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### A FEW USES OF PHENOMENOLOGY WITHIN ART HISTORY

**Abstract:** Our paper addresses matters such as the distinction between chronological time and the “internal time” (Mikel Dufrenne) of works of art, the possibility that artists may act as future art critics, the alleged unity of classic art *versus* fragmentary modern approaches and the validity of historical interpretation of works of art. We shall begin by studying the common apprehension of art history and what it entails so that we may afterwards observe the major difficulties that the research in this domain faces. In the second half of the following paper we shall examine how representations are formed within works of art and what is the proper way to analyze them after applying the phenomenological *epoché* to artistic phenomena. We will finally attempt to offer a clear image on how phenomenological philosophy contributes to the historical research of art.

**Key words:** philosophy of art, history of art, phenomenological bracketing, time and space

## Can art history account for today's art?

Nowadays art cannot anymore be subsumed to the principles that have provided it with a certain sense of unity throughout history. Contemporary works of art clearly prove that art itself seeks to shun all its known definitions, which makes it almost impossible for art historians to determine what their object of study entails from an analytic standpoint. For example, Duchamp's replicas of his urinal *Fountain*, as works of art whose value has accrued to over \$1.5 million apiece over the last years, still defy all theories that try to explain what exactly is artistic in them. Art defies all its current scientific definitions and that is why today's aesthetics, consciously or not, turns to new conceptual and methodological resources when studying the evolution of art in time.

Historical studies of art are intimately connected to the more general philosophical problem of time itself. Researchers are often confronted with the difficulty of discriminating between the history of art as linear evolution and the idea of an "internal time" or internal cycle of artistic phenomena. In his introduction to the second part of *The Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vassari – considered to be the "father" of written art history – argues that history should not conduct mere inventories of artists and works of art, but should rather explain the course of art based on the premise that "history is truly the mirror of human life" and that human intention and action can impose some sort of patterns on historical events. As Vassari puts it, history guides all works of art towards a universal classicism to which all art can relate. This idea would most eloquently be exemplified by the Renaissance<sup>1</sup>, which continuously acknowledged its own classical influences.

This perspective on the history of art is offset by the idea that art moves through a circle that cannot be fully grasped by means of chronology, a circle that belongs to an *internal* temporality of art which passes through successive states, e.g. its early state, its mature state, and so forth. Consequently, the historical date of a work of art would be less important than its "age" in a given succession of attempts, failures and successes. The philosophical view that art has its own internal time has been thoroughly investigated in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Henri Focillon in his text *La vie des formes* (1934) and has been taken up in Anglo-Saxon aesthetics by George Kluber with his study *The Shape of Time* (1962). Focillon argues that within art history life has often been mistaken for chronology, facts for landmarks and human action for specific measure units<sup>2</sup>. Dates, as fundamental elements of chronology, offer art historians some security, but not without a price. Researchers have ignored that generations may overlap all human ages and that art forms do not bear definite beginnings or endings, given that, throughout history, periods of time often pass one into another. Chronology, thus, rejects the idea that "a precise, historically dated, monument can be prior or subsequent to its date within an internal history of the art form itself"<sup>3</sup>.

In his book *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?* Hans Belting carries out a thorough analysis of today's theoretical study of art. The German critic argues that art forms are so dependent on genre, material, technique, functions and content, that they cannot become pure forms to which history should abide, nor could they give birth to "internal" histories, as it is the case in Focillon's aesthetics. Recent philosophy of art has

no reason to keep arguing that art offers pure forms and, accordingly, it now focuses on the *work of art* itself, i.e. on a one hundred percent determinable object, at least from a physical point of view. Belting's stake is to unveil a new historical sequence that can comprise "all individual concepts of a work of art"<sup>4</sup>. He writes that contemporary researchers in art should take the risk of losing professional autonomy and open their research to other domains so that its results may gain more recognition. Research would have to conduct a functional analysis of art and aesthetic perception, meaning it will have to consider all aesthetic experience within the social medium at which it makes reference. Besides historical series composed of prior interpretations to art, Belting argues that research in art should also look into the artist's own artistic experience, as the artist is an active part of the public that addresses his work of art and, thus, contributes directly to its appreciation.

