

Management

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## „WHY DO WE NEED ART HISTORY?” IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY – IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE

### ABSTRACT

The article presents various approaches to the methodology of modern and contemporary art history. It provides signposts and a set of possible orientations toward the field of art history, by presenting some of the theoretical perspectives most widely used in the discipline today (e.g. historiography, iconography, ‘iconic turn’ or the most recent concept – ‘*Relational Aesthetics*’). The aim of this article is to present art as a visual representation of a range of concepts and emotions as well as to examine the progress of different ways in which people study, interpret and appreciate art in its richness and multitude of forms.

**Keywords:** art history, iconography, iconic turn, contemporary art, culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION – *PREMONITION DE LA GUERRE*<sup>1</sup>

This rudimentary question in the field of the theory and historiography of art history – „Why do we need art history” was one of most important issues in the late 1940s for Fritzl Saxl (1890–1948) (Saxl 1976: 14). Saxl was a distinguished art historian of Austrian origin, who was the guiding light of the Warburg Institute especially during the long mental breakdown of its founder, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), whom he succeeded as its director. The Warburg Institute was quite famous for its interest in a more philosophical and interdisciplinary approach to Art History. In 1933, under the shadow of Nazism, the Institute was relocated by Saxl

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<sup>1</sup> *Prémonition de la Guerre Civile* (Premonition of Civil War), is a painting done by Spanish Surrealist Salvador Dalí in 1936. Dalí made this painting to represent the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Dalí painted this work six months before the Spanish Civil War had even begun and then claimed that he had known the war was going to happen in order to appear to have prophet-like abilities due to „the prophetic power of his subconscious mind”. Dalí may have changed the name of the painting after the war in a manner of proving this prophetic quality, though it is not entirely certain (Descharnes, Néret 2013: 78).

to London. He was also the first director of the Warburg Institute when it became part of the University of London in 1944. There, in a friendlier environment Saxl could examine the astrological manuscripts and problematical iconography of ancient works. The conclusions that Saxl drew from his observations were presented in the massive two-volume edition of his *Lectures* (Saxl 1957).

Saxl was convinced, as was Warburg, that visual images could be read as historical documents offering insights into the culture that were in no way inferior to those derived from written texts. Both scholars also shared a multi-disciplinary methodological approach to the problems they set themselves. Saxl described himself as an art historian who refused to recognize the borders of academic disciplines. He also mused that he was a „wanderer through the museums and libraries of Europe, a farm hand tilling the piece of land between art history, literature, natural science and religion”. (McEwan 2012: 196)

Saxl also believed that we must accept the dangerous and risky fact of the growing fascination with art and especially art history and that the majority of people who study art history generally just want to receive a precise and straight forward answer to the question how to evaluate and appreciate a work of art and how to make it part of their soul. He was convinced that the visual images should be used as historical documents and that the revealing glimpses and the enlightening facts that they provide are in no way less important to those derived from the study of written sources. The questions Saxl asked in his lectures are ultimately concerned with the beliefs, the aspirations and the dreams of the people who made them and who utilized these images (e.g. as *Biblia pauperum* in medieval times). Saxl assumed that research was always connected with an attempt to transcend generalities and to establish a link and relationship with the people of the past. He thought that one should treat art history as an essential and primary task in the life of a human being. He underlined the fact of the distressingly growing interest in art in general in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially the alarmingly increasing curiosity in the field of art history.

## 2. ARTISTIC CONCERNS OF THE MID-20TH CENTURY

Another intellectual backdrop for many art historians and art theorists concerns (sometimes positive, though much more often negative) was Clement Greenberg (1909–1994). He was an American essayist generally regarded as an influential visual art critic who was closely associated with the American Modern Art of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the chief theorist and advocate of modernism in the visual arts.

