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2013 Karolina Dolanská

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE
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Beauty Revisited in Contemporary Art
Současné umění a otázka krásy

Dizertační práce

Ústav pro dějiny umění
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Abstract

In his meditations on the arts of Ancient Greece Friedrich Nietzsche touches upon the essence of what makes art what it is. Since I feel that speaking about the essence of things became a possibility again — the post-modern relativism is less fashionable now, while at the same time it has opened new hitherto unthinkable possibilities of thought and expression — I take as my starting point some key moments of Nietzsche's thinking on art, in order to get — in the context of modern and contemporary art — an understanding of what makes art still so fundamental to our lives today.

Beauty here re-emerges as the main motive again in art. In Nietzsche's conception of art beauty is not just an aesthetic category but plays a much more significant role — it is the main and the only criterion of truth.

Even though beauty was in the last several decades denied, rejected and forbidden, it re-appears now as a constitutive value in contemporary art — although quietly and not as an aim in itself (as is indeed innate to beauty).

Rediscovering beauty is crucial also (and perhaps primarily) in the context of the possible (political) manipulation that art can be easily subjected to — which Plato warned against right at the birth of the mimetic arts, for it can result in spiritual, political and ethical corruption that today as much as ever poisons the cultural and public life of our society — and where beauty stands as the only real measure distinguishing truth from falsity.

Abstrakt

Ve svých zamyšleních nad uměním antického Řecka se Friedrich Nietzsche dotýká podstaty toho, čím umění je a být musí, aby uměním zůstalo. Neboť mám dojem, že se znovu objevila možnost hovořit o podstatě věcí — post-moderní relativismus již přestává být tak módní a zároveň také poskytuje nové, ve vyjadřování dříve nemyslitelné možnosti — chytám se několika klíčových momentů z Nietzscheho úvah a v kontextu moderního a současného umění se snažím mimo jiné pochopit, co činí umění, po všem čím prošlo, dnes stále tak životně zásadním.

Jako klíčový motiv zde (znovu)vyvstává idea krásy. V Nietzscheho pojetí umění není krása pouze estetickým konceptem, ale má roli mnohem závažnější — je hlavním a jediným kritériem (umělecké) pravdivosti.

I když byla v posledních několika desetiletích krása v umění popírána, zavržena i zakázána, znovu se začíná v současné tvorbě objevovat — přestože ne cíleně — jako formotvorná a normotvorná hodnota.

Znovuobjevení krásy je podstatné také (a možná zejména) v kontextu snadné (politické) zneužitelnosti umění — před níž naléhavě varoval u samého zrodu mimetických umění Platon — projevující se formou uměleckých paskvilů, ať již duchovních, politických nebo výtvarných, které také dnes zužují kulturní a občanský život naší společnosti, a kde je právě krása jediným skutečným kritériem, rozlišujícím pravdu od lži a přetvářky.

Preface

This paper has no ambition whatsoever to present an overall or systematic study of the history of beauty. It is a meditation on some key moments in modern and contemporary art, and among them, beauty again emerges as a value essential to art. Even though beauty was for many decades denied, rejected and forbidden by the official academic, intellectual and art establishment (beauty was proclaimed no longer relevant to the essence of art[1]), it again now becomes a constitutive value in contemporary art.

I began to think about the issue of beauty while working with contemporary art as a curator at the National Gallery in Prague. The artworks I was encountering at the time led me to propose for the 2005 Biennale of Contemporary Art of the National Gallery to be called "Beauty Again" — which became a working title for a while but in the end was unsurprisingly considered too eccentric and not 'sophisticated' enough to capture the complexity of the art of today.

Nevertheless, I soon realized that I was by no means alone in asserting that beauty was back — as was clear from Umberto Eco's (then) new book devoted solely to beauty (to take one example that captured my attention).[2] But also an anthology of texts by Whitechapel Gallery entitled "Beauty", dealing with the subject of the revival of beauty in contemporary art, was confirming my sense of the relevance of beauty in contemporary art. The book was published in 2009 with the premise that after more than half a century of suspicion and interrogation beauty had emerged as "one of the most hotly contested subjects in current discussions on art and culture."[3]

However, the issue of politics enters the picture when it comes to beauty, after the almost fatal attack that beauty is re-emerging from. Dave Beech stated in the introduction to *Beauty* that the book was assembled with "the politics of beauty in

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1. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1995.
2. Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty*, edited by Umberto Eco, translated by Alastair Mc Ewen, first published in the United States of America in 2004 by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.
3. *Beauty, Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Edited by David Beech, First published 2009 by Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited.

mind".[4] Indeed, the question of beauty is inseparable from the question of politics and ethics (and hence the attack on beauty has undeniably been also political and moralistic) — as Plato understood, and Nietzsche confirmed while revisiting from the perspective of modernity the Ancient Greek ideal of a "life justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" — and as it is clear also today, when beauty is (hopefully) to become a force again in our culture and society.

4. Beech, Dave, "Introduction//Art and the Politics of Beauty", in *Beauty: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Edited by David Beech, First published 2009 by Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited.

Introduction

What is the constitutive value of art? I would think that had this question been presented before a reasonable (and not too academically predisposed) layperson of our times, he or she may well be answering: beauty. However natural this answer is or should be — as may be the case for truth as the constitutive value for knowledge or science, and justice to our social and political life — we have found this answer under philosophical and political attack in our time. Here is the zeitgeist as expressed in Arthur Danto's words in the late 1980's:

> With the philosophical coming of age of art, visuality drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been.[5]

Danto here declares authoritatively what we were all presumably supposed to know by then: beauty was of no relevance to the essence of art. He does it with the authority of a physician declaring the death of a patient and uses it to further a claim that there also goes the fate of visuality, dropping away with little relevance to art. All this is announced in the name of 'the philosophical coming of age of art' — as it were following on Hegel — claiming that art as we have known it has ended, and artists are 'to come of age', maturing into philosophy, evolving into philosophers.

The aim of my work is less that of a philosophical treaty trying to discredit or refute the general move as expressed by Danto — though my stand against the falsity of Danto's 'prophesy' is evident — but to draw a trajectory both in the history of art (in particular in modern art) and in philosophy through which we can both trace the underpinning of a general move in modern art and in the thinking about art that may have lead to an intellectual atmosphere as presented by Danto — and against that to defend beauty as the constitutive value of art (both philosophically and historically, if we want). In so doing, I also examine the logical nature of beauty, or better, what is meant by beauty as a constitutive value in art, and consequently what (necessary) role art plays also in our lives. Beauty

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5. Danto, Arthur, *After the End of Art*, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1995.

must be invited back I argue against Danto — while I also believe that beauty, as a matter of fact, does nowadays make its comeback to the world of art and to the way we perceive and think about art.

My starting point is with the Greeks and the idea of art as the (true) justification of life. Here I will visit a theme — reinforced by the reading of Nietzsche of the Greek culture and philosophy — of the imperative to live one's life as if it was a work of art. This is what is meant by "art as the justification of life" and hereby we touch on the intimate connection between Ethics and Aesthetics — they are one, both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are quick to remind us.

But here at the beginning of our trajectory we can already encounter the root of the difficulty in the form of Plato's attack on art — in fact an attack on (illusionary) beauty, an attack that in one way or another could be shown to resonate all through the history of art, and to form the first underpinning of the modern attack on beauty. Beauty is corruptive, it rests on an inferior kind of imitation — it may confuse us to replace that which is true with an inferior useless replica of it — if we want, similar to us replacing the genuine hero with an actor playing him or her on stage. Here lies an educational danger of great proportions as the youths may follow not the true heroes but misleading imitators. Does Plato spell here a final guilty verdict to art? I would argue with Nietzsche that not — and will follow on Nietzsche and his idea of the "eternal recurrence" and the two poles, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the two forces that play out in our life and are rehearsed in art.

However complex and debatable is the theme of the "eternal recurrence" in Nietzsche, what matters to our case is the idea of the necessity imbedded in it, i.e. the sense of life tracing a necessity with, if we wish, an inescapable moral. In a sense, Nietzsche's theme here can be read as an imperative by which we must live our life in such manner that had it been repeated, we would embrace our fate and our decisions once again in the same exact way. If art is not imitative of something outside of it — as Plato would insist it should not be — but an exemplification or a rehearsal of a necessity on which a model for a (virtuous) life could be formed, than art is a power without which meaningful life is an impossibility. We stand before a great work of art rehearsing as it were the moves that the artist made, only to realize again and again the inescapable logic of the work — had we to make the moves again, however free in principle we are to alter them, we would

have to embrace the necessity of the path the work and the artist have taken as the only possible way.

But this necessity is only understood in the retrospective when the work is presented in full before us or when life is encompassed and observed in full view, since each work as each life must present a different new way by which things stand in a way that we acknowledge as necessary. This prescribes art and life with the imperative of the delivery of what we may call 'a message', but a message whose calling is indeed necessary — it is imperative for it to be delivered (when it is delivered) — it is not a product of the whim of the artist who wants, let us say, to express himself or herself, but an answer to a calling which has a universal bearing as it is shaped in a given time and context, answering, so to speak, to a need. But if the first claim the work is making is namely, (1) this must be expressed; then the second claim that must accompany it, is, (2) there is no other way but the way of the work to deliver what it must deliver. This logic must sit in the core-essence of art, namely, the union of content and form, of the "what" and the "how".

Here also are in play the Dionysian and the Apollonian poles or powers that Nietzsche introduced, such that in life, if one pole represents the raw power of active and full immersion in life and the second pole the power of reflection and ordering, of the giving of form to life, then in life which is meaningful the two poles must play against each other in such way that we find them tailored to each other, weaved into each other, in a unique and singular fashion — as indeed content and form are modeled in great works of art. From here the Greek lesson of art as the justification of life gets its force.

I follow Nietzsche here in acknowledging art as an exercise in exemplification and not of imitation of norms and forms that are located outside of the world — as in Plato's world of ideas or perfect forms. Here I also follow on Kant and the idea borrowed from his Ethics that in acting we must act as legislators — that in acting we actually legislate a law with a universal bearing — this is the (categorical) imperative that must direct us in choosing a course of action, that is viable as a universal law. (Paying with fake money for example for products we buy will violate such an imperative as it undercuts the very move we make; consider if everyone pays with fake money). So if ethics and aesthetics are indeed one, as is true of art, an artist must legislate in the very moves he or she makes the new

artistic or aesthetic categories of the time.

The need for a new legislation, what we may call, the extension of the established, entrenched norms, does not arise in the name of novelty for its own sake, but of a need of a political or social nature — a need that has a universal bearing. If not, the novelty imbedded in art is an exercise in indulgence and therefore presents no real case of novelty. It is only when the old or current modes of presentation exhaust their role, when they can no longer represent or serve the cause of life properly — when they become in fact tools of oppression or of forcing a way of seeing reality and life that prevents justified change — then the artist must break the old norms and legislate what must become in fact the true meaning of the norms in the tools of the time, thus answering to the pains and needs of his or her time. This is why for Nietzsche art stands higher than metaphysics, for it offers a "metaphysical comfort," and by virtue of beauty, turns our existence into something that is meaningful.

I follow a path in modern art, in works of such great legislators as Manet, Schiele, Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky and Magritte. Following their role in legislating modern art, thus extending what art and beauty is — I also follow a thread running through modern art that may explain the reason why towards the end of the 20th century we can find such sentiment — backed by what we must admit a powerful establishment of academians, theoreticians, art critics and bureaucrats — as expressed by Danto, by which beauty and even sheer visuality drop out as irrelevant to art. For if we anchor art and beauty in the tailored unity of content and form, in the exemplification of necessity of calling — a demand for, as it were, a liberating new content that finds expression in the only unique possible way or form which is being created to match it — then when strong cultural and intellectual forces aimed at separating form from content — as is and was a case in Modernity — we may find down the logical trajectory of things that the very idea of beauty and consequently of art is undermined. It is in this moment, of art coming of age philosophically, so to speak (as in Danto's quote) that we may find that the unique bond — however recreated and reinvented every time afresh — between form and content, signifier and signified, or meaning and reference, is being undermined (as this question surfaces for example in the famous work of René Magritte, *This Is Not a Pipe*).

Here the success of modern science is also in play. Science — at the least

on the technical, basic level — is alien to the very idea of form and content tailored in a singular fashion. Since if we have for example the formal property or definition of an atom, then many such entities, i.e. atoms, must answer to the definition. Science and the practicality of life must be based on generalizations, i.e. law-like entities to which many particulars can answer, as for example all particular chairs answer a practical definition of objects serving the purpose of sitting. In this sense all particulars are the same. But art and its constitutive value, beauty, are anchored in the idea of singularity. If we liken the work of art to a rule or a law-like entity, we find out that unlike in science only a single entity answers to the rule and this is the work itself — the work is both the rule and its unique extension — and it is therefore (truly) singular.

This is indeed the (logical) mark of beauty, that once we see it right, grasp what it is in full, we realize that it cannot be but what it is, by virtue of its own unique self-definition and materialization — we must admit it then perfect in accordance with its own standard, i.e. beautiful. This of course means — as indeed Kant argues — that beauty is no general term; there is no core/stable definition of beauty for which all beautiful things must answer. Beauty is indexical — says Kant — as each work of art presents a newly created standard for what is beautiful. To use Wittgenstein's terminology we would say that "the beautiful" is an open-ended family of such standards of beauty that is being creatively extended as this can be shown throughout the history of art or beauty for that matter.

Here again we can visit the connection between Ethics and Aesthetics, since both must refuse science and practicality of life as they force upon us a world-view of generality. The ethical dilemma would lose its luster and truth, we must admit, if we analyze it as science does, as a repeated scenario that answers to a general definition and prescribes accordingly a pre-established course of action. No says Kant, the hero of the ethical dilemma must legislate every time anew what is just and right — as does the artist who legislates the beautiful every time afresh — answering to the pains and needs of his or her time and thereby offering the much needed "metaphysical comfort" that Nietzsche spoke of in connection with art.

Motto:

Goethe's Faust is about the notion of one single moment that contains eternity. For the possibility to experience a moment of wishing that this moment would last forever, Faust is willing to sell his soul to the devil. And even though Faust never lived through such a moment, he felt, nonetheless, that it was the very thing that gave meaning and substance to human existence. He knew that he had nothing to loose in his deal with the devil because there was no point to continue a life without such experience.

We all know that a moment like that exists — a moment of beauty, a moment of truth. Yet it is so easy to deny. Since it happens in a split of a second, like a flash of light. And once this moment had passed, the memory of it seems unreal. For we cannot compare it to anything that was left behind, and it is impossible to recapture it. Until the next moment arrives — once we had lost almost all hope it ever existed — coming from an unexpected direction, in a whole new way again.

Art, I believe, more than anything, has to do with bringing about such moments.. with longing for those moments..

Greeks: Art as the Justification of Life

Friedrich Nietzsche captured the aesthetic nature of the Greek attitude to life in the metaphor of "life as a work of art." Life for the Greeks, he says, was justified only as an *aesthetic phenomenon*. Before we try to understand what this means, let us also note that Nietzsche claims, furthermore, that this aesthetic attitude to life of the Greeks was interrupted by Plato. Plato, that is, replaced art by metaphysics, thus denying the actual by placing all values and norms outside of reality, in a super-empirical realm of Ideals.

So whereas the wise and the virtuous man in the ancient Greece dwelled in the real world — *"he was it,"*[6] living all values by exemplifying them in action — in the times which followed after Plato, men believed that what was true was outside of their existence, outside of themselves. By thus removing an essential part of who they had been and placing it elsewhere, says Nietzsche, human beings became weak, vulnerable, sickly, humble — they ended up "all too human." The "true world," as Nietzsche describes in *How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth*, then gradually turned into something unattainable, beyond men's experience, perception, comprehension. The role of moralities, religions and philosophies, and of all the "teachers of the purpose of existence"[7] such as Plato, was to deny the cruel yet simple truth about men's existence — they are born and they die — a truth that is not justified by anything external.

Any turning away from the actual is, then, a denial of life. The Greeks, although they "knew and felt the terror and horror of existence,"[8] originally understood that all values, whatever they are, must be sought and found in actuality. No man, however, can deal with the anxiety that comes with experiencing reality in its apparent contingency and meaninglessness directly. It is only through art, claims Nietzsche, that life became possible for the Greeks. Art alone is focused on the actual, is part of the actual, yet makes

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6. Friedrich Nietzsche, "How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth," in *Twilight of the Idols*, R. J. Hollingdale, (Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 40-42.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kauffmann, (Vintage Books, New York, 1974), p. 74.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Kauffmann, (Vintage Books, New York, 1967), p. 42.

actuality something beautiful, meaningful, and worthwhile, even enjoyable, for it allows for a certain detachment from the disturbing existential truths. The *metaphorical distance* essential to art enables art to show reality in a way that is tolerable to men — not in a destructively blunt and literal way. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche speaks about the tremendous terror that seizes man, when he is deprived of the metaphorical distance provided by art, and ends up facing the existential truth literally, in its bare form:

> True knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action....Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence....Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity.[9]

The experience of pure despair and madness in the face of existential absurdity is ingeniously captured in the novella inspired by Nietzsche's philosophy, *Death in Venice,* by Thomas Mann. Mann describes a process whereby a man's metaphorical experience of reality turns into a terrifying *literal* experience of it, lacking all intellectual or aesthetic distance. There is no moment of transcendence, no shred of sublimation, in such a literal way of experiencing; there is nothing but a bare physical presence. The outcome of this process, for Mann's hero, is a total spiritual destruction that ultimately leads to death. The story reveals the necessity of a certain interplay between the literal and the metaphorical in our encounter with reality, provided, ultimately, by art.

So, in order to endure life, Nietzsche's claim goes, Greeks needed a metaphorical distance — a mediation of the 'raw experience' of reality — and this mediation was provided by art, which enabled men to embrace their existence without turning all attention *away* from it to another world, but also without having to face the terrifying truth of the meaninglessness, contingency, and unpredictability of human life in a direct, literal way.

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9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 60.

Art, for the Greeks, had two basic components, existing through one another, which Nietzsche identifies as the Apollinian and the Dionysian principles:

> Apollinian—Dionysian. There are two conditions in which art appears in man like a force of nature and disposes of him whether he will or no: as the compulsion to have visions and as a compulsion to an orgiastic state. Both conditions are rehearsed in ordinary life, too, but weaker: in dream and in intoxication.[10]

In accordance with his insistence on biological existence as the basis of life, it is not incidental that Nietzsche associates the two artistic principles with the physiological states of *dream* and *intoxication*. Dionysus is about the embracing of life, about accepting, saying yes to human existence, something which often happens in a state of drunkenness. Human beings, in such a state, experience the world in its totality, when men and the world are one and the same, when all individual borders dissolve and a human being identifies with life and existence as such.

Apollo, on the other hand, deals with existence by giving it form and structure. Life of an individual is made possible by this Apollonian ordering, which makes him or her feel a part of the world without being swallowed by its fluid totality. Apollo is what enables a person to have an individual perspective; it is the means of coping with the "hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge"[11] at the bottom of existence in a reasonable and organized way.

So Dionysus "objectifies himself into the Apollonian appearances,"[12] which in turn make life bearable for men, even pleasant, free of the "terror and ecstasy"[13] found in the innermost depths of men and of nature. While man cannot live without Apollo, Apollo "could not live without Dionysus,"[14] for Dionysus is what gives matter and animating energy to Apollo.

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10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Walter Kauffmann, (Vintage Books, New York, 1968), p. 419-20.
11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 51.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 67.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 67.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 49.

Art then contains both principles: without giving up the experience of the world in its totality, it offers beautiful individual images, an appearance of structure and order, which make man's existence possible. Art does not solve the problem of existence, but embraces existence in a pleasurable and fulfilling way. It deals with the actual not only by presenting life — by virtue of beauty — in meaningful manner, but it also creates actuality, i.e. produces what is in the world. Music, for example, is not a reproduction or reflection of reality as such, but is the outcome of man's co-creation of the world he lives in. The same can be said about most works of art and architecture, which give form and appearance to the environment men live in. Art then not only discloses reality in the right way but also represents man's freedom to create reality.

Art is therefore as real and true as we are going to get in life, without being destroyed by the wild and terrifying domain of bare existence. Art's appeal to human beings comes not just from its ability to accept the absurdity of existence, but also to work with it in a brave, creative, playful and inventive way. Hence Nietzsche's claim that life is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon; that beauty and truth are inseparable.

However, having the freedom to create their world, or having a choice, through art, in what environment men live in, by no means implies an unrestricted freedom in the absence of any rules and norms. On the contrary: precisely because there are no transcendental rules, determining our existence from outside the world, Nietzsche claims, the Greeks knew that in order to create anything meaningful, men must be subjected to a strict discipline within a rigid and definite framework of some kind. Although many artists and alleged 'free' thinkers have objected to the arbitrariness and caprice of all systems of law, Nietzsche himself says that:

> .. the curious fact is that all there is or has been on earth of freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness, whether in thought itself or in government, or in rhetoric and persuasion, in the arts just as in ethics, has developed only owing to the "tyranny of such capricious laws"; and in all seriousness, the probability is by no means small that precisely this is "nature" and "natural"—and *not* that *laisser aller*.[15]

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Walter Kauffmann, (Vintage Books, New York, 1968), p.188.

The values, norms and rules men work within are in a certain sense arbitrary and contingent, something chosen, devoid of transcendental necessity or metaphysical determination. But that does not make them any less real. In rejecting any metaphysical justification of our world from outside of the world, Nietzsche does not reject order per se, or the existence of the normative as a constitutive part of our reality. His whole discussion of Apollo and Dionysus implies that the Apollonian informing and structuring of reality is essential to living, and inseparable from the Dionysian embracing and accepting of existence. Nietzsche's point is that rules and norms exist in actuality; they are in the same space as men and their lives. The normative is always *already* included in the reality that men participate in. This is indeed an implication of the claim discussed above, that men cannot bear the passive apprehension of 'raw existence,' in the absence of both the Apollonian structuring and the Dionysian positive acceptance of it. So insofar as structures, rules, and norms are embedded in the reality we live in, there is *in fact* nothing arbitrary or contingent about them; they are real and true.

Nietzsche has a way of resolving the tension between the normative and the arbitrary, which arises with the nonexistence of any transcendental foundation of reality, by his idea of *the eternal recurrence of the same*. This expression refers, most immediately, to a way of becoming one with one's values such that one would continue to enact them in the same exact way in the same given situation through infinity of lifetimes. When 'repeated eternally,' things otherwise devoid of metaphysical or transcendental grounding gain weight, and appear without the "mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature."[16] What is (in principle) arbitrary and contingent, i.e. the choices we make, the actions we take, the values we follow, in fact ceases to be arbitrary, being forever the same. The idea that 'it could just as well have been otherwise' loses any sense, for the way *it is* happens to be the only possible way. A "number of fortuities"[17] have turned into necessity — contingency has been transformed into destiny. In the world of eternal recurrence, all actions we take are inflected by a *necessity* — necessity that is inherent to the actions themselves, not projected onto them from an external metaphysical realm.

16. A reference to Milan Kundera's discussion of Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence of the same in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, (New York, Harper Perennial, 1984), p. 4.
17. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 48.

This ‘self-affirmation’ contained in the notion of the eternal recurrence on the level of an individual life, applies also as a way of being to the life of an entire culture. In their aesthetic conception of life, Greeks composed their destiny, out of contingencies, into a work of art — guided by a sense of beauty and aesthetic sensibility — in which, just as in a musical symphony, all acts and individual parts, guided by what we could call an ‘aesthetic necessity’, have their permanent and non-interchangeable place.

The world of eternal recurrence is a world where all weight is put on the present moment. Things happen here and now, to such an extent that even the past and the future are brought into the present moment (this, I think, is the real meaning of Nietzsche’s “eternity”). When living life as art we act as if we were both legislating a standard of action (in a given specific context), and carrying out that standard through the actions themselves — we legislate and execute our values and standards all at the same time. When actions are carried out for their own sake, as ends in themselves — as is characteristic of art — when we act as if our conduct were the only possible choice in that it will be repeated in the same way forever, that conduct gains the status of necessity; all arbitrariness and contingency of life vanishes.

Art thus, for Nietzsche, is superior to metaphysics. Art has the power to create fiction that is more true than the “true world” — art is a semblance, an illusion, which stands higher than truth, for it provides a “metaphysical comfort.”[18] Art makes life possible by seducing us to live: while promising nothing outside of itself, it makes life worth living for. Without beautiful dreams, imagination, and fiction, reality would not be real — it would not be true. When living life as art, the question of truth is inseparable from the question of artistic sensibility.

There is a beautiful passage in the *Odyssey* that exemplifies the inseparability of beauty and truth in the Greek conception of life, which depicts the moment when Alcinous understands that Odysseus speaks the truth merely by the beauty of his composing of words, beauty so real that it could not possibly lie: “In your words is a formal beauty to match the graceful order of your ideas.”[19]

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18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 59.
19. E. D. Francis, *Image and Idea in Fifth-Century Greec*e, Art and literature after the Persian Wars, Edited by Michael Vickers, London and New York, 1990, p. 96.

So to “live life as art,” the way Greeks used to, according to Nietzsche, requires giving up on any transcendental foundation of the world from outside of it. The normative and the ‘descriptive’ are complementary; they exist through one another and in the same space as we do. This by no means undermines the crucial role that the normative has in the constituting of reality. On the contrary, instead of ‘imitating’ transcendental norms prescribed to us in advance from the realm of metaphysics, we live in the world of the *eternal recurrence*, where every move we take, every decision we make, has a crucial importance. We act as if we were legislating a norm and a value, and executing it, all at the same time. Life is neither an arbitrary sketch, nor acquires the justification for its norms and values from outside of the world. And it is art that provides us with a strong normative component, which gives life “weight” and meaning, and which discloses reality in a way that by virtue of beauty gives meaning to our existence — that is, at a certain *metaphorical distance* from the cruel existential truths.

Plato, the End of Art?

The Greek way of life as art, where beauty and truth were inseparable, came to an end, according to Nietzsche, with Plato and his introducing of the 'other world.' The Apollo-Dionysus artistic conception of the world taking place in the actuality gave way to Plato's metaphysics of truth and illusion, high and low, light and darkness. Against art, Plato invented the concept of truth, reachable merely by reason.

It was actually Plato's teacher, Socrates — the first rationalist — says Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, who killed the classical Greek tragedy by reason, and replaced it by philosophy. In the Greek tragedy, there was no distance between thought and action, truth and illusion: the Greeks were the truth and the enemy was false. Socrates brought in rationality, reflection, questioning. He succeeded to convince the Greeks that values were not what they intuitively took them to be and how they lived them, that goodness and truth did not necessarily go hand in hand with beauty and aesthetic pleasure, and that ugliness was in fact not evil, stupid, and inferior as one's basic intuition would have it (Socrates himself being known to be ugly). Good and beautiful from then on was to be constructed by reason, not felt by instincts and experienced by senses. Rationality was offered as a crutch when all certainties of instinct were lost.

Art was to be banished from Plato's ideal state for being untrue, a mere illusion, which in addressing the emotional and intuitive side of the human soul leads one astray from living in truth.

When we read Plato on art, however, we realize that his attitude to art is not all that simple. As a matter of fact, there are few thinkers, who would take art as seriously as Plato did. In the *Laws*, Plato speaks to the tragedians, to the 'serious poets,' in the following way:

> Most honoured guests, we're tragedians ourselves, and our tragedy is the finest and best we can create. At any rate, our entire state has been constructed so as to be a "representation" of the finest and noblest life — the very thing we maintain is most genuinely a tragedy. So we are poets like yourselves, composing in the same genre, and your competitors as artists and actors in the finest drama, which true law alone has the natural power to "produce" to perfection (of that we're quite confident).[20]

20. Plato, *The Laws*, Translated with an Introduction by Trevor J. Saunders. Penguin Books, 1970, p. 310.

This statement, in some variation, could very well have come out from Nietzsche's mind when speaking about his notion of Greek way of life as a form of art. That is, Plato seems to be saying that when living life as art, in that the actions of the community carry in themselves an inherent aesthetic necessity, there is no need for individual pieces of "art" on top of that way of living.

So what is Plato's attitude to art? And what is the fear that Plato expresses regarding art, a fear that leads him to his well-known condemnation of art as a kind of ethical danger seriously corrupting the human soul?

To begin, art, for Plato, is based on a *mimesis*,[21] an imitation. That is, art copies something that already exists in its own right. Plato also claims that everything in reality as we know it exists only in the image of its own ideal, preserved in the realm of Ideas, of the so-called Platonic forms, which are singular, eternal, invisible and divine. The existing, visible, sensual world is therefore merely the world of shadows of forms, where things exist as plural, finite and profane. Art, according to this logic, then comes out as an imitation of the 'real imitation' (i.e. our world); in other words, art is a representation of the existing representation of the Ideas, and is thus, says Plato, at a third remove from truth. Any given object in reality, according to Plato, can be seen in the light of these three existing 'degrees' of reality:

> Well then, here are three beds: one existing in nature, which is made by God, as I think that we may say — for no one else can be the maker?
>
> *No*
>
> There is another, which is the work of the carpenter?
>
> *Yes*
>
> And the work of the painter is a third?
>
> *Yes*
>
> Beds, then, are of three kinds, and there are three artists who superintend them: God, the maker of the bed, and the painter?[22]

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21. Possible translations are: presentation, re-presentation, imitation, participation.

22. Plato, *The Republic* "The Republic (Book X)" by Plato, translated by Benjamin Jowett; *Editor's Note:* This essay and the translation are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. (Copyright Julie C. Van Camp 1997).

It is worth noting that Plato here refers to God, the carpenter, and the painter, all as artists. That is, they all participate in a creation, however, with various degrees of truthfulness and success. The craftsman designs his object with the perfect form of the object in mind; he is guided by the knowledge of the object, of its form and function. What guides the artist, on the other hand, is not the true knowledge of the things he imitates, but only their appearance, that is, merely the external surface that changes with perspective, and not the essence of the object:

> And the same object appears straight when looked at out of the water, and crooked when in the water; and the concave becomes convex, owing to the illusion about colours to which the sight is liable. Thus every sort of confusion is revealed within us; and this is that weakness of the human mind on which the art of conjuring and of deceiving by light and shadow and other ingenious devices imposes, having an effect upon us like magic.[23]

The "imitator or maker of the image" thus imitates things not as they are but as they appear to be, because he knows nothing about their "true existence."[24] By remaining on the level of appearances, the imitator (whether a painter or a poet) has no capacity to engage reason, and appeals exclusively to emotions, which are very easily aroused yet exist without any "true or healthy aim," and in themselves are "irrational, useless, and cowardly."[25]

> And now we may fairly take him [the imitative poet] and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth — in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul; and therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil are permitted to have authority and the good are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, as we maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small- he is a manufacturer of images

23. Plato, *The Republic*, "The Republic (Book X)", 143.
24. Plato, *The Republic,* "The Republic (Book X)", 105.
25. Plato, *The Republic,* "The Republic (Book X)", 159.

and is very far removed from the truth.[26]

Plato's concern with the "magical effect" that art has on human emotions while blinding the reason is connected to questions concerning what we might call the *ethics of art*, which turned out quite pertinent throughout the history of Western art. The strong and irresistible emotional appeal that art holds easily lends itself to the manipulation of beholders. That is, art can slip into the minds of people any kind of politically or ideologically charged content, which the audience might not fully understand but is still moved and instructed by it, or understands when it is already too late for any reasonable questioning — when already in love with the work of art in such a way that its content is accepted without question.[27]

Plato apparently was not the only thinker of his time, who was worried about the possible ways in which the fictitious nature of art and myth can be used to emotionally manipulate the audience. E. D. Francis mentions other thinkers before Plato, who were also concerned with the ethics of art in connection with its strong moral and political influence on people:

> Would Xenophanes and Pindar have inveighed with such insistence against these 'deceptive fictions' if they merely entertained and did not more profoundly mould the moral attitudes of many Greeks? At the beginning of the fifth century, myth was probably still for most Greeks an extraordinarily potent means of expressing and informing their experience of the world.[28]

Francis brings attention to the fact that art and myth in Greece could be easily adjusted or invented in the hands of a clever politician to serve specific political ends, and to influence people to those ends. Art and myth were in fact used as

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26. Plato, *The Republic,* "The Republic (Book X)", 199.

27. There are many manifestations of this 'Platonic' spirit of suspicion in regards to the ethics of art in the history. Early Protestantism brought attention to the fact that Christian art can seduce the audience into believing without any reasonable questioning. Richard Wagner tried to prevent the potential 'prostitute-like' character that music can have in its ability to accompany any message and thus being potentially used by anyone for whatever purposes, by trying to fix music together with one and only content and context in his notion of the "gesamtkunstwerk". All totalitarian regimes tried to use the emotional impact of art to manipulate the audience ideologically.

28. E. D. Francis, *Image and Idea in Fifth-Century Greec*e, Art and literature after the Persian Wars, Edited by Michael Vickers, London and New York, 1990, p. 35.

powerful political tools in the service of the state, family, or politics; and, in its emotional appeal to wide audiences, as means for the persuasion of the majority in the Athenian democracy. Plato himself must have almost inevitably had in mind when warning against the "magical effect" that art can have on people — while manipulating them into a specific political agenda — the greatest creation of classical art, the Parthenon, which in its formal beauty and perfection carries a very specific political message, instrumental in bringing the Athenians into voting for and carrying out the Peloponnesian War — an event that subsequently brought the end of Athens as an empire.[29] Plato wants to prevent any political decisions based on emotional misguidance of the minds of the citizens, and for this reason decides to banish mimetic arts from the ideal Republic.

Among the imitative artists, Plato claims, the "tragic poets," who deal directly with ethics as the subject of their imitation, are especially dangerous in regard to the forming of ethical awareness and moral values among the wide audience that their art appeals to. The poet's ignorance about the true nature of the object of his imitation, reflected in his work, can through its powerful emotional appeal dangerously confuse the perceiver about the true nature of things in general, about the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, true and false. Having no true knowledge about "what makes a thing good or bad," Plato says, the poet easily mistakes that which only "appears to be good"[30] for real goodness, and by reflecting this confusion in his art, he presents his audience with values that are seriously distorted:

> Then must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colours and figures.
>
> *Quite so.*

29. This idea comes from Professor Günter Kopcke's seminar on "Greek Art and History," at the Institute of Fine Arts, in the Fall of 2003.
30. Plato, *The Republic,* "The Republic (Book X)", 133.

