

FORUM

SANTIAGO ZABALA
Why Only Art Can Save Us:
Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency
New York, Columbia University Press, 2017

Discussants:
DANIELA ANGELUCCI
AMANDA BOETZKES
PAUL KOTTMAN
IVELISE PERNIOLA

Ed. By Daniela Angelucci



DANIELA ANGELUCCI
(Università di Roma Tre)

At a time when many people are converging on the need for a new realism, Santiago Zabala's book starts precisely from the rejection of what he calls a real call to order, affirming rather the new importance assumed today by art and poetry. The title of his book paraphrases the famous answer – “only a God can save us” – given in 1966 by Martin Heidegger to the question about the possibility of salvation in an age dominated by technology. Zabala claims the solution, given God's death, today lies not in a return to reality, to objects, as much of contemporary philosophy affirms, but rather in art. According to the thesis of the book, which replaces Heidegger's God with art, the work of the artist Maurizio Cattelan depicted on the cover represents Pope John Paul II lying on the ground after being struck by a meteorite. The title, *The Ninth Hour*, alludes to the hour of darkness that descended on earth with the cry of a dying Jesus: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”.

But what contemporaneity are we talking about? In the subtitle, in a seemingly paradoxical way, Zabala alludes to our present day as the time of absence of emergency. While the rhetoric of emergency is the device through which sovereigns legitimize any order imposed through the concept of “state of exception”, as explained by Carl Schmidt, Walter Benjamin and recently Giorgio Agamben, today, in a world where politics, finance and privacy have been forced into previously established technological frames, the real emergency is, according to Zabala, real absence. At a time when we are constantly under surveillance, in a technologically organized world where even the future becomes increasingly predictable, the problem is not the emergencies built for consumption, but rather the one we neglect, obfuscated by alarmist rhetoric, that is, the situation where differences cannot emerge, suffocated by a system that has a monopoly on truth. Zabala says: “These events [refugee crisis, terrorist attacks] mark the absence of emergency, which does not mean they are not emergencies but rather that they are framed within our globalized system. They emerge as a consequence of this frame, which is the greatest emergency” (p. 3). Despite the fact that the media constantly inform us of catastrophic events and emergencies, the truth is we

are trapped in such a control system that the predominant impression is that nothing new can ever happen.

In this framework of fixity and return to order according to the author it is art – defined, following Heidegger, as an “event of truth” – that can not only make us aware of the absence of emergency, but also and above all question our comfortable and pre-established existences, responding to a sort of existential call. The objective of art, as an activity on the margins, “post-metaphysical”, not integrated in the dominant paradigm of control – is therefore not to save us from the many emergencies of which we are informed, but rather to force us to expose ourselves to risk, indecision, to a pluralism of possibilities. Referring to a constellation of concepts (and to what I would call the methodology) by his teacher Gianni Vattimo, Zabala thus transforms the fragility of artistic activity into an extraordinary potentiality: “The agents that seek to disrupt the framing powers are the weak, the remnants of Being, that is, every person and idea forced to the margins of this frame and that inevitably strives for change or, better, for an alteration of the imposed representation of reality. This alteration is necessary not only politically and ethically but also aesthetically” (p. 5). Here Zabala, with the expression “remnants of Being”, takes up an expression by Heidegger at the centre of a previous book of his (*The Remains of Being. Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics*, New York, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009), emphasizing the residual but also multiple nature of the proposed ontology, the only one that allows to grasp the lack of the sense of emergency through that extraordinary and unimaginable event that is art.

Starting from this idea of art, which therefore presents itself not as an imitation or representation of reality but as an existential, generative, transformative project, in the central part of the text Zabala analyzes the work of twelve artists able to produce this operation: kennardphillipps, Jota Castro, Filippo Minelli, Hema Upadhyay, Wang Zhiyuan, Peter McFarlane, NeleAzvedo, Mandy Barker, Michael Sailstorfer, Kardy, Alfredo Jaar, Jane Frere. These are very different artists, who come from different countries, who use different means, from recycled materials to audio and video tools. What they have in common is the ability not to let themselves be caged by the laws of the market and to lead us to the awareness of the emergency that concerns us as human beings: “In their works, we leave the realm of culture and enter the

remains of Being [...] independent of the environmental predictions and social conditions these works narrate, they mean to thrust us into an emergency that concerns us as human being, that is, as responsible interpreters". Hermeneutics is present in Zabala's book, which follows Vattimo in proposing the concept of interpretation not so much as a dialogue and "fusion of horizons" (Hans-Georg Gadamer), but as a transformative experience, a transgressive, multiform activity, that must be practiced in order to understand works of art, since salvation lies precisely in the danger that every interpretation implies.

Zabala's book advances a radical thesis, set out in a decisive and provocative way, able to raise many objections. Several reviews highlight its political aspect, viewing it as a bizarre characteristic for a text that puts art at the center, starting from the title. I do not agree with this observation, on the contrary I totally agree with the author when he claims it is impossible to separate aesthetics, ethics, politics. As Jacques Rancière writes, also quoted by Zabala, aesthetics is closely linked to political experience, not in the sense of a spectacularization of the latter, but as a practice capable of drawing the figures of the community and showing new configurations of the world. This undeniable aspect is rightly central to the text I am commenting on. Moreover, a non-specialistic vision of aesthetics and philosophy in general brings with it a stimulating way of thinking: an interesting example is the way Zabala enters into dialogue with the natural sciences going beyond disciplinary boundaries, which allows him to use their findings and at the same time to detect their being sometimes too involved in the system to be able to think freely.

Starting from the common idea of an inseparable relationship between aesthetics and politics, the first question I would like to put to the author concerns the description of our age as an age of no emergency. Beyond the intentional paradoxical quality of the expression, which aims to underline how the constant reference to emergency actually leads to a paralysis of the possibilities of transformation, I would like to ask him to respond to the particular moment we are experiencing. As I write, in Rome, we are in full emergency due to the spread of the Covid-19, which has unexpectedly changed our habits as citizens in the space of a few days. We still do not know what will happen and what mark this circumstance will leave on our society, also in terms of positive novelties in the future, on our general and individual behavior. Could this be

proof that not everything is yet predictable? And that there are still uncontrollable situations for us humans?

About the transformative possibilities of art proposed in the book, I start from a substantial closeness with Zabala's theses, although the philosophers I turn to in order to think about the generative capacities of arts' "becoming-minor" are Deleuze and Guattari, authors therefore far from a hermeneutic paradigm. I wonder, however, whether one should talk not so much of works of art, but of aesthetic experiences. With this expression I mean not so much something connected to beauty, but an event that is not necessarily linked to the production of a work, which however allows us a different, de-functionalizing gaze, for example a new way of relating to the space around us. I am referring here, for example, to the experience of walking as an aesthetic practice carried out by many avant-garde artists, from Dadaists to Situationists. One could also mention those artistic actions that do not lead to the production of an object, but propose, for example, a series of ephemeral or collective experiences.

In this regard, perhaps my most precise objection to this book concerns the catalogue of the artists proposed. Zabala states that, although the works analyzed in the book are all works of visual art, "it's not because visual works do it better at disclosing the essential emergency than other forms of art (dance, music, or cinema). They are simply easier to reproduce in a book" (p. 29). However, these works, as well as having in common the fact that they are works of visual art, share for the most part a content that explicitly deals with social, political and environmental issues: climate change, the proliferation of plastics, the situation of urban slums, the fake neutrality of social media. Perhaps in order to affirm the transformative power of art – as capable of exposing us to risk, of producing a non-majority, marginal, unforeseen vision – it is necessary instead to show how this possibility emerges beyond the contents illustrated, simply in the risk of a non-functional, anti-economic, free activity.

SANTIAGO ZABALA
(ICREA/Pompeu Fabra University)

Angelucci is right to begin her excellent contribution by highlighting the problem of the return to realism in my book. This is a serious issue in contemporary philosophy not only because of the

way it was introduced – as something “new,” a progression and improvement – but also because it is a symptom of the return to order that is taking place in Europe and abroad. While realist intellectuals will tell you they do not necessarily want their takes on psychology, neuroscience, or philosophy to prevail over others, in fact they are seeking to preserve a society in which they find themselves at ease – that is, in which they have become more or less conscious servants of the ongoing return to order. Realism is an aspect and a consequence of dominion, not its cause. Although these thinkers have different agendas, the general idea is to return to the universalistic aspirations of modernity: that fundamental political, moral, and cultural concepts function to denigrate and marginalize those who do not measure up to their criteria of rationality. This is particularly evident in one of their most important representatives eurocentrism: “the European project that I have in mind,” Markus Gabriel recently explained, “is that of the universal human values. Europeans, thanks to their philosophical past from the Greeks to contemporary philosophers, are the best equipped to respond to the challenge of social justice and the future of democracy. Not only for Europe, but for all humanity.”¹

Against this return to a Eurocentric Cartesian realism it is important to respond with an ontology that does not pretend to be a simple substitute, that is, one which can easily fall back into metaphysics. If my “ontology of remnants,” which Angelucci refers to, is realism’s worst enemy it’s because “what remains, not what is, is essential to philosophy.”² The goal of philosophy after metaphysics is to allow the remains of Being to emerge, that is, those alterations of reality that cannot be framed within metaphysics. These are the discharge of metaphysics, those “invisible,” “unpresentable,” and “ungraspable” events that take place at the margins. While my goal was not to present this ontology as “the only one that allows [us] to grasp the lack of the sense of emergency through that extraordinary and unimaginable event that is art,” considering other postmetaphysical stances in contemporary philosophy, I do hold that “it is impossible to separate aesthetics, ethics, politics,” as Angelucci points out. This separation is a symptom

¹ M. Gabriel, *Silicon Valley y las redes sociales son unos grandes criminales*, interview with Ana Carbajosa in «El País», May 1, 2019, https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/04/17/actualidad/1555516749_100561.html.

