Actuality of Aristotelian Aesthetic Concepts in Contemporary Philosophical Thought. 
A Case Study: Performance Art

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Abstract

Our purpose is to prove that Aristotelian concepts are still actual, being deeply reevaluated by 20th-century philosophical thought. We are focused on two representative philosophers of this epoch: Gianni Vattimo, as an interpreter of Aristotle’s concepts, and A.N. Whitehead, for his process philosophy in which he admires Aristotle’s genesis theory and implements it in his new vision of the universe as a continuous process. We will apply these theories to a contemporary art known as performance art, body art or action.

We will mainly use the following Aristotelian concepts: mimesis and poiesis (poiein). These concepts, used in aesthetics, have suffered significant change in their meanings due to the dramatic artistic revolution in the early 20th century, usually called the Avant-garde movement, which completely changed the way of thinking and the afterward artistic creation. Our question is if we can still speak about mimesis and poiein in performance art, which is an art of action, not of a finished artistic product. Vattimo demonstrates that techné (defined as art) supposes genesis (creativity) as process of poiein (production of the work of art), but the active principle is not in the produced object; it is in the producer himself – the author of a para phisin creative process as it is in accordance with nature, initiated instead from the outside of the process itself.

On the other hand, performance art implies action, not a finished artistic material product. The spectator participates in the creation of a work of art, which is not material as it was in the classical tradition. On the contrary, it is an on-going process. Alfred Whitehead’s philosophy of process revisits Aristotle’s theory of movement (kinesis), re-evaluating the concept of genesis even if he already considers the concept of substance as obsolete from the point of view of the contemporary philosophical thought. In our

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opinion, Whitehead’s philosophy, especially concepts such as actual entity, concrescence, transition, extensive continuum, body withness and symbolic reference, are fundamental notions when trying to understand the performance art. We will refer to several such actions produced by John Cage and Marina Abramović together with her partner, Ulay.

**Keywords:** performance art, body art, action, mimesis, poiesis, actual entity, transition, extensive continuum, body withness.

We are deeply convinced that the Aristotelian thought is not only part of the fundamental European philosophical tradition, but it is still actual at least as a source for the development of new theories. One of the most common concepts in aesthetic thought is *mimesis*. It was debated in the ancient Greek philosophy, in Plato’s and Aristotle’s works (especially in his *Poetics*) and then reconsidered, for a long and famous carrier, during the Renaissance period. At the beginning of the 20th century, arts pathetically declared their separation from this procedure considered as very traditional, imitative, producing a copy-like nature understood as a simple reproduction of a landscape, human face, human beings in action, etc. Starting with the cubist painting and then with the abstract art, these artistic movements can be considered as a real revolt, a violent denial of the theory of *mimesis*, understood in a very restrictive meaning, as a method of creating a simple copy of the nature.

However, if we go back to Aristotle’s texts we can see that there are two ways of understanding *mimeisthai*: either as a simple reproduction (re-presentation) of an object which nature also does2 or as a production intended to achieve an aim, a purpose.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle tells us that *mimesis* should represent the object as *it is, should be, or looks like*. That is why “the imitation is free”, as Vattimo says (Vattimo 1961, 5). It has to be verisimilar, credible as a potentiality. Why this? Because the work of art should produce satisfaction, aesthetic satisfaction specifically. It is in fact the pleasure of knowing something, on the one hand, and of recognizing something, on the other hand. In this situation, a work of art which does not represent

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3 See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1460b, 10-12, 32-36.
the object "as it is", but in one of the other two aforementioned ways\textsuperscript{4}, requires an intellectual effort on behalf of the artist and also a similar effort on behalf of the spectator in order to grasp what is not very obvious and simple as in a pure copy of reality. The aesthetic satisfaction produced by an abstract work of art, such as Kandisky’s creations, is not diminished at all. The same thing is applicable in the case of performance art. As any other art of different cultural periods, a performance refers to the human life; this is the imitated model – human emotions, actions, etc. The drastic change in the performance art consists in the fact that the spectator does not contemplate a material product made by the artist. On the contrary, instead of a painting or a sculpture, the spectator meets the artist himself who performs in person in front of him. In this case, the artist uses as instruments and material his own body. The artistic idea is lively \textit{represented} through an immediate and authentic experience.

The performance could consist of the painting itself placed horizontally together with the image that should be represented inside and which is vividly performed by the artist himself. Thus, the painting itself, as well as the process of creation, are developed in front of the spectator’s eyes. The painting becomes the “stage” from which the artist evolves in a creative action which becomes the work itself. The \textit{mimesis} in this art is more essential and more allusive at the same time, respectively more general and more immediate as a result of the presence of the artist himself.

