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THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF ART: FROM THE SYSTEM OF FINE ARTS TO MODERN AESTHETICS

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Abstract: This paper explores the historical evolution and transformation of the concept of art from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the era of Modernism and contemporary aesthetic theories. The first section analyzes the gradual establishment of the "system of fine arts," tracing its roots from the early notions found in the works of Francesco da Hollanda and François Blondel, through the definitive conceptualization in Charles Batteux's 1747 treatise, to the autonomy of art formulated by Friedrich Schiller. The study highlights a modern paradox: while the Classical and Medieval concept of art—grounded in craftsmanship and rules—was clear and easily definable, the contemporary concept of art, burdened by subjectivism and pluralism, evades universal definitions. The second section shifts focus toward the methodological framework of comparative art analysis (drawing on the contributions of V. Panić and M. Ranković) and the recontextualization of the ancient concept of *mimesis*. It addresses the problem of representation within twentieth-century abstract art, contrasting and synthesizing the theoretical perspectives of Giulio Carlo Argan and Rosalind Krauss. Conclusively, the paper examines the relationship between perception, visual models of reality, and epistemology, emphasizing that contemporary art transforms *mimesis* from mere imitation and replication toward a complex system of reference and subjective expression.

Keywords: concept of art, fine arts, mimesis, comparative aesthetics, abstract art, representation, autonomy of art.

Introduction

In the 16th century, while discussing the visual arts, Francesco da Hollanda accidentally used the expression "fine arts" (*boas artes* in the original Portuguese). However, as natural as it sounds to us today, the term did not take root at the time (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 17). The conception that corresponded

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to this expression (even though it did not use it) became distinctly manifest in the second half of the 17th century, namely in the great treatise on architecture published in 1675 by François Blondel (*Cours d'architecture*, 1675). In it, alongside architecture, he listed poetry, eloquence, painting, and sculpture, to which he further added music and dance—essentially all those, and only those, arts that predecessors had called spiritual, noble, and so on, and which would fit into the "system of fine arts" in the following century (Blondel, 1675, p. 122). Blondel saw their connection in the fact that, by virtue of their harmony, they are a source of pleasure for us. In this way, he expressed the thought that they operate through their beauty, and that this is what unites them. Nevertheless, Blondel did not explicitly use the term "fine arts."

All of the above demonstrates that, beginning in the 15th century, there was a vivid sense that painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, theater, and dance formed a distinct group of arts, separate from crafts and skills, with which they had shared the common designation of "arts" for centuries (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 23). However, it was not clear what united this group and what name they should consequently bear: spiritual, musical, noble, memorial, pictorial, or poetic arts. As late as 1744, Giambattista Vico proposed the term "agreeable" arts (*Scienza nuova*, 1744), and in the same year, James Harris (*Three Treatises*, 1744) suggested "elegant arts." Three years later, in 1747, Charles Batteux (*Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*, 1747) named them "fine" arts (*beaux arts*). This term appeared in the title of his popular book—and it took root. Along with it, the concept itself became consolidated (Batteux, 1747, pp. 4-8).

This was a fundamental shift. For while the classification of noble or memorial, elegant or agreeable arts had remained the private property of Capriano or Castelvetro, Harris or Vico, the classification of the *fine arts* became universal. The term "fine arts" entered the vocabulary of 18th-century scholars and persisted into the following century. It was a term with a clear scope: Batteux listed five fine arts: painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and dance, as well as two closely related arts: architecture and eloquence (Batteux, 1747, p. 24). This list remained universally accepted, and not only did the concept of fine arts become established, but their list—the system of fine arts, namely, after the inclusion of architecture and eloquence—was fixed at the number seven. The concept of fine arts and their system seem simple and natural to us today, but the historian knows how late and with what great effort they were established.

From the mid-18th century onward, there was no longer any doubt that crafts were crafts, and not arts; that skills were skills, and not arts; meaning that only the fine arts were truly arts. Since this was the case, it was possible and necessary to call them simply "arts," as there were no other arts. This terminology took hold, though not immediately, but in the 19th century. At that point, the meaning of the word "art" changed; its scope narrowed, now encompassing only the fine arts, excluding crafts and skills. One could say: only the name persisted, while a new concept of art was born.

When this occurred, the term "fine arts" was adopted by an even narrower group of arts, namely the visual arts, the very ones previously called the "arts of design" (*arti del disegno*): it was in this sense that names like the "School of Fine Arts" or the "Society for the Cultivation of Fine Arts" were used in the 19th century, denoting schools and societies that dealt with painting and sculpture, rather than poetry and music.