² S. Zabala, *The Remains of being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 13.

of Being's oblivion, which the "new realism," as well most analytic and applied philosophy, is a consequence. Emergency aesthetics is meant to show through art how Being, existence, and truth are no longer givens but points of departure to overcome oblivion or annihilation. This is why the works of art discussed in the book refer to "social paradoxes," "urban discharges," "environmental calls," and "historical accounts" independently of this separation.

According to Angelucci the ongoing COVID-19 emergency is a sign that "not everything is yet predictable" and "that there are still uncontrollable situations for us humans." The difference among "emergencies," "absent emergencies," and "the greatest emergency" (or "essential emergency") is not one of truth but rather of degree or intensity. Emergencies such as terrorist attacks or the refugees crisis "mark the absence of emergency, which does not mean they are not emergencies but rather that they are framed within our globalized order. They emerge as a consequence of this frame, which is the greatest emergency" (p. 3). Something similar occurs with COVID-19, an emergency we are all confronting now. But scientists have been warning us for decades of the threat of pandemic influenzas. This coronavirus, as well as other viruses, was an absent emergency that turned into an emergency. The problem is not simply that the threat was not taken into consideration – for example, preparing public hospitals for such an imminent emergency – but that it also emerged from our industrial and economic globalized system. The origin of the pandemic is rooted in growth at the expense of the environment and extractive capitalism draped in the colors of globalization. This does not imply there aren't any "uncontrollable situations for us humans," but these situations are often the result of an order that has become too framed. The greatest emergency is this framing order because it also forecloses the possibility to prepare for emergencies such as COVID-19.

I agree with Angelucci that "aesthetic experience", instead of "works of art", is another formulation I could have used to explain the "transformative possibilities of art." My concern with the term "experience" is related to Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics", where human interactions and dialogue have priority over the actual meaning of an artist's work. Whereas Bourriaud is interested in events where spectators coproduce and intervene in order to overcome the anonymity of pondering works in galleries and museums, I'm interested in the existential interventions that

works of art will request from us regardless of whether they are seen in a gallery and explained by the artist. This is probably why Angelucci points out that the “transformative power of art” could also emerge “beyond the contents illustrated, simply in the risk of a non-functional, anti-economic, free activity”. I agree, but how will we recognize this “risk” as the actual greatest emergency without the remains of Being? Like Bernard Stiegler’s “epoch of the absence of epoch”³, the absence of emergency has become the greatest danger we face today, signaling the abandonment of the interpretative nature of existence in favor of the return to order and realism.

AMANDA BOETZKES
(University of Guelph)

Emergency. It is difficult to imagine a concept more dissociated from its meaning. In early 2020, it seems we wake up to a new crisis almost daily. The novel coronavirus eclipses climate change, which eclipses the global refugee crisis, which eclipses the oil wars in the Middle East, which eclipse any number of other emergencies ad infinitum. Thus Santiago Zabala forcefully argues, emergency is in a state of perpetual disappearance. Following Heidegger’s insight, “The only emergency is the absence of a sense of emergency”, Zabala maps the sense-system of global finance capital and liberalism that ejects emergencies from our thoughts, so that emergency itself is absent. Or rather, emergency would be absent if not for art. It therefore follows, he argues, that in an epoch in which emergency continually disappears, *only art can save us*.

The fulcrum of this thought is that art asserts itself as a hermeneutic recuperation of aesthetic sense within the black hole of emergency’s disappearance. Yet this gambit takes us into the heart of a dilemma. In showing the disappearance of emergency within the logic of global capitalism, does art not also instigate the eclipse of our sense of crisis? How can it be the case that art does not in and of itself subsume emergency into normality, if not banality? Or, to repose this question, does global capitalism produce an aesthetic logic that is consonant with its liberal ideal so that art would ultimately enact the disappearance of emergency as a so-

³ B. Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, trans. Daniel Ross, Cambridge, Polity, 2019, p. 5.

matic and affective extension of globalization? How do the aesthetics of art save us in the absence of emergency?

Zabala locates art in the negative position of disappearance; it asserts itself in and as the remnants of emergency that point the event of its disappearance. Art stands in resistance at the margins of its absence. In this respect, it generates the hermeneutic circling around the discourses that induce a lack of emergency. Art jars us from our numbness to emergency. Instead, as Zabala outlines, these remnants occur as social paradoxes, urban discharges, environmental calls and historical accounts. These forms of contemporary art do not emerge organically from the logic of liberalist capitalism, but rather make their appearance as scattered debris (whether social, spatial, ecological or historical) at sites that gesture to the emergencies that have been expelled from visibility and sensibility.

Importantly, art does not seek to induce straightforward reactions to emergencies, even absent ones. The twelve case studies that Zabala weaves into his analysis do not seek to trigger moral outrage, panic or other surges of affect as was common in art of the culture wars in the U.S. Nevertheless, art creates a shock in the regime of absent emergencies. Here, Zabala tracks the Heideggerian implications of shock (*Stoß*) to elaborate the way that art produces a rift in history and a refusal to be absorbed into the existing horizon of meaning. Shock is less the frozenness of incomprehension and disbelief and more the tremor of an epochal shift, the occasion by which historical existence (Being) is revealed. Shock is not a sense of immediacy when the real is grasped, because the real has always already disappeared. Rather, it is an event of understanding that concerns our existence in the midst of its emergence. The experience of shock is therefore antithetical to reaction; it discloses historical existence by drawing our senses into its world.

The emergencies of art are indeed shocking: Zabala takes us through a photomontage featuring former British Prime Minister Tony Blair grinning as he takes a selfie in front of a burning oil field in Kuwait (*Photo Op* by kennardphillips, 2005); a banner with the giant lettering "TWITTER" raised on the wall of a turkey factory farm (*Contradictions* by Filippo Minelli, 2011); a dizzyingly high sculpture assembled in the shape of a tornado and made entirely of plastic bottles recovered from the countryside surrounding Beijing (*Thrown to the Wind* by Wang Zhiyuan, 2010); an in-

stallation of seven thousand miniature human figures sculpted out of wax by Palestinian refugees to commemorate the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 (*Return of the Soul: The Nakba Project*, 2007-2008), among others. Each of these artworks thrust us into the emergencies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries: global oil wars, ethnic genocides, toxic environmental wastes, and climate change.

This phrasing – the work of art as a sensorial thrust into emergency – is integral to the understanding it proffers. The thrust of art is its way of introjecting the remnants of emergency into the sensorial field; shock is therefore not an effect of the emergency itself but rather the clearing from which understanding of its disappearance transpires. More subtly, this clearing of a world in which emergency registers is different from the event of understanding in Heidegger's reading of the origin of art. Rather, the remnants are the very event in and of themselves, in and through their anarchical effect on the senses. Here is where Zabala brings his commitment to Gianni Vattimo's reading of Heidegger to bear on the definition of emergency and, coextensively, the saving power of art. For Vattimo, hermeneutics are anarchical interpretations that stem from the material agonism between earth and world. Stemming from that rift, the hermeneutic is necessarily transgressive, adversarial and antagonistic. In this same way, in order to en flesh the saving power of art – its very capacity to bring us into its shock – Zabala sets his case studies of art in the midst of quasi-forensic information that points to the many emergencies to which art would have us attend. This information gives us a lens to the emergencies that have slipped our attention: the utter negligence of governments in the face of impending genocides, the material toxicity of our techno-communication systems, war veteran's PTSD, enforced historical amnesia, the static that intercedes in a public discourse of climate change. But it is art that asserts itself into the zone of emergency's disappearance in and as its remnants. Its materialization as propulsion into view instigates a mode of interpretation as vital praxis. Interpretation is specifically *not* a science of knowledge production, but is rather a practice of holding open the existential meaning of these remnants so that they are not subsumed into passive acceptance.

To return to my initial question, then: how is it that art is a saving power and not one medium among many others of impelling attention, care and thought away from emergency, by sup-

plementing the emergency? How does art resist eclipsing the emergency it seeks to disclose? This is a question about the extent to which art behaves in consonance with hermeneutics (art as a material philosophical praxis), and whether in its very materialization it cancels (disappears) its own emergence in accordance with the logic of global capital. As Zabala would have it, the shock of art is the antithesis of disavowal: art's intervention preserves, protects and holds out for hermeneutic activity. Yet does it not also bear a kinship to the innate reflexes of trauma that numb, freeze and cast out emergency in order to salvage the subject? If it reveals emergency in its remnants, in the wake of its disappearance, does it not also deploy the logic of disappearance as a trigger? For even if the emergency is existential and not an appearance of "the real" as such, the emergency of Being would nevertheless have to pass through the debilitating forces that continually endanger our bodies, beings, environments, and importantly, our very capacity to perceive.

Consider a work by one of the most contentious contemporary artists, Santiago Sierra: *Polyurethane Sprayed on the Backs of 10 Workers* (2004), a work in which Sierra fired an industrial canister of polyurethane at ten Iraqi laborers, covering them in the toxic substance. The workers endured the spray and held still until it began to harden (they wore chemical protection suits). The work is a shockingly sadistic display of wilful degradation—breathtaking even. It immediately calls forth a thinking about the indignation suffered by the (art) workers. We consider the vile privilege of the artist who uses his position to trick the viewer into thinking there is a difference between the "real" degradation of Iraqis more broadly (such as those imprisoned and tortured in Abu Ghraib, the photographs of which were in wide circulation that year), and the purportedly "symbolic" degradation enacted in the artwork. We are to recognize this "trick" as the subject matter of the artwork, and to question whether there is a difference between the real and the symbolic. But is this a difference that could only be experienced by identifying with the artist's privileged position, at the expense of a care for an Iraqi perspective of the work? Would an Iraqi have to forfeit her or his perspective of the work in order to accept the work as a form of preservation of existential being? In other words, is it necessary that the particular beings in any given emergency be interpolated into an existential understanding of the emergency of Being? More strongly, does Be-

ing cannibalize beings? If so, then art has merely enacted the liberalist logic it seeks to expose and in so doing defeated any ethics or politics at the heart of Being's emergence. After all, what kind of existential Being would not flee (conceal itself, disappear) in disgust, indignation, and grief over the miseries of our epoch? Further, this flight is the hallmark of complex trauma: we flee emergency and then make it disappear from our conscious thoughts, holding it at bay through ever more dissociated tactics of evasion and diversion. Is art's capacity to hold meaning open stronger than trauma's capacity to eject danger from the subject and at the same time condemn the subject in a repetition of an event of bare survivalism, or even sheer barbarism?

