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# AN APORIA OF POSSIBILITY: ON TECHNOLOGY AND THE LOSS OF MATERIALITY OF ART

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## ABSTRACT

Numerous art historians and art critics have announced the death of art. From Arthur C. Danto's Hegelian analysis to Hans Belting's Kantian reading, art's fate seems sealed and its potentials exhausted. These approaches either claim that art has become pure idea and is thus no longer art but philosophy, or that art has so lost itself in the myriad of its possibilities that the artistic schools, periods and traditions which once provided its stability has vanished. In the following article, the crisis of contemporary art is analyzed from a third and strictly material perspective. Drawing on the thinking of André Leroi-Gourhan, the article proposes to look at art's current crisis as a direct result of the changed relations between the human and matter or between the hand and materiality, that modern technologies and processes of automation have produced. Where the human hand becomes increasingly superfluous, the ties to the material world that used to steer and guide artists is equally lost.

**Keywords:** the end of art; technology and automation; André Leroi-Gourhan; the hand; materiality of art

Many obituaries have been written for art to the point where they now form one of the liveliest and most promising genres of art criticism and art history today. It attracts intellectuals from a broad variety of disciplines and schools. Although there is little agreement as to the causes of art's death, there is, however, broad consensus that a revival of art is highly unlikely – at least in the form recognized by art historians and art critics from the time of Winckelmann and Diderot. In the words of the German art historian, Hans Belting: “I spoke of the farewell to the guiding model of an art history with an internal logic, which was favored in describing shifts of style from one period to another.”<sup>2</sup> The loss described by Belting is first and foremost the loss of any successional narrative, of any linear conception of art and its history, where styles continuously succeeded and replaced one another. Due to the postmodern dissolution of all grand narratives, due to today's skepticism about any linear and coherent history, contemporary art finds itself completely disoriented, robbed, it seems, of its future as well as of its past. Where there is no history, there can be no progress, and where there is no progress, art loses the very driving force which used to propel it. Without history there are no visionaries, without tradition no rule-breakers and no avant-garde. Losing the “guiding model” of the past, contemporary art is therefore, according to Belting, losing its very foundation, indeed, its life force and very reason for existence:

“We can now discern what is stirring people's minds when art loses the internal mirror of all the particular genres in which it has been created for so long. This is where progress, the life force of the individual arts, ceases to keep the old sense. Progress is exchanged for the concept of the 'remake': let's repeat what has been done before. Any new manifestation is no better, but also no worse... The genres always provided a solid framework, which now begins to dissolve. Art history was a framework of a different kind, designed to put art's course in perspective. That is why the end of art history is also the end of a story: either because

the story is changing or because there is, in the received sense, nothing more to tell.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not my intention here to offer yet another epilogue for art. Personally I am less convinced than Belting that the history of art truly has come to an end. It may very well be that the many reports of art's death are, to quote Mark Twain, ‘greatly exaggerated.’ This, however, does not mean that the contemporary art scene is untouched by the significant changes in the conception and foundation of art as described by Belting. The enormous profusion of styles we witness today together with the extremely short lifespan of any artistic expression may indeed appear to be the symptom of, if not a deadly illness, then at least a crisis that would challenge our understanding of art. It is this crisis rather than any presumed death of art that I wish to address.

There are many difficulties facing contemporary artists. Perhaps one of the biggest is the fact that everything today seems possible through the endless range of analogue and digital media techniques generating an unending variety of styles. Although this undoubtedly sounds more like a luxury than like a genuine and serious problem, it says something fundamental about the situation of the arts of today: the constant negotiation between possibility and necessity that historically has shaped the arts is today supplanted by pure possibility without any conceivable restraints – neither of a conceptual nor of a concrete, material nature. Where everything is possible, as Kierkegaard once reminded us, it is also possible to get lost in every possible way. So the contemporary artist is, like Kierkegaard's Don Juan, faced with unending choices, all of which may appear equally desirable at a distance and equally dull once chosen. Today's absence of any sense of framework or artistic principles and laws may very well prove every bit as challenging as the total lack of artistic possibility and freedom that has been in the darkest chapters of our past. Art is in this respect no different than any other activity, enterprise or game: some sort of resistance and opposition is needed for the possibility of any development to occur.

