

Sorgner, L.S. (2022). *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*. Schwabe Verlag.

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While scholarship on posthumanism is continuing to become increasingly transdisciplinary, there remain subjects which have as yet received limited attention by critics through a posthumanist lens. One of Stefan Sorgner's latest volumes, titled *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*, responds to this gap by offering an overview of a selection of aesthetics issues testifying to the rise of new tensions, challenges, and phenomena in contemporary art through an array of manifestations, from bio-sculptures to AI-generated music.

Sorgner has gained prominence as a leading scholar in transhumanism, especially in reference to his discussion on 'weak transhumanism', echoing Gianni Vattimo's studies on 'weak ontology'. Along similar lines, in *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*, Sorgner develops an ethical inquiry on current technological development as it pertains to recently made artworks, which he scrutinizes by combining three main perspectives developed in posthumanist studies (and already delineated in his previous publications), namely critical posthumanism, metahumanism and, transhumanism. In this sense, the audiences' expectations to retrace a specific transhumanist scope in the volume – based on Sorgner's grounded positioning in the field – leave space to a wider, diversified, and transdisciplinary posthumanist stance.

Central to this book is the concept of the 'twist,' which Sorgner establishes as a navigational tool for negotiating rooted dichotomies and dualisms in traditional approaches to aesthetics. As the philosopher highlights, the notion of 'twist' epitomizes the posthumanist predicament since it illustrates "two categorically separate substances [that] get woven together" (36). Twisting (from German *Verwindung*), according to Sorgner, does not simply provide a non-dualistic approach with the intent to move 'beyond' dualisms – a perspective which, in fact, runs the risk of prolonging the dialectical *a priori*; rather, it allows for rearranging the foundational essentialism of Humanism and related biases, such as speciesism, anthropocentrism, and heteronormativity.

The eight chapters of the book present a useful systematization of Sorgner's argument while disambiguating the notion of (posthuman) art mentioned in the title. Specifically, Chapter 1 ("Posthuman Aesthetic Intimacies") and Chapter 2 ("Preface") provide readers with a solid introductory framework by raising the main topics of the volume. These issues include a) the possibility of reframing preconceptions and clichés when evaluating a work of art, starting from the traditional focus on the "intense moments of special intimacies" (12) arising when one relates to, for instance, a painting or a sculpture, and b) highlighting the dualistic limitations of the twentieth century philosophy of art. In this regard, criticism is specifically addressed to the dualistic aesthetic

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framework offered by the Frankfurt School avant-garde aesthetics, considering Sorgner's claim for possible alternative philosophies of art which more effectively engage with the growing human-technology enmeshment in current times.

Chapter 3, "Philosophy of Posthuman Artworks," illustrates several contemporary artworks from different fields – such as bio-art and cyberart – which are considered representative of the 'aesthetic of twisting' due to their capacity to rediscuss categorical dualistic ontologies of Platonic derivation. In this sense, Sorgner mentions, for instance, Eduardo Kac's fluorescent rabbit "Alba", or "Edunia," the genetically engineered flower that is a hybrid of Kac's DNA and a petunia: these examples signal a (posthuman) paradigm shift occurring in the history of art since, in them, "the traditional subject-object structure of human interaction gets blurred both by challenging the traditional understanding of responsibility for one's act, as well as by raising the issue of where the interaction takes place." (34).

Chapter 4 elaborates this argument in the context of religious discourse by addressing the following research question: is the posthuman paradigm shift the end of monotheistic religions? By intertwining references to the aesthetic of twisting, the notion of 'weak ontology,' and Vattimo's Catholic philosophy, Sorgner argues that monotheistic religions after the posthuman paradigm shift are still plausible. In fact, as he explains, refiguring traditional Judeo-Christian humanist binaries, dogmas, and ideas – such as the fact that human beings bear the "divine spark and therefore are God-like creatures" (44) – fosters the possibility of a "liberal ethics of autonomy" which is "based on the virtue of love, and the moral demand to reduce violence directly being done to others." (59). Following this and other observations which Sorgner's recalls from Vattimo's philosophy – e.g. *kenosis* – the plausibility of a similar religious figuration becomes further proof of how the aesthetic of twisting allows new understandings of well-established culture domains, in and out contemporary art, without necessarily overcoming, or completely dismissing, their core dualism.

