

The obstacle is tautology

introduction

The utterance "the obstacle is tautology" is not equivalent to "obstacle and tautology". The "is" "IS" should be understood as a copula (*copula* means "to attach" in Latin), which is a logical preaching saying that "it is the obstacle which is tautology", the tautology is "IS" the obstacle. One can also reverse this utterance by saying that tautology is not just an obstacle, but that it is the obstacle *as such*, or at least the dominant or the first and foremost. So which is which? (unresolved question). Now what is this obstacle which "IS" tautology about? I would say it is about conceptual art which could be doubted, but we will come back to that.

We could say that "the obstacle is tautology" results from a syllogism which is missing two premises. This syllogism emerges from the question of echo in conceptual art. In fact, before claiming that "the obstacle is tautology" we have to analyze the primary question of echo in conceptual art. And if we insist that we know what the question is (according to Lacan, we normally only have answers, a question can arise only when there is already an answer), we must give an answer. Therefore, in this presentation before raising the question we are giving the answer: "the obstacle is tautology" ("IS", I reiterate) is the answer concerning the question of echo in conceptual art. The question itself is still absent here as is the problem. Just as in saying "the question of a chair" we are not really posing a question, merely announcing a possible question which could be determined if it had an answer. So we have to find the answer to the question of a chair. For example, "the chair is "IS" (copula) stands for the following problematic: how does a chair relate to space?

I - preliminary definitions / axioms

Our problematic is not yet clear, but let us try to define the terms it includes. We want to determine the field of references in the following proposition: "The question of echo in conceptual art" of which "the obstacle is tautology" is the answer.

So let us analyze the important notions in "the question of echo in conceptual art". The notion of the "question" is to be left in suspense in order to prepare for it better. The notion of "conceptual art" is to be left in suspense as well, nobody knows precisely what it is, but everybody has a more or less clear image. In the end we will see that it relies on the obstacle which is the tautology (I reveal the conclusion right from the start). For now we are left with the echo.

Let us try to learn more about the definition of the word "echo". One can easily find out that an echo is "the repetition of sound resulting from the waves of sound being reflected from an obstacle". Here we come across the term "obstacle" again. But in this definition we have four nouns, which is already something:

Repetition/ Sound/ Reflection/ and of course Obstacle.

We will now try to cast some light on these terms:

Repetition: considering the latter term in the statement "echo is the repetition of the waves of sound by the obstacle" one can deduce that without the obstacle there could be no repetition.

Sound: sound is materialized spatially by the "waves of sound" and because of this fact sound exists in space and time. One can easily see that there could be no sound without

materialized space (e.g., in vacuum there is no sound). Just as without temporality there could be no movement of the sound waves and therefore no sound.

Reflection: from the part of the statement saying "repetition of sound by the reflection of sound waves from the obstacle" one can suppose that reflection is the means of repetition. I want to repeat this again, to the deaf perhaps, reflection is the means of repetition.

Finally, the obstacle. We are proposing only the initial definitions now, later we will elaborate: the obstacle is that which gets in the way of sound, which reflects it, sends it back to its origin and diffracts it into parts.

Let us now make a second round of definitions to deepen our knowledge.

Repetition: first of all, one has to note that repetition is an enormous concept, terrifying by its extent and able to crush us with its philosophical weight. In this context we only come across it (together with 4 other terms) when trying to define echo. The concept of repetition itself probably extends far beyond this particular language game. We can say that echo is a specific kind of repetition. Repetition of that which returns to its source by diffracting in space and time. An echo can also be multiplied if it encounters a new obstacle on its way back.

Let us now turn to the second definition of the echo: echo is not differential repetition. It could be differential repetition, but only in a sense that it is "repetition which diffracts itself". How does it diffract itself? In space and time: it is therefore differential with an "a" (we can say together with Jacques Derrida that the diffraction which returns to its source is not complete (*pas-toute*), just as a woman in Lacan's view). Therefore Echo in mythology is this woman or nymph (striving for her femininity) who laments not being loved by Narcissus. The latter does not diffract in space and time but aims to coincide with himself (to become pure and complete). The moans of echo are endless and in her case teleology is lost, we may propose.

Now the sound: the first definition of sound was sufficient. I could not go much further talking about its spatiotemporal relationship so we will use the same definition of sound within the framework of conceptual art. Well, there is an axiomatic aspect here. I would say that a sound in conceptual art is an « utterance ». This leads us to a question what an "utterance" is. First of all, an utterance is not an idea as an idea is timeless, pure and comprehensible. So a *Candid* could ask: an utterance, is it an expression of an idea? - Which is not stupid and indeed different. As we have an axiomatic that will help us to develop our argument, I would merrily say that yes, or rather "it could be", to say that it occurs that an utterance in conceptual art is an expression of an idea. It's ok, but to be more precise it is preferable to say that an utterance in conceptual art is not an expression of an idea but rather an affirmation of a concept.

The next question is whether there is a difference between "an expression of an idea" and "an affirmation of a concept". I will be martial and will say 'yes' like during wartime when faced with confrontation one has to come to a decision.

