

## Interart Aesthetics

Today, we are faced with a fundamentally different situation than previous generations with respect to the relationship between the arts or that between art and non-art. This becomes particularly apparent when we try to overcome the boundaries between the established disciplines of art studies and fruitfully apply the accumulated knowledge and insights of each art form to the other arts and art studies. Yet, such attempts continue a long and honorable tradition that goes back to antiquity. Simonides of Ceos described painting as “silent poetry” and poetry as “vocal painting,” which Plutarch, in turn, took up in his *Moralia*. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discussed the multiplicity of art forms that come together in the performance of a tragedy. Thus, these thinkers laid the foundation for comparative art studies or also interart aesthetics, which we today seek to formulate and establish as a new theory. They engendered the two models which, though obsolete today, nonetheless significantly influenced and determined the discussion on the relationship between the arts.

The first model compares the individual art forms with regard to their specific achievements and effects and explores the possibilities and limitations of transferring the potential of one art form to another and, thus, transcending the boundaries between the arts. This model gained wide-spread acceptance and prominence particularly during eighteenth century. Perrault, Du Bos, Batteux, Harris, Hogarth, and Diderot all adopted and developed it further.<sup>1</sup> Lessing's *Laocoon* proceeds from the state of the discussion that they achieved and significantly expands it within the framework of the possibilities of a normative aesthetic.

The second model focuses on the interaction and interplay between the various arts. It bore particular significance for the discussion of opera, which repeatedly adapted and developed it further. Goethe's and Richard Wagner's interpretations of this model are considered the most incisive. In his essay published in 1798 entitled “On Truth and

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Karlheinz Stierle, “Das bequeme Verhältnis. Lessings Laocoon und die Entdeckung des ästhetischen Mediums,” in: Gunter Gebauer (ed.), *Das Laocoon-Projekt. Pläne einer semiotischen Ästhetik*, Stuttgart 1984, pp. 23-58.

Probability in Works of Art,” Goethe virtually apostrophizes opera performances as the ideal of autonomous artworks. He argues that in an opera performance everything--i.e. also the different art forms involved--gels in a way that “it constitutes a little world of its own, in which everything follows certain laws, which is judged in terms of its own laws, and must be experienced according to its own characteristics.”<sup>2</sup> Wagner elaborated on this idea and coined the term total artwork for this model, thus securing for it a long history of effect that ultimately continues to this day.

In the following, Lessing’s and Wagner’s interart aesthetics are to be examined with a view to identifying what aspects of the two models, which they significantly advanced, can be fruitfully applied to future interart aesthetics. In doing so, we must take into account today’s situation of permanent dissolution and transgression between the arts as well as the increasing blurring of boundaries between art and non-art. The point here, of course, is not to present a comprehensive interpretation of *Laocoon* or to enter into a detailed discussion of all the implications of the total artwork concept. Rather, I wish to flag certain points of departure that can and should be developed by today’s interart aesthetics.

Lessing’s famous comparison of painting and poetry reads as follows:

If it be true that painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry,--the one using forms and colors in space, the other articulate sounds in time,-- and if signs must unquestionably stand in convenient relation with the thing signified, then signs arranged side by side can represent only objects existing side by side, or whose parts so exist, while consecutive signs can express only objects which succeed each other, in time.<sup>3</sup>

The first step Lessing undertakes towards distinguishing painting and poetry here refers to the specific materiality of the arts: forms and colors in painting and articulated sounds in poetry. It is noteworthy that Lessing does not define poetry as a written text, also composed of “forms,” but as a form that is recited and performed, its material constituted by the sounds articulated by a voice. Lessing draws no particular

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<sup>2</sup> J.W. von Goethe, Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche. E. Beutler (ed.), Zurich 1948, Vol. 13, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon. An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, transl. E. C. Beasley, Hamlin Press 2008, p. 91.

conclusions from this difference in materiality as such but only with regard to their relationship to space and time: as forms and colors in space in painting and articulated sounds in time in poetry. Thus, Lessing defines painting and poetry as two fundamentally different media. One uses signs presented to the eye through a simultaneous spatial arrangement, while the other works with transitory signs that are conveyed to the ear as a temporal sequence.

