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**J. DERRIDA AND J. KOSUTH: THE TYRANNY OF THE LETTER  
OR ART FOR PHILOSOPHY**

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*Abstract*

This paper focuses on analysing Jacques Derrida's aesthetic thought with reference to the conceptual art of Joseph Kosuth. The examination of Derrida's aesthetics in the context of conceptual art is based upon, *inter alia*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Margins of Philosophy*. American conceptual art is regarded as a sign of a peculiar language crisis diagnosed by the French philosopher. The paper examines Derrida's dialectics of presence and absence, the infinite and the temporal in the context of colour and plane. Negation of negation (line) forms space, states Derrida. Analogously, the negation of traditional art forms conceptual mental space. I analyse the implications of Kosuth's theoretical statements with reference to his volume entitled *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, preceded by J.-F. Lyotard's introduction. Kosuth's *Art as Idea as Idea* aims to engage and confront thought, language and artworks. Devoid of the attraction of colour and governed by the rigorous logic of the line and typography, the aesthetic value of Kosuth's concept of idea defines not only art after philosophy, to refer to Kosuth's terms, but also art *for* philosophy.

**Keywords:** *parergon*, interdisciplinarity, conceptual art, *difference*.

At the outset of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, one finds an apostrophe to language and writing, an announcement of a closure, and an affirmation of a beginning. The rhetorical mastery of this introduction has been appreciated by many critics. In relation to this passage, Christopher Johnson notes: "The Exergue is an extremely dramatic piece of writing, with a very strong sense of historical conjuncture. It announces the closure of an epoch, or at least our emergent apprehension of such a closure, and anticipates a monstrous future." (Johnson 2011, 3). This future, according to Derrida, will be determined by the 'problem of language'. Being the silent and secret witness of any meaning-negotiations process, language has never directed its critical and ironical potential against itself in a more apparent manner than today. It has posed a problem to itself, a problem that would have to be reformulated and solved within the very system that generated it. As Derrida phrased it:

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However the topic is considered, the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others. But never as much as at present has it invaded, *as such*, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology. [...] It indicates, as if in spite of itself, that a historico-metaphysical epoch *must* finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon. (Derrida 1997, 6)

The role and significance of language and its critical analysis have become, in contemporary times, a fundamental issue, shaping a variety of fields and discourses, and perhaps most surprisingly, the domain of visual arts – as well. In particular, it has left a mark on the work of Joseph Kosuth, an artist born in 1945 in the United States (Toledo, Ohio), and thus fifteen years younger than Jacques Derrida. The suggested (not explicit however) relationship between an American artist and a French philosopher is the topic of the considerations raised in this paper.

Joseph Kosuth, regarded as one of the main representatives of American conceptual art, has made a radical attempt to re-examine the relationships between art, language, and philosophy. His famous statement that “art emerges as philosophy made concrete” (Schwarz 1989, 121) may indirectly indicate his debt to Derrida’s thought. Although Kosuth never explicitly referred to Derrida as the source of his inspiration, it seems to exist some (not very clear, although discernible) traces of his influence. As evidence for this correspondence, one could consider the inclusion of quotations from Derrida as elements of autobiographical photo-collages exhibited in Soho Photo Gallery in 2000. The thread of Kosuth’s philosophical interests, which he himself sanctioned, saying repeatedly that “philosophy is now closer to art” (Schwarz 1989, 23), leads directly to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of language games and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. These two approaches, at least, have been indicated by Kosuth directly, as the source of his philosophical and artistic inspiration. Yet, neither the philosophy of Wittgenstein nor Freud’s psychoanalysis expose the significant role of writing, which links Kosuth’s art to Derrida’s philosophy, constituting an important component of both systems. In this light, art of the American artist is not, paraphrasing his own wording, “philosophy made concrete” (Schwarz 1989, 45), but rather a concrete philosophy of a concrete philosopher – Jacques Derrida.

Kosuth explicated his artistic decisions in the aesthetic or philosophical statements that took the form of complex treaties, articles, interviews and commentaries to his exhibitions. His most famous publications were collected in a comprehensive anthology titled *Art after Philosophy and After. Collected Writings 1966-1990* (published in 1991), preceded by a preface by Jean-François Lyotard. It is a unique collection of essays that constitute philosophical accounts and explanations of his artistic experimentation. Another source of Kosuth’s thought used in this paper is a volume of interviews: *Joseph Kosuth:*

*Interviews. 1969-1989.* It seems that the very attitude of the artist-philosopher is worth considering for the light it throws upon the nature of his interest in the re-evaluation of already existing patterns and divisions.

The radicalism of Kosuth's attitude as an artist-theorist or anthropologist, as he would be willing to identify himself, involves abandoning painting or other traditional forms of imagery in art in favor of the textual, and this radical gesture should be regarded as an innovation in the field of interdisciplinarity. He remarks upon his critical involvement as follows:

If being an artist today means questioning the nature of painting, for example, then the nature of art cannot be questioned. If an artist accepts painting, or sculpture, he or she accepts the tradition which accompanies it. [...] Painting is a kind of art, and if that is accepted, the traditional separation between painting and sculpture established by European culture is also accepted. What however is the function and nature of art? Let's imagine that the forms of art are a language. We can say then that a work of art is a kind of proposition about art presented within the context of art. Works of art, in this perspective, become what is called in philosophy analytic propositions, that means tautologies, or in other words, pure repetitions from a pragmatic point of view. (Schwarz 1989, 55)

The discussion on theory that frames art brings up Derrida's topic of *parergon*. Kosuth's publications from the 60s and 70s indicate the potential of research and creativity which lies in the interdisciplinary understood as a parergonal relation of art and philosophy, theory and practice that will become the main focus of my argument.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I will examine the work of Kosuth in the context of Derridian concept of writing, with additional reference to Lyotard's introduction. The analogy between the significant role of language (especially in Derrida's concept of writing), and almost entirely language-textual nature of Kosuth's art will be crucial in my argument.

The issue of transdisciplinarity in postmodernism, despite the allegations of its anti-intellectualism, fascination with mass culture and the aesthetics of kitsch, seems to become, in this light, rather a response to diversity and stark contrasts. This uniquely postmodern urge to exceed the limits of narrow disciplines and to enclose theoretical reflection derives from the Renaissance tradition of universality. Not indifferent to intellectual stimuli, Kosuth's approach to artistic creation requires first and foremost an appropriate attitude of an artist who may undertake theoretical inquiry to conceptualize his

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<sup>2</sup> Derridian topics of the *parergon* and the frame bring up the discussion on the mutual relationship of the visual and the narrative in Kosuth's approach. In 'Within the Context: Modernism and Critical Practice' Kosuth states: "It is through making the effort to *see* that our 'frame of discourse' is *itself* made visible, as it limits and defines the visible. Our frame of discourse is with us; we make it as we try to leave it. When we pretend to have left it, we speak in ignorance as it speaks through us. It is in seeing it that we confront it, in terms which force its alteration. It is such 'alterations' which, within an engaged understanding such as art, suggested a critical and emancipatory enterprise." (Kosuth 1991, 168).

intentions. Therefore, the modus of artist-theorist-philosopher should be recognized as one of the norms possible in contemporary times.

In addition to Kosuth, one can refer to other American artists drawing inspiration from their philosophical inquiry, such as Mark Rothko – known for his fascination with Kierkegaard, and Barnett Newman – a painter, but also an author of essays on contemporary aesthetics, including *The Sublime is Now* (“Tiger’s Eye”, December 1948). On the other hand, in 1990, a philosopher – Jacques Derrida – was involved in curating an exhibition (*Memoirs of the Blind*) for the Louvre Museum. Those attempts to cross the borders separating disciplines and (Kantian) faculties suggest not so much the desire for totality, but rather certain reluctance to closed forms.

### I. The Crisis and the Heyday of Language

The self-reflexivity of language, or metalanguage, has become the distinctive motto of the postmodern era. So far, the mechanisms of language seem to have worked efficiently enough so that the resistance of the matter of language has been an issue solely relevant to poets, scientists, and fools. Nowadays, however, as Derrida claims, the links of this previously efficient communication device do not move as soundlessly as before. The deconstructive rust has revealed what had constituted a stylish framing of meaning. In other words, the signifier has become more perceptible than the signified; or else, the frame dominated the content. This shift has taken place not so much through the process of intensification, but rather through weakening and disintegration since, according to the principles of deconstruction, weakness attracts more attention.

Revealing the invisible patterns of language structures, Jacques Derrida’s thought elucidated the problem of language as such. The very act of pointing to the potential weakness of language, through inscribing this issue in the matter of the textual, has been, at the same time, an act of perpetuating and validating the problem of writing as a guarantee of coherency among the variety of postmodern jargons. Notably, *The Program* begins with an observation:

By a slow movement whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language is beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under, the name of writing. By a hardly perceptible necessity, it seems as though the concept of writing [...] is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. (Derrida 1997, 6-7)

Derrida depicts the state of contemporary “historico-metaphysical epoch”, as such which “*must* finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon” (Derrida 1997, 6). Elaborating further, he claims:

It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play but also because, for the same reason, language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and *guaranteed* by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (Derrida 1997, 6)

The devaluation or crisis of language is also a symptom; even more so, it is a symptom of language being menaced in its very life, which turned into a state of intensified activity threatened by the potential ultimate exhaustion of strength.

Paradoxically – as Derrida points out – too much attention devoted to a single aspect may indicate certain weakness of this point. Crisis which has affected language caused it to become “helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment its limits seem to disappear.” (Derrida 1997, 9) As a result, language has torn new transitions to subjugate new territories, and one of these newly seized domains is art. As Derrida remarked in 1988:

I wanted to recall that the concept of the text I propose is limited neither to the graphic, nor to the book, nor even to discourse, and even less to the semantic representational symbolic ideal, or ideological sphere. What I call ‘text’ implies all the structures called ‘real’, ‘economic’, ‘historical’, socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that ‘there is nothing outside the text’. (Gaston 2011, XXII)

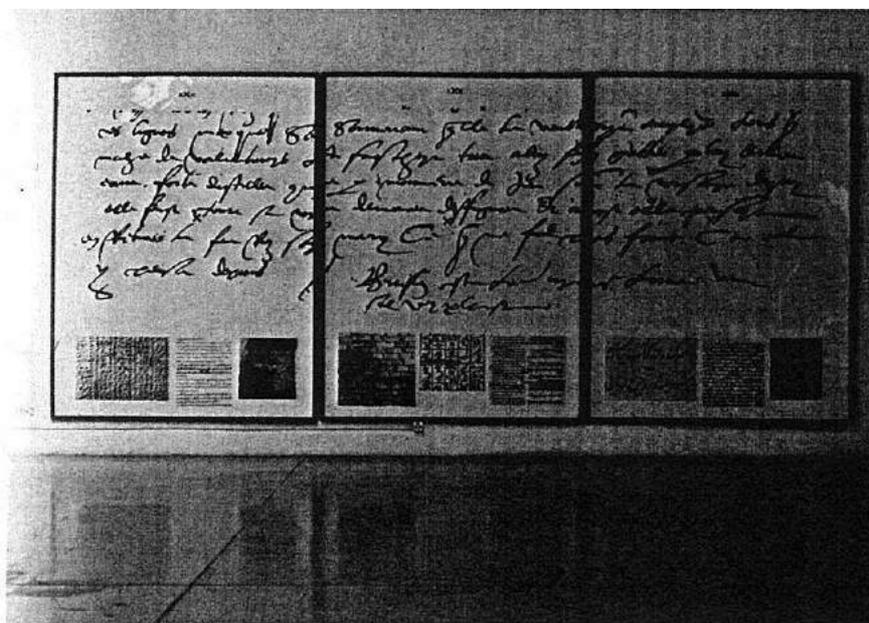
In this context, his most famous claim that “there is nothing outside of the text” could be paraphrased in Kosuth’s manner: art is never outside the text or there is no art outside of the text. If Kosuth’s art has become a certain parole of language<sup>3</sup>, perhaps this suggestion reveals a deeper source of permutations occurring in and around language. In the relation art-philosophy, the theoretical component, having as yet only a subordinate function with respect to the first element of the dominant artistic practice, was rehabilitated and placed at the focal point. A similar shift has affected the dichotomy art/writing. This change, in turn, seems somehow equivalent to the reversal of the speech/writing order observed by Derrida. Furthermore, Derrida points to a certain crisis of writing itself. The anticipated death of the book can lead to its rebirth in newly created forms, some of which are already present – as Derrida writes – in fields such as biology (and the discovery of the genetic code writing), cybernetics, policy, military, and, most interestingly, “pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing’.” However, he makes no references to specific manifestations of this phenomenon in art. Therefore, the following analysis could fill this gap.

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<sup>3</sup> Kosuth defines the terms *langue* and *parole* as follows: “Philosophical (theoretical) language is (momentarily) a *parole* within the *langue* of art.” (Kosuth, 1991, 162).

It seems that by inscribing Kosuth's linguistic art in the philosophical discourse on the crisis and domination of writing, the relationship of art and philosophy appears closer, as confirmed by art as well (which, according to Kosuth's plan, was to become the future form of philosophy). Certain universality and significance of these processes is reflected by the fact that a phenomenon described in French philosophy echoed and was almost immediately confirmed in American, and then British art (Language Art) of the 60s and 70s. Theory and experiment in art were in an unprecedented vicinity not only due to the thematic convergence. Possibly, art itself fell victim to this turn, because it is theory that subdued art rather than *vice versa*. However, this temporary victory is marked by overprinting the graphic abstraction of a letter in a concrete matter of art.

In the conclusion of the essay *The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing*, Derrida praised Hegel for highlighting the role of writing in a philosophical discourse. As he pointed out, it was Hegel who "reintroduced [...] the essential necessity of the written trace in a philosophical discourse – that is to say Socratic – discourse that had always believed it possible to do without it: the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing" (Derrida 1997, 26). One could also apply Derrida's remarks to the relation of art and philosophy, as Kosuth's conceptualism has made apparent. Notably, Kosuth's *Art as Idea as Idea* concerns the essential necessity of a written trace in a work of art. Therefore, Kosuth would be one of the first artists of a new variety of art – the art of writing.



## II. Thought Is Art

“Thought is art,” (Lyotard, 199, XVI) notes J.-F. Lyotard in his introduction to *Art after Philosophy* – Kosuth’s theoretical statement on conceptual art. The relation of art and philosophy is close in Kosuth’s art since “words are revealed as things (as expressed by the Hebrew word *davar*), signifiers are grasped as enigmas, writing is set down as a material thing” (Lyotard, 199, XVI), according to Lyotard. Furthermore, in *Art after Philosophy* Kosuth claims that “language in art is no longer as invisible as it used to be – this is something basically culturally philosophical” (Schwarz 1989, 24). Art and theory, object and text, used to function as parallel and correlate, yet separate mechanisms with no common part. Kosuth’s proposition was radical: to eliminate one of them – that is a representation and to replace it with the other – analysis, which is always modified by the context. This decision was all the more surprising since it has been taken by an artist, the subject of reduction being art (at least in its present form). With regard to traditional art he speaks in an interview titled: *A arte mundo* from 1987 in the following words:

Where do we begin? We begin with a meaning giving/making context always and already provided. With art there is the potential for working directly within a fabric of meaning giving/making systems, but this is denied by a traditionalized art where the form speaks in advance of what the artist wants to say. The forms of authority of a traditionalized practice beget, repetitiously, not only their own forms, but the authority to make them. (Schwarz 1989, 117)

If a result of this shift is art devoid of aestheticism, it also imposes new rules of perception. If art is an extension of our experience, **one needs to acquire a new skill of experiencing texts as artworks**. In Kosuth’s work, this takes a form of dictionary definitions printed on sheets of paper, or quotes placed on walls, the floor, and the ceiling of a gallery. The recognition of the hegemony of text allows him to use images only as a supplement and an ironic reflection on the function of reproduction in art (as in the case of the famous photograph of a chair confronted with its photograph and its dictionary definition). Perception of art, defined by Kosuth as art after philosophy, involves an act of deciphering or contemplating the interplay of “the relations between the relations” (Schwarz 1989, 43), which reveals the cultural weight of writing as that which transcends the borders defined by old schemes of beauty or individual talent. Even more interesting is Kosuth’s self-directed questioning, as he strives to redefine the notion of an artist (that is also his own role) in such a way as to take over the role and the competence of a linguist, a philosopher, an anthropologist, and a psychoanalyst.

Rejecting the decorative function of art, Kosuth points to a new transgressive form in artistic creation that finds its materialization in writing. Notably, the theoretical record of his thinking is an integral part of his creative

explorations, and the new form of art, the birth of which he advocates, appears to depend on language not less than philosophy or science. In his famous interview from 1970 entitled *Joseph Kosuth: Art as Idea as Idea* Kosuth states:

Inherent in the artist's intentions are his ideas, and the new art is dependent on language not much less than philosophy or science. (...) I had used definitions in a different kind of work using objects inspired by philosophy I had been reading. (...) I realized that I could use the definitions alone involving my dilemma about formless form – in other words, by just presenting art as idea. (Schwarz 1989, 13-14)

In this paradoxical way, research undertaken by Kosuth in two important and independent fields of art and philosophy was comparable. Interestingly enough, Derrida's privileging of the materialization of the spoken word and Kosuth's parallel dematerialization of art seem to reflect a common thesis on the fundamental role of writing, both in art and in philosophy.

Not only in *Of Grammatology* does Derrida rethink writing with reference to a universal code of articulation of *différance*, but he also defines writing as a guarantee of the internal consistency of anthropology (notably, anthropology is also Kosuth's main point of reference). Derrida quotes Leroi-Gourhan's definition of anthropology based on treating the ability to write as an interpretation of universal progress.

As Derrida notes:

Since "genetic inscription" and the "short programmatic chains" regulating the behavior of the amoeba or the annelid up to the passage beyond alphabetic writing to the orders of the logos and of a certain *homo sapiens*, the possibility of the *grammè* structures the movement of its history according to rigorously original levels, types, and rhythms. But one cannot think them without the most general concept of the *grammè*. (Derrida 1997, 84)

The language itself, in its present form, constitutes only a certain "phenomenon, an aspect, a species of writing" (Derrida 1997, 8). Should conceptual art be considered a transitory mode, a species of Derrida's writing? This point of view shows that a sight horizon unexpectedly turned into a horizon of thought. It seems that one should locate Kosuth's art within this horizon, being careful not to neglect its philosophical undertones.

In *The Outside and the Inside* Derrida examines the acts of aggression of writing, through which "the tyranny of writing goes even further. By imposing itself upon the masses, spelling influences and modifies language. This happens only in highly literary languages where written texts play an important role." (Derrida 1997, 41). The tyranny of the letter observed by Kosuth reaches equally deep, enclosing the field of mass art. It is a massive, anonymous crowd on the streets of big cities, such as New York, that is the intended audience: the viewer and the reader of Kosuth's surprisingly balanced formulas that are often deployed on billboards, buildings' facades, or in press advertisements. In this

way, the predictions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, quoted by Derrida, came true in the twentieth century, in a surprising context of the visual arts.

### III. The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing

With regard to the fundamental role of language in his art, Kosuth says:

It was the system of language itself which I felt held great implications when considered in relation to art which interested me. I've been very wary of using words as objects – concrete poetry and that sort of things. It's been thinking about language as a cultural system parallel to art which makes it useful, both in theory and in practice. [...] I've been working on games and other meaning generating systems. [...] So instead of working with the relations between objects, or forms, like most art. I'm trying to do work with the relations between relations. The work with common objects was a simple start, but those works are static. I want this work to be more dynamic – **less of an illustration and more of a text.** (Schwarz 1989, 43)<sup>4</sup>

In this section, I will show how, in the work of Kosuth, thinking becomes art, and words become the counterparts of color (according to Lyotard's interpretation) or the visual perception – a synonym of mental recognition.

Fragmentary though never intentionally finalized, Kosuth's projects necessarily require the act of completion. They correspond to the idea of a Derridian text based on a movement between an entity and its parts, the signifier and the signified, presence and absence. Kosuth's art, which often consists of displaced quotes, confirms Derrida's claim concerning the "exhaustion" of the book as a form, which "exposes the surface of the text." The exposed surface of the text, devoid of narrative continuity, turned out to be, unexpectedly, an interesting material for experimentation in the visual arts. Notably, Kosuth's installations seem to have developed around the idea of the deconstructed book.

As Derrida states in the conclusion of the section entitled *The Signifier and Truth*:

The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and, as I shall specify later, against difference in general. If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the

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<sup>4</sup> Although Kosuth distances his art from experimental poetry, one can trace some correspondences between Kosuth's art and par example San Francisco Language Poetry of the 60's, termed by Fredrick Jameson an exercise in discontinuity and a play with an open disjunctive form.

destruction of the book, as it is now under way in all domains, denudes the surface of the text. (Derrida 1997, 18)

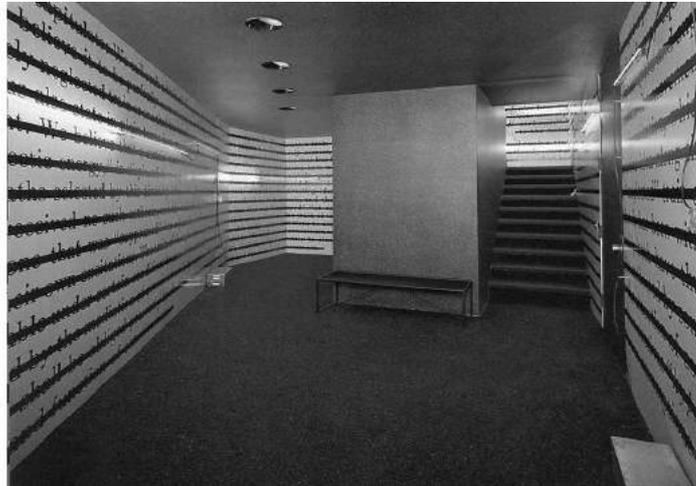
Deconstruction of writing does not only reveal its weakness, on the contrary – it emphasizes and highlights the conflict described by Derrida in terms of force, violence, desire and commitment. Deconstruction of the book, the idea of writing as such, triggers even more mysterious and centrifugal energy which disappears into fragmented structures, such as quotations used in the works of conceptual art. In this way, the diagnosis of Derrida seems to be prophetic for Kosuth's textual art.

Although art requires a surface, the surfaces of the canvases or walls (as it is the case of Kosuth's installations) are seldom appropriated by writing. In this sense, the work of the American conceptualist is very innovative, being at the same time illustrative in relation to Derridian apology of writing.

Moreover, the fragmentary nature of the narrative in Kosuth's art seems to have been imposed by the currently dominant model of perception. It is an involuntary perception composed of specific, relatively short-lived, acts of sensory perception rather than a coherent narrative. Deconstructing the unity of a text by isolating sentences (which can be absorbed both visually and mentally), Kosuth undermines the idea of a rigid boundary between art and language or between art and its criticism. The language of his art is a materialized language; its value and shape are also not indifferent to the reader's eye. Kosuth's *art after philosophy*, according to his own formulation, is an art that engages both the eye and the mind, stimulates the search for perceptual harmony, and the logic of the (deconstructed) narrative. In other words, it is an art that one can contemplate while reading.