In order to think through the place of the different paradigm within the modern art history, it is helpful, perhaps, to recourse to a number of diverse conceptual models, starting with the work of Thomas Kuhn, one of the most influential

philosophers of science of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a distinction between „normal“ science and the innovative inquiry that results in shifts of epistemological paradigm, can also be applied to understanding art-historical practice (Kuhn 1964: 123).

Simultaneously, in the field of art itself during the 1950s and 1960s emerged a new artistic direction Geometric Abstraction, Op art, and kinetic art. All of them flourished as international styles that linked artists across the globe. These practices were animated by socialist and phenomenological discourses that appealed to visual perception and interactivity as ways to democratize artistic culture. Eliminating elite cultural references, these artists aimed to train or stimulate perception as a gateway toward broader viewer participation within broader social constellations, such as urbanism, cybernetics, and labour.

During the 1960s many avant-garde impulses, dated back from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were reinvigorated, with the strong demand that art should find ways to address and even intervene in social and political life. Consequently, many artists felt the need to understand the relationship between art and society, and to conceive, at the level of ideas and concepts, how art and life might be realigned. Intellectual debate and theorizing about the nature of art became commonplace, and often essential to the process of art making itself. Articulating one's practice in written form, writing art criticism, making public statements, manifesto-like political commitments, or philosophical pronouncements on the nature of reality or human experience became an increasingly common component of artistic practice. As a result, practice itself became more and more theorized, and theory became the framework within which practice was increasingly reconceived.

Conceptual artists (such as Joseph Kosuth), who believed that claims about the meaning of art rested on a philosophical understanding of the nature of language, were key to this transition; while sculptors (like Robert Morris) explored how language itself emerged from a deeper perception and cognitive and bodily engagement with the surrounding world and its horizons of intelligibility. Other artists from the same period, such as Daniel Buren, Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, investigated art's networks of production and dissemination through both their writings and their works for non-standard contexts (magazines, billboards, and various other borderline or non-art spaces).

### **3. THE NEW MEDIA AND THEORETICAL CONCEPTS IN THE 1970S**

Since the late 1970s, when the history of photography became an academic subject, and with mounting interest in photography in the art market, there have been frequent calls by various scholars for a „new kind of history“ of photography.

These calls were part of what Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson described in a special photography issue of *October Magazine* (Summer 1978) as a renewed scholarly discovery of the medium, characterized by the „sense of epiphany, delayed and redoubled in its power”. This rediscovery carried the message that photography and its practices have to be redeemed „from the cultural limbo to which for a century and a half it had been consigned” (Krauss, Michelson 1978: 3).

Also in the 1970s a young British art historian – T. J. Clark has introduced a new range of thematic for art history – the social history of art. His books were seen as a manifesto of the new art history in the English language, provoking controversy as an unabashed Marxist interpretation of some of the most traditionally researched topics in art history. That gave serious consideration to the social and political determinants of artistic endeavor. Thus T. J. Clark has advanced an ambitious program to revitalize the discipline of art history. In „On the social history of art” – the programmatic introduction to *The Image of the People*, published in 1973 – he described the principal goal of the social history of art as being to demonstrate the processes of ‘conversion’, „relation”, and „mediation” through which the pictorial „text” incorporates the socio-historical context of its production (Clark 1973; Clark 1984). Clark’s success in realizing this program is debatable: the ‘connecting links’ between particular „artistic forms” and „more general historical structures and processes” are notoriously difficult to establish. It is at this point that Clark’s work becomes interesting. The aesthetic extends beyond an articulation between artwork and social context; it also represents the point where art and politics converge and diverge. The aesthetic renders an encounter with the political, that is, the experience of freedom that is the unfounded ground of any contingent political state. Nevertheless Clark’s work was blind to gender issues, a fact pointed out by Griselda Pollock (and acknowledged by Clark) (Dictionary). All these issues were important for the next decades. Meanwhile, Linda Nochlin and Pollock have, in different ways, addressed the exclusion of women from both the historical canon and the categories through which that canon is promulgated. Pollock in particular initiated a debate between the social history of art and feminism by arguing that this remained true of Clark's stress on issues of class to the detriment of questions concerning gender in his analysis of art's modernity. And she went on to develop an ambitious theory of the aesthetic, unique for being aligned with a feminist practice of art and art history, rather than being its target. The work of artists like Mary Kelly, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Martha Rosier is cited as paradigmatic of the project of a feminist art practice whose objective is to interrogate ideology and specifically ideological constructions of gender (Jones 2003; Horne, Lewis 1996).