Lessing does indeed draw far-reaching conclusions from this difference concerning the materiality and mediality of these two art forms, which, of course, he would have had to define very differently had he proceeded from poetry as a written, fixed text. For one, his conclusions concern the objects to be represented by both art forms, i.e. their specific semioticity, and, secondly, the perception and aesthetic experience that they enable--their aestheticity. Semioticity and aestheticity are not only closely connected; they are also directly linked to the particular material and medial conditions set by the two art forms.

In the above-quoted passage, Lessing speaks of a “convenient relation” that the signs must establish with the signified and concludes in a way that allows him to clearly distinguish the effect of painting and poetry, stating that “signs arranged side by side can represent only objects existing side by side, or whose parts so exist,” and “consecutive signs can express only objects which succeed each other, in time.” He then continues as follows:

Objects which exist side by side, or whose parts so exist, are called bodies.

Consequently bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting.

Objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other in time, are actions. Consequently actions are the peculiar subjects of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Lessing concedes the possibility that poetry, too, can represent bodies, as painting can depict actions. However, he insists that poetry can merely suggest bodies and only through actions, while painting can only evoke actions through the body. Hence, the particular semioticity of these two art forms is in this sense characterized by a certain

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

analogy between the materiality of the signs used (as well as the medial conditions of their conveyance) and the things signified by them.

It might seem tempting to apply Lessing's concept of a "convenient relation" to an aesthetic of imitation. This is so because imitating bodies and actions is perhaps easiest achieved by using signs that share certain material and medial conditions with them-- that is, by using signs that exist together in space to depict bodies, and by using signs that follow one another in time to represent actions. This, however, would largely render the concept of the convenient relation irrelevant for today's interart aesthetics.

Yet, Lessing subordinates the aesthetic of imitation to the goals of an aesthetic of effect, the first only serving to further the goals of the second. The aesthetic of imitation becomes relevant for Lessing only when the creation of the illusion of reality constitutes the precondition for the intended effect and when the aesthetic of imitation reflects on that very possibility. However, the concept of the convenient relation does not refer to it but to the effect that the artwork is meant to have on the recipient, that is to say to the specific aesthetic experience that it enables.<sup>5</sup>

For one, the connection between the particular medial conditions of the two art forms to the different senses--the eye and the ear--is of particular importance for this experience. Each establishes different conditions for perception. The eye aims to perceive a thing as a whole:

First we observe its separate parts, then the union of these parts, and finally the whole. Our senses perform these various operations with such amazing rapidity as to make them seem but one. This rapidity is absolutely essential to our obtaining an idea of the whole, which is nothing more than the result of the conception of the parts and of their connection with each other.<sup>6</sup>

A whole other set of conditions applies to hearing. This becomes amply clear when the poet seeks to laboriously describe what the eye perceives within a fraction of a second:

The ear, however, loses the details it has heard, unless memory retain them. And if they be so retained, what pains and effort it costs to recall their impressions in

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Stierle 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laocoon. *An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, transl. E. C. Beasley, Hamlin Press 2008, p. 102.

the proper order and with even the moderate degree of rapidity necessary to the obtaining of a tolerable idea of the whole.<sup>7</sup>

The “convenient relation” of signs to the signified thus does not primarily refer to the problem of imitation--or the distinction between natural and arbitrary signs that Lessing attributes to painting and poetry respectively--but to the specific medial conditions of both these art forms, which must at the same time be seen as particular perceptual conditions.

Secondly, aesthetic experience is determined by those possibilities that open the manner of representation to the imagination. Lessing elaborates on this idea through his explanation of the concept of the fruitful moment:

Since the artist can use but a single moment of ever-changing nature, and the painter must further confine his study of this one moment to a single point of view, while their works are made not simply to be looked at, but to be contemplated long and often, evidently the most fruitful moment and the most fruitful aspect of that moment must be chosen. Now that only is fruitful which allows free play to the imagination. The more we see the more we must be able to imagine; and the more we imagine, the more we must think we see.<sup>8</sup>

This means that the convenient relation that signs establish with the things signified also manifests itself in that the represented--through the manner of its representation--is able to focus the recipient’s attention on that one moment, thus setting in motion their imagination.