> In like manner the poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colours of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in metre and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well — such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have. And I think that you must have observed again and again what a poor appearance the tales of poets make when stripped of the colours which music puts upon them, and recited in simple prose.[31]

The mimetic arts can confuse people's minds in such a way that in general they are not able to tell the imitator, who only makes believe to have a real knowledge of his subject, from someone with true understanding. Such confusion can lead to a real corruption of the human spirit, and with it to serious political mistakes.

> And so, when we hear persons saying that the tragedians, and Homer, who is at their head, know all the arts and all things human, virtue as well as vice, and divine things too, for that the good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject, and that he who has not this knowledge can never be a poet, we ought to consider whether here also there may not be a similar illusion. Perhaps they may have come across imitators and been deceived by them; they may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities?[32]

In Homer's poetry, moreover, claims Plato, the great warriors, the virtuous statesmen — i.e. the heroes who make history — are portrayed only as they appear to someone who himself never, in real circumstances of life, acted as a hero, and knows nothing about what it means to be immersed in action, or in a serious political decision-making. Homeric poetry presents life without the true knowledge that is constitutive of the real achievements, which make history, and is thus bound to sully the minds of the perceivers with sentimental naiveté

31. Plato, *The Republic,* "The Republic (Book X)", 99.
32. Plato, *The Republic,* "The Republic (Book X)", 83.

that stays on the level of an emotional experience for its own sake, and results in serious political impotence. Homer leads people astray with false models, because Homer himself does not understand how standards are legislated from inside — he always speaks from the point of view of a bystander, not that of somebody who exemplifies standards through one's own actions.

Had the artist the true knowledge required for action in life, Plato asks, why would he not do the real thing — i.e. himself be the hero legislating the standard of action and behavior — rather than imitating that standard from outside, superficially, merely reflecting and commenting on the actions of others? The mimetic artist, for Plato, merely parasitizes on the achievements of others, not only contributing nothing by himself, but also harming the true values that he allows himself to represent:

> The real artist, who knew what he was imitating, would be interested in realities and not in imitations; and would desire to leave as memorials of himself works many and fair; and, instead of being the author of encomiums, he would prefer to be the theme of them.
>
> *Yes, he said, that would be to him a source of much greater honour and profit.*
>
> Then, I said, we must put a question to Homer; not about medicine, or any of the arts to which his poems only incidentally refer: we are not going to ask him, or any other poet, whether he has cured patients like Asclepius, or left behind him a school of medicine such as the Asclepiads were, or whether he only talks about medicine and other arts at second hand; but we have a right to know respecting military tactics, politics, education, which are the chiefest and noblest subjects of his poems, and we may fairly ask him about them. 'Friend Homer,' then we say to him, 'if you are only in the second remove from truth in what you say of virtue, and not in the third—not an image maker or imitator–and if you are able to discern what pursuits make men better or worse in private or public life, tell us what State was ever better governed by your help? The good order of Lacedaemon is due to Lycurgus, and many other cities great and small have been similarly benefited by others; but who says that you have been a good legislator to them and have done them any good? Italy and Sicily boast of Charondas, and there is Solon

who is renowned among us; but what city has anything to say about you?' Is there any city which he might name?

I think not, said Glaucon; not even the Homerids themselves pretend that he was a legislator.

Well, but is there any war on record which was carried on successfully by him, or aided by his counsels, when he was alive?

There is not.

Or is there any invention of his, applicable to the arts or to human life, such as Thales the Milesian or Anacharsis the Scythian, and other ingenious men have conceived, which is attributed to him? There is absolutely nothing of the kind.[33]

33. Plato, *The Republic,* "The Republic (Book X)", 87.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, the Dionysian Man

The theme of imitators versus heroes that Plato brings up here, had a serious echo in the times to come after him, and even became the subject of poets and artists themselves. The famous story of Hamlet, Nietzsche's "Dionysian man,"[34] is, in fact, about the tension between being an actor and being a hero, i.e. someone who does the real acting in history. Hamlet, in the course of the tragedy, gets captivated by the idea that actors can act out meanings in a way that provides them with substance, give body to words, weight to ideas, reality to concepts; that their acting can bring life into things. Hamlet, thus, organizes a theatrical performance in order to bring into life the true story of his father's murder. He believes that theatre can reveal the true nature of things, asking the actors to:

> *Suit the action to the word, the word*
> *to the action, with this special observance, that*
> *you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything*
> *so o'erdonne is from the purpose of playing, whose*
> *end, both at first and now, was and is, to hold,*
> *as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue*
> *her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very*
> *age and body of the time his form and pressure.*[35]

At the end of the day, however, Hamlet does become quite disturbed realizing that actors live purely in the fictional as if it were real, without truly participating in any actual circumstance. He understands that there is no way of acting meaningfully without a real involvement in actual events. The 'faking' of emotions and gestures on the part of the actors, moreover, where symptoms are confused for the cause, and emotional manifestations for real deeds and achievements, turn out to be ethically truly disturbing for Hamlet:

> *Is it not monstrous that this player here,*
> *But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,*
> *Could force his soul so to his own conceit*
> *That from her working all his visage wanned,*
> *Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,*
> *A broken voice, and his whole function suiting*

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34. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 60.
35. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, Edited by Sylvan Barnet, Signet Classic, 1998. 21, 3.2.

With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have?
He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appall the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.[36]

Actors disclose reality in a way, which can make it seem meaningful, but since they leave themselves out, without participating in that reality, what they present cannot be true.

A hero, by contrast, must accept the circumstance that he was born into and live up to it, making sure that the hi/story of which he is part, continues respectably and successfully, according to its inner necessity. Moreover, the hero at the same time cannot be explainable or exhaustible by his circumstance — it is in and through the exercising of his free will that he allows the hi/story to move forward. So rather than being a mirror to reality, merely copying something that already exists and has been done before, the hero makes reality; he makes history. The hero embraces something impersonal and makes it his own (being born into a specific time), and at the same time has a totally unique personal impact on what his circumstance, his time, turns out to be.

Hamlet's question "*to be, or not to be,"* can be read as a question of whether Hamlet is willing and able to live up to his circumstance and to participate in the continuation of his time, or whether to give up on his time by merely reflecting upon it and mirroring its flowing by. This question keeps torturing Hamlet throughout the whole play. By meeting his dead father, Hamlet was taken outside of his time, and from then on there was no way for him to continue participating in life the way he used to. He finds himself in a 'world out of joint,' with the impossible task of setting things back into their natural order, that his father urged him to do after he told Hamlet about his own murder. Paralyzed by this knowledge, Hamlet steps outside of the picture he once used to be part of, growing conscious of every step he takes and every move he makes. He can no longer move blindly, act thoughtlessly or spontaneously, since he "knows" too much, as Nietzsche explains to us in the

36. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, 561, 2.2.

context of Hamlet as the Dionysian man:

> …the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action, for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires the veil of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no—true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man.[37]

The kind of "knowledge" that Hamlet gains stands in the way of his participating in reality. For we cannot act and see that act both at the same time. While moving, while being inside events, it is impossible to look at them. Knowing in the sense of looking at prevents us from being actively involved, from participating.

From his standpoint above time, Hamlet sees everything, but since he is not participating, this seeing amounts merely to viewing from the outside. Values, meanings, relationships, events, have become objects that he looks at, but does not feel or understand. Whether beauty, love, or justice, everything appears equally senseless to Hamlet. It is because values and meanings can remain alive only as long as they are not turned into objects that we look at — the way mimetic arts present them, according to Plato. When viewed as an object of imitation, values and meanings lose exactly that which makes them what they are:

> I have of late, but
> wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all
> custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily
> with my disposition that this goodly frame, the
> earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most
> excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave
> o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted
> with golden fire: why, it appeareth nothing to me
> but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.
> What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason,
> how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how

37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.60.

> express and admirable, in action how like an angel,
> in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the
> world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what
> is this quintessence of dust?[38]

Living in the world of things emptied out of values and meanings, seeing everything in its sheer arbitrariness, Hamlet does not have to pretend madness — this is what madness is. How to act "meaningfully" in the world, which has lost all meaning, becomes Hamlet's main dilemma. The tension between being an actor mirroring and commenting on the world, and being a hero who truly acts, tension which Hamlet remains unable to resolve, is what creates the tragedy that Hamlet's story turns out to be.

In this context I keep being reminded of a haunting passage from Sartre's Nausea, which I read a long time ago, about a man that ended up seeing even his own face from outside, for what it was literally — an object, detached from any meaning, foreign and strange:

> My glance slowly and wearily travels over my forehead, my cheeks: it finds nothing firm, it is stranded. Obviously there are a nose, two eyes and a mouth, but none of it makes sense, there is not even a human expression. Yet Anny and Velines thought I looked so alive: perhaps I am too used to my face. When I was little, my Aunt Uigeois told me "If you look at yourself too long in the mirror, you'll see a monkey." I must have looked at myself even longer than that: what I see is well below the monkey, on the fringe of the vegetable world, at the level of jellyfish.[39]

38. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, 303, 2.2.
39. Sartre, Jean Paul, *Nausea*, New Directions Publishing, 1964, p. 130.

Art and *the Emotional Monstrosity*

Hamlet gets disturbed by the emotional "monstrosity" that the mimetic arts allow for, understanding that it is what stands directly in the way of action, of any virtuous meaningful conduct. This gets us back to Plato's worries concerning art: by appealing to what Plato calls the "inferior part of the human soul," to emotions and sentimentality, mimetic art can kill real action, destroy all true values, because gestures are confused for the real thing, the impression for the essence. To awaken the senses, to make an impact on the emotions, claims Plato in his critique, is in fact the aim of art — and the greater and more intense an emotional impact, the better, 'artistically' speaking. Art applies what we could call the 'principle of maximum force,' exaggeration, overdoing all manifestation of emotions, at the expense of all reason. Hamlet was appalled by the actor's "tears" and "broken voice" that the actor could just put on whenever asked to, for Hamlet then understood that emotional manifestations are in no way connected to any genuine emotional experience.

The 'exaggeration' that the mimetic art applies as means to appeal to the emotional side of people's soul, Plato claims, destroys the standard of a real virtuous behavior. A virtuous man, says Plato, when face to face with a tragic situation, must, contrary to the way presented by the imitators, show emotional restraint and dignity that comes only through reason — the only way that leads to truth, goodness, and beauty. The exaggeration of emotion by means of which art makes its point — otherwise the audience would not know what it is that they are supposed to be looking at or looking for — exploits human emotions in a way that disturbs all sense of moderation and of true aesthetics needed for any meaningful conduct in life.

> Hear and judge: The best of us, as I conceive, when we listen to a passage of Homer, or one of the tragedians, in which he represents some pitiful hero who is drawling out his sorrows in a long oration, or weeping, and smiting his breast—the best of us, you know, delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most.
>
> *Yes, of course I know.*

But when any sorrow of our own happens to us, then you may observe that we pride ourselves on the opposite quality—we would fain be quiet and patient; this is the manly part, and the other which delighted us in the recitation is now deemed to be the part of a woman.

Very true, he said.

Now can we be right in praising and admiring another who is doing that which any one of us would abominate and be ashamed of in his own person?

No, he said, that is certainly not reasonable.

Nay, I said, quite reasonable from one point of view.

What point of view?

If you consider, I said, that when in misfortune we feel a natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation, and that this feeling which is kept under control in our own calamities is satisfied and delighted by the poets;-the better nature in each of us, not having been sufficiently trained by reason or habit, allows the sympathetic element to break loose because the sorrow is another's; and the spectator fancies that there can be no disgrace to himself in praising and pitying any one who comes telling him what a good man he is, and making a fuss about his troubles; he thinks that the pleasure is a gain, and why should he be supercilious and lose this and the poem too? Few persons ever reflect, as I should imagine, that from the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves. And so the feeling of sorrow which has gathered strength at the sight of the misfortunes of others is with difficulty repressed in our own.

How very true!

.. And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action—in all of them poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.[40]

40. Plato, *The Republic*, "The Republic (Book X)", 203.

Paradigmatic expressions of emotions and feelings, which in order to have an artistic appeal, exaggerate emotions in a way that makes them fake and untrue, cripple the soul and prevent any meaningful action. Moreover, confusing theatrical gesture for true action and virtuous conduct, images for the real things, makes a parody of the whole culture, where gestures can be imitated to perfection, while the true and quietly dignified conduct of a genuine soul that carries the true standard, escapes the eye.

This part of Plato's critique of the mimetic arts might sound particularly relevant to us today, when the issue of what is real, what is true, behind the show of perfectly mastered gestures and phrases tailored to the 'emotional' needs and sensitivities of the beholders became painfully acute. We are completely surrounded by a mirage of an illusionary reality, where life is an imitation, but it is not clear of what ideals. There is no way of telling who plays what and who imitates whom; who actually legislates the standard, and who merely copies how that standard appears from the outside by imitating phrases, poses, and mannerisms. Actors and imitators are the heroes of our times.

What Plato and Nietzsche actually do share is the insistence that life has to be art in its own right, without imitating something outside of itself, but legislating and exemplifying a standard in and of itself (a very Kantian sentiment clearly). When living life as a work of art, our conduct ought to be guided by an aesthetic necessity, which is an inner necessity inherent to the composition of our life itself. The aesthetics of action, the beauty with which things are done — that the Greeks were so keenly aware of — indicates whether the actions are right or wrong, true or false.

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What Plato in his well-known critique of art warns us against is something that we might, from the hindsight of our time, call *kitsch*. That we can actually use this anachronism in connection with Plato only shows the ingeniousness of Plato's foresight into how emotions can be politically exploited under the cover of art.

Kitsch, which is the denial of beauty, then, represents a failure to interact with reality in a way that would be aesthetically agreeable and meaningful. Kitsch does not contribute anything to our understanding of the world; it fails in disclosing reality in a way that would be beautiful or valuable to our life. Kitsch knows nothing about

the *metaphorical distance*, essential to art, as interacting with reality in a direct and brave, yet moderately detached way. Kitsch appeals to values that have been agreed upon in advance, thus preventing the viewer from relating to his or her existence in the world freely, meaningfully, afresh. Kitsch promotes sentimentality instead of discipline and cultivates impotence when it comes to action. Kitsch exists for its own sake, showing us nothing about the world and our life in it. It covers things up, instead of opening them up.

The appeal that kitsch has on people's emotions, is, nevertheless, as is clear from the intensity of Plato's apprehension, extremely powerful. Some of the appeal comes from the fact that kitsch, as well as our response to it, are totally predictable. Kitsch offers certainty. We know exactly what we are going to get. Kitsch allows for no possible confusion; we can grasp and contain it completely. It is all spelled out, everything about it is explicit, and it always remains the same. Kitsch excludes *a priori* any novelty, anything unexpected, vague, unpredictable. We know everything about kitsch before we experience it: we know how and what to think and feel and we know why. Kitsch guarantees us that our experience is shared, that it is the same for all of us — we can be sure we are all talking about the same thing. Kitsch embodies what is the most 'typical,' the most 'appropriate,' the most 'representative,' and 'characteristic.' Kitsch is all true; it gives us all answers in advance, offering us comfort and safety. In kitsch nothing is left out, and nothing is added; all is clear and simple. With kitsch we take no risks. We can point to everything it offers us, we can label it, we are fully aware of everything it brings, and we fully understand it all.

The political role of kitsch, ultimately, is to reassure its consumers of their social standing[41], providing what we might call a 'moral flattery' — which explains how kitsch can be used as a powerful political tool. Kitsch knows how to play to the sentimental tastes that can be consciously cultivated among the masses, by providing them with objects to wonder at or to admire — objects echoing and celebrating the aesthetics of the official establishment, taking the form of, for example, oversized

41. Hauser, Arnold, *Soziologie der Kunst,* Munich, 1974; English trans. Chicago, 1982. Hauser defines kitsch, with its inherent mediocrity, as a pseudo, or parasitic art, whose essential function is to flatter, soothe and reassure its viewer and consumer.

public monuments to the glories of a regime.[42]

42. This definition of kitsch comes from Clement Greenberg's take on kitsch in the context of the 19th century. See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture; Critical Essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1961. Greenberg explains that the pretentious and pseudo-sentimental taste, blooming among the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, was subsequently imposed on the "uneducated masses," and that this in fact was the moment when kitsch truly came into being with all its political connotations.

Eduard Manet, *Dejeuner sur l'herbe, 1863*

Kitsch, clearly, is a modern term. As a phenomenon, with all its political and cultural connotations, kitsch fully comes into being in the 19th century. Georges Bataille speaks about the "dull, hopelessly conventional"[43] works promoted by the official Salon. Never acknowledged as such but much appreciated, kitsch defines itself in the "saccharine evocations"[44] of the classical themes that the art works exhibited

43. Bataille, Georges, *Manet*, *Biographical and Critical Study*. Translated by Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons. Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1955. Distributed in the United States by The World Publishing Company; p. 18.
44. Bataille, Georges, *Manet*, p. 19.

at the Salon excessively presented.[45] What most of all characterizes kitsch, which we can also read in the dictionary definition of kitsch, is its pretentiousness, its insistence on being taken seriously as art. Instead of demanding or examining "virtue," kitsch "congratulates the viewer for already possessing it"[46]; hence the great popularity of kitsch among the 19th century bourgeoisie. The impact of kitsch stays on the level of reminding the viewer of great works of art, deep emotions and sentiments, without ever exemplifying or achieving such values internally — a characteristic, as we know, much addressed by Plato in his critique of the mimetic arts.[47]

As a matter of fact, there is a way of understanding the beginning of modern art as a reaction against the kitsch epitomized by the bourgeois Salon. Bataille claims that Edouard Manet, in his desire to break away from the "stale and the conventional"[48] in the name of the visual truth, exemplified the denial of kitsch promoted by the Salon, and this makes him the first modern artist. Manet wanted to paint "true to life"[49] of his time, "cut off from the old lies set up in the name of eloquence."[50]

> A Manet canvas, by its very nature, conflicted with everything that a painting was, at the time, commonly expected to be... it says what it has to say regardless of the conventional standards governing eloquent expression, whether in written, spoken or pictorial form.[51]

Manet — and this is what makes him so crucial for us in this context and what makes him *modern* for Bataille — freed art from any former metaphysical, ideological or political claims, which concerned Plato so profoundly when it came to the essence of the mimetic arts. By doing so, moreover, Manet also prevented

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45. Linda Nochlin, in her article on *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, uses "kitsch" as the common term that applies to much of the works exhibited at the Salon. See: Nochlin, Linda, "Manet's 'Le Bain:' The dejeuner and the Deconstruction of a Landscape Tradition (or of the Heroic Landscape//or and the Death of the Heroic Landscape or//the Death of History Painting)." February 4, 1995 (revised June 1999); final version 10/23/01.
46. Bell, Julian, *What is painting?: Representation and Modern Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.
47. Tomáš Kulka, in his book *Kitsch and Art*, speaks about the parasitical character of kitsch. See: Kulka, Tomas, *Kitsch and Art,* Penn State Press, 2010.
48. Bataille, Georges, *Manet,* p. 42.
49. Bataille, p. 38.
50. Bataille, p. 67.
51. Bataille, p. 58.

any possibility of kitsch parasiting on top of such claims. Modern painting, the way Manet introduced it, was to deal purely with the visual data, unfettered by any morally or historically charged content. This attitude was to bring art closer to natural sciences instead of approaching metaphysics, as is clear from the subsequent aim of the Impressionists' to present things 'as they really are', the way camera would capture them, i.e. free of emotion, and thus immune to emotional manipulation feared by Plato.

Bataille in this context speaks about a new sense of silence introduced into art by Manet; silence replacing "all eloquence" that belongs to literature.[52] This comes together with some kind of "indifference to subject matter"[53] shown in Manet's works, whereby each object and compositional component, as in a photograph or a film, is captured with equal attention and with the same quality, showing that modern times are impersonal, anonymous, equalitarian, with no mythological heroes.

> In Manet's case the pleasure of painting fused with that indifference to subject-matter which opposed him to the mythological world in which Raphael and Titian had felt at home.[54]

Manet developed a whole new modern aesthetics in his art, capable of capturing the spirit of the time, what Bataille calls a "new world of forms"[55]:

> What inspired Manet as much as anything was the prospect, for him an act of grace, of entering a new world of forms which would deliver him, and with him to others, from the bondage, the monotony, the falsehood of art forms that had served their time.[56]

Manet's "modern" style emphasizes the material qualities of painting as an arrangement of paint on a flat canvas, in addition to its representational and illusionist function. Manet abandons the laws of linear perspective and the modeling

52. Bataille, pp. 71-2.
53. Bataille, p. 82.
54. Bataille, p. 82.
55. Bataille, p. 48.
56. Bataille, p. 33.

of volumes, hence destroying "what was no longer viable in art,"[57] which was fully manifested in Manet's painting *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* from 1863, the first modern painting in the true sense of the word.

Dejeuner was painted for and refused by the *Salon* in 1863, and was consequently exhibited, under the title "Le Bain," in the *Salon des Refusés* of the same year. The pictorial space in *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* is formed merely by color and tone. The bright natural light that subsequently awakened the Impressionists to the possibility of open-air painting makes the figures' contours stand sharply against their background. The flat yet stunningly lively colors, with few mid-tones, appeared "acid" to the critics of Manet's time.[58] The painting's brushwork is dynamic and rough, almost like a sketch, leaving the work with undefined areas of 'pure' color. It is easy for us to see how the reduced system of tonal gradations in Manet's work would have led the Impressionists to abandon the blended brush strokes and continuous tone surfaces of traditional paintings altogether, replacing them by a system of color-patches organized inside a rectilinear picture frame. The schematic quality of Manet's style, produced by placing areas of single color next to one another, forming the image in a discontinuous, mosaic-like manner rather than modeling in a traditional continuous mode, reminds us — way ahead of its time — of an aesthetics that we associate with a technique 'digital' rather than analog, echoing the 'neutrality' and anonymity of the modern technology.

Linda Nochlin speaks about Victorine and her companions as being "captured in a momentary frozen stasis, characteristic of a film-still."[59] Through this metaphor, we can see the figures, in their flatness and modern appearance, as if they were "projected" onto the canvas that has the flatness of a movie screen. Furthermore, in a strange collage-like manner, they are projected onto each other, which is the most apparent in the figure of the female bather in the background, who is too large for the position she occupies in the composition. Moreover, apart from the "borrowed" lay-out, there is no clear mythological story or any other metaphysical necessity that would justify or explain the connection among the figures, or the rest of the picture's components. The classical heroes and traditional narratives have

57. Bataille, p. 82.
58. Bataille, p. 72.
59. Linda Nochlin, "Manet's 'Le Bain:' The dejeuner and the Deconstruction of a Landscape Tradition."

disappeared, and we are left with ordinary men and women, and only a memory of the classical past, suggested by the picture's references to the old masters.

We realize further that the way the figures are organized within the picture frame does not come from any conception of an organic organization of the human body and nature. In contrast to the sculptural treatment of similar themes in the classical painting, the flatness, sharp contours and perfect symmetry of Manet's figural composition, strongly delineated against its background, seems to belong to something industrial or synthetic, with a feel, inmost, of the graphic design. It is as if we were looking at the first film poster before film was ever invented.

The "collage" effect of Manet's work is noted by Bataille, who admires the fact that every part of Manet's paintings "is wonderfully complete in itself."[60] In fact, Manet had each one of the figures pose separately in the studio and brought them all together only inside the work. We are thus supposed to witness the figures' silent encounter and its consequent artistic effect only in the picture. And, as in a film or a snapshot, such encounter is taking place in real time and is partly accidental — rather than re-creating an interaction that had already taken place in a myth or a historical narrative.

To stay with the film comparison, Manet's works can be viewed as strange silent documentaries of his time, whose actors are ordinary 'modern' people, as well as famous personalities of the contemporary French cultural scene, writers, artists and musicians. As is the case in *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, all hints and references to classical themes in his work are presented without any explanation or justification, simply as an artistic background to show reality 'as is,' 'now,' with modern men and women, who exemplify the true aesthetics of the time, and who are thus the real continuation of history and of the classical past. For "every old master has had his own modernity," writes Baudalaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*:

> It is doubtless an excellent thing to study the old masters in order to learn how to paint; but it can be no more than a waste of labour if your aim is to understand the special nature of present-day beauty.[61]

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60. Bataille, p. 38.

61. Baudelaire, Charles, *The painter of modern life and other essays*; translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne; 2nd ed., London: Phaidon Press, 1995; p. 14.

Beauty is thus, according to Baudalaire, something that must be all the time re-invented in the context of one's time — something that in order to be true to the time must be always new — beauty is the metaphor of change.

The what we can call 'film aesthetics' of Manet, brings a unique tension between the literal and the metaphorical to our experiencing of art, by which the borderline between spontaneous activity or accidental being, and between posing and playing a role for the audience, dissolves.

Manet's paintings silently return the 'impersonal' gaze with which viewers ordinarily look at them. Victorine in *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* looks back at us in the same detached way that we look at her. By and large, the eyes in Manet's pictures all have such distinct look — they are flat and opaque like the modernist paintings themselves, no longer windows but window-curtains, as Greenberg describes them.[62] Indeed, in *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* we can for the first time see the kind of flatness that Greenberg associates with the essence of the modernist painting — flatness that does away with the construction of the three-dimensional space and offers instead a "purely and literally optical" experience, "unmodified by tactile associations," refusing to deliver any story or meaning outside of the silence of the visual qualities in themselves.[63] Bataillle describes the modernity of Manet's paintings in the following way:

> What Manet insisted upon, uncompromisingly, was the end to rhetoric in painting. What he insisted upon was painting that should rise in utter freedom, in natural silence, painting for its own sake, a song for the eyes of interwoven forms and colors.[64]

In "seeking purity and wanting to repudiate all values foreign to painting," Bataille continues, Manet's works initiate a search for what painting is, in itself — a search that was to become the quintessence of artistic modernism (as it was later defined by Clement Greenberg, among others).

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62. Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting," (1960). *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. IV./ edited by John O'Brian. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
63. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 85.
64. Bataille, pp. 36-7.

> Manet was the first to practice the art of painting taken for itself alone, what we call today "modern painting."[65]

With his emphasis on the pure visual qualities of paintings, the flatness of his pictures, the sketch-like quality of his style with undefined areas of pure color, the equal treatment of all subject matter and the inherent silence of his works, Manet was the first modernist painter. Staying with this terminology, we might even say that, with the direct yet casual quotations of the classical painting, with zooming inside Raphael's picture, arbitrarily sampling one of the details and turning it into a central motif, Manet also already anticipated something of the attitude that we have come to associate with the post-modernism in art. With his seemingly random quotations of the old masters, that is, Manet samples classical art the same way he samples life of his time. Moreover, he creates an interplay, an interchangeability between the center of an art work and its 'margins,' figure and background, the general theme and the detail, so that choosing a theme and a composition becomes like borrowing a book from the library, or a quote from a book.

Perhaps, we can understand *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* as an emblem of modern art: a group of modern Parisians are discussing art together, while the model, who makes a connection between the work and its audience by looking out of the painting, is part of the discussion. In the background of the scene is a reminder of a classical artistic past embodied in a female bather. Appearing from water as if out of nowhere, surrounded by a mist or a cloud, covered in what could be a drapery, she recalls Greek or Renaissance torsos, yet she is fully alive and in the same space with the model, the artist, the student, and also the viewer of art. Manet shows that the divine and the classical are present in the aesthetics of the everyday life around us. Hence Bataille's claim that since the time of Manet "truth no longer transcends what we see"[66]; and with this very consciousness, the modern era begins.

> What was art of the past if not "that gigantic theological poem" of Marcel Proust whose function was to impose silence on everything else? Whether theological, mythological or simply dynastic, this poem was always an expression of a truth transcending the earthbound, transcending what we see. Olympia burst naked—but a woman, not a goddess—from that world, which had its charms, poetic

65. Bataille, p. 50.
66. Bataille, p. 62.

as far as it went, but conventional through and through.[67]

Manet renounces the 'Platonic ideals' that the masters of the past looked up to in their art. Standards, values and norms cease to be taken as something preserved in the metaphysical realm or in the hallowed past — they exist in the same space with people and their lives. For, as Bataille wrote, an "artist has got to move with his times and paint what he sees,"[68] Manet freed pictorial language from the metaphysical aura cultivated in the name of the classical paradigm of art, and introduced the notion of a 'standard' in the modern sense: as a norm, which is at the basis of an artistic style belonging to a certain time, and which — though constitutive of reality — is free of transcendental necessity and valid and true only to the extent to which it succeeds to show reality 'as is,' alive, afresh.

Instead of echoing the tension between the empirical reality and the world of metaphysical and historic values beyond that reality, inherent in classical art, Manet's new aesthetics in *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* dissolves that traditional dualism by presenting us instead with a whole kaleidoscope of aesthetic and intellectual contrasts and concepts playing themselves out inside the work. Linda Nochlin speaks about the oppositions between contemporaneity and tradition, flatness and depth, between the personal and the universal, nature and culture, present in the work. We can add a few more oppositions that have been suggested in this paper: painting and graphic design, window and curtain, analog and digital, original and copy.

The work comes to life again each time we look at it and discover yet a new and 'updated' group of oppositions and concepts set in motion. By experiencing their play afresh, 'animating the image' every time we look at Manet's painting, we realize that truth, meaning, and beauty, is to be found in motion, in the interplay between the literal and the metaphorical, the explicit and the implicit, the old and the new, the said and the unsaid, between words and silence. And this is what Manet's art does — it says more by what it leaves out, it speaks more clearly where it remains silent. The "silence" of Manet's art that Bataille admires so much as the emblem of its modernity — the silence of Manet's powerful, 'purely visual,' artistic

67. Bataille, p. 71.
68. Bataille, p. 71.

and political message — is indeed more eloquent than any rhetoric could ever be.

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So, in terms of our primary discussion, we might say that with Manet, art moved from a Platonic vision of the world to a Nietzscheanian modernist picture of reality. Once free from the metaphysical burden, cursed by Plato's condemnation, modern art was to undergo a phase of a serious search concerning its own nature. The process of such modern self-criticism involving the mapping of its own boundaries, as it took place in art, is the subject of the already mentioned essay by Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*, which I want to discuss in the following chapter.

Modernist Art in Essence

In his essay "Modernist Painting" Clement Greenberg claims (in Kantian spirit) that:

> The essence of Modernism lies in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.[69]

The point of this self-criticism in art was to uncover and re-define all values, norms, and properties hitherto innate to art — beauty among them — and, moareover, to capture what was "unique and irreducible" to each of the traditional artistic genres and for each art to focus exclusively on that:

> The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered "pure", and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.[70]

In the case of painting, according to the program which Greenberg detects, the modernist quest for self-definition involved the recognition of painting's most unique quality: namely, the *flatness* of the picture surface.

> It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained more fundamental than anything else to the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art.... Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.[71]

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69. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Collected Essays*, Vol. IV, p. 85.
70. Greenberg, p. 86.
71. Greenberg, p. 87.

Emphasizing such flatness, Greenberg claims, required eliminating all suggestions of three-dimensional space, which was characteristic of the arts of sculpture, theater, and architecture, and hence not unique to painting. Techniques such as shading and modeling, as well as the use of perspective, thus had to be abandoned. Whereas pre-modernist paintings had tried to disguise their own physical two-dimensionality through such illusionistic techniques, modernist painting for the first time acknowledged its own unique physical properties (which at the same time were its limitations) — flatness paramount among them. Furthermore, according to Greenberg's description, the uniqueness of each art's characteristic properties was supposed to give rise to an entirely unique experience in each case; in painting this was to be a "purely and literally optical" experience, "unmodified by tactile associations."[72] The space contained in a painting should be accessible only to the eye, and should resist the imaginative projection of a bodily experience into that space.

Thus in accordance with Plato's haunting critique of the visual arts, painting was no longer to be a *mimesis*, an imitation of the material world, seeking to 'resemble' it by mirroring things, but each painting itself ought to be part of that world, one self-sufficient object among others, and independent of them. Moreover, painting should be 'mute', refusing to reveal any kind of 'meaning' or story outside of the art object itself; even more so because narrative was the property of literature. Any 'content' external to the painting itself, be it a story, idea, concept, or illusion of the outer world, was to be eliminated. Paintings were not to relate to the three dimensional space, to communicate with the viewers, or to have anything in common with any other arts. They should exist for their own sake, referring to themselves only, emphasizing the materiality of their medium. Painting, instead of 'picturing things', was to be approached as 'making things'.

Greenberg uses the metaphor of a 'curtain' to illustrate what he thinks happened to painting after it ceased to be a transparent 'window' (the definition offered by Alberti in the Renaissance). The metaphor indicates the 'non-transparency' of the modernist works. A curtain does not offer a view into a three-dimensional space. It is an object, which is physically, literally present in the same physical space that the viewer inhabits. Modernist artists were "richly and variously inscribing

72. Greenberg, p. 89.

and folding the curtain"[73], but no longer creating the illusion of a world behind it.

> The picture has now become an entity belonging to the same order of space as our bodies; it is no longer the vehicle of an imagined equivalent of that order. Pictorial space has lost its "inside" and become all "outside". The spectator can no longer escape into it from the space in which he himself stands. If it deceives the eye at all, it is by optical rather than pictorial means: by relations of color and shape largely divorced from descriptive connotations, and often by manipulations in which top and bottom, as well as foreground and background, become interchangeable.[74]

Greenberg believes that "the very best art" of the preceding "hundred-odd years" came about via the above-described quest for autonomy and complete independence.[75] Such works aimed to be flat, self-referential, literal objects, existing for their own sake and in the same space as the viewer and all other physical objects.

There is something accurate and quite illuminating about Greenberg's description of the fundamental tendencies in modernist painting. However, when he speaks about and favors the *flattening* of the pictorial surface, and the painting's becoming a mere physical object, he means it *literally*.