Zabala's answer comes in the positioning of art as a post-metaphysical hermeneutic, and its interpretation as ontological. Aesthetics, here, binds together the work of art and the vital practice of interpretation in and as the saving of emergency (against trauma). We are held in the emergency of meaning-making, from a predicament in which we had been deprived of that capacity. In other words, interpretation saves art as much as art saves us. The key here is the anarchical effect an artist like Sierra instigates, a deep rupture that breaks apart the signifying chain of liberalist logic subtending global capital and its numbing effects.

Still, if we accept this invigorating theorization, then we must nevertheless interrogate who is interpreting, and for whom? After all, it does make a difference who in particular has taken hold of the saving power of interpretation, and the conditions of possibility for that taking hold. Herein lies Zabala's final provocation, the declaration of the end of the "social turn" and the rise of an "emergency turn". This is a crucial manoeuvre to extricate hermeneutics from a Heideggerian outcome, reading the origin of art as an opening to the historicity of a people (and concomitantly, the descent of his philosophy into National Socialism, and the racialization of that very historicity). The discourse of "the social" assumes a constrained relationality between the artwork and the viewing public. The constraints of the social lie in its assumed framing of art as the privileged object to convene a people and proffer its meaning and historicity to them. By contrast, Zabala considers the significance of the discourse of participatory art in which the public engages and relates to the effects (and often affects) of emergency. The emergency turn would therefore affirm

the implicitly anarchical freedom of interpretation that art awakens in its participants.

The difference between a liberalist freedom as universal concept and the anarchical freedom of hermeneutics is that between living (and dying) for an ideological abstraction that is divorced from its material conditions in the case of the former, and the vital activity of creating meaning from material remnants in the case of the latter. It is a difference in the form of understanding that comes from a transcendental category (operationalized by the political regime), and understanding that comes from the uncertain course of hermeneutic reflection. Here I would recall Hannah Arendt's brilliant essay "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)," in which she deftly shifts the hermeneutic work of understanding what is historically incomprehensible (in this case, totalitarianism), away from social scientific approaches to human behaviour to a politics of reflection that convenes a generously defined form of collective judgement.⁴ Here, understanding cannot be socialized nor be governed by the authority of the social; instead understanding and its implicit politics are discovered from preserving the freedom of reflective judgment in the face of the senseless. Her analysis shifts freedom from a concern for the social per se, to a way of freely thinking, reflecting and understanding through the freedom of collectivity, adjacency, co-existence. Let us then consider how emergency art demands this anarchical reflection from a newly discovered "us".

SANTIAGO ZABALA

"How does art resist eclipsing the emergency it seeks to disclose? . . . In showing the disappearance of emergency within the logic of global capitalism, does art not also instigate the eclipse of our sense of crisis?" These questions are at the center of Amanda Boetzkes's brilliant contribution. Her goal is to question not only whether art can also conceal the essential emergency (or absent emergency) but also the role of interpretation within my book: "Who is interpreting, and for whom?" These questions directly address the postmetaphysical nature of my hermeneutical stance. In order to respond I must first recall that the difference between

⁴ H. Arendt, *Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)*, in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954, Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, Berlin, Schocken Press, 2005.

metaphysical and postmetaphysical positions are not a matter of accuracy and error as much as oblivion and indifference. In order to think after metaphysics we must acknowledge not only those absences that condition our thought—such as Being, art, and emergency—but also that we are working within a different conceptual platform. This is why in the preface I alert readers that “contemporary art, like communism . . . is another realm where the remains of Being are disclosed, that is, where existence takes place.”

According to Boetzkes there are novel emergencies (e.g., the coronavirus pandemic) that “eclipse” previous ones (e.g., climate change) to the point these are in a state of perpetual disappearance: “the only emergency is the absence of a sense of emergency.” But as I tried to explain I do not think these emergencies are “novel” and that emergencies in general are disappearing. This reading, which Boetzkes shares with others, is the result my replacing the term “greatest” with “only,” giving the impression that there are no longer emergencies. If the coronavirus pandemic, for example, marks the absence of emergency, it’s not because there are no new emergencies but rather that it is framed within our globalized system. The pandemic has emerged as a consequence of this frame, which is the greatest emergency. As I argue in the introduction, Heidegger’s statement (*“Woher die Notlosigkeit als die höchste Not?”*), as well as its three different translations (“Whence the lack of distress as utmost distress?”; “whence the lack of a sense of plight as the greatest plight?”; and “how can the absence of emergency itself become an emergency?”), are meant to highlight the “greatest emergency,” not “emergencies.” This is why I rephrase it as “the greatest emergency is the absence of emergencies.”

Boetzkes is correct to point out that “global capitalism produce[s] an aesthetic logic that is consonant with its liberal ideal so that art would ultimately enact the disappearance of emergency as a somatic and affective extension of globalization.” This is evident in the works of Santiago Sierra that she mentions. But this occurs with artists who have not retreated from “metaphysics,” “emergencies,” or, as Heidegger says, “cultural politics.” This, as I explain in the first chapter, is where art becomes dangerous in that it is an indifferent measure of beauty that eclipses its ontological, existential, and historical bearings. When Heidegger called on art to “lose its relation to culture and manifest itself as an event of

be-ing” he was requesting that artist retreat from the world of “global capitalism,” “aesthetic logic,” and emergencies into the different conceptual platform that I mentioned earlier. This is why the difference between “cultural art” and “ontological art” is not one of accuracy and error, but oblivion and indifference. While the “emergencies” *the former produces are the* result of representations within the world picture, the “absent emergencies” that the latter “rescue us into” are *events that disclose the remains of Being*.

Unlike other critics, Boetzkes recognizes that my “emergency aesthetics” and the postmetaphysical ontology and hermeneutics I outline are not meant to introduce or follow Heidegger’s philosophy. The different meanings I attribute to concepts as “world” and “emergency” as well as the conclusions I’m trying to reach are properly distinguished from the German thinker’s intuitions. This “clearing of a world in which emergency registers,” she explains, “is different from the event of understanding in Heidegger’s reading of the origin of art,” and “the declaration of the end of the ‘social turn’ and the rise of an ‘emergency turn’ is a crucial manoeuvre to extricate hermeneutics from a Heideggerian outcome.” While I must confess it was not my intention to “extricate” hermeneutics from a “Heideggerian outcome,” I am interested in the saving powers of hermeneutics, its possibilities of and for freedom. This is why Boetzkes is right to ask “who is interpreting, and for whom?”.

Interpretation, unlike contemplation or description, requires an effort that is not philological or linguistic but primarily anarchic as it must thrust or rescue us into absent emergencies. The warnings of a coming pandemic—announced many times in the past years and decades and even in the months before many governments took the coronavirus pandemic more or less seriously—were meant to disrupt our indifference toward possible emergencies. But if little action was taken after these warnings it’s because they were unrecognizable. Warnings, like the remains of Being, emerge as an alteration and interruption of the reality we’ve become accustomed to. This is why their interpretation requires an effort that must challenge metaphysical realism, that is, our framed global order. In the book I try to illustrate this through social paradoxes and accounts of urban discharges, environmental calls, and first-person narratives of trauma. As we can see the strength of interpretation lies in a process of transformation that is vital for our existence and future. To answer Boetzkes’s ques-

tion: the militant hermeneuticist interprets for the emergence of Being, emergency, and art because their absence is the greatest emergency.

Paul H. Kottman
(New School for Social Research, New York)⁵

It was reported in the “Washington Post” that the Trump White House had asked to borrow Vincent van Gogh’s 1888 painting *Landscape with Snow* from the Guggenheim Museum in New York in order to display it in the President’s private quarters. The request for the Van Gogh was refused. In its place, the Guggenheim offered to lend a different work: Maurizio Cattelan’s *America*, an 18-karat, fully functioning, solid gold toilet that has been used by over 100,000 visitors to the Guggenheim.

The Guggenheim’s gesture was remarkable – first, for its redundancy, since Trump is more likely than anyone alive to already be in possession of a solid gold toilet⁶. Instead of shining interesting new light on the White House’s current occupant, the Guggenheim simply mirrored Trump’s self-fashioned image about as subtly as the playground taunt “I know you are, but what am I?” – or as subtly as anti-American pique is conveyed in Cattelan’s *objet de ridicule* itself.

Cattelan called his golden toilet “one-percent art for the ninety-nine percent.” But the name “art” is not earned – as Santiago Zabala wrongly claims, invoking Duchamp’s *Fountain* – merely by placing a readymade “within the walls of a museum.”⁷ As Du-

⁵ This essay originally appeared as *Fake Art and Inauthenticity in Philosophy. A review of Santiago Zabala’s ‘Why Only Art Can Save Us’*, in «Public Seminar», March 20, 2018.

<https://publicseminar.org/2018/03/fake-art-and-inauthenticity-in-philosophy>

⁶ Given, I mean, that he already owns a penthouse “outfitted in 24-karat-gold lamps, vases, and crown molding, a diamond-encrusted front door...crystal chandeliers... a \$100 million Boeing 757 jet with 24-karat-gold-plated seat belts, silverware, plates, bathroom sink, and personal leather-covered toilet.”