The moment of coincidence, when the letter freezes in its material form takes place, according to Lyotard's commentary to Kosuth's writings, both after and prior to philosophy. Thus, sentences become events of the same category as with any art of visual and tangible structure. In the introduction to the main collection of Kosuth's essays titled *Foreword: After The Words*, Lyotard draws attention to this very moment, in which thought itself becomes art and the intangible gains a time-space based existence in a form of the materiality of the letter. In a metaphorical way, Lyotard creates analogies between the role of individual words and the meaning of color in paintings. Radically rejecting decorative nuances of color as a form of art, Kosuth replaces the matter of painting with the matter of words and its graphic expression. A new form of art – in his view – is to be based on a game of harmony or disharmony of interdependances, always considered in a wider social, cultural, and historical context (hence Kosuth's often-repeated phrase: relations between the relations). In this perspective, Kosuth's art is allegorical through the figure of association of color with word games. "Words are the medium for language, as color for the

visual perception, or sounds for the hearing” as Lyotard notes (Lyotard 1991, 20). Implanted in the domain of the visual, alien to them, words become silent, as the silent irony of writing, which Derrida describes in *Différance*. Isolated sentences gain the material, time-space based existence, the temporary presence in the here-and-now, and lose some of their adherence to presence postponing mechanisms of semantics. What is the correct reading of Kosuth’s extensive theoretical comments on his own linguistic creativity? – asks Lyotard, suggesting that, like any interpretation of language art (and thus also his and mine) is nothing more or nothing less than a next figure of language, superimposed over a writing-based gesture of Kosuth. The final conclusion drawn from these parallels is the paradoxical statement that since language is art, art theory is also art. *Art after Philosophy* postulated by Kosuth, turns into quasi-philosophy – as Lyotard notes and, consequently, philosophy or theory take over many of the functions and privileges traditionally belonging to the domain of art. Kosuth repeatedly indicates that modern art is a contemporary and future mode of thinking, arguing that the dominant role of the philosophy, in its hitherto known form, has come to an end. In the future, the helm of thinking will be taken by a new form of intelligent paraphilosophical art. The predicted transformation of art into philosophy and, conversely, philosophy into art should not take the form of a simple scheme based on a reversal. A new expected quality will be rather closer to what Derrida describes as a fundamental necessity of the trace of the philosophical in the language of art.



Negation

Derrida’s *différance* lies in the difference between creativity and thought, and at the same time it transgresses it to appear in ever new forms of art and

reflection generated by its own dynamics. In this section, I will demonstrate how the gesture of crossing out places the concept of being and the concept of writing in a certain vicinity. I will pose the following question: should Kosuth's conceptual art, viewed from the perspective of Derrida's philosophy, be considered a new (albeit temporary) resurgent form of writing? For Derrida, language is an extremely privileged medium of discovery and concealment. Using such phrases as: "the dead letter" (Derrida 1997, 17) or "Western metaphysics [...] as the domination of a linguistic form," (Derrida 1997, 23) Derrida points out that semantics and etymology of the Greek word "be" was the basis for Heidegger's philosophical thought.

Heidegger occasionally reminds us that "being," as it is fixed in its general syntactic and lexicological forms within linguistics and Western philosophy, is not a primary and absolutely irreducible signified, that it is still rooted in a system of languages and an historically determined "significance," although strangely privileged as the virtue of disclosure and dissimulation; particularly when he invites us to meditate on the "privilege" of the "third person singular of the present indicative" and the "infinitive." Western metaphysics, as the limitation of the sense of being within the field of presence, is produced as the domination of a linguistic form. To question the origin of that domination does not amount to hypostatizing a transcendental signified, but to a questioning of what constitutes our history and what produced transcendentality itself. Heidegger brings it up also when in *Zur Seinsfrage*, for the same reason, he lets the word "being" be read only if it is **crossed out** (*kreuzweise Durchstreichung*). (Derrida 1997, 23)

In this context, art deriving from the language system may be seen as proximate not so much to philosophy as to the truth of being, manifesting itself through the forms of language. While privileging poetry seems to be characteristic of Heidegger, Kosuth strongly rejects associating art with the lack of precision and metaphorical language experiments typical of poetry. In this way, however, he makes his art even more mysterious. The social context – the confrontation with a popular audience, and the mechanisms of everyday life, and – emphasized by Kosuth repeatedly – anthropological aspects, in fact point to aims that are wider than just purely aesthetic.

One of the figures, 'rhetorics of writing', or technical procedures, which may indicate some unobvious relationship between Derrida's and Kosuth's thought is the gesture of crossing out. Do horizontal black lines obscuring regular text letters painted on the walls in the project *No Exit* have solely aesthetic or compositional function, or are they a 'merely negative symbol'? (Heidegger 1958, 31) As a proper interpretation of this gesture, one may point out similar procedures indicated in the paragraph quoted above, where the word "being" is crossed out. These deletions are apparently significant and purposeful, perhaps more important than the literal meaning of words, because they reveal the matter of "the final writing of an epoch" (Derrida 1997, 23). Beneath the blurred lines the presence of the transcendental signified disappears – while

remaining clear. The sign – blurred and destroyed, as Derrida writes – unveils through its disappearance.

It seems meaningful that the gesture of crossing out occurs in the late works of Kosuth. The work of deconstruction, although discreetly and originally present in his work from the beginning, unfolds gradually, with an increasing uncertainty as to its own direction. The movements of deconstruction always result in a transformation of existing structures that causes tremors. Derrida asserts, “they are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures” (Derrida 1997, 24). Therefore, the gesture of crossing out is revealed in the late work of Kosuth to emphatically confirm its inner deconstructive nature. This project was initially based on the difference between the discourse of writing and its artistic representation, and as a result of even more consistent permutations, it revealed the difference of discourse in relation to itself. Thus, the gesture of crossing out becomes “the principle of death and of difference in the becoming of being” (Derrida 1997, 25) and art. Following Derrida, one can argue that conceptual art transgresses the immediate presence of the sign.

In the context of Kosuth’s often repeated phrase (relations between the relations), the word “between” becomes a synonym of difference. It is in it and through it that the deconstructive nature of Kosuth’s writing is disclosed. In-between the text and its negation, this gesture reveals its irrationality, being described by Kosuth almost in terms of a scientific experiment. However, the purposelessness of this action marks the difference with respect to the research of an anthropologist, psychologist or sociologist, to whom Kosuth often compares himself. This difference is Kant’s “purposefulness without a purpose,” which, as a universal feature of art, is adequate also in relation to the art of this American artist, notwithstanding his quasi-scientific statements about the practical application of his analysis of art. In his late projects Kosuth more explicitly deconstructs the idea of writing, possibly, influenced by Derrida’s well-known statement: “*différance* is”. (Derrida 1982, 6)

The basis of this comparison is a very significant role of writing in both concepts. Writing preserves that which has become blurred in speech. It has a potential of universality, and due to its visual presence, becomes an easy subject of artistic experiments. In Hegel’s account, according to Derrida, the best spirit of writing is writing of the spirit, which he defines further by referring to the concept of the sublime. The space of writing seems refined, because “all that by which it sublimates space and sight, all that makes of it the writing of history, the writing, that is, of the infinite spirit relating to itself in its discourse and its culture” (Derrida 1997, 25) – Derrida claims.

#### IV. Lines, Billboards and Gaps

Kosuth's goal of seeking what art means outside the traditional frame provided the possibility to observe how art acquires meaning. Even though Kosuth insists on the significance of meaning in his experiments, one could also analyze his art as a tribute to or a manifestation of the privileged function of writing. The aim of Kosuth's early work was a diagnosis of a general crisis of art. As a result of his rejection of the limits of representation, he relocated art within the context of language and society to reveal the linguistic foundations of culture. In his remarks on Wittgenstein, Kosuth states that: "drawing out the relation of art to language began the production of language whose very function it was to *show* rather than to *say*." (Kosuth 1991, 248) Although Kosuth strongly emphasized the conceptual aspect of his work, rather than its visual graphic component such as design, the physical presence of the text (specific arrangement of letters and words, black and white lines surrounding the void) has always remained a significant factor and a distinctive feature of his work. The tyranny of the letter, observed by Derrida, has, in this way, become more apparent at a much deeper level as it conquered the domain of mass media and influenced the language itself, altering it in the same way that it had altered art.

One might venture to place the need for further transformation of writing within the future history of art. Kosuth's insistence on the graphic linearity could rightly be seen as parallel to several of Derrida's arguments concerning aesthetics, such as the concept of linearity. Inherent in every scheme of historical development, the linear model of presence should, according to Derrida, always be considered in relation to the unfolding of presence as differentiation. Each occurrence of difference is possible only as a result of the confrontation of two entities or points. As Derrida notes, the relation of two points in space or time requires a description in terms of line and a linear scheme. Once started, the process inevitably leads to a differentiation of linearity, because the restitution of unity and thinking about entity will be possible only on the assumption of the concept of line. The process of linearization and the notion of line itself imply certain restrictions that are felt as a limitation at the same time as the possibility of line emerges, further defined by Derrida in terms of: "discernibility, distinction, separation, *diastem*, spacing." (Derrida 1997, 18). In this light, Kosuth's graphic articulation of his idea of art as language becomes an attempt to recapture this original linear nature, both in its material and abstract terms. In the later sense, the linearity of writing implicates the linearity of the visual. In Kosuth's late work, where linearity becomes a significant issue, re-thinking of Wittgenstein and, perhaps, Derrida's philosophy marks a shift from an analytic to a more dialectical approach. After this shift of emphasis, Kosuth aims for art that would reflect the

deeper structure of language, defined further as “relations between the relations.” (Schwarz 1989, 43) Moreover, he depicts the model of those relations in an apparently linear manner, as a series of events conjoined by the linear movement of sense production. As he explains his work:

There are no intrinsic meanings in an object or image, the meaning is always in relationship to society, in relation to what preceded it with what it is sharing, and in relation to what follows. It is in the series. We have one word, maybe this one, flowing to the next and then to the next, and we have a sentence and then another one and then, always this sentence, and the next one, and this paragraph, and the one that followed which become this text, which is part of several conventions that make up that discourse and this one... Our thinking is a process, as is our art, and that is how we should see it. (Schwarz 1989, 133)<sup>5</sup>

The linear nature of discourse and time also exposes their spacial dimension. Every relation of two points in space or time (past or future), according to Derrida, demands thinking in terms of the linear scheme. Any confrontation of two points is a place of occurrence of *différance*. According to a similar reversal, two seemingly distant movements, with opposite vectors, may become related. Somewhere on the margins of the issue of linearity, there is also a problem of a negative line – a line that plots and crosses. “The negation of negation, the spacial negation of the point is the line,” (Derrida 1982, 42) as Derrida describes it in *Ousia and Gramme*. In Kosuth’s *No Exit* the negative use of line becomes a sign of a radical artistic provocation, the triumph of abstraction over realism. Reversal or cancellation – gestures deconstructing perceptual experience – are acts of embracing an individual object within the abstraction of thought. In a more literal and physical aspect, a line formed by a sequence of letters and words remains the main organizing factor of Kosuth’s arrangements of two- and of three-dimensional compositions. Moreover, linearity of the mental process of reading is conceptualized by Kosuth in linear patterns such as fluorescent lines of neon lights or intentionally exposed electrical wires. This celebration of linearity sometimes leads to the exclusion of the text itself with a radical gesture of crossing out. In such projects as *No Exit*, the dialectical relation between line and text is thematized with regard to their mutual competition for meaning and presence. In Kosuth’s phrasing, the linear cancellation of the text itself creates a dynamic constellation and affects the volatile interface of meaning between the viewer and the artist or the artist and the author.

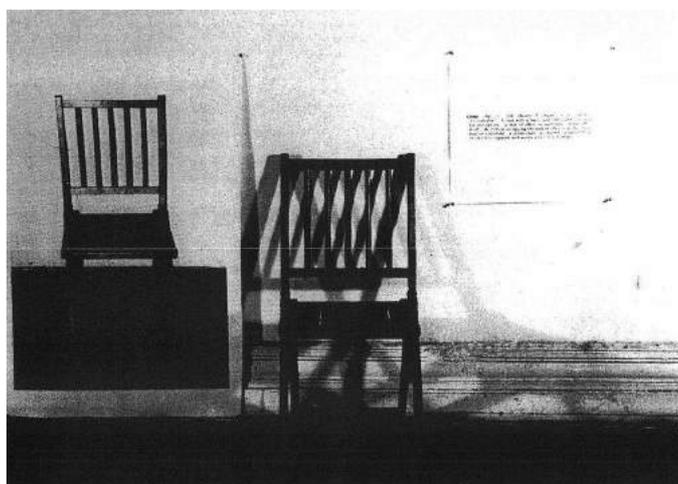
The second possibility of the circular movement establishing the relation of the final presence to the original presence could be also regarded in the context of the mutual relation of art and philosophy. Deeply rooted in

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<sup>5</sup> A similar concept of certain linearity of the narrative discourse and its perception may be found in the experimental texts of some postmodern authors such as Donald Barthelme’s *Sentence* (a short story composed of one few-pages-long sentence).

philosophy, Kosuth's art finally retreats, revealing a negative space of *différance* and exposing their relation in terms of negative exclusion. Commenting on the work of Kosuth in his famous foreword to Kosuth's *Art after Philosophy*, Lyotard states: "while philosophy would want to speak of the world, it would need to speak of art, as a part of it, if only to deny it." (Lyotard 1991, XVII)

With the main goal of analyzing art as relations to relations, Kosuth, especially in his late projects, explores the complexity of discourse by introducing a deconstructive perspective expressed by the idea of absence. The impact of Derridian concept of *différance*, which is constituted always on the edge of presence and absence, is particularly apparent in Kosuth's project *Zero and Not*. A necessary condition of any presence, similar to the procedure of crossing out, it reveals the context necessary for any act of writing and reading. In his famous installation *One and Three Chairs* (currently in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York), it was presence itself that was problematized or even challenged: from the concrete object, assembled with its corresponding photographic reproduction to a depersonalized dictionary definition. The installation consisted of three elements representing three consecutive steps of a fading presence. Image, word and a photographic reproduction – which, according to Derrida's words – in the same way replace presence of their real counterpart, intrigue with their purposelessness. The purpose here is not the presence or its modification, but the ironic questioning of representation in art. Kosuth's project can also be read as an ironic commentary on the fundamental thesis of structuralism: the division of the sign into the signifier and the signified.



Absence, as Kosuth explains with regard to his use of billboards, has a crucial role in perception and in creating the interplay of relations with the mass culture.

He notes that “the text is made to prevent any identification, and if someone reads it, even quickly, for some time afterward, the entire habitual environment of naturalized ads will become different for that person.” (Schwarz 1989, 57) In this way, according to Kosuth, the play on relations: art/language/context, as well as on the circular logic of absence and presence of discourse becomes an essential part of artistic participation in the social process of signification. On one of the billboards put up in New York in 1979 as part of the project *Text/Context*, Kosuth placed a significant statement, which is quoted below:

What do you see here? The text/sign to the right presents itself as part of something else, something we could normally take for granted. What do you expect to see has been removed, to be replaced by a kind of absence, which attempts to make visible what is unseen. This text/sign would like to explain itself, but even as it does, you continue to try to look beyond it to something else, that meaning which seems provided in advance by a location of which it is already a part. This text/sign wants to see itself as part of the 'real world', but it is blinded by those same conversations which connect you to it, and blinds you to that which, when read, is no longer seen. (Kosuth 1991, 240)<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly enough, the attribute of uselessness distinguishes conceptual billboards from ads. In this respect, Kosuth’s projects may be read as a return to Kant’s understanding of art as “purposive without purpose” (of practical application). The distinctive feature of the work of art – according to Kosuth – is not so much its aesthetic value, as the lack of clear and pragmatic benefits of its existence in a given public space. Thus, Kosuth’s semi-billboards are an excellent implementation of Kant’s statement – in this way, art uses forms undeniably belonging to the commercial world and, contrary to the expectations of an average consumer, deprives them of any aesthetic element. Thus the purified form (of a billboard) becomes empty, in terms of practical application, sign, filled solely with an abstract matter of cultural relationships and unfulfilled expectations of the customers. Notably, a new form which is a result of the deconstruction of a poster is constituted by the difference in relation to the original form. The incompleteness of both: presence and beauty, replaced by the presence of sign, offer a possibility of metareflection rather than a purely aesthetic experience. The object of contemplation is Derridian difference between presence and absence, as well as the replacement of presence by the signified (the idea). In the commentary to his project entitled *Zero Not*, Kosuth

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<sup>6</sup> On the accompanying poster in the same project exhibited in New York in 1979 Kosuth placed the following statements: “Can you read this? This text/sign, to the left, expects you to read more than it provides, but it provides more than is needed for it to mean what it does. What it says, how it says it, and where it says it either or separates you from what it is. This text/sign (like other things seen here before it) is trapped by conventions which constitute its conception of the possible in terms which deny what they would want to suggest. Is the relationship of this text/sign to itself any different than this text/sign is to this context? To read this text/sign is to erase that erasure which this must become in order to say more than that which is said here.”

proposed an interesting reading of his own work that seems deconstructive in its origin: “cancellation [...] constructs as it erases, suggesting ‘one thing’ (a field of language itself) present, while removed.” (Kosuth 1991, 222) Thus, the spacial arrangement in this project constitutes a part of the writing process proceeding according to the deconstructive mechanisms of interplay between the determinants of presence and absence, constructing and deconstructing at the same time, since it proposes two intermingled orders of discourse. The order of writing juxtaposed against the order of the architectural space creates a specific spatial syntax, based on the architecture of individual exhibition halls. It is emptiness that completes and constitutes this space. Following Derrida’s remarks on the role of incompleteness and anticipation in the discursive, Kosuth pays special attention to discontinuities and openings. In an interview with Henri Ronse (1981), Derrida comments on *Of Grammatology* in the following way: “In what you call my books, what is first of all put into question is the unity of the book and the unity ‘book’ considered as a perfect totality, with all the implementations of such a concept” (Gaston 2011, XVIII). Sean Gaston, quoting this passage in his *Introduction to Reading Derrida’s Of Grammatology*, characterizes the entire collection as “a series of intervals or moving gaps that gesture towards the interlacing oscillations that are recognized here under the name of *difference*” (Gaston 2011, XIX). In this light, it is clear that the critical attention with regard to Kosuth’s work, should be directed to those elements which are absent; in other words, to gaps and omissions (the entrances, exits, views in and out). With regard to spatial discourse Kosuth states: “There is another syntax, also anchored to the world, which is the architecture of rooms which also orders this work.” (Kosuth, 1991, 222) He further evolves this concept in *Philosophia Medii Maris Atlantici*, or, *Re-map, De-map (Speak in the Gaps)* when he defines the artist’s role in six deconstructive terms<sup>7</sup> of unmaking, defining creation as an act of “leaving out, canceling, ignoring, erasing, misusing, disregarding (...) in order to be able to speak in the gaps.”

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<sup>7</sup> In his project *A Preliminary Map for >>Zero & Not<<* Kosuth employs one more deconstructive practice by turning the exhibited photographs upside-down. This act or event is meant to investigate and to deconstruct the relationships between the viewer and the work, the visual perception and the meaning-making process. Notably, Kosuth describes his projects in the following way: “When viewed >>normally<< the fictive space of the painting permits the viewer an entrance to a credible world; it is the power of the order and rationality of that world which forces the viewer to accept the painting (and its world) on its own terms. Those >>terms<< cannot be read because they are left unseen: the world, and the art which presents it, is presented as >>natural<< and problematic. Turning the image >>upside-down<< stops that monologue; one no longer has a >>window to another world<<, one has an object, an artifact, composed of parts and located here in this world. One experiences this as an event, and as such it is an act which locates and includes the viewer. As an event it is happening now (in the real time of that viewer) because the viewer, as a reader, experiences the language of the construction of what is seen. That cancellation of habitual experience which makes the language visible also forces the viewer/reader to realize their own subjective role in the meaning-making process.” (Kosuth, 1991, 22-23)

(Kosuth 1991, 235) Furthermore, he notes that creative contextualizing or criticism proceeds in a parallel manner. Because contemporary culture suffers from the excess of information, the process of creation has to resort to eliminating. Furthermore, Kosuth's gesture of crossing out may be a reference to the paradigmatic act of erasing in American art of the 50s that is the erasing of one of de Kooning's drawings by Robert Rauschenberg.

### V. The Age of Final Solutions

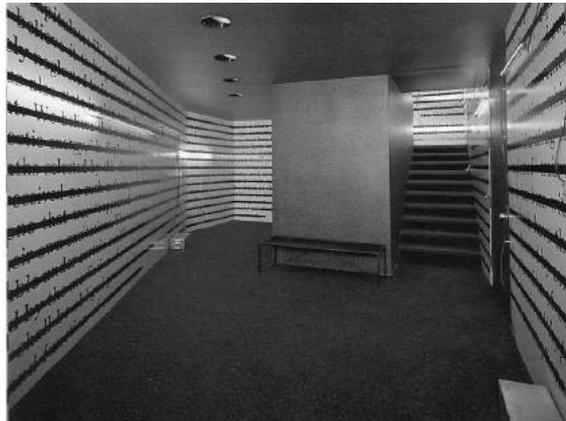
The state of exhaustion manifested itself in various fields on the American ground, par excellence, in the phenomenon of 'literature of exhaustion'. As Derrida states: "never as much as at present has it invaded, *as such*, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method and ideology." (Derrida, 1997, 6) In American literature the crisis, and at the same time the peculiar popularity of language, have been reflected in the aforementioned literature of exhaustion. The very term was introduced by John Barth, an American novelist and essayist, one of the most interesting authors of postmodern American fiction. In his famous essay devoted to contemporary fiction, he diagnoses an exhaustion of narratorial strategies, the repertoire of possible plots, and traditional roles of the story-telling author and a passive reader. Questioning all the traditional reference points would not be complete however without undermining the very basis of any act of writing that is language as such. Language, which, in case of literature, may be synonymous to Derrida's writing, becomes an object of intense experimentation, especially in short prose forms, such as the short stories of Donald Barthelme.

The most radical strategy of the postmodernist writer, the exhausted and deconstructed language of nonsense, exists only as an empty form, though it has lost its primary communicative function and its connection to sense and logic. Devoid of superior rules, postmodern discourses resemble puzzles that can be rearranged in any arbitrary fashion. The reason searching for order, logic, and connections encounters only rudimentary and accidental meanings which arise on the peripheries of all-powerful chaos. An interesting example of a word-play, Donald Barthelme's *Sentence* is composed of one, few pages long phrase. This radical narratorial experiment is reminiscent of the solutions proposed by conceptual artists, Piero Manzoni's *Line of Infinite Length* in particular. In both cases, language or rope/line were isolated and subjected to artistic hiperbolization. The purpose of these action seems to be close to Derrida's concept of *magnitudo* – the unattainable yet extremely attractive imaginary limit of human perception. An age of "final solutions" and "*felt* ultimacies" (Barth 1984, 67), as John Barth termed postmodernism, has searched for what

follows the infinite. The resulting transgression is somehow secondary to the limit determined by the exhaustion of all possible alternatives in the series of problems, creations, artistic means, art disciplines.

A sudden rise and the predicted fall of the linguistic model following the closure of an epoch is depicted by Derrida as an all-embracing process of transformation. As Christopher Johnson notes, a ‘devaluation’ of the word ‘language’ has meant “a subtle displacement within the linguistic paradigm itself” (Johnson 2011, 12). The inflation of the sign “language,” that, as Sean Gaston claims in his *Introduction to Reading Derrida’s Of Grammatology*: “Derrida attempted to counteract or redirect” (Gaston 2011, XVI), has also left a mark on art discourse, and nowhere has this sudden and radical shift towards language made its impact more apparent than in the work of Joseph Kosuth.

Commenting on the writings of Becket and Borges, Barth notes that we live in an age of final solutions. Although the exhaustion of possibilities is expressed through negative forms exposing nothing rather than something, it does not mean the end of writing itself. Although, as Barth says, “Nothingness is necessarily and inextricably the background against which Being, *et cetera*”<sup>8</sup> (Barth 1984, 68), the negative impulse stops just before the fall into the abyss of nothingness or chaos, and, paradoxically, it disperses into a multiplicity of different forms of language, in many small narratives, to use Lyotard’s terminology – narratives that are concerned with the topic of language. As if just before its extinction, language sought to consolidate itself in all possible forms and varieties.




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<sup>8</sup> J.-L. Nancy reads the Derridian ‘grammatological project’ in the horizon of nothingness and opening: “Neither a science nor a philosophy of writing. No assurance, but a surge, a drive that we cannot fail to recognize: the very life of ‘meaning or wishing to say nothing’, life beyond: right here. A pointed thought meaning to say nothing, but which pricks and pierces – which broaches and opens.” (Nancy 2011, 109).