Prior to that, in the mid-18th century, something more crucial took place: not only did the concept of fine arts take shape, but their theory also became established. This means that a consensus emerged regarding the common traits of the fine arts and their core essence. Today, this 18th-century theory appears questionable, but at the time, it gained almost universal recognition, and for a considerably long period. It was the work of the very same C. Batteux who had decided on introducing the name and concept of fine arts. Batteux was an author far more influential than he was outstanding; if he was influential, it was largely because he had predecessors, and because the need to separate and explain this specific group of arts had been growing for a long time.

Batteux's theory of fine arts rested on the perception that their common trait lay in imitating reality. It would seem that he was following an old, and even ancient, path well known since antiquity. Yet, this is merely an illusion. From antiquity (more precisely, from Plato and Aristotle), arts were divided into productive and imitative ones, and all discourses on imitation—*mimesis*, *imitatio*—for over 2000 years concerned solely the "imitative" arts: painting, sculpture, and poetry, but not architecture or music. It was Batteux who first treated all fine arts as imitative, thereby basing their general theory on imitation (Batteux, 1747, p. 51). Though this theory does not seem entirely successful today, it nevertheless enjoyed immense success. It was the first general theory of art within the modern understanding of art.

The 18th century, which isolated art in its modern sense, also found an expression for the distinctiveness of the laws governing it. Aristotle had already written that "the same rules do not apply to the art of poetry as to politics" and that what is impossible in reality can be correct in art. However, it was not until the end of the 18th century that this brief and pithy sentence was uttered: "Art is that which gives itself its own rule" (*was sich selbst die Regel gibt*). This thought belongs to F. Schiller, expressed in a letter to Körner (Schiller, 1793/1962, p. 245). Yet, this idea of the autonomy of art did not meet with the same widespread recognition as Batteux's idea.

Looking back at the evolution of the concept of art, we can say: such an evolution was natural, even inevitable. We can only wonder why it took so many centuries to bring this concept to its current form. And something peculiar occurred: the Classical-Medieval concept of art—the starting point of this evolution—was broad but clear; it allowed for a simple and regular definition. Its contemporary concept, however—the culmination point of that evolution—

narrower than the old one and seemingly more specific, is precisely what remains indefinite, eluding definition. This is confirmed by modern dictionaries and encyclopedias, as they either avoid a definition or stick to the old one. For instance, Larousse's definition: "*application de la connaissance raisonnée et des moyens spéciaux à la réalisation d'une conception*" concerns both the ancient and the modern concept of art. Alternatively, by narrowing the concept in accordance with its later evolution, they define art based on the 18th-century model. Lalande calls "arts" "*toute production de la beauté par les oeuvres d'un être conscient*" (Lalande, 1926, p. 75), while Runes defines them as creations whose "principle is based on beauty" (Runes, 1942, p. 33).

Concepts of the Definition of Art in the 20th Century

However, contemporary art in many of its movements, at least since the time of the Dadaists and Surrealists, no longer fits such a definition: beauty is not only not a distinguishing feature of art, but it is not even a necessary one. Theorists, wishing to account for contemporary art, reject such a definition. Doubts as to whether distinguishing art through beauty is correct appeared as early as around 1900. Half a century later, it became an almost universal conviction that this definition was incorrect. Thus, another chapter in the history of the concept of art opened.

Modern thought views a work of art in clear opposition to simple manual or mental labor; today, the meaning of a work of art is separated from secular, utilitarian purposes of a moral, political, or erotic nature. Likewise, subjectivism has become a hallmark of aesthetics, whereas Medieval aesthetics was characterized by direct objectivism. "For us, the artistic quality in a work of art is precisely the subjective expression, and we negatively evaluate any narrowing that the determination of a goal or the transmission of a specific meaning might impose on that subjective expression." In a work of art, one observes not (only) the subjective expression of the author's feelings, but "an object that takes the spectator by the hand to lead him from this world below to a higher world" (Białostocki, 1982, p. 114).

The fundamental question is how it is possible to compare two phenomena that do not belong to "the same categories." This is, therefore, the problem that must first be overcome. Vladislav Panić, in his *Aksiologika* (Axiology), offers a model for bridging this "obstacle," emphasizing: "The comparison of phenomena from different categories is only possible if they are transformed into concepts of the same category" (Panić, 1999, p. 55). This would mean that concepts can be subsumed under the same category if they share something substantial, if they possess some common essential characteristic, a common denominator. In this sense, Milan Ranković emphasizes: "It has been realized that art cannot be exhausted by combinations of classical aesthetic categories (the beautiful, the ugly, the tragic, the comic, the sublime), but that it integrates within itself a vast number of attributes that are objectively doubly grounded: a)

by the development of the content of human reality, and b) by the changing relationship toward it" (Ranković, 1973, p. 214). From this follows the conclusion that one of the vital components of art's development is its immanent tendency to encompass with its aesthetic structure a larger and more diverse number of facts—a wider scope of the content of human reality, his world, and life. Likewise, when it comes to works of art, one cannot entirely reliably demarcate what constitutes "facts," but one must certainly keep in mind that under aesthetic circumstances, it is not a mere coincidence, as it is in nature, that we see what we see.