⁷ Glossing Arthur Danto, Zabala mistakenly claims that the dependency of art on interpretation “began taking shape in 1917, when Marcel Duchamp revealed his *Fountain* and pointed out how any ‘readymade’ could become a work of art if placed within the walls of a museum, which forced the public to question of the work and enter into dialogue with it” (8). This short passage manages to suggest at least two falsities. First, Duchamp never “revealed” his fountain to a public, and it was never placed “within the walls of a museum” (a replica is displayed in the Tate Modern). Second, simply placing a work within the walls of museum hardly amounts to “forcing [a] public to question... and enter into dialogue with it.” Surely, readymades – if nothing else – make clear that museum placement is hardly sufficient to “force” meaningful encounters with artworks. There is also a larger contradiction between Zabala’s valorization of museum exhibition (as ‘in-

champ understood, the term “artwork” applies in late modernity only to those objects that are *treated* like artworks, in virtue of belonging to a collection of such works⁸. For a start, to be treated as belonging to an art collection means that the object in question is taken out of the cycle of use, consumption, and waste.

Manifestly, the claim that *America* is “art” is nothing but a hollow assertion — not borne out by the Guggenheim’s treatment of it. For one thing, it is not publicly displayed, nor is it conserved in the bowels of the museum’s archives. Instead, it is installed as a functioning toilet in a restroom that accommodates one “user” at a time⁹. One is thus not invited just to view or admire *America* — one is explicitly urged to use it, in just the way one would utilize any other toilet in the world as a means of waste disposal, say, after enjoying a cup of coffee in the museum’s café. In contrast to other works in the Guggenheim’s “art collection,” the golden loo is not preserved from routine use. It is treated as a commodity — a *commode-ity*, if you like.

America is therefore not, as Cattelan falsely claims, “one-percent art for the ninety-nine percent.” It is a one-percent toilet temporarily on loan, courtesy of the Guggenheim, to individual museum-goers (a demographic that is, in any case, a questionable metonymic for the ninety-nine percent). In effect, the Guggenheim “lends” *America* to one private user at a time — but not as an artwork; only as a ridiculously expensive latrine. Anyway, the Guggenheim itself already retains the power to annul Cattelan’s definition since, as the offer to Trump shows, the museum has the power to restrict the use of toilet to the “one percent” as, indeed, to one person.

But “art” is not only a misnomer here. It is also deceitful since the term “art” serves to actively mask the golden toilet’s true significance.

terpretation provoking’) in this passage and his recurring discussion of (and seeming agreement with) Heidegger’s insistence that museum exhibition is a merely kind of “frame” [*Ge-stell*], not adequate to the disclosure of truth in art (see pp. 21-22, for example). More on the contradiction with Heidegger in a moment.

⁸ This is not to say that being thus treated is sufficient for something to qualify as ‘art;’ only that such treatment is a necessary condition for qualifying as an ‘art object’ in late modernity.

⁹ As the Guggenheim declares: “Its participatory nature, in which viewers are invited to make use of the fixture individually and privately, allows for an experience of unprecedented intimacy with a work of art.”

The truth, of course, is that the toilet's status reflects the Guggenheim's (at least temporary) ownership of it – a relation of private proprietorship that is underscored by the toilet's sheer expense, its ostentatious wastefulness and manifest excess, its placement and maintenance on the Guggenheim's premises, as well as the “generosity” with which the museum loans the toilet to needy individuals on a limited basis (for the amount of time needed for someone to “use the toilet”). The Guggenheim displays Cattelan's “art” as its property, as something *owned*, in exactly the way Trump features his gilded escalator in the lobby of the Trump Tower – except for the fact that Trump makes no deceptive claims about the escalator being “art.”

By offering Trump exclusive use of its golden loo, then, the Guggenheim revealed the true status and significance of Cattelan's achievement. It was never an artwork. It was always a luxury consumption item, a kind of “fake art.” The appellation “art” barely masks the Guggenheim's hypocrisy in offering the toilet to Trump. A more forthright approach would have been to ask Trump to pay rent for the Van Gogh.

Contemporary artworks like Cattelan's are “determined to save us,” writes Zabala in *Why Only Art Can Save Us* (8). Perhaps this claim would be true, if it meant that contemporary works like the golden loo “save us” by servicing the demands of human consumption (and constipation). And perhaps – where extreme wealth abounds – salvation might also come from “making available to the public an extravagant luxury product seemingly intended for the 1 percent.” What we produce in the contemporary world might perhaps begin to save us, that is, just by serving unmet material needs.

Alas, Zabala has a more pious form of salvation in mind.

The cover of Zabala's *Why Only Art Can Save Us* is adorned with the image of yet another work by Cattelan. This time, it's an installation called *The Ninth Hour*, which depicts Pope John Paul II lying on the ground, clutching a crucifix, after being struck by a meteorite. “The sculpture's title,” Zabala explains, “alludes to the ninth hour of darkness that fell upon all the land when Christ called out ‘*Eli, Eli lema sabachtthani?*’ – ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (xi). The sentence just cited is – somewhat bafflingly – the only comment that Zabala dedicates to Cattelan's sculpture in his book. The next sentence moves on: “This al-

ludes to this book's title, which paraphrases Martin Heidegger's famous statement that 'only a God can still save us'...

The suggestion that being forsaken by God "alludes" to being "saved" by a God (and *only* a God) is a sleight of hand – not unlike the quick substitution of "art" (and "*only* art") for "only a God" in the "paraphrase" offered by Zabala's book¹⁰. The sleight is facilitated by the fact that the verb "allude" occurs three times in the first four sentences of his book – where Zabala suggests that Cattelan's installation alludes to Scripture, which in turn alludes to the title of Zabala's book, which in turn paraphrases Heidegger's famous statement, which in turn "alludes not to God's representative on earth, as portrayed in Cattelan's work, but rather the absence of being" (xi).

If it seems like nitpicking to point out that these allusions take the place of logical argument or interpretative judgment, then consider that Zabala's entire book rests on this string of associations, which tumble into the book's basic conclusion: We are "thrust us into" the "essential emergency (the absence of Being) ... as it is revealed through works of art" like Cattelan's (xi).

And yet another sleight of hand is not far behind, since it also turns out that the "essential emergency" into which art thrusts us, according to Zabala, is not, as Heidegger claimed, "Being's abandonment." Instead, it is "the political 'neutralization' or 'lack of a sense of emergency' that we find ourselves in" (11).

Because Zabala's use of Heidegger is confusing, a few words about Heidegger's theory of art are in order. For Heidegger, the historical-philosophical significance of artworks is connected to their status as "events." Art is above all something that happens, rather than just something that is done. Art is thus both unconcealing and concealing at the same time, the way a gust of wind both covers and uncovers as it passes over a sandy beach. What is "at work" (*am Werk*) in artworks is not so much a particular artist, Heidegger claims, but something more like the artist's world (the historical world – "technology-saturated" societies, for instance). "Art is the becoming and happening of truth," writes Heidegger – where the "truth" that happens is both the "unconcealing" and

¹⁰ It turns out that Zabala's book owes its title to a passage by Mark C. Taylor, cited as the epigraph to the Afterword: See, Zabala, 127.

“concealing” of the world in tension with what Heidegger calls the Earth, *das Erde*¹¹.

Like the Trump White House, Heidegger turns to Van Gogh for a perspicuous example of what he means by “art.” In *Pair of Shoes* (1886), Heidegger sees the work of art allegorized by the painting’s disclosure of the peasant-farmer world, in tension with the Earth, as visible in the “equipmentality” of the shoes as painted. For Heidegger, the value of this is the way in which Van Gogh’s painting compels us to acknowledge something that, Heidegger thinks, modern technological modes of self-understanding not only overlook but actively conceal: namely, the opacity that adheres in any truth claim or in any historical self-understanding. Heidegger speaks of all this as the “struggle” of earth and world, or as the tendency of “metaphysical thought” to “forget” Being’s concealment. For Heidegger, this tendency is countered by the “preserving” function of art like Van Gogh’s. In sum, art not only discloses a historical world’s tacit self-understanding; art also shows how that disclosure is also opaque, a “concealing” as much as an “unconcealing,” a struggle of earth and world.

Cursory as this account is – and as questionable as Heidegger’s own conclusions may be¹² – this should give some sense of how important it is to Heidegger that art be seen as a kind of corrective to the tendency to imagine that any social world can ever declare itself transparent to itself, can ever fully be “unconcealed” without also being “concealed” – that a social world’s self-understanding can be made transparent by means of artworks.

It is thus striking that, although Zabala turns to Heidegger for support throughout the book, he ultimately sees art in ways diametrically opposed to Heidegger. First: adopting the stance of what he calls the “militant hermeneuticist” – a political stance “in favor of the victims” (124) – Zabala claims, contra Heidegger, that what art discloses is “not truth, but emergency” (124). Second: “Works of art,” according to Zabala, following Gianni Vattimo’s in-

¹¹ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, Harper, 2001, p. 71.

¹² I have written elsewhere that I think Robert Pippin’s *After the Beautiful* contains a number of missteps, when it comes to thinking about Hegel’s philosophy of art in relation to modernism [see, P. Kottman, *Hegel and Shakespeare on the Pastness of Art*, in *The Art of Hegel’s Aesthetics: Hegelian Philosophy and the Perspectives of Art History*, eds. Michael Squire and Paul A. Kottman, Muenchen, Fink, 2018]. But I think that Pippin’s reading of Heidegger in that book – and his criticisms of Heidegger’s theory of art – point us in the right direction. See, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 96-130.

terpretation of Heidegger, “have become remnants of Being.” But by “remnants of Being,” Zabala does not mean (as Heidegger does) material sites of a tension between world and Earth. He means, rather, “ontological or existential alterations that aim to shake our logical, ethical, and aesthetic assessments of reality” (25). Third: Zabala quotes Heidegger defining “emergency” as “a lack of sense of emergency” which is “greatest where self-certainty has become unsurpassable, where everything is held to be calculable” (2). But what Zabala himself means by “emergency” (as “lack of emergency”) is something else entirely. Zabala has in mind a lack of urgency that “seems to constitute the condition of our globalized world” (4).

In other words, by “emergencies,” Zabala just means to refer to festering crises that often elude collective acknowledgment: oppression and domination; poverty; landfills of toxic waste; endless wars and occupations; homelessness and the expansion of slums. Zabala imagines that art “saves us” from these crises by “shocking us” (125) into the “militant stance” of the interventionist, by awakening us from our ideology-induced slumber or complacency.