As an example, I would refer to Marina Abramović and her partner Ulay, a Dutch artist. They created many performances based on the study of the physical and psychological limits of the human body. They succeeded in harmonizing with each other in such a refined way that they almost reached the limits of the human sensitive capacities. For this purpose, they exercised an increased rational control of their own body and tried to extend this sensitiveness to the other’s body. Thus, they managed to speak about a new type of human existence, “a two-headed body”\textsuperscript{5}. The \textit{mimesis} in their performance is understood as a

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4} It should be or looks like.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} M. Abramović quoted by Denise Green. See Green 2005, 76.}
representation of the human body in general, an extended sensitivity intended to create concordance between each other. It was also an exploration of the body limits, a demonstration on how this body should be, or would look like, in Aristotle’s words.

In his study on Aristotle’s concept of poiein, Gianni Vattimo interconnected several significant notions and explained Aristotle’s theory about technē and poiein, pointing out that the meaning of these notions is not limited to art, including, in fact, any human activity based on knowledge, praxis and making (poiein). A technē supposes genesis as a process of poiein, technazein (technical effort) and also theorein (knowledge) in order to produce an object which “can be or not”. The active principle is not in the object, it is in the producer. Vattimo emphasizes that this production is a genesis understood as a productive transformation generating a substance. This change, this transformation is not accidental. Because it is an action, a motion, it has a purpose and this purpose cannot be found in the motion itself, but outside it, in the author of the motion, the artist who is the efficient cause of the genesis.

Vattimo also underlines that art and nature are the principles of genesis (Vattimo 1961, 6). This process implies an evolution (becoming) of the substance understood as a unity achieved between form and matter. He also makes a distinction between kata physin and para physin. This distinction refers to the fact that, in the natural genesis [kata physin], the principle is inside the becoming substance while in the artistic genesis, [para physin] the active principle is outside it. In Phys. 254b, 255a, 192b, Aristotle refers to the external mover saying that it causes a movement a) in accordance with the natural genesis, b) the object produced is moved according to its natural tendencies, but following a rhythm imposed from the outside and c) the object is moved contrary to its tendencies.

This para physin implies a movement initiated from the outside, in accordance with nature. However, it is not caused by the nature itself, it has an accidental character. All these aspects could help us reformulate

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6 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1140a 10-14.
7 Aristotle, Physics, 200 b 33.
8 Aristotle, De Caelo, 300a 3-10.
the definition of the work of art. a) It is the result of a process of creativity, a motion of *genesis*; this type of *genesis* is in accordance with the natural one; b) the object is produced according to the natural tendencies of the material involved, instead according to the symbolic meanings imposed by the artist and c) sometimes these natural tendencies of the material are denied. This latter situation refers to the case when garbage, dust, rubbish are used, representing the artistic material in 20th-century art (ex. Kurt Schwitters’ paintings), as well as the cases in which the human body alive is used as artistic material, as in the case of performance art. The accidental character is thus present in the *genesis* of a work of art, as the artistic material can be used in an accidental way, not according to its natural, specific way of being. Therefore, the artistic *mimesis* generates *poioumena* (something made by the human being) as it is an accidental motion not a natural one.

The artistic *mimesis* respects and imitates nature not because it is a reproduction of nature, lent because it is a manner of organizing the diversity according to the form (*eidos*) perceived by the artist, like the nature itself organizes matter in a structural way. As matter of fact, *mimesis* implies a *structure* not a simple copy. In this way, Vattimo wants to demonstrate that *mimesis* as *poiein* in art should not be connected to the reality which is represented (imitated), but related to the purpose for which the work of art is produced. He stresses the purpose of the artistic creation which is the aesthetic satisfaction and the *catharsis*9. This underlines the qualitative dimension of the work of art, the fact that it belongs to the domain of values. It has a meaning as it is not only motion, action, but also praxis. It has a position in the moral order and it is established in accordance with the practical, moral laws.

Aristotle only refers to real, concrete artistic products resulting from the unity between form and matter. The case of performance art is not included in his exploration. However there is a fragment which I have already quoted in reference to *technê*: a *technê* is a process of production, says Aristotle, made in order to produce an object which can

be or not\textsuperscript{10} by taking into consideration not only the material products of \textit{technē}, as also as the spiritual ones. Or, in performance art, there is no concrete material product made by the performer. This art emphasizes the process, the action of \textit{genesis}. In his \textit{Poetics} 1450b 36, Aristotle considers the work of art to be similar to a living organism. The productive movement should be seen as an organic motion, a \textit{genesis}. It is specific to the artistic production \textit{(poiein)}, to the product itself, and to the contemplation, as Vattimo would argue (1961, 99). The process of \textit{genesis} is subordinated to the action \textit{(praxis)} and it is instrumental \textit{(poiein)}. According to Vattimo, it depends on the general purpose of life (5). Aristotle considers \textit{technē} as a \textit{dianoetic} virtue in the \textit{Nic. Ethic} 1140a and a productive habit \textit{(hexis)}. Consequently, art should suppose also a rational activity based on a moral dimension.