It is evident from a comment in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, published shortly thereafter, that Lessing locates the particular quality and significance of aesthetic experience not just in one of the two art forms--even if painting serves as his example to elaborate on the concept of the fruitful moment--but in art per se. Here he contrasts nature and art in the following manner:

In nature, everything is interconnected; everything is interwoven, everything is changeable, mutates from one into another. But beyond this infinite multiplicity it is just a spectacle for the unlimited mind. For the limited mind to enjoy it to the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 16.

same degree, they must be able to set the boundaries that nature lacks; they must be able to discard and let the mind steer their attention. [...]

Art is meant to transcend this process of discarding in the realm of the beautiful, to facilitate the focusing of our attention. In nature, everything that in our thoughts we discard with respect to an object or a chain of objects either in time or space, art truly discards, allowing us to perceive this object or chain of objects solely through the emotion that it is meant to trigger in us.<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, aesthetic experience always, i.e. in all the arts, proceeds from focusing the attention on one object, one moment.

Disregarding the normative conditions and conclusions in *Laocoon* and focusing instead on its methodical approach, it is striking that Lessing does not compare the two art forms of interest to him with respect to individual traits as implied by the “ut pictura poiesis” thesis, which he in fact seeks to refute. Instead, he examines each mutual conditional relationship between materiality, mediality, semioticity, and aestheticity in both art forms. Here it is of particular interest to him how materiality, mediality, and semioticity interact to achieve an aesthetic effect that enables aesthetic experience.

Lessing has a very clear idea of the nature of this aesthetic experience, on the basis of and with a view to which he formulates his normative conclusions and judgments of both art forms. If we ignore these insights, we find that *Laocoon* follows an approach that could in some respects also serve as model for today’s interart aesthetics. Two aspects in particular make Lessing’s method interesting and promising to me. For one, I am referring to his focus on the aesthetic experience enabled by the arts. Proceeding from the assumption that aesthetic experience is not an invention of the eighteenth century, made in the course of the proclamation of the autonomy of art, but an anthropological fact that is articulated and realized differently according to cultural and historical conditions--and is not necessarily realized only in and through art--then aesthetic experience emerges as a fundamental category for every interart aesthetic. For aesthetic experience offers the point of reference which makes comparing different art forms interesting and relevant to begin with. Perhaps we will discover that not only historical and cultural conditions enable various articulations and

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<sup>9</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Stuttgart 1981, No. 70, p. 361.

realizations of aesthetic experience, but also the different art forms and their diverse historical and cultural manifestations. In my opinion, such investigations should be of pivotal importance to any kind of interart aesthetic.

The second aspect arises from the assumption that aesthetic experience depends on each mutual conditional relationship between materiality, mediality, and semioticity in the arts. That is to say, whenever a certain aesthetic experience enabled by an art form is to be analyzed and defined, its particular materiality, mediality, and semioticity, as well as their interrelationships, must be examined. Such an approach is not only relevant in terms of the principal diversity of the arts but also with regard to the transgression--indeed blurring--of boundaries, since this presupposes the prior establishment of boundaries to be subsequently transgressed or blurred. Moreover, we must ask in what respect boundaries are transgressed--with regard to the materiality, mediality, semioticity, and aestheticity of the art forms concerned.

In the opinion of many of its spectators, Einar Schleef crossed the boundaries between theatre and the visual arts in his production of Wilde's *Salome* (Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus 1997). As the curtain rose, the audience was presented with a *tableau vivant*. Gray-blue light flooded the stage; eighteen figures dressed in gray or black stood completely motionless in picturesque compositions and configurations. The image shown to the spectators was very beautiful, and they welcomed it with several appreciative "Ahs!" and "Ohs!" Of course, a *tableau vivant* in a theatre performance is not necessarily a new invention. Especially during the eighteenth century it became customary to mark a critical point in the performance--a fruitful moment--with a *tableau vivant* that dissolved after a brief period. Similarly, the beginning and end of a performance was frequently highlighted in this manner throughout the history of theatre. Playing with the boundaries between the art of acting as "transitory painting,"<sup>10</sup> as Lessing defined it, and painting as representation of a scene captured at the instant of a fruitful moment, held in high esteem by Diderot, thus forms a part of the traditional repertoire of staging devices. However, what made Schleef's use of a *tableau vivant* in his production so provocative was its extensive duration. It lasted a full ten minutes. After that, the curtain fell, indicating the intermission.