For example, Zabala argues, if Tony Blair and his allies try to sell us on a “fake” emergency – “the absence of democracy and neoliberalism in Iraq” – then kernardphillips’ *Photo Op* 2007 “saves us” by disclosing “the hypocrisy of Blair, the absurdity of the invasion, and also the political paradox of invasion by liberal states” (36). Whereas Heidegger had spoken of a concealing in every unconcealing, Zabala sees only an “actual emergency” (Blair’s hypocrisy) brightly revealed by kernardphillips — a naked “speaking truth to power” gesture. “As we can see,” writes Zabala, kernardphillips’ work has “thrust us into the essential emergency, disclosing the political paradox of our age...” (38).

Leave aside the fact that such strident declarations are precisely the sort of hubristic conclusions (about the transparency of self-understanding) against which, Heidegger thought, art served as an indispensable talisman. It’s also difficult to discern just what kernardphillips actually “disclosed” about Blair’s “hypocrisy” that was not already crystal clear to a general public that had never laid eyes on a kernardphilips – given, I mean, the dramatic drop in the popularity of Blair’s Labour Party during the general election of 2005, even before *Photo Op* was created. As the *Guardian* aptly observed in 2013, *Photo Op* now looks less like an artistic master-

piece than a mere historical document, a kind of crystalized reflection of increasing public disapproval of Blair in the mid2000s – a historically indexed “selfie.”

At any rate, it quickly becomes clear that Zabala has no philosophy of art, and no account – above all, no interpretation – of the artworks he gathers together in his book as evidence for his assertion that “art saves us” by becoming “political” or “existential.” All the Heidegger quotations notwithstanding, Zabala’s thesis is pretty straightforward – even commonplace. In fact, artists – including many of those discussed by Zabala – have long voiced claims about the way in which their works are meant to “shock” us into an awareness of various social crises, to focus our attention and actions on deficiencies in social justice and so on¹³. “Consciousness-raising” was once a term that feminists used for this kind of collective social practice, and the contemporary art-world is chock-full of practices that explicitly present themselves in just these terms. For some time now, what counts as “critical” in the art world is the idea of, say, “resistance” – art is deemed critical insofar as it “resists” or “challenges” unjust features of capitalist, neoliberal, bourgeois society.

Whether it makes sense to call such challenges “art” – rather than activism or consciousness-raising or “existential intervention” (Zabala’s term) – is an issue I’ll return to at the end of this review. But first I want to express a genuine puzzlement, or better, a suspicion.

To wit: why present such an uncomplicated, straightforward set of claims about art-as-activism in the form of a university-press academic book of “philosophy” or “theory,” replete with *de rigueur*, if misleading, citations of Heidegger, Gadamer, Benjamin, and company? Why propose a practical “intervention” (Zabala’s word) that is actually at odds with Heidegger’s far more circumspect understanding of art as unconcealing/concealing, and certainly at odds with Heidegger’s vies about the necessary priority of interpreting the world over changing it¹⁴ – all the while invoking Heidegger as a guiding thinker? What is going on?

There is no doubt about Zabala’s passionate sincerity when it comes to pollution or the evils of war. Without question, he

¹³ “Now that aesthetics has overcome metaphysics,” writes Zabala – we “can focus on the existential claims of art [which] enact the demands not only of art but of politics” (7). “Works of art are points of departure to change the world...” (9).

¹⁴ See Heidegger’s televised comments on Marx, for instance.

wants the world to be a gentler place. But another kind of genuineness is at issue, analogous to the issues of fraudulence and authenticity in contemporary art that I raised at the outset in reference to Cattelan's work¹⁵. To put it plainly: there is now a crisis of authenticity in academic philosophy, quite like the crisis of authenticity in contemporary art.

Consider Zabala's "use" of philosophical work in order to persuade us of something that not only does not require the invocation of philosophical writings (one can be persuaded of the political uses of "shock art" without ever reading Heidegger), but actually turns out to be difficult to reconcile with, even at odds with, the philosophical work under discussion (in this case, Heidegger's theory of art). The worry is not that Zabala himself is inauthentic – anyway, no one is duty-bound to be authentic. Rather, by offering us something that *appears to be* a "theory" or "philosophy" book – much as Cattelan offers work that can *appear to be* art – Zabala's book actually obscures, in its misleading references to Heidegger for instance, any normative appraisal of it *as* philosophy¹⁶. And this is not something Zabala is doing on his own. Like Cattelan, he is working within a context (in this case, academic "philosophy") that is currently in the grips of a deep crisis in authenticity.

Anyone working in the contemporary humanities will immediately be able to think of hundreds of titles of "theory" or "philosophy" that are the academic equivalent of Cattelan's golden toilet. I have in mind works that are obscurantist not only in that they are impenetrably written or just plain confused but, rather, obscurantist in the sense that they advance, ostensibly through discussions of canonical philosophers, ultimately straightforward or even self-evident and moralizing conclusions: "Aspects of contemporary social life are unjust and need fixing!" or, "We need to

¹⁵ I have in mind Stanley Cavell's comments about fraudulence in art, in *Music Discomposed*, in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

¹⁶ Consider Zabala's remarks from a promotional interview for *Why Only Art Can Save Us*: "I'm more interested to know what the art world will have to say about [the book] as I can predict the philosophical community's reactions to theories such as the one I explore here. A philosopher who posits that only those who thrust us into the "absence of emergency" are intellectually free today risks being marginalized as a radical who is surpassing the limits of rationality or common sense. But the problem is precisely this common sense. To be intellectually free today means disclosing the emergency at the core of the current absence of emergency, thrusting us into knowledge of those political, technological, and cultural impositions that frame our lives. I think the art world (from artists to curators and art historians) is better prepared for challenges, change, and even emergencies".

be shocked out of our complacency about catastrophic crisis!" Moralism, after all, is probably the most common form of inauthentic philosophy. Lately, it seems to permeate academic publishing in philosophy, in the kind of reader-expectations it stimulates and the sort of discursive norms it fosters, in something like the way that art-museums seem increasingly unsure of what they should display or collect.

What is wrong – one might ask – with inauthentic philosophy as long as one's morals and politics are in the right place? Well, one could begin to answer this by pointing out that the "emergencies" at issue – deficiencies in how we acknowledge real suffering, for a start – are themselves connected to the social conditions under which authentic forms of life are possible and recognizable as such. So, one can hear the passionate sincerity of a moral plea, while nevertheless wondering whether – in books like Zabala's – the "use" of philosophy in the making of that plea masks an inauthenticity that, if one thinks about it, actually goes to the heart of the social-moral emergencies whose case is being pleaded.

Heidegger is far from my own personal philosopher of choice, but I here invoke his language of "authenticity" since Heidegger, too, thought that a crisis of authenticity in the activities we undertake was at the heart of modern social crises of all dimensions. For Heidegger, the threat of fraudulence and inauthenticity arises because human being is a form of *being* for whom "being" itself is always at stake, never settled by natural or moral laws. Inauthenticity is an extremely unsettling threat, of course – typically, we flee from it or deny it. Heidegger famously saw its denial as, basically, the whole of metaphysical culture in the West after Plato. Like Socrates, Heidegger believed that the problems of social inauthenticity and philosophical inauthenticity are inextricably linked.

At any rate, surely one of the most common forms of denying the very question of authenticity is to appeal to the opinion of *others* – to accepted *doxa*, rather than to our critical judgments – in order to settle the issue of what is authentic and what is not. It's what we do, for instance, when we ask the Guggenheim or some other curated institution to tell us what counts as contemporary art, or when we turn a university press – or promotional "buzz" – to tell us what counts as contemporary philosophy. Confronted with such "buzz," readers (and reviewers) might feel as if

they are being invited to suppress their doubts – which, of course, saves a book not from doubt but from being taken seriously.

The only response to this state of affairs, it seems to me, is to give Cattelan and Zabala reinvigorated scrutiny as artists and philosophers, by way of giving contemporary art and philosophy – and, for that matter, activism – proper scrutiny as collective, authentic activities.

To that end, let me close by returning – as promised – to the question of art and politics, and to the basic question of what distinct human need(s) *art* responds to, in ways unavailable elsewhere. Obviously, the nature of art and its role in human life is far too large a question to tackle here. But invoking this immense question can at least help us point to the pitfalls that adhere in defining art merely as the vehicle for a politically critical idea, or as a “saving power” that is – as Zabala puts it – equally available in “God” or “communism” (11). This is, I would argue, an impoverished way of thinking about art’s distinctiveness, about what “only art” can do (not to mention an impoverished way to think about God or communism).

The impoverishment of Zabala’s reflections aside, one final point is worth making: just *calling* something “art” (or “political”) does not make it so. If Zabala is going to title his book *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, then the *least* he can do is to tell us what counts, in his view, as art and why. Here is the only passage I could find where an attempt in this direction is made:

“Art often works better than commercial media or historical reconstructions as a way to express and bear emergencies. A work of art, such as a song or a photograph, is not that different from other objects in the world. The difference is not one of kind but rather of degree, intensity and depth. This is evident in our everyday encounters” (7).

I should think that artworks are *very* different “from other objects in the world” – especially if they are the “only” objects that can “save” us. I should think that it is incumbent upon Zabala to tell us *how* artworks are distinctive “in kind” in a book entitled *Why Only Art Can Save Us*¹⁷. Since Zabala fails to do this, we should at least remind ourselves that whatever calls itself art, or is purchased or sold as art, might not really be art. To take art’s distinc-

¹⁷ The triumvirate – “degree, intensity and depth” – is, of course, nothing but smoke and mirrors.

tiveness seriously is to admit that one can be wrong about that distinctiveness. Beware of fraudulence.