Surely this *aporia* can be addressed in several different ways. One might, as Belting does, analyze it in strictly art historical terms. The lack of resistance is thus translatable into the lack of tradition and the lack of artistic genres and schools. The problem is basically a problem of authority: where art academies and art history are losing their previous privileged positions, a power vacuum is created that leaves art in a seeming state of chaos. Professional judgement is supplanted by layman opinion and the contingent fashions and tastes of the art market, offering no directions other than the whims of collectors and gallerists. Albeit clearly elitist, this approach does offer important insights into the specific postmodern conditions where art styles are as exchangeable as fashion styles and the only guiding principles are the ever changing prizes of the market.

Another, less elitist, approach will be to address this *aporia* from a more technical and concrete, materialist perspective. The problems facing contemporary art can also be formulated in technical terms and with a focus on the specific, artistic means of production. All art forms are *techne* and as such susceptible to technological developments and changes. As we shall try to extrapolate in the following, the problem of choice, the lack of any guiding principles and laws are closely related to larger changes within the technological field of science and society itself, in a period of human history where the use and handling of all sorts of materials and tools is subject to dramatic changes – both within and outside the art world. The crisis of contemporary art is, as we shall see, as much a crisis of the hand, of the shifting roles of manual labor and work, as a crisis of lofty, artistic ideas.

At the end of his seminal work, *Le geste et la parole* (1964-65) the French anthropologist and philosopher André Leroi-Gourhan gives a somber account of the direction in which modern humanity is heading. Due to the invention of more and more sophisticated and abstract machines and technologies, the gap between humanity and the rest of the living world is constantly increasing, threatening to destroy the last ties between man and his environment. This severance is particularly obvious in the development of robotics and machine automation where the role of human

labor and agency is quickly diminishing, reducing human engagement and involvement to an absolute minimum. While this may from a certain perspective be regarded as a pure victory and gain, finally freeing the human being from the toil of physical labor, this liberation does have profound and less innocent consequences for the future possibilities of the human being. Where automation prevails, the human hand recedes and becomes for the first time in mankind's history superfluous. What is threatened is not only the human ability to work but our very palpable and physical contact with the world. Our relation to matter, to the particularity and very concreteness of things, is thus thrown into a state of uncertainty and crisis. We, as a species, are literally losing touch with the world, receding from our previous proximity and contact with things unto an ungraspable, unreachable distance. In the words of Leroi-Gourhan:

“The loss of manual activity and the reduction of the human physical adventure to a passive one will cause... serious problems... We must therefore expect a completely transposed *Homo sapiens* to come into existence, and what we are witnessing today may well be the last free interchanges between humans and the natural world.”<sup>4</sup>

As recognized by Kierkegaard, the liberation from all restraints is as much a curse as it is a blessing. Freed from tools, gestures, and muscle, *Homo sapiens* is losing its very physical and worldly foundations. This divorce from matter, this crisis in the relationship between man and environment, which today, in the age of climate change and climate catastrophe is manifesting itself ever louder and clearer, affects not only man as an empirical, sensuous, biological creature but as an intellectual and cultural being as well. One way of tracking and following this manual regression is therefore through the arts, where the relationship and drama between man and matter for millennia has been played out. If Leroi-Gourhan is right in his diagnosis then surely the manual retreat, the manual surrender must be inscribed and find expression in the history of art itself.

Looked at from a purely material perspective one can detect two main tendencies in the developments of modern art through the 20<sup>th</sup> century: One which leads towards an apparent freeing of matter, lessening the artistic grip and control; and one which seeks the complete abolishment of matter, pursuing sur-material and immaterial goals. What both tendencies, despite all differences, share is a common distrust in the traditional relationship between matter and tool, material and hand and a suspicion towards all inherited artistic technics. Where the hand is still actively engaged in the artistic practice, it no longer seeks absolute control but allows chance and contingency to play an active, sometimes even determinate role. Matter is no longer what is to be mastered but only loosely, often hastily, sculpted and formed. We see the hand tremble as if in the grips of a fever, leaving traces, no longer appearing to circumscribe, delineate or represent a thing. Figuration is either completely abandoned or only persists in almost illegible forms, flirting with its own demise and destruction. One might, as Roland Barthes<sup>5</sup> famously does, see this as the signifier's triumph over the signified, resulting in gestures that now only exist for their own sake. But this aesthetic pleasure derived from the works of Cy Twombly and other more or less abstract expressionists in no way contradicts or curtails the malaise and awkwardness that has crept into the artistic production. A certain clumsiness and ineptitude is precisely the sought-after effect which is here evoked with strangely pedantic precision. It is as if the hand and gesture of the artist communicate their very inability to project their own expression: a beautiful and touching surrender for sure, but nevertheless an unmistakable concession. Figuration hence becomes a sign of the past, belonging to a bygone era, an echo of a manual and manipulative skill that appears increasingly outdated and foreign. From the last traces of blurred, shaken and contorted figures in the works of Jean Dubuffet, Karel Appel or Asger Jorn to their complete disappearance in the works of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell and many others, the story of painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would appear to be one of increased material emancipation and matter's gradual but certain triumph over the tool and the hand. Although figuration has since then