Comparing modern paintings and historical paintings helps us understand how the past influences the present. Learning the elements of art, design, and artistic methods helps us communicate and write in a new language to compare the art of various periods. Looking at artistic creations is the foundation of learning how to write papers on the comparative analysis of works of art. The longer we look, the more information we begin to see, such as brushstrokes. Asking questions about brushstrokes can help define the type of art we are looking at. For example, Impressionism uses broad brushstrokes with visible patches of color. On the other hand, Renaissance artists used oil paint with almost hidden brushstrokes, giving the painting a lifelike appearance. These observations will help us decide which period a work might belong to when we do not know the answer.

Taken on its own, comparison cannot be a complete and successful method of cognition. Despite this, it has helped us discern the most characteristic parts of the whole and, through its mediation, arrive at a large number of facts that we certainly could not identify and collect by other means (or at least not in such a qualitative manner). The creator, through their creative act, infuses meaning into sensory facts, thereby granting these facts a certain power. Through this act and path, the creator objectifies their internal faculties. A visual artwork, as a sensory object intended for sensibility, encompasses complex natural, physiological, and biological determinations, and as such, "it emerges from natural vitality"—as Lefebvre puts it—and "appeals to the natural vitality of the human being contemplating it." This type of "natural vitality" is inherent to artists, certainly more pronouncedly than in other people, but also—and this is of primary importance—to developing children. Put simply, one could say that in this sense, developing children are closer to artists than to the ordinary, average person (Vuković, 2016, pp. 217–230).

Let us also recall the concept of *mimesis*.

The concept of *mimesis* is an ancient concept by which the imitation of reality is designated as the fundamental property of art. From the very beginnings of philosophical thought on art, its specific relationship with reality was outlined and emphasized. Regardless of the different understandings of this relationship—which we also trace from antiquity, based on the antagonism

between the artwork as lesser than nature (which it imitates to the point of deception) and the artwork as higher than nature (which it compensates for or corrects)—the prevailing opinion is that it always involves a sort of depiction, representation, or description of visible reality within the work.

By problematizing depiction or representation in the field of modern art, the question arises whether it is possible to interpret 20th-century abstract art as *mimesis* as well, despite its essentially anti-mimetic structure. Giulio Carlo Argan frames the problem between art and reality in a particular way as a problem of the relationship between art and nature, where this relationship is then reduced to the connection between a given schema (Nature), which can only be expressed within the boundaries of history, and creation or action (art) that can lead to a radical modification of the same (Argan, 1982, p. 47). Contemporary American art theorist Rosalind Krauss, on the other hand, sees the anti-mimetic, anti-narrative, anti-historical, and anti-developmental structure of the *grid* within abstract art as the key moment of departure from tradition—namely, the modern within modernism—pointing to a direct contact between art and the reality in which that art originates (Krauss, 1985, pp. 9-11). Their analyses overlap in certain parts, but while Argan emphasizes the social component of modernity in general, Krauss highlights the influence of structuralism and psychoanalytic interpretation. Both authors examine the concept of representation in an abstract work of art, pointing out a significant modification or expansion of the meaning of this concept: to represent something, besides meaning making those resemblances present, simultaneously means standing in place of something else that is merely absent, which implies reference, where resemblance becomes irrelevant.

From the very beginnings of reflections on art, which reach almost to the origins of philosophical thought in general, questions about art have also implied the problem of cognition, that is, reality. This is evidenced on the one hand by the ancient concept of *mimesis* itself, and on the other hand by Renaissance art, where *mimesis* manifests through a new, typically modern invention: the invention of perspective.

The first to reflect on the relationship between art and reality were the ancient Greeks, and the concept of *mimesis* is thus justifiably placed at the roots of both the philosophy of art and philosophy in general. Despite the conventional and most frequently translated term of "imitation" in the sense of replication, in Greek speech, the concept of *mimesis* had several meanings; imitation was not replication, especially not the replication of seen things. According to Tatarkiewicz, the original meaning of the concept of *mimesis* had no application in the visual arts, but primarily related to dance, mimicry, and music, and to them alone, since it arose together with the rituals and mysteries of the Dionysian cult (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 264). Imitation was not a reproduction of external reality, but of the internal one, and in that sense, it was understood as expression rather than copying. Only later, when the term "imitation" shifted

from cultic speech into philosophical language, did it begin to mean the reproduction of the external world, of visible reality, or the appearance of things.