## VI. Conclusion

According to the Platonic concepts, representation in art is twice removed from the original idea and the desired presence. Paradoxically, Kosuth's decision to replace an art object itself with a textual idea seems to be a reversal of the Platonic concept of *mimesis*.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the presence of the word *idea* in Kosuth's main statement: *art as idea* does not seem accidental. Devoid of any metaphysical claims, Kosuth's art as idea could be considered an undeniably postmodern and deconstructive response to ancient aesthetics. In a somewhat circular fashion, Kosuth adds another element to the chain of representation, substitutions, and imitation in art. Notably, this new element is named after the original Platonic one (an idea). The conclusion may be as follows: language art, including Kosuth's art, is another link in the chain of substitution: idea – subject – work of art – idea being a supplement not only for a depicted object, but also for a work of art as such.

1. *Idea*, adopted from L, itself borrowed from Gr *idea* (*ιδέα*), a concept, derives from Gr *idein* (s *id-*), to see, for \**widein*. L *idea* has derivative LL adj *ideālis*, archetypal, ideal, whence EF-F *idéel* and E *ideal*, whence resp F *idéalisme* and E *idealism*, also resp *idéaliste* and *idealist*, and, further, *idéaliser* and *idealize*. L *idea* becomes MF-F *idée*, with cpd *idée fixe*, a fixed idea, adopted by E Francophiles; it also has ML derivative \**ideāre*, pp \**ideātus*, whence the Phil n *ideātum*, a thing that, in the fact, answers to the idea of it, whence 'to *ideate*', to form in, or as an, idea.

In addition, Kosuth often recognizes the tautological character of his projects, making it explicit in his commentary entitled *Within the Context; Modernism and Critical Practice*<sup>10</sup>: "In art one must speak in a circular fashion; that is, through the attempt of understanding the language system itself: in the process of that circularity the art process shows and is affected by its collective

<sup>9</sup> In 'The Arbitrary' Derek Attridge points to an interesting parallel in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*: "Earlier Derrida had remarked that Plato's account of writing, speech and being or idea was fundamentally the same as Saussure's, but that the philosopher's tone was preferable, being 'more subtle, more critical, more troubled'." (Attridge 2011, 63).

<sup>10</sup> In this text, Kosuth employes a clearly deconstructive metacommentary fragments such as: "this text seems to take itself for granted. It contains the word art or artist 122 times, makes reference to meaning 51 times, mentions culture 41 times, points to modernism 27 times, talks about language 26 times, includes the word context 12 times, and so on." (Kosuth 1991, 166).

character, its historicity, its actual location.” (Kosuth 1991, 145) In *Art as an Idea as Idea* he notes further: “The circularity of this relation employs its own analysis to analyze and simultaneously expose itself.” (Siegel 1985, 49). Notably, it is somehow analogous to Derrida’s observation on the theme of supplementarity, which reads as follows: “it happens so that this theme describes the chain itself, the being-chain of a textual chain, the structure of substitution, the articulation of desire and of language, the logic of all conceptual oppositions (...)” (Derrida 1997, 163).

Although never openly stated, Kosuth’s ironical impulse seems to undermine popular expectations towards art. In certain respects, Kosuth graphically articulates in writing what we would expect to experience. He misleads our perceptual demands, substituting the desired visual experience with a mental one, as happens for instance in the work composed solely of definitions of colors (white, black, grey) translated into several languages. To further reinforce this idea, along with those definitions Kosuth supplies a definition of the word ‘nothing’ and, most importantly, of the word ‘phenomenon.’ Since a phenomenon is “any fact, appearance, or occurrence in consciousness; that which is apprehended by the mind, in contrast to that which really exists, or to things in themselves,” the irony in Kosuth’s installation, inherent in misdirecting the traditionally shaped perception, manifests itself openly. With a paraphrase of Kant’s notions, there comes a possible conclusion of the phenomenal quality of Kosuth’s textual art.

Interestingly enough, the word phenomenon, as defined by Kosuth, also depicts a symptom of a disease, perhaps a deconstructive disease, described by an endless process of supplementation, of which no other trace is available, except for a mere phenomenon of the text. Aiming at distancing himself from art conceived as illusion or representation, Kosuth has had to face certain frustrations. Frustrations which Derrida identified in what he names a psychoanalysis of Jean Jacques Rousseau as a confrontation with “the already-thereness of instruments and of concepts.” (Derrida 1997, 139) Consequently, any radical departure from the traditional aesthetics and the physical presence of an art object is never absolute; it leaves a trace inscribed in language and culture. The gesture of rejection, reflected by Kosuth’s obsessive insistence on abstract categories such as meaning, concept, idea, and self-reflection marks an entry into an indefinitely multiplied structure of his art, which testifies perhaps to the argument that “the graphic of the supplementarity is the origin of languages” (Derrida 1997, 235). Art confronted with its theory and replaced by it, becomes, in Derrida’s words, an entire theory of the structural necessity of an abyss further defined as an endless process of supplementarity. “Originary differance is supplementarity as structure,” (Derrida 1997, 167) as he claims in *Genesis and Structure of the Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Following this line of thought, one notes that, in the process of replacement, Kosuth’s art becomes a

textual substitute for art, a philosopher a substitute for an artist, or else art a substitute for philosophy. Art transformed by language, is confronted with an abyss of abstraction and, paradoxically, somewhat contrary to the Kosuth's assumptions, becomes a testimony of a desire for the presence. Following the logic of both Derrida and Kosuth, one arrives at a conclusion that there is nothing outside the text, multiplied by its own reflections, with art being one of them. With respect to artistic creativity, there seems to be no better formulation of this thesis than that proposed by Derrida. "... [W]hat we call production is necessarily a text, the system of a writing and of a reading which we know is ordered around its own blind spot" (Derrida 1997, 164). Conceptually blind as an artist who willfully makes art a tautological idea that "represents, among other things, a cancellation, a blindness also, and a framed formalism."<sup>11</sup> Because, as Derrida concludes, "language is spoken, it speaks to itself, which is to say, *from/of blindness*" (Derrida 1993, 5).

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<sup>11</sup> See: Joseph Kosuth, *A Note to Readers* (1991), p. 51.

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## PERFORMANCE ART AND SOMAESTHETICS

MIHAELA POP<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

This article aims at pointing out some fundamental aspects of performance art, especially the body presence and its aesthetic implications from a philosophical perspective. It will also develop the new theory of somaesthetics elaborated by Richard Shusterman.

**Keywords:** body, intuitive consciousness, live art, performance, somaesthetics.

During the 1960s and 1970s, performance art manifested intensively under various ways and manners. It belonged to a wide range of artistic movements including happenings, body action, body painting and even installations. The first approaches were explored during Futurist shows and especially during Dadaist and Surrealist *soirées* where the participants, artists and audience, could interfere, talk, and move. The artistic *soirées* took place in common locations as cabarets, pubs, art galleries. Artists belonging to painting, literature, music, film making, and dance were present. These artistic gatherings had one basic common characteristic: the idea of making art, the idea of live art. Not the work of art as a well finished product but *the action*, the experience of living artistically was the main purpose. At that historical moment, such activities were thought to be a new vision, a new way of making art in strict opposition to what art had meant till then.

This basic characteristic of live art is maintained in performance art too. A large series of theoretical consequences derive from it.

The visual art is seen<sup>2</sup> as an on-going process, not as a finished object (the painting itself); the relationship between artist and spectator changes. The “work” of art is the *action* itself which means that at the end of this action nothing remains except some photos or video images. Thus, the work of art is

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of critics agree on these characteristics. See: Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance art. From Futurism to the Present*, 2001; *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, edited by Amelia Jones, 2006, pp. 378-396; Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, 2008; Donald Davies, *Art as Performance*, 2004.

no longer a stable, long-existing product but an ephemeral and also immaterial one. The visual art becomes action, event, something that happens. Being an act it is defined by the notion of *presence* and by the temporality of the present supposing a direct, immediate experience. It is thus characterized by spontaneity and immediacy. According to Derrida's theory, the *presence* of the body can be a proposal for a metaphysics of presence. It expresses the desire for a transcendent meaning; it ensures an immediate access to the essence of the action. If we accept this way of understanding performance art then it could be considered not only as a presentation but also as a re-presentation which speaks about an absence.<sup>3</sup>

As for the artistic material, it is usually the human body and especially the artist's own body. The presence of this new artistic material has significant implications. The *subject – object* relationship is no more an oppositive one; on the contrary, it is an associative one as the object (the body) is at the same time the subject (the artist). The relationship between artist and spectator changes also a lot as the spectator can interfere and react to what he sees and he also can experience intense feelings when participating to such performance. Thus the first preoccupation of this art is the direct experience instead of the hermeneutic attitude demanded by the classical art.

In our opinion, the most significant aspect is the presence of the living body, especially of the artist's body which brings an intense feeling of living experience. The analysis of some of the consequences of this new material and medium (the artist's own body) constitutes the purpose of this article. Our approach is structured into two parts. In the first part (A) we will analyze several performances of two couples of artists: Gilbert and George and Marina Abramowicz and Ulay. In the second part (B) we will try to analyze some philosophical implications generated by the presence of the artist's body in this art.

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**A.** Gilbert and George are two British artists who performed in 1969 at the Royal College of Art of London, their performance being entitled *The Singing Sculptures*. The two artists stood motionless for many hours on a small 6-feet tall table while a cassette recorder played a music hall piece, *Underneath the Arches*. They had their faces and hands covered in bronze paint and they wore drab and old fashion suits (belonging to the 1920s). Large drawings were moving around them generating a space which included the artists themselves and the audience. These moving drawings seemed to blur the difference between art and life. The performances lasted for 7 hours during 5 days. They

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<sup>3</sup> This is the point of view expressed by Christine Rosse in her study "The Paradoxical Bodies of Contemporary Art", in *A Companion to Contemporary Art*, p. 383.

were repeated many times and then, once again in 1991. The two artists called themselves *living sculptures*.

Afterwards, Gilbert and George performed other works stressing the idea of violence or abject. This couple of artists always manifested, through their behavior, a significant distance or separation from the public, they eliminated any interaction with the spectators. This separation was enhanced by the base on which they stood and their faces covered with paint which imposed a bigger distance from the spectators similar to that established between the mime and his public. Thus the communication was strongly restricted between them.



Gilbert and George – *Singing Sculptures*

They even established a *Law of Sculptors* in 1970:

1. *Always be smartly dressed, well groomed relaxed friendly polite and in complete control.*
2. *Make the world to believe in you and to pay heavily for this privilege.*
3. *Never worry assess discuss or criticize but remain quiet respectful and calm.*
4. *The lord chisels still, so don't leave your bench for long.* (Green, 2001, 148).

This law, written in a non-academic English language, free spelling and odd archaic syntax, seems to be a parody of the artistic tradition. All is based on

an exaggerated respect of tradition, manner, etiquette in their appearance and performance. They used to choose pedantic titles for their performances and the music as a fetish. They created even a stamp – G&G – with which they stamped their fronts in 1969. Their gestures could be interpreted as a parody of the English society and its normalized behavior. The *law* was a kind of recipe for a well studied immobility and impassivity. Their behavior, their old fashioned and drab suits, their refusal to talk, all contributed to their success. They succeeded in raising the art to a pseudo- religious level due to their impassivity.

Then, during their following performances, they incorporated another aspect in their performance: their movements became more robotic, they acted as mechanic puppets. Thus, they combined a very stylish but old fashion English dandy behavior with that strangely metallic painted face and robotic or mechanical gestures. There was a combination that attracted much at the end of the 1960s and the 1970s in a Western country dominated by the fascination for humanoids and aliens.

Another significant characteristic: the two artists had mirrored gestures and an identical behavior as they acted as one double body.



Gilbert and George – *Hoi Polloi*

There is another couple of artists: Marina Abramowicz and Ulay (F. Uwe Layseipen) who experienced the idea of a third identity, not only the self identity and the other's identity but another one, beyond the two, a sort of

common corporal identity. Between 1976-1980, Marina and Ulay acted in several performances entitled *Relation Works* which tried to explore the limits of the self. These limits become accessible only through a process of disappearance of the outside and of a growing inaccessibility manifested from the inside for any connection with the outside. In a more clear expression, the two artists tried to reach those limits by a deep concentration which meant a process of absorption within the one's inner self cutting any connection with the outside. According to Abramowicz, "[w]hen you are focused on the here and now, people get the impression that you are absent." (Green, 2001, 157).

How did they do this? – practicing a kind of oblivion. They created scenarios of immobility and inside absorption which were perceived from the exterior as completely non-active. They practiced the self-absorption, the self-*evanescence* by trying to eliminate any aspect of personal identity which supposes connection to the outside, to the others. This self-absorption is mutually-perceived and thus this couple admits firstly the romantic vision of a self sufficient couple but then they overpass this condition towards a third one that of *one two-headed body*, as Marina said. They seemed to practice a de-constructivist corporal art as they succeeded in escaping from the limits of the individual subjectivity. The artist extracted his self from the social and sexual codes reaching finally a sort of sensitive intuition of the other's body and feelings. In 1977, during the performance *Relation in time*, they stood still hours and hours back to back, bound to each other with their hair. They developed a deep experience of self psychic and physical concentration and created for themselves an inner world where the spectator could not look in. The artists admitted that during the performance they escaped mentally through exotic worlds. Thus they tried to extend the limits of the self.



Marina and Ulay – *Relation in Time*

During 1980-1981 they spent long periods of time in Australian deserts trying to communicate between them through other ways than the language in order to develop an enhanced mutual sensitivity. They also exercised *sadhus*, an Indian practice, and succeeded thus in creating “immobile paintings”. In 1981 they had another experiment without eating and talking for a long period of time. According to Abramowicz: “... it is quite logical that we went to the desert because of our kind of background, and the work we do. We minimize ... and we try to realize with pure body and energy.” (Green, 2001, 159). During their solitary existence they developed a heightened sensitivity and tried to communicate through means other than physical sight, in a telepathic way.

Abramowicz’s biographical entry for that year states: “1981 – Experiments without eating and talking for long periods of time/ Meeting Tibetans/ *Nightsea Crossing* performance/ Be quiet still and solitary/ The world will roll in ecstasy at your feet/ Eating honey, ants, grass hoppers/ *anima mundi*/ wounded snake men/ missing boomerang/ slow motion” (Green, 2001, 167). They spoke then about an exercise intended to reach a “pure body and energy”.

During the same year 1981, the two artists prepared *static live pictures* characterized by impassivity and immobility. An example is their performance *Tango* at the Triennale of Australian Sculpture, in Melbourne. Marina wore a red dress and Ulay, a black suit. They danced together some steps of tango while the music was played by a cassette recorder; they separated few times and then, they remained in a tango embracing in the center of the room for some minutes. The critics appreciated their experience about self absorption through a process of self purification. The language is annulled and a process of voiding out the identity and any structured value starts up. One could speak about the temptation of the void or the emptiness which is also familiar to the explorations of contemporary art, at least since Yves Klein, during the 1950s.

This void or emptiness supposes a practical experience of “the death of the artist” theorized by R. Barthes. The artist has no longer personal life outside or behind the work of art. The artist with and within his body *is* the work of art. All these approaches supposed firstly giving up using the language as a way of communication and thus giving up identification. Finally, the body gets an autonomy that makes possible the revelation of certain corporal intuitive capacities that have been forgotten in the civilized industrial and consumerist society. Denise Green remarks that in Eastern ancient cultures which influenced a lot the practices of these artists, the rituals and practices intermediate a special relation with an inner spirituality and a material, natural world from the outside (Green, 2005, 36-37). The meaning of identity in these cultures derives from a metonymic vision of the universe where the human being is in strict continuity with the natural world where he/she lives. In the Aborigines’ culture, the inner self extends to mythical and mystical dimensions which are lived in a unified manner. The self projects itself in the outer landscape which is thought as magic

and mystic and this space invades the inner subjectivity. In the Indian culture, there is a goddess, Uma, which represents the creation, power and energy. The process of sculpting its statue represents the direct manifestation of the goddess itself through the energy force and creativity involved in producing that object. All these characteristics of the goddess are acting from the inside of the material when being sculpted.

The self absorption of the artist could be considered also as liberation from the language understood as instrument of the civilized society. This liberation results in a new condition according to which the other is no longer perceived as another identity, but on the contrary the other becomes part of the extended self generating a third condition which is like “a two-headed body” as Marina Abramowicz said. In order to get this level of perceptive consciousness, the two artists became familiar with some Buddhist practices as *Vipashana*, *Zen* and some Australian practices of the Aborigines. Their purpose was to get a deeper knowledge of one’s own body and its forgotten capacities.

**B.** As we could see, these examples of performance art suppose the application of some basic ideas: the work of art is the performance itself, the instrument is the body of the artist which is present as an object of the action but also as a subject, the time of action is obviously the present. A lot of questions arise when trying to analyze this art from a theoretical perspective and a clear separation becomes obvious if we compare this art to a classical, traditional European painting. No more finished product separated from the artist. The painting is replaced by a living person (flesh and bones) who is, in our examples, the artist him/herself. The condition of uniqueness of the authorship has also changed: there are two artists (a couple) who act as one body. This art is also ephemeral as nothing of it remains after the action itself, except some photos or videos. Then the meanings of such art-works are completely new. They are based on explorations of a wide variety of topics: experience of space, time, lack of communication, memories, experience of one’s own body, exploration of forgotten extended capacities of the body in order to adapt to more demanding necessities, experience of violence, etc. And all these are experienced by the artist on his own body proving an extension of the meaning of art. The art is no longer a very well defined and restricted domain; it is equivalent to life, to human life in a human body. Thus we can assert now that the performance art is a domain where the meaning of art gets an enlarged sense with significant consequences when trying to understand contemporary art. We also think that some of the philosophical approaches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can contribute a lot when trying to get a deeper and widened understanding of this domain. Among these philosophical approaches we mention M. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of *bodily-being-in-the-world* in his

*Phenomenology of perception*, J. Dewey's pragmatist understanding of *art as experience* and a recent research, R. Shusterman's new proposal – *Somaesthetics*.

We shall insist in the following pages on R. Shusterman's new approach by marking also his points of view concerning his predecessors' theories.

Shusterman proposes a new vision on aesthetics which he calls *somaesthetics*.<sup>4</sup> According to his theory, somaesthetics means "a body centered discipline" (Shusterman, 1999, 303). He tries to point out the fact that such a discipline is not new; in fact it has its sources in the ancient Greek philosophy and its *kalokagathia* concept. He mentions that nowadays philosophy is restricted to a narrow academic domain instead of keeping up its very ancient first meaning as a way of living or the wisdom of living. In his *Timaeus*, Plato pleads for the right balance between body and mind which was the main purpose of the ancient Greek philosophy even before Plato. Socrates himself used to maintain his body in good condition. Cleobulus and Aristippus, philosophers of the Cyrenaic philosophical school, thought that the good practice of the body could help to become a virtuous man. Epicurus saw the health of the body and the equilibrium of the mind as the fundamental purposes of a philosophical behavior. Diogenes at his turn thought that a good control of the body was important in becoming virtuous.

Shusterman remarks that this attitude stressing out a balanced body-mind connection was also present in the Oriental wisdom such as the Buddhist thought, in *t'ai chi ch'uan*, yoga and zen practices. As the Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo insists, the concept of "personal cultivation," or *shugyō* (a Japanese equivalent of "care of the self"), is perceived in Eastern thought as "the philosophical foundation" because "true knowledge cannot be obtained simply by means of theoretical thinking, but only through 'bodily recognition or realization' (*tainin* or *taikoku*)" (Shusterman, 2008, 18). The Chinese ancient philosophies, Confucianism and Daoism, stress out also as an imperative the self knowledge of one's own body. "He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be given the custody of the empire." Or, "being complete in body, he is complete in spirit; and to be complete in spirit is the Way of the sage" (Shusterman, 2008, 19).

Then, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the European philosophy, after a long period of stressing out only the superiority of mind in comparison to the body, succeeds in making a progress by Al. Baumgarten's contribution. His *Aesthetics* should be considered as the expression of a new direction of philosophical research. Baumgarten tried to prove the existence of a sensitive knowledge based on sensitive perception (*aesthesis*). This sensitive knowledge should be

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<sup>4</sup> There are many texts (articles and studies) where we can find his new approach. Here are some of them: "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal", 1999; *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, (Rom. transl.), 2004, especially pp. 266-301; *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, 2008.

connected to the abstract rational thought and thus ensure a complete theory of knowledge. The German philosopher was convinced that the perception could be considered as a level of knowledge and also it could contribute to a better life. He called his aesthetics the art of well thinking, saying that it is the science of sensitive cognition (Shusterman, 1999, 304). He was convinced that this science could contribute to the enhancement of knowledge.

Shusterman is however critic when appreciating that Baumgarten omitted to include in his research the body itself and its education or cultural *shaping*. He remarks that Baumgarten maintained the philosophical Western tradition (Descartes, Leibniz and Wolff) considering the body only as a simple mechanism not as the real core of perception.

In Shusterman's view, *somaesthetics* should be "a critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetics appreciation (*aesthesis*) and creative self-fashioning. It is devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it" (Shusterman, 1999, 306). He points out that knowledge is based on perception and it is generated by the body. We can have our perceptions only in strict connection with our bodily-being-in-the-world as Merleau-Ponty mentioned in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 99-123). A better knowledge of the body, of how we get our perceptions and the continuous exercising of the body in order to ameliorate our perceptive capacities could enhance our bodily connection to the world, our implication in life. This kind of knowledge is a self knowledge that has been a philosophical purpose at least since Socrates and the Apollonian imperative – *know thyself*. According to Shusterman's thought this means knowledge based on lived personal experience centered on becoming aware of our physical behavior, on our habits, and gestures.

Then the right, correct action and virtue are also a philosophical issue. Shusterman thinks that getting this practical knowledge of our body could help us to use our volitive side in a more appropriate way. By knowing more precisely our body capacities we could better orient our desires and volition.

There is also a more social side of this soma-knowledge. Shusterman mentions Foucault's studies on the history of corporal domination in relation to the social imperatives of various historical periods. Each historical period produced an ideology of domination expressed even by somatic norms. By getting aware of such ideologies and also by having a good knowledge of our own body's needs and functions we can better protect ourselves against various new manners of submission and domination. Shusterman also points out that Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty were those philosophers who stressed out a certain ontological dimension of the body. It is a criterion for personal identity and an ontological base for the description of mental states.

To all these approaches through which the knowledge of the body facilitates a better understanding, Shusterman adds the contribution of certain therapies which are based on the tight connection between somatic and psychological sides of the human being. He particularly refers to the methods of F.M. Alexander and M. Feldenkraiss whose main purpose is to enhance the awareness of our body, to get a better consciousness of our bodily-being. All these therapies are based on practical exercises. According to Shusterman's approach, the new discipline Somaesthetics, should have three interconnected sub-domains.

- An analytical side which should analyze the nature of perceptions and their functions. It supposes ontological and gnoseological approaches of the body as well as sociological analyses such as those already achieved by M. Foucault and P. Bourdieu.
- There would be also a pragmatist somaesthetic which should have a "prescriptive character" (Shusterman, 2008, 24). It should propose methods of ameliorating the body functions through a comparative analysis of methodologies of practices: those representational, pointing out how the body appears and those experiential, analyzing the internal experiences.
- And finally, a third sub-domain would be a practical somaesthetics which should suppose a practice of an intelligent shaping of the body by practicing, exercising through direct experience of corporal norms and ideals.

All these aspects should be perceived as ways of knowledge. We can understand now that Baumgarten's vision of aesthetics as a discipline of education is reactivated in Shusterman's new proposal but with a strong accent on the body. In such a vision the body should not be considered as an object on which we apply a force or a desire. It becomes a medium in order to enhance our capacities of thinking and finally to establish better or more appropriate connections with the world. A better soma-knowledge supposes better habits in all our activities.

In art as well. In this situation, the aesthetics gets an extended meaning (sense). Somaesthetics can help us to better understand how one could play better an instrument or paint or shape a material. Somaesthetics can also help us to better understand performances such as those mentioned in the first part of this article.

Standing still for long periods of time means a deep effort of the artists' bodies, a good control achieved exactly through this better awareness of the body's functions, capacities, their limits and how these limits could be extended or exceeded. It also can tell us something about the fact that this body enhanced perceptive awareness could generate a more artistic expression of philosophical topics as the absence or the separation, the presence, the void, the connection or separation between interior and exterior, the violence, the existence, the

existence in connection to the nature, especially the non humanized one such as life in and within the desert. In this way, art is no longer perceived as a separate domain from the other life experiences. Being dominated by experience, by action, it should be perceived in connection with all the others life experiences as John Dewey stressed out in his *Art as experience*. He remarked in his courses at Harvard in 1931 that the classical artistic product or the work of art is completely separated from the artist. In consequence, this art, considered as a universe of objects, does no longer communicate with life. Dewey said that art should reestablish the continuity with other forms of experience which are events, actions, deeds or pains common to the general human experience.