Along this line, Chapter 5 offers a selection of ten aesthetic concepts which, according to Sorgner, align with his posthumanist critical 'twisting.' Each subchapter is dedicated to one of these notions (e.g., Aesthetics of Monsters, A. of Hybridity, A. of the Amorphous) and to a selection of examples epitomizing them, which are taken from the works of renowned contemporary artists (including, respectively, Patricia Piccinini, Eduardo Kac, and Jamie del Val). In addition, the selected forms of aesthetics are associated with one of the three main strands of posthumanism discussed in the book – critical posthumanism, meta-humanism, and transhumanism. For what concerns the latter, for instance, Sorgner calls into account the "Aesthetics of Superheroines and Superheroes" – well represented by Jeff Koons' "Hulk Elvis" – for its capacity to underline the limits of the Frankfurt School's aesthetical vision: beyond reproposing the well-established posthuman Promethean theme of the "humans creating other humans" (83), the separation between the *work of art* and the *realm of popular art*, which Adorno's aesthetics implies, is surpassed in Koons' Marvel comics-inspired work.

In Chapter 6 Sorgner focuses on contemporary music and retraces the aesthetic of twisting in multiple, diversified examples, including Sven Helbig's music dramas, the musical works by Philip Glass, and Björk technologically innovative music productions. In the chapter, AI-generated music is also scrutinized as further evidence of how present-day technological advancement has significant effects on both the way artworks are created and on how they can be approached critically, beyond traditional aesthetic categories unable to embrace the complexity of the contemporary artistic landscape. This argument is further elaborated in Chapter 7, which highlights the limitations of the



historical notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in a posthumanist perspective, by proposing an alternative to it along the idea of a possible (posthuman) Non-Totalitarian Total Work. While Wager's musical dramas were notoriously built upon a kind of dogmatism which was "associated with vehement violence, namely violence against the diversity of human physiology, against which a totalitarian structured culture is taking action" (108), contemporary music dramas, such as those composed by Sven Helbig, exhibit an alternative precondition. In "Vom Lärm der Welt", for instance, Helbig explicitly refers to the dangers related to embracing a utopia; moreover, he makes evident that the topic elaborated in the music drama is not treated for exclusively entertainment purposes nor in a paternalistic way: contrarily, by realizing a work of art which is "a suggestion, an option, or an offer, but not the attempt at an ultimate solution or answer" (108) Helbig's composed a work which aligns with the dynamics of 'weak ontology' and the aesthetic of twisting.

This evaluation resurfaces in Sorgner's final discussion on the notion of 'leisure,' stretching across Chapters 7 and 8. By stressing the differences between *otium* and leisure – the first primarily conceived as a break from an occupation, but still functional to productivity; the second referring to activities of self-cultivation – Sorgner observes how, today, more and more people conduct the kind of lifestyle aiming at ensuring them a certain amount of time free from their working activities, in which one can think and reflect. This condition differs from what occurred in the past centuries, when a similar opportunity was the sole privilege of aristocrats. Hence, leisure, as Sorgner explains, is of utmost importance in this day and age since it allows people to mature a more critical perspective on culture aligned with the aesthetics of twisting, thus exploring the tensions of established cultural binaries: this operation not only enhances the posthuman paradigm shift, but also favors the spread of its related ethical implications – e.g. non-exclusion, non-totalitarianism, and non-dualism. In Sorgner's view, this effect favors the affirmation of social, ethical, political and philosophical dimensions in today's world while demonstrating that "[w]e are not in opposition or outside of the world [but that] we are contingent nodal points in a multifaceted construction of relational complexes." (132).

While this argument runs across the book – thus determining *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* an undoubtedly cohesive work – Sorgner's focus across diverse topics, disciplines and artistic fields may at times provide a challenging dialogue on aggregate, especially for neophytes in fields adjacent to posthumanism. Similarly, Sorgner's employment of diversified critical scopes within posthumanism studies defies a clear positioning of the volume in the field, particularly considering that, in relation to the very notion of the 'posthuman,' for instance, critical posthumanism, meta-humanism, and transhumanism presents idiosyncrasies. Eventually, due to the quantity of the objects of study discussed, wide margins for further elaborations, through a more in-depth exploration, remain. Yet these aspects should not be considered negative sides of Sorgner's engaging publication, but rather inspiring suggestions for getting involved with further studies on similar (unexplored yet promising) areas of knowledge production in posthuman studies. For this reason, *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* is a particularly valuable tool for both established scholars in posthuman studies to get inspired to expand their perspectives on new artistic areas, and for newcomers to the field who, with the support of Sorgner's discussion on the aesthetics of twisting, are encouraged to making progress with reviewing multiple manifestations of posthuman art in contemporary culture.