



Interdisciplinary Colloquium

**LE SENSIBLE A L'ŒUVRE :
THE BODY BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND NEUROSCIENCES**

CRAL/CEHTA/EHESS – 15 May 2014 – at the INHA Auditorium, Paris

The interdisciplinary colloquium *Le sensible à l'œuvre: the body between aesthetics and neurosciences* aims to examine the stakes and perspectives of the research projects often grouped under the label “neuroaesthetics,” and to explore the main questions and debates arisen by them.

Over the past twenty years, the term “neuroaesthetics” has come to designate a large domain devoted to the relations between arts and neurosciences, emphasizing so far the visual arts. Due to some connotations of the prefix “neuro” and to the work of some of the early authors who identified themselves explicitly with neuroaesthetics, this field has been the object of both sharp and foreseeable confrontations, which are exemplified by the opposition between an apparently reductionist naturalization of the processes of artistic creation and aesthetic reception on the one hand, and the subject’s creative freedom and personal experience on the other. Such antagonisms may appear as a recent form of the “mind-body problem.” This problem is indeed constantly updated by psychology and cognitive sciences, even though they may give the impression of considering it outmoded or resolved. The time has thus come to examine in depth the neuroaesthetic project so as better to understand what it mobilizes in contemporary thought.

Neuroaesthetics does not occupy a conceptual space that theoretical research would be unable to fill because of its supposed weaknesses when compared to empirical research. It does show the strength of a materialist perspective reinforced by the increasing sophistication of tools such as brain-imaging. Neuroimaging, indeed, has been applied to the study of conscious and unconscious processes, including the emotions provoked by art, whose bodily bases however have long been recognized by aesthetics and the psychology of art. Yet, beyond its empirical contributions, neuroaesthetics may also contribute to build novel conceptual perspectives. Its emergence and development suggest the existence of a theoretical need that we consider emblematic of our times: that of understanding the cognitive power of the body. The body is the first object of human self-consciousness, it functions as an agent of intentionality, movement and affects, and is the chief means whereby both artists and spectators relate to artworks.

From a methodological point of view, a main feature of neuroaesthetics is its appeal to several disciplines. Yet, it produces heterogeneous findings without unifying them, as it still has not lived up to the ideal Roland Barthes imagined when he said that interdisciplinary activity does not come about via the confrontation of specialized knowledge, but begins effectively when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down to the advantage of a new object, a new language that do not belong exclusively to any one of them. In Barthes' spirit, the colloquium *Le sensible à l'œuvre* hopes to stimulate ways of thinking about new objects and concepts that neither the neurosciences nor research about the arts may be able to institute by themselves.

While the two morning keynote lectures, by the philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer and the neurobiologist Margaret Livingstone, will open the way to a critical and historical inquiry on neuroaesthetics, the four afternoon speeches will pursue different approaches to the body.

Video projections will highlight how the body, as a paradoxical “living thing,” has been interrogated less by body art than by painting, dance, theater, and a large spectrum of contemporary art forms, from Jackson Pollock's drippings to Philippe Parreno's installations where he obliterates the soma of the piano player although representing the energy it needs for playing. In such a framework, the idea of performance will emerge as particularly valuable insofar as it eliminates the opposition between mind and body—assumed as equal poles of a relationship—, and leads the working out of the definition of the new theoretical object we are looking for. The body will not be seen merely as a case study to be exploited for apprehending the neurobiological conditions of art, but will, on the contrary, be considered as a “material a priori” (Mikel Dufrenne).

This will also provide the occasion to emphasize that aesthetics can play a philosophical role only when it places the body at the center stage, since by definition it brings together the theory of art and the study of subjectively experienced sensory phenomena.

The colloquium will close up with a roundtable with all the participants, who will be joined by Anne Simon, Josette Féral and Jean-Pierre Changeux.

The colloquium *Le sensible à l'œuvre* is organized by the CRAL/CEHTA/EHESS under the patronage of the Philosophy Department of the Università degli Studi of Milan, and with the support of the Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Paris.

Organisation

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