Another philosopher who revisited Aristotle’s theory of motion as \textit{genesis} was A.N. Whitehead. In 1929, he published his \textit{Process and Reality}, proposing a new theory, the process philosophy, or the philosophy of motion. Thus he tried to give a better understanding of our existence. Whitehead mentions that there should always be a strong connection between the metaphysics of substance and the metaphysics of the flux (process), as they cannot be separated (Whitehead 1957, 242). Aristotle provided an extraordinary analysis of the concept of \textit{genesis} and protested against the Platonic separation between the static spiritual world and the permanent becoming, the actual world as Whitehead calls it. He considered that the Aristotelian theory of \textit{genesis} was a very solid and a spectacular demonstration, stressing at the same time that the scientific discoveries at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century required a re-evaluation of the philosophical way of thinking. It was no longer useful to think in the traditional way, in terms of substance and static universe. At that time, physicists proved that the functioning of the universe and the matter was more complicated. Einstein’s theory of relativity, the discovery of electromagnetic forces and the theory of corpuscular and wavelike motion of matter are discoveries attesting the role of \textit{processuality}, of becoming, and the multiple ways in which the matter

\textsuperscript{10} Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, 1140a, 10-14.
was transforming in a continuous process. In these terms, becoming is no more considered as a unique *seriality* of a linear type. Whitehead recognizes it as being a “creative advance” (11). However it is not a continuous becoming as each *actual entity* is a stable entity once completely determined.

In the process philosophy or *the philosophy of organism* as Whitehead calls it, the Aristotelian substance is replaced by the *actual entity* or *actual occasion* which is the ultimate, the most recent product of the new. The actual entity is no longer the immutable subject. It is seen as the subject of *this* proper experience. It is also the final term of *concrescence*.

Whitehead distinguishes between *concrescence* and *transition*. The first one represents the process of becoming of what is called *actual entity*. It is the concrescence of many potentialities in an actual unity. The becoming is a transformation of the incoherence of these many possibilities into a coherent unity. Once the actual entity becomes completely coherent and unified, it remains stable, well determined, and atomistic until its proper decay, *perishment* (245).

The second process is called *transition* and it implies “a transfer from a particular existence to another one” (247). If the concrescence implies an internal constitutive process and it is based on the final cause, the transition is founded on the efficient causation represented by the time. The process of concrescence entails two phases: a) the perception of the world seen as a vector, a tendency full of potentialities and b) the supplementation – a moment when the origin is denied being subordinated to the individual experience.

Whitehead also speaks about the *extensive continuum* (76-99). Each actual entity exists in an *extensive continuum* which is the actual world. The philosopher makes a distinction between continuity as potentiality and actuality as atomistic determination. This extensive continuity is a nexus which forms a “corpuscular society”. Each extensive relation within the nexus implies a temporal connection between the past (called “historical route”) and the actual entity. The philosopher is more interested in the contribution of the perceptive activity through which our human being is connected to the extensive continuum, adopting the Empiricist vision of British philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries (J. Locke, D. Hume). This allows him to focus on the connections between
the actual world and the actual entity and its process of genesis. According to Aristotle’s thoughts, poiein was seen as a dianoetic virtue and a habitus. Embracing the empiricist attitude, Whitehead makes room for a more open connection of the entity with the extensive continuum, pointing out to the interference of multiple potentialities within the process of concrescence (genesis). A corpuscular vision brings a more fluent and vague element in this process which is supported by the extensive continuum, the nexus. Whitehead also mentions another important element, the human body, to which Aristotle did not pay much attention in his theory of genesis. On the contrary, Whitehead, as well as Merleau-Ponty, pointed out to the role played by the body in the process of perception.

We have to mention here the contribution of the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who, in his Phenomenology of Perception, underlined the role of the body in the process of perception. Like Whitehead, he said that we perceive the real world through and within our body and this specifically determines our perceptions as we have a vertical position, a specific disposition of our body parts, etc. Merleau-Ponty saw a certain consciousness of our body which he named mute, silent consciousness, known as vague in Whitehead’s works. Both philosophers unveiled the existence of this body awareness and its contribution to the perceptive process. This is what Whitehead calls body witness (98). Being a consciousness, it has its memory, called historical route in Whitehead’s texts.

There is also another side of this characteristic: it is not only the body which participates in the experience, but also the extensive continuum, the world outside us. Each actual entity has to house its actual world as this entity originates and evolves in that universe which is causality for it. Thus, there is a strong relationship between the entity and the extensive continuum. On the one hand, the entity is the product of that universe, and it contains (houses) that universe, on the other hand.