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<sup>10</sup> Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, No. 5, p. 37.

Already after the first minute the audience became irritated. The audience was invited to behold the *tableau vivant* as it would a painting in a gallery or museum. Yet, the spectators were only too aware of the different medial conditions; only a small number of them were willing to apply the medial conditions of painting to the theatre performance. Some applauded, whistled, shouted “bravo” and “da capo,” thus clearly referring to the particular medial conditions of the theatre as established by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. Others engaged with these conditions by explicitly taking on the roles of actors: they made witty comments and attracted the attention of the other spectators. Yet another group chided the commenting spectators for disturbing their peace of mind while contemplating the *tableau vivant*. Whatever their reactions, the sculpture-like actors onstage observed the audience, which tried very hard, but in vain, to elicit even the slightest smile, cough, or movement from the actors. Even though the actors behaved like statues, the spectators nonetheless perceived them as actors with whom they wanted to interact. The actors thus appeared as seemingly passive spectators, while the spectators took on the roles of active, partly quarreling, actors who vainly tried to move the “spectators” on stage into action.

The theatre’s specific medial conditions came into even sharper view due to Schleeff’s transgression of the boundaries between theatre and visual art; indeed, it reflected on the specific mediality of each of the two art forms (and, of course, on the fraught subject of the audience’s passivity and activity argued with great vehemence throughout the twentieth century). Schleeff’s production clearly referred to Lessing’s deliberations in *Laocoon* and developed them in a very specific manner. Thus, his production automatically referenced a tradition that had been founded by the historical avant-garde. In the twentieth century, artists, in particular, reflected on the boundaries and differences between the arts by transgressing them; the act of transgression served as an act of artistic self-reflection. Artistic practice must therefore serve as a starting point for art studies’ endeavor today to develop interart aesthetics.

At first glance, Wagner’s concept of the total artwork, which he most notably developed in his two early theoretical works, *The Artwork of the Future* (1849) and *Opera and Drama* (1850/51), seems to stand in direct antithesis to *Laocoon*. While Lessing sought to distinguish the different art forms on the basis of their specific

material and medial conditions resulting from their particular characteristics, Wagner aspired to the “great total artwork,” which “must gather up each branch of art to use it as a mean, and in some sense to undo it for the common aim of all, for the unconditioned, absolute portrayal of perfected human nature.”<sup>11</sup>

The total artwork is to unite the different art forms in such a manner that they can no longer be distinguished and identified individually. As such, the total artwork would obliterate the concept of individual art forms. This means that the “combination of all the arts” into the total artwork must follow specific principles and conditions. It by no means denotes a situation whereby “for example, [...] in a picture-gallery and amidst a row of statues a romance of Goethe’s should be [*sic*] read aloud while a symphony of Beethoven’s was being played.”<sup>12</sup> Wagner polemicizes not only against the utter incoherence of merely presenting different art forms at the same time and place--in this case, visual art, poetry, and music--but also against the mid-nineteenth century theatrical practice to mindlessly involve other art forms in its production. Wagner criticizes Grand Opera, the most popular form of opera in his time, for being no more than a mere aggregation of the arts.

Against this notion, Wagner proclaimed the union of all the arts as their perfect fusion and amalgamation with far-reaching effects for the description and theoretical analysis of the total artwork. Given that in it the individual art forms are no longer identifiable as such, they can also not be defined as the elements or entities that constitute the total artwork. Other elements must thus be identified that either form the basis of the individual art forms or that arise out of this fusion of the arts.

Accordingly, Wagner demands that the total artwork should consist “both in content and in form [...] of a chain of such organic members,”

conditioning, supplementing and supporting one another: exactly as the organic members of the human body,—which then alone is a complete and living body, when it consists of all the members whose mutual conditionings and

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future*, transl. William Ashton Ellis, 1849. Online. Available HTTP: <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagartfut.htm> (accessed 27 July 2009). See also Richard Wagner's *Gesammelte Schriften*, Julius Kapp (ed.), 10 Volumes, Leipzig 1914, Vol. 3, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, transl. William Ashton Ellis, 1852. Online. Available HTTP: <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0063.htm> (accessed 27 July 2009). See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 4, p. 3.