In order to understand the artworld we should abandon the old manners of aesthetic evaluation and appeal to experience. We should come back to the basic material which is the day-to-day experience. Art is not a copy of the real objects; it reflects emotions and ideas associated with the basic daily experiences.<sup>5</sup> Shusterman mentions that Dewey manifested a deep interest in the Alexander's therapy and he practiced this therapy for 20 years. This direct implication in the exploration of the deep connection body-mind and the process of getting aware of one's own body and its enhanced capacity convinced Dewey of the necessity to propose this new vision about art thought as an experience in perfect continuity with the other life experiences.

The performance art is obviously a very good example of such continuity and the art in its dynamics. The instrument and the material of this art is the human body but one which is not only object but also subject. This approach supposes exactly the possibility of manifestation of the life experience because the subject is the artist who brings his live experience and this one is applied onto the artist's own body which is thus an object of expression and a medium of artistic language.

In our opinion Shusterman's somaesthetics could be successfully applied to analyses of performance art, happenings, events, installations. On the contrary, in the case of other kind of artistic contemporary movements, its application seems to be less efficient such as in the case of conceptual art, for instance. Anyway, the idea of performing artistic activities is also used in art-therapies which have a positive impact in many cases especially on children with certain handicaps but also on old persons or for imprisoned ones. It could also be very helpful in practicing and performing culture, activities which help people to better understand various ways of living and thinking characterizing other historical periods and societies.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1980, especially chapter 1: *The Live Creature*, pp. 3-19.

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**PORTRAYING THE UNREPRESENTABLE:  
“THE METHODOICAL EYE” OF THE EARLY  
MODERN META-PAINTING. “LAS MENINAS”,  
FROM VELAZQUEZ TO PICASSO**

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*Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to examine and define a new aesthetical paradigm, claimed by *the speculative painting*, following two different but connected artistic discourses: *Las Meninas* by Velazquez, and its 58 replicas of Pablo Picasso, the self-portrait being possible only as representation of the fictional author and its authorial Ego. The working hypothesis is that, by resort to this premise, the authorial representation of the painter performed through a self-portrait or the perennial relation between interior and exterior dimensions were created each time differently, using the insertion of a mirror representing a particular manner to give form to auto-reflexivity. Taking into account the elements and the conclusions of the current analysis, the present contribution aims to synthesize general characteristics of the mirror motive and the negative painting as meta-referential discourse. *Las Meninas*, both in Picasso's and Velázquez's representations, include exophoric and endophoric elements. I shall argue that this two types of elements generate two registers of visibilities, remarked as “visible” and “invisible” levels, in Foucault's terms, the problem of Self's representation being, in fact, originally constructed as the genuine difference between seen and unseen forms of pure representation. Inspired by Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, performed by Picasso, created a new artistic discourse, in which the problem of the pure representation is abolished, the construct being replaced by the couple “self-reflective”-“self-reflexive” representations. “Portraying the Unrepresentable” is nothing else than creating an aesthetical dimension where visible and invisible contents can coexist and generate a fluent and consistent materiality for the pure representation's Subject, testing on what conditions the terms of the critique change if “visible” is understood as “presence”, while any “invisible” – or at least speculated element as “invisible”- is recognized as “absence”.

**Keywords:** pure representation, figurative anthropology, self-reflective vs. self-reflexive representations, Self, Subject, exophoric vs. endophoric elements, *tableau-objet*, speculative painting.

**I. What Is the Methodical Eye? Consequences of Descartes's  
(Aesth)Ethics Self-Representation in Modern Meta-Painting**

Descartes's century inaugurates the modern paradigm of the relation between the work of art, the author as a reflected image and the receptor.

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Reflecting the artistic creation in the dignity of the author's image is nothing else than the source of the "contextual self-representation" technique, which consists of "a process that allows the insertion of the author's representation into a work whose creator, in one way or another, it declares himself, showing multiple ways of self-achieving, such as: the textualized author, the masked author, the guest author, the author reported as self-portrait" (Stoichiță 1999, 282). The philosophical source of this new expression of self-representation could be interpreted as a technique inspired by Gassendi's objections to the Cartesians *Meditations*, developed as it follows:

«... Considérant pourquoi et comment il se peut faire que l'œil ne se voie pas lui-même; ni que l'entendement ne se conçoive point, il m'est venu en la pensée que rien n'agit sur soi-même: car en effet ni la main, ou du moins l'extrémité de la main, ne se frappe point elle-même, ni le pied ne se donne point un coup (...) Donnez-moi donc un miroir contre lequel vous agissiez en même façon, et je vous assure que, venant à réfléchir et renvoyer contre vous votre propre espèce, vous pourrez alors vous voir et connaître vous-même, non pas à la vérité par une connaissance directe, mais du moins par une connaissance réfléchie, autrement je ne vois pas que vous puissiez avoir aucune notion ou idée de vous-même »<sup>2</sup>.

Gassendi suggests that the corporeality must be regarded as materiality of the body. Understanding that Descartes's *je pense* ("I think") "may be rendered equivalently by variants such as *je sens* ("I feel"), the truth of the *cogito* lies in the subject's self-reflection" (R. Koch 2008, 23). As the body becomes interpreted as an aesthetic machine<sup>3</sup>, the subject can be regarded as a construct in which material forces, representations and sensations, passions and affectivity are all taking exterior forms, once they are communicated. But this is not the main source of Descartes's (Aesth)Ethics consequences in inspiring the canonical structures of self-representation in The Early Modern Meta-Picture. The mirror that Gassendi reminds, during his objection proposes, in a tacit form, of new instruments for the representation's techniques. What I am trying to argue is the fact that gradually, Descartes-Gassendi controversy generates the transition from common painting, as a metaphor of any discourse, to opened representations, remarked by the speculative painting's insertion in a hybrid context consisting of poetic and aporetic dimensions, that became paradigmatic coordinates for the postmodern art. From the *image-in-mirror* to the *image-in-picture*, inspired by Carracci, the synthesis of specular and speculative is

<sup>2</sup> "Objectiones quintae. Eximio viro Renato Cartesio P. Gassendus S." (1647), in Descartes, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, vol. II, 737-738.

<sup>3</sup> "In the Cartesian system, the machinelike body is first and foremost a sensory substance and he source of passions and sensory representations, that is, the body as an aesthetic machine. The body is subjected to the play of forces from the outside world that provoke those received responses. This development marks an increased differentiation and distancing of body from mind, a phenomenon that Anne Deneys-Tunney qualifies as the 'exteriorization' of the body" (R. Koch 2008, 23-4).

possible by creating the painter's authorial insertion as a mirror's self-reflection. This is why I claim the fact that the specular image, supported by the Port-Royal Logic, guides the artistic creation to distinguish reflection of representation, act which, *mutatis mutandis*, requires the difference between "curiosity" and "method" in generating the authorial picture.

Both in modernity and postmodernity, the creator must be in picture and outside the picture, performing the game of the otherness as a play of contextual complicities at the end of which "the art must see itself", as Gassendi required. Naturally, this kind of movement created an artistic impasse occurring the early '20s-'30s of the seventeenth-century, a period remarked in the history of art as the time when the fictional author and the criticism of the work of art *in fieri* as self-portrait are attributed to an authorial Ego who claims to originate from what is generically called "*a cuadro de la familia*". In my opinion, the paradigmatic example of this process is the painting "*Las Meninas*". Chronic life or self-creation, the painting "*Las Meninas*" by Velázquez, conceived in 1656, was going to inspire 58 artistic replicas of Pablo Picasso, the work of art becoming a production scenario written or designed in the first person. "*Las Meninas*"'s discourse is not only a transepocal construct, it is also the inspiration source in creating an aesthetical paradigm from "the methodical eye", by which meta-painting is regarded as an opening process for representation through the insertion of the speculative painting.

## II. The Mirror and The Negative Painting. Exophoric and Endophoric Elements of "*Las Meninas*"

Velázquez ensures the syncretism of cloth, mirror and space, the last one being always the dimension "du dehors", beyond the painting itself, where the imagological labor develops a game of perspectives that will inspire the later Picassian *Weltanschauung*. Justifying the allegory of artistic creation in competition with the divine one, by exploiting the relation between painting and meta-painting, Velázquez inserts in his work of art two pieces of Ruens and Jordaens. The aesthetical discourse of *Las Meninas*<sup>4</sup> becomes, by this manner of suggesting art through art, a relational network of possible contexts and situations for one particular subject. Creating the frame by reflex, a process analogue with the aperture development, or deepening communication flaws through inter-textual elements of the intimal goals suggested by mirrors and

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<sup>4</sup> To avoid any representational advertence, I should mention the fact that I took as reference Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil painting, 318x276 cm, Prado, Madrid. Foto: Museo del Prado, Madrid.

paintings, leads to the creation of “*the negative-painting*”, a creation reverse located in the foreground, to the left of *Las Meninas*.



*Las Meninas* by Velázquez

The mix of light and shadow and the mosaic of perspectives create the illusion of reproducing a reality through the mirror effects, the reflection of the rear sight suggesting, in Searle's terms, the lack of power of the modern subject in resisting to the artistic realism. The mirror reveals the body and the face of two royal characters, embodying the author's goal: his axiom becomes, implicitly, proclaiming any perspective as possible as long as it is assumed as position of a body in space, at a given time. Although in reality, an eye that seeks to track an object, at its turn, is a chimera, the receptor of Velázquez work of art succeeds in following the same road of visual carnality with the creator of the painting. His glimpse is the glimpse of the creator. What I want to point out at this level is the fact that the conventional principle, according to which it can be painted only what is seen or had to be seen, is abolished. We can speculate, therefore, that Velázquez did not painted a scene reflected in the mirror because the loyal representation of that potential reflection would have result from changing the perspective angle that contributed to accomplish the figure's illustration. The mirror is situated in a center position, otherwise, the representation of the royal couple would not have been possible. A good support for a suitable comparison might be represented by the artistic and visual discourse of *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Van Eyck, regarded in contrast with *Las Meninas*.



*Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His  
Wife* by Jan van Eyck.

The painter is reflected in the central mirror, if not included in the act of artistic creation, but it appears recreating the experienced situation from past, providing a memory of visiting the two members of the Arnolfini family. On the other side, *Las Meninas* have a direct look but they can not perform the reverse. This is why, taking for example, the portrait of Venus looking into mirror (*Venus in her Mirror*), it can be seen only the reflected character, not the image viewer itself. The Self represented as the contemplator of *Las Meninas* is far away an exponent of the royal look: at a second thought, we discover that is the authentic representation of a Kantian transcendental Ego. The dynamics experienced by Velázquez's painting proposes the biography of the author as a silent operant instance: the painter represents authorial himself by a self-portrait. "In order to be visible, the painter had to break away from his work... if he got the idea of reflected mirror from Van Eyck, it was to reverse its function: the painting is reflecting in it, not the reality, in this way, succeeding to adapt and criticize the mannerism"<sup>5</sup>. Both painting and meta-painting, Velázquez's work

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<sup>5</sup> Stoichiță 1999, 346. This aspect is signaled by Zuccari during his conference realized in November 1986 in Hertziana Library from Rome, "Velazquez e Zuccari", pointing out the fact that the painter was approaching the motive of reflection by extraction. He also reminds about the mannerist legacy that Palomino, Velázquez's biographer, assumes in narrating his relationship

of art combines limit-elements, *not-yet-images* and *more-than-images*, but this kind of *opera in fieri* leads to legitimate the technique of “opening the frame” which calls for speculation. This will inspire all the interpretations that Picasso<sup>6</sup> creates for *Las Meninas* in more than 58 pieces, “replacing the painting easel with a coffin and making the painter to disappear”<sup>7</sup>. Picasso proceeds by applying the deconstruction process constituting what generically is called a “*Obra culminante de la pintura universal*”, using the duplication of the Infant’s portraits to expose the postmodernism as an innocence’s vanguard. Creating a twisted motion of the subject both by a frontal and profile view of the Infant, Picasso uses a *d’après technique* to design a painted genealogy of his own work of art: inheriting from Velázquez only the apparently significant items, Picasso prefers in-depth case-studies, extrapolated either in a hybrid meta-painting, either in details that insists on space as generative dimension, not only as simple coverage. If Velázquez transforms the canvas into “the metonym of a curtain”, having the role to hide and to reveal constructs, the speculative painting exploiting the denial power of the painting itself, Picasso exposes the artistic meta-discourse of *Las Meninas* not as a reverse, but as dismissal of a visual space charged to dimension affects, not reflections.



*Las Meninas* by Picasso

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with Zuccari. Moreover, the biographer admits, “He (Velázquez) based his conception of art on the Painters’ Idea of Zuccari”. (Palomino, *Museo Pictorico*, 894-95).

<sup>6</sup> For this aesthetical analysis, I took as reference Picasso, *Las Meninas*, 1957, oil painting, 162x130 cm, Museu Picasso, Barcelona.

<sup>7</sup> Stoichiță 1999, 351.

Picasso represents the dehumanization of contemporary art, following the interpretative model of Ortega y Gasset, which proposes understanding the representation technique as an undermining process of reality. It happens, therefore, the identity dissolution and the schizoid affirmation of the modern subject, that Arnold Hauser found tributary to Picasso. In this terms, the exercise of destroying the unity of the personality of an artist involves accepting that the reality is dependent by representation and that nature and art are two coexisting phenomena, but disparate. Hauser, for example, believes that Picasso offers the complete suspension of individualism and subjectivism, denying classical art with personality. His works become notes and comments of reality, not claiming at all their sovereignty as paintings of world and totality, as a synthesis and an epitome of the immediate existence. Postmodernism can be experienced as a propagandistic process for a schizoid fragmentation of the subject, remarked by inaugurating a new technique for representing the selfhood, completely different of any method applied in Renaissance.

The authorial representation of the painter performed through a self-portrait or the perennial relation between interior and exterior dimensions were created each time differently, using the insertion of a mirror representing a particular manner to give form to auto-reflexivity. Taking into account the elements and the conclusions of the current analysis, the present contribution aims to synthesize general characteristics of the mirror motive and the negative painting as meta-referential discourse. *Las Meninas*, both in Picasso's and Velázquez's representations, include exophoric and endophoric elements. On one hand, the exophoric constructs point out towards something outside the discourse: the mirror, in this case, has the power to create an extra-visual reference; it reveals what is in front of the subject, but it also takes the contemplators of the painting outside the painted discourse altogether. On the other hand, endophoric elements point out towards something within the discourse: here is the context in which the mirror plays the role of an endophoric element, keeping the author, through self-reflection, inside the painting. By all means, it helps performing a reference to something already mentioned in the visual discourse: the creator himself. Being alternatively an endophoric and an exophoric element, the mirror provides, for *Las Meninas*, the right measure of the swift of exterior and interior dimensions. Moreover, it would be not implausible to speculate the fact that Picasso's duplicates, pieces and recreations of *Las Meninas* represent exophoric elements, responding in the same context with an external discourse to an already constructed one.

### III. Visible and Invisible in *Las Meninas*. Foucault's Interpretation of The (Dis)Order of Things in Velázquez's Painting

There is no doubt that in the original version, *Las Meninas* suggests what Foucault recognized to be, in his *The Order of Things*, the source of a "figurative anthropology". The whole humanity is surprised in the power of a painting that forces its interpretation to an exercise of meta-language. The figurative subject is expressed by a fragmented language, and the unity becomes more like a Faustian striving. In order to offer itself, the subject is inserted into a figuration in frame: painting in painting, the result is a matryoshka of representations, created to constitute a space for the continuous generation of the self. The romantic autonomy of the relation developed between the subject and its own self, by what generically is called by Foucault the aesthetics of existence, is designed as symbol for modern alternatives that legitimize the cult of the self as "tableau-objet" or "painting as materiality".

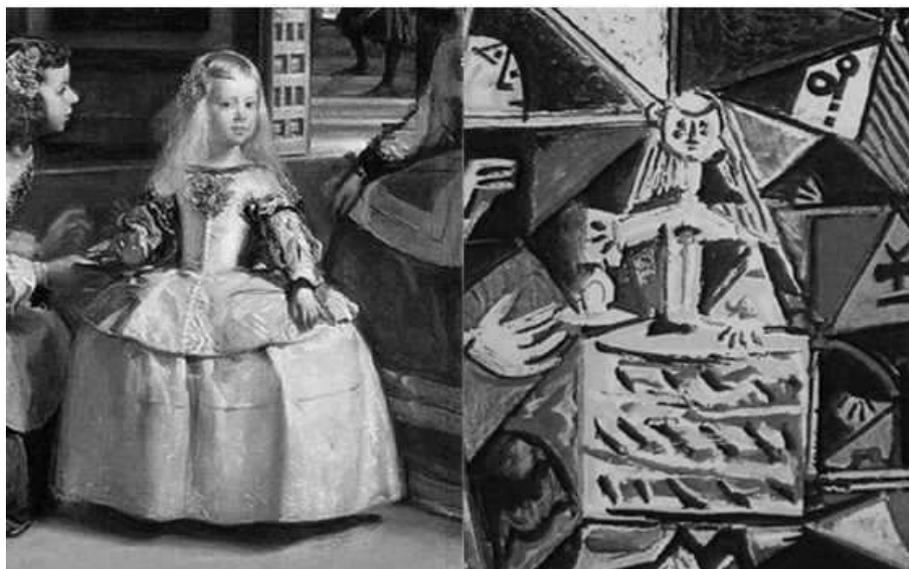
What could really approach Picasso's reworkings of *Las Meninas* and Velázquez's figurative discourse in Foucault's interpretation is the problem of the pure representation. First of all, we shall not forget the fact that Foucault is a partisan of the idea that a pure representation is possible only in paintings that define the Classical age. But, (re)presenting means taking the visible and the invisible to a common discourse having equal powers to support both elements. The painting is something more than just inert materiality. In order to be a spectacle, a dynamic discourse, the painting must be something beyond object: subject, interpretation, speculation, interval. Then, what is visible and what remains invisible in *Las Meninas*? I shall offer a deconstructive reading of Velázquez's painting, following Foucault's assumptions, arguing that by all means, principles, ideologies and involved techniques, *Las Meninas* is the exponent of a specific paradigm that proposes "portraying the unrepresentable", by making visible what, by its own nature, can not be like that. *Las Meninas* involves a different type of figurative discourse, in which the painter is visible and masked, and his show is invisible. Foucault explains: "The painter, on the other hand, is perfectly visible in his full height; or at any rate, he is not masked by the tall canvas which may soon absorb him, when, taking a step towards it again, he returns to his task; he has no doubt just appeared, at this very instant, before the eyes of the spectator, emerging from what is virtually a sort of vast cage projected backwards by the surface he is painting. Now he can be seen, caught in a moment of stillness, at the neutral center of this oscillation. His dark torso and bright face are half-way between the visible and the invisible: emerging from that canvas beyond our view, he moves into our gaze; but when, in a moment, he makes a step to the right, removing himself from our gaze, he will be standing exactly in front of the canvas he is painting; he will enter that region where his painting, neglected for an instant, will, for him, become visible

once more, free of shadow and free of reticence. As though the painter could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing something. He rules at the threshold of those two in-compatible visibilities" (Foucault 1971, 3-4).

Foucault argues that Velázquez performs, in the same painting, two different types of visibilities, apparently incompatible. I believe that there it can be speculated something deeper, originally constructed as the genuine difference between seen and unseen forms of pure representation. The two visibilities, claimed by Foucault, are nothing else than two registers of the same painting, generated by visible and invisible. The question is how succeeds Velázquez in portraying the unrepresentable, where unrepresentable often means invisible? I shall try to construct a potential answer starting with the painter's look. It is not directed to a dead-point, it is consuming something given at the beginning of his figurative discourse, which might be the inspiration point or the premise of all the work of art. Foucault himself tends to recognize this, but he assumes it vaguely by asserting that "the painter is starting at a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, our-selves, who are that point: our bodies, our faces, our eyes. The spectacle he is observing is thus doubly invisible: first, because it is not represented within the space of the painting, and second, because it is situated precisely in that blind point, in the essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking" (4). The invisibility is brought to our eyes. Furthermore, visible and invisible are two registers situated in reciprocity and mutual recognition, each one possessing a different space materiality given to the other in order to receive a proper shape and dimension. In other terms, more simply stated, the invisible is present in any surface that represents the artist's observation; the visible exists in any figurative space (re)constructed by the painter who creates, from his own work of art, a painting-in-painting.

In consequence, it appears logical to admit that this kind of interpretation serves to a better understanding of Foucault's figurative anthropology, by proposing two ways to (de)construct and criticize the subject. Although, it is not a complete support, taking into account the fact that *Las Meninas* contains a particular note that changes all the classical theories of Foucault about the pure representation. As the poststructuralist clears out, "we are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us" (5). The network of visibilities created by a perennial switch of perspectives is, in my own terms, the only way that Velázquez found to create the subject as an intersection element, a confrontation that puts the visible and the invisible into an equation of multiple spaces: material, immaterial and neutral, all of them generating the scene of a spectacle. The meta-painting is the spectacle itself, while the painting, discovered as painting-in-painting, painting-as-materiality, masked-painting and

other possible constructs, represent the spectacle's discourse, the script, generated in all the figurative and variable forms. In this way, the (de)construction is construction, the interpretation is (re)creation, and the subject is anyone, anywhere, anytime, once that the painting and the meta-painting are allowing a spectacle with different roles: the painter's, the *Meninas*'s, the spectators', the models', the observers', the authors'. Foucault blames the looking for this figurative spectacle: "The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter's gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators; in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable, or rather in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles infinity" (6). Even if they are not inserted in the painting, the spectators are made visible. In fact, any spectator "sees his invisibility made visible to the painter and trans-posed into an image forever invisible to himself" (6).



*Las Meninas* –The model problem from Velázquez to Picasso

Visible and invisible are two different types of discourse, but their instruments become, during their mutual support and insertion, exophoric and

endophoric elements. For example, the spectator, as an "outsider", is inserted into a continuous figurative discourse, not only to make the meta-painting possible, but also to create an extra-visual reference, pointing out what is in front of the subject. At his turn, the spectator himself becomes a subject: then, all the mutual relation between the artist from the painting, the painter in person, the spectators, the models and the characters discovers the fact that they communicate into the same discourse, so they are an endophoric element one for each other. We shall see that this conclusion comes as a confirmation for one of the most pregnant attributes of the Dutch painting and its classical canons, creating a loyal duplicate for our reality, by involving the mirror's motive, Foucault himself agreeing with this kind of interpretation<sup>8</sup>. Invisibility is what is hidden, not what is inexistent, and the mirror succeeds in reflecting the invisible as a visible representation. It not only presents and makes visible the materiality, but it also opens a space where the invisibility gains corporality.

#### IV. "Visible" and "Invisible" Meanings in Picasso's *Las Meninas*: "Self-Reflexive" and "Self-Reflective" Representations

The classical relation between visible and invisible allows, in Foucault's terms, criticizing Velázquez's painting, performing the representation of a "*psyche*" understood as a symbol for otherness, through which it is suggested the resemblance between different spaces, corps and materiality's exponents, creating the meta-painting's discourse as imperfect language<sup>9</sup>. Although,

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<sup>8</sup> "It must be admitted that this indifference is equaled only by the mirror's own. It is reflecting nothing, in fact, of all that is there in the same space as itself: neither the painter with his back to it, nor the figures in the center of the room. It is not the visible it reflects, in those bright depths. In Dutch painting it was traditional for mirrors to play a duplicating role: they repeated the original contents of the picture, only inside an unreal, modified, contracted, concave space. One saw in them the same things as one saw in the first instance in the painting, but decomposed and re-composed according to a different law. Here, the mirror is saying nothing that has already been said before. Yet its position is more or less completely central: its upper edge is exactly on an imaginary line running half-way between the top and the bottom of the painting, it hangs right in the middle of the far wall (or at least in the middle of the portion we can see); it ought, therefore, to be governed by the same lines of perspective as the picture itself; we might well expect the same studio, the same painter, the same canvas to be arranged within it according to an identical space; it could be the perfect duplication. In fact, it shows us nothing of what is represented in the picture itself". (Foucault 1971, 6).