Of course, human products that look like art can *also* do important political work – they can “intervene” in social reality in ways that we might want to applaud, or interrogate, or study. This happens all the time, and we need hardly look to the twelve “cool” artists that Zabala treats in order to see this. Hollywood movies, folk music, or protest performances can play this role, serve this need¹⁸. So can public speeches, rhetorical gestures, propaganda, emoticons, YouTube videos, street activism, pamphlets, soap boxes, flags and banners – even bumper stickers. In a generous mood, one might even imagine that all these things “save” us somehow. But, if they do, they don’t just thereby do so *as art*.

I hope it’s clear by now that the statement “only art can save us” is absurd. Even Zabala cannot really believe it’s true, since by “art” and “salvation” he just means ethical practices that might have some social or politically salutary dimension to them. Rather than reduce those practice to just *one*, to the “only” savior – art alone – we are better off heading in just the opposite direction.

That is, we should instead reconsider and engage the manifold practical ways in which human beings deal with suffering and ongoing catastrophes, taking more seriously, too, Hegel’s claim about art’s highest vocation being a “thing of the past.”¹⁹ Hegel never meant, in saying this, to suggest that art-making comes to an “end.” Rather, art itself starts to register the pastness of the hope that – wherever oppression and suffering persist, reflections on ethical life incompletely formed – art can come to the rescue and save us.

SANTIAGO ZABALA

Paul Kottman’s contribution – which originally appeared as a review titled “Fake Art and Inauthenticity in Philosophy” in *Public*

¹⁸ In a breathtaking and telling admission, Zabala writes that he only treats visual artists– not because of any essential distinctiveness of the visual arts with respect to the ‘emergency’ thematic – but because of the market-based, material demands of writing an academic book. As if the academic book form itself obviously prevented authors from treating the non-visual arts to serious discussion: “The twelve works of art that I present are all visual works, but it’s not because visual works do better at disclosing the essential emergency than other forms of art (dance, music or cinema). They are simply easier to reproduce in a book” (29).

¹⁹ See Kottman, “Hegel and Shakespeare on the Pastness of Art”, in *The Art of Hegel’s Aesthetics*, München, Fink, 2018, pp. 263-302.

Seminar, a journal of the New School, where he teaches – is very different from other critical reviews of my book.²⁰ Arne De Boever, for example, wrote a longer piece in *Boundary 2* claiming I should have given Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben more space in my account of emergency.²¹ Gregory Sholette, in the *Hong Kong Review of Books*, wonders why the figure of the “social art activist” is missing in a book on political art.²² These two scholars found loopholes that show the limits of the book but also how to overcome them by proving valuable comments and insights.

Kottman’s contribution instead is meant to demonstrate I belong to a group of philosophers, artists, and museum curators who are incompetent, “fraudulent,” and also “inauthentic.” Right from the beginning one can read “Zabala wrongly claims,” a few paragraphs later the Italian artist “Maurizio Cattelan falsely claims,” and later “the Guggenheim’s hypocrisy.”²³ Kottman also questions the integrity of the publisher (Columbia University Press) even though all manuscripts must go through a rigorous peer-review process, as he well knows. Kottman’s central message is: “beware of fraudulence.” Who knew an academic book on “emergency aesthetics after the deconstruction of metaphysics” could give the impression we were really trying to scam readers?

The best reviews or book discussions are critical because they enrich the text, providing readers with new insights and interpretations. The best criticism enhances the message and meaning of its object. But Kottman’s criticism is not constructive; it is full of resentment. I can only speculate on the origins of such hard feelings as I have never met him. Perhaps he did not approve the journal’s plan to review this book. Or he wanted to write a similar book. Or maybe he really enjoyed it but prefers to deny it. If the matter were more interesting, this would be for future psychiatrists or historians to reveal. But even though I briefly (and ironical-

²⁰ A list of reviews can be found here: <http://www.santiagoabala.com/#/interstate-1-1-1/>.

²¹ Arne De Boever, “Art and Exceptionalism: A Critique,” *Boundary 2* 45, no. 4 (2018): 161-181.

²² Gregory Sholette, “A Review of S. Zabala’s Why Only Art can Save Us,” *Hong Kong Review of Books*, August 14, 2018, <https://hkrbooks.com/2018/08/14/why-only-art-can-save-us/>.

²³ Maurizio Cattelan is the artist who created the work of art on the cover. I’m honored to be associated with Cattelan, but my only contact was with his archivist to request permission to reproduce one of his works on the cover. The Guggenheim often hosts Cattelan works.

ly) responded to Kottman two years ago in an interview, I'll attempt to say something more here.²⁴ I think it is important to recall how accusations of inauthentic art and culture often end up in acts of burning books and even incarcerating authors.

At the end of his contribution Kottman quotes Hegel's claim about art's highest vocation being a "thing of the past" but points out at the same time that he "never meant, in saying this, to suggest that art-making comes to an 'end.'" This is a strange concession from Kottman considering similar statements (my "only art can save us" or Cattelan's "America is Art") are liquidated as "absurd" or "hollow assertions." Throughout the book I explained in detail not only the meaning of this statement but also its relation to the thought of Martin Heidegger (pp. 1-2, 112-13, 126, 133, 147, 175), Hans-Georg Gadamer (10), Reiner Schürmann (1, 134), Gianni Vattimo (1, 134), Friedrich Hölderlin (132, 147), Walter Benjamin (9, 179-80), Miguel De Beistegui (147-48), and Mark C. Taylor (127), as well as concepts such as metaphysics, ontology (see the introduction), art and works of art (9, 124-26, and part 2), aesthetics (part 3), danger (p. 125), event (179), and emergency (113, 148). Ignoring this detailed analysis of art's ability "to save us" is like eliding the arguments in favor of a leftist populism in criticism of Chantal Mouffe's *For a Leftist Populism*. I don't want to imagine what he must think of Jacques Derrida's claim "there is nothing outside the text" or Judith Butler's statement "gender is performative."

If Kottman were to carefully read these philosophers' claims he would notice they are often meant to make broader arguments, one that underlines their intellectual project. This is why hermeneutics is so important. As Friedrich Schleiermacher explains, hermeneutics can help us understand a work "at first just as well and then better than its author." But Kottman's hermeneutics is selective. Not all claims and statements merit interpretation for him even though they provide arguments, examples, and references. This selectiveness is also evident in his review of my treatment of Heidegger, which he calls "confusing," "contradicting," and "misleading." Apparently one cannot turn to a classic thinker such as Heidegger for support and arrive at different conclusions. If this

²⁴ L. Franceschini, *Why Only Art Can Save Us: An Interview with Santiago Zabala*, in "Arcade" 19 (April 2018), <https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/why-only-art-can-save-us-interview-santiago-zabala>.

is true then Emmanuel Levinas should have ignored Edmund Husserl's phenomenology in formulating his concept of "the Other"; Rodolfo Kusch should not have studied Heidegger's Dasein analysis to think phenomenologically the anthropological reality of indigenous Americans; and Richard Rorty should have left aside John Dewey's pragmatism when he proposed a new pragmatism closer to Gadamer's hermeneutics. But the fact that there are many Husserlian, Heideggerians, and Deweyans who objected to Levinas's, Kusch's, and Rorty's conclusions does not mean they were wrong or inauthentic. Quite the contrary.

I could go on and provide further arguments to respond to Kottman's unfounded accusations and objections ("it quickly becomes clear that Zabala has no philosophy of art, and no account—above all, no interpretation—of the artworks he gathers together in his book as evidence for his assertion that 'art saves us' by becoming 'political' or 'existential'"), but I prefer to end with the only idea that might justify his resentment: the claim that there is a crisis of authenticity in academic philosophy and contemporary art. Whether this is the case it's too soon to know. Any judgments now will miss that broad perspective that only time can provide. But if one feels that one is writing from "God's eye view," as Kottman does, then it's easy to individuate such crises of authenticity now. Who else could distinguish so carefully between fake and real art or philosophy? This justifies his knowledge of what theory and art are supposed to be considering I offered "something that *appears to be* a 'theory' or 'philosophy' book—much as Cattelan offers work that can *appear to be* art." Kottman must agree not only with those analytic philosophers who attempted (without success) to convince Cambridge University in 1992 to avoid honoring Derrida because his assertions were "either false or trivial" but also with the board of the Society of Independent Artists, who rejected Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* in 1917, claiming it could not be considered a work of art.

In sum, according to Kottman, we (Cattelan, the Guggenheim, and Columbia University Press, and I) manage to pull this off because we are "working within a context . . . that is currently in the grips of a deep crisis in authenticity." The truth is I would be much more worried if there wasn't a "crisis in authenticity" at all. This would imply a return to metaphysics, modernity, and authoritarian regimes that decide what is and isn't authentic, true and false, and of worth and useless. Whatever is left of "crisis," as Kottman

understands it, is precisely the only spaces we have left to resist authoritarian leaders such as Trump, whom Cattelan and the Guggenheim openly to mock by offering an 18-karat, fully functioning, solid gold toilet that has been used by over 100,000 visitors. I'm glad my book is in such good company – even though there are better ones out there.

IVELISE PERNIOLA
(University of Roma Tre)

Santiago Zabala's text is an important text, because it leads to the emergence of some important reflections about the perception of reality, art and the difficult interpretation of the latter in contemporary society. I write these pages during the days of the Coronavirus emergency and I can't help but start from this very event to develop some considerations around Zabala's book. The coronavirus is indeed an emergency, one of those that were missing globally at least since the end of the Second World War, at least in our protected territory of Western democracies. Santiago Zabala is a peer of mine, we were both born in 1975, and I believe that he, like me, does not remember in forty-four years of life on this world a phenomenon similar to the one we are living in these days. September 11 was certainly a shock, but it has not changed our daily habits, which the coronavirus is doing exponentially.