supplementings make up its whole; when none are lacking to it; but, also, when none are too many.<sup>13</sup>

While the individual arts are involved in constituting these “organic members,” they are no longer identifiable as such. Rather, they each serve a particular function for the “organic member” as a whole. As such, the “the first thing to which the Orchestra has to devote its own peculiar faculty of expression, is the Action’s dramatic gesture.” Wagner criticizes the singer who “does not know that he is the representative of a definite dramatic Personality, primarily expressed by Speech” and thus is “certainly in no position to convey to the eye the gestures requisite for an understanding of the Action,”<sup>14</sup> and demands the opposite approach. Thus, he first refers to the smaller elements that constitute the individual art forms, such as melody, gesture, or verbal expression. These elements then come together to constitute “organic members” as complex entities. “Action,” for example, represents one such “organic member,” employed both by the orchestra and the singer, as does the “dramatic Personality” that is constituted with the help of the orchestra, language, and gesture. While the individual art forms co-constitute the creation of such complex categories as action and figure, they no longer exist in them as such.

This becomes even clearer when we acknowledge that the participating art forms influence and consequently change each other within these “organic members.” The combination of language, music, and gesture leads to the semanticization of the latter two, while language experiences the opposite. Wagner accordingly judged the grand scene between Alberich and Hagen as follows: “It will seem as if two peculiar animals are speaking to one another, nobody understands anything, and everything is interesting.”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, such mutual transformations, which at the same time transform the individual art forms into a total artwork, are based on the assumption that the participating art forms are in fact diverse. To determine their differences, Wagner, who

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<sup>13</sup> Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, transl. William Ashton Ellis, 1852. Online. Available HTTP: <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0063.htm> (accessed 27 July 2009). See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 4, p. 196.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 4, pp. 217.

<sup>15</sup> Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher, 1869-1883*, Volumes I and II, Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (ed.), Munich, 1976/77, p. 770.

focuses in particular on music, dance, and poetry, takes a significantly different route than Lessing. Instead of exploring their particular material and medial conditions, he applies them to anthropological categories. Thus, he attributes dance to the “corporeal man,” music to the “emotional man,” and poetry to the “intellectual man.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, dance gives expression to and addresses the “corporeal man,” music the “emotional man,” and poetry the “intellectual man.” The three art forms differ in that they each give expression to a different aspect of being human and address a different human faculty. Their union in the total artwork would thus correspond to the union of the corporeal, the emotional, and the intellectual man. The total artwork could give expression to the “complete” man and, on the level of reception, the spectator in turn could experience himself as “complete” man.

As such, the union of the arts into the total artwork aims to afford the spectator an aesthetic experience that Wagner--in obvious allusion to Schiller--defines as the self-experience of the subject as a “complete” man. As Lessing does in his *Laocoon*, albeit proceeding from very different assumptions and using different means, Wagner in his theory of the total artwork examines the conditions under which art sparks an aesthetic experience in the recipient. From Wagner’s perspective, Grand Opera is incapable of achieving the same, for what he judges the aggregation of the arts only serves to maximize the effect. According to Wagner, the union of the arts in the total artwork, on the other hand, can afford the spectators aesthetic experiences precisely because of its transformation of the individual art forms.

Among the transformations that take place, Wagner seems to place particular emphasis on the transformation determining that in the total artwork cognition does not occur on the level of the intellect but on that of emotion. The desemanticization of language in the “organic members” invalidates the dominance of the intellect. This, in turn, corresponds to the increased semanticization of music achieved by the orchestra “attach[ing] itself [...] intimately [...] to the gesture.”<sup>17</sup> This semanticization allows it to

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<sup>16</sup> Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future*, transl. William Ashton Ellis, 1849. Online. Available HTTP: <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagartfut.htm> (accessed 27 July 2009). See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 3, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, transl. William Ashton Ellis, 1852. Online. Available HTTP: <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0063.htm> (accessed 27 July 2009). See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 4, p. 186.

“speak” the “unspeakable.” Given its “faculty of uttering the unspeakable,”<sup>18</sup> the orchestra relies more heavily on gesture than on the spoken word. That is to say, the verbalization or semanticization of music is not to be seen as a musical repetition of an articulation that might as well have been expressed through language, but as the musical formulation of an expression that language would have been unable to convey. The guiding principle here falls to the function of “Memory” and “Foreboding,”<sup>19</sup> which is sensually depicted in the theatre and at the same time released in the spectator via the orchestra.

