

IV MEDITERRANEAN CONGRESS OF AESTHETICS “Art & Time”

Historical and Trans-historical Time of Art

or

Metamorphosis and the Other History of Art

Alexandra Mouriki

University of Patras

Greece

I

The temporal nature of Art

Aporias and difficulties

Si les créations ne sont pas un acquis, ce n'est pas seulement que, comme toutes choses, elles passent, c'est aussi qu'elles ont toute leur vie devant elles.¹

Works of art are not permanent acquisitions, but not just because, as Merleau-Ponty says in this closing phrase of *Eye and Mind*, his last book he saw published, not just because artworks, like all things, pass away, but, inversely, because they have almost their entire life before them. And we could say that by these words he is summing up, the whole questioning about the relationship between art and time in a general sense.

Certainly, there are many ways to approach the issue of the relationship between art and time; for instance, very interesting questions arise from the ways individual works of art portray the experience of time as well as the ways we understand the time of experiencing a work of art. However, the question about *the relationship between art and time in general* is of a different kind. It is not just a question about a relationship or about the terms of the relationship and the ways they are interconnected; it is mostly a question about the nature of art itself: its temporal nature. In addition, the examination of this

question is of a great importance concerning our understanding of the role and impact of art in western culture, and, at the same time, it reveals aspects of the ways this culture understands itself and its values, of the ways it constitutes its world and history.

A. Widespread in western tradition was the (still influential) idea that great art or rather great works of art are those that have lasted through the course of history and its turnings. The 'true' work of art, it is said, is the one that endures, overcoming the ravages of time. Unlike other aspects of human endeavors that succumb to change and sink into oblivion, works of art overcome temporariness and continue their course through history, reappearing in other times and places, enjoying a way of being quite different from that of the earthly or 'mortal' things. Art, at least the great works of art, live out of time, they are 'eternal', to use an old fashioned expression. Such kinds of propositions are so familiar –although of course not many dare nowadays to speak about eternity– that generally we do not reflect on their content of truth. We tend to accept them as self-evident. And the fact that their impact in western culture has been so deep and long-lasting explains why even today there are so many advocates of these views willing to accept their validity. They may abstain from using terms like 'immortal' or 'eternal', but they accept that the 'true' work of art is that which lasts, which endures, which successfully passes the test of time. But is that so? Once we decide to reflect seriously on this idea of art's transcendence of time, we realize that it is not a self-evident truth but rather an unproven belief, which has to be re-examined. For, what precisely does it mean that a work of art lasts, that it traverses time and history, reappearing in other times and different historical contexts, as if independent of time's changes and history's alterations?

A1. The idea that art is eternal, that the works of art exist out of time is not just refuted by the present situation in the domain of arts; it is also contradicted and rendered implausible by the history of art itself. The idea of an artwork that endures is connected with certain historical periods and civilizations, while it seems irrelevant to others and also to popular culture and creations. On the other hand, although we can accept that there are certain works of art that are objects of admiration throughout centuries despite the inevitable changes in sensitivity and taste, there are many others that have faded or even disappeared. And there is another category of objects which, for centuries also, were not considered or functioning as works of art: for example, objects coming from pre-historical or non-western civilizations as well as objects which in their original context were not

intended as artworks, but which became or transformed into art because of time and the changes time has brought in people's views concerning art and its significance. These transformations deprive the argument about art's timelessness from its validity showing that art is not immune to time changes, that time and the changes it brings about are constitutive of the way we understand art. Consequently, to insist on art's timelessness is an illusion; an essentialist illusion we could say, since it presupposes that there is an essence of art remaining unalterable in the passage of time, or at least, that the great works of art possess an inherent capacity to rise above the malign powers of time. However, no explanation has been proposed as to what this capacity is (unless of course we accept the traditional viewpoint, adopted by the Renaissance and prevailing at least until the classicist period up to assuming the status of a 'given' in European culture, that works of art meriting the name are those which are bearers of beauty and since beauty is considered 'immortal', they too belong to the realm of immortality; a realm not subject to the ravages of time and certainly not following the adventures of human history. They are out of history; art's time is a-historical.)

B. On the other pole of this traditional conception of art's timelessness, there is the idea, no less strong and influential, of a tight correlation between art and history. It is an idea dating from the 19th century and still retaining its hold. Art's disconnection from time and history was unacceptable to 19th century thought, fascinated as it was with the idea of history. From this point of view, every human activity, including art, bears the marks of its times and cannot be exempted from the historical process. It is worth mentioning in this connection, that it was Hegel who explicitly placed art within history and gave it a teleological perspective, inaugurating therefore a tradition still in effect and in accordance with the project of modernity for development and progress –even if, in Hegel's view, this evolution of art resulted in its end. In any case, this view of a historically oriented art contested directly and soundly the traditional approach of the relationship between art and time and focused on art's change and development and on its contribution to the realization of the program of modernity.

