

Art and Theory at a Time of Intermediality

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This paper presents the results of the latest scientific research in the field of aesthetics, art theory studies and theatre studies conducted at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design and the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana. The research results were presented in the form of lectures and accompanying discussions at a scientific conference in Koper on 29 September 2020. The research is dedicated to thematising, analysing and reflecting on phenomena, processes and transformations that characterise the state of the fine, visual and performing arts in the turbulent period of late modernity. The spectrum of topics is diverse and complex. Before I briefly address them, it is worth saying a few words about the circumstances of the research: the time in which it took place, the nature of the phenomena studied, and the theory in its effort to keep up with the times and the phenomena.

Time

There are two general currents of thought in late modernism. The first ties in with 20th-century modernism, believes in progress and sees its horizons illuminated in a Promethean way. The ideal of this current is the demiurgic “new man 2.0” who rejects previous anthropologies, who outlines the “developmental directions” of life through social construction and who believes he is living in prehistory, the continuation of which will be a highly mechanised, highly emancipated, post- or transhuman history.¹ The other school of thought does not believe in such developmental optimism. Based on the disappointments of the modernist past, it has strongly relativised a belief in redemptive progress, although it maintains the hope for “new man” in the form of “ecology” and “human rights”. In the conceptual matrix of this current, the eradication of the old, imperfect world and its replacement by the new, perfect world is more or less an illusion. It strives to protect and develop what it is. In the 21st century, it seeks to give the world and man back the charm that the demiurges of the 20th century took away with their violent and inhuman Promethean actions. The first current, characterised by phenomena such as the information and biotechnological boom, the derealisation of reality, the dehumanisation of man, etc., nourishes the hope that man with his “enlightened mind” can intervene in the “natural order of things” and discover a brave new world. The second current, increasingly characterised by opposition to unbridled globalisation and the oligarchic world economy, finds many reasons for man to respect the natural order of things and abandon the belief that the world and man can be improved by simple intervention. The first current can provisionally be called *radical progressivism* and the second *neo-pragmatism*. Our lives, our economy, our culture and, of course, the art and science that deal with it, today revolve in the intermedial space between these two opposing poles.

Art

The transfer of this visual and operative antithesis to the realm of art is visible on two levels. On the level of general culturalisation, we can trace it in recent times through the difference between so-called hyperculture and cultural essentialism, while on the level of practice and mediality it has long been present through difference and intermedial space between the so-called basic and expanded field of art. Like science, art expresses throughout its history an awareness of what it is moving away from, while it can only guess at what it is moving towards.

1 Cf. Fukuyama, F. (2002): *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Therefore, it usually evokes discomfort and even resistance from all kinds of “signifiers of forced directions of development”, ideologues who hate the intermedial space of options, alternatives and polyvalences, because of its openness, because it demands to make choices without prior certainty and practise the complexity of synthesis rather than the simplicity of elimination. In contrast, art is “fine-tuned” to “intermediality” and feels like a fish in water in it. *Jacques Derrida* emphasised this nature when he wrote in *L'écriture et la différence* (1967) that every artistic artefact “stands” between a thing and a sign, that “intermediality” is the relationship between a thing and a sign.² Its power and uniqueness, Derrida argues, derive precisely from the fact that it does not fit into either of the two ontological categories into which we otherwise divide the world: neither into the sphere of nature or objects (formality) nor into the sphere of the spirit or signs (semantics). The obvious consequence of this is that, from a hermeneutic point of view, the work of art successfully resists both the explanatory science of things and their causal relations and the explanatory interpretation of signs and their meanings.³

This is true not only of hermeneutics, but perhaps even more so of the creative hemisphere of art, for its forms, as we know, originally reckon with man’s “dual citizenship” and require of him both engagement and detachment, both Promethean spirit and reflection, both emancipation and tradition, both infatuation and sobriety, both contemplation and action, both a sense of *poiesis* and a sensitivity to *téchne*. Art simply has the character of both simultaneously and inseparably. That is why it is a true unifier or synthesiser of opposites and cannot be instrumentalised, at least in its most original and authentic core by ideological or fashionable “forced directions”. Not even today. The theory of the art system sometimes tries to believe that “relevant” works are primarily those that the system can control and place within its coordinates. But in the long run, artists prove again and again that they not only provide material for the assertion and proof of the models on which the theories are based, but that what is truly original and unique in the art arena usually lies in the “blind spot” of the ideologies, models and theories produced.

2 Cit. after: Derrida, J. (1972): Die soufflierte Rede. In: same (1972): *Die Schrift und die Differenz*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 292.

3 Menke, C. (2005): Einführung. In: Koch, G., Voss, C. (2005, pub.): *Zwischen Ding und Zeichen*. Zur ästhetischen Erfahrung in der Kunst. München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 15–17.

