

## Essential Art

Raising the question of essence at the end of postmodernity means to shed all fears with respect to the past, thus freeing ourselves from any and every notion of “neo-,” “post-” or “trans-,” and to opt instead for the openness of an originary, initial gesture. For any truly radical gesture that might affirm itself today, the question of essence comes to expression through a clear confrontation with tradition while fully aware of the impossibility of in any way turning back, and intent on the need to move beyond the present. Essential Art thus embodies an attitude that’s capable of rising to the challenge of the question of art at a time in which art would seem to disappear into a system in which nothing differs from anything else, and “anything goes.” To address the question of essence is to speak of the need to confront anew the question of beginnings, of creating, of art itself. We stand at the bottom of the void that defines the contemporary world, and from there search out the essence of space and time.

This search is no attempt to reach some final point of arrival, and presents itself instead as the experience of an exposure to the naked reality of the gesture of the making of art. There is no desire to reach or announce “the end.” There’s a need, instead, quite to the contrary, to grow acquainted once again with beginnings, with the inauguration of a possible scenario, of origins which are neither lost nor utopian, but always present, here and now, in my gesture and your gaze.

The question, basically, doesn’t even entirely reduce to focusing attention on essence; it’s concerned, instead, with a search for the essential quality of the gesture that transmutes itself into the work of art; with the search for the essential gesture that reveals the dimension of essence, and which places us face to face with the nakedness of life, with its lack of routes of escape, with its demand that its questions be given replies. Art is the real and concrete reply—in the form of the work of art—to its own most fundamental question: what is art?

So, art is not primarily political, critical, committed, light, ironic, comic, tragic, sublime, grotesque, relational, minimal, public, private or anything else. Its only true problem is not to be anything other than itself, but to understand and be what it cannot not be. Its only true problem is *to be* art in the light of a critical and creative examination of its own peculiar essence. When art is capable of presenting itself as precisely such a gesture—which is no less ethical than artistic—it can then be all the rest as well, as a consequence of having grasped its essence: that which truly belongs to it, that which sets it apart from everything else. Its essence will coincide with its embodiment in a necessary work of art.

Such gesture finds articulation through acts of spoliation, through a sort of reduction of the compositional grammar of contemporary artistic praxis. It can somehow be maintained that what the various differing modes of essential gesture have in common is a certain nakedness, an ability to identify the nothingness in which it grounds itself, and to allow that void a space in which to breathe within the folds and creases of being. In the face, today, of an accumulatory proliferation of cultural, artistic and existential products, Essential Art effects a thinning of space and time that allows the emergence of “what is,” nothing more and nothing less.

The problem of essence has nothing here to do with an ideal world that might lie beyond our material world, and concerns itself instead with a material world that makes itself available to the abyss which it recognizes itself to be. Matter as endless potential. As this world’s availability to itself, and to its own endless capacity for the articulation of meaning. The pursuit of essence is the recognition of the astonishment this world provokes, and of the

impossibility of closing it up in any one system of meanings. Essential Art involves an ecstasy on the part of matter, an ecstatic materialism: the point at which, in the work of art, matter and materials exit from themselves in order to become what they are.

Essential art is an attitude that exposes every individual to the radicality of the fundamental questions of art, thought and life. Its characteristic traits are found in the serenity and sobriety of the gestures that embody it, at a distance from spectacle and communication in favor of creative silence, while peopled all the same by the hum and echo of the community of those who belong to no community. There are no essentialists; there's only a singular plurality of individuals who expose themselves to the questions of essence and essential gesture.

Essential art, in other words, is art.

Federico Ferrari, Milan, May 2009