All contemporary art criticism strives to accord to contemporary art, which nowadays transgresses the frontiers of aesthetical autonomy and encourages interest in the study of "lived life". This takes place all the more the general critique of art focuses on symbolic communication inscribed in forms, which in turn gives birth to mass-media and publicity. Art, therefore, faces a great dilemma when faced with a critical introspection: all of its functions are taken over, one at a time, by new media. It is this dilemma that has to be considered when researching art: historically speaking, the distinction between applied arts and an alleged "aesthetic autonomy" that is supposed to pierce all works of art appears in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, alongside the distinction between modern and traditional art. The first was backed up by the "pluralism" of modern society. Belting, however, suggests we look upon modern and pre-modern art as upon historical phenomena, i.e. as if they were "distinct traditions" rather than contradictory testimonies. These two historical sequences can point out what makes classicism more of a "unitary" art than fragmentary modern approaches. In this respect, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe presents a staggering interdependency between artistic norms and general cultural beliefs: art in these centuries appears to be just as conflicting as its modern manifestations. Moreover, the only reason for which we can now state that during the same artistic age "citizens of a Dutch town would defend art on completely different bases than those invoked in France"<sup>5</sup> is because the norm followed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century may nowadays be examined with a new kind of curiosity and detachment, which in turn helps pointing out the discontinuities intrinsic to what we had considered to be a continuity.

Adopting such an attitude means accomplishing Belting's declared purpose for his study. However, it does not offer an answer to the general problem of the history of art: if art is neither the culmination, nor the loss of a tradition, what else can it be? Contemporary artistic phenomena contradict themselves because they are entitled "art" or "works of art" despite the fact that they reject all known definitions of the terms. This is why Harold Rosenberg wrote that art is permanently "anxious" in what regards its current status. Anxiety is, nonetheless, only one of the human traits attributed to art. Its history has been so "humanized" that, even if it has renounced dogmatic interpretation, once it poses a question concerning its role in human history it inevitably poses a

question concerning all man's world images, a question concerning *lived life*. The history of art therefore gives birth to a new type of art critic, one that casts off both the "scholarly" discourse characteristic of pure artistic forms, as well as all pure subjective interpretations of art.

In Belting's opinion, this new type of critic is the artist himself. He conducts his critique by "citing" or "altering" (both actions take place by means of his work) what Belting calls "prior proposals", which the artist allegorizes through a combination of heterogenic signs, forms and motives so that they produce a new discourse, unknown up until presently. "Artists create a history of art for themselves"<sup>6</sup>, as they approach the past without caring to justify their interpretations within an ordered speech such as those of art historians. The methods used by artists to conduct their critique can only lead to exclusive interest in the singular and the particular elements of art and cannot, thus, support an entire narrative. On the other hand, the truth enclosed within works of art (if any) will always come forth by means of the questions posed by the persons interested in the works. By eliminating the "narrative" that the work of art could have told, we risk seeing in the work itself nothing more than each of us wants to see. Thus, the question is left unanswered: what remains of art?

### **Towards a hermeneutic phenomenology of art**

The historical analysis of art may be profound and original, it may very well elucidate how research in the theory of art works and when do artistic activities take place. Nonetheless, it reaches its limits when trying to question the work of art as if this were an object to be dissected by means of various scientific methods. Theoreticians often realize that works of art seem to fit in the questions that are addressed to them by their public, only to pave a road that leads back to the initial premises on which all questions are based, without entering the realm of the work of art itself. One of the most profound questions that address this impediment belongs to the phenomenological research of Martin Heidegger, and is posed as follows. Works of art may be seen in art galleries and private collections; they are, thus, at the discretion of public and private consumption. They are taken care of and well-preserved, either in public institutions or within special commodity markets destined to commercialize them. Research in art and humanistic studies sees them as mere scientific objects. "Yet in all this busy activity do we encounter the work itself?"<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the scientific methodology applied in the history of art, which assumes that studied objects must confirm or infirm a formerly-stated hypothesis, phenomenological philosophy argues that "every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought"<sup>8</sup>. A common statement in phenomenological research is that not everything can be asked about complex phenomena such as art. Therefore, when we study a work of art we should first of all make sure that our conceptual basis does not impose on our object of study any characteristics pertaining to the theoretical systems of which our operating terms are part (chronology, etc.).

According to Hans Sedlmayr, all historical studies of art entail an "essential paradox" because of the fact that works of art belong, as all historical events do, to a historical time, but also pass, simultaneously, into an "extra historical" dimension. The