<sup>9</sup> "It is in the painter's hand the power to create the other face of a *psyche*. But the relation between language and painting is an infinite one. Not because the word is imperfect, but because in front of visible, it is incapable to recover what is expressing. It is useless to say what can be seen, because what is visible has no place in what is said, and so is in vain the effort to express, through images, metaphors, comparisons, what we are about to say, because the place where they shine is not the eye's one, but the syntax's succession's one. The resemblance, the similitude governed the representation. The world spun around itself: the earth repeating the sky, the human

Velázquez represents just one moment of Foucault's scheme of the pure representation, in which he includes also Manet and Magritte. Deleuze believed that this was Foucault's way to become a painter himself, but in a different manner: "Foucault's passion for describing scenes, or, even more so, for offering descriptions that stand as scenes: description of *Las Meninas*, Manet, Magritte, the admirable descriptions of the chain gang, the asylum, the prison and the little prison van, as though they were scenes and Foucault were a painter" (Deleuze 1988, 80). In his *The Order of Things*, he wanted to give a proper language to the subjective consciousness, a construct that he closely followed in *Las Meninas*, but that was declared as invisible. From Velázquez to Picasso, *Las Meninas* becomes the image for itself, the subject's developed and framed process of consciousness.

"When Velázquez painted *Las Meninas* in 1656, Man, as Foucault conceives him, was not yet knowable as such; Man was still unthought. Man, so defined, still lay outside the limits of the classical episteme. Picasso, painting his versions of *Las Meninas* three hundred years after Velázquez, postdates Man. A different field of representation is yielded up as a result, one that finds its center in a subjective consciousness that willfully appropriates the image for itself" (Kleinfelder 1993, 63). Man couldn't enter the scene until Kant proposed the finitude of knowledge by considering the relation between subject and object into the terms of transcendental Subjectivity. Picasso is not creating a suitable mimesis for *Las Meninas*, leaving the visible and the invisible in Velázquez's terms. He converts *Las Meninas* in a possession problem<sup>10</sup>, creating variations for an aesthetical representation of the individual consciousness. Picasso's *Las Meninas* represent both "self-reflexive" and "self-reflective" (65) constructs. He plays the subject being spectator and artist.

For Velázquez, the subject's sovereignty was leading in the capacity to represent the visible and the invisible and to contribute from inside and from outside to a meta-painting. Picasso gives power to the subject by considering it capable to relate the invisible in visible forms, putting in a fictional or narrative

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faces reflecting in stars, the grass hiding the secrets of nature serving the human being. Painting imitates space. And representation, being either a holiday or a science, passed for repeating: theater of life or mirror of the world, this is the title of any language, its proper way announcing itself and formulating its way to speak".

<sup>10</sup> "Suppose you just wanted to copy *Las Meninas*. If I were to set myself to copying it, there would come a moment what I would say to myself: now what would happen if I put that figure a little more to the right or a little more to the left? And I would go ahead and try it, in my own way, without attending any more to Velázquez. This experiment would surely lead me to modify the light or to arrange it differently, from having changed the position to a figure. So little by little I would proceed to make a picture, *Las Meninas*, which for any painter who specialized in copying would be no good, it wouldn't be the *Meninas* as they appear to him in Velázquez's canvas, it would be my *Meninas*" (Pablo Picasso, apud Kleinfelder 1993, 63).

figurative discourse biographical elements<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, Infanta's royal parents receive a mirror reflection from Picasso that puts the relation between visible and invisible into the terms of transfiguration. Picasso's mirror turns upside-down all the reality, by creating a new order of things for the immediate society: "The artist has, in effect, undergone a transfiguration. The sense of inherent divinity associated with royalty has now been bestowed on the painter. The ultimate demonstration in this usurpation of power is evident in the mirror that no longer reflects the royal patrons but which now functions as a crown for the artists. The glorification of kings, of the sovereign onlooker, has been eclipsed, thus, by the emergence of the artist-hero as the transcendental Subject" (67). For Picasso, is visible what is self-reflected and is invisible only what the cannons dictated to exclude from the representation, for example, the subject who considers the picture for himself. "Under the self-reflexive terms of this new order of things, the subject of representation will inevitably be the subject representing" (67).

A last significant remark should be outlined at this moment: when Foucault described Velázquez's work, he considered it a figurative and aesthetical paradigm for the classical episteme, in which the pure representation, the resemblance and the relation between subject and representation itself were playing the role of principal elements. Picasso, painting variations of *Las Meninas*, succeeds in creating a new episteme, one is inspiring from the breakdown between sign and its referent. For Picasso, a sign is just a referent for another sign. The painting can be meta-painting only by representing the act of representing. This is why his theory about creation defines and representation as a self-reflexive sense. "Visible" and "Invisible" are, in Picasso's language and because of the sign's role, "Presence" and "Absence" equivalents.

## V. Conclusion

At the end of this analysis, it is fair at least to admit the fact that "*Las Meninas* is much more than an anthology of self-representational-theories" (Awret 2008, 34-35)<sup>12</sup>. Of course, *Las Meninas* remains an open representation,

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<sup>11</sup> It is less known the fact that Picasso appropriates the dog from Velázquez painting into a drawing of his own dog, Lump, and that Velázquez's handmaidens are reflections of Jacqueline's portraits, including, as it is speculated, a self-portrait into one of his owns *Las Meninas*.

<sup>12</sup> In his article, Awret discusses *Las Meninas* as an allegorical enactment of elements coming from the philosophy of cognition and self-representation. Considering two different ways of approaching *Las Meninas*, the first one, an analytical trajectory, linked with David Rosenthal, Robert Van Gulick or Bruce Mangan theories, and the second one, a continental one, inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological "embodied self-representation", Awret concludes: "*Las Meninas* is much more than an anthology of self-representational theories. It is the story of two progressions: (1) an 'ontogenetic' progression that describes the temporal evolution of the observer's cognitive response to *Las Meninas*; (2) a more 'phylogenic' progression (in the sense

illustrating the perfect model for the relation between painting and meta-painting, the two qualities being reflected by the same work of art. Even if Velázquez created from his *Meninas* a paradigm for the early modern meta-painting, it is still qualified, in Foucault's terms, as an exponent of the "classical age"<sup>13</sup>, claiming a specific episteme. As a figurative discourse, *Las Meninas* supports different hermeneutic treatments: the problem of the pure representation, discussed by Foucault, was clarified, during this article, in two different ways, according to its appearances. Regarded both as painting and meta-painting, Velázquez's *Las Meninas* develop, through its instruments, motives and techniques, the paradigm of the negative-painting, of the *tableau-objet*, proposing the mirror as space for any pure representation constituted by a sum of endophoric and exophoric elements. Then, *Las Meninas* become a succession of replays performed by Picasso, who created a new artistic discourse, in which the problem of the pure representation is abolished, the construct being replaced by the couple "self-reflective"- "self-reflexive" representations. "Portraying the Unrepresentable", as I mentioned at the beginning of the article, is nothing else than creating an aesthetical dimension where visible and invisible contents can coexist and generate a fluent and consistent materiality for the pure representation's subject, testing on what conditions the terms of the critique change if "visible" is understood as "presence", while any "invisible" – or at least speculated element as "invisible" – is recognized as "absence". This is a different way to treat *Las Meninas*, from Velázquez to Picasso, constructed with "a methodical eye". At the end of the road, of course, "we have invented nothing"<sup>14</sup>. Picasso himself believed it.

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that it contains a whole evolutionary history of species) – the evolution of the notion (and philosophy) of representation. Both progressions are self-referential processes. In the 'ontogenetic' cognitive progression, *Las Meninas* serves as a sublime mirror leading Velázquez and the observer into a rapturous self-referential process. The progression of the philosophy of representation can also be viewed as a self-referential process. This is because unlike the sciences, in its search for 'truth' philosophy has no discipline of a higher order to appeal to other than itself." (Awret 2008, 34).

<sup>13</sup> "In interviews given after the apparition of OT, Foucault was asked to provide examples from the domain of art to encapsulate modernity in the way that *Las Meninas* captured the Classical age's experience of representation. In both cases, he cited Paul Klee. In the first instance, he presented Klee's art in many of the terms he used to describe the modern episteme and the art of Manet. In tandem with the general movements of modernity, Klee's art is the becoming-self-reflexive of painting. It constitutes itself through a "knowledge of painting" (*savoir de la peinture*), much like Manet's critique of representation and the analytic of finitude" (Tanke 2009, 107-8).

<sup>14</sup> Pablo Picasso, on exiting the Lascaux cave in 1940.

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## IN FAVOR OF BEAUTY

RALUCA NESTOR OANCEA<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

At the beginning of a new century an old question has to be asked: are the aesthetic category of the Beautiful and the works of art which promote this classical category really obsolete? Many voices, like the literary critic Sianne Ngai,<sup>2</sup> state that in a new era postmodern categories such as – Zany, Cute, Interesting – are needed. The mighty Kitsch itself is defined by Matei Călinescu as one of the very faces of modernity. Other voices, such as the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton and the modernist art critic Robert Hughes talk about the ageless feature of Beauty that lies in the very structure of the human senses and mind. At the beginning of a new millennium Hughes even dares to state that the aesthetic experience is still at the very heart of art.

This article will analyze several opinions of contemporary thinkers about Beauty and will argue that Beauty is still needed today and still present in contemporary works. Furthermore, this article will claim that the pursuit of Beauty must not to be related only with traditional media as painting and drawing, like conservative art critics and thinkers do, but also with new media such as installation, photography or cinematography.

**Keywords:** Beauty, modern art, aesthetic experience, new media.

One of the key questions of contemporary aesthetics is whether it is still possible to speak about beauty after more than a half century of conceptualism and countless concessions to the mighty kitsch? Is there any need for the work of art to be beautiful in *the society of spectacle* (Debord 1994) where everything is to be bought and sold, where life is more about *having* and *appearing* than *being*, where the work of art itself turns into a banal commodity? Today any artist is aware that the classical concepts of genius and contemplation are somehow out of place. Beauty also seems to be a word that dropped out of fashion. The citizen of the spectacle society has no time for contemplation and no consideration for an art without firm market value, for artists with no credits by established art institutions.

At the same time many artists and critical theorists, who aim for a strict segregation between the *Artworld* and the commodity market, also reject the beautiful and the aesthetic form: it is safer to drop out the aesthetic form, the

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<sup>2</sup> Ngai, Sianne (2012). *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard University Press.

exponent of the ancient bourgeois culture. Anti-art and the rejection of the beautiful and its *aura*<sup>3</sup> seem to be more compatible with a cultural revolution<sup>4</sup>.

But after all these mutations and abdications artists, spectators, art critics and philosophers together start to wonder what is the new meaning and scope of art, if any? What can art be without the aesthetic form?

In his book *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Herbert Marcuse, a founding member of the Frankfurt School along with Theodore Adorno, provides a lucid and objective analysis of the relation between art and revolution. The art promises resistance to societal repression but there is no need to drop out the aesthetic form in order to develop a cultural revolution. The affinity between art and revolution is an inner and subtle kinship.

Marcuse criticizes the obstinate politicization of art done by the radical Marxist aesthetics. Taking for granted the assumption that *the aesthetic form is a factor of stabilization in repressive societies, helping to justify and beautify an established order*, these theories generalize the denial of classical form to all possible styles and aesthetic forms. This is the way the radicals strain to develop an Anti-art, to “find forms of communication that may break the oppressive rule of the established language and images which have long since become a means of domination, indoctrination, and deception” (Marcuse 1972, 79). The new goals of the revolution require a nonconformist language, they say. “The subverting use of the artistic tradition aims from the beginning at a systematic desublimation of culture: that is to say, at undoing the aesthetic form.” (81).

Marcuse defines the aesthetic form as “the total of qualities (harmony, rhythm, contrast) which make an oeuvre a self-contained whole, with a structure and order of its own (the style)” (81). By means of these qualities the dominant order of the reality can be transcended and transformed. It is a fact that the transformation implied is not a real and effective one. The universe of art contradicts the reality. The contradiction is methodical and intentional but also sublimated. The realm of the aesthetic form is the domain of the idealist *illusion*. This is how Marxist aesthetics aim at disintegrating bourgeois culture altogether – *operational values* (the father figure as head of the family and the enterprise, the authoritarian education, the instrumentalist reason) and *higher intellectual culture* as well.

At the end of the 60's – the decade of the *open* and *free* forms, when void score performances as “4'33'” by John Cage, null paintings as Rauschenberg's “White Paintings” and unexposed films like “Zen for Film” by Nam June Paik did not shock anybody anymore, the break with bourgeois culture seemed complete. The whole universe of fine art had been diminished as a piece of

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<sup>3</sup> In his seminal essay entitled *The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin defines the *aura* as the *here and now* of the authentic, original and unique work of art.

<sup>4</sup> I am not referring here to any particular movement like the Chinese Cultural Revolution but to a potential one.

ancient history. The historical function of art had been reversed. But did these efforts really subvert what they were supposed to subvert, were they really steps on the road to liberation?

However, it is important to realize that, in fact, the *idealist intellectual culture* devaluated and even negated the *operational values* of the bourgeois material culture from the very beginning. Marcuse took note that all the so called *bourgeois oeuvres*, at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, firmly dissociate themselves “from the world of commodities, from the brutality of bourgeois industry and commerce, from the distortion of human relationships, from capitalist materialism, from instrumentalist reason.” (86). Thus the definition of art lays in the very negation of reality, this negation subsisting in the very *form* of the work of art. In conclusion, in Marcuse’s view, without this inner dialectic between affirmation and negation, without specific aesthetic tension between the established order and the other reality that celebrates the universal humanity, the beauty of the soul, the inner freedom, we can’t talk about art at all.

The aesthetic form is nothing but an equivalent concept for what Kant coined as *the beautiful* in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, referring to the universal, disinterested, both sensuous and intellectual pleasure that every subject of knowledge can experience. This pleasure, that only the human subject can feel when he is confronted with the beautiful form of a flower, a tree or an work of art, can and has to be distinguished from the interested, sensuous pleasure of the *agreeable* (for example the pleasure of a nice meal that even an animal could appreciate) and also from the interested (in the existence of an object or an action), rational satisfaction of the *good*.

The fact that the *beautiful* and the aesthetic pleasure correspond to certain universal qualities of the human intellect, sensibility and imagination, certifies the aspiration of the *judgment of taste* to objectivity and necessity and can also provide a strong base for a definition of the human being. Giving up the beautiful will nevertheless signify giving up the very concept of the human as a rational being that can transcend the material world of appearances (*phenomena*, representation) and reach his *noumenal* side, his liberty. The objectiveness and the universal quality of the beautiful alongside the capacity to transform a particular, individual content into a higher, universal order of which the individual partakes, thus guarantee a firm universal validity to the realm of art.

Therefore, confronted with the age-old question, the aesthetic theory is able to declare: the Greek tragedy, the medieval epic, the 19<sup>th</sup> century painting and literature are still true and also enjoyable today. Authentic art reveals facts and possibilities of the human existence: the tragic universe where man is confronted with his ontological limit, the quest for secular redemption. Although the aesthetic universe puts forward an illusion, in that very illusion another reality shows forth, that of possible liberation. By invoking this promise art transcends all particular class content. Even though the bourgeois himself, his specific problems and décor

are part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century work of art's content, Marcuse argues that this content "becomes transparent as the condition and as the dream of humanity: conflict and reconciliation between man and man, man and nature – the miracle of the aesthetic form:" (90). Certainly the intellectual bourgeois culture is an elitist culture but this character, in Marcuse's view, is the very character of culture since antiquity. Thus if a cultural revolution aims to extinct the elitist character of the bourgeois culture it has to go far beyond against the aesthetic form itself, against the art as such, against the literature as literature.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the concept of a cultural revolution is for Marcuse nothing but an abstract negation. Not carried by a revolutionary class, on one hand "it tries to give word, image, and tone to the feelings and needs of *the masses* (which are not revolutionary)" (93) and on the other hand it creates anti-forms by means of fragmentation and montage techniques applied on the traditional forms. After a hundred years of anti-forms and conceptualism, at a half century since Pop Art has opened the Pandora box of the *kitsch*<sup>5</sup> and serial reproduction we can ask if there really is such a thing as *art for/of the masses*?

Walter Benjamin himself, in the very essay in which he talks about the politicization of art by means of the new technical expressions of film and photography, admits that the public of the film "*is an examiner, but an absent-minded one*" (Benjamin 1968, 241). The problem is the same confrontation between the masses' desire for distraction and the art, which reclaims concentration from the spectators. "Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. [...] In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings." (241). Architecture is the most ancient art form that outlived Greek tragedy, the epic poem and who will maybe outlive painting too. In Benjamin's view this is because the reception of architecture is not optical but tactile. "On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit." (240). Benjamin states that the modern, industrialized era needs a new mechanism of perception, a technical one, and this kind of perception couldn't be performed only by means of optical side (visual perception) and contemplation. Tactile appropriation and habit are needed. He concludes that film, with its shock effect and its own method of *reception in the state of distraction*, is the only one capable to mobilize the masses.

But we have to ask: is the artistic feature of a building the one that people perceive by habit? And furthermore is art compatible with entertainment and distraction? Arthur Schopenhauer strained to explain in *The World as Will and Representation* why the visitors of a foreign city are the only ones who can reach

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<sup>5</sup> Kitsch in the words of Matei Călinescu has an aesthetic and also an ethic feature, it can be opposed to the good taste as bad taste and also to the truth as false art, mimesis, counterfeit art.

the true beauty of the place – habit kills the aesthetic value and the capacity of contemplation. We can accept that film is the new technique suited for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But we have to be very careful not to reduce art and aesthetic value to the plain language or medium suited for a certain art paradigm. The medium or technique is not able to guarantee beauty by itself. Of all the oil paintings done in the Baroque period only a few are stated as beautiful. Of all the buildings we appropriate today by habit most are just ugly and functional.

Moreover if we accept the relation between art and the masses' desire for distraction and entertainment we have to drop out the very definition of beautiful, the one Kant taught us in order to help us discern between the *beautiful* (the human characteristic intellectual and sensuous pleasure) and the *agreeable*, the pleasure which the human subject shares with the animal. This approach was the one that in fact opened the Pandora's Box of kitsch and commercial music and films. To ignore the aesthetic value means to reduce art at a popular and suitable technique at the disposal of a capitalist system. The first and most serious effect was to emphasize the commodity value of the *so called* work of art. In his 1972 book Marcuse reveals that the dominant class of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century had ceased to practice the aesthetic culture and was not interested in any culture. In the globalization era it is not a cultural Marxist revolution that has determined the fade of beauty and the disintegration of the aesthetic culture, instead, these shifts are due to "the work of the internal dynamic of contemporary capitalism and the adjustment of culture to the requirements of contemporary capitalism." (Marcuse 1972, 85).

This article is not implying here that Benjamin was not right to identify film and photography as the most significant artistic languages of the new technical era. But the difference between plain language or medium and the aesthetic use of a medium has to be underlined once more. Today we can very clearly see the huge difference between the film as art and the film as industry, or in the words of the great French director Robert Bresson, the difference between *cinematography* (the art of cinema) and *cinema*. In an interview taken by Jean-Luc Godard, after the 1966 premiere of "*Au hasard Balthazar*", Bresson explains: the film as art is about the human soul and its innermost depths, about interiorization, intimacy, isolation.

In the films of established great directors, *authors*<sup>6</sup>, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky (the director who defined the art of film as *Sculpting in time*) or even in more recent films made by Theodoros Angelopoulos or Chantal Akerman, we can access a true form of beauty and can experience contemplation. Even if at the same time, with different authors, we can identify the very film aesthetics based upon

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<sup>6</sup> See the *Author Theory* of the Nouvelle Vague artists and critics: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard etc.

shock and montage predicted by Benjamin, one cannot state anymore that film has to be connected only with shock or the *agreeable* pleasure of the masses.

Today we can understand the personal urge that determined a romantic semiotic character like Benjamin to convert to Marxism and give up the aesthetic form. In 1936, four years before committing suicide while he was chased by Nazi troops, Benjamin feared that aesthetics was directly linked to German spirit and fascism. In this context his only concern could have been that his new theses about the *era of mechanical reproduction* will become effective weapons. An inevitable side effect has been accepted alongside: the theses will “brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery – concepts whose uncontrolled application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense.” (Benjamin 1968, 241).

Thirty years after, the great film director Robert Bresson will contradict Benjamin: *We must preserve the mystery. Life is mysterious, and we should see that on screen.* Moreover, members of the Frankfurt school – both Theodor Adorno, the disciple of Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse – reject the abdication of the aesthetic form. Talking about the reemergence of form Marcuse stated: “And with it we find a new expression of the inherently subversive qualities of the aesthetic dimension, especially beauty as the sensuous appearance of the idea of freedom.” (Marcuse 1972, 117). Beauty returns and with it the very soul of the art returns, and here Marcuse stresses that the beauty implied is not the one in food and commercials but the old and repressed one, the one capable to hold a subversive content. He is obviously not talking about the banal revival of classicism, romanticism or any traditional form. He refers to the contemporary art paradigm. Accepting the premises of Marcuse that revolution is the very substance of art we are able to find beauty in the 70’s in a simple poem of Brecht (but not in a radical political play) or in the music of Bob Dylan.

Marcuse provides a general and operational definition of beauty: “Beauty as a quality which is in an opera of Verdi as well as in a Bob Dylan song, in a painting of Ingres as well as Picasso, in a phrase of Flaubert as well as James Joyce, in a gesture of the Duchess of Guermantes as well as of a hippie girl! Common to all of them is the expression of beauty as negation of the commodity world and of the performances, attitudes, looks, gestures, required by it.” (121). In this case the well known *Death of Art* will be possible only when humans will not be able to distinguish between true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly. This perfect barbarism at the height of civilization is similar with Vilem Flusser’s idea of Post-History and deliberate illiteracy. In conclusion, the dissolution of the aesthetic form means the dissolution of art itself.

Furthermore, there are recent opinions that plead for the universal human need for art and beauty. One belongs to the art critic Robert Hughes, the author of the well known book and BBC TV series *The shock of the new* (1980), a classical work consisting of eight essays about eight separate subjects important

to an understanding of modernity. Starting from *The mechanical paradise* to *The landscape of pleasure* and *The future that was*, Robert Hughes discusses key problems of modern art such as: the myth of the Future in the machine age at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the loss of the newness in late modernism, how has art created images of political propaganda, what has been the relation of art to pleasure, to the irrational and the unconscious and what changes were forced on art by the pressure of mass media. At that time Hughes, as any progressist critic, was very fond of Television (he valued the great virtue of TV to communicate enthusiasm), art democratization and the use of art works reproductions. His films and book were rooted though in the traditional concept of aesthetic pleasure. In 2004, 25 years after he made *The shock of the new*, Hughes added another chapter, this time a more conservative and critical view of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, entitled *The new shock of the new*.

This new chapter proposes a meditation on the very concept of novelty in contemporary visual art, an inquiry on the difference between *just another piece of art* and a work that really has something fresh and vital to say. At the beginning of the century the Eiffel tower, a symbol of the energy and self confidence of the modern man, attracted a mass audience<sup>7</sup> and left millions of people touched by the feeling of the new age. But do the art works of today have the same power and impact?

In Hughes' opinion Guernica of Picasso<sup>8</sup> was one of the last works of strong political meaning. Contemporary art has lost its interest and power to depict and criticize reality (and here Hughes agrees with Marcuse in valuing the subversive power of art and intellectual culture).

A possible comment to this statement can be done starting from the hypothesis formulated by Benjamin: photography and cinematography has taken the place of modern painting. What if contemporary painting really lost the mass impact that cinematography holds in turn. Hence strong political meaning is present mainly in documentary films and, in a smaller percent, in artistic cinematography as Benjamin had predicted. Maybe the works of the Italian neo-realists have depicted the World War Two events and the years that followed better than any other medium could have done it. We can invoke the same argument about the New Wave Romanian cinema and the communist period or the 90's.<sup>9</sup> We have to

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<sup>7</sup> We must underline that in this case we have a different way of perceiving the architecture than Benjamin has had. Hughes investigates the very concept of aesthetic pleasure and the optical reception and not the habit like Benjamin has done in *The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction*.