experienced an important revival, today being at least as common and popular as abstract art, the return to recognizable, legible figures has lost any kind of naturalness and naivety it might have had in the past. All kinds of artistic means are employed to either cover over or make excuses for the reappearance of figuration in art, as if figuration after having been abandoned for so long can only reemerge on the canvas and under the brushstrokes of the artist as an awkward, uncomfortable stranger: Georg Baselitz hangs his pictures upside down, Gerhard Richter covers his figurations in so many layers of paint that his figures are either partially or completely buried. It is as if artistic, *technical* skill must somehow make amends for its own return to the site of production. But surely, where the matter is set free, the hand is equally emancipated – at least in principle untied from any previous bonds and commitments. Today, everything indeed seems possible and the range of artistic styles and means of expression appear broader than ever before. Photorealistic art, abstract art and graffiti art are exhibited side by side in the galleries and museums of contemporary art, and the hand is free to use spray cans, stencils, knives, hammers and scissors in the constant pursuit of new expressions – not to mention the many other body parts as well as body fluids that have been more or less provocatively applied since the works of Yves Klein and the rise of feminism and body art in the 60s and 70s.

The other main trend of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would appear to dispense with the hand and the tool altogether. Matter and manual labor are here no longer emancipated but rather circumvented or completely eclipsed. What begins with Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades is the realization that art does not have to depend on any physical practice but can consist of pure conceptualizations. The artist is first and foremost an intellectual and the main material of his work is ideas. Instead of taking the detour over color and paint, instead of wasting time and energy developing and perfecting a skill, it suffices to choose an already fabricated object and transplant it unto the art scene. Hence the signified now outshines the signifier, placing all emphasis on the content and the idea of the work instead of on its empirical, sensuous form. The artist is now a finder

instead of a creator, a chooser instead of a craftsman. What he seeks to express is expressed no longer thanks to but rather in spite of the material support. The hand now seems either completely superfluous or reducible to the simple function of the index finger, pointing out what is next to be selected and put on display. Arthur C. Danto<sup>6</sup> has in his Hegel-inspired writings famously declared this the end of art since art has disappeared into the spirit, become something else, namely philosophy. Whether or not conceptual art truly constitutes a final break with the discipline of art to become pure conceptual thinking, it is clear that art can no longer be thought of in classic, art-historical terms. In this sense, conceptual artists have been far more radical in their rejection of all previous art forms and modes of expression than abstract painters ever were. Gone are even the last traces of the artworks' aura that Adorno<sup>7</sup> in his aesthetics held on to. Mass production and automation is henceforth no longer the enemy and destroyer of art but its new, good playmate and friend – enabling Marcel Duchamp to collect his mass produced urinals and bottle driers and Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol to exhibit their selections of soda cans, bean cans, and soap boxes. Immaterial ideas and material support thus enters into a new and significantly cooler relationship, based on the uniform and always predictable products of the assembly line and the machine, leaving the sculpting of matter outside artistic concern. Although this may indeed appear to be the only reasonable artistic reply to the significant changes in late capitalist society, there can be no doubt that something essential is lost on the way. In the words of Marcel Duchamp, describing the thoughts behind his own selections of Readymades:

“You can choose many objects if you want but the thing was to choose one that you were not attracted to for its shape or anything, you see. It was through a feeling of indifference toward it that I would choose it and that was difficult because anything becomes beautiful if you look at it long enough... Indifference, you see, there is a form of indifference in life after all. We are indifferent to many things, aren't we, and so, especially in painting or art,

generally, it's a matter of taste. A painter paints and applies his taste to what he paints and, in the case of the Readymade it was to get rid of that intention or feeling and completely eliminate the existence of taste, bad or good or indifferent.”<sup>8</sup>