First of all an expression of an idea can be subjective and can bring to a certain level of lyrism or expressionism, or even to a pathos linked to the abilities of the speaker to express himself/herself. While an affirmation of a concept is of a different order, its affirmative side implies that an utterance is performative which means that all the affirmation of a concept is performative which in turn means that the concept is created in an immanent way. While an expression of an idea holds on a Saussurian dialectic where an idea, as discussed by Platon, exists independently from the speaker who is trying to express it in a transcendent domain.

Thus we can easily hold that an utterance in conceptual art is precisely the confirmation of a concept. But not only that. To be more precise we should say: an utterance is the confirmation of a concept in the matter of the history of forms which gives the created conceptual statement, and in this second round of definitions we could keep it as the definition of sound.

We now return to the reflection and we should next define an obstacle. Starting from here we will be twisting the two remaining concepts—“Reflection” and “Obstacle” - to be defined in this second round of definitions and thus we will now move on to talk about a more intimate dialectic of the echo and the obstacle.

II – dialectic echo/obstacle

So the reflection: let's take the first example of a work – I think that the majority of us knows this example which allows me not to give a visual presentation of it, nor to bring a video tape with me. It's the scream of Jochen Gerz documented in the video. I believe that he says “hello” and that he repeats it until the extinction of his voice. So what do we have here? An utterance? Is a « hello » an utterance? An expression of the primary language? We could say that in this case “hello” is a performative utterance, which means that it is an utterance that does what it says. This definition of a performative statement is suggested by Austin, an American philosopher. Since by saying or shouting “hello” Jochen Gerz does not talk about the time of doing it - in the latter case, it would be a descriptive statement. But no, he performs an act of saluting us, addressing us by saying “hello”, which is of the same nature as an example of the performative act of baptism given by Austin in his book *How to do things with words*. By saying “I baptize you”, the priest in fact performs the action by simply saying it. In this example of artistic work, is there reflection? And of what order is it? We could say no, because from the first sight there is no obstacle while reflection only happens when there is an obstacle. However, there is certainly a repetition exhausting itself. It's like an artist producing his/her own echo. So that is an obstacle.

Thus we will jump ahead and say that in this operation the obstacle is the camera used to record Jochen Gerz's performance. If the camera is the obstacle and since the camera is the means or representing performance, we can move forward by saying that in this case the obstacle is the representation. To conclude this part concerning the definitions we could say that the echo is diffraction in the space and time of an affirmed utterance to be represented.

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As a follow-up we could say that it is the representation that makes an obstacle to the affirmed utterance and that diffracts it in the space and time. This means that the cornerstone of our proposition is the obstacle and that it's an obstacle which needs to be taken into account during the representation. If we rely on the short text of Alain Badiou entitled: “The real is the deadlock of formalization; formalization is the place enforcing the real”, we need to ask what this expression could mean. What is an enforcement of the real? According to our definitions and in this context of work, reflecting on the representation would mean reflecting on the obstacle which produces an echo/the obstacle being the representation.

The work of art as a reflection of the obstacle is the work of representation – given as a representation of the reflection of the obstacle. Alternatively: reflection of the obstacle = work of representation in art. We can take the argument further:

There is an obstacle: (two points) if not, then there wouldn't be art.

Art (if we follow the axiom of Badiou's) as work of representation is given as reflection of the obstacle, is not of the order of the real but of the formalization. A piece of art is not real; it is produced to enforce the real. The result is formalization that a piece of art isn't real. Let's

keep this idea in our heads; it will be useful for what follows.

III – the not yet of the echo

Now we can pose a question: is there an initial utterance without an echo in conceptual art? We could say yes, under condition that there is no obstacle because without an obstacle there is no echo. So yes, under condition that there is no representation, not yet anyways, under condition that there is no enforcement of the real. So yes, one can have an initial utterance without an echo in conceptual art if and only if, so under condition that, there is no reflection of the obstacle.

Does it ever happen? We can say that it can absolutely happen as such but it would absolutely not reach us. Since this “reach”, allow me the expression (I consider that “reach” is the concept derived from the concept of an event) cannot come to us. So let’s go back: can an initial utterance given as without echo exist in conceptual art?: let’s say yes, but under the condition that there is no diffraction from the obstacle. This implies that no spectator or audience can hear this utterance. This utterance will be inaudible/invisible since without representation which diffracts by creating an obstacle to the conceptual utterance and without this diffraction in the space and time this utterance is perfectly colorless, odorless, inaudible, invisible. Even if it can exist, no phenomenology can assume, realize or exploit it.

Let’s take a well known example of the laser. What is a laser? It is a beam of one-way light, and it is invisible, as James Bond or MacGyver could confirm to us. And what do we need to do to see a laser? We need to put some powder on it, and this powder (for example made of crushed chalk) will create multiple obstacles to the beam of light and will diffract the light in a way that our eye can perceive it. If a light goes from point A to point B without diffraction, it is invisible, I had seen it during primary courses in physics.