I do think that 'flattening' is a term elucidating a process inherent to modernist art. Modernist pictures are 'flat', inasmuch as the viewer cannot automatically look through them, but only at them; they seem opaque, impenetrable. Because of this non-transparency, modernist painting does call attention to its own materiality first of all.

Nevertheless, the moment of referring to something 'other than itself,' something more general than immediate physical properties, is exactly what distinguishes an art work from a physical object. I do not suggest that modernist works of art necessarily possess some kind of 'aura' (to use Walter Benjamin's term). All I am saying is that an art work offers an experience characterized by a moment of symbolic or *metaphorical distance* that was mentioned already in the context of

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73. Clement Greenberg: "Abstract, Representational, and so forth" from *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 136.
74. Greenberg, p. 136.
75. Greenberg, p. 94.

Nietzsche's take on art. That is, a work of art raises questions or alludes to issues which lie 'beyond' or outside its own literal materiality. The art work promises something other than itself, something not immediately, physically present, but which the viewer longs to get access to through the work of art (hence our initial motto from Goethe). Except for its utopian connotations, part of what I understand by this 'transcendent' moment is captured in Baudelaire's phrase that art offers a *"promesse de bonheur"*. The artistic experience of an object is, in fact, the very opposite of the literal experience of its bare physical presence. Art is about making suggestions, not literal statements. We do not take an art work only for 'what it is', but mostly for what it suggests, symbolizes or implies.

The Dimension of Pain

The figure that directly and quite uniquely captures in his work the dialog and the tension present in modern art, regarding the literal and the metaphorical, is Egon Schiele.

There is something about what we can call the 'flatness' of Schiele's works, which still feels disturbing today — although at first it might occur to us that what makes one feel uneasy face to face with Schiele's pictures is his explicit presentation of the most intimate aspects of human sexual and emotional life. Such subject matter in itself, however, could not possibly generate any such strong reaction on our behalf — after all, sexuality and intimacy has in the past decades been uncovered, disclosed and displayed to an extend that it by now borders on the banal. Let us then try to find out where this discomfort, even offensiveness, innate to our experiencing of Schiele's art, comes from.

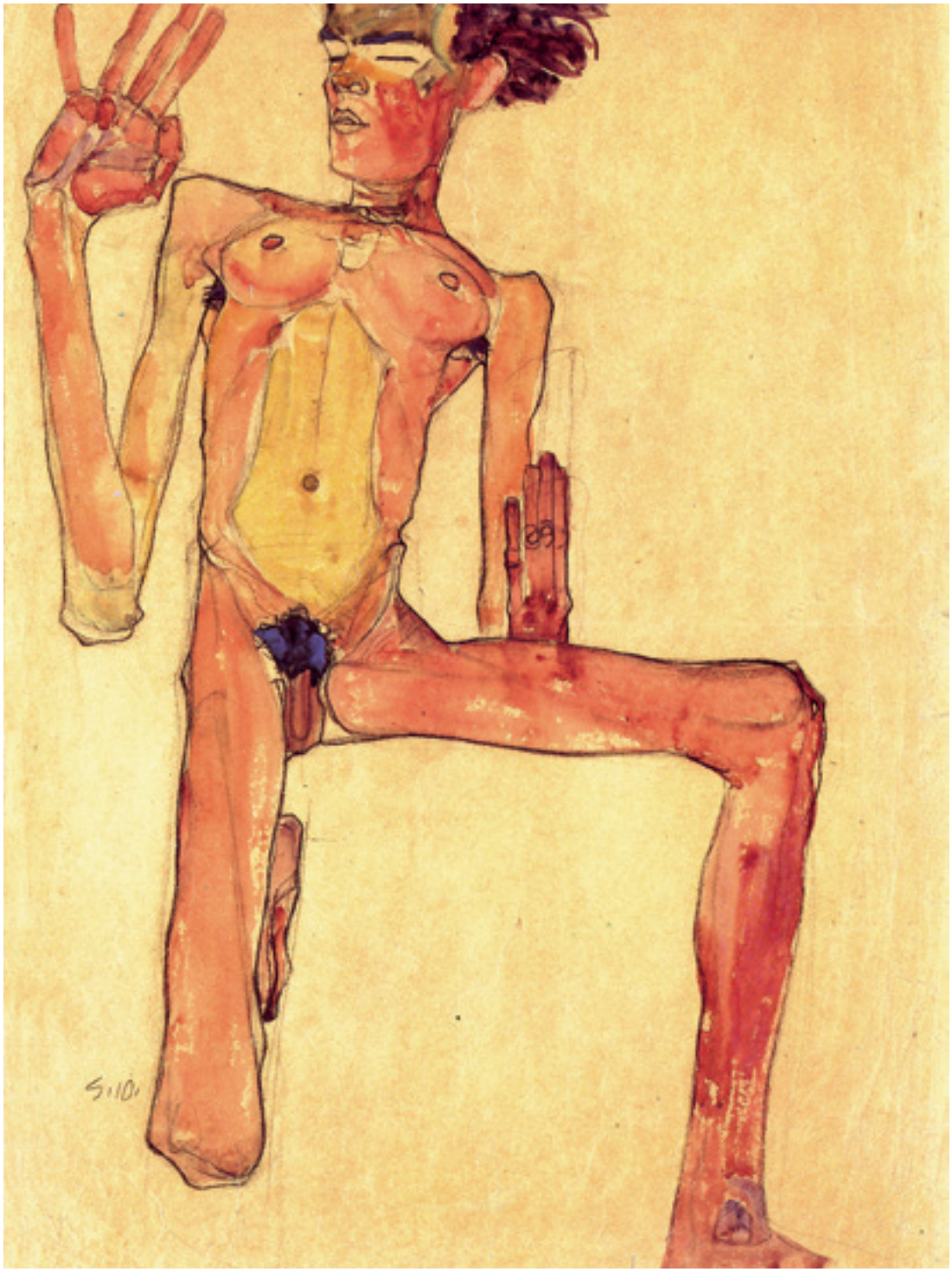
Schiele was in his early years influenced by the organic decorative Viennese *Jugendstil* of Gustav Klimt, but rather quickly had he arrived at his own unique artistic language: while still working within the decorative flatness of Klimt's idiom, he introduced a specific way of using a line, a line so fluid that, like a seismograph, it registers the slightest motions of human bodies and souls, yet is restricted within a kind of volumeless two-dimensionality. The main subject of Schiele's work at this time (roughly, the years following 1910) are human figures on abstract screen-like backgrounds, whose more or less exposed, naked bodies are captured in various, often explicitly sexual postures. The flatness of the compositions, which originated in the decorative Secessionist style, here acquires a whole new meaning. The sense we get from these depictions is not one of pleasing formal satisfaction, but of acute pain. It is as if the pictures were slices of people, freshly - made cuts through bodies and souls.

Because of this dissecting gaze, Schiele's compositions read like "maps," locating and marking human emotions, pains, desires. His color schemes often suggest variations in the local temperature of different body parts and organs; indicate motions and vibrations inside the body.

Schiele's human maps, then, use line and color in the same way a geographical map marks off a territory and its various characteristics. We can actually separate line from color, drawing from painting in Schiele's art — each of these is assigned

a different role. The line maps out the territory, locates things, shows how they stand in relation to one another within a given segment of reality. The color, on the other hand, has the attributive function of ascribing various properties and characteristics to things, indicating their momentary state and condition. If we look at *Kneeling Male Nude (Self-Portrait) (Kniender Mannerakt [Selbstdarstellung])* from 1910, we see a figure of a man as if taken from an anatomy book. We can look inside his body, through the skin — indeed, it is as if he had no skin. The line maps the body's structure, clearly outlining and positioning the individual muscles and bones, while the colors of various shades indicate the tensions inside the muscles, the specific temperature of the individual body parts. We see burning red cheeks contrasted with a cold, greenish forehead and temples. The young man's eye-sockets are blank, empty, as if they contained a vacuum. The muscles which are contracted we recognize by their darker shade of pink. The inner organs, in the area around his stomach, are strangely chilled; we get a sense of nausea or sickness spreading from inside, indicated by pale, yellowish color tones. The figure's hands, disproportionately large, are tensely posed against the outside world, as if trying to protect the body — a body so totally exposed because its skin has been stripped off, and the inside opened out.

There is something shockingly 'realistic' about the blunt nakedness and the exposed sexuality of Schiele's figures. But at the same time, they are awkwardly unreal and somehow untrue. The same unusual tension manifests itself in the painting called *Act of Love (Liebesakt)* from 1915. The carefully thought-out and well-balanced composition, only formally related to the *Jugendstil's* decorative schemes, here again takes on the character of a sharp, penetrating slice, this time not through an individual body, but through the event of two people's love-making. The cut, we feel, goes right through the core of the event. The exposure it offers, however, rather than revealing something central or essential, comes out empty, senseless. What we see are two people tightly glued together, their bodies touch in every way possible, but their tangent-like contact appears totally arbitrary and random. The map we get here contains an exhaustive set of data, but in terms of capturing any possible sense of the two people's interaction, it turns out to be useless. Schiele exposes the event in a manner by which nothing stays hidden from our eyes, but this disclosure does not afford us a better understanding of how things make sense together, what connects them, what their point of being together is.



Egon Schiele, *Kneeling Male Nude (Self-Portrait)*
(Kniender Mannerakt [Selbstdarstellung]), 1910

What Schiele does is projecting three-dimensional events onto a two-dimensional map, not in a merely technical sense, inherent to the medium of painting, but in what we could call a metaphysical sense. That is, Schiele's flattening

does not involve merely a suggestion of or a reflection upon a real event, but a literal *exhausting* of a real event. We get a full account of what we are looking at, we see even what normally remains hidden 'underneath', but precisely at the cost of loosing any sense of how things stand in relation to one another in a three-dimensional space, how they are mutually interconnected, what their respective proportions are, how and why they work together in any meaningful way.[76] This disrupture of all meaningful relations, moreover, comes with the absence of any spatial and temporal context that would accompany Schiele's figures. In terms of space, the background behind the couple in *The Act of Love*, just as in the rest of Schiele's figural compositions, is an abstract, opaque surface, a sort of neutral screen, and as far as the temporal dimension of the works is concerned, Schiele really shows us only a single instant, with no traces of any past, and no anticipation of a possible future. The scenes in Schiele's pictures, as in *The Act of Love*, are indeed quite divorced from space and time — the very elements of experience, which make possible the constitution of meanings.

Egon Schiele, *Act of Love (Liebesakt)*, 1915

76. To go back to the cutting metaphor: a surgical cut into a human body can reveal things we could never see otherwise, but cannot lead us to understand what it means to be human.

What, then, offends and disturbs us in Schiele's works is not the subject matter itself, but the brute explicitness of Schiele's dissecting gaze with which he exhausts people by flattening them into a literal account that drains all life and sense out of them. An exhaustive account of a sexual encounter we get in the *Act of Love* can give us an explanation of the mechanics of sex, but must lack any erotic force, which by its very nature has to do with hints, suggestions, playful implications, indirect allusions. A literal depiction of sex totally defies sex. Schiele's sexual cartography in its two-dimensional literalness comes without a shred of erotics. And what is left of sex if we strip it of Eros? It can only appear empty and bizarre.

A three-dimensional picture, in contrast to a flat map, is an invitation to become part of that picture, to participate in the language it uses, to feel the emotions it brings, to understand the full weight of what it conveys, instead of simply seeing the picture with its subject from outside, as an object. Schiele's maps of human pain, as is clear in *Kneeling Male Nude (Self-Portrait)*, turn pain into an object, into something that we look *at* instead of being part of. We see the pain but do not feel it. Seeing in the sense of looking *at* prevents us from being actively involved, from participating. We cannot act and see the act both at the same time. While moving, while being inside events, we do not look *at* them (that which Hamlet lost after being taken outside of the reality he used to live in).

Understanding things in three dimensions means that we share the same space and time with them, move among them and along with them. Thus certain blindness is necessary for gaining an understanding of things. Imagine trying to jump down from a high tree: when we look and see far below, when we become aware of the movements we will have to go through, we get paralyzed, unable to make any move.

The jump itself takes place in a moment of blindness, when we do not look at what we do. Children understand the necessity of these moments of blindness — they instinctively close their eyes when they want to jump down. This same kind of blindness is what enables us to be part of events, and thereby to gain an understanding of how much things weigh, what their volumes and proportions are. By moving through the world, acting, being inside events, immersed in relationships and interactions, we get a sense of the "third dimension" — that which gives meaning to things, sense to events. And this dimension is something we cannot exhaust by looking at and giving a literal account of; rather, it is

Egon Schiele, Nude with Blue Stockings Bending, 1912

something which we *live* — it is the dimension of involvement, of participation.

Consider the picture called *Nude with Blue Stockings Bending,* from 1912. The woman in this picture is curled up into a ball, in the attempt to prevent exposure, to keep hidden all that which, in order to stay alive, should remain hidden. Her pain is contained within the volume of her body; all we can see are

slight suggestions of her suffering, indicated by touches of red color along her body's outline. Our heart really goes out to this woman, whose pain is so touching and convincingly real precisely because it is not displayed, spelled out, shouted at the world.[77] We sense her pain in its full weight only because it is merely suggested, hinted at. This work shows us that things gain weight and substance just to the extent to which they are not fully exposed — in what is not literally said, but still understood about them. By spelling things out to their complete exhaustion, we empty them of their meaning. What we get is no longer alive, and therefore cannot be true. Truth — like beauty — is to be found in the interplay between the said and the unsaid, between explicitness and implicitness — just the way Nietzsche suggested when speaking about *life as work of art*, and Plato stated in his critique and mockery of the mimetic arts (namely, his critique of the principle of the maximum force, exaggeration, of overdoing all manifestations, instead of a restraint, with touches and hints).

77. Returning to Plato's critique of the imitators.

Spatial and Semiotic Flattening

To get back to Greenberg: as we already know, he construed the notion of the modernist 'flattening' literally, as a compressing of space out of paintings. Moreover, he turned this notion into a criterion for evaluating works of individual modernist artists.[78] Painters who abandoned illusionistic modeling altogether, such as Picasso or Mondrian, Greenberg considers 'up-to-date', whereas artists who did not subscribe fully to this particular program (Kandinsky, Rouault) he dismisses.

Unlike Greenberg, as I have been suggesting, I tend to understand 'flattening' not so much in the sense of draining space out of pictures, but more as an interrogation of the pictorial language itself, whether that language includes illusionistic techniques or not.

Modernism in visual arts, I believe, can, in the most general sense, be characterized by the scrutiny of painting's plastic elements by means of a comparison with natural language. That is, modernist paintings treated their pictorial language as an arbitrary and autonomous system of signs[79] - and questioned that language's relationship to the 'object of representation' in the real world. Such scrutiny manifested itself in the separation of pictorial language from its 'meaning', of visual forms from their 'content', of the pictorial signifier from its signified, and in the focusing on each of these aspects separately.

Such interrogation of the very means of representation, and not flattening per se, is how modernist self-criticism manifested itself in the domain of painting. The works of modernist art, at their best, raised general issues concerning the status of representation and 'meaning' in art. Their language ceased to be taken for granted and lost some of its transparency, for that language itself became the focus of artistic attention. The opacity of much modernist painting then resulted

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78. To be sure, this is not how Greenberg represents his own attitude to the 'flattening' theme. In the footnotes of his article on "Modernist Painting" Greenberg claims that the so-called 'flatness' is purely a description of a tendency in modernist painting. Nevertheless, he does advocate this flattening, and he certainly uses that description in an evaluative manner in relation to individual modernist painters, as indicated above.

79. This is the way all languages came to be viewed and scrutinized in modernity in the context of the newly found structuralist and linguistic theories (some of which I will look at more closely later in this essay).

from the process of becoming aware of the visual language itself, and its ways of functioning. This process disturbed the automatism which typifies the way languages function 'normally', i.e. when they *are* transparent, signifying objects without 'standing in the way'.

The language of modernist paintings *did* stand in the way; it became an obstacle which the viewer had to penetrate in order to 'read' the work. Modernist pictures in fact call attention to the depiction apparatus itself, to the very process of representation, by blocking or impeding access to the signified. The abandonment of all shading and modeling in certain paintings, which Greenberg refers to as 'flattening', is only one part of modernist art's project of calling attention to its own visual language — one *symptom* of the modernist interrogation of the mechanism of representation in visual arts. The 'literal flattening', that is, which Greenberg discusses and valorizes is thus only one outcome of the more general process of semiotic investigation.

Modernist painting, it can be said, questioned its own pictorial language by asking how that language 'worked'. More specifically, it questioned the 'iconic' nature of the visual language of painting — along with the concomitant 'naturalistic' or 'realistic' style presumably based on 'resemblance' to the natural world — in part to inquire about the degree of convention in pictorial depiction. Modernist painting can be characterized as an interplay between an 'image' and a 'text', between 'icon' and 'symbol', illusion and convention.

Modernism in art resulted in giving up the belief in the possibility of depicting reality in one 'accurate' and 'truthful' way, through the use of one 'realistic language' naturally 'hooked up' with the world. Pictorial language was recognized as being based on convention, and therefore as something that had to be acquired if paintings were to be 'legible'.[80] Concomitantly, modernist works exemplified that the world is to a large extend shaped and formed by the language we use. Impressionism, for example, strongly determined the way we view things henceforth — it is more 'realistic' now to see Paris through the eyes of the impressionists' works, than it is to see it through the 'spectacles' of the pre-impressionist academic realism, which was in the 19th century considered to be

80. See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art,* where Goodman shows that all languages, including the 'realistic' or 'naturalistic' style in art are based on convention.

the only possible "realistic" reading of reality.

When, at the beginning of his cubist period, Picasso was challenged that a portrait of his did not "look like" the model, he presciently replied "but it will", thus implying (and rightfully so) that the model would gradually come to be viewed through his portrait. The language we use to describe reality in fact shapes back that reality and the way it appears back to us — in fact, in order to see reality truly, as it is, we must at all time find new, fresh, and up-to-date ways of capturing and representating that reality that would be true to the moment.

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So the works of modernist art were raising questions concerning the status of representation and meaning in art. Different modernist artists were formulating such questions differently in their works. The interrogation of the visual language made many modernist paintings seem non-transparent, and in that sense 'flat'.

Greenberg's description, therefore, is correct so far as it goes; only he took one symptom of the modernist project to be its essence, and, moreover, he took it to be its goal. This becomes clear in Greenberg's bias against painters whose works were literally not 'flat enough', as in the case of Kandinsky or Rouault. Because he preserved an illusion of three-dimensional space through the modeling of forms and shapes, Wasily Kandinsky, according to Greenberg, did not "ever quite catch up with the present".[81] The fact that Greenberg's criterion does not permit appreciation of painters as significant for modern art as Kandinsky shows that this criterion is too narrow and hence misleading.

In the following section I will look, albeit briefly, at two very different modernist painters — Picasso and Kandinsky — to show how questions concerning the problems of representation and meaning determined their creation, and in what sense can their pictures be considered 'flat'.

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81. Greenberg, *Art and Culture,* p. 111.

Picasso

Picasso, in his aspiration to critically comment on the established modes of representation, never gave up reference to natural objects, as, so to speak, his point of reference. That is, though he was indeed preoccupied with the pictorial language itself, the viewer's perceptual identification of the object of reference in his works had an important role in Picasso's project of 'rethinking representation'. By thus contrasting the novelty of his style with 'traditional' ways of representing the same common themes (portraits, still-lives, female nudes, etc.), he brought attention to the material and aesthetic qualities of the new pictorial language, which he went on to continuously invent, develop and reinvent throughout his entire career.

Picasso's painting can thus be understood in terms of a 'textualization' of the picture surface.[82] His paintings are 'flat' because they are texts as well as pictures. In challenging the idea of a 'realistic' style in art, Picasso 'wrote down' characteristics of objects by using various pictorial signs, instead of creating a 'realistic' illusion of their presence. He inscribed properties of "light," "depth," "plasticity," "foreshortening," by signs more closely related to words than to images or icons, as it is manifest especially in his early collages. His works, we might say, display the mechanism of pictorial denotation in the way Picasso plays with various degrees of convention and arbitrariness in creating a meaningful and convincing image, showing us that art's power comes largely from disturbing all that had been (conventionally) accepted as 'natural' and 'realistic' and showing things anew, in the light that is relevant and meaningful, and therefore true, to the context of the time.

The literal flatness of Picasso's pictures, which Greenberg points to as a sign of Picasso's being an up-to-date modernist, is symptomatic of his art's shift from illusion towards symbolic representation, which Picasso discovered was always based on a convention of some sort. Picasso's paintings are 'flat' not because of some explicit desire to compress space out of paintings, as Greenberg would have it, but because Picasso "textualized" his pictures, and texts are not spatial entities.

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82. I owe a lot about the way I think of Picasso's work here to Rosalind Krauss's lectures she held at Columbia University in 1995-97.

So flattening, though a symptom of Picasso's real aim, cannot simply be equated with that real aim, which was an inquiry into the nature of representation in art — and a fortiori, neither can it be considered the prime virtue of Picasso's work.

Kandinsky

Kandinsky, in this more 'general' understanding of the process of 'flattening' in modernist paintings, not only was in touch with the present but, as a pioneer of abstract painting, was one of the first to explicitly problematize the status of representation and 'meaning' in art. He did indeed preserve some of the traditional techniques of pictorial representation, such as creating the illusion of space, or modeling shapes. As a matter of fact, Kandinsky's very focus was on the aesthetic and expressive qualities of the traditional pictorial language itself — when unconditioned by natural appearance, and freed from any mimetic role. He turned the traditional pictorial language into the object of representation, thereby making it opaque and only in that sense flat.

Even more blatantly than in the case of Picasso, with Kandinsky it is the language itself and its expressive material qualities which the viewer encounters, without seeing anything 'through it'. This makes Kandinsky's paintings, according to my understanding and definition, 'flat'. They call attention to their own formal properties, displaying the aesthetic qualities of pure graphic and color combinations, before one starts to wonder about new meanings of Kandinsky's language, which he himself saw very clearly in the realm of the spiritual.

Moreover, Kandinsky's work also undermines Greenberg's valorization of the autonomy of the various arts, in that Kandinsky's interrogation of the visual language involved comparing that language to the languages of other arts — of music in particular. It is perhaps not surprising that Kandinsky, in his attempt to 'liberate' painting from the function of copying empirical reality, would turn to this most non-representational of arts. The perceivers of music, he noted, do not normally relate what they hear to any 'objective' sound as its reproduction. For Kandinsky, colors and shapes in painting, just as tones and melodies in music,

should display the "infinite beauty and power these artistic means possess."[83] This conviction comes through in Kandinsky's referring to his paintings as "compositions" with a specific "sound", and in his exhortation that the perceiver of his paintings should "place himself in front of a picture and let it speak for itself".[84]

Kandinsky's paintings seem non-transparent and flat, despite the fact that he did not drain out space from his paintings, as Greenberg would have wished from a modernist painter. That this flattening was achieved precisely through the direct influence of another art form further illustrates the misleading narrowness of Greenberg's valorized 'quest for autonomy.'

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To sum up: both Picasso and Kandinsky disrupted the habitual connection between particular illusionistic images and objects in reality that was inherent to traditional ('realistic') artistic representation in order to find the new means to show what was relevant to the context of their time — Picasso by using blatantly conventional signs to challenge the traditional belief in the superior ability of the currently accepted symbols to accurately represent the world; Kandinsky by preserving the illusionistic language, without using it to refer to natural objects, but to other hitherto hidden realities.

83. Wassily Kandinsky, *Letter to Arnold Schöenberg, April 9, 1911.*
84. Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art.* Translated with and introduction by M. T. H. Sadler, by Dover Publications Inc., 1977. p. 70.

Literalization of Modernist Painting

In what we can call the literal modernism celebrated by Greenberg, flattening per se — the literal spatial kind — was turned into a virtue. One symptom of the modernist project in painting was taken to be its goal. Opacity for its own sake, instead of being the means of investigating questions surrounding representation, became the quality required in a 'modernist' work of art.

I have argued, by contrast, that modern art formed itself around questions concerning the issue of representation and meaning in art, and of discovering new ways of capturing reality truly. This involved calling attention to pictorial language itself and the *consequent* flattening of pictures. In different ways, the automatism inherent to the perception and 'understanding' of traditional paintings was disrupted; the spectator was forced to look 'at pictures' before looking 'through them'. Modernist paintings at their best called attention to their material properties, but only in order to bring to mind problems beyond their literal physicality.

Modernist art then reached its limit at the moment when the literal material characteristics became all there was, i.e. when the works of art ceased to comment on issues 'beyond' each individual art work and its immediate physical presence. Such works no longer show the role of convention in pictorial representation (as Picasso had done), or explore the expressive potential of visual language itself (like Kandinsky). All they do is exist in physical space. This literal modernism obviates any moment of transcendence or metaphorical allusion, which I believe is essential to art. Instead of showing reality in a new truthful way, or revealing something unique about a particular way of looking and seeing, they offer themselves in their own literal physicality.[85]

When modernist works became literal objects displaying nothing but their sheer existence, when they lost any symbolic moment, modernism in art reached a dead end. All that could follow was a repetition, an accumulation of physical objects with various properties. The fulfillment of Greenberg's original program

85. An example of this would be certain works of abstract painting from the 1950s, especially the huge monochrome canvases, or canvases rigidly structured by repetitious geometrical grids.

thus revealed its self-vitiating character, when taken literally.[86]

86. Greenberg himself came to re-evaluate his original conception of modernist painting's program in connection with Abstract Expressionism, which he very much favored. It is still in terms of 'spatial flatness' or its lack that he views these works; however, in his article "After Abstract Expressionism" from 1962, he has given up his definition of the essence of modernist painting as involving an emphasis on literal flatness. Indeed, in this essay, he expresses an indirect appreciation of earlier painters who had preserved illusionistic modeling and perspectival space in their art, like Kandinsky or Rouault. This article outlines the important influence these painters had in the reintroduction of what Greenberg calls the "painterly" tendencies back into modernist art, which mainly means the return to a "heightened illusion of three-dimensional space". (Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism" (1962), *Collected Essays*, p. 123.) As a matter of fact, Abstract Expressionism represents a way of breaking through the modernist literal flatness towards treating the formal qualities of the pictorial medium as expressive means for evocation of feelings, moods and thoughts; allusion to objects and events.

What Greenberg advocates as "autonomous art" can thus be seen as leading to a blind ally. Other theorists have noticed this. Peter Bürger explicitly critiques Greenbergian autonomous art — art that makes a point of carrying no content or meaning of any kind, that exists purely for its own sake, self-consciously withdrawn from society, giving up all social responsibility — calling it *aestheticism*.[87] Modernism, for Burger, ought to be thought of not in terms of Greenberg's definition of what modernist works of art ought to look like, but on the contrary in terms of the Avant-Garde movements of Dada and Surrealism that happened to be pushed out into the artistic margins precisely due to not corresponding to the Greenbergian modernist model. For Bürger the Avant-Garde movements of Dada and Surrealism represent the real heart of modernism for they epitomize a serious attempt to play a revolutionary role in society, and, moreover, stand as a living critique of the inaptness inherent to the Greenbergian modernism of having nothing to do with any actual life experience and of being utterly detached from reality.

Against Bürger I would say that Greenberg's definition of modernist painting as focusing on the artistic medium as separate from what it conveys is revealing in alluding to a process, which I believe is central to modernism in general: the separation of language from its meaning, of forms from their content, of signifier from its signified and focusing on each one of the separate sides independently of its counterpart. To put, once more, the Greenbergian thesis in a non-Greenbergian lingo, which I will continue to develop here a bit further: modernist painting, in general, treats its pictorial language as an autonomous system of arbitrary signs, which is not directly dependent on the object of representation in the real world. It underminds that language's relationship to reality as something that is transcendentally given.

Equally, I believe that surrealism is also engaged in altering and breaking the automatism inherent to the traditional ('realistic') artistic representation, in which particular illusionistic images are taken to be directly linked to the furniture of

87. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde.*, Translated by Michael Shaw, Manchester University Press, 1984.

the empirical world. But whereas modernists in the Greenbergian sense were preoccupied with the 'how' in art, i.e. with the formal means of representation, the surrealists' interest was directed to a large degree towards a new kind of 'what', an unprecedented content or meaning of art: surrealism aimed to show the 'work' of human unconscious life by capturing dreams, hallucinations, and the traces of free-associative processes.

The avant-garde movements that Burger appreciates started out with the Dadaist attack on all conventions, forms and grids. However, the very annihilation of any point of reference, when there was nothing left to challenge or destroy, exhausted of the Dadaist project. As we know from Nietzsche, the absence of any system of rules or a point of reference, instead of bringing an unlimited freedom, paradoxically proves to be paralyzing, stultifying. A quote taken from Marcuse well illustrates this moment:

> The "tyranny of form" — in an authentic work a necessity prevails which demands that no line, no sound could be replaced (in the optimal case, which doesn't exist). This inner necessity (the quality which distinguishes authentic from inauthentic works) is indeed tyranny inasmuch as it suppresses the immediacy of expression. But what is here suppressed is false immediacy: false to the degree to which it drags along the unreflected mystified reality.[88]

The surrealists subsequently realized that some kind of a referential framework is not only necessary, but also in a deep sense liberating, and hence simply employed the traditional pictorial techniques of trompe-l'oeil, central point perspective and illusionistic effects in the service of depicting some kind of pure and unique content supposedly laying behind all forms. Painters like Salvator Dali did not experiment with form, nor innovate the pictorial style, but concentrated fully on what can be found underneath forms. Surrealism, with its illusionistic academic style clearly constitutes a total denial of Greenberg's chosen criteria of good modernist art.

The formalist modernism addressed and promoted by Greenberg is, as we saw, preoccupied with the formal representational means as separate and independent

88. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension:Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1978, p. 43.

of any individual content. What I call Greenbergian modernism, that is, displays 'signifiers' in their formal and material qualities — not pointing outside of themselves, but to themselves first and foremost. It investigates pure structures, orders and grids, concentrating on the mode of presentation itself. The model examples of this type of modernist art are the compositions of Piet Mondrian or Theo van Doesburg from the twenties and thirties. But art focused on the presentation of grids and structures continued to be developed long after, as is clear from the works of, e.g., Frank Stella, Agnes Martin or Barnett Newman. Rosalind Krauss, who wrote an article about such 'grid obsessed' modernist painters, speaks about "the grid" in the following way:

> It is safe to say that no form within the whole of modern aesthetic production has sustained itself so relentlessly while at the same time being so impervious to change. It is not just the sheer number of careers that have been devoted to the exploration of the grid that is impressive, but the fact that never could exploration have chosen less fertile ground. As the experience of Mondrian amply demonstrates, development is precisely what the grid resists. But no one seems to have been deterred by that example, and modernist practice continues to generate ever more instances of grids.[89]

In another place, Krauss continues:

> And thus when we examine the careers of those artists who have been most committed to the grid, we could say that from the time they submit themselves to this structure their work virtually ceases to develop and becomes involved, instead, in repetition. Exemplary artists in this respect are Mondrian, Alberts, Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin.[90]

varies in each case, there is something similar about the seriousness with which, for example, Mondrian structured his paintings with repetitious grids, and with which Newman divided his huge monochrome canvases by regular vertical stripes — and

89. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 9.
90. Ibid., p. 160.

also something ultimately and inevitably limited about their respective projects.

By contrast with the Greenbergian 'formalism', surrealism searched after the pure, formless 'content' behind forms, after the 'signified' behind the formal sign. It aimed to tap into the 'raw energy' of pure instinct, suppressed under the restraints of civilization and the requisites of social order. Georges Bataille, for one, wrote about annihilating "the grid" altogether, apparently considering any order or structuring, be it social or rational, as oppressive per se. Surrealism was an attempt to break through socially imposed conventions, and to liberate the repressed and muted instincts and drives, the formlessness, irrationality and chaos behind formal, rational, ordered appearances. Andre Breton, surrealism's father figure, explicitly stated these desired aims in his *Surrealist Manifesto.* He announced that surrealism sought a freedom of thought, existing in the "absence of any known restrictions", which he felt could be attained by breaking through the rational structures of consciousness, and focusing on the "actual functioning of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern".[91]

After our discussions of Nietzsche, I find it tempting to view the relationship of surrealism and formalist modernism as involving the two contradictory artistic principles described by Nietzsche, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Nietzsche, as we saw, defines Dionysius as personifying the crude, irrational instincts and drives deep inside man. In themselves terrifying and destructive, these drives objectify themselves in Apollonian appearances, which constitute an illusion of reasonable order that informs and structures reality. Dionysius stands for the chaos and contradiction existing in the absence of Apollonian ordering. In terms of this antithesis, then, the modernist painters of the Greenbergian type, preoccupied as they were with formal ordering and 'pure' structures, represent the Apollonian attitude. Surrealism, on the other hand, insists that our culture is overly occupied with Apollonian forms and conventions, which become restricting, dry, passionless and lifeless, if not enough space is given to Dionysius.

However, as we already know, Apollo and Dionysius exist through one another rather than one (namely Apollo) arbitrarily and unnecessarily limiting or suffocating the other (Dionysius). Thus, neither can be privileged to the exclusion

91. Andre Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, p. 26.

of the other. Dionysius, which stands for a raw life energy or some 'pure content', is not even thinkable, imaginable or perceivable without Apollonian ordering, information, conventional structuring. Apollo, on the other hand, is brought into life by the Dionysian energy, as there can be no pure structure or form existing independently of a specific content. Formalist modernism and surrealism are thus opposite sides of the same coin, and are afflicted by complementary blindnesses. Greenbergian modernism emphasized order and form abstracted from any particular content. Surrealism aimed to access something like a 'pure content' behind all forms and conventions. Both projects, then, are equally illusory and incoherent.

As I have been suggesting, when works of Greenbergian modernism, actually fulfilled Greenberg's original program of self-purification, and presented themselves as literal physical objects, this program ended up in sterile repetitions.