#### 4. „MODERN ART – MONUMENT OR MOCKERY?“

In the 1980s and 1990s new, significant question in the field of history of art has arisen: is „modern art – monument or mockery?“ (Cottington 2005: 1). To illustrate this, one need only refer to conceptual art which came into use in the late 1960s to describe artworks in which the concept (or idea) behind the artwork is more important than traditional aesthetic and material concerns. With conceptual art, its „informative“ dimension is neither fully composed sensation nor a new concept. Following the work of Deleuze and his frequent collaborator Félix Guattari some modern philosopher seemed to put aside conceptual art as compromised, calling it „(...) doxa of the social body“ because it creates affects that depend on a viewer, falling back into generalization. They opted for sensory otherness „caught in a matter of sensation“, dynamic „vibrations, clinches and openings (...)“ (Deleuze, Guattari 1994: 172, 177, 198). Stephan Zagala, current curator of the Monash Gallery of Art in Australia has argued that here a work of art makes „new modes of existence,, using „the force of sensation“ for a kind of thinking, where „the only law of creation is that the compound [of art] must stand up on its own“ (Zagala 2002: 20). That makes art insubordinate to theory and discursive control, the latter mediums in the transformation of sensation into simulacrum, whether in Barthes' terms as „intellect added to an object“ (Zagala 2002: 21). Within this context, then, that it can be clearly seen that the postmodernist embrace of popular-commercial visual culture by artists from around 1980 was not in itself a new departure, nor was the ironic character of this embrace. Appropriate examples of such artistic activities often suspected of fraud were Jeff Koons' ceramic statuettes of *Michael Jackson*, through the Royal Academy's *Sensation* exhibition of 1997 or Matthew Barney's extraordinary plundering of the American pop-cultural imagination in his epic multimedia *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002). Also kitsch seems to be everywhere in contemporary art, almost obligatory for any aspiration to „relevance“ (Cottington 2005: 99).

Most prominent artist of this movement is a British artist – Damien Steven Hirst. He became famous for a series of artworks in which dead animals (including a shark, a sheep and a cow), sometimes having been dissected, are preserved in formaldehyde. The best known of these objets d'art being *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a 14-foot (4.3 m) tiger shark immersed in formaldehyde in a glass showcase. Hirst has also made „spin paintings“, created on a spinning circular surface, and „spot paintings“, which are rows of randomly colored circles created by his assistants. And this apparent similarity of orientation has opened fresh perspectives on the art of that earlier epoch, inviting today's audiences to an enjoyable complicity with its engagement

with „low” culture – a complicity that had previously been frowned upon by Clement Greenberg in his insistence on the superiority of an unadulterated „high” art tradition.