greatest error art critics make, as Sedlmayr puts it, is that of associating what art has to offer either with past or future events, despite the fact that works of art are actually represented by their own presence, both materially (stone, canvas and so forth) as well as “spiritually”, the latter meaning that art critics should always strive to bring forth the work of art to their comprehensible present<sup>9</sup>. Another common mistake is idolizing the time in which the work of art is contemplated, as if this would help gain access to an “extemporal” feeling of the work. This belief is infirmed by what operates within the work of art, namely the play of particular significations, which directly relate to the whole of the work. A work or art’s whole is not, in its turn, “extemporal”, but always present when interpreted. Sedlmayr’s efforts to differentiate between the external present of a work of art, which is an “apparent” one, and its “authentic” present go to a great length. This distinction is the exemplary ground for explaining the empirical situation in which we find that time can be lived in different ways, especially in front of a work of art. Sedlmayr argues that historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should have paid more attention to people that wrote on the subject of “the crisis of time”, varying from journalists to poets and philosophers. This because our time entails a deficiency in comparison with the authentic time which “feeds” it, which accounts for why people feel a constant need to return to a work of art as the main vehicle of “authentic” time. For example, we cannot “deplete” a musical composition, but can instead listen to its interpretation over and over again. There is always a possibility that what appears to be a sheer musical “moment” may actually represent the manifestation of authentic time itself. However, the tradition in which the work of art has been handed down to us can in no way guarantee the “revelation” of authentic time.

In his monumental attempt to rethink the history of art, Hans Sedlmayr argues that works of art must be “brought to present” no matter what historical status they bear. This is an action seldom understood by “the intelligence oriented towards objective life” characteristic to history in general<sup>10</sup>. Bringing a work of art to present means interpreting it and does not entail explaining one of its numerous aspects or its forms. The present of a work of art is a recreation of the respective work, exactly as a musical creation is “recreated” during its interpretation, for example. The authentic history of art, argues Sedlmayr, has a hermeneutical basis of interpretation and implies a very difficult task for the historian, who must pierce through to the “text” of a work of art as it had been before it was read or narrated by somebody else (he must conduct a phenomenological suspension, *epoché*). Historians now have the task to seize the initial state of the work of art without becoming some sort of a second artist that goes through the process of creation once again. The interpretation carried out by an art critic is not so much of a process, but rather the capturing of a work’s whole, from which “intuitive characters” may afterwards be derived. These intuitive characters offer the work of art an objective aspect, although the work in itself has a pre-objective status (“a halo of diffused visions”<sup>11</sup>). Works of art follow their own time and evolve independently, according to the moments of conception, structuring and perfection. Conception refers to the answer that an artist offers to prior inspiration, structuring means presenting each fragment that will facilitate the reception of the intuitive character of the work of

art and, finally, perfection refers to the final stage of the work, in which any change can radically alter its proper being as an art phenomenon.

The task of art historians is all the more difficult because their object of study manifests itself as “a superior institution” through which authentic time was present and which is nowadays not so active in daily life. Once myths, cults, feasts and authentic celebrations have disappeared, art – the last of these “institutions” – is approached either by means of *passism*<sup>12</sup>, either through *futurism*. Passism manifests itself through a “museum spirit”, which is not to be confounded with museums as neutral institutions. This trend looks upon art as objective past and tries to answer the following questions: when, where, and by whom? Futurism, on the other hand, is more like a surrogate of the idolized “eternal time” mentioned earlier and regards *the new* as if it were a religious category of some sort. It refuses the past as living tradition, meaning that the artist is always obliged to start over with his work.<sup>13</sup> This generally leads to forming “popular fashions” in art. In between these two research approaches, the present being of art, which only appears during the interpretative reconstitution of the work of art, is all the more vapid. “Authentic time” thus remains hidden within the art history.

Most of these difficulties and limits inherent to the objective history of art are assumed by the phenomenological method belonging to philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Mikel Dufrenne. According to Heidegger, the reconstruction of a work’s historical world is impossible. “The works are no longer the same as they once were”<sup>14</sup>, thus the way history as science relates to art is caducous. The history of art proves that the transition within art from an ideal to physical objects (works of art) asks for new approaches that are capable of grasping all that relates to the work in one way or another. Phenomenology takes this transition one step further, asking if the sum of all that affects the becoming of a work of art can offer satisfactory answers regarding the nature of art. Works of art, like all other phenomena, before being objects for the study of various sciences, belong to the research domain that they put forth themselves. That is to say, the reason why our attention is constantly drawn to the extra-ordinary space and time of the work of art is the work itself and nothing else. If we were to take a recurring example from Heidegger’s texts, i.e. a Greek temple, we could observe that the space it unfolds is owed to the sacred image that the temple aggregates. Time is important for people who share a certain belief to which the temple contributes with its being, a (mainly religious) belief that coordinates the ways of life and death, richness and poverty. When people find their belief mirrored in the work of art, they let themselves taken in by the ratios that such monuments put forth and eventually discover an “historical destiny” they have to fulfill.