Surrealism, by contrast, 'de-literalized the literal'. Instead of creating art works as real objects, surrealists did the opposite: they approached literal objects as symbolic. Surrealism is about experiencing reality metaphorically, whereas formalist modernism is about seeing art works as objects in reality. Surrealist artists, that is, treated reality as a system of signs, which could potentially reveal a 'deep' meaning of some sort. This attitude is captured, for example, in Breton's book *Nadja*, where nature's configuration in all its form is understood as semantically inflected and inherently articulate. It also comes through in the way surrealists understood and treated 'found objects'. As Rosalind Krauss describes in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde,* Breton and Giacometti believed themselves to be "claimed by seemingly useless objects"[92], which they turned into works of art (e.g. Giacometti's *Invisible Object*, 1934). Duchamp's ready-mades, to take another example, epitomize this process of 'de-literalization'. Duchamp presented real, literal objects metaphorically, investing them with a symbolic function. Even the surrealist interest in photography, which displays 'traces' and reflections of real objects, putting them into new contexts and thereby revealing their unexpected 'meanings', is part of the general surrealist tendency to de-literalize real objects.

In this process of 'de-literalization' surrealists aimed to get to some kind of

92. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 160.

'pure content' beyond form and convention — to the ultimate Dionysian 'truth' underlying the world of appearances. However, when he first drew the Dionysius-Apollo distinction, Nietzsche knew that there is no 'pure content' without formal ordering. By seeking after an ultimate truth about human nature — by worshipping Dionysius and neglecting or even denying Apollo — the surrealists lived the opposite (and complementary) illusion to the Greenbergian modernists.

So the Apollo-Dionysius polarity is a metaphor elucidating the form-content split in modern art — the split between the search after 'pure forms' on one hand, and some kind of a 'pure content', on the other. In my opinion, works of modern art can be understood in terms of this dichotomy, or rather, in relation to the continuum of which these terms form the extreme poles.

As I have explained, the Apollonian modernist artists, praised by Greenberg, divorced formal structures, grids, and perceptual screens from objects in the natural world. By pointing at the visual signifiers and perceptual grids themselves, emphasizing their material, formal qualities, they turned those grids into literal, physical objects.

The model example of this Apollonian modernist position is Piet Mondrian. Mondrian believed that his art could capture some kind of ultimate transcendental structure, putatively underlying all natural appearances. To accomplish this, he disjoined formal structures from all concrete individual objects, abandoning any particular characteristics of objects as random and incidental. Mondrian considered forms and structures as prior to objects; for him they were what was 'real' about objects. A transcendental grid, abstracted from all particularities, which he considered true and essential, therefore became the only subject of his art. In its attempt to capture pure forms abstracted from any content his art exemplifies the Greenbergian virtues of 'flattening' and 'autonomy'. However, on the basis of Nietzsche's insight that form and content exist only through one another, we can see, rather, that Mondrian merely places us within a sort of 'hierarchy of grids'. Far from capturing a 'transcendental grid', Mondrian merely turned one grid into an object.

What I mean is the following: a form (grid) is approachable or conceivable only through an individual object; it can only be 'shown' by means of the objects it discloses. Once separated from the object, the grid ceases to function *as* a grid, and itself becomes one object among others. Mondrian's art then does

not reveal a transcendental grid underlying all objects, as he believed, inasmuch as the original grid (now object) cannot be perceived without another grid as a point of reference or perceptual screen. Hence the 'hierarchy of grids'. But by 'hierarchy' I do not mean to suggest that conceptual grids fall by themselves into 'vertical' relations of superiority and inferiority. Indeed, my whole discussion of semiotic flattening and the interdependence of Apollo and Dionysius (qua form and content) entails that conceptual grids and the objects they disclose, exist, as it were, on the same plane. Mondrian's 'transcendental grids' do not give us a truer or more ultimate vision of anything. Instead, each Mondrian work merely presents us with one more object.[93]

The Dionysian avant-garde movements, in contrast to formalist modernism, could be characterized as 'anti-grid', or 'anti-structure'. These movements were initiated by the Dadaist attack on all conventions, forms and grids. The very annihilation of any point of reference, when there was nothing left to challenge or destroy, however, exhausted the dadaist project. The absence of any grid, instead of bringing an unlimited freedom, paradoxically proved to be paralyzing, stultifying. Surrealists subsequently realized that some kind of a referential framework is not only necessary, but also in a sense liberating. They simply accepted and employed the traditional pictorial techniques of trompe-l'oeil, central point perspective and illusionistic effects in the service of depicting some kind of pure and unique content supposedly lying behind all forms.

Painters like Salvador Dali did not experiment with form, nor innovate the pictorial style, but concentrated fully on what can be found underneath forms. Others, such as Andre Masson or Jean Miro, attempted to eliminate any preconceived convention in art, hoping to work totally spontaneously, in the absence of any pre-meditation. But the common theme uniting surrealist artists was that they all aimed to discover the 'essence' of what human beings are about, the true way our psyche functions, and to just 'record' or 'reflect' this pure content on some blank *neutral background* through the methods of automatic writing, automatic drawing, recording of dreams, and so on. Surrealists failed to recognize the constitutive role of a particular perceptual grid in the processes of perception

93. I here obviously refer to Mondrian's period of pure geometrical abstraction, which lasted throughout almost his whole career. Greenberg, *Art and Culture,* p. 111.

and representation. This non-recognition is evident from the surrealists' belief that automatic writing and drawing was a medium for capturing the workings of human psychic life *itself*, unmediated by the rigid structures of reason or any other formal order.

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So, to conclude, modernism in visual arts involves a scrutiny of painting's pictorial language, and a questioning of that language's relationship to the object of representation. This scrutiny manifested itself in the separation of pictorial language from its meaning, of visual forms from their contents, and in the focusing on each of these aspects separately.

The formalist modernist artists addressed by Greenberg divorced formal structures, grids, and perceptual screens from objects in the natural world. By pointing at visual signifiers and perceptual grids themselves and emphasizing their material, formal qualities, they turned those grids into literal, physical objects. Instead of revealing some kind of transcendental essential forms, as they believed, they ended up in a repetitious accumulation of mere physical objects — an artistic dead end.

Surrealist artists, on the other hand, by trying to capture the true essence of human existence underneath all cultural restrictions and established order, lived the illusion of being in touch with pure content liberated from any structural constraints, with the 'real' way that the human psyche functions when unmediated by the rigid structures of reason — unable to recognize that form and content are part of one another, existing through one another, and that perceptual grids have a constitutive role in what content they deliver to the viewer.

From Metaphysics to Language Games

René Magritte, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 1929

Modernist art, as it was described by Clement Greenberg, reached a point of critical self-awareness — no longer reaching up to divine ideals, and no longer certain of its imitative role — it started questioning all values it was to stand for and the role it was to play at all. The issue of reference, obviously, was one of the central questions: what do works of art refer to? What do they represent? It turns out that a reference of some sort is innate to art — for if an art work refers to nothing, it ends up being a mere physical object, as we saw in following the Greenbergian line of argument. Furthermore, it also turned out that a language and its object of reference are not connected by any metaphysical bond and can be seperated. The inquiry into the mystery of the relationship between signs (whether words or images) and what they denote became the real quest in modern art. For we know also, as was discussed for example by Baudelaire in the context of Manet, that in order for a visual language to be true, it must be all the time re-invented, and only in such truthfulness a new definition of beauty can be found.

Michel Foucault, in his essay *This Is Not a Pipe*,[94] discusses the paintings of

94. Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 35. Hereafter cited by page numbers in the main text.

René Magritte, and in doing so, he offers an important insight into the issues of representation that modernist art had been largely centered around. Therefore, in this chapter, I want to focus on Foucault's essay and the implications it might bring into our discussions.

Magritte's art, as Foucault shows, problematizes the relationship between the 'object' of artistic representation and the way of 'getting to the object' — that is, he disrupts the automatic connection between the content of a picture and the formal characteristics, which carry that content to the viewer. (In this sense Magritte's art is part of the general modernist agenda we discussed in the previous chapter.) In other words, Magritte opens up a gap between a meaning and its mode of presentation (whether this mode consists of words or images).

This disruption is made explicit in the famous picture "This Is Not a Pipe". Magritte has us look directly at a pipe by means of a blatantly 'realistic' image. In Foucault's words, this "picture does not 'aim' like an arrow or a pointer toward a particular pipe in a distance or elsewhere. It is a pipe."[95] However, Magritte subsequently (or simultaneously), by means of a written statement, denies this direct, "habitual" connection between this 'realistic' representation of the object and the 'object itself'. Magritte makes us wonder how and why we see a pipe when looking at this particular "collection of intersecting lines"[96] on a flat canvas — if there is any 'real' reason for us to see a pipe through this particular image and not something else (or perhaps nothing at all), and, for that matter, whether another image couldn't just as easily point us to a pipe.

In questioning and making us question the 'naturalness' or 'causality' of the relation between the mode of representation and the object of representation, Magritte undermines any 'metaphysical' or 'necessary' connection between a given mode of representation (in this case, a pictorial one) and reality, between a given image and a real object. He points to the arbitrariness of the connection between signs (whether words or images) and the objects they denote; and makes clear that representations and their objects are not attached or glued together in any metaphysically given or necessary way.

Does Magritte, then, suggest that words and images are just interchangeable

95. Foucault, p. 20.
96. Foucault, p. 19.

labels pointing to the real things 'as they are in themselves' in the world? If so, then, what does Magritte mean when he says that there is "nothing behind the image"?[97] It sounds as if Magritte were denying that there is a world 'out there' that pictures and words aim to 'get to' — as if, in other words, he has lapsed into a kind of radical idealism.

But Magritte's art neither denies the existence of 'objective reality,' nor suggests that words and images are mere 'labels' arbitrarily attached to particular 'pieces of reality'. Rather, I believe, by saying that there is nothing behind images, Magritte indicates that the world is to a certain extent articulated by the act of representing it. In other words, he denies a 'thing-in-itself', left 'as is' outside language (whether verbal or pictorial).[98]

I take it that Foucault makes this very point, by claiming that Magritte's art has thoroughly undermined the "disjunction between the canvas and what it is supposed to mimic."[99] This would mean that his work dissolves the ontological distinction between 'real things' (the world which serves as the object of representation) and conceptualizations of the world (including pictorial representations) — between meanings separate from their expressions, content independent of any form. This is what I believe Foucault has in mind when he draws a distinction between *resemblance* and *similitude* in connection with Magritte's art.

Resemblance, in Foucault's usage, involves the 'original model' on one hand, and its copies, on the other. The resembling copies reproduce the original, they "submissively imitate it,"[100] relating to *it* from outside. Resemblance thus implies a 'thing-in-itself,' independent of and external to the various means of representation and perception that reach *it* by pointing to *it*. Similitudes, on the other hand, are images that do not point to any 'thing in itself' outside of themselves, but, on the contrary, imply that there is no 'object in itself' apart from various representations or ways of perceiving. Images, in this sense, do

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97. Cf. René Magritte, *Les mots et les images: choix d'écrits*, (Bruxelles: Labor, 1994).
98. This is an allusion to one of Wittgenstein's points in the *Philosophical Investigations*, (P. I. 95). What made me think of this are Foucault's frequent although indirect references to Wittgenstein and his usage of certain Wittgensteinian terms and concepts. I will point out some of these references, and will make use of them in my own interpretation of Magritte's works.
99. Foucault, p. 50.
100. Foucault, p. 7.

not merely reflect or copy something like 'the sovereign model,' understood as ontologically superior, prior, or more 'real'. The image and what it represents are part of one another:

> Similitude is restored to itself — unfolding from itself and folding back upon itself. It is no longer the finger pointing out from the canvas in order to refer to something else. It inaugurates a play of transferences that run, proliferate, propagate, and correspond within the layout of the painting, affirming and representing nothing. Thus in Magritte's art we find infinite games and purified similitude that never overflow the painting.[101]

The distinction between reality and the art that represents reality thus gets blurred or dissolved in Magritte's paintings; it is unclear 'what represents what,' or what is the 'origin' of what. We find ourselves close to realizing that 'life imitates art' as much as 'art imitates life' when encountering Magritte's paintings, a theme echoed and illuminated by some hermeneutic thinkers. Gadamer, for instance, in this connection speaks about a "reversal of the ontological relation of original and copy," claiming that "word and picture are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they represent to be for the first time what it is."[102]

Magritte's art, as I understand it, dismisses the distinction between the 'object itself,' which is 'real' but unapproachable, and its appearances, which are all that is available to human experience. Magritte's pictures imply that the so-called 'thing-in-itself' is not separable from the way we perceive and experience. The world *is* as it appears to us to be, is as real as it gets. To put it in a different way — and this is Foucault's point here — there is no *arché* or founding principle underlying appearances. Correspondingly, the antithesis between form and content, signifier and signified, conventional constraints and the 'true nature' of things is dismissed in Magritte's art. He shows that there is no content without a specific form. Objects cannot be perceived or depicted outside of a specific grid, which is largely constituted, moreover, by a convention of some sort. But equally

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101. Foucault, p. 49.
102. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*,
(New York: Seabury, trans. 1975), p. 126

and correlatively, the given form, grid or 'perceptual screen' that we happen to employ is approachable or conceivable only through the object; it can only be 'shown' by the objects it discloses.

This becomes clear in Magritte's *La Lunette d'approche* (1963). We are offered a view of the blue sky through the transparency of a window. Behind or outside the window, however, there is only a black void. The window and the view through the window are part of one another: the window is, of course, what makes the view possible, but equally, the view 'through' is what makes the window a window. There can never be one without the other. A particular window, i.e. a given form or grid, is a precondition for the perception or even the notion of an object. Magritte shows that there is nothing like either 'pure forms' or 'pure

René Magritte, *La Lunette d'approche*, 1963

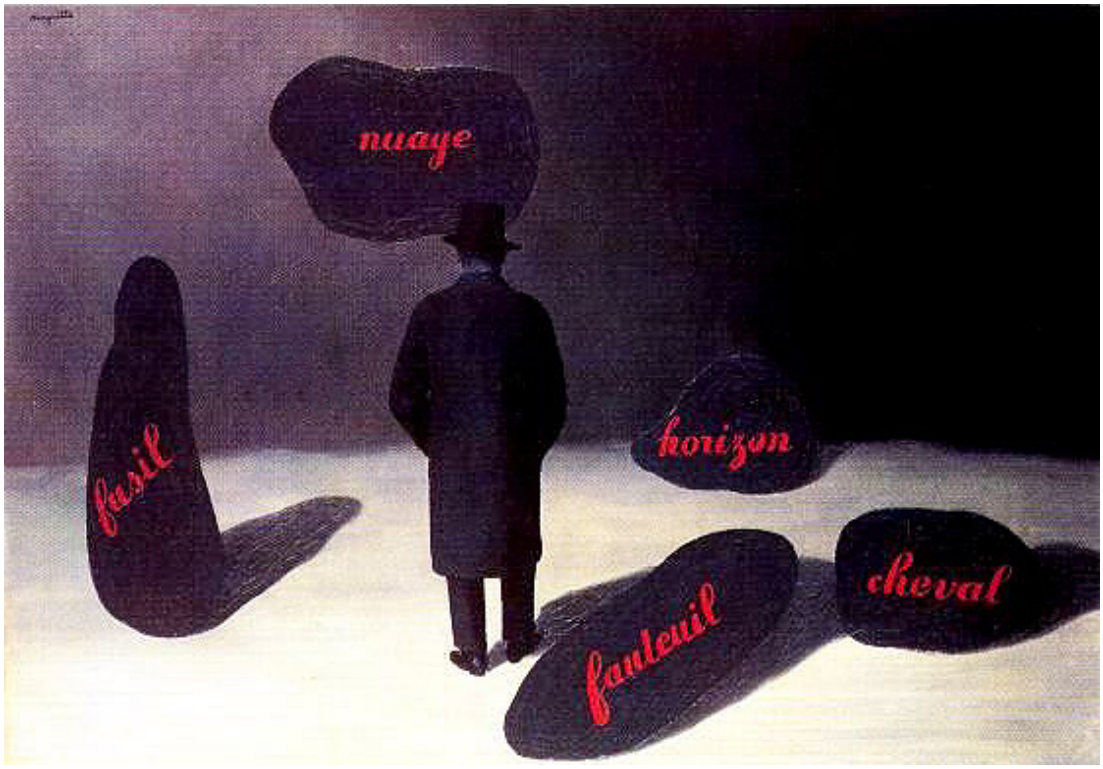
content'. He juxtaposes words, pictures, and objects, I believe, precisely in order to show that they exist through one another. All contents come only through particular formal presentation.

If we go back to Magritte's picture *This Is Not a Pipe*, we find that it illustrates the same point.[103] The image that Magritte employs gets us directly to the object it 'represents'. We do not see a picture qua arrow pointing to a pipe outside of the picture; phenomenologically speaking, indeed, we do not see 'an image' at all—we just see a pipe. The form of representation is thus already 'filled' with its content. The image and object are part of one another; when we see an object, the pointer (i.e. the mode of representation) must already be included in what we see — the pointer must be functioning successfully. Thus far, our perception of the object — namely, the pipe — is instant, direct, and unproblematic. However, Magritte simultaneously uses another pointer, a written statement, to refer to 'the way the pipe is represented' — that is, to 'point to the pointer' — and thus lets us know that it *is* an image, and not a pipe that we are looking at, one pointer among possible others that could possibly refer to the same given object (a pipe). We then see a representation of the mode of representation. And by this means, the image of the pipe ceases to be a transparent pointer denoting its object of reference, but in being 'pointed at' by the written statement, itself becomes the object of representation.

The upshot is this: objects come with their mode of representation already included, already built-in. The cognitive apprehension of any object presupposes the perceptual (and conceptual) mode or screen that discloses it. *This Is Not a Pipe* shows that, contra some other surrealists, form and content make up a unity, and therefore that the goal of accessing the pure content underneath all forms, beyond all arbitrariness, turns out to be, so to speak, the ultimate dream.

Personnage marchant vers l'horizon (1928-29) represents 'pieces of reality' cut off from their 'names'. Names divorced from objects are shown as labels attached to meaningless blobs of matter. By being 'pointed at', by being presented as a "drawing of a written text,"[104] or as 'a representation of a word,' the name ceases

103. What follows here is a gloss on, and 'local' application of, the say/show distinction from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.
104. Foucault, p. 47.



René Magritte, *Personnage marchant vers l'horizon*, 1928-29

to point to its own object of reference, and itself becomes an object of reference. The nonsensical blobs of matter, it seems, allude to the 'things-in-themselves,' supposedly independent of particular modes of perceiving. But the point here is, I think, that nothing like that is to be found. When perceiving something, we do not see a 'raw chunk of reality' *as* a given object—we see the object.[105] We do not see blobs of matter as "horses" and "armchairs"; we see horses and armchairs. Magritte's painting thus questions the whole idea that things exist in themselves, independently of and prior to their being named or depicted.

In conclusion, Magritte's paintings show us that the connection of words and images to objects is indeed (in principle) arbitrary. But as there are no 'things-in-themselves' outside of their particular forms and appearances, and as we cannot get to some 'real content' without a perceptual screen, grid, concept, name or image, the connection between name (or form) and object is real and true. As a matter of fact, we can only question the connection from the standpoint of having *already* perceived the objects through that very connection, i.e. of having experienced the

105. A reference to Wittgenstein's 'seeing as' notion.

connection as actually existent and successfully functioning. There is nothing transcendental (in principle) about the relationship between objects, words, and images, but as there is no way of viewing reality from outside of language or a specific perceptual grid, and indeed, as some such grid is a necessary condition for the notion of 'objective reality,' the languages and perceptual screens we use are real, and in this sense non-arbitrary from the point of view of the perceiving, measuring subject (and there is no other point of view than this). Therefore we will never acquire a truer or realer picture of 'reality' than the one we get through the arbitrary and to a large extent conventional systems of signs, which constitute that reality as such.

Deducing and Inducing Matisse

Henri Matisse, *The Dance*, 1909

Foucault's discussion of Magritte's art brings us to an important issue, which in fact became indispensable to any discussion of art ever since — the role of a grid, a viewpoint, or a theory (intellectual, conceptual, aesthetic, emotional) that is necessarily present in any viewing of art or reality.

It seems unavoidable to mention Jacques Derrida in this context (which I am about to do), because it was he who came with the explicit claim that the reader of a text with the perspective he or she brings in, or a viewer of an art work and the lens he or she uses, is, to a considerable degree, also the writer of the text, and the maker of the work.

In the following pages, I want to look at two texts, both dealing with another key figure of modern art — Henri Matisse — in an attempt to become aware of the *perspective itself* that is used in order to view Matisse's art and to recognize the role that a given theoretical lens plays in an interpretation of works of art.

The first text, "Matisse and 'Arche- drawing'," is written by Yve-Alain Bois, and is fully based on the thought of Jacques Derrida. The second text "Engendering Imaginary Modernism: Matisse's Bonheur de vivre" is by Margaret Werth, and

represents what can be thought of as the opposite approach to the viewing of a work of art, empirical in her attitude of collection 'facts', although at the same time saturated by fashionable and pretty much mandatory sentiment of feminism and psychoanalysis, dominant in any academic discussion at time and place she wrote the text (American academia in the 1990s).

I would call Yve-Alain Bois' approach 'deductive' or 'top- bottom'; Bois starts with a given theory (Derrida's deconstruction), which exists independently of Matisse's art, and looks at Matisse through that theory. Since it is a theory of structural linguistics he uses, Bois regards Matisse's art as a kind of pictorial language. I will try to reconstruct the "discoveries" Bois sees in Matisse's art using Matisse's work "The Dance" (1909) as my point of reference.

Margaret Werth's approach, on the other hand, is 'inductive' or 'bottom-top'; that is, she empirically describes and analyzes the individual aspects of Matisse's painting, in order to generate her "reading" of the picture. Werth does not stop at the level of a linguistic analysis, then, but aims for an iconological analysis and a historical account of the theme Matisse uses, (i.e. the 'meaning' conveyed in his pictorial language), in addition to addressing the formal aspects of the language itself (spatial construction, composition, specific forms of representation). Again, I will albeit briefly try to approach "The Dance" through her "reading" of Matisse.

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Matisse, according to Bois, deconstructed certain dualisms inherent to western thought that have been reflected in the visual arts. We have already spoken about what Bois calls the dualistic approach in the context of modern art, the approach that consists in separating form from content, structures from natural objects, language from meaning, conception from realization, idea from expression, etc. We spoke of Piet Mondrian, who divorced a formal structure, an 'abstract' grid, from objects in the natural world, as a representative of the one side of the modernist dualistic mentality (given the fact that 'abstraction' is one of the key concepts of modernism). The opposite pole of the dualism would be the tendency of realistic and naturalistic art, in our discussion represented by the surrealists, who aim to represent objects as they 'really are in themselves', denying the constitutive role

of a particular grid in the process of the perception and representation of reality.

Bois, as I understand his point, implies that Matisse reconciled both the 'naturalistic' and 'abstractionist' tendencies, 'dissolving' the conflict between the opposed poles. According to Bois, Mattise approached every painting as an individual totality, refusing to draw a distinction between conception and realization. For Matisse every work is an individual solution of a particular problem. According to Bois, Matisse gave up on a 'conception' existing prior to the surface destined to receive the 'inscription', i.e. the grid divorced from the object. Simultaneously, on Bois' reading, Matisse got beyond the ways that the 'dualisms of western metaphysics' have manifested themselves in visual arts: separation of figure from background, drawing from painting, shapes from colors, quality from quantity, the totality from the individual elements. Matisse's art reflects the 'complementarity' of such oppositions, where each one exists only in and through its opposite.

Is the 'deconstruction' of such oppositions apparent in "The Dance"? I will look at the painting through Bois' 'grid' and try to see what characteristics this grid brings out.

As mentioned above, Matisse, according to Bois, approached the canvas in its individual totality, that is, he considers the over-all surface while forming each individual element of the painting. The circle of dancers in "The Dance" fills out the whole space of the picture. The two top figures are even bending their heads as if they were subjected to the limitation given by the picture frame. Furthermore, each of the figure's gains its 'meaning' and becomes what it is (i.e. a 'dancer') only in relation to all the other figures, through a mutual contrast of their various postures. The sense of dynamics and motion (the act of 'dancing') is the outcome of a tension among the individual figures and their relation to the frame; the figures are almost breaking out of the frame, as if they needed extra room to expand. All the different forces are however brought into an equilibrium of mutual balance. The viewer perceives the painting in its totality; no one element stands out dominating the scene. This is what Bois means when he calls Matisse's space 'tabular': there is no linear narrative, which one would read starting from one point and proceeding to the next in order to get the whole 'story'. Each element makes sense only in immediate connection with all the rest of the painting's elements.

Here, Bois' structuralist sensibilities make themselves evident. Saussure, that is, understands natural languages as totalities, in which no one element can stand on its own, but gains its functional status only by contrast with other elements and in relation to the whole. The meaning of a word therefore cannot be known separately from the meaning of words in a sentence, and sentences cannot exist without relation to the totality of language.

So "The Dance" is a result of a unique balance of all the elements in the painting in proportion both to each other and to the actual dimensions of the enframed surface of the canvas. A related issue here is that all factors present in the process of creation play a part in the final outcome of the painting, which explains, for Bois, why Matisse's pictorial practice was not projective. In other words, there is "no image — in the classical sense of disegno — that is not coextensive with the field... no preformulated 'idea' informing an inert matter" (Bois, 28). Claiming that the conception is inseparable from the actualization of the work is another deconstructionist notion: an idea, according to Derrida, gets formulated, constituted through its expression (whether written or spoken), i.e. it is not anterior to its expression. Language thus organizes and determines thought while the thought is being verbally formulated. In a similar manner, the 'idea' of Matisse's painting comes into existence through the act of the painting's own execution. An 'idea', whether in language or in a painting, thus does not exist independently of its particular embodiment/s.

Concluding that the individual elements of Matisse's paintings, in our case in "The Dance", constitute each other and exist through one another, it is clear why Bois points to colors and shapes in Matisse's works as inseparable. Matisse himself noted that "1 cm 2 of blue is not as blue as a square meter of the same blue"[106] The 'quality' of color, its value and tone, are given by its 'quantity', i.e. by the size and the shape of the color patch. Correlatively, the shapes are determined by their color, modified by it. There is no 'actual' size or shape apart from color. The shapes of the figure's bodies in "The Dance" are given by their 'fleshy' color. The color modifies them differently than, say, the red colored bodies in another version of "The Dance" from 1909-10 (in The Hermitage, Leningrad). The color of

106. Quoted in Louis Aragon, *Henri Matisse*: *A Novel* (1971), English tr. Stewart (New York, 1972), vol. 2, p. 308.

the background is another constitutive element in forming the 'shape' or 'volume' of the figures. The contrast of the former couple of colors generates a different form or volume than the latter contrast. The red figures are coming forward in a much more "bodily" or "physical" way against their background than the fragile pink bodies sinking into their respective background. This brings us to other aspects of the "Matisse system": the issue of the figure and its background and "expression by drawing".

Starting from the totality of the picture, where all elements are mutually determined, we can see why Matisse gives an equal importance to both the figure and its background, why they have "the same value". Background is what forms the figure and there is no figure without a background. In other words, there is no such thing as a neutral background which would not affect the figures. Matisse, being aware of the constitutive role of a background in creating the figure, alters the theme of "The Dance" by changing the backgrounds and coming up with many different versions of the painting — in fact with different paintings. (Matisse used small versions of the "Dance" motive in the context of other pictures, e.g. "Nature Morte a la Danse", "Le Bonheur de vivre".) As in the Derridian view of language, Bois' reading makes use of what we might call the "constitutive outside", which is neither accidental nor indefinite, but on the contrary necessary to the constitution of the 'inside', a condition of the possibility of the 'inside'[107].

The second of the two mentioned aspects of the "Matisse system" is his use of drawing, which Bois refers to as "expression by drawing". Matisse was aware that "the contour governs the color" and that it is "impossible to distinguish between the border and the partitioning it forms on the surface" (Bois, 27). In other words, contour determines color values by compartmentalizing the surface. Bois suggests that Matisse in fact came to understand the way color functions through its very opposite (even its contradiction) — the line, contour. This is what makes Matisse, according to Bois, a deconstructionist; he 'deconstructed' the hierarchical relationship of line and color (whereby color was considered a mere supplement of drawing). Matisse liberates color through drawing, which, following the 'theory' of deconstruction, is the only way of displacing the conflict without

107. The phrase "constitutive outside" comes from Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida,* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 16.

simply reversing the hierarchy. The difference between drawing and painting is "determined by the number of color parameters implicated in the relations of the whole." Drawing can have infinite 'color' nuances given by the areas enclosed by the drawing. Both issues, the one of figure and background and that of 'expression by drawing' (i.e. the modulation of color by compartmentalization) are analogous to the concept of 'spacing' in structural linguistics.[108]

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Bois' analysis of Matisse's picture is 'linguistic'- directed predominantly at the visual language Matisse uses. He addresses the discoveries Matisse made in the visual medium, and the way he used that medium. As I have said above, Bois has a theory to start with, a 'grid', which he uses as a lens for viewing Matisse's art. The theory does not originally come from Matisse's work; it did not come into existence by observing his paintings. That is why I would call his approach 'deductive' or 'top- bottom'. Is Bois' grid accurate, i.e. getting at some 'truth' in Matisse's art? Is there such a thing as an 'accurate', truthful lens at all, or are there just various different 'useful' lenses? Bois does seem to imply that he is looking through an 'accurate grid', and the main validation of his thesis is the fact that he found statements in the writings of Matisse, which seem to confirm the 'deconstructionist' reading. Is it Matisse's 'awareness' of the 'ideas of deconstruction', which make his art 'deconstructionist'? In my understanding, deconstruction is a way of reading a work, not something we find *in* the work. Matisse's awareness of the inseparability of shapes and colors, figure and background, drawing and painting, etc. surely is fascinating as a historical fact, but that in itself does not give his work some deep 'truth' or 'meaning', if we are consistent with the 'deconstructionist' reading.

Could not the very same grid Bois uses here in order to view Matisse be used for looking at another artist, for drawing out similar characteristics in his or her work? To say that colors and shapes mutually modify each other, that the

108. As discussed in the lecture on the Cubist Collages, where Rosalind Krauss referred to the "cutting of the flow of signifiers" and their mutual contrasting in relation to the totality of language.

background to a large extent constitutes the figure, or that quantity determines quality is to assert some putative psychological facts, that, if true, apply to visual arts in general, not specifically to Matisse. It is a way of understanding how visual perception works, in the same manner as structural linguistics is a theory about how language works. There are no individual texts or 'speech acts' which are more in 'accordance' with structural linguistics than others. By the same token, there are no art works which would be more 'deconstructionist' than other art works. In one respect, therefore, the question that Bois' article makes us want to ask is: "Why Matisse?", whereas Bois, it seems to me, theory in hand and looking for a painter to confirm it, may have asked: "Why not Matisse?". Is it a Procrustean bed we are dealing with here, Matisse having simply happened to be of 'the right size' to validate the theory? Bois' grid does bring out interesting features of Matisse's art, but it cannot at the end of the day tell us what is so unique about that art.

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Margaret Werth has a very different approach than Bois, much less 'grid-like'. She does not start with a coherent theory as does Bois, but instead focuses on the description of individual aspects of the picture. She approaches the painting from the opposite direction than Bois, from the bottom to the top, 'inductively'. Her aim is to "propose a new reading" of Matisse's work; far from sharing Bois' self-consciousness about the role of a specific interpretational grid in the perception of an art work, she wants to come up with a comprehensive interpretation of the "picture itself" (Werth, 51). Therefore Werth does not address the visual language exclusively, but approaches the work from several different angles. In the first place, she addresses the theme, the particular subject of the painting, and traces back the sources and the history of the same theme in the Western artistic tradition. Secondly she does pay attention to Matisse's pictorial language, which he used in order to depict the theme, the specific representational forms appropriated specifically for the subject of the painting. Matisse, according to Werth's understanding, has "appropriated" the tradition, in the attempt to make a "modern" version of a traditional theme (in the case of "Le Bonheur de vivre" the image of idyll, a pastoral landscape). Her particular emphasis is

on Matisse's rendering of gender and sexuality in his painting. Finally, she is concerned with the viewer's relation to the work. Throughout the whole article she makes frequent references to the art historical literature dealing with the same subject.

What would be Werth's 'reading' of "The Dance"? I will try to approach the painting following her line of 'reading'. I do not think it is a particular lens or a grid, through which she views the work. Werth changes various grids in the course of interpreting the work, or rather, her reading is more or less linear, treating the work as a 'text'. In the following passages I will make an attempt to' read' "The Dance" as I think Werth might read it. 'Appropriating' or imitating an 'inductive' approach is, however, almost impossible, due to the absence of a particular pattern or plan in collecting data. My 'reading' will therefore be very brief.

"The Dance" develops a motive of the bacchanalian round used by Matisse already in "Le Bonheur de vivre", the painting Werth's reading is specifically addressed to. The theme of the "kinesthetic pleasure of the dance" (Werth, 64) in the Western pictorial tradition, can be traced back to Poussin's bacchanals, to Mantegna's dance of the muses in Parnassus, and, further back in history, to Greek vase paintings. The dancers' "communal, ecstatic energy" in classical iconography is directly associated with the mythic realm of Dionysian joy.

The pictorial space of "The Dance" is inhabited with light-toned, simplified figures set against a flat, dark-blue and green background. The ring of five dancers is interrupted by the "break in the linkage of arms" (Werth, 60), which creates a tension that "energizes the circle". According to Alfred H. Barr, this very motive was probably inspired by the narrow space between the fingertips of God and Adam in Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" in the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

Matisse is preoccupied with the exploration of the female body and the figures' relations to the canvas as a whole; with the "way of negotiating the unity of the figure with its field" (Werth, 57). Werth agrees on this point with Bois, who emphasized Matisse's 'over-all' approach in his treatment of the picture plane. The bodies are simplified, almost schematized, emptied of weight, volume or mass and somehow floating in the air above or in front of an abstract, de-spacialized background. In contrast to "Le Bonheur de vivre", Matisse here makes clear

identification of gender in the painting: he attaches "feminine" gender markers to all figures, however schematized. We notice certain disproportions in the scale of the figures and the degree of clarity and realism with which they have been rendered. Matisse here experiments with different degrees of "de- realization", the result of his interest in "figural condensation" (mentioned in his text "Notes d'un peintre"). That is, he seeks to render the body's essential lines with the utmost economy of pictorial means. Werth points to Matisse's use of contours and lines of various thickness, enclosing forms and colors, thereby implying that Matisse distinguished between lines and colors, which distinction, according to Bois, he had abandoned. Furthermore, in contrast to Bois, who downplays the role of preparatory studies in Matisse's creation, Werth takes them seriously into account. In fact, her interpretation is largely based on the comparison between Matisse's cartoons, seen as the 'original conceptions', and the final version of the work. Werth thus explicitly separates conception from realization in Matisse's art, a separation which, we have seen, Bois also rejects.