The dialectic of the relationship between art and reality became particularly prominent when it became clear that photographic and cinematographic processes—the result of this program of organizing the visible that originated in the *quattrocento*—represented reality with far greater precision and efficacy in terms of the "stabilization of the referent." In this way, the possibility opens up for doubling the effect of reality or the phantasms of realism. A large part of 20th-century art attempted to expose such realism as merely one of the "models of visibility," which is especially evident in abstract art.

Since the relationship between art and reality is based primarily on vision as such, what we significantly notice in an abstract work of art is that, at first glance, it does not correspond to visible reality in any way. Therefore, the question immediately arises as to how such a work of art relates to reality. The fact that it is impossible to approach visual art without perception indicates that a work of art must be perceived to realize its value at all. This fact indicates that a connection exists between it and the world of perception. Why else would it be necessary to create an object whose first and fundamental property is to be visible, if that object subsequently did not serve to clarify the problems inherent to what is visible? If we know that observing, looking, sight, and vision are directly connected to cognition, it is justifiable to ask what visual works of art tell us about the visible, even when those works of art are entirely abstract.

Argan addresses this problem by interpreting the period of classical art, i.e., the Italian Renaissance, in which art was understood as a positive cognition of the world, and observation was accepted as a comprehensive method that yields exhaustive experiences (Argan, 1982, p. 89). Furthermore, the belief that nature is the work of God and that all experience is contained within God fully justifies artistic creation based on experience. However, this premise—namely, that all experience is derived from the will that created the universe and governs it through providence—implies that all creation will always be an imitation, and that nothing can be done that is not already written in that plan laid out by providence. It is then that a new meaning of understanding art as *mimesis* is born, or at least posed. The process by which *mimesis* or representation is realized in this sense is not creation, but the imitation, the repetition by limited human means, of that divine, creative act from which, it is believed, the world emerged.

The Latest Concepts of the Definition of Art (21st Century)

What began as a doubt around 1900, and grew into a general rejection of the definition of art through beauty by the mid-20th century, has undergone a radical theoretical turn in the first two decades of the 21st century. If modern thought, as stated above, viewed a work of art in opposition to simple manual

labor or secular goals, the latest aesthetic theory completely erases these boundaries. The contemporary concept of art is no longer defined through the aesthetic properties of the object, nor even through the institutional framework that dominated the end of the last century, but through networking processes, digital ontology, and affective relations.

One of the key concepts dominating contemporary theory is relational aesthetics (*esthétique relationnelle*), theoretically formulated by Nicolas Bourriaud. According to this concept, art is no longer viewed as the creation of objects that document the author's subjective expression, but as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 14). The 21st-century artwork does not strive to be a picture that imitates reality or a grid that departs from it; it strives to be a space of interaction. This means that the concept of art has shifted from *what art is* (ontology) to *what art does* (pragmatics).

Parallel to this social turn, the influx of digital technologies, generative artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual spaces during the 2020s has re-actualized the problem of cognition, reality, and the visual model of reality about which Argan and Krauss wrote. The latest concepts of digital aesthetics introduce the term "post-digital art," where the clear distinction between the material object and digital code is lost. As Hito Steyerl observes, the contemporary image is no longer a representation of the world, but an active fragment of it circulating in a global network, transforming reality itself through algorithmic models (Steyerl, 2012, pp. 31–32). In this context, the ancient concept of *mimesis* gains a third, entirely new dimension: art no longer imitates nature (the classical model), nor does it create an autonomous world (the modernist model), but instead algorithmically generates a new, simulated reality that retroactively shapes human perception.

This radical shift in the understanding of art has led contemporary theorists to declare an era of "post-aesthetics." Boris Groys emphasizes that in contemporary society, the artwork loses its traditional aesthetic function and becomes a form of political or existential self-design. Groys points out: "Art today is no longer an object of contemplation for the spectator, but a production process that transforms the author himself and his surroundings" (Groys, 2008, p. 46). In this way, the evolutionary circle of the concept of art closes in a paradoxical manner: after centuries of struggle for autonomy and separation from the sphere of practical life (from Batteux to Schiller), art in the 21st century merges once again with everyday life, technology, and labor—but no longer as a craft (*techné*), but as a total media and existential environment.

In the context of domestic theoretical thought, these latest global processes are reflected through the re-examination of axiological and comparative models. If the comparison of phenomena from different categories was once bridged by

searching for a common denominator in the aesthetic structure (Panić, 1999, p. 55; Ranković, 1973, p. 214), contemporary theory demands a bridging between human and non-human creativity. Today, the concept of art must encompass hybrid forms that integrate biological, technological, and ecological facts, thereby expanding the scope of the content of human reality beyond the boundaries of anthropocentrism. Viewing artistic creations, even when they are entirely virtual or generated by code, still remains the foundation of cognition, but the brushstroke from the beginning of this paper is now replaced by the trace of the algorithm, leaving art historians with the task of defining new visual languages for the time to come.

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