## 5. THE NATIONAL FRAMING OF ART HISTORY

Another set of problems exist for James Elkins, an art historian and an art critic. In his opinion „normal” art history consists of practices such as „iconography, social history, style analysis, archaeological reporting [and] archival documentation”, which is to be contrasted with „twilight genre” such as the history of art history, highly theorized reflection, or reception history (Elkins 2000: 11–12). Elkins’s concern is primarily with methodological issues, but one can map the difference between ‘normal’ and ‘heterodox’ art history onto the question of the national framing of the discipline. This norm was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century; an early product was the development of the genre of „Art Topography” (Ibidem: 111), the systematic documentation of artistic and architectural monuments within the boundaries of the national state. The key phase in the evolution of modern art history across Europe in different countries, from Spain, Romania, and Poland to France and Italy, was the production of inventories of artworks and the identification of the national artistic heritage. The construction of the history of national art was seen as a duty and moral imperative by many art historians, and is still a work in progress. Although patriotic art has been neglected because of its perceived irrelevance to the modernist paradigm, it is increasingly evident not only that first-rate artists produced such art, but also that it posed for its producers many of the same problems that faced contemporaries, now ensconced in the modernist canon. Indeed, artists concerned with national identity were equally committed to the expression of a complex iconography through distinctive and often newly devised visual vocabularies. In many cases, the seemingly contradictory tendencies of patriotic – national expression and modernism met in a single artwork, as, for example, in Edvard Munch’s *Festival Hall* murals at Oslo University and Claude Monet’s *Poplars* or *Rouen Cathedral* series. Recognizing the significance, and the ubiquity, of nationalistic art throughout Europe begins to balance our understanding about art production and consumption at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Given that art history was a key institution in the formation of modern European nation states in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this is hardly surprising; the discipline also emerged in response to the requirements of different audiences, from amateur local enthusiasts to regional and national governments, and also international networks of scholars and supranational organizations. However, despite the substantial quantity of research on the history of the discipline in its wider political and social context, in which the role of the university and the

museum as state institutions has been fore grounded, this still remains a little explored aspect of contemporary art history (Bennett 1995; Preziosi 2003). The historiographic focus has thus been largely on those writers whose work, exceptionally, achieved an international prominence, in many cases because they focused on topics of international interest and also because they were writing in the major international languages of scholarship.

## 6. THE „ICONIC TURN“ IN ART HISTORY<sup>2</sup>

The long term dominance of the national paradigm has cast a long shadow over present-day practices; a striking illustration of this can be seen in the contours of current-day visual studies and image theory. Referred to in terms of the „iconic turn“, visual studies emerged in France, Britain (and the United States) and Germany in the 1990s as a powerful challenge to many assumptions sustaining art-historical discourse. While some commonalities are clearly visible in this trend, with the work of certain writers, such as Hans Belting, Gottfried Boehm, W. J. T. Mitchell or Nicholas Mirzoeff, being widely translated and having a major international impact, there are also distinctive discursive trajectories that map onto national discursive communities (Rampley 2012). Thus, Anglo-American visual studies, emerging out of cultural studies, in which a concern with the politics of visual representation and popular culture has been uppermost, has a quite different centre of gravity from the theory *Bildwissenschaft*, the term used to describe the wide range of image theories prominent in Germany (Zeidler-Janiszewska 2006; Boehm 2014). The „iconic turn“ recalled the important role of images in constructing social realities. Images carry a special power, a dynamic that is overlooked by strictly linguistic models. In the center of this dynamic, we find what has been called the „iconic“ as a specific feature of images. In a semiotic perspective, this can be understood as a form of signification. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Charles S. Peirce suggested thinking of the icon as an icon that resembles the thing it represents (Short 2003: 124). Other theorists have sought to understand the „iconic“ as a feature that pertains to the perception of images in the context of discursive utterances. Images are perceived with the eyes; they do not only tell, but they do also show something. The latter, drawing on discourses from aesthetics, communication theory, anthropology and theories of social memory, has in general kept aloof from questions of political engagement. Moreover, while some

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<sup>2</sup> In 1994 two professors, one in America and one in Switzerland, independently from each other, described the pictorial turn of human sciences. W. J. T. Mitchell introduced the phrase „pictorial turn“, while Gottfried Boehm used the expression *ikonische Wendung*, that is „iconic turn“ in the discourse dealing with pictures and texts. The term was inspired by Richard Rorty who in 1967 had characterized the history of philosophy as a series of „turns“.



exponents of *Bildwissenschaft* have emphasized its links to art history, visual studies has, in contrast, aggressively distanced itself from the historical analysis of the image.