This is a real emergency. I read Zabala's book in the light of this emergency and I'm driven to think that, in the end, art in the perceptual and interpretative system of the individual counts for very little. Art is too elitist to be the spokesperson of the emergency: before reading the text I didn't know any of the artists Zabala talks about, even though I deal with cinema I consider myself a discreetly cultured and curious about the expressions of others. Surely the performances around the environment, the recovery of traumatic memory, the housing emergency and the growing gap between rich and poor are fundamental, important and absolutely necessary; all these same performances touch a limited number of cultured people, interested in art and its aesthetic expressions. A derisory number in the global panorama, irrelevant from a decisional point of view and in any case extraneous both to the top of the power that controls and to the mass that suffers. So I can argue that I would very much like art to become the (strong) voice of emergency, but I consider this possibility nothing more than a

utopia. The real emergency, when it occurs, as in these weeks of forced cloistering, is played fully and exclusively on the plane of reality. The emergency of the real, the tip of the iceberg that emerges from the depths of the habit to wrong and harmful lifestyles, brings to light, around itself, also a good part of all the other latent emergencies, to which the art of which Zabala writes is scrupulous narrator.

All locked at home, without working, without having fun (so stoically without losing the route), without travelling, we understand and feel the planet breathing again and a new history perhaps reconfigured thanks to actions that men can no longer perform. The emergencies that the artists of Zabala talk about are no longer emergencies, outclassed by a greater and uncontrollable emergency that manifests itself in the only possible way, that is through fear. In the European seas, as I write, fishing has been discouraged, there will not be any balloons abandoned at sea for some time, the load of pollutants on the cities has dropped drastically, looking out of the windows today we no longer hear roaring cars but the singing of birds, factory emissions have halved, animals are free from Sunday hunters, capitalism has abandoned its fierce grip by closing the shutters of the useless and compulsive shopping, for now we can stay without the latest model of mobile phone or without the designer bag. From a social point of view there is no room for crime, no one around to buy drugs, no Saturday night high, no accidents at dawn when leaving discos, no thieves robbing houses momentarily without inhabitants, no stalkers, no maniacs, no war, no torture. The coronavirus seems almost like a metaphysical revolt of the planet against the innate human evil through the most effective means since the time of the Holy Scriptures, fear. Only through Revelation can faith in the existence of God be restored and Prometheus can run to hide.

In the face of the triumph of reality, of *bios*, how can one still defend the subversive and revolutionary charge of art? This is the first question I would like to ask Zabala. The second question, on the other hand, goes beyond the emergence of emergency in everyday life and concerns the role played by the market in the artistic context. To tell the truth, I believe that all artists who gain visibility are in some way closely related to the capitalist system that monetizes the artistic experience by incorporating it into the meshes of counter-information. In short, I think, but I could also be wrong and in this I would ask for an answer from the author,

that we get to the realization of the performance, to the media visibility of the performance only through the pacts that the artist contracts with the art market. This process is effectively described in Michel Houellebecq's novel, *The Map and the Territory* (2010), a narrator who has often used the literary medium in a provocative way to make the reader uncomfortable, to make him feel the urgency of the emergency, through a narrative form that is deeply disturbing and never condescending. Doesn't the author think that the market is still a form of control of the message and that in the end only what capital, in all its perverse forms, wants it to come to us? Perhaps Zabala's opinion is such that in the end it is indifferent whether or not art is part of the market circuit, what is important is that it exercises a salvific power for us? I would like to have an answer on this.

Another point I would like to touch on concerns the centrality of cinema and in particular the cinema of reality in this recovery of aesthetics as a form of emergency and no longer of contemplation, evasion, saturation and visual gratification. Documentary cinema in recent years has taken on certain messages, stubbornly trying to make them pass into a system that penalizes the 'creative treatment of reality', as Grierson defined it, in favour of the aesthetic illusionism of the special effect and the immersion of the spectator. In 1996 art historian Hal Foster, quoted by Zabala in his latest text in 2015, wrote an essay with the emblematic title *The Return of the Real- The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*; an essay in which the author highlights the end of the paradigms of art as a text, typical of the 1970s and of art as a simulacrum, which characterizes all the 1980s, in the name of a return of the category of the real, in art and theory, which would characterize the production of the 1990s; an art that regains contact with the bodies and the social fabric and that brings the artist back to become a mirror reflecting the drifts of the contemporary world. Hal Foster's reflection, written before the events of September 11, 2001, events through which reality becomes artistic and not art becomes realistic, becomes more relevant than ever after the direct date of contemporaneity. Since 2001, in the cinema, there is once again a misguided disconnection between reality and its representation; an increasingly anti-realistic entertainment cinema emerges (just think of James Cameron's *Avatar* in 2009, the forerunner of a hypermedial vein in which the greater the virtual immersion of the spectator, also thanks to sophisticated 3D technol-

ogies, the greater his passivity and sense of inaction with respect to the text. The blockbuster then becomes sweetened, while the witness of reality is collected by documentary cinema.

The new documentary, which in a text I defined post-documentary, is however an aesthetically ugly, hypomedial text; what emerges in the new documentary cinema is the end of the beautiful. The end of beauty, and on this point I very much agree with Zabala, inevitably marks the end of a certain aesthetic discourse, if not the end of aesthetics *tout court*. In the documentary, beauty is definitively submerged by what Adriana Cavarero²⁵ defines as the 'horrorism' of everyday life. The horrorism takes possession of the means of production and the technique adapts, abandoning the *hyper-medial* experimentations that had characterized the 90s, to adapt to a form of *hypomedial* production and therefore little or nothing relevant from an aesthetic point of view, which distinguishes the films produced for the web (of which the online site You Tube represents the most overexposed element) or the images collected from mobile phones and, by now, very small digital cameras. The elaborate, what is mediated by the artist's intervention, has given way to the fascination of the inelaborate, what is filmed instantly, on the wave of an unreasoned sensationalism, and downloaded immediately on the net. The artist then becomes a witness of the times and abdicates his millenary role as producer of images. The spectator of the new millennium is then often brought closer to the spectator of early cinema: a subject for which the technical apparatus is of greater importance than the aesthetic quality of the images shown to him, a subject for which the shocking sensationalism of a raw reality exerts more fascination than the refinements of the art of staging. None of the documentary filmmakers who achieved success between the beginning of the 2000s and today is noted for having attended a film school or for having a training as a cinephile (I am certainly thinking of Michael Moore's dominance of aesthetics in early-millennium real cinema or the observational trend of the more recent documentary, in which very often the edited images have the poor refinement of the images produced by surveillance cameras). However, the end of aesthetics as we have been accustomed to know it brings with it a consequent habituation to ugliness and a sensorial dullness towards the great expressions of human talent,

²⁵ A. Cavarero, *Orrorismo ovvero della violenza sull'inerme*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2007.

on this aspect, which Zabala punctually records, I seem to grasp a substantial resignation and I would invite the author to express his point of view on it, in a more direct way.

It seems to me, in fact, that what the real is no longer able to offer is the representation of beauty, through the mediation of the author. The photogeny of Delluc definitely belongs to the millennium that has just passed. Even the war scenario, with all its raw realism, is put in crisis by the end of aesthetics. War is no longer one of the fine arts (just think, as Susan Sontag claims in her famous essay on photography, that in recent decades, while increasing the possibilities of photographic retouching, the degree of staging of war images has decreased substantially). From the political point of view, the disaffection for beauty is already an established fact, Zabala rightly notes that democracy is already resigned to the indifference of the people towards beauty (21) and cinema has done nothing but record this resignation.

Surely in subject cinema the film that best represented this passage is certainly *Redacted* by Brian De Palma (2007), a real wise film about the new spectatorship and the irreversible crisis of the author. In *Redacted*, De Palma does not create any image, but reproduces, in a literal sense, only what is available on the net; there is no form of creation (as the director himself claims in several interviews), but only quotation. The beauty is totally expunged from the work, characterized by an assemblage of low-definition materials: images sent back by CCTV cameras, blogs of American pacifists, amateur films, executions shot on the net by Islamic terrorists, fake documentaries, TV reportages. Everything is true, real, to the maximum degree possible and at the same time false, because reproduced, reconstructed but not 'artfully', this time. On the contrary, what is striking in *Redacted* is precisely the ugliness of the image, the impossibility of finding a single aesthetically relevant image in ninety minutes of projection (the photographs relative to the so-called 'collateral damage' of the Iraqi conflict, edited at the end of the film, assume an aesthetic value not in themselves, but thanks to the sound commentary, a passage from Puccini's *Tosca*, which accompanies them). The condition of the contemporary spectator, in addition to being rendered through the fragmented and discontinuous editing of the work, becomes the implicit theme of the film itself; in which the rape of an Iraqi girl and the ferocious violence against her entire family perpetrated by a group of American marines, while being filmed

from different sources, is not actually seen, recorded by anyone. The multiplicity of points of view, the pervasiveness of the recording sources, ultimately cancel out any possibility of viewing. To support the silence and safety of the guilty is not the hypothesis of conspiracy, so dear to classic American cinema, but rather the inability, the impossibility of seeing. The disturbing presence of an acephalous eye that sees in our place and that exonerates us from any empathic intervention towards our neighbour; and here the return of reality brings with it all its contemporary nihilism, from the splendour of truth that Godard talked about Rossellini's *India*, we have come to the splendour of nothingness, or perhaps more precisely to a nothingness without any form of splendour. Reality has taken possession of the means of production, from which it has taken away the aesthetic value and now no longer controlled, dominated, interpreted, read by the spectator produces myriads of unwatchable, aphasic and acephalous images that record a horror that no one wants to put their hands on, Jean Baudrillard concludes his illuminating pre-11 September text with these words: "Is it better to be where you should not be, but where there is something to see (elsewhere than in front of your television) or where you should be, but where there is nothing to see (in front of the screen)?"²⁶. In the case of documentary cinema this dilemma is particularly topical. The observational documentary that has been depopulated in recent years places the viewer in a condition of passivity, in front of a screen, where he cannot see anything other than what he can already see from his window. After all, even the performances proposed by the artists who quote Zabala put the viewer in front of a passive vision, once the performance is over, the bearer of an environmental or political emergency (in relation to the examples given by Zabala, the militant path of a director like Lech Kowalski comes to mind in documentary cinema, author of numerous documentaries that record environmental emergencies and political emergencies), the viewer returns to his comfort zone with, perhaps, an extra awareness, but with the ill-concealed satisfaction of being at peace with consciousness only because, he believes that in the images knowledge is exhausted. Now I know, so I am fine, because I know, I am already better than those who do not know or pretend not to know. Actually, the art that has to

²⁶ J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, New York-London, Verso, 1996, p. 69.

manage an emergency, has to get out of this condition of passive spectatorship in order to introduce the action effectively.