B1. However, this strictly historical explanation of art's evolution, although it is more plausible in comparison to the idea of art's a-historical time, it is not unconditionally defensible either. It fails, just like the a-historical view, to explain why and how certain works of art, although bearing the marks of their times, manage to transcend their

historical context, giving rise to ever new aesthetic experiences, exerting their fascination on subsequent generations and historical epochs. It seems that the insistence on the exclusively historical explanation of art's relation to time is also deficient. If the belief in art's timelessness isn't but an illusion, the argument in favour of art's exclusive dependence upon its historical times is rather an elusion. The more intensely the supporters of the strong historical view insist on the indissoluble bonds connecting a work of art with its historical context, the greater is the difficulty they face in explaining how it is possible for this work to transcend its time and affect the audience of subsequent ages and the bigger is their puzzlement while trying to find an answer as to why certain particular works lived on while others –even products of the same historical period–faded into oblivion. As Marx himself pointed out,

...the difficulty is not so much in grasping the idea that Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It is rather in understanding why they should still constitute for us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment.²

As curious as it may seem, this remark, made by a thinker who strictly correlated art to the historical process, draws attention to the fact that although history may offer the necessary perspective to understand how a work of art is generated, history alone can not explain how this work continues its life. A strictly historical explanation, paradoxically enough, results in evading the temporal nature of art. Both the a-historical and the exclusively history-dependent conception of art fail to explain the temporal nature of art itself, erroneously identifying it with a horizontal movement of art either placing it out of time (a timeless hovering of art over the flow of history) or submerging it in this very flow and examining it in its linear progress towards its supposed future culmination.

C. Moreover, this linear progress has been, in its own turn, strongly challenged by post-modern thought which considers it as a myth of modernity, an old narrative having reached its end. In this view, art also has reached its end though in a somewhat different sense than the one it had in the teleological hegelian perspective. In Hegel's view art reaches its end by evolving into a higher level of the spirit, that of philosophy. In post-modernist view however, this end has the meaning of an end of art's linear progress towards a common goal and of its simultaneous opening to a pluralistic post-history. Art's end doesn't mean that art dies. It rather means that it perpetuates (reproduces) itself indefinitely without any progress. Art has no future; it belongs to an infinite present,

permitting the development of every kind of creative projects except those aiming at a progress. Post-modernism then, becomes that era of post-history, where any artistic goal, style, method or mixture can be valid.³ What is not valid any more is art's evolution. In that sense, time is somehow abolished: the post-modern approach results in a conception of art's relationship with time which looks very much alike the timeless conception of the pre-modern tradition.

The pre-modern, a-historical view installs art out of time in a realm of its own, still and unchangeable, and it is contradicted by the history of art itself.

The modern, strictly historical perspective, immerses art into history and its historical times, rendering the explanation of how a work of art is able to transcend its historical context and revive in different ones evoking significant aesthetic experiences to very different people almost unattainable.

Finally, the post-modern, post-historical view, proclaiming the end of art or the end of the history art, not only brings art out of history and historical progress but, what is more, it also modifies the terms through which we understand art.

Consequently, either we place art or artworks out of history – in an eternal realm or in an indefinite present – or we insist on their link with time and historical contexts, we end up with the same aporias: how does it happen that, without being permanent, art and artworks surpass their historical boundaries continuing their life beyond them? How is it possible that, after its alleged end, new forms and types of art appear proposing themselves as forms of expression of their own time?

II

Trans-historical Time or the Other History of Art

Hence, is there a different way to overcome this impasse, re-placing art and art works into their historical time while recognizing their power to rise above it and become significant for other people and times from the ones that generated them?

It is true that an enormous change has taken place throughout the 20th century concerning our conception of what can be considered as art and, as a result, of what can be included in the field of art. Greek and Egyptian sculptures, African masks and pre-Colombian figurines as well as abstract paintings, installations and works of video art (all of which we regard equally as art) populate our museums of art –mostly those museums without walls, those musées imaginaires, as Malraux had called them. The establishment of these museums (real or imaginary) corresponds to a huge shift in our response to art, to an ‘aesthetic revolution’ Malraux says⁴, the significance of which must be taken into serious account. And the major question to which this shift is giving rise is that of a possible reconsideration of the relationship between art and time.