Another discourse *Bildwissenschaft* tries to challenge is that of media theory or sciences which has been very efficient over the last twenty years in analyzing new phenomena and mediality in the history of technical inventions concerning photography, film, video, TV and digital imaging, not only as a technical means but as instruments that are changing the ways of perception, cultural meaning and subjectivity in the tradition of theorists like Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer or Roland Barthes – phenomena about which art history has had little to say (Schade 1999: 270). In fact gender studies and media sciences have a lot in common and, based on the heritage of cultural studies, they have addressed the relations between high and low culture, art and mass media etc. as legitimate research fields.

In their now classic study *The Love of Art*, Bourdieu collaborating with Alain Darbel note that working class visitors typically responded most positively to the provision of guidebooks or directions as to the best route to take through an art museum. It may well be, Bourdieu and Darbel argue, that such clarifications are not always able to „give the eye” to those who do not „see”. (Bourdieu, Darbel 1991: 56) Nonetheless, their presence in a gallery is symbolically important just as is the demand for them by working-class visitors; in that both testify to the possibility that the gap between the visible and the invisible may be bridged by means of appropriate trainings. If, by contrast, and as their evidence suggested, the cultivated classes are the most hostile to such attempts to make art more accessible, Bourdieu and Darbel argue that this is because such pedagogic props detract from that charismatic ideology which, in making an encounter with a work of art the occasion of a descent of grace (*charisma*), provides the privileged with the most „indisputable” justification for their cultural privilege, while making them forget that the perception of the work of art is necessarily informed and therefore learnt (Bourdieu, Darbel 1991:56).

At this point we must not forget a French curator – Nicholas Bourriaud. In 1997 he published an influential book called *Esthétique Relationnel* (Eng. *Relational Aesthetics*), in which he defined his newly coined term 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, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 1998: 14).

Bourriaud saw artists rather as facilitators than makers and regarded art as information exchanged between the artist and the viewers. The artist, in this sense, gives audiences access to power and the means to change the world. He cited the art of Gillian Wearing, Philippe Parreno, Douglas Gordon and Liam Gillick as artists who work to this agenda.

## **7. THE DILEMMAS STANDING BEFORE THE PRESENT GENERATION OF ART HISTORIANS**

The power of attraction of pictorial art has nowadays correspondingly increased: „Art – writes Rene Huyghe – philosopher of aesthetics – has never seemed so important, to the point of becoming an obsession, as in our own day. Never before has it been so widely accessible, so greatly appreciated. Never before has it been so intensively analyzed and explained. In this it benefits (particularly as regards painting) from the major role visual images have come to play in our civilization. Surely someone from this culture of the image is immediately endowed with the necessary culture to decipher the pictorial work of art, the image of all images? The museum has the privilege of speaking the language of the times) which is a language intelligible to all and the same in every country. (...) The museum has become part of our way of life. Soon it will be the necessary complement and parallel to all our activities” (McClellan 2003: 3).

However the dilemmas which stand before the present generation of art historians are yet even more significant because nowadays the problem is not only the interpretation of the work of art but also the proper kind of contact with the art work. In the multitude of present day attractions, the average spectator's contact with the work of art in the gallery lasts only approximately 8 seconds, meanwhile the recipient appears in the museum in connection with the widely advertised „art events” such as the much adored „Night of Museums”, which started in 1997 in Berlin. This „Night of Museums” is often adorned by truly „cultural” events such a music concert of Polish pop star Doda or railway tickets of Intercity PKP sold at half price on this day for all sightseers of the museums (to receive the 50 percent railway ticket discount it is necessary to present entrance ticket from the museum). Museum staff usually does not especially like these special nights, but in essence it results in the essential human flow through museum premises which in turn has a positive impact on the all-mighty statistical graphs which illustrate the annual number of museum visitors.