Finally, Werth makes an interesting point about the viewer's relation to the image. She implies that Matisse's way of appropriating the tradition in terms of altering the theme, its specific content, and the pictorial language, his "refusal to belong and not belong" (Werth, 68) to the tradition, is what makes the viewer's perception unsettling. Matisse, as I understand this point, plays with the viewer's particular expectations in connection with the given theme (which still comes through clearly enough, and those expectations together with it), and the artistic shift away from the traditional treatment of the theme, which undermines those expectations.

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Margaret Werth does not start with a 'conclusion', as does Bois, and in fact she never reaches one. Her 'inductive' method stays on the level of pointing to and interpreting individual aspects of Matisse's art work, which are unique to him only, but she ends up never reaching any 'deductive' climax. On the other hand, as I tried to show, Bois' model, because it addresses the pictorial language in a very general way, cannot elicit what is unique about Matisse's art.

It seems one needs an equal degree of 'induction' and 'deduction' in the process

of viewing a work of art, in order to show what is unique about it but still make some kind of general ‘statement’, and not just a poetic or intelligent ’listing’ of impressions and ideas.

Beauty Extended

Pablo Piccasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907

If there is one name that for most people represents what modern art is, it is without any doubt Pablo Picasso. Picasso in his work exemplifies the question central to modern art, touched upon throughout this text — the issue of following rules versus extending (legislating) — of freedom versus necessity.

The issue was best defined by Immanuel Kant, in the context of ethics, by his categorical imperative, which states that one should act as if one was legislating a standard, a universal law, and executing that standard throughout the actions themselves.

Nietzsche (and later Wittgenstein), as we saw, applied this concept from ethics into aesthetics, into art. (As a matter of fact, also for Kant the artist was a genius who legislates the rules and follows them, applying freedom and necessity, and

who has to win in the game he is by himself setting/inventing.)

So in order for a standard to stay alive and valid, it must be exemplified in concrete situations throughout real acts. The same goes with rules and norms: they are true and meaningful only as they are legislated from inside in action, not when they become a dead formula, repeated and imitated from outside. Hence the opposition between the heroes (the law-makers, the real artists), who legislate in bringing together freedom and necessity (in the sense that 'it should be done'), and the imitators, who lack freedom and creativity and only repeat from outside something that was done by others, mistaking symptoms for the essence — an opposition that Plato insisted upon so acutely. (Here enters also the notion of *eternal recurrence of the same*, and his *dancing in chains* metaphor discussed in the context of Nietzsche's take on art.)

The new has to come from inside, from understanding and knowing something intimately, in freedom needed when we take a jump, a leap of faith — where the limitations are posed by reality itself (to a tight rope walker by the rope; to a painter by his flat canvas).

So to look at Picasso: though he embodies a paradigm of modernism, he at the same time and on many levels represents its overcoming, dissolving. For one, he epitomizes a denial to any consistent theory innate to modernism. The moment Picasso solves an artistic problem, that is, he is already fully immersed in a new one, making it impossible for anyone to pin down what his art is actually really all about:

> When I paint a bowl, I want to show you that it is round, of course. But the general rhythm of the picture, its composition framework, may compel me to show the round shape as a square... I can never be tied down, and that is why I have no style.[109]

The "anti-theory" aura around Picasso's art has much to do with the way his works confront and involve the viewer (in the form of intellectual and semiological games of references already spoken of previously in this paper), and moreover, this confrontation exists also on an almost physical level (Picasso in fact denies the whole agenda of the modernist distancing between the viewer and the work of art).

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109. Picasso, quoted in Walther, 1993, p. 40.

Picasso, moreover, introduces the concept of a game into art, by which he lures the viewer inside the work, showing "round shapes as square," playing with seeing and knowing and how those are interconnected, offering maximum freedom both to the artist and the viewer to participate in the picture, where shapes and proportions are not fixed but remain in a state of a constant free-play. Picasso abandons the idea of one perspective in art and shows us that today it is more realistic to see the world through many perspectives simultaneously, than to watch it through one single so-called "realistic" perspective.

This attitude finds its manifestation in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the "paradigm of modern art," the work which, as is generally known, opens Western art to previously unknown perspectives and tests "every received idea of painting."[110]

> No modern painting engages you with such brutal immediacy. Of the five figures depicted, one holds back a curtain to make you see; one intrudes from the rear; the remaining three stare you down. The unity of the picture, famous for its internal stylistic disruptions, resides above all in the startled consciousness of a viewer who sees himself seen.[111]

This is where Picasso's inspiration by the non-western, namely African and Oceanic "primitive" art available to him in 1907, is often cited. We know how Picasso describes his visit to the Trocadero museum, where he for the first time encountered the African art:

> Men made those masks and other objects for a sacred purpose, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown, hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it form and an image. At that moment I realized that this was what painting was all about. Painting isn't an aesthetic operation; its a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by

110. William Rubin, "From Narrative to "Iconic" in Picasso: The Buried Allegory in "Bread and Fruitdish on a Table" and the Role of "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon"." Art Bulletin v. 65, no. 4 (1983), p. 95.
111. Leo Steinberg,"The Philosophical Brothel, I." Art News, v. 71, no. 5 (1972), p. 20.

> giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.[112]

Art, Picasso discovered then, does the opposite of imitating a subject from the outside:

> For a primitive sculptor, who carved a ritual object, there was no schism between form and content. The object is not imitative, but embodies its message in forms that create rather than reflect, become rather than describe their subject.[113]

Henceforth, Picasso takes us outside of the western rationality, into the world of magic, ritual, and wudu dolls; where all parties are participants and no one in a position of an outside spectator. The artist approaches us from inside the work — the work becomes our own experience.

Looking at *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, we realize that the character of the figures and the space of the work acquired a radically new quality in contrast to the western artistic tradition centered around the concept of the *mimesis*. No longer are we able to view the work through the Renaissance linear perspective, which measured space independently of the figures in it. Here it is the bodily presence of the figures that builds up the pictorial space; and we can also feel that space with our bodies, not just see it with our eyes. The figures' background has acquired a presence not different from the one of the figures that occupy that space, so that the figures and the ground can switch roles at time. Each and every part of the composition has the potential of becoming a figure and measures its physical presence against ours. There are no absences in this work, only presence. Picasso experiments with the issue of absence and presence in the formal language of his work, making the negative, empty spaces full and positive, and vice versa.

At the same time, there is a surprising inconsistency of style among different parts of the painting: the two figures in the right part of the work seem to come from a different world than the figures on the left (none of them, however, from a world that we recognize). Furthermore, all of the picture's components

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112. From the memoirs of Francoise Gilot, Picasso's mistress of his 60s. Francoise Gilot, *Life with Piccasso*, Published 1990 by Virago (London). (First published 1964)
113. Picasso quoted in Schwartz, 1971, 21-24.

are literally compressed within the square frame (how dense is this painting!), pulsating under the tension of the condensed mutual coexistence, alive no less than the viewer facing it, ready to expand out into his or her space.

Against the traditional narrative image Picasso brings a new, what William Rubin calls a "conceptual" or an "iconic"[114] image, which is of a tabular, square format, with no anecdotal development, and without any one privileged constituent standing out dominating the scene. The work ceases to narrate a story existing outside of itself and independently of us (Steinberg calls the painting "anti-narrative"), hereby making a transition from the "perceptual" to a "conceptual" way of thinking. As Golding puts it in his essay on Picasso, the work has:

> the quality not of a representation but a symbol — a re-creation rather than a reinterpretation... While Picasso was undoubtedly fascinated by the formal and sculptured properties of Negro art, he also admired it intuitively for a more fundamental reason: for its 'reasonable' or conceptual quality... Their paintings are not so much records of the sensory appearance of their subjects, as expressions in pictorial terms of their idea or knowledge of them. 'I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them,' Picasso said."[115]

And here we get to the issue of extending in Picasso's art, i.e. to the issue of how the new comes into being.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon is an outcome of 19 preparatory sketches and studies. While modernism, we could say, undermined the idea of preparation in the name of spontaneity and freedom of expression, Picasso shows us, on the contrary, that preparation does not constrain or limit the spontaneity of artistic creation, but in fact frees the artist to carry out his work in a singular moment of a unique manner (hence Nietzsche's dancing in chains metaphor). In his sketches, Picasso demonstrates that freedom is a result of a thorough preparation.

Once preparation has become a part of what you are, a move can be made that looks like a denial of all that had been planned. Throughout the stages of

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114. William Rubin, "From Narrative to "Iconic" in Picasso: The Buried Allegory in "Bread and Fruitdish on a Table" and the Role of "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon"."
115. Golding, 1968, pp. 47-60.

the work captured in the sketches, Picasso lived with the figures, moved among them, danced with them, got to know all of them from inside, to the point where one figure's gesture would change the whole posture, the whole composition of the work. In that process of preparation, the figures communicate with the artist and with each other, compete, lecture each other, so that even though some of them are absent in the final work (like the figure of the sailor), all the characters are in some sense still present. Once the figures of *Demoiselles* became fully part of Picasso's life, the moment of spontaneity could come — the picture was born.

As a matter of fact, we can view the sketches as moves in the drama, with the artist in the middle of that drama. Here we already get to the mentality of an art work as a performance, eventually taken over by artists like Jackson Pollock.

> In the action which these characters develop in his imagination there comes a moment when it is Picasso who dominates, directs and, in short, acts. Unless we understand this action or performance of Picasso's, which is inseparable from the creation itself, unless we understand that this work is an art, then we cannot understand the picture... Picasso changed his course - one of the many attempts to find a definitive form - and began, perhaps by way of contrast, to move in the direction of schematism; that is to say he began to fashion the human figures reducing them to the least possible expression, but obtaining simply their essential features... The impulse that groups them, the need to bring them together within a composition seem to be born of the anecdote itself, just as a theatrical producer tries out the distribution of his characters on the stage at the first rehearsal, to see if the will give the effect he wants...[116]

In the studies Picasso prepared himself to be able to deny all the preparation in the freedom of his final work. We thus cannot think in what way are the sketches consistent or not, in the same way we cannot think whether Picasso's art is consistent. The studies are all clues towards understanding the work — they are angles to approach the work. If each sketch is a problem, the work is born when all the problems are resolved simultaneously, through one another. Picasso, that is, struggles with many problems simultaneously — and simultaneously they come

116. Palau, 1980, pp. 490-496

together — get solved in the final work. Starting from the initial problem — when the artist does not yet knows what he does — the only way is to work from inside, and the solution comes us a surprise — born seemingly out of nowhere. It is not clear where Picasso's figures in *Demoiselles* came from. However, immediately they are alive, and even if we do not understand them, they together with us inhabit our world, they become part of our mental/aesthetic landscape, we live with them.

Let us look at the famous image of the *Dove* painted by Picasso as a symbol of peace. If there is a canonic representation of what a dove is it is Picasso's representation. However, such an original image could come to life only due to the fact that Picasso as a young boy painted thousands and thousands of pigeons in his home town in Spain, in the context of his father, who was an academic painter who specialized in naturalistic depictions of birds. The more formally prepared the artist is — after the image he is creating has become part of his being — the more free he is in the free-generating of the new image, i.e. in extending the rule and legislating a new standard:

> Everything that happens is here… Before it reaches the end of the pen or the brush, the most important thing is to have it at one's finger-tips, all of it, without losing anything.[117]

The new comes from inside, from knowing something intimately. Picasso prepared from his childhood, to be able to draw a pigeon freely, within the rigid framework of a rigorous exercise (as Nietzsche would put it) he gained his freedom, invention, his brand new style. It is a sort of a paradox — the more constrained you are, the more free you are: Picasso has it in his fingertips.[118] Hence the difference between knowing the represented object from inside and an object imitated from the outside (which brings us back to Plato and his distinction between real artists that create and imitators that parasite on their inventions) — "the object known not seen". Picasso does not obey a rule that would be outside of him:

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117. Quoted by Vallentin 1963, p. 10-11.

118. One of the problems in art schools today is that they teach to argue, not to draw or paint and to master the techniques of the past. There is such a thing as the domain of the exercise that must not be mistaken with the domain of legislating — in exercise you do not solve an aesthetic problem in front of a canvas, you simply follow a pattern to a perfection, and in mastering your technique you start questioning what the aesthetic solution is.

> I would like to underline here the importance of the artist's respect for a completely different reality, which involves considering the model as not being merely a passive object... The new figure is born, in fact, from a model that has been represented on a number of occasions…[119]

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To conclude here with our original theses of the Ancient Greeks, celebrated by Nietzsche, that beauty is the criterion of truth — Picasso, as he liked to reverse things, has proven in his art also the opposite — if something is true it is beautiful.

119. Palau, 1990, 45-53

Beauty Crucified

Beauty and art were once thought of as belonging together, with beauty as among art's principal aims and art as beauty's highest calling. However, neither beauty nor art have come through avantgardist rebellion and modern social disruption unscathed. Their special relationship has, as a result, become estranged and tense.[120]

The attack on beauty that was part of modernist rethinking of all traditional values and radically redefining and extending their meanings, turned in the second half of the 20th century into a major crusade against beauty, colored with a type of moralistic undertone, and promoted, moreover, by the official academic and art establishment. Beauty — according to Arthur Danto, who we might say represents the voice of the time we speak of here — was not just irrelevant to art [121] — it was actually "immoral":

> our societal aversion to beauty has to do with our heightened moral sensitivity. We cannot in good conscience close our eyes and ears to the troubles of our world, but beauty threatens to conceal them.[122]

It might seem that Danto here tries to play out the old Platonic fear from the "magical effect" that art has on human emotions while blinding the reason, and wants to remind us of questions concerning the 'ethics of art':

> It can be a criticism of a work that it is beautiful when it is inappropriate for it to be so.[123]

And, as a matter of fact, it turns out that it was indeed in the name of 'appearance' versus 'essence' that beauty got under a vehement attack in the last several decades, by art theoreticians, academians, and the art establishment. For

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120. David Beech, *Beauty, Documents of Contemporary Art*, p. 12
121. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1995, Bollingen Series XXXV: 44 Princeton. Copyright 1997 by the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
122. Arthur C. Danto, "Beauty and Morality", in *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994). pp. 363-375.
123. *Ibid*.

this I want to turn here to an essay by Dave Hickey dealing with the issue of beauty in our time.[124] Hickey begins the essay by describing a moment when, while sitting in a panel discussion on the subject of 'What's Happening Now,' he uttered the word "beauty":

> I direct your attention to the language of visual affect — to the rhetoric of how things look — to the iconograp hy of desire — in a word, to beauty! (22)

The reaction he got from the audience and from his colleagues was one of utter silence, of people gazing outside of the window, acting as if they never heard him pronouncing the forbidden word. Hickey started wondering then, among other things:

> Why historically artists had been persistently and effectively employing the rough vernacular of pleasure and beauty to interrogate our totalizing concepts 'the good' and 'the beautiful' and now this was over? (23)

In order to get to the bottom of the issue of what happened to beauty Hickey looks at the structure of the official art establishment and the ways of its workings. He points to the raise of "vast, transcontinental sprawl of publicly funded, postmodern iceboxes" — i.e. "powerful corporate, governmental, cultural and academic constituencies" striving for "power and tax-free dollars" with ranks of 'art professionals' making up a "massive civil service of PhDs and MFAs". Since the 1980s such institutions have administered a "monolithic system of interlocking patronage" in arts" (23) while being exempted from any cultural critique as "untainted, redemptive, disinterested, taste-free, and politically benign" in the transactions of value enacted under their patronage (24). Such institutions in fact have since then stood between the art works and the artists, as well as the viewers — censoring the look and the meaning — in a way not much different, implies

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124. Dave Hickey, "Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty," in *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993). Published in David Beech, *Beauty, Documents of Contemporary Art*, pp. 22-30. Hereafter cited by page numbers in the main text.

Hickey, than under feudalism:

> The route from the image to the beholder now detours through an alternate institution ostensibly distinct from church and state. Even so, it is not hard to detect the aroma of Caravaggio's priests as one treads its grey wool carpets or cools one's heels in its arctic waiting rooms. (27)

Art works in the face of the institutions become subject to a "bureaucracy of meaning" and the artists, in order to be able to function successfully within the system, must be clerks. And since art, by essence, must answer to no formal criteria — it makes it virtually impossible for any genuine work of art to make its way anywhere pass the system's gatekeepers. The 'works' that the system promotes and produces, that is to say, are only those that by definition re-affirm the existence of the system itself and everyone involved in it.

Hickey in this context mentions Michel Foucault and has us reminded of Foucault's depiction of the modern system of power relations as a machine, working transparently and automatically, sustaining itself by its own mechanism, as a calculated permanent economy, with no one center source of power but a wide multiplicity of locals. The modern system of power, moreover, is one that constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising — it is not a triumphant power coming from the top down, but a modest power of bureaucrats, that is based on discipline, self-censorship and economic fear, underlying all discourse, and being both the instrument and the effect of the power — transmitting and producing power, and reinforcing the system even while undermining and exposing it.

As far as beauty is concerned then — since beauty is the outcome of legislating of a new standard, and is in fact the refutation of anything mechanically answering to rules — it clearly has no place in a system that has become the machine of rules.

> The institutions' curators hold a public trust. They must look carefully and genuinely care about what artists 'really' mean – and therefore they must, almost of necessity, distrust appearance – distrust the very idea of appearances, and distrust most of all appearances of images that, by virtue of the pleasure they give, are

> efficacious in their own right. The appeal of those images amounts to a kind of ingratitude, since the entire project of the new institution has been to lift the cruel burden of efficacy from the work of art and make it possible for artists to practice that 'plain honesty' of which no great artist has yet been capable, nor ever wished to be. Yet, if we would expose the inner soul of things to extended public scrutiny, 'sincere' appearance is everything, and beauty is the bête noir of this agenda, the snake in the garden. It steals the institution's power, seduces its congregation, and, in every case, elicits the dismay of artists who have committed themselves to plain honesty and the efficacy of the institution. (25)

Beauty, thus, according to the new institutions' logic, is "not honest" because "beauty sells", and belongs thereby to the corrupt old market that trades only with appearances (hence Danto's immorality of beauty); while the art professionals employed by the new institutions actually care about "what things mean", not what they look like (hence Danto's end of visuality). This is why Hickey draws a parallel here between the "priests" of the new bureaucratic institutions and those of the Old Church, checking on the appearances and censoring the subject matter in art:

> One must suspect, I think, that we are being denied any direct appeal to beauty, of much the same reason that Caravaggio's supplicants were denied appeal to the Virgin: to sustain the jobs of bureaucrats. Caravaggio, at least, shows us the Virgin, in all her gorgeous anatomy, before instructing us not to look at her and redirecting our guilty eyes to that string of wooden beads hanging from the priest's fingers. The priests of the new church are not so generous. Beauty, in their domain, is altogether elsewhere, and we are left counting the beads and muttering the texts of academic sincerity. (28)

However, the undeniable power of beauty lies in what Hickey calls its "democratic appeal"(30) — while in front of our eyes there is no way to doubt beauty — we simply know that it there and that it is true. It is only later (when that moment had passed) that we start doubting what was it that we actually saw, or if we indeed saw it. And at that point the speculants of meanings come with their words and arguments of why certain things have the moral right to exist and

other things must be eliminated in the name of 'the system'.

Hickey thus speaks of a moment when he — among politically correct art shows of the time, which in order to demonstrate "honesty" and "sincerity" would generally "incorporate raw plywood" (24) — encountered beauty. It was in an exhibition called *The Perfect Moment* of Robert Mapplethorpe's erotic images — one of the "magic occasions" when the private visual litigation that good art conducts might expand into the more efficacious litigation of public politics – and challenge some of the statutory restrictions on the conduct.. A single artist with a single group of images had somehow managed to overcome the aura of moral isolation, gentrification and mystification that surrounds the practice of contemporary art in this nation and directly threaten those in actual power with his celebration of marginality. (28)

It was precisely the beauty of Mapplethorpe's images, with its direct appeal to the beholder, Hickey maintains, that made those images "dangerously persuasive", disdaining the umbrella of "the care" of the bureaucratic apparatus. And for this Mapplethorpe was put on trial, charged for corruption, while the American art community:

> at the apogee of its power and privilege chose to play the ravaged virgin. . [and] to ignore the specific issues raised by Mapplethorpe's photographs in favor of the "higher politics". It came out strenuously in defense of the status quo. . (28)

It is by virtue of beauty, Hickey claims, that art challenges the status quo of the established structure. After the sight and experience of beauty reaches from the art work directly to the beholder, without the bureaucratic mediation, a possibility of change is introduced — the system of oppression is disclosed for what it is — the therapeutic institution with its clerks is exposed as the "moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization" (28).

> Yet the vernacular of beauty, in its democratic appeal, remains a potent instrument for change in this civilization. Mapplethorpe uses it, as does Warhol, as does Ruscha, to engage individuals within and without the cultural ghetto in arguments about what is good and what is beautiful. And they do so without benefit of clergy, out in the street, out on the margin.. (30)

Beauty thereby stands as a force against a monopoly on art of any value-laden dominant discourse, which in our time, as Hickey shows, involves the bureaucratic institutions that the art establishment and the academia have become — with their overly-sophisticated, politically correct, and dry language that has become so predictable that it can be used mechanically by repeating ready-made phrases. In the face of this 'new academism' one starts to understand why 'people on the street' don't believe that contemporary art has anything to do with them or their lives; and think of it as something strange, nonsensical, degenerate. That is to say, while the "priests of the new therapeutic institutions" seem to understand one another so self-evidently, speaking as it were in one voice — the art generated and supported by them has in the meantime turned in the eyes of anyone outside of the self-promoting system into something incomprehensible, alien, and disconnected from reality. The special sophistication with which the new priests speak on art, moreover, reminds us again of the priests of the old church speaking Latin to keep their monopoly on God.

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So — contrary to Danto's allegation against beauty in the name of moral indignation and call for action to correct things — it turns out that beauty is in fact what personifies both morality and action. Beauty, that is, stands out as the negation of any a-priori fixed picture imposed on reality and has the power to break the established discourse, which had lost the capacity for a true and fresh description of reality — or of interaction with reality — and thus became oppressive.[125] In Hickey's words, beauty is the refutation of "the language of symptoms that is profoundly tolerable to the status quo" (30). Beauty introduces the possibility of change.

Art, by essence, must break the old forms of representation that have become inadequate in capturing what is relevant to the time — and thereby became false

125. The "end of art" announced by Danto is then a correct description of the workings of the bureaucratic institutions upon art — after the bureaucrats are done checking the meaning and all the appropriate aspects of the art works, in order for them to qualify, no work of art any longer exists.

— by presenting a new form of representation that collapses the old mold and allows one to see things anew, afresh, truly, in a way that is unrepeated and unrepeatable — in a way that makes us feel: "this could not have been otherwise". Only then, we see, know, feel and understand that what we are looking at must be beautiful — that it is beautiful.

Nelson Goodman in his book *Languages of art*[126] has a notable analysis of the naive form of realism in art, where he proposes that advocating realism in the depiction of reality is no more than adopting entrenched conventions of representation of reality and mistaking those conventions (however established as the privileged means of representation) for depicting reality 'as it really is' — a notion that Goodman clearly dismisses. The same sentiment is also captured earlier in a poem written by Nietzsche about 'realistic' painters:

Realistic Painters

"True to nature, all the truth: that's art."
This hallowed notion is a threadbare fable.
Infinite is nature's smallest part.
They paint what happens to delight their heart.
And what delights them? What to paint they're able.

Realistic Painters paint "what they're able" while maintaining that they are "true to nature". In this they make a mistake that is in philosophy called a naturalistic fallacy, i.e. mistaking what you master or can do for what you should do or must do. In other words, it amounts to insisting on the conventional practice of representation as the transparent capturing of the metaphysical form of reality — confusing between 'what is' to 'what should be'. Joining here with Goodman and Nietzsche we can conclude that there is nothing necessarily 'more realistic' about realism in art than the fact that it happens to be the common practice of depicting reality.[127]

A (true) work of art must thus be an extension of the existing "entrenched" standards

126. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art, An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., Indianapolis/Cambridge 1976.
127. For the discussion of realism in art in the light of Goodman see Doron Avital, *Singular Rule*, in The Journal of Aesthetic Education, Volume 41, Number 1, Spring 2007.

— challenging the given fashioning of values in the form of rules whose application or employment is pre-established in advance, as if rules were, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, "railroads to infinity", prescribing every time in advance what is the application of each rule. In contrast to this model or picture Wittgenstein in his later writings sees as his mission to free us, and philosophy as a whole, from the (conceptual) chains of this picture. Art presents itself as a model example here, for in art a rule gets defined only when it's meaning is being re-invented or extended by each application. An artwork, that is, goes against the literal reading of rules and norms, against the expected default employment of every value as a prescription that tells you what to do in every circumstance. In art rules are not a prescription but an invitation to re-invent, in light of history, as well as in concrete context or need. With respect to expected default prescriptions of rules, the artist who is accused of betraying (default) principles of the past (as we saw with Picasso, Manet, etc.), turns out in retrospect to be the one who is in fact true to the past and its established practice and norms — and by way of extending the norms he or she exemplifies responsibility before the future, as well as the legacy of the past.

Let us take as example again Picasso and the reaction he got from the public and his friends when he introduced cubism into art, by which he at once broke all the expected default prescriptions of rules — in his time a reaction of an utter shock and disregard — while from the perspective of today the cubist style is considered the logical, the inevitable and the essential continuation, i.e. the only possible extension of the artistic tradition. On the other hand, if an artist today would seriously attempt to compose a cubist painting, he would be addressing a problem belonging to the past, and his painting would without any doubt come out ridiculous and out of place. An artwork cannot be a repetition of an answer to a question of the past — borrowing solutions that belong to previous problems, and using what is familiar and what has already proved to give result. The meanings of words and concepts, aesthetic considerations, values, and norms, the point is, have to be all the time re-invented in the face of the question of the time.

Wittgenstein speaks of the "form of life" in the sense that may remind us of Hegel's zeitgeist, i.e. as the (political, social, cultural) context, in which things make sense, and which the artist must live fully. A problem of the time, let us say, is something like a pain that everybody carries feeling that something does not hold — and the true artist, in the sense of the word that Plato spoke of, is someone who knows how to define and solve

that problem, and move forward in tackling the difficulty and pain of the time. A work of art is a junction, a point in time, where the artist, in complete freedom, extends all the existing and competing rules simultaneously, employing all the (relevant) resources — there are no spares in the work of art, everything is in the game, and the reality is completely present — in order to find a resolution of the question of the time in legislating for us the meanings of things, of what is true, what is beautiful, and what is just. Only then the work is singular, and in its singularity perfect.

When face to face with a work of art that answers to the problem of the time, we feel — to use Wittgenstein's terminology — the "friction" of the work working against the oppressive model imposed by the established system of power. The "metaphysical comfort" that art offers, which Nietzsche spoke of, is then a sense of relief of getting rid of the frustration when feeling something is wrong, while you cannot show it and you cannot share it. And beauty that accompanies art is a voice speaking with the plea for the future, with the eye to the most intelligent, in hope that what is true will eventually shine through — beauty is the refutation of cynicism, and the refutation of kitsch. Beauty is the 'cultural oxygen' that we need in order to resist any oppression from suffocating us, in order for us to stay alive and breathing.

Art without God

When Nietzsche spoke on art in the context of his time, he contrasted art against science as its main counter-force, i.e. as representing the modern rationality. Modernity, that is to say, replaced God by rationality — the reason became the arbiter, the judge, the new anchor, once God disappeared. Nevertheless, once reason was translated into a set of rules — in the attempt to make things 'precise' and prevent any accident or possible confusion — there was no way to locate art as something that is the manifestation of beauty. The concept of beauty obviously cannot answer to the scheme 'if such and such is the case then so' as it is in science, which became the standard of modernity. And since modernity was an attempt to set things once and for all — art came out as local, contextual, subjective, confusing, and for this reason subject to manipulation and misunderstandings of different kind. Post-modernity was consequently an attack on the claim over the objectivity of the modernist criteria, introducing and emphasizing precisely the aspect of the political context of the time and with it the sense of relativity.

To this the answer (again) is Kant and his statement that art is super-objective — i.e. that a work of art sets its own rules and at the same time answers to them. An artist is someone (and here we are paraphrasing Nietzsche) who frees the object from the force of generality imposed on nature by science and practicality of life (Plato's ordinary object) and in presenting the object as unique and singular, shows its beauty.[128] When we understand that the object could not be but what it is, as exemplified in a given artwork — we get the necessity of things having to be a certain way, knowing that this is it, this is what it is, the only way it could have been, and we thus cannot force the object to look different than the way the artist presented it — then we indeed feel: this is beautiful!

To the modernist assertion that nature without God must answer to rules, Nietzsche responds: without God men must legislate as if life was a work of art, where the only criteria to judge whether things are right or wrong, true or false is an aesthetic criteria — it is the beauty of things that determines whether they are true or false

128. An artwork, then, to follow Kant again, must be singular - something that sets its own rules and answers to them — and beauty is the indication that indeed this is so.

and the grace of a conduct or a deed that reveals whether right or wrong. Art is thus always political (the way Plato took it to be) in the sense of that it is a place from where the liberating force gets its anchor.

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Let us now try to organize the various concepts of our discussion into a coherent picture. We have countered the arts and the sciences as two opposing forces competing in a sense. If science, as well as the practicality of life, must work with generalizations, treating things as being the same, from the same chair to the same atom — art in contrast is centered around singularity.

We must pay attention to the difference between a thing being a particular, as a particular chair, or a particular molecule, to the thing being singular. A particular is thus particular in virtue of many other such particulars being the same, and the fact that all such particulars answer to the same generalization amounts to a concept or a rule. Hence all particular chairs or atoms are such (particulars because from the perspective of science or practice they are the same) that they answer to the same constrain: say all chairs serve the constrain that they can be used for sitting purposes, and all atoms that they answer to a definition of some scientific theory or to a set of defining scientific rules.

This is the point of departure for the work of art that it is, or must strive to be, singular — that it answers only to itself as a rule, is both a rule and its unique application, and is setting a problem and uniquely solving it — or in a terminology of a game, that it sets itself as a game and shows itself as the sole winner of its own game or it's set of rules.[129]

In fact the critic or the observer when he or she views a work of art in order to evaluate it or its force, they do it with a critical eye aiming to undermine the work's claim for singularity. That it is singular in the sense just described must mean that it is beautiful, since we fully realize a (physical) presence that is unrepeated and unrepeatable — it cannot be but be what it is. The force of beauty, that is, must be such that we understand that the thing – being what it is

129. The notion of 'singular rule' as a metaphor for a work of art is developed by Doron Avital in *Art as a Singular Rule*.

– could not have been (presented) otherwise – that what the artwork is and how it impresses itself upon us are one.

Let us think of an element of nature presenting before us that it cannot be but what it is — any variation would make it something else, no alteration possible — we must surrender and think: real perfection, real beauty is present. This is the sense in which art is a liberating force for nature as well as for our lives, since what the perspective of science sees as particulars belonging to a general term — i.e. a particular mountain to the concept of "being a mountain" — the perspective of art on the contrary can, let us say through a masterful painting of a landscape, rescue the mountain from it's, as it were, scientific anonymity, and reveal it's unique, unrepeated, singular grandness — i.e. show it as beautiful. In such picture of a mountain there would be no longer a real difference between the what of the work and its how — what the work depicts and how it does it are one.[130]

This is where art can be seen as a therapeutic power, offering "metaphysical comfort", since if, for example, a life story of a hero is viewed from the perspective of science, say, of modern psychology or modern sociology, and its reliance on generalizations in the form of statistic tools, no real comfort could be offered neither to the hero, whose life is played on stage, nor to us, the observers. But if the tragic drama of the hero's life, on the other hand, finds notable artistic expression in a singular tale of a courageous struggle, i.e. as beautiful however painful, than Nietzsche's metaphysical comfort is being hereby offered.

This is also where necessity meets its counterpart, freedom, and where ethics and aesthetics are one — since the ethical dilemma must be such that it is construed as singular, unique set of circumstances and values mutually competing, leaving the agent of the dilemma without pre-established answer as to the course of action that he would be able to abstract from the past experience. All answers abstracted from past dilemmas, that is, are now offering contradicting and competing

130. If indeed it is a work of singularity, we will identify it as both a rule and its unique application, since there could be no other work answering to the work itself as a rule – then the work, rule and the application are one, the what and the how are one, as two sides of the same coin, and we are free to choose which side of the coin to label as the how, and which side as the what, i.e. which as a rule, and which as an application of the rule. See Doron Avital, *Art as a Singular Rule*.

directions, while declaring to the agent that he must follow them. Now if indeed the ethical dilemma is true, singular in a sense that there is no easy escape in the form of an answer literally borrowed from the past — i.e. that it is unique in its circumstances — then we must allow the agent full freedom to re-define all values in competition, so that when in retrospect we analyze his actions, we would be able to charge them either with a failure of repeating an answer taken from the past and therefore avoiding confronting the dilemma in its full force, or that we acknowledge that he did indeed successfully and uniquely chart a new answer and a new course of action in the face of the dilemma — i.e we acknowledge the resolution taken by the agent as a necessary one. The freedom to re-define all rules and values, to extend them anew, is the precondition for us to be able judge the course of events, and acknowledge their given resolution as necessary.