<sup>8</sup> The same painting is mentioned by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Like any other authentic art work, Guernica posses in Adorno's view a non-ideological character, so it is able to speak by means of its power of visual expression only like a visceral wound of society does. This is the source of its strong character of social protest.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking of Romanian art in the communist period I don't want to argue that the Realist Socialist painting or the underground Performance Art of artists like Ion Grigorescu or Geta Bratescu had no political impact. But Realist Socialist painting although has had a mass audience

take into consideration the possibility that visual contemporary art (painting, installation, performance) is not able to change anymore the way a large number of people think and feel about power, like *Guernica* and other modernist works did.

This fact could be related with the very definition of the artist: the visual artist of today is not interested in the world anymore but only in his personal phobias, said Hughes having Jeff Koons' and Damian Hirst's works in mind. These artists' only egocentric goal is to make a powerful and immediate impact, to stay out of the crowd no matter what, to assure the public that they are different. Hence contemporary shows present only fast, gettable and cynical images like mass media do.

The pact of high art with the kitsch and commercial values was signed first by Andy Warhol, the artist who tried to redefine art as business, using as his primary model the Fashion industry. Hughes invokes Warhol's obsession for the bright colors of TV and the process of serialization: two Elvises are better than one, the cans of soup are depicted on a canvas exactly as if they were standing on the shelf of a supermarket.

Defining kitsch as a typical feature of modernity, as one of the very faces of modernity Matei Călinescu<sup>10</sup> has taken into consideration the infiltration of the kitsch in high art's territory. He mentioned the *camp* sensibility - contemporary art form that emerged in the 60's in New York, first in some queer artistic communities. Camp art uses the category of kitsch for its ironic potential. It plays with bad taste, usually the bad taste of yesterday, presenting it as a high form of refinement. The mechanism is simple: once it is accepted and assumed, kitsch becomes its very absolute negation. A succinct description is provided by Susan Sontag: "It is beautiful because it is awful." (Sontag 1969, 2963).

In a way Pop Art and Camp provide an interesting research of the inner mechanism of commodity in a capitalist society. In Marcuse's view, though, the very tension between operational values and intellectual high culture is lost. "I want to be a machine" Warhol, the artist who called his own studio *The Factory*, proclaimed. It is a fact that the Camp artist did not fight anymore against the repressive capitalist society but tried to become a direct mirror of the commodity itself alongside with its rules, its mechanics. The fight, the tension are replaced by a relaxed and vague irony.

Matei Călinescu quoted the art critic Hilton Kramer (Kramer 1974, 19), the one who coined the name *The Flea Market School* for the Camp group coagulated by Warhol: today any remains of bad taste, buried in the past, are ready for exhumation. Hughes seems to share this opinion when calling Warhol and the Gilbert and George duo image scavengers and recyclers. The danger of

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was not authentic art but pure ideology while Performance Art had and still has a small, elitist, professional audience.

<sup>10</sup> To be consulted Matei Călinescu (1987). *Five Faces of the Modernity*. Duke University Press.

Camp sensibility consists in the fact that between kitsch and Camp there is just a very thin line of demarcation; looking from the outside and in the eyes of a neophyte public the two are identical.

Jeff Koons<sup>11</sup> is considered by Hughes the true follower of Warhol's kitschy manner and in the same time the heir of Duchamp's legacy of the readymade. From his first exhibitions consisting of consumer items (basketballs, vacuum cleaners) shown in Plexiglas boxes to the huge porcelain statue of Michael Jackson and his chimpanzee, and the controversial paintings and sculptures *Made in Heaven*, Koons shocks and at the same time pleases the consumerist public. The use of pornographic and advertising images has helped him to become a VIP, a star. Thus the contemporary artist is no longer a clear eye, a contemplative genius but one of the media stars described by Debord as: "spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles" (Debord 1994, 58). The media star is nothing but an entity committed to the semblance of life, to the spectacular, the opposite of an individual.

Considering himself the natural descendent of great artists of the past, Koons pretends that his works are related to religious works like Masaccio's *Expulsion* and Michelangelo's *Pietà*. For example, his porcelain glazed sculpture of Michael Jackson, a so called contemporary replica of *Pietà*, appears as tragic to him. In the eyes of Koons, Jackson the media star, harassed by the public and the press, is the very contemporary tragic hero and the way in which the celebrity is treated in contemporary society constitutes an authentic tragic condition. In a similar way Damien Hirst (Britain's richest living artist), author of the dead animal in formaldehyde sculptures, declares himself to be a Bacon disciple and refers to his own work as metaphysical meditation.

To solve this debate it is better to ask first what the meaning of tragic is nowadays. Could a simple particular fact, like the murder of Kennedy, the divorce of Koons and Cicciolina or the death of Michael Jackson, be tragic? The confusion between metaphysics and everyday life determines the category of tragic to dissolve, to lose its meaning. Once upon a time the tragic implied the human condition, the finitude, the conscience of death and at the same time the sublime. Nowadays it seems that every piece of news on TV can engage this category. Another fact which contributed to this state of confusion was the reduction of the tragic to the art of tragedy itself committed by the literary

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<sup>11</sup> Jeff Koons, one of the most famous living artists in America with works sold at prices of millions of dollars, husband of the politician and porn star Cicciolina for seven years, has started his artistic career very young by arranging items in the window of his father shop and worked as a commodity trader at the New York Stock Exchange.

critique. The very definition of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>12</sup> is another source of vagueness and confusion in its contemporary interpretation. We cannot reduce the tragic at the two subjective feelings of *fear* and *pity*.

Hughes seems not to agree either. He spitefully suggested that the only relation between Koons' works and the classical ones could be the material he used (marble, gold etc). Hughes groups all the works described above in the category of *Fast Art*, a concept similar to *fast food*. He claims that, especially in consumerist society, human nature needs *Slow Art* – art which can hold the time as a vase holds water, art that is not merely sensational, that does not get its message across in ten seconds, that is not falsely iconic, in a word – art that is the very opposite to mass media.

The same message is carried by the well known BBC documentary written by the British philosopher Roger Scruton and entitled *Why Beauty Matters*. It is the pursuit of beauty that helps us to understand our essence as spiritual beings. Invoking the classical Kantian definitions of beauty and taste, Scruton tries to signalize the danger implied by the abandonment of beauty. Losing beauty, which was central to our civilization for two thousand years, not as a subjective value but as a universal need of human beings, requires losing the meaning of life. Ignoring this need means finding ourselves in a spiritual desert. Using the same Kantian terminology we can add that losing beauty requires giving up the very definition of man related with the *disinterested pleasure* provided by beauty.

After a long period of time<sup>13</sup> when the only aim of art was beauty, as one of the most important values of man (like truth and goodness), it seems that today beauty and good taste have no place in our lives. We have to face the fact that the era in which modern art with its transcendental power provided a remedy for the chaos and sorrow in everyday life, like religion did before, is also over. Twentieth century artists became weary of spiritual tasks... The randomness of contemporary life cannot be redeemed by art... Art has become an egocentric practice, not interested anymore in either human nature and what humans share or in the liberty of thought that distinguishes us from animals. Quoting Scruton we can say that one word marks everything nowadays and this word is *me, my pleasures, my desires* and that the art's response to all this is: yes, go for it!

In a society centered on use and appetite, beauty is nothing but a side effect said Scruton probably thinking of the way Hirst (alongside with many of his disciples) has fallen back on repetitious works and pieces of exorbitant, vulgar bling. It seems that art turns its back on beauty and becomes a slave to the consumer culture feeding just our pleasures and addictions. It is as the works of

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<sup>12</sup> "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, ... in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (VI, 2).

<sup>13</sup> Scruton specifies the 1750-1930 period.

art, instead of presenting reality, take revenge on it, spoiling what could have been a home and leaving us alienated in a spiritual desert. A need to desecrate the experience of sex and death, to destroy their spiritual significance for the sake of the shock itself appears in the most criticized works of Hirst<sup>14</sup> (*For the Love of God*, 2007) and Koons (*Made in Heaven series* etc). It also seems that adverts become more significant than art. Works of art, like the skull of Damien Hirst (*For the Love of God*, 2007), imitate the advert, the very mechanism in which the advert captures attention or tries to create a brand even with no product to sell except itself. Thus we can ask ourselves if what we are facing is the uncritical acceptance of the actual world with all its counterfeit values and compromises to the capitalist mechanics? Is it not the very path which Deleuze<sup>15</sup> and Guattari spoke of, the disintegration of the subject and integration of the human in a desiring machine?

It seems that contemporary art aims mostly to disturb and break moral taboos, as if beauty is not important anymore. Originality<sup>16</sup> at any moral cost is what matters instead. As such our society celebrates the new cult of shock and ugliness<sup>17</sup>. In Scruton's view this cult determines not only art and architecture but also our manners, our music and our language, which are also increasingly raucous and self centered. In a similar way with Hughes, Scruton criticizes artists whose works engage the category of kitsch, desecration and vulgar bling like Koons, Hirst, Gilbert and George, but he also includes in the cult of ugliness conceptual works of artists like Carl Andre and Martin Creed.

First it is important to take note that we are dealing with two contemporary art trends addressed by Scruton under the single category of ugliness. It is a fact that both trends reject the very category of beauty along with the transcendental and spiritual need of humanity. Hence both trends, in order to certify themselves as art, need only the vote of the *Artworld* (critics, art market and art institutions) as the *Institutional Theory of Art*<sup>18</sup> requires. It is also a fact that the

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<sup>14</sup> Here we must take into consideration Hirst's confession: "I can't wait to get into a position to make really bad art and get away with it. At the moment if I did certain things people would look at it, consider it and then say 'f off'. But after a while you can get away with things", appreciating the fact that he had at least the courage to admit it.

<sup>15</sup> To be consulted Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>16</sup> We have to notice that this can't be art in Kant terms. A work of art needs balance between originality and good taste, specified the philosopher in his theory of genius and the good taste is the most necessary condition.

<sup>17</sup> We have to stress here once again the difference between ugliness and a beautiful representation of ugliness. From the beginning of our civilization it has been one of the tasks of art to transform the pain, the ugly and the sordid in a vivid and beautiful symbol of human condition. Hence the cult of ugliness refers only to the death of the beautiful representation.

<sup>18</sup> The theory formulated by Arthur Danto and George Dickie is also the very premise which allows an artist like Tracey Emin, faced with her installation consisting in an unmade bed, to declare that her work is art just because she says it is.

master of both contemporary art trends is Duchamp himself, the one who deliberately discredited<sup>19</sup> the very concept of art. Moreover there are artists like Hirst who take part in both. But there are significant differences between art that engages kitsch and makes a pact with the consumerist society assuming its inner values and mechanics and conceptual art.

Conceptual art gave up the aesthetic form for the sake of an idea. A light that goes on and off (Martin Creed, *The Lights going on and off*, 2000), a pale of bricks (Carl Andre, *Equivalent VIII*, 1974), a glass of water (Martin Craig Davis, *An Oak Tree*, 1973). The single aesthetics still valid for these works it is the most ascetic minimalism. The objects are plain or inexistent, it is only the intention, the gesture of the artist that makes the difference.

*An Oak Tree*, the well known installation of British artist Michael Craig-Martin, consists of a glass of water on a shelf and a text which explains why the physical appearance of the glass is in fact an oak tree. The text refers to philosophical concepts: substance and accidents, cause and effect like a philosophical poem. Some works of his former student at Goldsmith College, Damien Hirst seem to be a meditation on death: pills and pill bottles, flies, rotten meat, dead animals showed in tanks of *formaldehyde*. We recognize the same minimalist aesthetics with more stress on the element of shock.

The problem with shock is that what shocks you first time around becomes boring and null when repeated. The mechanics of shock are different from the mechanics of beauty. Kant states that a gifted disciple after he closely watches the work of a genius will soon be able to make a genius work himself. The disciple does not copy the form of the work or a manner but he appropriates the spirit of the great master, the very power to provide new rules to the art domain by paradigmatic examples. Shock is too ephemeral to make a link between artists. Nor is it a proper *know how*, a *techne*. This could be a reason for the very poor quality of so many second rate works by artists which strain to win the public pushing forward the single ingredient of shock, shock as cheap mimesis of a manner, shock for the sake of shock.

Interviewed by Scruton, Michael Craig-Martin tries to justify the aesthetic experience of a readymade: even if it is a different experience from the aesthetic pleasure and transcendence of traditional works it is not a lack of aesthetic experience. He confessed that as a student he was stunned in amazement in front of Duchamp's works. The urinal is not meant to be beautiful, its aim was to captivate the imagination. So Duchamp gave a new definition of art, like any genius does in Kantian theory of the genius, with the only help of a paradigmatic work – his urinal. This new art has a new core apart from the skill and technique of the *hand*, apart from the optics and the too much

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<sup>19</sup> “We have to get rid of art like we got rid of religion” said the artist in a 1968 BBC interview.

praised artistic *eye*. Craig declared that this was not a cynical attempt but an attempt to purify art from all corruption and prudishness.

A question has to be asked though – doesn't this attempt relate to the modernist dualist approach in rejecting the sensuous side of the human being? Isn't it in fact the same old Cartesian message: the very essence of the human has nothing to do with sensations, with the hand or the eye, it is all about the mind, the brain. Isn't it true that this is how works like *An oak tree* work?

Conceptual works seem to give up beauty in order to dissociate themselves from the world of entertainment and commodity value. They renounce the very idea of pleasure in art in order to dissociate from the kitsch and its *fake catharsis*. Kitsch parodies Catharsis. Ambitious art, however, produces the same fiction of feelings; indeed, this was essential to it: "The documentation of actually existing feelings the recapitulation of psychical raw material, is foreign to it. It is in vain to try to draw the boundaries abstractly between aesthetic fiction and kitsch's emotional plunder. It is a poison admixed to all art; excising it is today one of art's despairing efforts." (Adorno 2002, 239).

So what is art after Duchamp? Should the urinal and all the readymades, the conceptual installations and the kitsch objects of Hirst, Koons and Craig-Martin be interpreted only as jokes? Or are we facing a new way of perceiving the world, the view of a cynical, ironical and detached eye of an individual habituated with the consumer society? Being asked about the aim of contemporary art Craig-Martin responded that these works help people to understand better the world they live in, in a way that gives more meaning to them. Contemporary art is not about an ideal world, Craig-Martin continued. The role of art is to help people feel more at ease with the actual world, with the here and now and all its imperfections. But we have to ask: can we call this practice art? Could art be only a slice of life, asks Scruton in his turn? And we can add: is it not the field of politics, social activism or journalism what we are in fact talking about here? Has the artist of today become something between a poetic journalist and an original activist?

The work of art has to be more than a joke or an idea Scruton said. Indeed, if we enlarge the sphere of creativity and let in anything that surprises people and ignore any skill or Kantian good taste, the very definition of art will become vague and vacuous. Art is play, but not any game is art. Not every person could be an artist like the Marxist aesthetics dreamed about in the 30's.

In Kant's terminology we are facing an *aesthetic idea* reduced to a gesture, or to abstract *concepts*, with no particular *form* or *intuition* attached to it. This practice cannot be Art though, but some kind of a science. Maybe this practice is just second rate philosophy or maybe we are facing *The Emperor's new clothes* as Craig-Martin himself suggested in his *An oak tree* text. Could the text of a conceptual work of art be a valid philosophical argument? This essay proposes a negative answer. We may say at most that it is a poem which

pretends to be an argument. Has visual art been transformed to poetry then? At any rate we have to admit that in a conceptual work the text is more important than the visual. Kant could have enjoyed this.

In what way could the contemporary apophthegm: *a work of art has to be art because the artist says so*, be justified though? The opinion put forward by this essay is that we have to be cautious in accepting it. This work agrees with Scruton in stating that there has to be more than a gesture or an idea to make a work of art. Radical conceptualist art is better interpreted as an act of social protest with ideological message, the same anti-form and anti-art message: better to give up the beauty in order to avoid making a pact with consumerist society and its counterfeit Catharsis, the kitsch. Conceptualist works like *An oak tree* or Joseph Beuys'<sup>20</sup> social sculptures are not authentic pieces of visual art but rather seminal messages of ethical, social content addressed to the blind consumer. They have no aesthetical visual value though, but only the critical value of the very negation of the kitsch alongside with the instrumentalist reason of the consumerist society.

These radical conceptual works are the works of the 70's and early 80's. At the end of the 80's a new species of beauty was conceived. This essay agrees with Michael Craig-Martin in saying that there is a kind of contemporary beauty in Jeff Koons' gigantesque balloon toys. Conceptual works can be beautiful but in their own way. Koons' balloon toys (*Fig. 1*) are at a first glance too colorful and too minimalist but this is just the first glance. Their beauty coexists with a touch of ironic view of the world. In order to sense this beauty the interaction with the very works in a show is perhaps useful (the jpeg reproduction on the net is not enough as it is not with any classical artistic work). This paper believes that this beauty can also be felt in some of Gilbert's and George's large scale works too. And perhaps Damien Hirst's shark, entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, suspended in the transparent turquoise of the *formaldehyde* solution impresses the public in the same way. A new species of beauty triumphs in contemporary design, installation, photography and cinematography, presenting postindustrial landscapes, everyday objects in austere or vivid colors, elegant shades of grey or hues of pink and neon green.

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<sup>20</sup> In the very words of Kara L. Rooney, the curator of the show entitled *Process*, focused on Beuys's work (the Rooster gallery, Manhattan) Beuys went from "maker of objects to artistic philosopher."



*Fig. 1. Jeff Koons, Balloon Dog, Versailles, 2008*

Contemporary painting and sculpture, influenced by this new aesthetics, adopt the same minimalist forms and vivid colors. Michael Craig-Martin's own works, made during the 90's, (*Fig. 2*) provide some valuable examples of astoundingly beautiful contemporary art. Hughes himself values the work of the painter and photographer David Hockney, an artist who knows the contemporary world but also seems to know what to filter out of it, the English answer to Andy Warhol.

The error of the conservative art critics and philosophers like Hughes and Scruton, error that causes the vulnerability of their theses, is the venturesome assumption that beauty can be found only in traditional media like painting, drawing or sculpture. They are right about complaining that in the last years there has been a radical depreciation in the traditional art skills. It is also true that nowadays a lot of artists do not bother to apprehend the proper skills invoking the argument that the only needs of a contemporary artist are the ideas and the imagination. But new media is not to blame for all this. New media has technical skills of its own, skills needed in the process of artistic creation. The real reason for valuing only traditional media, figurative or abstract, is their own ignorance about new media and the possibility of a new kind of beauty. Even if they declare the contrary they in fact pursue the pointless task of resuscitation of traditional beauty. Hence this paper does not agree with Hughes in stating that only the painter or the sculptor are capable of a deep and full relation to the object. This essay considers that this state of contemplative union with the object is only dependant on the artist's way of relating to the world. It is not a problem of the medium but

one of artist's intentionality. The medium has its own message like McLuhan said but if you truly seek beauty you can find it in any medium of expression.

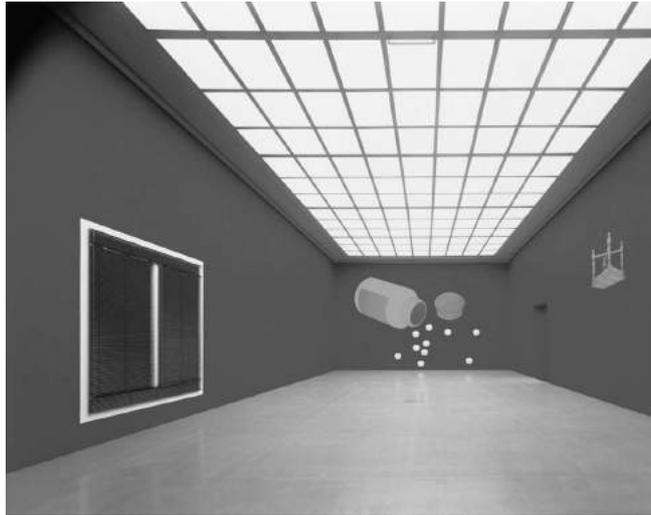


Fig. 2. Michael Craig-Martin, *Always now*, 1988

This paper agrees with Hughes in stating that the technical image, the machine view is not necessarily closer to the truth than drawing or painting. It is a fact that the truth of the world implies more than the accurate mimesis of the surface of the objects which the technical image can provide. But when we consider photography and cinematography as art, we are not interested in just mirroring the surface of the real or in the commercialization of a brand like mass visual media does.

In his documentary *Scruton* confronts the beautiful, tormented bed painted by Delacroix (*Un Lit Defait*, 1827) with the similar contemporary installation of Tracey Emin (*My Bed*, 1998), stating that it is impossible for the installation (being a real object, the unmade bed itself) to transfigure the ugliness of the world in a beautiful representation. This essay cannot agree with him either. The space of a three dimensional artistic installation is not the cartesian space of real objects, not an abstract but a virtual, intentional space. Maybe Emin's installation is just a worthless, not functional work, a poor citation, a useless mockery, like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* is, but we cannot accuse the general definition of an installation.

In this sense we can invoke the extraordinary beautiful installation of Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project* (Fig. 3), exhibited in the middle of the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in 2003. This project reconstructs a beautiful pale yellow virtual sun in the huge hall. Two million visitors from all over the world

have come to visit and bow in amazement in front of this new god. In spite of its lack of political message or any compromise with the consumerism the project was world popular. Works of art like *The Weather Project*, contemporary but still engaging categories as beautiful and sublime, seem to be the very place where the deep human need for transcendent understanding has taken shelter.



Fig. 3. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003

Perhaps Scruton is right and humans still need to believe that life is more than the everyday concerns, that there are more than appetites and utilitarian needs. Projects like the one above make us think that people are still able to experience the timeless moments when the presence of a higher, transcendental order becomes almost tangible, people still know that there are things in life, like friendship, beauty or love, which need no use, no functionality. Hughes ends his documentary with a similar hope: people still need beauty, people still seek up zones of silence and contemplation, arenas for free thought and unregimented feeling. It seems that, in spite of the mass media arena that feeds him with shock images of no cultural value, the contemporary individual has the same hunger for aesthetic experience.

We are all aware that in a democratic society it is almost dangerous to talk about good and bad taste. A lot of people, some artists included, claim that in a democratic culture there is nothing like a standard of taste, and the judgments of taste have to be considered as equal votes. It is also true that the flux of images we are exposed to has made it almost impossible to decide what is worth looking at, what are the images that matter. But we still have the natural beauty as an instance to hang on to for guidance. The undoubted

possibility of all human individuals to enjoy the simple form of a flower, the image of a tree or a river gives us a strong argument to state that at the very base of all the beautiful things we can find firm standards originated in human nature. It is the same old lesson from Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the same lesson of Botticelli's Venus (known today better as the icon of Adobe Illustrator), that tells that human appetites can be transcended, the lesson of the disinterested attitude in contemplation of a flower or a child playing. Apart from any desire for possession we can define beauty as a way of seeing, a way of understanding the world not through science or use. Perhaps today after science has disappointed us by turning out to be more subjective and uncertain than we thought, we will find time to really look at things. We do not need to explain a flower in order to understand what it means said Scruton quoting Lord Shaftesbury. The message of a flower is the flower.

Complaining about the contemporary need to desecrate the experience of sex and death for the sake of the shock itself, Scruton uncovers another frightful phenomenon: the denial of love, the attempt to redefine the world as though love was no longer a part of it. He warns us about the loveless feature of postmodern art and culture, about its determination to portray the human world as unlovable. This warning must arouse us: we do not have to endorse this alienation, but to look for the path back from the desert, guided by our still universal and vivid feeling of love, by the glimpses of the experience of the sacred, which the body of the beloved, more vivid than anything yet seeming not to belong to the everyday world, still provides us.