As far as the visual arts are concerned, I see only two possibilities to make the emergency fully perceptible (although I cannot imagine the future scenarios of this violent pandemic and I cannot predict how it will change our lives). The two possibilities, in my opinion, are either the iconoclastic choice or the active participation in the change. In the first case, the artist perceives the substantial futility of his role within society and decides, in the pandemonium of images (as Derek Jarman said in his iconoclast masterpiece *Blue*), to show nothing more and to turn this choice into a revolutionary act. Somehow Guy Debord had already anticipated this possible path with the provocative *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952). The second road instead consists of active participation in change, in the management of the emergency on a small, individual scale. I as an artist cannot save the world, but I can save someone I know, make their story visible, transform their existence into a narrative, on which I can act in the first person, improving their living conditions. The proposal of a participatory cinema that breaks with the illusion of objectivity, bringing the text back to its linguistic and therefore fictional root and consequently modifiable. A similar path has been followed by Agostino Ferrente and Giovanni Piperno in all their filmography, starting from *Intervista a mia madre* (1999) and *Il film di Mario* (2000) to *Le cose belle* (2013). Ferrente and Piperno, in their path as authors, decided to follow some social actors, immediately revealing the mechanism of narrative construction, understand the social and human difficulties in which their characters are immersed and try to help them to come out of it, mainly through an attempt to realize their most secret aspirations, their dreams, their ambitions. On an international level, Crystal Mozelle's *The Wolfpack* (2013) follows a similar path, freeing a group of brothers segregated at home for years by their father through the cinema.

The examples are numerous, but the main objective of these documentary forms remains to break the illusion of objectivity and, at the same time, of objectivity in order to integrate real life in the filmic text, or rather what could be the real life of the social actors through an empathy and a form of participation shared with the authors of the film. The emergency is shared through the singular, coming out of the maximum systems and arriving at a creative form of philanthropy of everyday life. In this way we

work by pieces, by small steps; a path that even the performing arts could follow. I imagine that when Zabala writes that the truth of art resides in its capacity for transformation (p. 7) he means precisely the potential that art has to modify the existing, even starting from the minimum action, perhaps limited to the existence of a single individual, from this can still start a regeneration of art in the management and understanding of new emergencies. Art can take the place of God, using its own baggage to direct human beings towards alternative paths. We are curious, at this point, to wait for the voice of artists, when the real, first emergency of the new millennium, the pandemic, will be a narrative chapter, more understandable, more aesthetically visible.

SANTIAGO ZABALA

Ivelise Perniola's insightful response was written during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both of us were born in 1975 and have a similar perspective and experience as far as emergencies in Europe are concerned. I agree with her that the ongoing pandemic is an emergency that we've been "missing globally at least since the end of the Second World War, at least in our protected territory of Western democracies." While she mentions the terrorist attacks of 9/11, I would also add the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl in 1986, which in Vienna (where I was living at the time) was probably felt more strongly than in Italy. I remember we were not allowed to drink milk for several weeks. I also recall that many of my classmates (at the International School of Vienna) had experienced wars, genocide, and terror in their countries of origin, to which the nuclear disaster, in comparison, was of little significance (although they also missed our milk breaks).

The first objection Perniola raises concerns the reality of the pandemic. While I agree with her that the pandemic is an event whose consequences will be with us for several decades, I have some reservations about her insistence of the "reality" of this emergency. This objection is closely related to art's inability to "be the spokesperson of an emergency" and to the "role played by the market in the artistic context." These, together with other insightful observations, are at the center of Perniola's intervention, which I will attempt to respond to, hoping to clarify further some of my book's arguments.

When Perniola states that “this is a real emergency” in relation to the COVID-19, it seems she is devaluing not only other related emergencies but also the absence of this one during the years previously, when we were warned it could emerge. What is dramatic about COVID-19 is that it was an “absent emergency” until very recently; just one year ago the WHO director-general, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, warned us that the “threat of pandemic influenza is ever-present.” And David Quammen, author of *Spillover* (2012), predicted this was going to happen. This emergency is “fully and exclusively on the plane of reality” not only now that it has emerged but also was in the years of warnings. This is why questioning or stressing the reality of the pandemic does not suit well those “essential” (also called “absent” and “greatest”) emergencies that I discuss in my book. Aren’t deforestation and plastic and air pollution – which are absent emergencies – also “fully and exclusively on the plane of reality”?

What was vital for me in this book is not the reality of emergencies but rather their distinction from those “absent” or “greatest” emergencies. I’m not trying to imply the coronavirus is not a fundamental emergency that we must confront at all levels but that the greatest emergency are the ones we do not confront. These, I claim, are also real. I can only hope climate change – which is responsible for the deaths of seven million human beings every year because of air pollution – will also become a “real emergency” fought with the same unified purpose by many people as the pandemic is now. But for Perniola the pandemic represents a “triumph of reality” and a “metaphysical revolt.”

If, as a hermeneutic thinker, I tend to favor those warnings, predictions, and interpretations it is not because they turn out to become “real” but rather for the pressure they exercise against such realization. This is where art comes in. When Perniola asks “how can one still defend the subversive and revolutionary charge of art” considering “the role played by the market in the artistic context,” I feel compelled to respond “what else is there?” Scientists, in particular the ones now searching for a vaccine against COVID-19, must also operate within a market that has different priorities.²⁷ But art, unlike science, always involves a critical ele-

²⁷ A. Darzi, *The Race to Find a Coronavirus Treatment Has One Major Obstacle: Big Pharma*, in “The Guardian”, April 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/02/coronavirus-vaccine-big-pharma-data>.

ment meant to stir our existence. This element ought to be particular evident in the artists I chose to examine as thrusting us into absent emergencies, considering that most of them are not in the art market. I agree with Perniola when she states the “market is still a form of control of the message and that in the end only what capital, in all its perverse forms, wants it to come to us.” However, this does not imply that there is no possibility to resist or confront the market. The example of Banksy’s *Girl with Balloon* intervention at a 2018 auction at Sotheby’s demonstrates this. Whether a work of art is part of the market circuit is irrelevant as long as it thrusts us into absent emergencies—that is, rescues us into emergency.

Perniola turns to cinema and documentaries to question the difficult relation between truth and beauty any philosopher dealing with art must confront. As her research demonstrated²⁸ “what emerges in the new documentary cinema is the end of the beautiful,” an end that “brings with it a consequent habituation to ugliness and a sensorial dullness towards the great expressions of human talent.” Together with Michael Moore and Brian De Palma I would also add Oliver Stone whose documentaries on Castro and Chavez too often are forgotten. These documentaries (similarly to the examples of Steven Soderbergh, Dmitry Lipkin, and Colette Burson I make in the book), not only rescue us into absent emergencies, but also “mark the end of a certain aesthetic discourse” as Perniola points out. But the “consequent habituation to ugliness and a sensorial dullness towards the great expressions of human talent” does not “grasp a certain resignation” as much as a responsibility towards the emergencies. This responsibility is evident in art’s superiority to commercial media or historical reconstructions as a way to express and bear emergencies. The difference, for example, between Moore’s documentary “Bowling for Columbine” (2002) and Gus Van Sant movie “Elephant” (2003) is not one of kind but rather of degree, intensity, and depth. Documentaries can be truthful, but rarely as powerfully as its cinematic narration as in the case of Van Sant. Something similar occurs with climate change: how is it possible teenager activist Greta Thunberg mobilizes more people than respected philosopher of science Bruno Latour?

²⁸ I. Perniola, *L’era postdocumentaria*, Milano, Mimesis, 2014.

There are two points at the end of Perniola's brilliant contribution that I want to clarify: the need to "make the emergency fully perceptible" and art ability "to take the place of God." In the first paragraph of my book's introduction I criticize those who interpreted the word "God" too literally in Heidegger statement "only a God can still save us." These ignored that to the German thinker God was simply another realm where Being and truth takes place as he explained in "The Origin of the Work of Art." The other places can be the "essential sacrifice," "founding a state," or a "work of art." I do not think art ought or can take the place of God, science, or philosophy. The issue is who manages to rescue us into the greatest emergency. Also, this emergency can never be "fully perceptible." Climate change or refugee crisis are impossible to fully perceive. In this condition we can only strive to interpret, that is, intervene existentially in those absent emergencies that concern us and environmental artist have been working on for decades.

Notes on Contributors

Santiago Zabala is ICREA Research Professor of Philosophy at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. He is the author or editor of thirteen books and has written for *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *Al-Jazeera*. His most recent book is *Being at Large: Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

Daniela Angelucci is professor of Aesthetics at the University of Roma Tre. She is the author of *L'oggetto poetico*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2004; *Filosofia del cinema*, Carocci, Roma, 2013; *Deleuze and the concepts of cinema*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014.

Amanda Boetzkes is professor of contemporary art history and theory at the University of Guelph. She is the author of *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (MIT Press, 2019), *The Ethics of Earth Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), and co-editor of *Heidegger and the Work of Art History* (Ashgate, 2014).

Paul Kottman is an Associate Professor of Literary Studies at the New School. He is the author of *Love as Human Freedom* (Stanford University Press, 2017); *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); *A Politics of the Scene* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

Ivelise Perniola is professor of Film history at the University of Roma Tre. She is the author of *Chris Marker, o Del film-saggio*, Lindau, Torino, 2003; *Oltre il neorealismo: documentari d'autore e realtà italiana del dopoguerra*, Bulzoni, Roma 2004; *L'immagine spezzata. Il cinema di Claude Lanzmann*, Kaplan, 2007; *L'era post-documentaria*, Mimesis, 2014; *Gillo Pontecorvo, o Del cinema necessario*, ETS, 2016.