Whatever the total artwork articulates thus cannot be perceived and grasped by the intellect: “Art ceases, strictly speaking, to be Art from the moment it presents itself as Art to our reflecting consciousness.”<sup>20</sup> The expressions of musical drama can only be understood emotionally: “In the Drama, we must become knowers”--but knowers like Brunnhilde in *Twilight of the Gods* or Parsifal in the Third Act: “through the Feeling” and not through the “accommodations of the Understanding.” “In presence of the Dramatic Artwork, nothing should remain for the combining Intellect to search for. Everything in it must come to an issue sufficient to set our Feeling at rest thereon [...]” The “directly receptive organs” are the “senses.” The dramatic action thus must be transmitted entirely through sensual “comprehension.”<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Wagner wrote in *Music of the Future (Zukunftsmusik)* that we must “consider ideal that art form which can be understood entirely without reflection.”<sup>22</sup> For him, only the total artwork qualifies as such an ideal, in which the diverse arts unite in a way that obliterates them as separate art forms and transforms their individual characteristics.

In order to view Wagner’s theory of the total artwork within the parameters of an interart aesthetic that can be fruitfully applied to today’s discussion, we must return to the answers provided by Wagner and reformulate them as open questions. The

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 4, p. 173.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 4, p. 186. Wagner uses the word “Ahnung” to describe this function. Ellis’ choice of “foreboding” implies a somewhat ominous premonition, which is absent in the German. Wagner simply means that the spectator experiences an as yet unarticulated emotion.

<sup>20</sup> Wagner, *Actors and Singers*, transl. William Ashton Ellis, Bison Books, Winnipeg, CA, 1995, p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, transl. William Ashton Ellis, 1852. Online. Available HTTP:

<http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0063.htm> (accessed 27 July 2009). See also Wagner 1914, Vol. 4, pp. 78.

<sup>22</sup> Wagner 1914, Vol. 7, p. 130.

reference to aesthetic experience seems to be of particular importance here. Hence, we must examine what possibilities for aesthetic experience arise from the fact that several art forms come together; how these possibilities change depending on what art forms converge to create such hybrid formations and how they converge: whether they simply appear side by side without any apparent coherence, or whether they perceptibly refer to each other, whether they mutually complement and reinforce each other, or even fuse into one.

The second aspect I consider worthy of discussion in this context derives from Wagner's claim that the individual characteristics of the different art forms involved are transformed in the total artwork. This gives rise to the question of how the convergence of different art forms in all their variations affects each one. It is to be investigated how the materiality, mediality, semioticity, and aestheticity of the art forms involved are affected by each hybrid formation--and how this, in turn, affects the aesthetic experience it enables.

Such experiments have already been conducted--solely by artists, however. In his *Untitled Event*, initiated by John Cage in 1952 at Black Mountain College, he probed the effects on different art forms when they converged at random and the possibilities for aesthetic experience arising from this situation for the spectators. Apart from Cage, the pianist David Tudor, the composer Jay Watt, the painter Robert Rauschenberg, the dancer Merce Cunningham, and the poets Charles Olson and Mary Caroline Richards participated in the event. The common preparations were minimal: each participant was given a score of sorts with time brackets. These determined the durations of the actions, breaks, and silences, and had to be filled out by each participant individually. This ensured that there was no causal relationship between the different actions, i.e. that "anything that happened after that happened in the observer himself."<sup>23</sup> This means that the *Untitled Event* roughly conformed to Wagner's nightmare vision of reading Goethe in a picture-gallery accompanied by a Beethoven symphony.

The event took place in the college canteen. The audience consisted of the remaining participants of the summer school, employees of the college, their friends, as

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<sup>23</sup> John Cage, quoted in Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art. From Futurism to the Present*, New York 1988, p. 126.

well as the rural population from the surrounding areas. The spectators' seats were arranged in four triangles, one to each side of its four walls, pointing towards the center of the room without touching each other. This left a large, empty space in the middle, although only few activities actually took place there. Instead, the empty space served as a kind of passageway. Broad aisles between the triangles stretched across the entire space like two invisible diagonals crossing each other at the center. On each chair stood a white cup. The spectators were left in the dark about their possible uses; some spectators used them as ashtrays. The ceiling was decorated with Robert Rauschenberg's "white paintings."