As the idea of immortality is not acceptable any more –the history of art as we know it today does not permit us to consider art as immortal or timeless–, we have to search for a different explanation in order to understand how is it possible “...on this earth of ours where everything is subject to the passing of time, one thing only” to be “both subject to time and yet victorious over it: the work of art⁵”. Malraux has argued that art creates worlds which are irreducible to the real world (by the term ‘real’ describing the world of appearances, the ephemeral world of chaotic and fugitive things as we experience it in our everyday life). And these worlds of art, though coherent and unified –in contrast to the fragmentariness and incoherence of the ‘real’ world–, are neither fixed nor definitive; they are worlds ‘born to metamorphosis’, as he says, and if they last or endure, they do so through a process of resurrection and transformation. Consequently, art does not live timelessly, in eternity; and if it lasts, it does so through its capacity to ‘live again’ even after long periods of oblivion. But what do these ‘renaissances’ mean and how are they possible? Should we suppose that the proposed by Malraux notion of ‘resurrection’ simply repeats this very familiar idea that a work of art is susceptible to different interpretations and that each historical period finds in it different meanings? Not really. The key-notion in Malraux’s theory is ‘metamorphosis’⁶. Resurrections or ‘renaissances’ are inseparable from metamorphoses. The work of art is not something fixed, it is by its nature susceptible to change and its signification is not pre-determined, i.e. the work is not endowed with a series of meanings initially given to it at the moment of its creation, which would be the object of subsequent interpretations. The work of art is instead a field of possible meanings in constant movement and open to unexpected changes. That’s why works of

art can disappear for centuries and then reappear in other places and cultural contexts, while their initial meaning has been replaced by other and in some cases quite different meanings: the moment of their creation isn't but the beginning of a long journey of metamorphosis, which can explain how even these objects which initially were not considered or intended as artworks, have become art: through a transformation in their signification.

Art, as conceived by Malraux, is then intrinsically connected with this capacity of metamorphosis and it is through this transformational process that, being into time, it becomes victorious over it. Malraux seems to adopt neither the timeless nor the strictly historical explanation of the relationship between art and time. From his point of view, art overcomes temporariness through its capacity to create its own worlds and to launch them in the unknown seas of the human future, as he says. It seems that his account of art as a continuous adventure of metamorphosis constitutes an original way out of the impasse described above.

But is that so? On closer examination, we realize that the explanation offered by Malraux, interesting as it may be, it poses several problems. For example:

– He argues that art transcends time through its capacity for resurrection and metamorphosis, but he doesn't explain how he understands this capacity. He claims that the works of art are born to metamorphosis but he doesn't explain whether there is a quality in art that makes this process of metamorphosis possible or, inversely, different meanings are projected onto the works of art transforming them into something else from what they were.

– Moreover, transporting all these different works and objects from different cultures and historical periods in his imaginary museum, Malraux uproots them from their historical context, deprives them from their unique characteristics as human creation emergent in a particular time and place, and make them co-exist in an ideal ou-topos as different modes of appearance of Art (capital letter) –as if there were a Spirit of Art uniting all these disparate products of different cultures in a 'suprasensible world'. Malraux invokes a metaphysical principle to explain the unity of art throughout time and hence he puts art and artworks out of time and history, or at least, out of the 'real' (in the sense Malraux gives to this term) world and empirical history. Subsequently, his approach is not a

different answer to the problem of the relationship between art and time but a different version of an a-historical or rather supra-historical conception of art:

As if an imaginary spirit of art, pushed forward from miniature to painting and from fresco to stained-glass window in a single conquest which it suddenly abandoned for another, parallel or suddenly opposed, as if a subterranean torrent of history unified all these scattered works by dragging them along with it, ... a style known in its evolution and metamorphosis becomes less an idea than the illusion of a living fatality.⁷

Malraux turns to the idea of a History which unites the most disparate human endeavors, he discovers an Art that works behind the artist's back, and a Reason in history of which the artists is the instrument, as Merleau-Ponty aptly remarks⁸. In order to explain the convergence of separate works, he invokes a destiny which rules over them. Not being able to find in the human-artistic activity itself an explanation of the unity of its attempts, Malraux consigns the history of art to a spirit of the absolute and renders the process of its metamorphosis fatal: from the order of the real or perceived world, he moves on to a metaphysical order, sidestepping somehow the real question concerning art and its relation to time.