The new media are another way of contact of the present day spectator with the work of art. Everyday many new applications relating to art appear, which are easy to install on one’s Smartphone – for example DailyArt – a Polish educational application for smart phone, which in an accessible form and in English language describes the values and merits of an individual work of art. The observations are captured in straight forward manner and often contain very simple and laconic information about the authors of the works of art based on information found in Wikipedia. The added „bonus effect” of such an application is that it improves the average Polish person’s acquaintance with the English language. As a result the work of art which is presented on a familiar display of our own smart phone has the dimensions of several square centimeters only but on the other hand it

completely belongs to its temporary recipient. The only question which comes to mind is whether such an object of art, presented in such a manner possesses still the values of true work of art; does it have the genuine Benjamin air and quality? The answer to such a question seems quite obvious, the artifact does not possess any true aura or atmosphere, but it holds the value of accessibility and has an air of egalitarianism, and in our world of immensely immanent homogenized culture it is often the most important value in itself. This type of cultural homogenization is frequently connected with attempts to include the works of art of much higher level through the use of elements which can attract a much wider and popular public. Such manipulations are often made not only by the author of the work of art himself/herself, but also by the museum staff, by the net programmers or by the ordinary users of the Internet themselves.

The immanent homogenization can however be recognized as *contradicto in adiecto*, because the works of art which belong to this category make up fundamentally uniform compositional elements of higher level and they have nothing in themselves of mechanical composition of content and form of a different character; their ability of appealing to the interests and tastes of a wide range of recipients is actually the result of extraordinary talent, skill of expression of the wealth of realism and the complexity of various phenomena. (...) Therefore the common experiencing of art by means of the „Museum Nights”, through various smart phone art applications or by belonging to this part of the Facebook community interested in art, in fact is the ideal supplement of community current in the present day culture, in which the individuals are envisioned to be the manufacturers of culture (the prosumenci) (Siuda 2012), who create „the feeling of social solidarity, creating the outstanding, distinctive, fragmentary, voluntary, and at times temporary cultural worlds through the dedication to their common consumptive interests” (Arnould, Thompson 2005: 873). These problems, often defined as the thesis about modern tribal society, concentrate on new types of ties and forms of socialization (the post-traditional communities): the tribes (Maffesoli 2008), (the subculture of consumption) (Schouten, McAlexander 1995), the communities and whole societies built around the leading cult brand or pop culture texts, the virtual communities in which the main „building or construction factor” (Kozinets 2002), is not the common breed, education or place of birth or dwelling, but the same shared interests, opinions, emotions or practice. It therefore seems possible, that art itself or the fad or fashion of association and appreciation of art may become for some people the equivalent as for other people the need for possessing same expensive brand of clothes or cars. It obviously has to be art expressed in a simplified way or form, well adapted to the needs and expectations of such „immanently culturally homogenized art recipient”.

And this is where the importance of art historians appears vividly. Art historians must serve the role of the bonding force or the connecting link between the world of high artistic culture, which demands numerous complicated

competences ex. the knowledge of ancient mythology, holy attributes, painting techniques, the changeability of art styles through the ages – and the present day recipient’s most common query, who expects straight forward answer to the question: Why is a given painting/sculpture/building etc. cool, jazzy, extraordinary, super or just worth seeing? And this answer has to be fast and witty just like an internet comment and last but not least it must be accessible through the Facebook or Google account on his own smart phone.

## 8. SUMMARY

Summarizing or recapitulating the problem „Why do we need art history” in today’s world – it seems quite clear that it is necessary to somewhat modify the profile of education for the present day student of art history and to introduce the obligatory gamification of university lectures, or the elements of creative writing about art, all this so that our graduates to be able to effectively compete on the contemporary, very difficult and complex work market.

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#### AUTHOR NOTE

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Creativity is now an exposed trait. This is due to the high need for innovation, original and useful solutions that serve the development of the organization, their effective market entry and long-term survival. This publication is a collection of papers prepared under The First National Conference „CREATIVE VIBES. Kreatywnością napędzamy gospodarkę”, whose aim was to stir issues concerning the significance of creativity from the point of view of the development of innovative economy, as well as to draw attention to the role of creativity in the education process of students and its impact on the development of professional competence.



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