In conclusion, even if the 20<sup>th</sup> century's hope that art was going to produce a social change was not achieved, or if it was, it was almost invisibly like Hughes suggested, art still possesses the power to lift us above the trivial and ordinary due to its aesthetic beauty. Even though beauty is not the sign of a higher order like Plato<sup>21</sup> stated, even if it was not planted in the world by God and there is no God at all, we can state, like Scruton<sup>22</sup>, that beauty is here *to fill the God shape hole made by modern science*. And beauty is here to stay. The cult of Art has replaced the cult of God, or in Hughes' words museums supplanted the churches as places both of social congress and of civic pride. It seems that these contemporary cathedrals are the most suitable hideaway places from the commercial reign of mass media, an authentic kind of public space, uncorrupted by Heidegger's *das Man*. Their safeguarding depends on all of us.

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<sup>21</sup> In *Symposium* Plato interpreted Eros like a cosmic force, like a stairway to the luminous sphere of the divine. Even if it starts with desire this path ends with the very contemplation of an ideal.

<sup>22</sup> In his documentary Scruton states that the capacity of beauty to redeem our sufferings is the one who shows why beauty can be seen as a substitute for religion.

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## UGLINESS IN THE AVANT-GARDE: GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM AND ITALIAN FUTURISM<sup>1</sup>

MARIA-ALEXANDRA BULEU<sup>2</sup>

### *Abstract*

In this article we focus on the metamorphosis of classical aesthetic categories in accordance with social change, discussing the new perspective on Ugliness and Beauty in modern art at the beginning of the twentieth century. To this purpose, we analyze German Expressionism and Italian Futurism in the attempt of not only justifying the presence of Ugliness, but also for a more profound understanding of the way artists of the avant-garde express themselves.

**Keywords:** Beauty, Ugliness, avant-garde, mimesis, progress, degradation, impurity of art.

From a classical perspective, Ugliness is the opposite of Beauty seen as harmony and proportion. Ugliness is not viewed as an autonomous aesthetic category; it exists as an affirmation of Beauty, bringing it into focus and giving it shape. Ancient aesthetic theories remind us of the search for an ideal Beauty, immutable and transcendental, or of an art whose purpose was “depicting as faithfully as possible the Beauty which exists in and through nature. [...] Sculpture and painting depicted harmoniously developed bodies, literature – unrestrained, heroic characters, and music – pleasant tonalities and rhythms, fortifying or stimulating” (Mašek, 1984, 11).

Therefore, besides the beauty of a body built in perfect harmony of its parts, there is also an ugliness that can be “redeemed” by a faithful representation in art, by the artist’s talent to imitate it as such. We also find this idea in Kant’s writings: “Where fine art manifests its superiority is in the beautiful descriptions it gives of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like, can (as evils) be very beautifully described, and even represented in pictures” (Kant, 2007, 312).

This brings out the question: what changes took place during the avant-garde that transformed the relation between Beauty and Ugliness? In contrast to the traditional perspective, in this new artistic approach we no longer have

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beautiful representations of Ugliness, but works of art that might appear ugly by classical standards, deformations of reality. As a result of this approach, critics look upon modern painting as a triumph of Ugliness (Eco, 2007, 365). We should bear in mind that we are not dealing with a uniform aesthetic manifestation that refuses to glorify the classical view on beauty, but with a metamorphosis of classical aesthetic categories in accordance with social change. On this particular aspect we focus our attention.

The first step in answering the afore-mentioned question is to consider the archetypal classification made by Gilbert Durand in *Arts and Archetypes: The Religion of Art*. The author approaches painting through the three forms of the mirror concept.

*The Mirror of Zeuxis*<sup>3</sup> represents the art of “imitation” (Renaissance art) which was founded, as the author says, on reality perceived through senses. It is the same *mimesis* defended by Aristotle but criticized by Plato (who “does not give credence to those immediate data of senses which adorn our earthly Cave and especially to those artists who do nothing but propose the redundancy of «imitation» (Durand, 2013, 29)). *The Mirror of Pygmalion* is the space where the work of art reflects the soul of the artist and contains the entirety of his emotions and anguishes (e.g. the modern artistic movements – Expressionism). Durand argues that the mirror of Pygmalion best applies to German art, “the torments of passion or melancholy, the uncertainties of faith, the temptations of devils or Nibelungs, the burden of the sin «of being here», *Dasein*, within the world, lends the German sensibility that lasting hallmark of the pathetic. As for the mirror of Pygmalion, it reflects the secret world of the soul’s desires and aspirations” (Durand, 2013, 42). Lastly, the *mirror of Narcissus* represents art for the sake of art (the Italian decor), which highlights the human inclination towards aestheticism and not utilitarianism. This is art conceived for the sake of art, with no intention of discovering Truth, be it general or individual.

This classification of art takes us to the conflict between ancients and moderns, the different approach to Beauty and to the work of art. Modernity opposes the concept of *mimesis* and the representations of abstract, perfectly harmonized bodies that lack individuality; the modern work of art now expresses the artist’s inner world. Against the background of modern individualism and conflict with the utilitarian society, the artist looks with inquiry upon his inner self, revealing originality through subjectivity. Consequently, artists of the avant-garde (particularly the Expressionists) analyze their own intimate experiences. Modernism in art means a gradual

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<sup>3</sup> The Greek painter that drew grape-clusters so realistically, that birds tried to peck at them.

separation from everything that existed until then – this is what defines the avant-garde attitude<sup>4</sup>.

As we shall see, this feeling of revolt was not aimed solely against classical aesthetic categories but stands for the entire cultural mentality at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.



Leonardo da Vinci,  
*Mona Lisa*, c. 1503-1506



Marchel Duchamp,  
*L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919

*Mona Lisa*, a symbol for the classical art, reinterpreted during the avant-garde as a revolt against tradition and the past, is proof for the dialog between ancients and moderns

What led to this change of perspective? One of the contributing elements was, of course, the social and political circumstances. We are dealing with an industrial revolution that fully transformed the European society: the invention of the locomotive that sped up the development of railways and transportation (economic development), the scientific progress in mathematics, physics and biology (a scientific spirit that instills a feeling of power and control in the nineteenth century man), the development of industrial production,

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to mention the difference between modernism in philosophy and modernism in art; the latter corresponds to post-modernism in philosophy.

demographic growth and urbanization, the emergence of the proletariat<sup>5</sup>. New materials, such as glass and steel, are available to artists and will be used to build the industrial Beauty of the machinery.

The effects of the industrial revolution are also noticeable in painting. In the article *Revolution in Art* (Hart, 2013) Perry Hart reviews these aspects in detail: during this period more than twenty pigments were invented, and their production at an industrial level made the painting much more affordable. Most pigments were sharper and opaque, which made works of art more dramatic and at the same time sped up the artistic process (the academic method of overlapping thin layers of paint was no longer necessary, painting became a matter of days or weeks rather than months or years). Paint tubes also had a large impact; besides the practical advantage of preserving paint for a longer period of time, these portable tubes enabled artists to paint outside their studio.

The status of art changes, there is a new Beauty and a new Ugliness. Modernity introduces us an artist who does not represent ugliness and beauty in a classical manner, based on *mimesis*, and from this point of view we can understand why a certain triumph of ugliness and abstract forms takes shape. The concept of Ugliness is seen differently.

Another explanation for the presence of this ugliness can have as a starting point the impurity of art, a notion introduced by Ion Ianoși. He argues that “the work of art is the live, diverse, multilateral, complete, individual phenomenon, the phenomenon as the organic totality of countless characteristics, which demand to be portrayed, assimilated and studied precisely in their totality”. In order to analyse the work of art we must look at it as a whole, the art is not pure, it is tightly connected to ethics, religion and philosophical themes. “Art is bound to incorporate in its web countless foreign bodies by which it can regenerate itself. Thus the aesthetic organism is structured on biological, psychological, scientific, economical, political and ethical cells, on infinite extra-aesthetical elements; without which it does not exist and cannot be understood without their knowledge” (Ianoși, 1985, 17).

Therefore we can understand why artists searched ways to emphasise the ugly, which is partly due to the fact that the art and the social are interlinked. Artists attempted through art to take up a moralizing stance, and in many cases they consciously emphasised the ugly. Umberto Eco indicates the important influence of Baudelaire’s maxim *épater le bourgeois* – “artists endeavoured to astound the bourgeois, but the general public was not only astounded but actually outraged” (Eco, 2007, 136).

It might be said that the avant-garde art is a “declarative” one, in the sense that it asserts its ideas openly and verbally, not necessarily through

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<sup>5</sup> To be consulted: F.-G. Dreyfus, A. Jourcin, P. Thibault și P. Milza (2009), *Istoria Universală (Universal History)*, vol. III, cap. *Revoluția economică (The Economic Revolution)*, pp. 77-107.

traditional artistic mediums but sometimes through manifestos and similar documents as well. Avant-garde brings into focus the symbiosis between art and the socio-political, idea underlined by Matei Călinescu: “socio-political phenomena and artistic manifestations are organically interconnected” (Călinescu, 2005, 158). Consequently, Ugliness – an avant-garde aesthetical category – is perceived as a way to express the severe anxieties faced by the modern man.

Therefore, we cannot conceive art outside its socio-political context; understanding the works of such artists as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, George Grosz, Umberto Boccioni, Otto Dix, Salvador Dali requires immersing in the cultural view of the time.



Oskar Kokoschka, *Pietà* (Poster for “Murderer, Hope of Women”, at the Summer Theater at the Internationale Kunstschau), 1908



Carlo Carrà, *The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*, 1911

Modern artistic movement (German Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism etc.) developed against a background of consecutive technological revolutions, of a massive industrialization that intensified class differences, drawing inspiration from a deeply pessimistic literature (Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Poe, Wilde, Ibsen, Mann). There are two fundamental directions in the evolution of the European society at the end of the nineteenth century. On one hand there is an astonishing technological progress – “the triumph of electricity, the invention of the automobile, the cinematograph, metallic architecture” (Durand, 146). On the other hand there is a decadent movement triggered by an overwhelming feeling of discontent, an angst that surfaces when contemplating the finality of the world. Thus, progress becomes entangled with decay.

In respect to this dichotomy Durand mentions that in order to survive, a society needs the confrontation between different myths – the decadent movement and the “techno-industrial spring” – just “as Dionysus acts as a counterbalance for Apollo” (Durand, 146) in Greek mythology. The entire period is built on contrasts: decadence-progress, angst-enthusiasm, denying the values of the past-searching the new, destructive-creative.

A case in point is the German Expressionism and the Italian Futurism. They are born out of the same dimension that stands at the core of modernity – revolt against traditions and the need to separate from what is old (the Expressionists proclaim their opposition to the previous movement – the Impressionism – and the Futurists voice their denial of old values and the need to establish a new culture. In other words, they are both built on the same fundamental concept – the revolt – although their evolutions will later take different forms: Futurism exalts the need for progress whereas Expressionism denounces a state of degradation.

Considering all these, Fleming notices that German Expressionism “reveals a new emotional world in the bleak impulses, the hidden fears and the secret motivations of human behaviour.” (Fleming, 1983, 357). Therefore, it denounces the destructive elements of industrialisation, conveying an overwhelming air of disgust, and protests against the mayhem of war. On the opposite side, Futurism exalts technology and speed, glorifies war and violence, and fosters the idea of a total and liberating destruction that would open the way to a new beginning.

There is a need in Expressionism to create a style with a strong emotional force, where the work of art is a path to the artist’s inner world. Expressionism takes as a reference point the words and the works of Vincent van Gogh “I want to express with red and yellow the terrible human passions”, colour was not only the incasement of form, it conveyed a process of introspection (Grigorescu, 1969, 16).

Expressionists relinquished art “that relied on classical criteria, on *mimesis*; the new points of reference are the spirit and the imagination, following the Freudian pursuit of the subconscious. Fleming adds that “by describing their reactions to different physical, mental and spiritual phenomena, Expressionists modify, distort and colour images depending on the intensity of his feelings” (Fleming, 1983, 281).



Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893

Munch's work *The Scream* is one of the most representative example, despite being created 13 years before the first Expressionist group was established. Characterised by sharply traced lines and colours, this painting is important not only for its impact, but also for the atmosphere it conveys, dominated by tension, despondency, desolation, anxiety – themes recurrent in Expressionist works. Munch vividly decribed it: "One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord – the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The color shrieked. This became *The Scream*" (Munch in Grigorescu, 1983, 26).

Pre-war Expressionists divide into two groups that respond differently to surrounding anxieties. *Die Brücke* protested against the mechanised world, using Ugliness to denounce society. Figures were absorbed into the background, form and cromatic value were distorted by a dramatic intensification, the dark colours accentuated the feeling of alienation and malaise brought on by the new industrialised society.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Street, Dresden*, 1919



George Grosz, *Metropolis*, 1917

*Der Blaue Reiter* advocates the escape from reality by building a dream-like land, refusing the mechanised society and protesting against it through simplicity and naturalness. The feeling of inadequacy in a world based on questionable values finds finality in the quest for an inner truth. Revolting against materialistic interests, we can find purity in an art that renounces mimetic representations.



Franz Marc, *The Dream*, 1912



Wassily Kandinsky, *Garden of Love (Improvisation 27)*, 1912

“The artist who could not bear the sight of people crawling through dust during the long and torrid hours of military instructions, the intellectual who thought war was a «shame of the human species», they all searched a realm of beauty and purity. Marc’s dream encompassed those fairytale lands where all is possible, horses were blue or purple, strangely coloured fantastic plants sprouted from all sides, bringing a fresh air to his paintings.” (Grigorescu, 1983, 59).

It can be seen that the two artistic movements rely on contrasting principles. On one hand, we turn to Ugliness as a means to revolt against the overwhelming industrial society; on the other hand Futurists exalt a new type of Beauty, inspired by machinery as a symbol for a new order.

The general state of mind among the Futurists was the revolt: against political leaders, social inequality, the past, and the viable solution was to reshape values and concepts. Moreover, they were convinced that a new art would help build a new world, but in order to reach progress degradation through war was necessary. Therefore, a process of destruction was necessary in order to create, “to destroy means to create” (Călinescu, 120).

This idea lies at the center of Italian Futurism, and it was translated into a need for change and nationalism, phenomena that gained momentum at the time. We can trace the origins of this stringent need to take action and to abolish all that is old and obsolete, to interpretations of Nietzsche’s works that greatly influenced the cultural movements of the time.



Umberto Boccioni, *Charge of the Lancers*, 1915

Filippo Marinetti initiated the *Futurist Manifestos* that exalt speed, force, race cars, war, the slap and fist, the fight against the “moonlight”, against museums and libraries. To make room for the future, one must destroy all that belongs to the past (the past is death) and build a new art meant for a mechanistic age, an art that dissolves the barrier between politics and culture (Hofmann, 1977, 61-70).



Giacomo Balla, *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, 1912

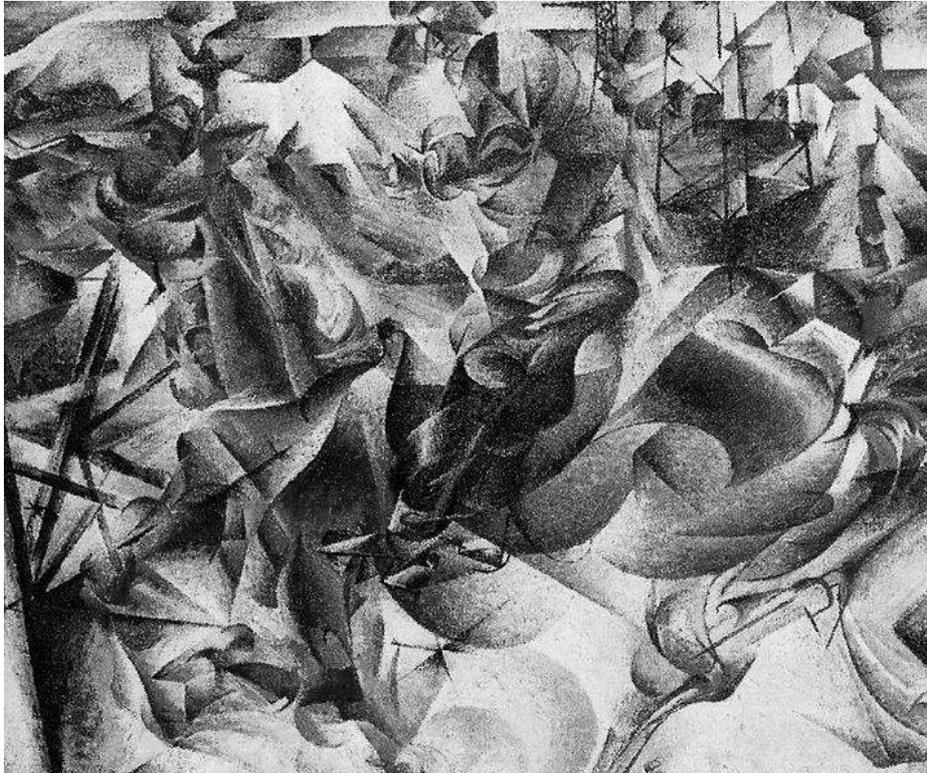
These are in short the fundamental ideas of Futurism. Besides the social challenges and the general revolting spirit, Futurism coagulates around the concept of movement. Futurists wanted to introduce a fourth element – time – in the works of art (like Cubists), a concept that would prove essential to the artistic movement. “The world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car, whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like a serpent of explosive breath – a roaring car that seems to ride on grape shot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace” (Marinetti, 2009, 75). A new Beauty and a new Ugliness take shape, aesthetic categories are viewed from a different perspective. The desire to separate from the classical beauty does not stem only from the need to build a new art; from the Futurists’ point of view,

classical beauty is a static one and contradicts the active spirit they encourage, this is why they revolt against the passivity and apathy of the bourgeoisie.

Considering the following extract from the *Futurist Manifestos*, we can clearly see the change in attitude towards Ugliness and Beauty. “They shout at us, «Your literature won’t be beautiful! Where is your verbal symphony, your harmonious swaying back and forth, your tranquilizing cadences?» Their loss we take for granted! And how lucky! We make use, instead, of every ugly sound, every expressive cry from the violent life that surrounds us. We bravely create the “ugly” in literature, and everywhere we murder solemnity.” (Marinetti, 2009, 104). Therefore, if we apply classical standard to Futurist work of arts, even to modern creations in general, we would conclude that they are ugly. Nonetheless, seen through the lenses of the new perspective and axiological framework, Ugliness transforms into Beauty.



Gino Severini, *Armoured Train*, 1915



Umberto Boccioni, *Elasticity*, 1912

In light of these ideas<sup>6</sup>, we can see that art is not pure. The artistic dimension sometimes blends with the social one and in the modern society from the beginning of the twentieth century, art became an answer, a solution or a means of sanction, with a strong moralizing nature.

As a result, we can suggest an answer to the question why would avant-garde be considered a triumph of Ugliness. It seems there are two types of ugliness: one which breaks away from the old traditions and values, from the classical aesthetic principles, and a provocative one that aims at astounding the bourgeois, at sanctioning a corrupted society with questionable values. The change in perspective on aesthetic categories explains the presence of both ugliness and beauty in a society which undergoes progress and degradation at the same time; from this new perspective Ugliness transforms into Beauty.

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to mention that the two artistic movements are more nuanced and complex; I choose nonetheless to emphasize those features that serves to our current endeavour.

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## THE APPEAL TO EXPERT OPINION IN CONTEXTS OF POLITICAL DELIBERATION AND THE PROBLEM OF GROUP BIAS<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

In this paper, I will try to answer the question: *How are we supposed to assess the expert's opinion in an argument from the position of an outsider to the specialized field?* by placing it in the larger context of the political status of epistemic authority. In order to do this I will first sketch the actual debate around the problem of expertise in a democracy and relate this to the issue of the status of science in society. Secondly, I will review how Douglas Walton's pragma-dialectical approach offers a practical procedure to assess the expert bias from a nonprofessional's perspective. Thirdly, I will introduce the problem of group bias using insights from Bohman and Fischer and show how Walton's solution does not address this specific type of bias. Lastly, I will try proposing a revision of Walton's solution in order to address this problem. In order to make the explanation more easy to follow I will use a case study concerning the medical expertise in the public debate on second-hand smoke.

**Keywords:** expert opinion, deliberative democracy, democracy, pragma-dialectics, presumptive form, argumentation theory, social epistemology, group bias, fallacy.

### **I. Introduction**

Living in a democracy implies that we, the citizens, delegate the right to decide on public matters to the politicians we elect. A similar type of transfer takes place when we delegate knowledge to the experts (Bohman, 1999, 590-607) because it is assumed that we will not question the experts at each step or decision, although in specialised knowledge we maintain our right to do so from time to time. Because we live in a society where the amount of general is so immense that nobody is expected to know it all, we need some form of "cognitive division of labor." (Bohman, 1999). Therefore, we expect certain people to become specialized in narrow fields and we take their opinion in the respective field as being as close as possible to the common ideal of objective knowledge. Nevertheless, there is always the possibility that an expert could

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<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to dr. Jan Albert van Laar (University of Groningen) for his insightful observations on how to improve this paper.

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abuse this power of specialized knowledge because experts are hard to verify by the laypeople. How are we then to assess the expert's opinion in an argument from the position of an outsider to the specialized field? The answer to this interrogation depends on what sides we take on a larger issue regarding the place of the expert in a democratic and political deliberation. Democracy has generalised the practice of using expert panels in order to decide controversial issues – be it in tribunals or policy forums. Even though experts are asked for their opinion, the decision makers (judges, politicians, managers) are usually non-experts in those fields and the final decision hinges a lot not only on the credibility of the experts, but on how people have been accustomed to deal with experts: will they trust blindly the experts or will they question their judgements? What are we expected to do normally in a democracy: question the experts all the way in the name of our rational autonomy or bow with silent respect?

In this paper, I will try to answer the research question by placing it in the larger context of the political status of epistemic authority. In order to do this I will first sketch the actual debate around the problem of expertise in a democracy from an epistemic point of view, and relate this problem to the debate about the status of science in society, which is an ongoing debate in social epistemology. Secondly, I will review how Douglas Walton's pragma-dialectical approach offers a practical procedure to assess the expert bias from a nonprofessional perspective. Thirdly, I will introduce the problem of group bias using insights from Bohman and Fischer and show how Walton's solution does not address this specific type of bias. Lastly, I will try proposing a refinement of Walton's solution in order to address this problem. In order to make the explanation more easy to follow I will use a case study concerning the usage of medical expertise in the public debate on second-hand smoke.

## **II. The Problem of Expertise in a Democracy**

Political deliberation is, in what Mansbridge et al. call the "classical paradigm", a rational debate among people with conflicting opinions in which self-interest should play no part (Mansbridge, 2010, 66). However, Mansbridge et al. argue that we should abandon this ideal for a more realistic deliberation because self-interest, even if it might seem to introduce an emotional dimension to the discussion, is essential in understanding the other side's motivations and instrumental for reaching an agreement. "Including self-interest in deliberative democracy reduces the possibility of exploitation and obfuscation, introduces information that facilitates reasonable solutions and the identification of integrative outcomes, and also motivates vigorous and creative deliberation." (72-73).

The "classical paradigm" excluded self-interest from the deliberation because it was seen as a way of introducing "irrational" elements in a discussion

that should remain governed by reason alone. However, since most debates are about issues that affect personally the parties involved, openly revealing what is each ones' self-interest will lead to a more clear starting point for negotiations because only when we know why the other party asks certain things, we can find alternate ways to reach the same results but through different policies or actions. In addition, a debate anchored only in the sphere of reason alone will leave behind the democratic assumption that there is not one single common good, but a plurality of goods (68) that need equal consideration.

Nevertheless, if political deliberations are centred on the self-interested parties, how are experts to be employed in such settings? Ideally, in a democratic debate each side should have access to an expert's opinion to defend its own self-interest. However, even if both sides use an equal number of experts, this does not solve the problem of the authority of the expert's opinion in a democracy. How much should the expert's opinion weigh as a premise in a general debate? What is the role of the expert in a democratic debate?

Depending on our views of the social role of science, there are multiple answers possible, ranging from the empiricist view to the constructivist model seen as extremes of a spectrum. We could see the expert either as an objective and incontestable source of truth, or as a member of a community of consensus who builds theories in accordance to the social needs of his setting.