Now coming to the connection between the ethics and aesthetics. The artist, who faces the demands and pains of his time, while carrying the teachings of his schooling and the knowledge of the artworks of the masters of the past as the source of inspiration — think of the young Picasso in this context — must be given full freedom to engage with the artistic dilemma he happens to be part of in order to be able to carve a new direction. This means that all that he commands from techniques to values are now at his service, and he is completely free to extend them, to translate them anew within his work so that the art he creates indeed impresses us as necessary — i.e. that the problem he sets is unique in such way that only the work itself could be its answer, and only then the artwork is indeed singular and therefore beautiful. To phrase it in terms closer to those of Kant — the artwork sets itself as a new standard to what beauty is — a new standard or criteria of beauty, which, in the language of Wittgenstein, could be added to the family of standards that makes up the family of the beautiful. All the newly found criteria would from then on serve all future artists by way of guiding them again in their quest for singularity and beauty, while — in face of the nature of beauty and singularity as explained here — will not impose any one vision answers to all or an in advance concept of beauty — instead will inspire by their own unique tale of finding the beautiful to find beauty again and anew.

Beauty Again

Beauty, as Dave Hickey explained, became subject to a bureaucracy of meaning, which is a process inherent to the logic and character of the modern system of power itself. However, since beauty is essential to art in the sense that beauty is ultimately the outcome of the legislation of a new standard or a value — and the sign that we are able to see reality truly — beauty ultimately cannot be eliminated from the world. As a matter of fact, beauty in recent years began to re-emerge in contemporary art — even though quietly and not as an aim in itself (which is innate to beauty, after all).

Since in the last eight years I have worked as a curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery in Prague, and experiencing works of art was part of my daily practice, I want to think about some of the main issues we have spoken of in the context of the exhibitions of contemporary art that I have curated at the National Gallery. I will do this in the following pages.

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Martin Káňa, *Atomo*, 2001
Fiberglass, chipboard, araldite, varnish
sklolaminát, dřevotříska, araldit, lak

Sculpture Today

They say new language, and they mean new words and sentences;
I say new language, and I mean new letters.
Anonymous

Sculpture in the traditional sense has in recent decades almost vanished from our awareness. Few sculptures were made, there was no prominent or distinct sculptural style, and it was not entirely clear what sculpture was or what was its subject.
The exhibition Sculpture Today reflects such questions rather than answering them. Consequently, it has the character of a sketch. In a certain sense, however, it is a specific selection – all the works are somehow similar, and together they create an atmosphere that takes over the space they share.
It is possible to say that all the present works exist outside of the fashionable trend of the conceptual intellectualism, which came to dominate art of the last ten years, to the effect that the difference between art and language, work of art and idea, began to disappear. Works of art were replaceable by words (entire sentences, paragraphs), and became a virtuous illustration of a game with the language itself, where the concept existed independently of an art work.
The works on display here express the fact that the conceptual language used in art in such manner has been exhausted. That is, it got stuck on the level of mannerist tricks and skilful manipulation of the already existing means of expression, acquiring thus flair of certain decadence.
Each of the sculptures here participates in a search for a new visual language, for new ways of expression. For such language to be fresh, free from stereotypes and ideological and philosophical baggage, it is necessary to look for a new visual alphabet.
As a response to intellectualized phrases, the art works displayed here – in their apparent and unconcealed naiveté – may be understood as the letters of a yet undefined pictorial language. It is not clear whether this alphabet will become the foundation of a new language and a meaningful communication. The search is merely intuitive. The works declare nothing, make no claim to being avant-garde, and declare no war to nobody. They do not offend nor underestimate the viewer, neither do they tire him or her. On the contrary, the art works invite to meet, quietly, with no words, without a clear concept, and with no undertone of sophistication.

Karolina Dolanská

Socha dnes

Říkají nový jazyk, a mají na mysli nová slova a věty;
Já říkám nový jazyk, a myslím nová písmena.
Neznámý autor

Socha v tradičním slova smyslu se v posledních několika desetiletích téměř vytratila z našeho povědomí. Mnoho soch nevznikalo, neexistoval žádný výrazný nebo zřetelný sochařský styl a nebylo zcela jasné, co vlastně socha je a co je jejím námětem.
Výstava Socha dnes je reflexí těchto otázek více než odpovědí na ně. Má proto jako celek charakter skici. V jistém smyslu je to však výběr specifický — všechna díla zde přítomná jsou si v něčem podobná a společně se také podílejí na atmosféře, jež ovládá jimi sdílený prostor. Lze říci, že se jedná vesměs o díla, která existují mimo módní proud konceptuálního intelektualismu, jenž ovládl umění posledních desetiletí tak, že se ztrácel rozdíl mezi uměním a jazykem, dílem a myšlenkou. Umělecká díla byla nahraditelná slovy (celými větami, odstavci) a stávala se bravurní ilustrací hry s jazykem samým, kde koncept existoval odděleně od umělecké tvorby.
Přítomná díla jsou výrazem toho, že konceptuální jazyk takto v umění používaný je vyčerpán. Uvízl v rovině manýristických hrátek a zručné manipulace výrazových prostředků již existujících a mnohokrát použitých, a získal proto nádech jisté dekadence.
Každé ze zde přítomných děl se podílí na hledání nového vizuálního jazyka, nového způsobu vyjadřování. K tomu, aby byl tento jazyk čerstvý, bez stereotypů, ideologických a filosofických nánosů a zátěží, je třeba hledat novou vizuální abecedu.
V reakci na zintelektualizované fráze lze přítomná díla, v jejich zjevné a neskrývané naivitě, chápat na úrovni písmen nějakého ještě nedefinovaného obrázkového písma. Není jasné, jestli abeceda, na jejímž utváření se podílejí, se stane základem nového jazyka a smysluplné komunikace. Hledání je zatím jen intuitivní. Díla nic nedeklarují, neohlašují se jako avantgarda, nevyhlašují nikomu válku. Neuráží ani nepodceňují diváka, neunavují. Naopak, zvou k setkáni, tiše a beze slov, bez jasného konceptu a jakéhokoli sofistikovného podtónu.

Karolina Dolanská

I curated the exhibition *Sculpture Today* in 2005 when I started working as the curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery in Prague. This was when I returned to Prague after nine years of living and studying art history and art theory in New York City.

I found the art scene in Prague, at least within the circles I found myself in, immersed in a strange sort of 'intellectual conceptualism', which was politically loaded yet based on a language that I felt was running on empty — as if moving in a vacuum cut away from anything real (by the time I encountered it anyway).

Nevertheless, I soon discovered, that underneath (or on the side) of what presented itself as the mainstream, emerged works of young artists, whose characteristics stood for a kind of anti-thesis to the fashionable conceptualism of that time — a direct dialog with classical art genres, emphasis on artistic craft and skill, sharp aesthetics of the material and physical presence, the presence of beauty. In the end it was those works that at first looked like single examples that eventually created in a my eyes a whole new picture of what the current art scene looked like and could look like.

For the show I selected works of sculpture exclusively, finding it fascinating to envision art history of the last decades in terms of sculpture as the main figure, instead of a background to other genres. The young sculptors were in their works, however naively, re-thinking the issue of communication in art, but not by making theories ahead of their works, but by searching for the means of communication on the most basic level of the aesthetics of a new visual language.

Words and means of expression, as we know, must anticipate new possibilities of capturing and describing reality, which of course would be impossible to do by using phrases – something pre-fabricated and ready-made in advance. A work of art is not an illustration of something that was already discovered and described, but is in itself a discovery of what could not have been seen and said until that work of art came into being.

The moment captured in the exhibition was, I thought, that of a language in the making, as if from the beginning, afresh, by crafting of new letters and with them trying to create new words.

It is not surprising, after all, that it would be sculpture coming to remind us that a work of art is more than an intriguing concept. For sculpture inhabits the same three-dimensional space as we do and has a real physical presence. We cannot

grasp a sculpture simply as an idea or a sight — in order to see it, we must move around it, in and out of it, follow its gestures, close and to a distance, in a mutual dance of a sort. The understanding we have of a sculpture we gain by taking an active part in the art work. The directness of such experience, taking place in real space and time, in a physical encounter, endowed the works with realness and familiarity, so that one ended up feeling as if knowing and understanding the works in the most basic sense, even if not exactly sure of what they were saying. And this is what happens when we encounter something new — we recognize it while we know that we never saw anything like it before. The truly new comes in silence.

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Lenka Melkusová, *Little Sister*, 2004, porcelain
Sestřička, 2004, porcelán

Lenka Melkusová, Milan Houser

Milan Houser, *Ball*, 2000, laminated plastic, plexiglass,
Koule, 2000, laminát, plexisklo,

Martina Chloupa, *Sitting Object,* 2005, laminated plastic
Objekt na sezení, 2005, laminát

Jiří Černický, Martina Chloupa

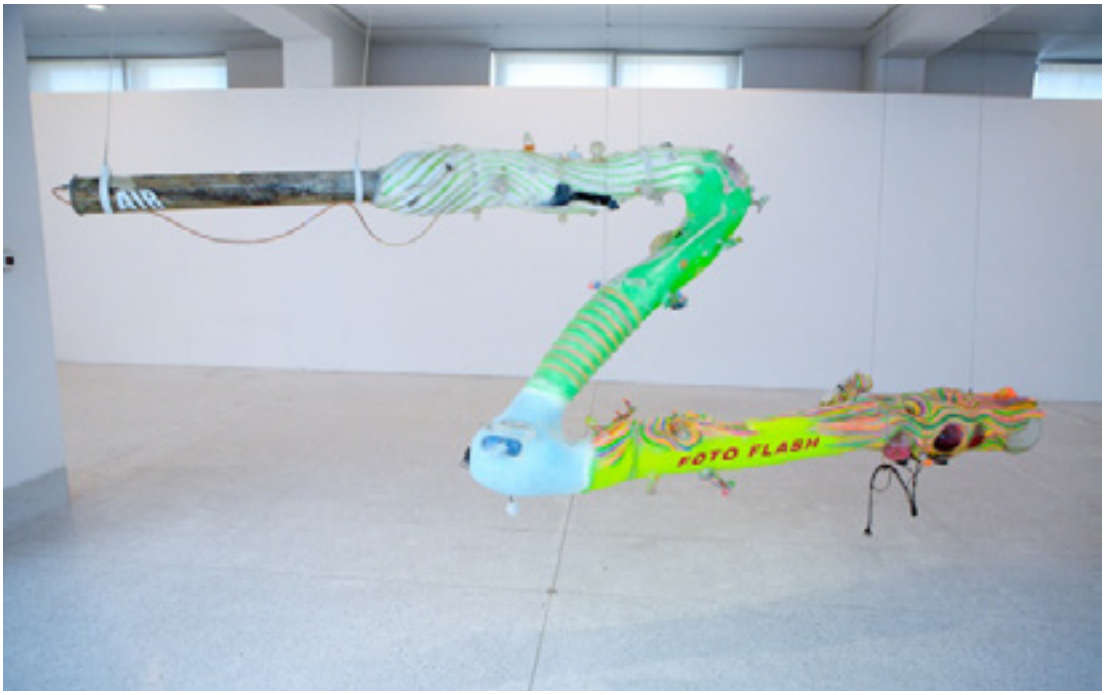
Jiří Černický,
Home Explosion, 1998, *(Nuclear Explosion According to Latest Fashion)*
glass, electric installation
Domácí výbuch, 1998, *(Nukleární exploze podle poslední módy)*
sklo, elektroinstalace

Markéta Melkusová, *Bathing,* 2005, polyester, binding agents
Koupání, 2005, polyester, tmely

Paulina Skavová, Markéta Melkusová, Jiří Černický

Karel Přáda, Paulina Skavová

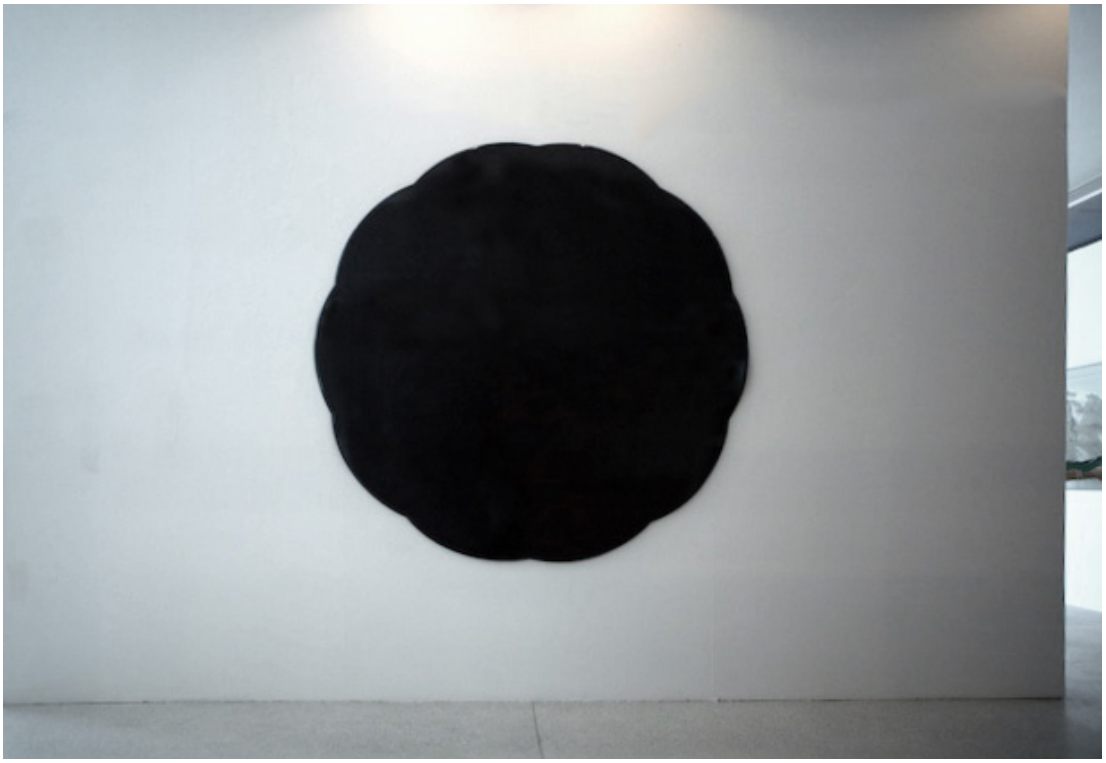
Paulina Skavová, *Underwear – Size S,* 2002
(Collection of Underwear as Protection), copper mesh
Underwear – velikost S, 2002
(Kolekce spodního prádla jako ochrany), měděné pletivo



Jiří Černický, *Photoflash*, 1996, silicon, plastic, glass
Fotoflash, 1996, silikon, plasty, sklo

Jiří Černický, Martin Káňa

Martin Káňa, *Scooter*, 1997-9, wood, laminated plastic
dřevo, laminát



Patrik Križovenský, *Mandala*, 2001-2, wood, autolack
dřevo, autolak

Petr Písařík, Martin Káňa, Tomáš Medek

Patrik Križovenský, Petr Písařík, Tomáš Medek, Lenka Melkusová

Petra Valentová, Pavel Doskočil

Petra Valentová
Market Art ... So Long Ago
I Can´t Remember, 2001
laminated plastic, plastic, metal, plexiglass
laminát, plast, kov, plexisklo

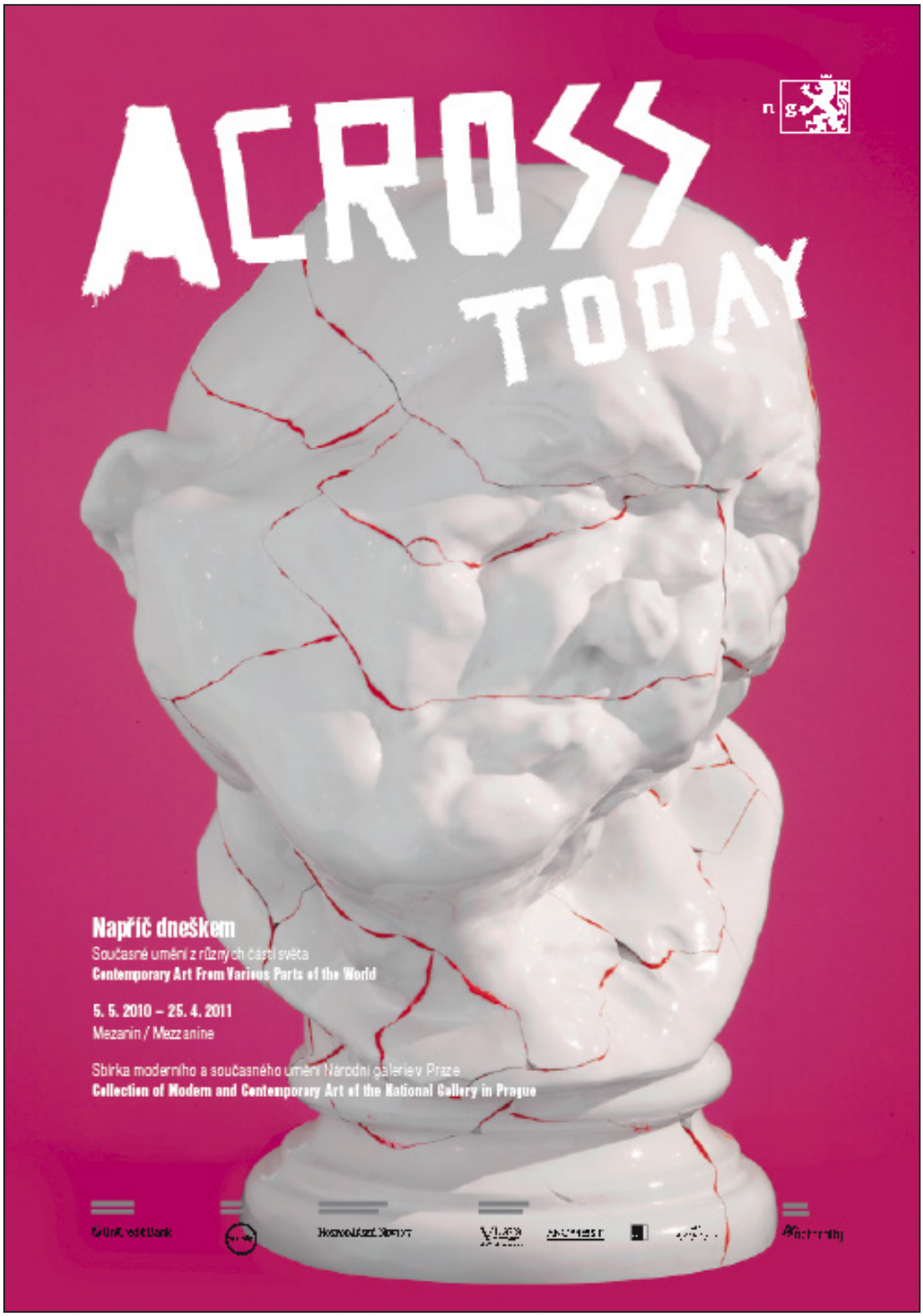
Isabela Groseová, Milan Hauser

Lucie Ferlíková, Jan Klimeš, Jan Kovařík

Benedikt Tolar, *Crriissis*, 2004, wood, rubber
Krriizze, 2004, dřevo, guma

Jiří Černický, *The First Serially-Produced Schizophrenia*, 1998
laminate, foam, textile, varnish
První sérivě vyrábená schizofrenie, 1998
laminát, pěna, textil, lak

The Small Hall, The Trade Fair Palace, The National Gallery in Prague
Malá dvorana, Veletržní palác, Národní galerie v Praze


ACROSS
TODAY
Napříč dneškem
Současné umění z různých částí světa
Contemporary Art From Various Parts of the World
5. 5. 2010 – 25. 4. 2011
Mezanin / Mezzanine
Sbírka moderního a současného umění Národní galerie v Praze
Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art of the National Gallery in Prague

ACROSS TODAY

Napříč dneškem

Contemporary Art from Various Parts of the World

In connection with globalization we hear about the collapse of time, space, distance ("death of distance"), and about the flat world (Thomas Friedman) created by the virtual reality of the internet, film and mass media. The exchange of data and information in this virtual world is instantaneous. All differences, the uniqueness of things and places, as well as the individual character of people, consequently melts down in the constant flow of anonymous, faceless data, news-bits, and images within the virtual arena that we are engulfed in.

How does such situation reflect in art? Despite the anticipated end of everything as we know it – including the classic art genres – the traditional painting, sculpture and photography still maintain their 'up-to-date-ness' in contemporary art alongside with the new media. Moreover, the classic art genres seem even fresher, more alive than the new media. Why is that?

The explanation might be simple. Globalization in art, intertwined with the spirit of democratization that sought out the universal common denominator, has brought works of art that do not have to be seen in actuality because any encounter with them is fully substitutable by a reproduction, a photograph, even a mere description or a verbal explanation. Nevertheless, in the moment when such virtual work of art came to represent a standard of a sort, it has also become a background against which any real gesture suddenly stands out again. That is, against the background of the universal neutral world of global media, which became the basis of our thought, feeling and perception, the physical presence of real people, things, places, works of art, acquires a whole new force, meaning and intensity. And because an encounter is no longer centred around the exchanging of information—since all data is permanently and universally available—a simple happening such as common experiencing of a present unique moment in a specific place becomes a luxury and a real joy. Likewise, an individual likeness, an identity, a nationality, stands out like a colour against a grey background, and we can now see it clearly.

The art works on display, coming from different parts of the world, are universally comprehensible and relevant to the degree to which they represent a specific angle of perceiving reality bound to the specific context of their respective origin. In their diversity they do not testify to the relativity of all values but on the contrary to the inevitability of the existence of different values representing the inner necessity of a given practice of life—not of rules imposed from the outside. Although the art works use a globally comprehensible vocabulary, they do not represent global art – perhaps only the possibility of a global respect for local differences — for the existence of global art is no more real than the existence of some neutral, universally valid perspective of approaching reality.

Karolina Dolanská

ACROSS TODAY

Napříč dneškem

Současné umění z různých částí světa

V souvislosti s globalizací se mluví o kolapsu času, prostoru, vzdálenosti ("death of distance"), o plochosti světa (Thomas Friedman), tvořeného virtuální realitou internetu, filmu, masových médií. Předávání dat a výměna informací je v tomto virtu
álním světě instantní. Všechny rozdíly, veškerá unikátnost věcí a míst, jakož i individuální charakter lidí se tak rozplývají v nepřetržitém anonymním proudu informací, útržků zpráv a obrazových dat virtuální arény, jež nás obklopuje.

Jak se tato situace odráží ve výtvarném umění? Navzdory předpokládaným koncům všeho, co známe, včetně tradičních uměleckých žánrů, si tradiční obraz, socha a fotografie v současném umění vedle nových médií neustále udržují svou aktuálnost, dokonce se snad v této chvíli zdají čerstvější, živější než nová média. Čím to?

Vysvětlení je možná snadné. Globalizace v umění, provázaná duchem demokratizace, jejímž cílem bylo nalézt univerzálního společného jmenovatele, vedla k tomu, že vznikala díla, která nebylo třeba ve skutečnosti vidět. Setkání s nimi bylo plně nahraditelné reprodukcí, fotografií, či pouhým popisem, verbálním vysvětlením. Ve chvíli, kdy takové virtuální dílo začalo představovat jakýsi standard, se nicméně

stalo zároveň pozadím, na němž se každé reálné gesto najednou znovu profiluje. Tedy na pozadí univerzálního neutrálního světa globálních médií, jenž se stal základem myšlení, cítění a vnímání, nabývá tak fyzická přítomnost skutečných lidí, věcí, míst, uměleckých děl novou sílu a význam. A jelikož se při setkání již nejedná o výměnu informací, neboť všechna data jsou neustále a univerzálně k dispozici, prosté zážitky jako společné prožívání přítomného neopakovatelného momentu na konkrétním místě se stávají luxusem a skutečnou radostí. Stejně tak individuální podoba, identita, národnost vyvstává jako barva na šedém pozadí a my jsme nyní schopni ji skutečně vnímat.

Vystavovaná díla pocházející z různých koutů světa, jsou univerzálně srozumitelná a aktuální do míry, do níž reprezentují specifický úhel pohledu na realitu spojený s konkrétním kontextem svého původu. Ve své rozmanitosti nevypovídají o relativitě hodnot, ale naopak o reálné nezbytnosti existence odlišných hodnot, představujících vnitřní nutnost dané životní praxe, ne z vnějšku projektované pravidlo. Přítomná díla sice používají globálně srozumitelný jazyk, ale nereprezentují globální umění – jen možnost globální úcty k lokálním odlišnostem – neboť globální umění neexistuje o nic víc než neutrální všeobecně platná perspektiva výpovědi o skutečnosti.

Karolina Dolanská

The exhibition *Across Today* dealt with the issue of globalization in art, which is often spoken of, but it is in fact not that clear what globalization means, what it amounts to, and what its implications are.

The basic premise of the exhibiton was my conviction that there is no such thing as a neutral, universally valid perspective of approaching and viewing of reality — something that globalization is actually often equated with. From this also follows that in order to be international, universal, worldly, one must always speak from the point of view of one's own experience — in the present tense and in the first person — not to imitate whatever happens to be in a given moment considered as the "worldly trends". An artist, that is, must completety exemplify the condition he or she lives in, and only through knowing something intimately, from inside, it is possible to discover true meanings and to find real expression of things and ideas.

A true artist is someone who extends rules and norms and who legislates values — not someone who is the fastest in repeating the already entrenched conventions, however fashionable, desired, or demanded those might appear at the time. For whatever is at any given moment considered as the 'hottest trend' often turns out totally irrelevant from the perspective of history (think of the stars celebrated at the bourgeois *Salon* of Manet's time, whose names have completely vanished from history). History is in the end written by people who are too busy to explain or shout out what it is that they are doing at the time, and who legislate and carry the standards that come to be fully manifested and understood only in the process of time.

> Something new in the true sense, opening up a new époque in the development of natural or human happenings, emerges regularly as if in the shadow of the only seemingly new; it is the seemingly new that claims all the attention of the world of the present.[131]

Art is in fact that which must break the mainstream, the fashionable, the expected and the required ways of thinking, seing, experiencing. And this can happen only from a strong stand-point bound to a specific context of one's origins, nationality, gender, location, history — only through the most

131. Milan Machovec, *Ježíš pro moderního člověka*, Akropolis, 2003.

concrete, specific and real it is possible to find the universal and the new. This is the sense in which art has always been political — it always speaks from the point of view of living in a time and place — not outside of it — and only then it can become something that has a relevance beyond time and place. The same authenticity and realness of a specific historical, cultural, and personal perspective is at the basis of any encounter between people and works of art — it is only in the singularity of such 'personal' encounters that urgency and desirability can be generated and shine as a color on the background of a gray mainstream.

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Jan Stoss, *Cross*, 2008, acrylic on canvas (Czech Republic)
Kříž, 2008, akryl na plátně (Česká republika)

Vladimír Pešek, *Sculpture – Kitchen*, 2006-7, akrystal (Czech Republic)
Socha – kuchyně, 2006-7, akrystal (Česká republika)

Haroldo Higa, *Souvenirs Cremosos,* 2004, paper, polystyren (Peru)
papír, polystyren (Peru)

Stanislav Pamukchiev, *Steps*, 2004, resin, wood (Bulgaria)
Kroky, 2004, pryskyřice, dřevo (Bulharsko)

Tian Younghua, *Flags,* 2008, mixed media (China)
Vlajky, 2008, kombinovaná technika (Čína)

Zhao Jungsheng, *Story,* 2004, acrylic on canvas (China)
akryl na plátně (Čína)

Lovermore Kambudzi, *Mbare Musika Market Place*, 2006
oil on canvas (Zimbabwe)
olej na plátně (Zimbabwe)

Tomáš Džadoň, *Domesticated Prefab*, 2009, MDF (Slovak Republic)
Ochočený panelák, 2009, MDF (Slovenská republika)

Unknown artist, *Toys*, 2007, toys purchased by a deserted road in Zimbabwe
Neznámý autor, *Hračky*, 2007, hračky koupené u opuštěné silnice v Zimbabwe

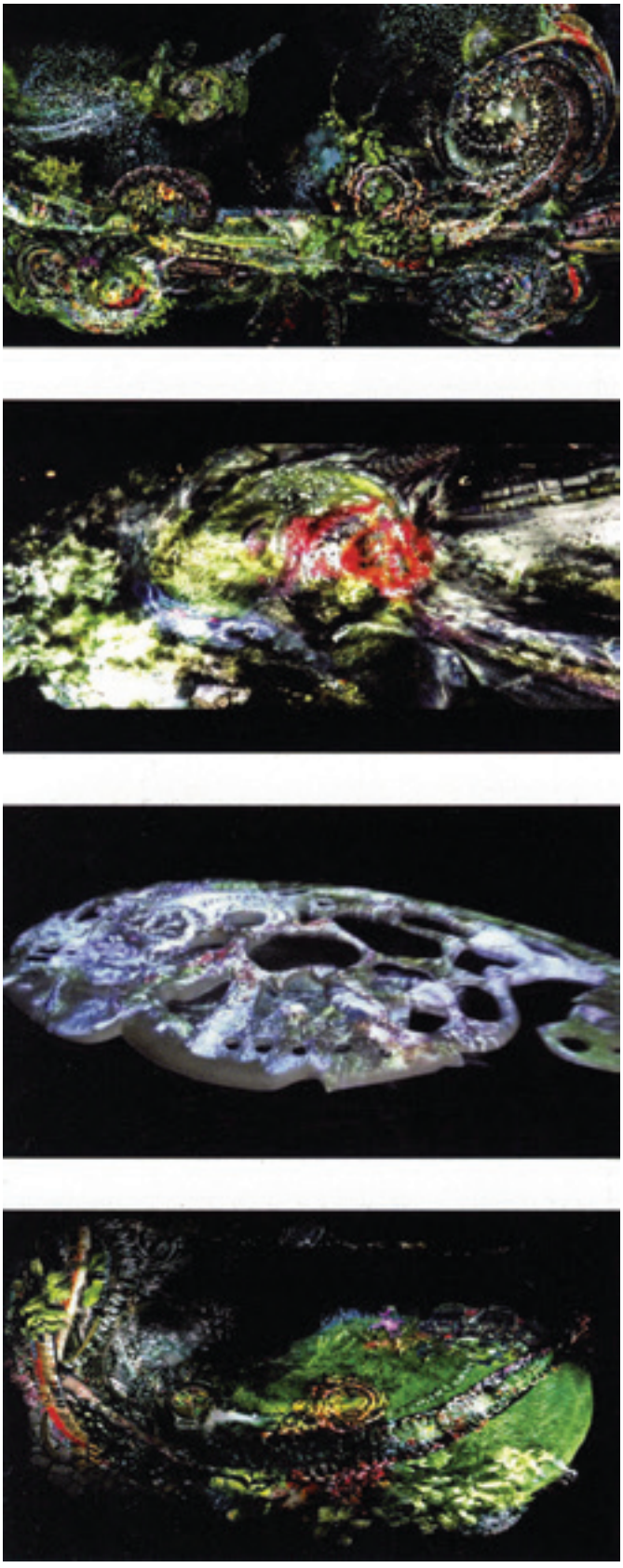
Cédric Lallia, *Human Comedy*, 2005, akrylic on canvas (France)
Lidská komedie, 2005, akryl na plátně (Francie)

Marek Kvetán, *Carpet*, 2006, instalation (Slovak Republic)
Koberec, 2006, instalace (Slovenská republika)

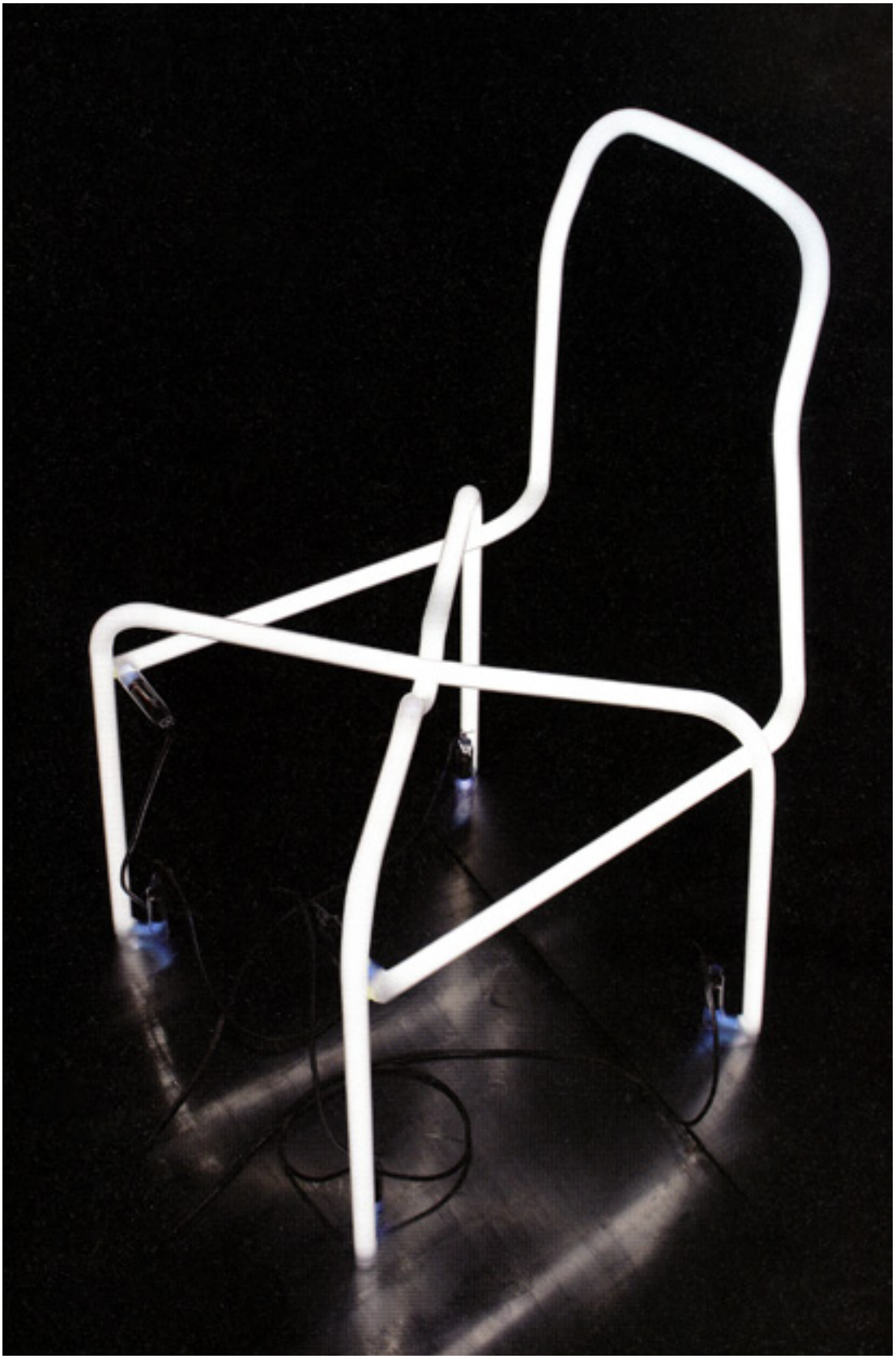
Martin Káňa, *Transformer*, 2002
steel frame, electric engine, polystyrene, epoxy, carbon , (Czech Republic)
T*ransformér*, 2002, ocelová konstrukce, elektrický motor, polystyren,
epoxid, karbon (Česká republika)

Viktor Frešo, Martin Káňa

Viktor Frešo, *This I Call a Sculpture 04*, 2008, wood, metal (Slovak Republic)
Tak tomu říkám socha 04, dřevo, kov (Slovenská republika)



Jakub Nepraš, *Time Crust,* 2008
plexiglass sculpture, DVD (Czech Republic)
plexisklo plastika, DVD (Česká republika

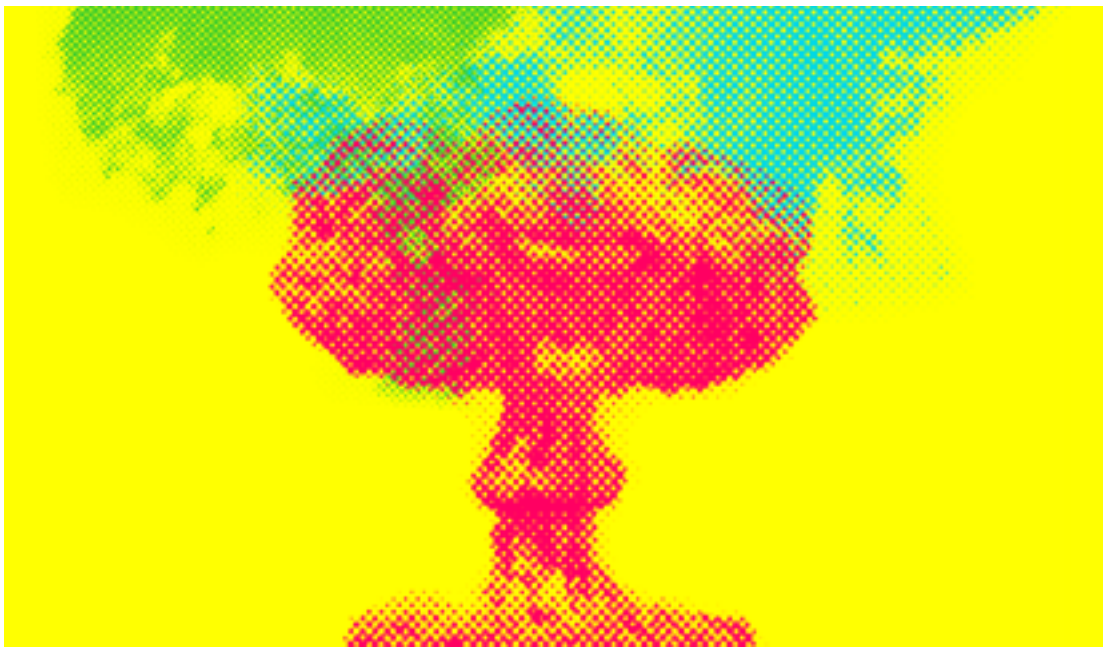


Martin Sedlák, *Neon Chair,* 2000, neon tube (Slovak Republic)
Neon Chair, 2000, neonová trubice (Slovenská republika)

Petra Valentová, *Figures (The Three Graces),* 2004–8, ceramics (USA)
Figurky (Tři Grácie), 2004–8, keramika (USA)

The Small Hall, The Trade Fair Palace, The National Gallery in Prague
Malá dvorana, Veletržní palác, Národní galerie v Praze

Beauty in Freedom



Sketch for the *333 Award* (planned) website, 2011
HMS Studio Prague
Návrh grafiky (plánovaných) webových stránek *Ceny 333*, 2011
HMS Studio Praha

The true artist, for Plato, is someone who by the example of his own life legislates standards, making a work of art out of the life of the community — not someone who produces 'pieces' of art on top of that way of living or who reoproduces what had been already achieved by others. This is why politics, ethics and art are all interconnected in Plato's Ideal state.