Together with the cooling of art's relation to matter, it would appear that an emotional cooling follows as well – the new attitude towards the art work being one of deliberate indifference. And Duchamp is far from alone in his search for emotional detachment and indifference. Not to arouse feelings or emotions of any kind seems to become a common trait, even artistic strategy, in the works of a broad range of artists following Duchamp. Since emotions are regarded the enemy of thought, a truly conceptual art must do its best to avoid them – hence the anemic works of Joseph Kosuth, his naked and cadaverous clocks and chairs; hence the dry and purely analytical and intellectual aims of the Art and Language movement. As always, Andy Warhol took this idealized coolness and indifference even further, looking for boredom and emptiness itself:

“I've been quoted a lot as saying 'I like boring things.' Well, I said it and I meant it... Apparently, most people love watching the same basic thing, as long as the details are different. But I'm just the opposite: If I'm going to sit and watch the same thing I saw the night before, I don't want it to be essentially the same – I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.”<sup>9</sup>

Surely, indifference, emptiness and boredom seem to be the natural consequence of consumer society itself where all goods are repetitious, interchangeable and alike. It is the luxurious boredom of the supermarket, the towering indifference of popular entertainment and TV shows. But again, this apathy can also be thought of in more technical terms: where the hand recedes from the artistic practice and site of production itself,

liberty and boredom, passivity and emptiness become synonymous. It would appear there is only a short distance from the superfluity of the hand to the superfluity of the artist himself. Although, matter is precisely what no longer matters, the question is, if the manipulation of matter can be taken out of the artistic equation without also influencing, even damaging and crippling, the generating of artistic concepts and ideas? Isn't the pure intellectual stance towards art threatened with emptiness and boredom from all sides? How far can concepts and ideas truly go on their solo ride? If Arthur C. Danto is right, that conceptual art is no longer art but philosophy, one should remember what kind of philosophy this is: What Danto is describing is German Idealism *after* the opposition between mind and matter, subject and object, reason and nature has been resolved and all historical and dialectical movements have come to a final standstill. As enticing and liberating as this Hegelian freeing of spirit may possibly sound, it does leave the crucial question, what mankind is now supposed to do? Surely, the sheer sterility of this final stage is enough to make freedom sound a terribly lot like boredom. And even without following Danto unto such soaring, philosophical heights, one may still wonder what pure concepts and ideas, left on their own, detached from all material concerns, are truly capable of? In the words of Leroi-Gourhan: "The loss of manual discovery, of the personal encounter between human and matter... has closed one of the doors to individual aesthetic innovation."<sup>10</sup> Where creativity is no longer challenged by anything, where ideas meet no material or worldly resistance, thought may seem to lose the very dialogue partner from which its innovative powers and vitality springs. What we are left with is nothing but a empty conversation: Art talking to itself about art – which, and this is no coincidence, is precisely how Ad Reinhardt has described it: "Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art-as-art is nothing but art."<sup>11</sup>

Whether we approach contemporary art by the way of modernist painting or by the way of conceptual art, the problem now appears to share certain important features: the emancipation of matter no less than its conceptual effacement leads to a crisis in the artistic production

itself. Either art is sealed off in a tiresome, redundant conversation with itself or art is set free to pursue any and every imaginable goal. In both cases freedom seems equally problematic. The manual regression that characterizes our age of increased machine automation leaves the hand strangely jobless, often awkwardly superfluous in many, if not most, day to day operations – a tendency that the coming years of new IoT technologies are sure to make even more pronounced. The deliberate expression of manual ineptitude, the stumbling and stuttering of the modern and modernist hand across so many canvases, metals and marble blocks is perhaps the melancholic yet beautiful sign of the human hand's gradual withering and faltering. Let's recall what the concept of *techne* used to mean: for centuries art was regarded primarily as a craft, giving form, providing shape to matter. The word *techne* derives from the Proto-Indo-European root "Tek", meaning "to weave." This should undoubtedly be taken literally as the production of garments and textiles which has, throughout the history of mankind, played an essential, indispensable role. But the word may also evoke a number of transferred meanings that are no less significant to a traditional understanding of art: to weave, not only garments, but also brushstrokes, colors, impressions – to weave ideas and matter, to weave concepts and form in an ongoing dialogue between opportunity and necessity, freedom and law.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Belting: *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan: *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993), 407.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes: *The Responsibility of Forms* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1985)

<sup>6</sup> Arthur C. Danto: *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)

<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

<sup>8</sup> Jeanne Siegel: *Artwords – Discourse on the 60s and 70s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Lars Svendsen: *A Philosophy of Boredom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 104.

<sup>10</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan: *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993), 397.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanne Siegel: *Artwords – Discourse on the 60s and 70s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 51.

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