### *II.1. The Objective Expert*

In the empiricist framework, the expert is seen as an unbiased person that looks sincerely for truth while working under the assumption that there is an objective truth out there and that it can be found. This is what Collins et al. would call the "first wave of science" (Collins, Evans, 2002, 235-296), which had its peak around 1950s-1960s. At that time the experts were very highly esteemed and "it was inconceivable that decision-making in matters that involved science and technology could travel in any other direction than from the top down" (239) therefore it was not the place of the laypeople to question the expert from their bottom-up perspective.

The problem with experts that work in this framework is that they do not see any reason for including the public's views in any debate because they see the technical matters as being too complicated and hard to explain to the laymen. A feeling of esotericism emerges from this attitude about scientific expertise that survives even today. Cook et al. performed a study in 2004 in which they found by analysing the language of experts in the case of genetically modified (GM) organisms, that the experts thought of the public's opinions on the issue of GM as being only of an emotional nature, and that "this characterization of public opinion appeared to free the GM scientists we interviewed from having

to engage with public disquiet.” (Cook, 2004, 439). The scientists working under an empiricist assumption of science see themselves as educators and their engagement with the public as only one-sided, with the expert speaking and educating, while the public listens respectfully and learns. A two-way dialogue seems impossible unless the public gains the same level of expertise, which is unlikely to happen.

### ***II.2. The Expert in a Constructivist Paradigm of Science***

In the constructivist paradigm, the focus shifts from the empirical practice to the way in which “scientific knowledge is used in social institutions such as schools, courts, policymaking agencies, and public deliberations. These investigations focus on the issue of how expertise has emerged, how it is socially constructed, and how it gets taken up by various institutions” (Fischer, 2009, 140). In this paradigm science will be “reconceptualised as a social activity” primarily while making scientific truth seem relative and just another type of discourse which tries to gain authority while competing with other discourses. Scientists are not regarded as objective searchers of truth anymore, but rather people who construct the truth in closed communities of consensus. This position on science is a radical extreme of a more nuanced spectrum, yet we should keep in mind the possibility of a group bias in which the individual expert acts as sincerely and honest as possible, without being aware of the larger context in which his science unfolds.

## **III. Douglas Walton’s Solution to the Problem of Expert Bias**

In this section, I will present Douglas Walton’s approach to dealing with the possibility of a fallacious appeal to expert opinion and his 5-questions method for establishing the reliability of the expert. His approach comes from a pragma-dialectical perspective and I will use this method in the following pages.

### ***III.1. Pragma-Dialectics***

Pragma-dialectics is a method developed by the Amsterdam School authors Van Eemeren and Grootendorst who proposed that we assess arguments by looking primarily at the dialogue setting in which arguments appear natively. Thinking about pros and cons in one’s head is not really an argument, according to this school of thought, only by engaging in a debate with an opponent the real argument can unfold. Dialogue is primarily “a means of resolving differences of

opinion which must operate within particular rules for critical discussion.” (Groarke, 2013). Consequently, a good counter-objection has no value if it was not included at the time of the dialogue, because what is taken into consideration are only the utterances, commitments and concessions one makes in the dialogue with the opponent – these are called “externalised commitments.” (van Eerman, 2007, 3). This means also that one is responsible for “what one has put forward, either directly or indirectly, and for what one, explicitly or implicitly, has committed oneself to.” (2).

A dialogue has four specific stages in this theory: “confrontation, opening, argumentation, and closing”<sup>3</sup> with each stage ruled by specific constraints. A fallacy in the pragma-dialectic approach is understood as a “violation of the rules for critical discussion.”<sup>4</sup> Walton and Krabbe proposed that we group dialogue types according to several criteria: goals, rules, initial situation, and the aims of the participants. They distinguish six possible main types of dialogue that can, in turn, be mixed and combined (Walton, 1995, 66). For the purposes of this paper, I shall look only at the deliberation dialogue, which seems to be the most relevant for the political debates that are the focus of this paper.

Deliberation dialogue has mainly a practical purpose that is coming to an agreement in solving a certain problem, according to Walton (Walton, 2010, 13-24). This is a collaborative type of dialogue and the result will be a proposal that is “optimal for the group may not be optimal for any individual participant.” (16). There is no hidden information in this type of dialogue, because each participant has to share what her interests and preferences are in order to reach a common agreement and withholding a personal interest would lead to no visible advantage (16). The deliberation takes place in eight stages: “open, inform, propose, consider, revise, recommend, confirm and close.” (16). There is no actual burden of proof in the deliberation dialogue, explains Walton, because “the central aim is not to prove something but to explain something that the questioner claims to fail to understand.” (16). However, a similar function to the burden of proof can be seen in the requirement to justify one’s proposal, Walton calls this a “burden of defending or justifying a proposal” (16) because the participants have to show how their own proposal actually leads to achieving a common goal.

### *III.2. The Presumptive Argumentation Scheme*

Whenever we delegate knowledge in theoretical or practical matters to someone else, we appeal to expert opinion. There are two possible types of authority according to Walton epistemic or cognitive, and prescriptive – meaning any

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<sup>3</sup> Groarke, “Informal Logic.”

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

person with power that can make us do something (Walton, 1997, 77). Authority, taken in a larger sense, applies to anyone with “judicial or administrative power” and in the narrower sense, “someone with epistemic access to something we would normally not have.” (84).

Appeal to expert opinion in a dialogue occurs when one of the interlocutors cannot explain directly the facts that motivate his proposal, but instead cites the opinion of an expert in the field that also holds that assertion to be true. This appeal is by no means decisive for the entire discussion, but it does “shift the burden of proof” (133) from the proponent to the opponent who has to justify why he cannot accept the expert’s opinion.

What makes the argument from expert opinion interesting from a dialectical point of view is the nature of the argumentation scheme. The argument from expert opinion does not use a deductive or inductive form to draw conclusions from the premises, rather a presumptive scheme. According to Woods and Walton, the defeasible argument has the following form:

- “1. X is a reliable authority in domain K.
- 2. p pertains to K
- 3. X asserts that p.
- 4. is coherent with relevant information obtained from other factors.
- ∴ p.” (Woods, Walton, 1974, 146).

A presumptive argument is defeasible in the context of the dialogue that generated it. This type of argument appeals foremost to the plausibility of the reasoning articulated in the dialogue context and it should be accepted only temporary, until new evidence appears, while it remains open to future criticism. Even if the opponent accepts all the premises of the argument, he is not bound to accept the conclusion – as it was the case with deductive arguments. It is a type of argument used in contexts of insufficient information: when people ask an expert’s opinion, they are in a state of insufficient information, but this state is not permanent because the non-expert has always the option of asking the advice of other experts, or just of challenging the internal coherence of the expert’s argumentation.

When we accept a person as an expert in a certain field, this implies that we think that the expert’s opinion in that particular field is “worth having – but not infallible.” (Walton, 2010, 101)<sup>5</sup> Even when all critical inquiries have been successfully answered by the expert, “the argument could still be defeated if new evidence comes into the case that provides a rebuttal to the original argument.” (Walton, 1997, 78). The expert’s warrant premise has the form of “a Toulmin warrant” which, according to Walton, means that “it does not hold universally, but only subject to exceptions or countervailing instances that may

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<sup>5</sup> In “Types of Dialogue and Burdens of Proof”.

arise.” (Walton, 2006, 750). However, in the case of political decisions which result in new policies, there is no way of coming back and revising the expert opinion, the conclusions of the expert are taken to be fixed and unchangeable from a practical point of view.

### *III.3. The Examination Dialogue*

The dialogue in which the expert can be asked to present and justify his professional statement is called an “examination dialogue” by Walton and usually takes place in a court setting. (746). By testing the expert’s reasons through an examination dialogue, the examiner accomplishes two goals: first, he finds out the raw information needed, and secondly inquires the expert regarding the reasons for his statement (746). The second goal is more important from an argumentative point of view. The main question Walton tries to answer is how does one critically question an expert from the position of an outsider to the field of expertise?

The examination dialogue is a “species of information-seeking dialogue” (2006, 746) which shifts at some point into a persuasion dialogue as the examiner asks to be persuaded by the expert of the truth of a certain claim. Walton names this shift in dialogue a “dialectical shift” which is a “transition during a sequence of moves from one type of dialogue to another.” (756). Such a transition should be avoided in formal dialogues but Walton argues that “in any real case of natural language argumentation, such shifts are extremely common.” (756). The information-seeking dialogue is a non-adversarial exchange, the main goal of one participant being to gather information while the other participant, easily identifiable with the expert, wishes to share the information. (Walton, 2010, 13)<sup>6</sup>.

In an examination dialogue the burden of proof typically shifts “back and forth, from one side to the other, during the course of a dialogue” (Walton, 2006, 752)<sup>7</sup> because, just as the expert is expected to motivate his claims, so does the examiner who needs to explain why he chose to question a certain premise. Once the expert has explained satisfactorily a premise, the burden of proof passes on to the examiner who has to show why that proof is insufficient.

In such a dialogue there are three forms of valid inquiry (757): the first one requires that the expert clarifies what he means by certain terms (for example one could ask the expert “what do you mean by [technical term] x in common language?”); the second one regards the logical form of the expert

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<sup>6</sup> In “Types of Dialogue and Burdens of Proof”.

<sup>7</sup> In “Examination Dialogue: An Argumentation Framework for Critically Questioning an Expert Opinion”.

testimony (for example if it seems to the layman that the expert is contradicting himself in two different assertions, he can ask the expert to clarify this.) (757). At the third level of inquiry, the examiner may ask different questions that draw on previous established points in order to make the examiner reveal a possible internal consistency of his beliefs. The third level acts as a test, but it is not a mere fact-checking test, but rather an internal consistency check (761) which verifies what are the reasons that the expert has for holding certain views. At this level, the examiner may question the values, beliefs or biases of an expert.

“At the third level, the findings of the first two levels are processed, and conclusions are drawn in the form of hypotheses. The third level comprises a critical discussion of the findings of the first two levels.” (759-760).

According to Walton, there are 6 types of questions that an examiner might ask an expert in order to assess the credibility of the expert opinion regarding his assertion A:

- “1. Expertise question: How credible is E as an expert source?
2. Field question: Is E an expert in the field that A is in?
3. Opinion question: What did E assert that implies A?
4. Trustworthiness question: Is E personally reliable as a source?
5. Consistency question: Is A consistent with what other experts assert?
6. Backup evidence question: Is [E]’s assertion based on evidence?” (Walton, 1997, 232)<sup>8</sup>.

For a broader perspective on this questionnaire, we can turn to Goodwin (Goodwin, 2010, 138) who re-frames the six criteria in terms of the principal/agent problem. Thus the six questions would fall into two main groups: 1-4 are the ones that assess whether the expert is biased (the adverse selection) and 5-6 would try to find out if, during the testimony, the expert is not acting in his full capacity (the moral hazard problem which appears when an expert tries to employ as little effort as possible or just says what the laymen want to hear) (Goodwin, 2010, 138). This is a more clear explanation of what exactly we want to know about the expert before accepting him in this role, and it helps us understand what the purpose of the questions selected by Walton is. Goodwin also proposes that we take into consideration the community opinions about an expert (through forums and public websites) as supplementary ways of checking the expertise from the position of the outsiders of the field.

According to Walton, the appeal to expert opinion is a fallacy only when it does not fulfil one of the six criteria quoted previously, in other words when the expert quoted is not reliable as an expert, does not act in his full capacity as an expert, has a personal bias, or when the expert opinion is used deductively instead of inductively by the one who quotes it. In the following pages, I will try

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<sup>8</sup> In *Appeal to Expert Opinion: Arguments from Authority*.

to show that the question of the expert's bias is more complicated than Walton's initial assessment and that an appeal to expert opinion can fulfil all the formal criteria proposed by Walton and still be fallacious.

#### **IV. The Problem of Group Bias**

Returning to the initial question on how should experts act in a democracy, Bohman<sup>9</sup> shows that the delegation of knowledge to experts poses a fundamental problem to democracy. By dividing the epistemological tasks and delegating to experts a certain piece of knowledge which we could not come to learn even in principle, we risk supporting the formation of an elite of knowledge (Bohman, 591). This requires that we find a way in which we make science "more democratic." (591). Bohman proposes that we chose a pragmatic solution to this problem by adopting Habermas's model of a "critical interaction" between the expert and the public (597). In this habermasian model, the public would be mediating between the experts and the politicians (597), and this would place the larger public on an equal footing with both sides because the public would have a crucial role in every debate. The expert's knowledge would be then placed in "the context of public accountability and testing of credibility" (604) and we would need institutions that would allow for a public inquiry of the experts in a democratic way. One notices that Bohman's proposal is in accord with Mansbridge's ideal of deliberation, because both take into account the public self-interest as a valid basis for inquiry. "The question for the democratic division of labor is not whether science is a "democratic" and "communal" institution (...), but how to establish credibility across communities of inquiry, each with their own interests and intersecting, but often conflicting criteria of relevance and judgment" (599).

According to Fischer, an "epistemological disjunction" divides the "scientific reason of the technical community and the practical reason of the public sphere." (Fischer, 161). This implies that even if we take the experts' propositions at their face value, a dilemma of practical reasoning remains: what to do with this knowledge? More precisely, can we incorporate the expert's interests in the democratic debate on the collective interest? Fisher points out that the expert does not necessarily have a personal interest in the debate (the so-called personal bias) but that his position as a scientist representing a community of scientists might pose a bias in itself:

"Whereas science was accepted in earlier periods as a disinterested pursuit of truth, it is today also seen by many – not altogether wrongly – as an interested group advancing its

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<sup>9</sup> In "Democracy as Inquiry, Inquiry as Democratic: Pragmatism, Social Science, and the Cognitive Division of Labor."

own status, both materially and socially. This results in various ways from the central role conferred on it in politics and policy, both wittingly and unwittingly. (...) For example, as science has become more and more dependent on public largess for its research projects, the scientific community's advice about funding projects is intricately bound up with the advance of the community's own interests." (Fischer, 153-154)

To counteract this danger, Fischer proposes that experts should act only in the role of "epistemic translation," that they translate for the lay public what a certain policy decision would imply for their lives.

Types of public expertise can be roughly categorised in two types: normative and substantive. When the issue at hand is of a normative nature, usually a question requires only a yes /no answer such as "should we legalize same-sex marriage?" Most of the time, the organizers of the debate will identify the supporters of the two opposing sides and invite an equal number of experts for each side of the debate. This implies that we know in advance each expert's allegiance to a particular side and the question of bias becomes then merely secondary to other concerns.

In the substantive case however, when the expert is neutral and supposedly does not take any side before the discussion, we should always have in mind the possibility of expert bias. If the expert is not present and someone else quotes the expert's opinion, we should inquire whether there is a fallacy at some point. How can one question the expert in the matter at hand in order to reveal his biases? Walton's questions deal mostly with the authenticity of the expert. The consistency question does not help us much if there are two sides of the debate and there is already another contradicting expertise. In the rare case that expert E is the only one in the field maintaining that A is the case, then he can be rejected as an expert because he does not fulfil the consistency criteria. Nevertheless, what if an expert is trustworthy in his field and he asserts that A together with other fellow experts, yet the assertion that A is very helpful for a certain company that has been funding research in that area? A good example are the studies over the carcinogenic effects of second-hand smoke funded by tobacco companies<sup>10</sup>.

## V. Case Study: Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS)

In a study done by Francis et al. on expert testimonies in court related to ETS, they found out that expert witnesses for the defence used a common tactic when confronted with epidemiological studies about the effects of second-hand smoke: they emphasized the "limitations of epidemiologic research, raising methodological and statistical issues, and disputing biological plausibility."

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<sup>10</sup> Also called industry-funded reports.

(Francis, Shea, 2006, iv 68). In this way, the experts were practically asking for “an unachievable standard for establishing the mechanism of disease.” (Francis, Shea, 2006, iv 68). For example, when experts were confronted with the statistics that people married with smokers have a 25% more chance of getting lung cancer than those married with non-smokers, the experts called this figure as relatively low compared with the 2000% chance for smokers themselves of getting lung-cancer. Although a 25% risk is small compared to a 2000% risk, the risk-assessment cannot be left only in the hands of the experts because it is not the expert's place to say whether a certain risk is acceptable, rather it concerns the stakeholders, the people who actually have to face this risk.

Another argumentative tactic by the expert witnesses was to say that the epidemiological studies who outlined the 25% increase in lung-cancer risk were showing nothing but a correlation and then they cited the well-known Humean view that correlation is not causation. Francis et al. call this stance an *unrealistic standard*. In addition, when saying that we cannot explain how exactly second hand smoke affects the lungs, the experts ask for a level of evidence “in terms of mechanistic understanding that cannot be reached.” (Francis, Shea, 2006, iv 74). These questions of a general philosophical relevance are misplaced in a public debate where a decision has to be reached in a limited amount of time. Sometimes the financial ties of the experts and the tobacco industry are revealed and their testimony loses legitimacy, but this cannot be always the case. Can we then, based on a pragma-dialectic approach alone, discover this hidden bias of the expert?

The 6 criteria proposed by Walton function only inside the empirical framework which analyses testimonies looking for logical consistency and evidence in the real world. However, the expert bias is more complicated than just using unsupported data or misinterpreting it. It regards what kind of scientific standards are acceptable for the expert called to testimony and for the public involved in the debate. Because this is a highly controversial and technical debate, its assumptions are almost never brought explicitly into question.

I have identified so far three ways in which the expert opinion can be questioned:

First, inside an empiricist framework, we should look if an assertion A is justified in itself, unrelated to the expert that has uttered it. This can be done either by looking for the evidence on which the expert bases his claim, or for internal coherence in the expert testimony. This would correspond to the third level of inquiry in Walton's classification. (Walton, 2006, 757)<sup>11</sup>.

Secondly, inside a constructivist framework of science, we can test the expert's objectivity by looking whether expert E is a recognized expert in his

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<sup>11</sup> In “Examination Dialogue: An Argumentation Framework for Critically Questioning an Expert Opinion”.

field, or if there are other experts who claim the same thing. The result of the inquiry would reveal who is the community of scientists that backs up our expert and, if we ourselves agree with that particular community's views on science, we can view this to be an "objective" truth.

Thirdly, in a true postmodernist setting, we could ask ourselves what kind of science we want to accept as reliable, what criterions are good-enough inside for our science and what are the common goals that we want the scientific inquiry to serve. Because we, the public, decide what type of science serves best out interests, we can be involved as an equal partner with the expert in the debate because at this level, all interests are equally legitimate and the expertise loses its superior epistemic status.

Let us examine the following example of a dialogue in which we could question an expert:

Proponent: We should not ban smokers from restaurants because second-hand smoke is not harmful. (S)

Opponent: Why do you say that? (why S?)

Proponent: Because professor E says that S and *E is an expert in medicine (T)*. (T, T->S)

[Assumption accepted by both at this stage: S belongs to the set of medical sentences in which E is an expert]

From here, there are four possible tactics of challenging this inference.

**Tactic 1: questioning the expert's reasons**

Opponent: Why does E say that second-hand smoke is not harmful?

Proponent: Because epidemiological studies show negligible risks. (R)

Opponent: Why are these risks negligible?

Proponent: Because expert E says that R and E is an expert in medicine

Opponent: However, the R statement does not belong to medicine, but rather to risk assessment, which should be established by the public, so E has no authority in this particular matter. [because R does not belong to the set of expertise]

Proponent: I concede.

**Tactic 2: questioning the expert's authority**

Opponent: Why do you say that E is an expert?

Proponent: Because he is well recognized by his colleagues, and has published in peer-reviewed journals in his field.

Opponent: Is E the only expert who says that S?

Proponent: No, there are a few other scholars who say that S.

Opponent: I provisionally accept S until new evidence appears.

[the expert opinion was accepted under the presumptive reasoning scheme]

**Tactic 3: questioning the expert's bias**

Opponent: Does E have any personal interest to say that T is the case?

Proponent: I do not know. Why does it matter?

Opponent: If a tobacco company sponsors his work, then expert E might have a reason to favour certain studies and ignore other relevant studies.

[At this point, neither the proponent nor the opponent have enough information to assess the expert's bias. The dialogue may go in any direction according to the level of information they have on the expert.]

The expert's personal bias can be questioned in more than one way: "Is the expert E in a position to benefit personally if we accept that A is the case?" A second way could be "Is the expert E in a position to benefit as an authority-figure if we accept him as being an expert?" and, related to this, "Is the expert's field of expertise likely to benefit/enlarge if we accept his authority in the matter at hand?" For example when we ask an expert in geology to advise whether we should mine in a certain area. His expertise is not just about the mere facts which indicate whether there are pockets of oil or not, but it becomes a prescriptive expertise, telling us what to do if there is oil there. However, this decision should belong to the stakeholders only, and should be taken only after all the interests have been laid out on the table. An epistemic expert acting out more than a consultant in the values-interests deliberation level is surpassing his expertise.

**Tactic 4: questioning the expert's scientific standards**

Opponent: Are expert E's standards unrealistic for an epidemiological study?

[At this point, the dialogue turns into a deliberative debate in which the participants decide what the common accepted scientific standard is for their personal interests. Only after these personal interests have been made explicit, the expert's authority can be accepted. ]

**VI. A Revised Questionnaire**

In the light of the four examples mentioned above, I propose that we improve Walton's questionnaire and add to it 4 more types of questions in order to assess the social bias and the group bias of the expert. The initial 6 questions were the following:

1. *Expertise question: How credible is E as an expert source?*
2. *Field question: Is E an expert in the field that A is in?*
3. *Opinion question: What did E assert that implies A?*
4. *Trustworthiness question: Is E personally reliable as a source?*
5. *Consistency question: Is A consistent with what other experts assert?*

6. Backup evidence question: *Is [E]'s assertion based on evidence?*" (Walton, 1997, 223)<sup>12</sup>.

One can easily notice that questions 1-4 are about the expert's person, question 5 places the expert in the field and works also under a constructivist assumption of science, while question 6 functions in an empiricist framework.

In order to extend this set of inquires I propose that we add the following questions:

7. *Is the expert offering a prescriptive advice when he was appointed only for fact checking?*

8. *Does the expert E have a personal interest in the matter at hand?*

9. *Does the expert E have a group interest in the matter at hand?*

10. *Is the type of science promoted by the expert consistent with the public interests of the society at this point in time?*

Question 7 will cover the normative/factual distinction and prevent experts from overstepping their boundaries.

Question 8 takes into consideration the cases when an expert is paid by a company or has some emotional reason to support a certain cause.

Question 9 takes into account the group interest of the field of experts; such a group may want to extend their authority over matters that do not concern them in order to gain social status or funding.

Question 10 is the most difficult to answer and might be seen as a meta-question that frames the previous 9 questions. In the case of the tobacco smoke, it was obvious that the standards required by the experts for scientific explanation were unrealistic. Depending on the time and place of a society, people may accept the risks associated with a nuclear reactor near their homes or not. Before the Fukushima disaster, the risk assessment on a possible accident was in acceptable limits for the locals, and thus was part of a socially accepted standard of science. After Fukushima however, our ways of assessing risk underwent a radical transformation. It is not that the risk of a nuclear catastrophe increased worldwide, just that the global context changed and people did not accept previous levels of risk anymore. Depending on the stakes at hand and on the community's guidelines on what constitutes reliable scientific standards, an expert may or may not be accepted as an authority figure.

## VII. Conclusion

Experts do not appear in a vacuum. They fulfil a certain role in a society and their status depends on the degree of trust that a society delegates to them. The question about how much authority should an expert have is not a detached pondering about the objectivity of science, rather a matter that concerns us all. This issue should be settled like many other issues in a public deliberation where all interests, including the expert's, have been laid out in the open.

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<sup>12</sup> In *Appeal to Expert Opinion: Arguments from Authority*.

Appeal to expert opinion, when used in a political deliberation, could become a fallacy in at least three different situations. Walton described how the expert's authority could be used in an unjustified way, just by name-dropping, or by making unjustified claims. The expert can also have a personal bias in the issue and this is harder to uncover by examination dialogue alone. However, Walton's questionnaire does not cover the more general type of bias associated with the position of expert itself. Depending on the views we, as a community, have on science, we can take an empiricist approach and trust experts blindly, or we can be constructivist and question their standards. However, either way, if we approach the matter from a pragmatist perspective, we should take into account the self-interests of all the stakeholders involved and consider the expert just another interested party in the debate at hand, with no special authority claim.

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