As we know already, art is always political in the sense that Plato speaks of it, since it must speak from the point of view of living in its time, where the artist fully exemplifies the condition he (or she) lives in while answering to the rules he (or she) by himself legislates — not repeating the ready-made rules imposed by the current system of power.

I want to devote this last chapture to a group of artists called Ztohoven (a pun in Czech that means both "out of it" and an obscenity) that is known for its provocative interventions in public affairs, by which the group has extended the domain of art into the real social and political space. Art, for Ztohoven, is a way of living and involves shaping and transforming of the political, social and legal

system one lives within. The members of the group are through their actions actually directly touching upon the borders and testing the limits of the political system we are all part of. By such direct encounder and clash with the law and the official norms and rules they, while putting their own lifes at stake, force the system to transform itself. Their art, we might say, and this is what makes Ztohoven so interesting in the context of our discussion, is generated directly within the friction inherent to the extending of rules.

The 'art performance' that perhaps best defined the group was called "Media Reality", which was a fictitious nuclear explosion created by hacking into the ČT2 broadcast appearing in a weather report programme in June 2007:

> One Sunday, early risers gazing at Czech Television's CT2 channel saw picturesque panoramas of the Czech countryside, broadcast to the wordless accompaniment of elevator music. It was the usual narcoleptic morning weather show.
>
> Then came the nuclear blast.
>
> Across the Krkonose Mountains, or so it appeared, a white flash was followed by the spectacle of a rising mushroom cloud. A Web address at the bottom of the screen said Ztohoven.com.[132]

Ztohoven explained that "Media Reality" was "not meant to be threatening but to land softly on the public consciousness so that people won't let themselves be brainwashed."[133]

What makes the performance what it is, moreover, is the fact that while the members of the group were under criminal prosecution facing up to three years in jail or a fine or both, charged with scaremongering and attempted scaremongering, the National Gallery in Prague in the meantime awarded Ztohoven it's most prestegious prize for a work done by young artists — The 333 Award. Milan Knížák, the National Gallery's general director at the time,

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132. "That Mushroom Cloud They're Just Svejking Around", *The New York Times*, January 24, 2008.
133. *Ibid*

explained then that the award was not a statement about the court case but about the work of art that "Media Reality" represented and introduced. The committee of the National Gallery, the official statement went, appreciated the fact that Ztohoven appeared as the only artistic unit with the actual courage and the skill to enter into real public space and put themselves at risk, moreover, by a deed of an aesthetic perfection and of a political message. Art, the general director of the National Gallery concluded, must break the law sometimes, if this reflects the true convictions of the artists and the artwork created requires it, and if, finally, the artists are prepared to carry the consequences of their convictions and actions as part of their art work.

Ztohoven hereby faced a moment, when one hand of the state persecuted them while the other hand awarded them for one and the same thing — all as part of the work of art that took on its own political, ethical and easthetic life. A work of art, that is to say, is always to a large degree centered around posing a problem, aking a question, and searching for the answer that would extend the existing possibilities and thus change the given picture of reality. Ztohoven indeed ask such questions on the level and scale that concerns the society as a whole (Ztohoven's signature is in fact a question mark), and force the society to react and answer to those question through the legal system, and through other procedures that involve the challenging of the entrenched rules and norms of the given political system. The questions asked, then, are universal questions, about what is a state, how it relates to an individual, how its established system restricts the citizens and what it offers them; what are the motives behind the structure of power of the social and political establishment of the time, and the mechanics of its workings together with the instruments that the system uses in applying the power. And, namely, how can one uncover the seeds of a totalitarian regime potentially growing within any system of power, no matter if it is colored in red, green or blue. Ztohoven question things without any right/left political orientation, for their questions are such that they should concern everybody, and that everybody should be able to understand.

The issue of truth is at stake, of course. And with Ztohoven it is clear that truth is interconnected with the aesthetics of action — the way things are done indicates whether the actions are right or wrong, true or false. Truth can be recognized in the degree of the aesthetic sharpness — in how aesthetically convincing things

and actions are, the language is. When something is aesthetically unacceptable, it must be wrong. Ztohoven show us that when the language of the media or the aesthetics of the advertisement is wrong, it must be a lie.

The issue of truth and how it is being presented to us is obviously not dealt with in the politically correct sense of the 1990s, with Noam Chompsky, who wanted to find the truth disguised by the media and by the official system of power by searching for 'raw facts'. Ztohoven on the contrary are fascinated by the reality that facts are something that is created; that a perspective with its ethical and aesthetic judgements, as well as political considerations built inside of it, is an art work of a sort.

We know that we are facing the truth by the aeasthetic of what we are looking at, of what we are hearing. In order for something to be true, the form and the content must be one (which is indeed innate to a work of art). When the form is too decorated, overdramatized or twisted; or one aspect aspect is drawn out of proportion — the way it is done in advertisement, and in the world of mass media — we know that the contend we are getting is false.

Through their public interventions Ztohoven break the mechanics of our automatic accepting of what is served to us by the state, by the law, by the media, by advertisement, and raise our aesthetic and political awareness so that it becomes aesthetically unacceptable for us to consume 'the truth' as a product, without active questioning and the passion to discover and to understand. By their own example Ztohoven wake up in us the desire to actively search for truth in all aspects of our life as a community — just the way art should, as we have discovered throughout this essay.

Ztohoven - Media Reality (Manifesto)

We are no terrorist or political group, our purpose is not to intimidate or manipulate the society in the very same way as we are witnessing in everyday real life or media. No matter the intentions wheather political or those of market, companies, global corporations which secretly manipulate and exert presure on their products and ideas through every channel possible into the human subconsciouness. Even the slightest intrusion into this system, appeal on pure humain intellect, its ability not to be worked upon is by our opinion harmless inside democratic country. Hence the reason why artist group Ztohoven intruded public premises of our capital, Prague, few years ago and managed to impeached advertisement territory in principle as well as advertisement itself. On the June 17th 2007 our group invaded media and television territory intruded and impeached its trueness as well as its credibility. Pointed out the possible confusion of media presented picture of our wolrd for the real one. Is everything that our media such as newspapers, television, internet offer on daily basis real truth or reality? It is this idea that our project is to introduce to general public, sort of reminder to everyone. We truly believe that independet territory of television governed by public law is that kind of media which can handle such thing even at the cost of self impeachement. Let it be this kind of appeal for our future and reminder to any media that the truth must be presented at any cost. We are greateful f or independent media and independent teritory for society.

Ztohoven – Mediální realita (manifest)

Nejsme žádná teroristická ani politická skupina, účelem není jakkoli společnost strašit, či manipulovat, tak jako jsme toho dennodenně svědky ve světě reálném tak mediálním. Ač už to jsou politické zájmy, nebo zájmy trhu, firem, nadnárodních společností skrytě manipulují, tlačí své produkty a ideje všemi možnými cestami do podvědomí občana. Jemné narušení tohoto systému, apel na čistý rozum člověka, jeho neovlivnitelnost, si myslíme nikdy neškodí ani v demokratické zemi. Proto umělecká skupina Ztohoven před několika lety nabourala veřejný prostor hl. města Praha, zpochybnila prostor reklamy v principu, i prostor konkrétní reklamy jako takové. Dne 17.06.2007 napadla mediální prostor, prostor televize. Narušila ho, zpochybnila jeho pravdivost, uveritelnost. Upozornila na možnou zámenu mediálního obrazu světa za svět jako takový, reálný. Je vše, co denně vidíme na obrazovkách televizí pravdou, realitou? Je vše, co je nám médii, novinami, televizí, internetem za pravdu předkládáno opravdu pravdou? Tuto myšlenku má náš projekt uvést, připomenout. Věříme, že i svobodný prostor veřejnoprávní televize takovouto akci a tedy i své vlastní zpochybnění snese, bude apelem pro budoucnost a připomínkou médiím pravdu dále presentovat. Díky za svobodná média, svobodný prostor pro společnost.

Ztohoven*, Media Reality,* 2007, Czech Television's CT2 Panorama
Mediální realita, 2007, program ČT2 Panorama

Krátce z politiky

Piráti se nabourali do vysílání ČT:

Atomový výbuch v přímém přenosu!

Karel Schwarzenberg:

A za magory se neomluvím!

Za jakýkoliv Váš starý vůz dostanete

Atomový výbuch v přímém přenosu!

Piráti se s jaderným výbuchem vloudili do ČT

Co spáchala Ztohovna

Hrozí nárůst počtu policistů

Piráti napadli vysílání České televize

Ztohoven, *Media Reality,* 2007
Mediální realita, 2007

333

The Finalists

The 333 Award of the National Gallery and the ČEZ Group

Installation Views, Artwork Images, Posters, Catalogues

(I only show here the years 2009, 2010, 2011 that I curated)

NG 333 Finalisté Finalists

Cena Národní galerie v Praze a Skupiny ČEZ pro mladé umělce
The National Gallery and ČEZ Group Award for young artists

Třetí ročník ceny pro mladé umělce do 33 let z České a Slovenské republiky
The third year of awarding young artists under the age of 33 from the Czech and Slovak Republics

4. 12. 2009 – 28. 2. 2010

www.ngprague.cz

Výstavu pořádá Národní galerie v Praze – Sbírka moderního a současného umění.
The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery in Prague – Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Respirium 5. patra Veletržního paláce / Respirium of the 5th floor of Veletržní Palace

Otevřeno denně mimo pondělí od 10 do 18 hodin / Open daily except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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Vltava Český rozhlas 3
Grand Princ
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Petr Bařinka, *The End*, 2007–2009, instalation
(*TO*, black rubber textile, red parachute cloth, PVC, ventilator, diodes)
The End, 2007–2009, instalace
(*TO*, černá gumová látka, červená padákovina, pvc, ventilátor, diody)

Karel Kunc, Jakub Janovský, Martina Chloupa, Petr Bařinka

Jakub Janovský, Juraj Kollár

Martin Sedlák, *Gate*, 2008, aluminium and electroluminiscent foil
hliníková a elektroluminiscenční fólie

Petr Stibral, Karel Kunc, Martina Pešková

Vladimír Véla, *Adoration., TEN III., TEN IV.,* 2009
acrylic on canvas, from the *Dowsers* series
Klanění, TEN III., TEN IV., 2009
akryl na plátně, z cyklu *Virgulkáři*

Vladimír Véla, *TEN III.*, 2009,
from the *Dowsers* series, acrylic on canvas
z cyklu *Virgulkáři*, akryl na plátně,
TEN IV., 2009,
from the *Dowsers* series, acrylic on canvas
z cyklu *Virgulkáři*, akryl na plátně,

Martina Chloupa, *Nice and Czech*, 2009, wood, foam rubber, textile
Hezky česky, 2009, dřevo, molitan, látka

The Finalists NG 333

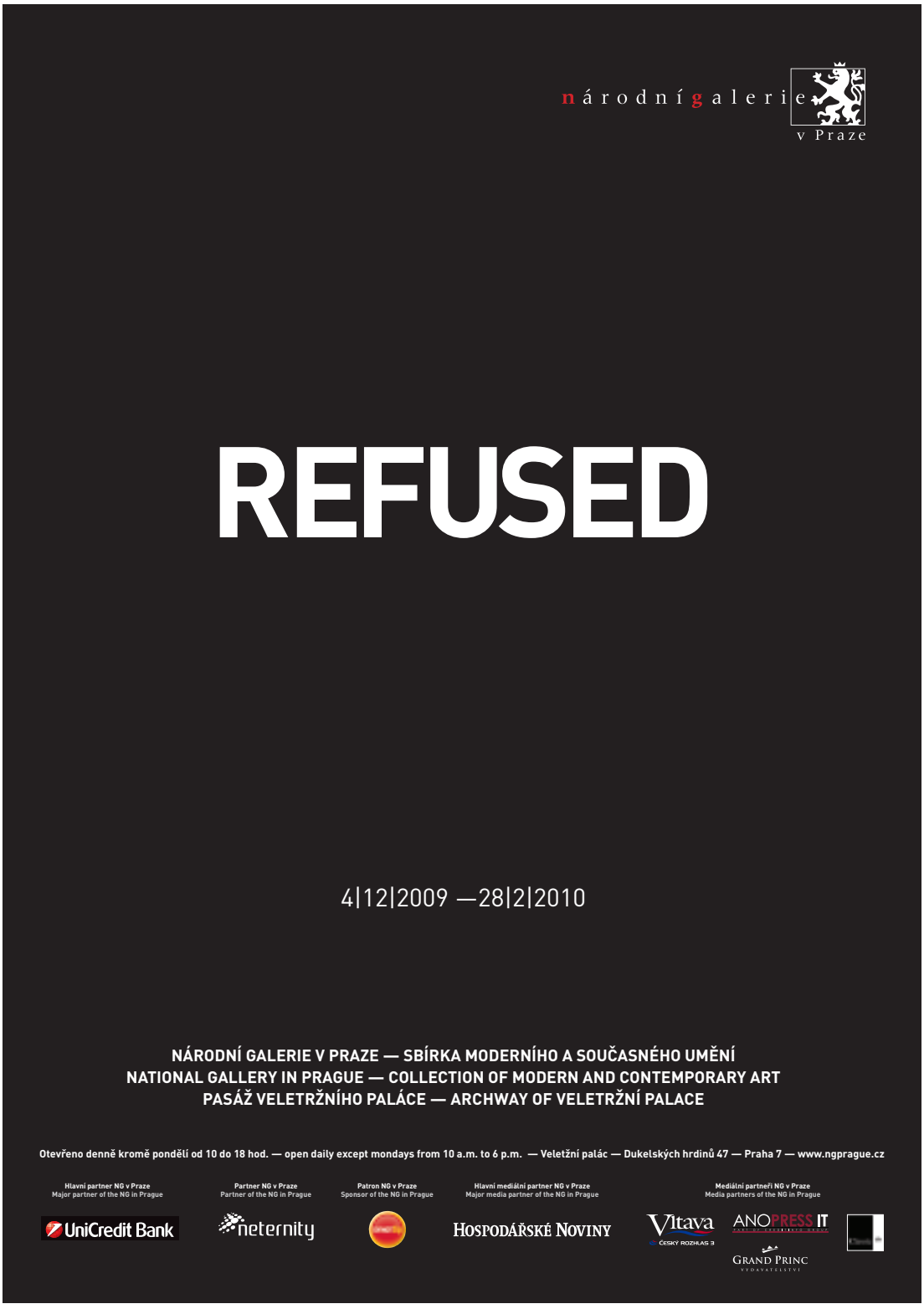
Choosing 11 works out of 129 in a course of a few hours, in a group of people that hardly know one other, is in itself a strange type of an art happening. The selection process was surprisingly fast, taking place in a mutual agreement of values and views. If someone was not part of the general agreement, it was a single voice or two, timidly resisting the assertive and self-assured majority.
This brings many questions. What constitutes such strongly articulated and clearly defined viewpoint that becomes (at each given time) the standard in the circles dealing intellectually and theoretically with art (artists, as well as art theoreticians and critics)? Is it really so obvious what is good and what is bad art, that it is trivial to distinguish one from the other in a glance? Is not such a definite viewpoint more of blindness than a way of seeing?
Such questions stayed with me. But together with them also a certain satisfaction of feeling that the young artists' creation remains — as was clear from the received applications — free from the officially constructed verdict personified by the committee. The young applicants composed a whole spectrum of artistic positions and while going over their projects I did not get the slightest suspicion that some apriority preconceived requirement even registers in their minds. (The only dominant characteristic was perhaps the fact that most works, surprisingly, represented traditional artistic genres of painting and sculpture, rather than the new media, conceptual projects or happenings.) Such expression of freedom among young artists left me, in the end, with a hope and faith regarding the meaningfulness and the force of art today. It was my great pleasure to think about the received applications and to try to perceive, feel and understand them, as well as to curate the exhibition of the chosen eleven finalists.

Karolina Dolanska

Finalisté NG 333

Vybrat 11 děl ze 129 během několika hodin, ve skupině lidí, kteří se téměř neznají, je samo o sobě zvláštním typem uměleckého happeningu. Proces výběru proběhl překvapivě rychle, v podstatě v naprosté shodě hodnot i pohledů. Pokud někdo stál proti, byl to vždy osamělý hlas či dva, nesměle se podporující proti rozhodné a sebejisté pozici většiny. To přináší spoustu otázek. Co utváří tak silně vyhraněné a přesně defi nované prizma pohledu, jež se stává (v každé dané době) standardem v kruzích zabývajících se intelektuálně a teoreticky uměním (ať už z pozice tvůrčích umělců, nebo teoretiků a kritiků)? Je skutečně tak jasné, co je dobré a co špatné umění, že lze jedno rozlišit od druhého již v nejletmějším kontaktu? Není takto vyhraněný názor vlastně slepotou? Tyto otázky se mnou zůstaly. Stejně tak však i jisté uspokojení nad tím, že sama umělecká tvorba mladých – jak bylo ze zaslaných návrhů zřejmé – zůstává naopak projevem do velké míry svobodnýma oním oficiálně vytyčeným standardem nedotčeným. Uměleckých poloh se mezi přihlášenými objevilo celé spektrum, a při procházení soutěžními návrhy se mi pocit, že nějaký předem stanovený požadavek vůbec existuje, v podstatě ani vzdáleně nevtíral. (Jediným dominantním faktorem bylo snad to, že se letos překvapivě objevily spíše tradiční umělecké žánry jako malba a socha nežli nová média, konceptuální projekty či akce.) Projev takové svobody mezi mladými umělci ve mně nakonec zanechal naději a víru ve smysl a sílu umění. Bylo mým velkým potěšením zamýšlet se nad zaslanými návrhy, snažit se je vnímat a pochopit, a stejně tak i připravovat výstavu děl vybraných jedenácti finalistů.

Karolina Dolanská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4|12|2009 —28|2|2010
NÁRODNÍ GALERIE V PRAZE — SBÍRKA MODERNÍHO A SOUČASNÉHO UMĚNÍ
NATIONAL GALLERY IN PRAGUE — COLLECTION OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART
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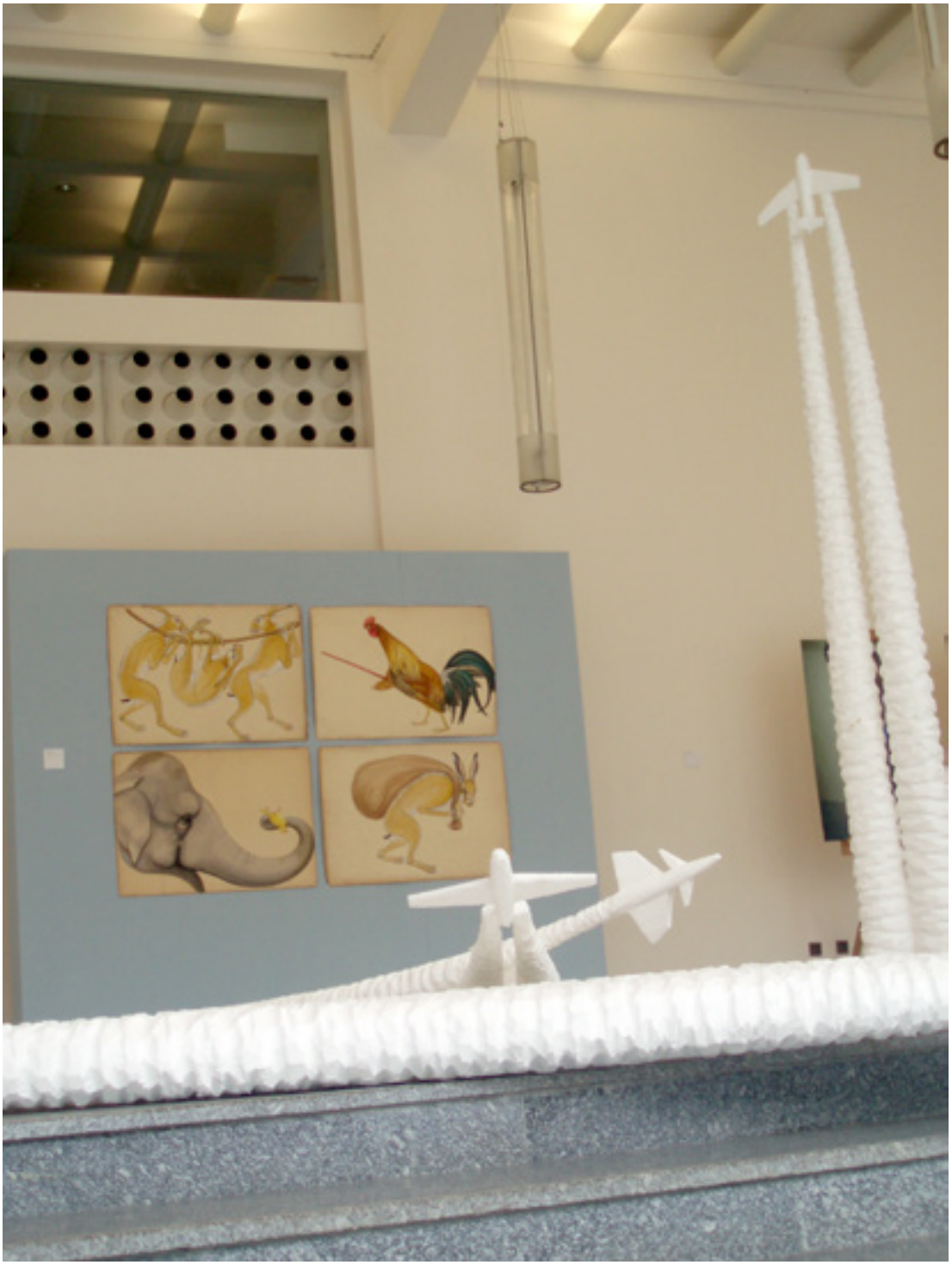
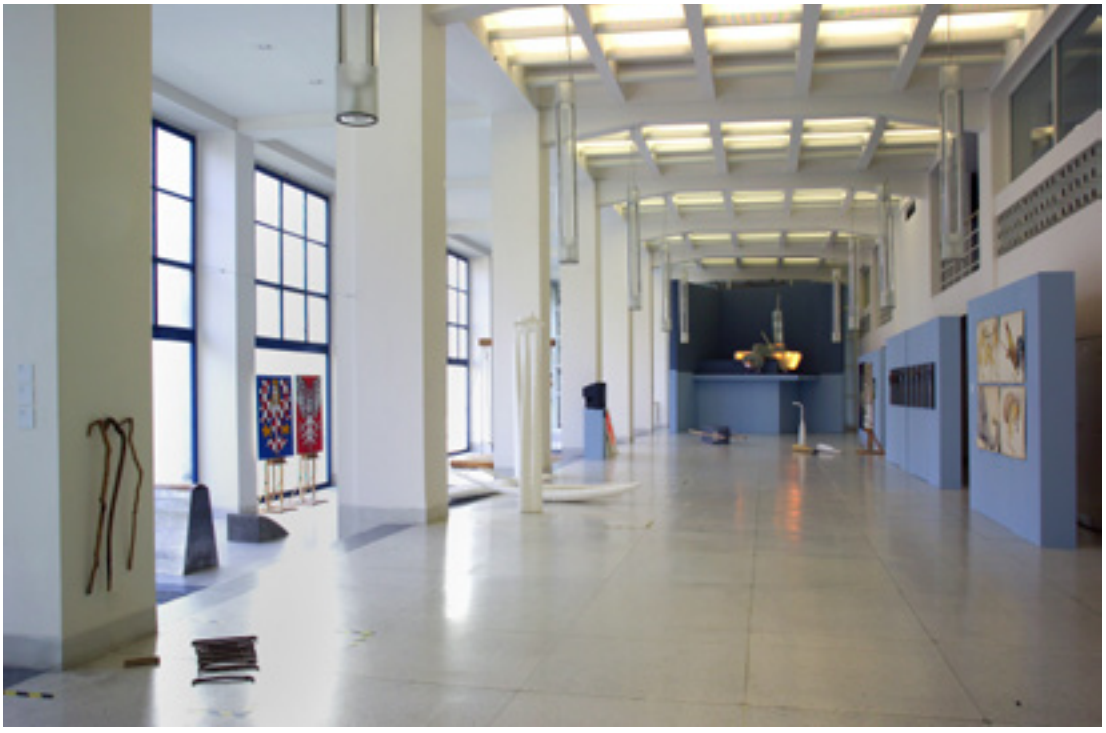


Lucie Ferlíková, Jan Cileček

Šimon Vahala, Denisa Cirmaciová



Lea Petříková, David Hnídek, Jan Synek, Jan Cileček, Evžen Šimera, Šimon Vahala, Denisa Cirmaciová, Lucie Ferlíková

Paulína Skávová, Lea Petříková, Jan Cileček, Šimon Vahala, Denisa Cirmaciová, Jan Wolfchen Vlček, Lucie Ferlíková

Jan Cileček, David Hnídek, Jan Synek

Jan Wolfchen Vlček, Martin Pertl, David Hnídek

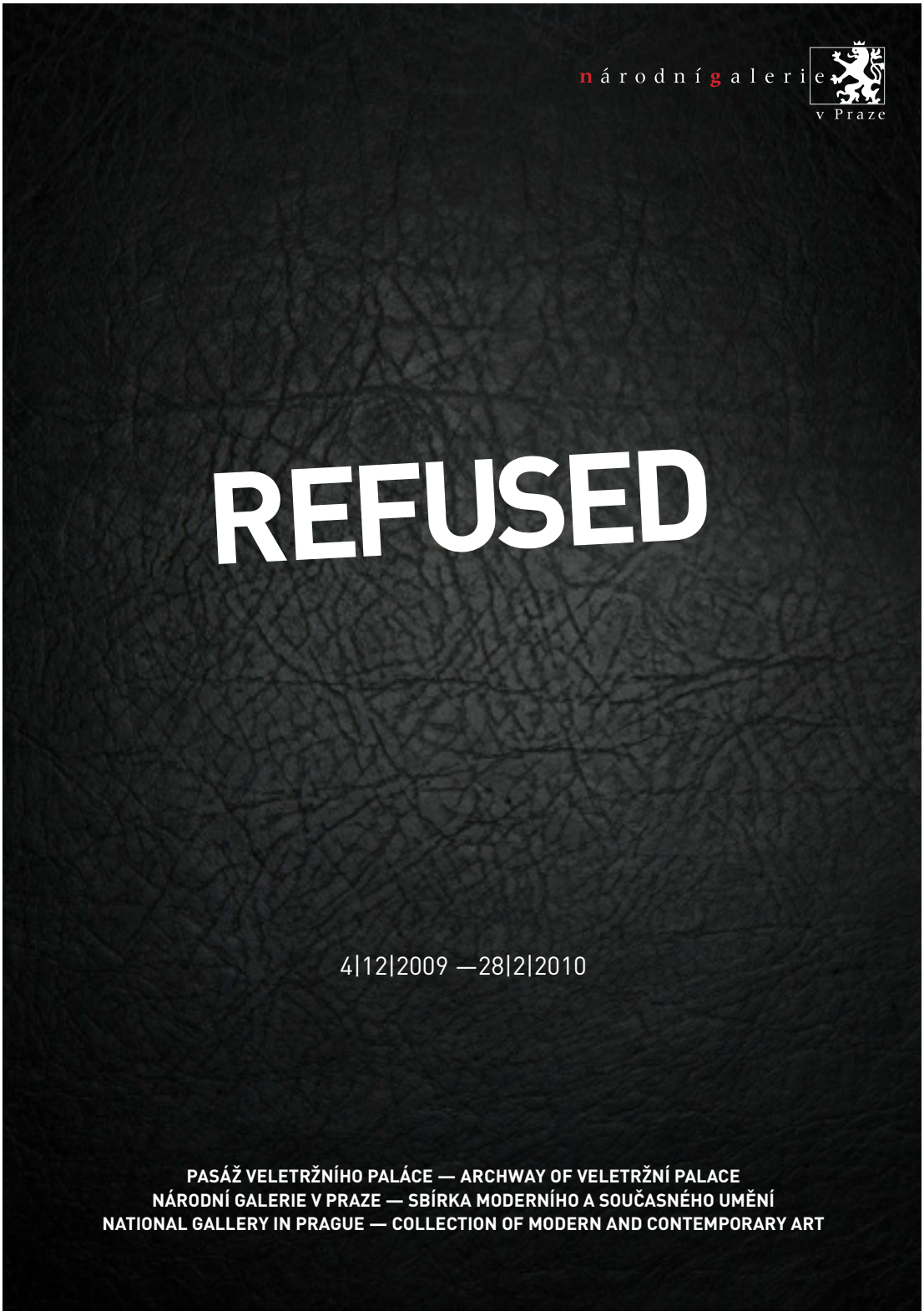
Lucie Ferlíková, *Visual Instructions Series*, 2009, acrylic on cardboard.
Cyclus z nározné výuky, 2009, akryl na kartonu

Jan Wolfchen Vlček, *The Merry Weapons Series*, 2009, akrylic on canvas, firework,
Série Veselé zbraně, 2009, akryl na plátně, ohňostrojová raketa

Jan Cileček, David Hnídek, Evžen Šimera

Evžen Šimera,
Pictures from Weightlessness, 2009
video-dokumentation, acrylic on canvas
Obrazy ze stavu beztíže, 2009
video-dokumentace, akryl na plátně

David Hnídek, *Gymnasium*, 2009, installation
Tělocvična, 2009, instalace


národní galerie
v Praze
REFUSED
4|12|2009 —28|2|2010
PASÁŽ VELETRŽNÍHO PALÁCE — ARCHWAY OF VELETRŽNÍ PALACE
NÁRODNÍ GALERIE V PRAZE — SBÍRKA MODERNÍHO A SOUČASNÉHO UMĚNÍ
NATIONAL GALLERY IN PRAGUE — COLLECTION OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

REFUSED

This exhibition is made out of works that were not selected by this year's committee of the NG 333 competition. Most of the works here were in fact ruled out right at the very beginning of the selection process. This in a sense makes them invisible. They cannot be automatically classifi ed. An expert dealing with art would pay no attention to them, because they do not meet his or her clear expectations and demands. This, however, may at the same time well be their claim for fame – their claim to be considered unique and new. Paradoxically – and this is the point of the present exhibition – when viewed in a wider open context, the works come out surprisingly alive. They are all specifi ed by a certain naiveté, as well as a determination to carve one's own unique path. The works stand before the observer without shame or fear, wide-open to criticism. Their style, in fact, is likely to appear conservative and old fashioned on one hand, or childish and lacking of artistic "virtuosity" on the other. This perhaps has to do with the fact that the artists here do not just seek answers, but, rather, they look for the questions that are worthy of being answered in the fi rst place. We believe that it is worthwhile to see the "refused" works – both as complement to the offi cially selected fi nalists of the NG 333 competition, as well as an independent exhibition standing on its own grounds. What is common and unique to all the present works is something that an art expert is often not able to see at all. You, observers and guests, are hereby invited to see and judge the works with your own two eyes.