So now that we know that an utterance without an echo in conceptual art can exist but that we cannot know about it, as if its existence is put in brackets, like the one of an epoché, or a phenomenological husserlian reduction, let’s discuss the question of the conceptual art.

Let’s take a rather famous example which allows me to once more avoid bringing slides or a gramophone for you to hear it. It’s the “this is not a pipe” of Magritte and the consideration of its echo in conceptual art by Marcel Broodthaers in his interview with a cat.

The object that makes an obstacle to the pipe is its representation. The echo to Broodthaers raises from a device aiming to represent the impossibility to communicate this echo. In fact, the cat cannot speak. In our imaginary we can say that the cat does not recognize the representation. So it creates an obstacle to the representation. In the interview the cat only more or less approves with meows, translating among other possibilities that it does not understand the subject, its meow is not an echo of conceptual art, but just an echo in the lack of an echo that Broodthaers puts into perspective. Broodthaers gives evidence in this dialectique of the obstacle and the echo, the question of the lack of impossibility of the echo when the representation in the conceptual art is not possible.

With the meuw the cat is creating an obstacle to an obstacle. It is without representation, it is therefore real. (Meanwhile Broodthaers plays the cat himself which could bring another story but we will leave for now). Broodthaers thus puts conceptual art and its question of representation across a composed reality (the meows of the cat) or across a recomposed reality (the meows of the cat feign). So now we are combining the question of the real with the question of the performative utterance. And what about its interlacing? We can ask ourselves the question concerning the echo/obstacle dialectic.

Let's take Laurence Weiner, the champion of the mental picture. He says: "an object has a meaning only in the stream of life ». He asks the question in the sense of an object which according to him can be found in the stream of life. So what is the stream and what is life? I don't know about life but a priori I would like to say that saying "life" is the way of saying "the real" and that stream can make us think of a stream as discussed a few lines above, like the waves etc...

What is the phrase of Weiner "an object has a meaning only in the stream of life"? Is it a descriptive utterance or a performative one? If it is descriptive, it says something real, a fact, like the fact that it is raining or that the weather is good. If it is performative, it says what it actually does, so "an object has a meaning only in the stream of life" is not real, so not just taken into the stream of life but created an asserted concept. You can hear this utterance if there is an obstacle to diffract it so that it reaches our ears. One question: are there utterances that aim at cutting the stream? What would affirm an utterance (which is conceptual art in strong sense) without being diffracted by an obstacle?

Let's look at another example together with Joseph Kosuth: take "five words in orange neon", the famous piece written on an orange neon light. To follow the same reasoning: what is there? We have an affirmation of an utterance in the matter of the history of forms. For the forms we could say: the color/the spatiality of the piece/ the typo employed. This piece forms around the utterance which is appropriate to this utterance, it is in a way descriptive of what it is. And yet a description is not ordinary performative: when I say that it is good weather, I mean the reality, in life, the sun is shining. But if a description is self-descriptive and it is the same as the action of its description, such description becomes equally performative. So is it taken to the stream of life? And is it real or not? that's the problem posed earlier. It could also be said: does the phrase "five words in orange neon" make sense?

A priori no, it does not make any sense, it's a tautology, which means that an utterance that is self-descriptive (*tauto logos* in Greek), tautology is in fact saying the same thing twice. So in our perspective by transforming a performative utterance into the truth or in other words transforming a performative into a descriptive utterance and as a result blurring the distinction between the two concepts so important from the linguistic point of view. We can say that a tautology is always true and consequently real and does not make sense. Why? It is real, exists autonomously but it is not taken into the stream of life. It exists independently like an idea but does not have a function in life. As it is autonomous and real it is not art. We had left the discussion of art as enforcement of the real in our heads when we went ahead with our lecture of Badiou. It does not enforce the real because it is real, a piece of art is too real.

We arrive at our conclusion which from now on could serve as an axiom for all subsequent reflections: tautologies of conceptual art are not pieces of art. I repeat it again for the deaf and myself: tautologies of conceptual art are not pieces of art. "What are they then?" an innocent question could be right. What is tautology then? It's simply the real obstacle on which Magritte stumbled.

We can now easily say that "five words in orange neon" is the obstacle of "this is not a pipe". I would say that the work of Kosuth in tautology is not conceptual art/ I would say that the work in tautology by Kosuth is not conceptual art, it does not have the sense and that it is absolutely the obstacle of conceptual art. Kosuth has a systematic philosophical desire where inside the system he will produce its own obstacle. Starting from this obstacle, of this cornerstone, which in fact creates an obstacle which will diffract other utterances created by conceptual art. So let's say that with Joseph Kosuth's work tautology produced the obstacle needed for diffraction of the utterances created by the conceptual art.

So the conceptual art alights as a system of which the obstacle is tautology. I repeat it since it's my last sentence: the conceptual art alights as a system of which the obstacle is tautology.

Benoît Maire, Bordeaux, August 2007.

Given as an improvisation in the street in April, 2008 in Paris

Pictures: paintings accompanying the lecture, diverse origins (adjusted publications of contemporary art)