Consequently, the theory of corpuscular motion helps Whitehead explain the societies of living beings. These societies (actual worlds, nexus) are corpuscular. The processes of emission / absorption as well as the photoelectric effect are among the physic phenomena specific for this
corpuscular motion. They become very suggestive examples of the way in which such societies function.

Another concept which seems useful in our study is Whitehead’s *symbolic reference* (195-198). Direct experience does not provide past or future data. It reveals a part of the present duration. It is in fact a cross section, a moment of the actual world. However, any perception (*prehension* in Whitehead’s terminology) is not only immediate; it is also a mediator, as it includes data of the past and future at the same time. Whitehead considers that human perception is based on the symbolic reference which is ensured by the past experiences and the intellectual products (thoughts, ideas). Hence, perception is interpretative as it contains direct (immediate) data, as also as indirect (mediate) information.

The symbolic reference is founded on the *locus* (the object and its environment). It is both directly and indirectly perceived in the immediate perception. In this last case, the perception is so vague that the geometrical relations are not clear, precise; certain regions of the perceived image are almost not distinct. Such an indirect perception generates vague, uncontrollable and multiple deviations of significance. This gives birth to confusions, uncertainties, a certain feeling of other vague presence of the past partially recognized, which cannot be very well determined. This indirect type of perceptions represents the *general sense of our existence* (196). It remains the uncontrolled basis of our character. Our body inherits this fundamental experience which implies also other bodies. This experience is common and archetypal. Due to this experience the sensitive data obtained from more ancient data are projected upon the actual locus without a clear determination of certain regions of the locus. The past is brought into present, without all the distinctions of the past. Hence, they do not become clear distinctions of the present. This mediated mode of perception is the source of symbolic reference. It is specific to the human being. The example mentioned by Whitehead refers to the distinction between immediate and mediate perception which includes also the intellectual activity. In these terms, symbolic reference is always difficult to grasp and vague.

Merleau-Ponty also referenced this indirect, mediate interpretative character of human perception. He called it *culture* as any human
perception has indeed an interpretative side based on the cultural background of the subject.

Coming back to our special interest – performance art – we can now have a better understanding of it. In fact, performance art designates, in accordance with its name, a performance, an action, a process. It is a concrescence of the work of art which, in its final stage, does not become a material actual entity, instead a spiritual, imaginative one. In other words, it does exist, but not at a material level. The process philosophy also says that an actual entity can be any object, particle, action, etc., and this is the main reason for which an artistic performance is included by this theory in the category of actual entities. We have seen that Aristotle himself spoke, long ago, about a technê whose product can be or not (in a material condition). In the traditional way of thinking, there are voices claiming that this activity should not be seen as an art as it does not produce a finished object. Performance art emphasized the process of creativity, stressing the idea that this process is the most important component of the artistic phenomenon, not the product. This is, in our view, the source of its obvious originality.

Another specific aspect consists of the fact that the artist is usually the one who performs the artistic action. His body represents both the artistic and the material instrument. The artist’s body is an object and also a subject. In the traditional art, our eyes were contemplating the work of art, the artistic product, not the process of creation developed by the artist. In performance art, the spectator participates in a more immediate experience. This direct experience is intensified by certain artists who, while performing, stimulate the spectators to participate directly. However, through the spontaneous dialogue between artist and spectator, the process of creativity suffers changes in a hazardous, accidental manner. This aspect raises a lot of questions from an aesthetic perspective: is the artist the only author of that action or are there more authors? Does the artistic creation belong to a single person or it is created by a multitude of authors? Which is the identity of such artistic creation?

If we take into account the extensive continuum of the process philosophy, in the case of a performance, its ingestion into the artistic universe is even more profound considering the contribution of certain spectators. Keeping in mind this contribution, the symbolic reference
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intensifies, multiplies, as each spectator brings his own imagination and cultural background. I would like to give an example of such extension of the continuum or nexus of the actual world and also of the symbolic reference: John Cage’s work “4 minutes and 33 seconds”. We know that Cage considered that any sound can be a musical element. According to this work, the silence and the various sounds within the concert hall such as coughing, noises etc., replaced the musically elaborated sounds. As a result, the continuum of the immediate perception was enabled to become part of the work of art. And the silence, the absence of a clear, systematic music which would generate a quite determinate symbolic reference, made the manifestation of a much wider symbolic reference possible, as each spectator could imagine his own music in accordance with his level of musical culture and his emotional state at that precise moment.

It is obvious that Aristotle could not have imagined such ways of understanding art. However, his theories of motion (genesis) and those of mimesis and poiesis opened the door to new perspectives, such as the process philosophy which is more adapted, in my opinion, to the way of thinking art during the 20th century.

REFERENCES