Cage, dressed in a black suit and tie, stood atop a stepladder and read out a text on the relationship between music and Zen Buddhism and excerpts from Meister Eckhart's writings. After that, he performed a "composition with a radio." At the same time, Rauschenberg played old records on a wind-up gramophone with a dog sitting beside it. David Tudor played a "prepared piano." Later he began pouring water from one bucket into another while Olsen and Richards recited their own poems, first standing amidst the audience and then atop a ladder leaning against one of the room's narrow side walls. Cunningham danced together with other dancers through the passage-ways and in between the spectators, chased by the dog, which by that stage had gone completely berserk. Rauschenberg projected abstract slides and film onto the ceiling and along one of the long sides of the room. The slides had been created by rubbing colored gelatin between two glass plates, while the film first showed the college cook and then the setting sun as these images gradually moved across the ceiling and onto the wall. In another corner, the composer Jay Watt played different, partly exotic, musical instruments. The performance ended with four boys dressed in white pouring coffee into the cups – regardless of whether these had been used as ashtrays or not.

Without a doubt, the convergence of these different art forms in this experiment affected their mediality and semioticity. As such, visual artworks, such as the "white paintings" and the slides, and literary works, such as the Meister Eckhart's writings and Olsen's and Richards' poetry, were subjected to the medial conditions of performance generally valid for music and dance. They fundamentally co-constituted the materiality of the performance and were infused by its fleeting and transitory nature. The

audience's attention was diverted from its artifactual and textual nature and directed towards the peculiarity of the performative situation: the slides were being presented in quick succession and the texts were being recited. Instead of contemplating the images at length, the spectators had to keep track of the colors and forms flitting across the ceiling and wall. Instead of immersing oneself in a text while reading, browsing back and forth through the pages, the spectators listened to the fleeting sounds articulated by the voices of Cage, Olsen, and Richards. In this sense, the materiality of the two art forms was also affected by their convergence with others.

Unlike its contemporary theatre, this performance did not employ the different art forms to create plot or figures interacting with each other. Rather, its dramaturgy consisted in letting these art forms collide at random. Consequently, the conditions for the audience's perception and process of constituting meaning fundamentally differed not only from works produced by these individual art forms but also from theatre performances that employed different art forms. Cage's event lacked the dramaturgical and staging devices that could have guided perception and created a meaningful correlation between the participants' actions and the space. The spectators, then, were left on their own to choose from the simultaneous perceptual possibilities or allow their eyes to rove across the scene randomly, creating contexts guided by their fantasies, memories, or associations. This, in turn, affected the aestheticity of the performance. Since every spectator created their own performance, the aesthetic experience enabled by it was a very particular one.

Cage's experiment should be mirrored by art studies in accordance with its specific interests and following its own--or better still, newly developed--methods. As we have seen, we cannot take recourse to a particular model in this respect. Yet, both models discussed here offer interesting points of departure: firstly and most importantly, to examine the aesthetic experience enabled by the individual art forms and their convergence into the most diverse of hybrid formations; and, secondly, to explore their materiality, mediality, semioticity, and aestheticity by taking into account the emerging transformations, such as material, medial, or code changes.

Elsewhere I suggested to proceed from the performance concept in developing such an interart aesthetic when hybrid formations are of key interest. However, it

remains to be determined to what extent it can be applied to hybrid formations of artifactual and textual nature. Rather than settling on just a single concept, it makes more sense to assess a whole range of concepts with respect to their applicability to different types of hybrid formations. I chose the performance concept because it seems appropriate to many interart phenomena since the 1960s and at the same time opens up the possibility to include performances such as festivals, ceremonies, rituals, etc., which, while not considered art, do indeed fulfill an aesthetic function. These performances can then be analyzed in the context of an interart aesthetic and with regard to the specific experiences they enable. Moreover, it can be probed to what extent it makes sense to apply the concept of aesthetic experience to these performances. The questions raised here place us on the edge of a wide-open field.