Of course, not all “destinies” that works of art put forth must correspond to objective reality. No defeat had stopped the artists from the time of king Aurnasipal the 2<sup>nd</sup> to sculpt Assyrian victories from the years 883-859 B.C. in which none of their own warriors were injured or taken down, a faith worthy only of their opponents<sup>15</sup>. The same is the case with ancient Romans, who have erected Trajan’s Column to proclaim their victories and succeeded in shaping future historical studies according to the

monument. Even if what works of art represent does not correspond to our historical data, their subject matter has played a much greater role in the lives of the people they have belonged to than that of scientific data. If we can accept for a single instant that space and time are themselves the "offspring"<sup>16</sup> of a domain that the work of art puts forth, we are then ready to admit that both science and metaphysics are erroneously oriented in their research, because they study time and space considering what *already* lies within these two dimensions.

As Mikel Dufrenne puts it, the aesthetic object indeed implies corroboration of time and space, but not as its age and physical exposure, but as two dimensions that *belong to it*. According to the French philosopher, aesthetic objects abide to their own time, as can be seen when comparing them to other objects. Works of art "recommend themselves to me, disallowing me to destroy them and inviting me to pay full attention"<sup>17</sup>. For example, music imposes its own time on us, a time about which the metronome can offer no information, because measuring tools have a pre-established time they indicate; different passages from a literary work defy any constant reading rhythm and so on so forth. As far as space is concerned, monuments have a specific "grandeur" that exceeds their material surface but which cannot be measured by means of any known instrument. The question that Dufrenne poses is, therefore: how and why does a work of art "absorb" its audience through its specific time and space?

The world that works of art convey when they meet their audience, i.e. when they become aesthetic objects, has a pre-objective time and space. Generally speaking, audiences have the ability to ask questions and reflect upon something else than what is already given to them directly and which, accordingly, lies beyond physical reach. Works of art offer "the promise that we can accede to a world which is unpopulated by the objects that we otherwise encounter on a daily basis"<sup>18</sup>. The world that art "promises" has no constituted time and space. It rather expresses time and space as if they were "qualities" of a world which foreruns knowledge. As we can easily observe, history's discourse when describing works of art coincides with what the works actually stand for. Within history, representations gain their coherence from their linking together in objective time. However, Dufrenne argues, representations are always only subsequent to the aesthetic object, which must first put forth an expressed world in order to "cause" representations as we know them. It is only after this process takes place that we can classify a work's representations, as art historians do. According to Dufrenne, this also explains Heidegger's famous quote, "the world worlds" (*die Welt weltet*), which means not only that the work of art will always remain an object in a world where we all abide to some strict spatial and temporal rules, but that it also puts forth its own world, just as "active" as the one we all know, only less object-oriented<sup>19</sup>.

Conclusively, contemporary philosophy of art and art history can no longer approach art from an ideal point of view and can no longer make use of a paradigm which explains art beyond any historical variable. This is why it has strived to conceive new methods that would explain aesthetic experience and perception. Basically, the change in attitude can be summed up as follows: rather than focusing on art as a pure form manifested through its various physical phenomena, philosophical reflection has

turned to the phenomena themselves, i.e. to works of art. This standpoint is extremely productive in the field of phenomenology, which has helped philosophy overcome some of the greatest aesthetic, epistemological and metaphysical impasses over the last century by exercising the phenomenological bracketing through which it attempts to offer non-binding interpretations to objects such as the works of art. We have outlined some ways in which the historical study of art may be influenced by the approaches that phenomenology has to offer and offered a few examples in a way that will hopefully enrich current research on this matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Belting, *L'histoire de l'art, est-elle finie? Histoire et archéologie d'un genre* (The End of the History of Art?) (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Focillon, *La vie des formes* (The Life of Forms) (Chicoutimi: University of Québec, 2002), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Focillon, *La vie des formes*, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Belting, *L'histoire de l'art*, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Belting, *L'histoire de l'art*, 92.

<sup>6</sup> Belting, *L'histoire de l'art*, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), 39.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 24. Also, see the whole second section of *Being and Time* for an explanation of this statement.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, „Problema timpului”, in *Epoci și opere. Studii de istoria și teoria artei* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1991), 170.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, „Probleme ale interpretării operelor de artă”, in *Epoci și opere*, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Sedlmayr, *Epoci și opere*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> An exemplary statement of passism: "Greek classics differ with nothing from barbaric classics".

<sup>13</sup> Sedlmayr, *Epoci și opere*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon, 2006), 59 and 95.

<sup>16</sup> This expression was attributed to Heidegger by Otto Pöggeler in a lacunary reference. See Otto Pöggeler, *Drumul gândirii lui Heidegger* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 181.

<sup>17</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, *Fenomenologia experienței estetice* (Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1976), 155.

<sup>18</sup> Dufrenne, *Fenomenologia*, 256-266.

<sup>19</sup> Dufrenne, *Fenomenologia*, 244.

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