between the two Kantian faculties, and hence would manifest the relationship that binds together the proper name and the feeling. The condition of possibility of such relationship lies, so to speak, outside the empirical world and empirical community; it is the transcendental idea of “universal communicability of the mode of representation in a judgment of taste (...) apart from the presupposition of any definite concept”.³⁹ It is as if our historical contemporaneity, no matter how defined, were constantly dissynchronized by the feeling that names something as art and thus obliges everyone to agree and to feel the same. I believe that with respect to the interpretation of Kant’s third *Critique* such a position can be placed somewhere between the political interpretation suggested by Hanna Arendt and the radical, transcendental version presented by Jean-François Lyotard.

For Arendt in her *Lectures in Kant’s Political Philosophy*,⁴⁰ *sensus communis* is not only occasioned, but fully realized by the aesthetic community of human beings who judge and share those empirical judgments with each other: “when one judges, one judges as a member of community”.⁴¹

On the other hand, we have Jean-François Lyotard, trying to show in his radicalism that in fact there is no *radix* – root of subjectivity, whose origins precede even “I think” of the transcendental unity of apperception. In his text on *sensus communis*⁴² (in which, strangely for Lyotard, the sublime does not appear) the transcendental character of the aesthetic feeling is opposed to “anthropological temptation”, as Lyotard calls it. The free play of two faculties – their “euphony” – is, for Lyotard, the subjective condition of all cognition and judgment. In other words, feeling – the pure pleasure, is not only a sign,

³⁹ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 18 (§ 9).

⁴⁰ H. Arendt, *Lectures in Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁴² J.-F. Lyotard, *Sensus communis*, transl. M. Hobson, G. Bennington in: *Judging Lyotard*, ed. A. Benjamin, Routledge, London and New York 2003, pp. 1–25.

however discrete, of the original unity of two distant systems: of natural necessity and of human freedom. It is the origin itself, the unconditioned *Ursprung* of not only objective knowledge (i.e. presentation subsumed to the determined concept) but also of the subject who is “being born” in aesthetic feeling, who is presented “à l’état naissant” – such sensible community would be placed outside any empirical, anthropological order.

The aesthetic self is simultaneously structured and fractured by the feeling that makes any communal experience possible and deferred. The aesthetic name instantiates the idea of contemporaneity as *sensus communis* – universal communicability only for a moment, in a flash of feeling, to re-turn to it once again, *usque ad finem...*

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ZWRÓT / POWRÓT NOMINALIZMU W SZTUCE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ (streszczenie)

Hans Blumenberg pokazał w swojej *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, w jaki sposób pojawienie się nominalizmu w średniowiecznych debatach położyło podwaliny pod nowoczesność. Nominalizm zakłada, że tym, co istnieje są jedynie pojedyncze, konkretne rzeczy, a wspólne własności nie są osadzone w jakichś innych ponadindywidualnych własnościach, czy relacjach, które mogłyby istnieć niezależnie od tego, co jednostkowe. W interpretacji Thierry de Duve'a „nominalizm pikturalny” Duchampa kładzie nacisk na jednostkowe imię, zatrzymuje proces odniesienia i ukazuje jego „plastyczne istnienie”. Ta idea estetyczna otwiera całkowicie nowy obszar, który określamy współcześnie mianem „sztuki”, gdzie sztuka staje się „nazwą własną”. W artykule pragnę prześledzić tę analizę, jak również chcę ją przemyśleć w kontekście współczesności, by odpowiedzieć na pytanie o charakter nominalistycznego zwrotu/powrotu w sztuce współczesnej. W tym rozumieniu współczesność charakterystyczna dla doświadczenia estetycznego okazuje się nominalistyczna w sensie, który zamierzam wypracować w artykule.

Słowa kluczowe: nominalizm, uczucie, *sensus communis*, Kant, Duchamp, de Duve.