The right approach would be, according to Merleau-Ponty, not to try to find a cause but to try to understand why different cultures become involved in the same task,

why what one culture produces has meaning for another culture even if it is not the original meaning; why we take the trouble to transform fetishes (wooden statues) into art.⁹

In other words, the issue in question is to understand why there is *one* history or *one* universe of art, and this cannot be done as long as we place works of art in the physical world as separate events; if we consider them as such events, their connection becomes questionable and calls for an explanatory principle, i.e. for this Reason or Spirit invoked by Malraux. If, on the contrary, we place them in the order of the *advent*, an order not derived from that of mere events, and understand them as efforts of expression, there is no need to turn to an external principle in order to explain their **unity**. The order of advents –distinct from that of the empirical events– is not a second causality which would make the world of art "a supra-sensible" world with its own laws.¹⁰

– The unity of art is based upon conceiving the works of art as a kind of an expressive gesture. An original operation, i.e., which, according to Merleau-Ponty, –starting from the basic orientation of the human body in the world and continuing with all kinds of human

gestures, cultural gestures included— constitutes a sign as a sign, implants a meaning in that which did not have one and thus, inaugurates an order and founds an institution or tradition. Accordingly, this meaning is on principle a meaning in genesis; a meaning, the intrinsic order of which is not eternal:

Although it does not follow each zigzag of empirical history, it sketches out, it calls for, a series of successive steps.¹¹

Hence, it is essential for art to develop and thus to present itself in the form of history.

– The unity of art is not to be found in the museum alone; it exists in that single task of expression we described above, through which an *other history*¹² is

constituted and reconstituted step by step by the interest which bears us toward that which is not us and by that life which the past, in a continuous exchange, brings to us and finds in us, and which it continues to lead in each painter (artist) who revives, recaptures and renews the entire undertaking of art in each new work.¹³

The relationship between art and time is one of pre-figuration–transfiguration, a continuous exchange between the art of the present and that of the past and it is in this sense that we can understand how the works of art are have almost their entire life before them. It is in this sense also that the real meaning of **metamorphosis** should be understood: The works of art are not permanent acquisitions. They offer themselves the ways through which they appear in another light¹⁴, gathering up at the same time a series of antecedent expressions in an eternity ever to be recreated.¹⁵

Hence, art’s time is neither a-historical nor exclusively history embedded (in history’s empirical sense). Art’s time is **trans-historical**: artworks, initiating themselves the process of their metamorphosis, ‘transcend’ time being into time (an immanent transcendence, we could say) and, thus, they ‘traverse’ history.

¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *L’œil et l’esprit*, nrf Gallimard, Paris 1964, p. 92-93. “If creations are not permanent acquisitions, it is not just that, like all things, they pass away: it is also that they have almost their entire life before them.” [M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, in Galen A. Johnson (ed.), *The*

Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader. Philosophy and Painting, Northwestern Univ. Press, Evanston, Illinois 1993, p. 149]

² D. McLellan (ed.), *Marx's 'Grundrisse'*, Macmillan Ltd, London 1980, p. 45.

³ Cf. A. C. Danto, "The End of Art", in A. C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986, pp. 81-115.

⁴ Malraux speaks about this 'aesthetic revolution' in his *La Métamorphose des Dieux* (Cf. A. Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux* Vol 1. *Le Surnaturel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977. This volume has first been published in 1957 under the title: *La Métamorphose des Dieux*).

⁵ Extract from an interview which forms part of the television program: *Promenades imaginaires dans Florence* (1976).

⁶ Malraux argues that art transcends time through a process of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis is the very life of the work of art in time, one of its specific characteristics, as he says in *La Métamorphose des Dieux* (Cf. A. Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux* Vol 3. *L'Intemporel*, Gallimard, Paris 1976).

⁷ Cited by M. Merleau-Ponty in the "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence". Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, in Galen A. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader. Philosophy and Painting*, Northwestern Univ. Press, Evanston, Illinois 1993, p. 101-2 [M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le langage indirect et les voix du silence*, in M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, nrf Gallimard, Paris 1960, p 81]. In this famous essay Merleau-Ponty opens, we could say, an 'imaginary' dialogue with A. Malraux on the philosophical interpretation of painting and offers his critical response to Malraux's aesthetic theory, as developed in Malraux's *The Voices of Silence* [Cf. A. Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (transl. St. Gilbert), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1978. (A. Malraux, *Les Voix du Silence*, Pléiade, Paris 1952)].

⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, op. cit. p. 102 [81]

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104 [84]

¹⁰ Advent is a term that Merleau-Ponty 'borrows' from P. Ricœur and he understands it as "a promise of events" (*ibid.*, p. 106 [87]).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "The history that the writer participates in (...) is not a power before which he must bend his knee. It is the perpetual conversation carried on between all spoken words and all valid actions, each in turn contesting and confirming the others, and each recreating all the others." *Ibid.*, p. 111 [92]

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 97 [75]

¹⁴ Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, op. cit., p. 139 [62]

¹⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, op. cit., p 112 [94]