Karolina Dolanská

REFUSED

Tato výstava je uspořádána z děl, která nebyla vybrána komisí letošní soutěže NG 333. Co více, většina z nich byla vyřazena hned v prvním kole výběru. Jsou to tedy díla v jistém smyslu neviditelná, protože jsou na první pohled nezařaditelná. Odborník zabývající se uměním jim nevěnuje pozornost, neboť nesplňují jeho vyhraněné požadavky a jasná očekávání. Právě tím jsou však díla možná výjimečná. Paradoxně, a to je smyslem této výstavy, v širším a obecnějším kontextu působí díla nezvykle živě. Je pro ně typická jistá naivita, ale zároveň i odhodlanost jít vlastní cestou, nestydět se, nebát se kritiky, kterou si lze ve většině případů snadno představit již předem. Mnohá z děl se totiž vyznačují stylem, jenž se povrchně může jevit jako konzervativní či zastaralý, nebo naopak jako dětinský a nedotažený do umělecké bravurnosti. Je to asi tím, že jejich autoři nehledají jen odpovědi, ale především otázky, na které má vůbec smysl odpovídat. Věříme, že určitě stojí za to „odmítnutá" díla zhlédnout; snad jako doplnění ofi ciálního výběru fi nalistů soutěže NG 333, ale i nezávisle na něm. Jejich společným jmenovatelem je asi to, co odborník často nevidí. Je tedy na divákovi, aby se díval a soudil vlastníma očima.

Karolina Dolanská


n g
333
Finalisté / Finalists
Cena 333 Národní galerie v Praze a Skupiny ČEZ pro mladé umělce
333 Award of the National Gallery in Prague and ČEZ Group for Young Artists
10. 12. 2010 →
Respirium 5. patra Veletržního paláce
Respirium of the 5th floor of Veletržní Palace
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Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art of the National Gallery in Prague
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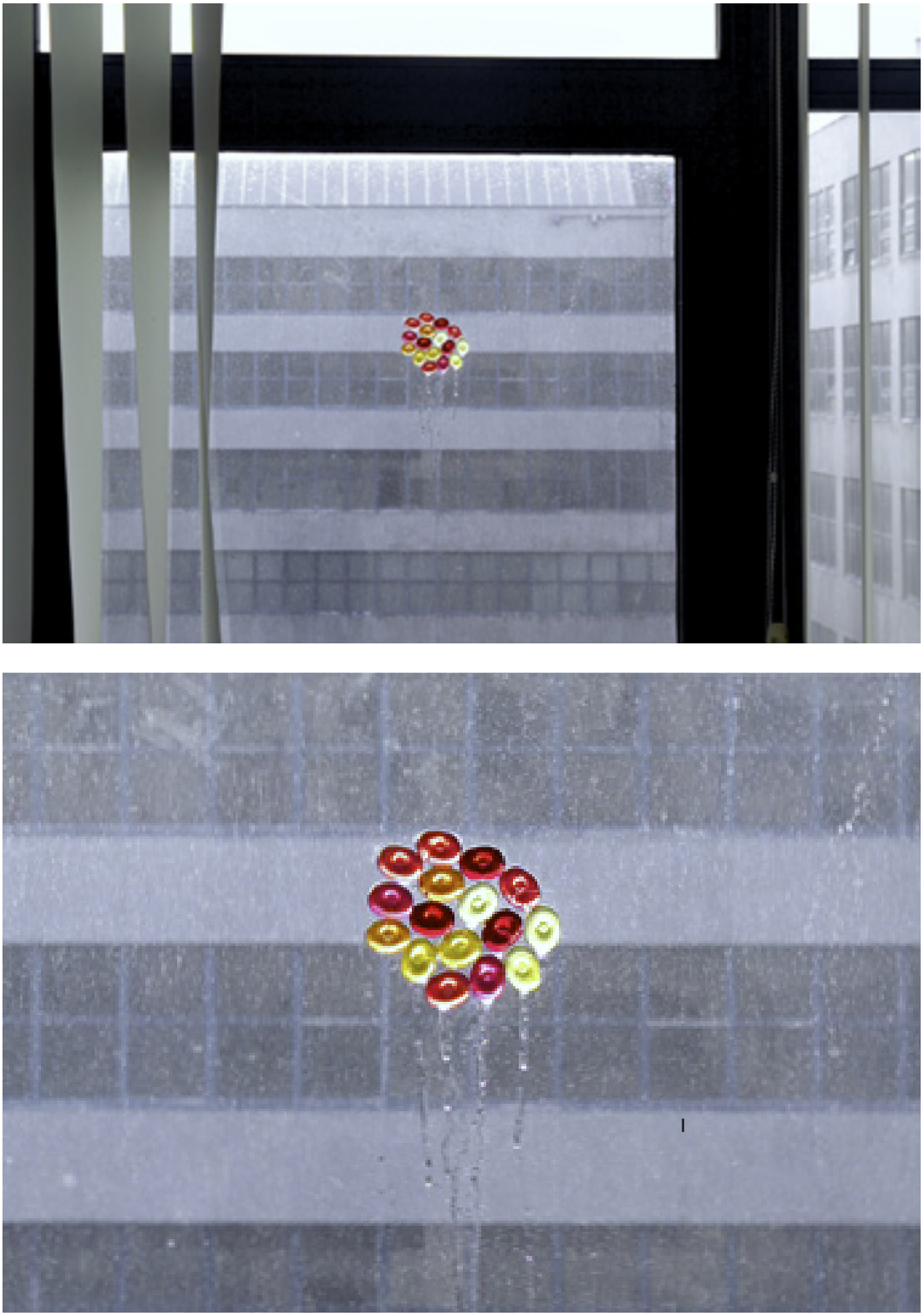
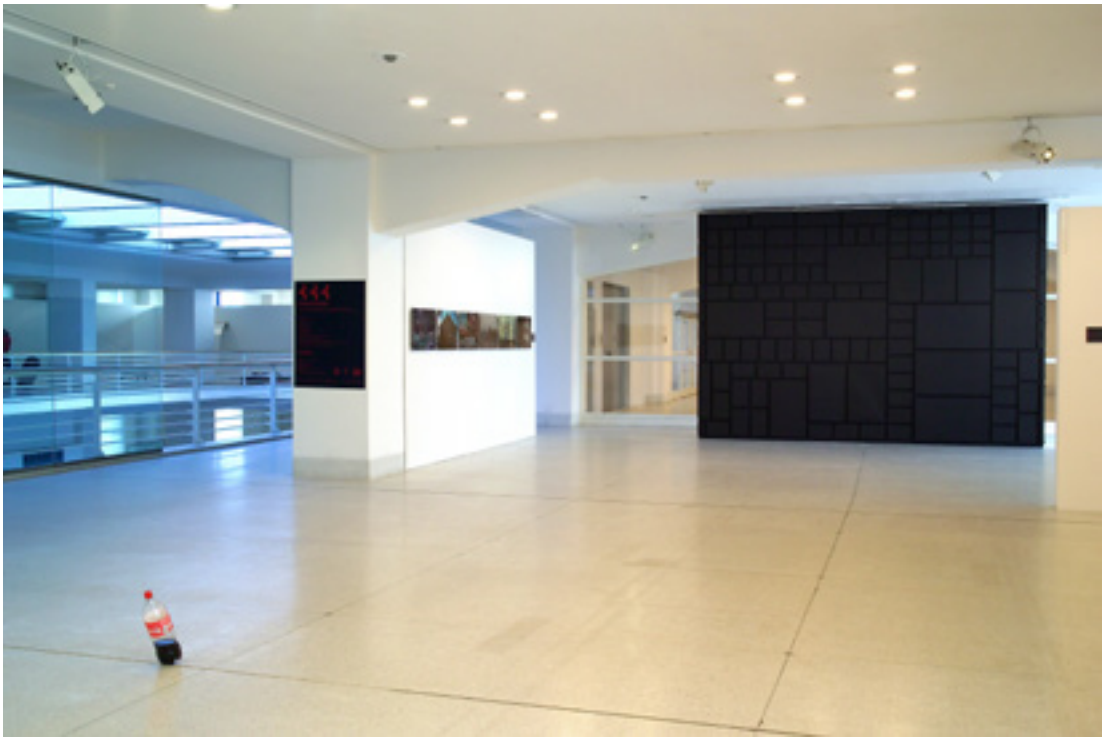
Juliána Hoschlová, *Girl from Circus*, 2010, video
Holka z cirkusu, 2010, videozáznam

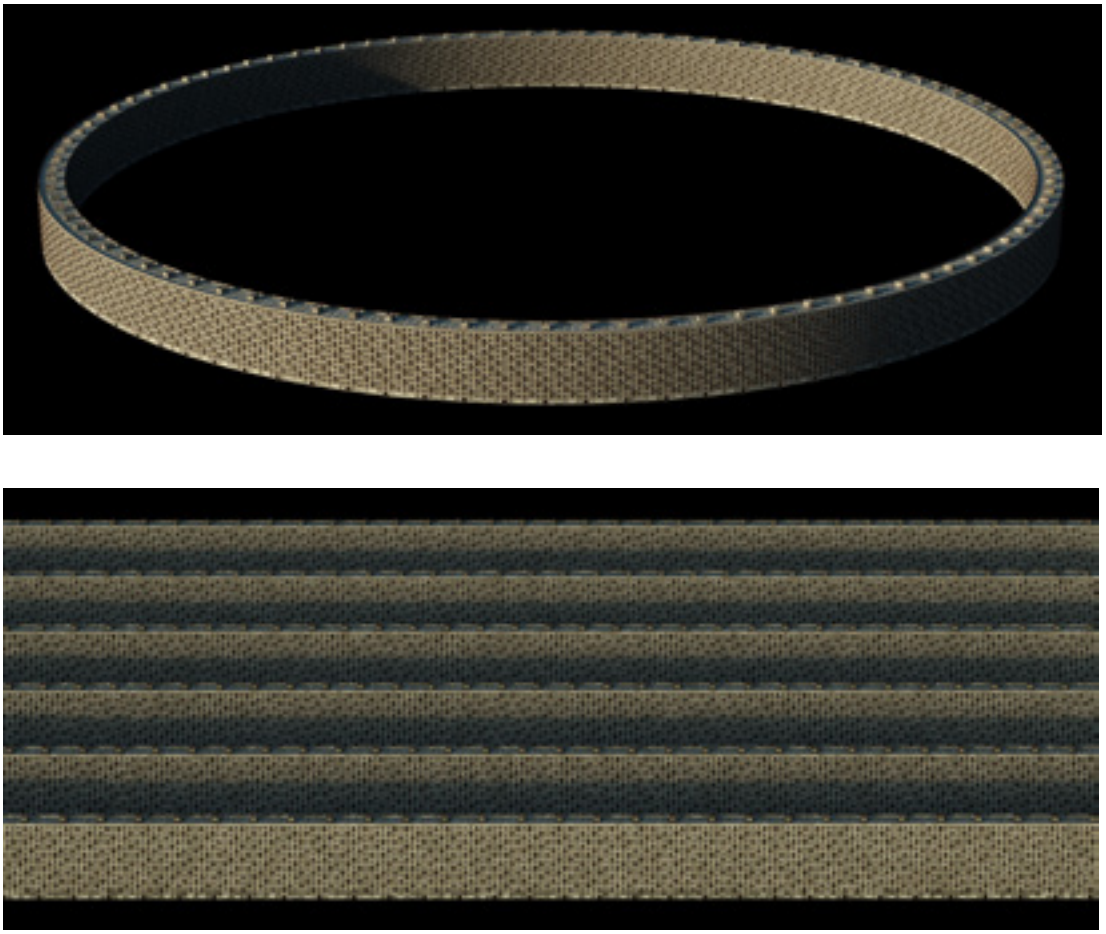


Aleš Novák, *Fruit Vitrage*, 2010, from the series *Home Sculptures*,
bompary candy glued on the window with their juice
Ovocná vitráž, 2010, ze série *Domácí sochy*,
bompary přilepené na okně vlastní šťávou



Aleš Novák, Vojtěch Maša, Lenka Veselá

Jaroslav Varga, *Untitled* (part of a series), 2010, installation, mixed media
Bez názvu, (část z cyklu), 2010, instalace, kombinovaná technika



Jakub Geltner, *Plebeian Courtard I., II.*, 2009, photo process on dibond
Plebejský dvůr I. II., 2009, fotoproces na dibondu

Šimon Vahala, from the series *State of Silence*, 2010, piezography, dibond
ze série *Skupenství ticha*, piezografie, dibond

Martin Šilhán, *Pissoart I.*, 2008, from the series
Re-Interpretation of Mental-Apartment Space, laminate
ze série *Reinterpretace mentálního-bytového prostoru,* laminát

Aleš Novák, *Tape*, from the series *Home-made sculpture,* 2010
adhesive tape dropped down by its own weight
Páska, ze série *Domácí sochy*, 2010
lepící páska spuštěná vlastní vahou

Martin Pertl, *Hermitage*, 2010, Spruce boards, OSB, cetris, glass, steel
Poustevna, 2010, smrkové latě, OSB, cetris, sklo, ocel

Is the Selection Good?

This year the artworks of the Finalists compose a meaningful whole. It reflects the fact that also the committee functioned as a whole. Even though a whole spectrum of different opinions and views were present, the committee members trusted each other's point of view to the extend that something like a new mutual perspective, or an unspoken new point of view, was formed during the mutual interaction.

Against this perspective, through the prism of which the works of the Finalists were selected, one might object that it is one sided, etc.; but this is part of what a perspective is in the first place—a sharply defined point of view from one definite and defined angle, a certain clear standpoint, without which it is impossible to see anything in the first place.

A very specific, although certainly not a unique aspect about the process of choosing the works of the finalists of the 333 Award is the fact that they are being chosen only based on the documentation of the works. The committee sees none of the works in reality (this is why in this catalogue only the artists themselves write about their art works because at this point they are the only ones who know them.) Presentation of works as well of oneself thus becomes in itself a form of art. In the committee we tried to look for works that would in today's context, full of empty visual illusions and tricks, convince us as non-speculative.

In contrast to the last year dominated by the classical art genres, panting and sculpture, this year it was photography, photomontage, video art, installations, objects, that came out victorious.

Behind the apparent playfulness of the works lies a real mastery of the craft and an aesthetic perfection. In this lies the wroks' seriousness. Otherwise they appear light, with no sign of ethical weight. Although they each offer a unique outlook on reality, neither one of the artists take themselves too seriously, which is truly refreshing. There are no personal psychological investigations, no general abstract concepts, but simple and original descriptions of reality. The art works impress us as up-to-date, almost urgently so, but not in the momentarily accepted politically correct sentiment of the time. With no aggression, no cynicism, and despite the undeniable power of their presence, they surprise by their mutual tolerance — the artworks do not disturb or criticize one another, neither do they compete. There is no shred of moralism present in them. Their up-to-dateness has to do only with their aesthetic sharpness. And here, perhaps, a new definition of beauty can be searched for and found (as well as a new picture of reality that has been long out of focus).

Karolina Dolanská

Je výběr dobrý?
Letos tvoří vybraná díla finalistů určitý smysluplný celek. To jistě do velké míry odráží fakt, že komise fungovala také především jako celek. I když přítomno bylo celé spektrum odlišných názorů a pohledů, členové komise zároveň natolik důvěřovali hledisku ostatních, že vzniklo něco jako společná perspektiva či nevyslovený názor, který se utvářel v průběhu vzájemné interakce. Proti této perspektivě, prostřednictvím níž se díla vybírala, lze zvnějšku namítat, že je jednostranná atp.; to je ovšem součástí toho, čím perspektiva je - vyhraněným ostrým pohledem z jednoho defi novatelného úhlu, určitým jasným stanoviskem, bez kterého lze těžko vůbec něco vidět.
Velmi specifickým, i když určitě ne neobvyklým rysem výběru děl finalistů Ceny 333 je fakt, že se vybírá pouze na základě dokumentace prací. Porota žádné z děl nevidí ve skutečnosti (proto v katalogu píší o dílech umělci sami; jen oni v této fázi věci opravdu znají). Prezentace díla a sebe sama se tak stává samostatnou formou umění. Hledali jsme díla, která v dnešní době plné prázdných vizuálních triků působí nespekulativně.
Na rozdíl od minulého roku, kdy dominovaly klasické žánry, malba a socha, zvítězily v letošním výběru fotografie, fotomontáže, video, instalace, objekty.
Vybraná díla jsou přes zjevnou hravost specifická řemeslnou a estetickou dokonalostí. V tom je jejich vážnost. Jinak působí lehce, bez známek etické tíhy. Přestože nabízejí osobitý pohled, nikdo z autorů sám sebe příliš vážně neprosazuje, což je osvěžující... Nejedná se ani o osobní psychologické sondy, ani o univerzální abstraktní koncepty, ale o prostou a originální výpověď o skutečnosti. Díla tak působí aktuálně až naléhavě, nikoli však v momentálně přijatém politicky korektním slova smyslu. Bez agresivity, bez cynismu, přes nepřehlédnutelnou sílu výrazu nás překvapují tolerancí. Vzájemně se neruší, nesoupeří, nekritizují. Není v nich moralizování. Jejich aktuálnost spočívá v míře ostrosti výrazu. A tady je snad možné hledat i novou definici krásy (a především také podobu skutečnosti, která je rozmlžená).

Karolina Dolanská

Finalisté I Finalists

5. ročník I 5th Year

Cena 333 Národní galerie v Praze a Skupiny ČEZ
The 333 Award of the National Gallery in Prague and ČEZ Group

16. 12. 2011 – 9. 4. 2012

Malá dvorana a respirium 5. patra
Small Hall and Respirium of the 5th floor

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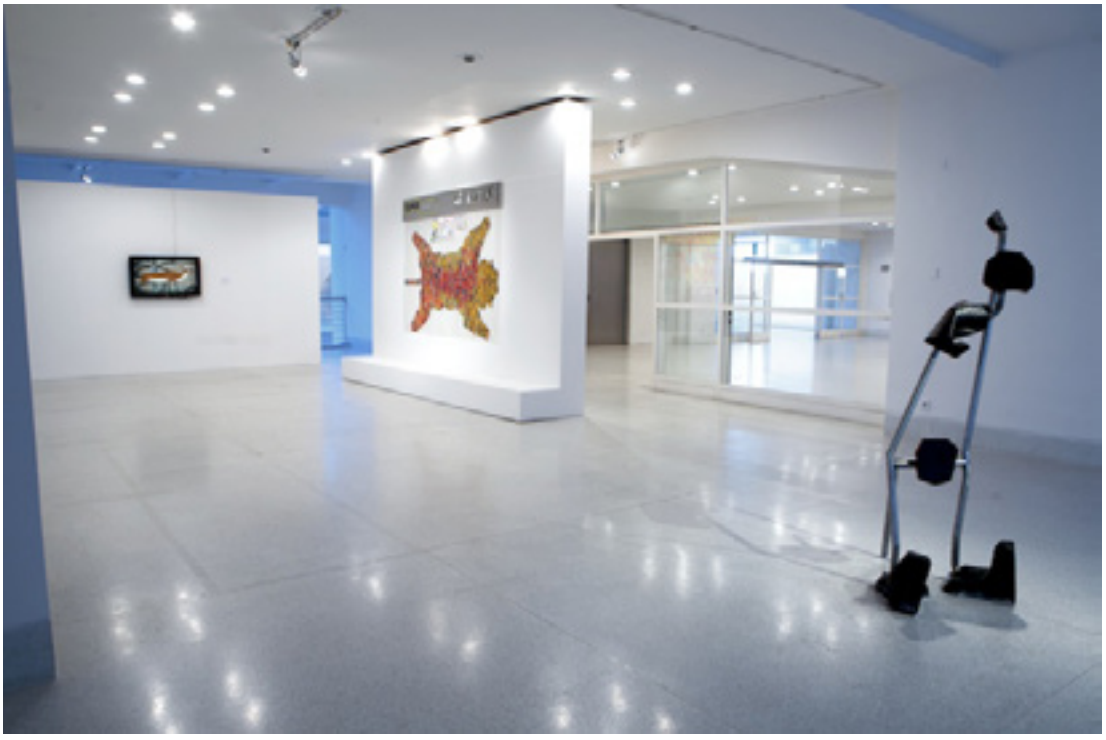
Jakub Matuška Aka Masker, *Porn Bloopers*, 2009
akrylic, sprey, american retouche on canvas
akryl, sprej, americká retuš na plátně

Jakub Geltner

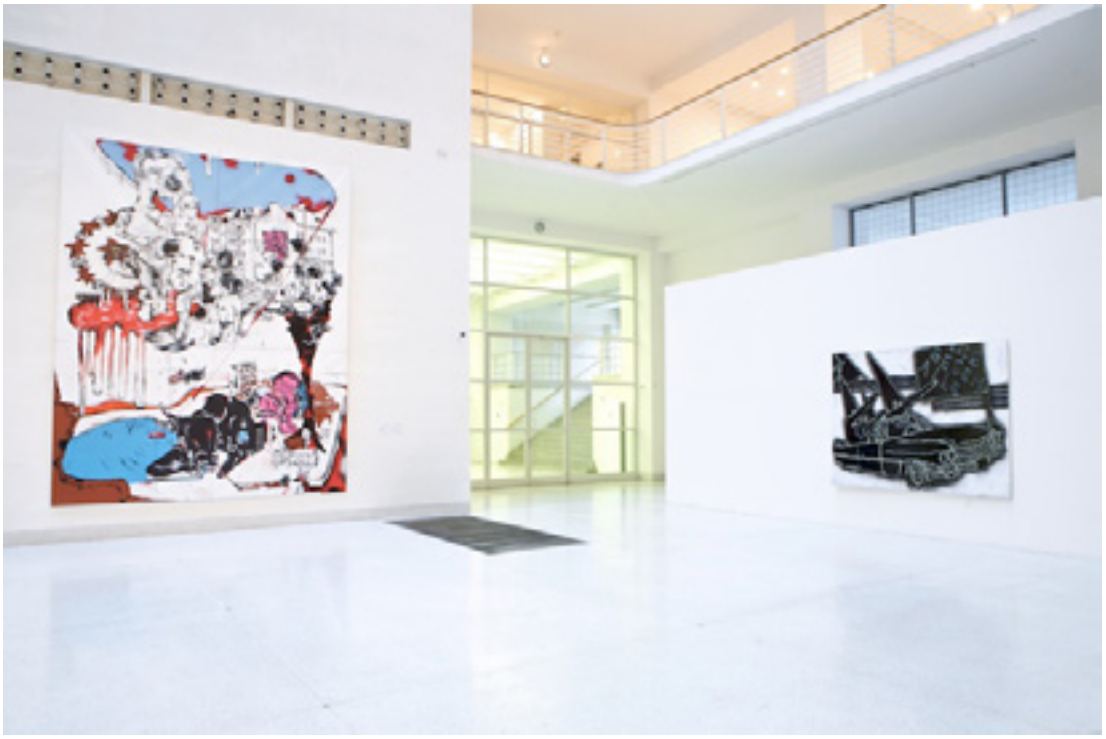
Magrot - Svatek, Jan Boháč, Adéla Babánová



Magrot - Svatek, Jan Boháč

Jan Boháč, Adéla Babánová

Denisa Krausová



Jakub Matuška Aka Masker, Jakub Janovský

Jakub Janovský

Ján Vasilko

Epos 257

The Finalists, The 333 Award, 2011
The Small Hall, The Trade Fair Palace, The National Gallery in Prague
Finalisté, Cena 333, 2011
Malá dvorana, Veletržní palác, Národní galerie v Praze

The 333 Award

With the fifth year of the 333 Award of the National Gallery in Prague and the ČEZ Group it is already possible to speak of a tradition. What does the 333 Award represent? It came into being as another opportunity for young artists to enter the art scene. At the same time, the heading of the National Gallery gives the Award an aura of a standard — traditionally representing the classical artistic genres, craft, but also ideals — and together with it a standing unaffected by momentary waves of fashion, and resisting superficial trends of the time, which are often mistaken for the mainstream.
Nonetheless, as was clear in the last years and as is clear also this year, the 333 Award is open also to the new media, photography, video-art, happenings — from a position protected by a tradition of believing that classical art genres still carry their undeniable up-to-date-ness. The purpose of the 333 Award is to motivate and support young artistic talents. For this it has a unique place in the context of the Czech culture, and I consider it my pride and my pleasure to present this year again.

Karolina Dolanská

Cena 333

U pátého ročníku Ceny 333 Národní galerie v Praze a Skupiny ČEZ lze již hovořit o tradici. Co představuje Cena 333? Vznikla jako další šance pro mladé umělce proniknout na uměleckou scénu. Zároveň jí pod hlavičkou Národní galerie nelze upřít auru standardu, jenž tradičně reprezentuje klasické umělecké žánry, řemeslnou zručnost, ale i ideály. Má tak možnost korigovat momentální módní proudy, oponovat jepičím populárním trendům, chápaným u nás často jako mainstream. Jak bylo patrno v předešlých ročnících a jak je zřejmé i letos, je otevřena také novým médiím, fotografii, videoartu, uměleckým akcím, a to z pozice prostředí chráněného tradicí, která si uvědomuje, že klasická výtvarná média mají stále nezpochybnitelnou aktuálnost. Cena 333 má za úkol motivovat a podporovat mladé umělecké talenty. Má tudíž nenahraditelné místo na poli české kultury, a proto s hrdostí a potěšením uvádím její další ročník.

Karolina Dolanská

Conclusion

Since the "death of God" in modernity values and norms do not have a transcendental justification from outside of the world but are part of our reality. This in fact changes nothing about their normative status and their fundamental role in our lives. In order to live right one must act as if one were legislating a universal standard of action and exemplifying that standard through that very action in every step of one's life — just the way Kant defined ethics. The fact that values and norms are something that must be created, moreover, dissolves the boundaries between ethics and art (as Nietzsche, and later Wittgenstein noted).[134]

A work of art, according to Kant, is something that sets its own rules and at the same time answers to those rules — it is a paradigm shift in the face of which one has to re-evaluate one's aesthetic (and ethical) considerations each and every time. Legislation of a value is thus at the essence of art the same way that beauty is at the core of an ethical conduct. A work of art is an extension of the existing standards — going against the literal or expected application of the prescribed rules — re-defining the meanings of things in a way that is true and relevant to the time.

The fact that a work of art must legislate a new standard — not to imitate or repeat something that already exists — is at the basis of Plato's distinction between the true artists, who act and create, and imitators that only parasite on the achievements of others. True artist is someone who completely exemplifies the condition he or she lives in — while acknowledging the legacy of the past, and while also standing responsible before the verdict of the future — not before the verdict of the commentators of the time who follow the latest fashions and trends.

The pre-condition to create is of course freedom. Only a free autonomous agent — in our case the artist — can extend the rules and legislate what beauty is. This obviously presupposes a perfect command of the existing rules, i.e. the knowledge and the skill (the "know-how"), as well as an acute awareness of the uniqueness of the context at stake — only then one can gain complete freedom required for legislation.

The criterion, moreover, that indicates that freedom and necessity are one is,

134. Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'ethics and aesthetics are one'. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Frank P. Ramsey & C . K . Ogden, trans., Kegan Paul, 1922.*

once again, beauty: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," says John Keats in his famous *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Only the artist who does not lie, i.e. does not repeat ready-made solutions discovered by others, can reach beauty. And, the same goes the other way round — in the pursuing of truth, our notion of beauty gets extended, as is clear from the works of all great artists, politicians, philosophers, but also scientists — for a scientist searching for truth (which is the constitutive value of science) must in his research obey certain aesthetics in order to find what is true.[135]

> When I am working on a problem I never think about beauty. I only think about how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.[136]

The aesthetics of action, the way things are done — which the Ancient Greeks were, according to Nietzsche, so keenly aware of — indicates whether the actions are right or wrong, true or false. If every move one makes, every line of an artwork is not beautiful, the work must be wrong. This brings back the notion of a life justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon of the Ancient Greeks, where beauty and truth were inseparable, and where human life, in order to be meaningful, had to be modeled on a work of art, governed and judged by the aesthetic criteria first and foremost — for in an aesthetic sharpness alone or the lack of it, in the beauty or its absence, the truth comes out with an undeniable clarity.

Like all values, moreover, beauty is not something that we can fix once and for all or own, but can only be shown through a deed or a creation — beauty exists in time, in motion, in action (Goethe thought beauty can exist only in a single moment). Beauty, as we know, is an indication that a new standard, whether in art or in life, is being legislated. This is why by essence beauty cannot be reduced to a formal definition or an aesthetic formula that would be imposed on reality, or become an object in its own right. Beauty is not an external property of things —

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135. The definition of Medicine for example is that it is simultaneously science and art, i.e. that the form and content must be one.

136. Richard Buckminster Fuller, cited in Darling, David J., *The Universal Book of Mathematics*, 2004, John Wiley and Sons, p. 34.

one of the facts that are present — but must be rediscovered and updated through each one of its manifestations. That is why beauty must in itself never become the goal of art, or of one's action, and this is at the same time what has made beauty so untouchable, intangible, and ineffable throughout the history, while nonetheless carrying the weight of truth.

While writing this I am thinking about Professor Milan Machovec contemplating the fact that men and women in modern times are deeply unhappy precisely because the search for happiness became the sole purpose of their life. Happiness, like beauty, is the side effect of what we do in life — it cannot become the aim of our life, neither can it be fixed into an object that we could posses or fetishize. It is because once we turn a value into an object — take it literally at "its face value", so to speak — we empty it out, disconnect it from the very thing it stands for.

Certain metaphorical distance, then, is necessary to our experiencing of reality, and is essential to art. In this connection we should perhaps bring in Immanuel Kant's famous notion of the dispassionate stance of "disinterestedness" that Kant considers essential to beauty and to the experience of the beautiful.[137] Beauty, according to Kant, transforms raw emotion, raises us from the literalness of life, in the sense that we do not 'need' beauty in the sense of fulfilling any real physical, biological or emotional functions — it is not food for the soul nor a fetish — and precisely such 'non-personal' quality is what gives beauty the spirit of objectivity. As Umberto Eco writes in his book on beauty:

> ...passion, jealousy, lust for possession, envy, or greed have nothing to do with the sentiment of Beauty.[138]

The Ancient Greeks expressed the state of balance that beauty personifies by the Apollo-Dionysus dialectics (taken up and developed by Nietzsche), where in order to live meaningfully one must never get attached to neither one of the two opposite poles of rationality (represented by Apollo) or emotions (personified by Dionysus):

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137. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 1892, translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised). London: Macmillan, 1914.
138. Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty*, p. 10.

> The co-presence of two antithetical divinities, Apollo and Dionysus, marks the expression of certain important antitheses that remain unresolved within the Greek concept of Beauty, which emerges as being far more complex and problematical than the simplifications of the Classical tradition would suggest.[139]

As the Apollo-Dionysus polarity also implies, in times when beauty itself became the goal of the artistic activity, it sooner or later turned into an empty aesthetic formula taking form of different types of academism and formalism. And, on the other hand, when any 'goal' and aesthetic considerations in art — which always go together with a firm framework of a sort and with strong discipline — were given up in the name of 'sincerity' and 'freedom of self-expression,' the result was emptiness and impossibility of form, style, or meaning of any kind. Since beauty, again, is the result of an activity of some kind, taking place in time, in a specific context, it cannot be frozen in a doctrine, nor found in a 'let go' state of raw passion free of context.

Beauty, to conclude, is something that we cannot capture and cannot own; yet we cannot live meaningfully without it. Beauty, moreover, is something that we cannot compute or calculate but it in turn guides our lives as an ethical measure. It is a place where we cannot lie, since the beauty of things or the lack of it shows whether they are true or false, and the grace of a conduct or a deed reveals whether right or wrong. Art as the legislator of beauty is a counter force to the modern rationality represented by science, and to the practicality of life — securing every time anew the possibility of the singularity and uniqueness of our life, and thus providing it with truth and meaning. We are hence back to where we started, that is, with the Greek idea of *art as the justification of life.* It seems only befitting to conclude here with the words of T. S. Eliot that capture the re-occurring eternal lesson of beauty being legislated/explored every time afresh, so as to validate anew our place in the world. It must be in this that Nietzsche insists that art is truer than metaphysics.

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139. Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty*, p. 55

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot: Little Gidding (Four Quartets)

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