Theory

In our case, the transfer of the determinants of time to the field of art studies is called contemporaneity.⁴ Its understanding is particularly important when it comes to theoretical reflection and the actualisation of simultaneous phenomena. Put simply, it is a matter of establishing that theoretical thought originally has its own historicity. Indeed, art theory, like philosophy according to Hegel's well-known insight, is always too late for "its time": "If we say a word as caution about how the world should be, then philosophy always comes to it too late without further ado." As a thought of the world, it appears at a time when reality has already come to a close of its formal process and ended".⁵ In a word: it is a fact that theory always misses the moment when it could voice "how the art world should be". It is precisely this delay, which at first glance appears to be a flaw, that is, in fact, a strength of philosophy and theory, since both, with their aposterior "distance", can pay attention to what eludes us in the unfolding phenomena, i.e. in their simultaneity.⁶ In this sense, theory can open up an insight into the difference between contemporaneity/simultaneity and relevancy.⁷ In other words, an insight into the question of what is today is actually relevant. The point is to understand the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of temporal events, which is essential to the existence of the aesthetic and has long been defined by the Greek terms "chronos" (χρόνος), historical, chronological, quantitative time, and "kairós" (καιρός), the moment something "significant" or "decisive", in which something special, qualitatively pivotal and permanently important happens. To illustrate the exploration of the difference between obsolete "temporality" and the kairótic quality of the "always relevant", we can use a quote from Agamben's discussion *What is the Contemporary?*: "Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time."⁸ The identification and reflection of this qualitative type is particularly useful in theory when

4 Cf. Komel, D. (2021): *Horizonti kontemporalnosti*. Ljubljana, Inštitut Nove revije.

5 Hegel, G. W. F. (1986): *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III* (Werke 20). Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 28.

6 Komel 2021, 46.

7 Cf. *ibid.*, 47–50.

8 Agamben, G. (2009): *What is the Contemporary?*. In: same, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 40.

researchers do not or cannot have a sufficiently large and sobering temporal distance from the phenomena under study. This is a situation that not only characterises the framework of most of the essays published in this book but also implicitly reveals their degree of untimeliness, which is all the easier for the reader to comprehend the more time that has elapsed since the essays were written.

Aesthetics, fine art and theatre studies belong to the field of the humanities, which have been responsible for the “production of meaning” since their beginnings, given that cultural and artistic phenomena within their scope are not only the object of research but are also brought into a meaningful context. Namely, as systems of knowledge and values that serve humanity. In this, the humanities differ from the value-neutral natural and mathematical sciences. There are differences within the humanities today. Some of their studies try to be scientific along the lines of the natural sciences, i.e. value-neutral, as if they were dealing with bare facts.

Still, others see their role in a deconstructive function and develop new ways of perception, reflection and analysis based on modern intellectualism. Especially those who, in a world where everything is for sale and where sentimental fakes can no longer be distinguished from genuine goods, foreground doubt, criticism, mistrust of authority and thus value relativism. They are unaware, however, that reason comes first when unbridled doubt about all things flourishes, as G. K. Chesterton notes.⁹ Both are deviations from the humanistic tradition, which always valorises experiential events and findings with meaning, interpreting and evaluating facts according to their “kairótic”, i.e. future-based potential. However empirically accurate the humanities may be, they are always hermeneutic at their core. The main problem of the modern humanities is to remain true to their original task of combining empiricism and hermeneutics, exactness and axiology.¹⁰ This becomes clear, at least in part, from the discussions published in this book.

9 Chesterton, G. K. (2001): *Pravovernost*. Celje, Celjska Mohorjeva družba, 31.

10 Cf. Kos, J. (2021): *Kultura in politika*. Ljubljana, Nova obzorja, 98–100; Muhovič, J. (2019): Preokvirjanja v noosferi. Spremembe v interakcijskih razmerjih med umetnostjo in humanistično znanostjo od razsvetljenstva do danes. In: ANNALES 29/4 (2019), 563–575.

The question, then, is how the intermedial space, the intermediary status of artistic phenomena and the current state of art theory are reflected in the humanist debates triggered by the present work, and how these debates simultaneously “relate” to the two currents of late modernist thought. Let us consider this in a first approximation with a brief account of the field of reflection that ALUO and AGRFT researchers have been working on recently.

Aesthetics

Art today is under the influence of information technologies, digital media and technosciences. This aspect of change is discussed by URŠULA BERLOT POMPE in the paper entitled **A Topology of Virtuality and Technoart**. In the introduction, the author highlights some conceptual changes in the understanding of space in modernist and post-modernist art, while the central part of the text is devoted to the treatment of the concept of “virtuality” in connection with art (the virtual in the relationship with the relevant; the virtual in relation to the real, etc.). Another characteristic phenomenon of late modernist art is the “expansion of the artistic field”.

The question of this transformation is explored by JOŽEF MUHOVIČ in his contribution **Art and Boundaries. On the Genome and Models of the Expanded Field of Art**. His paper takes the form of a triptych. In the first part, the author traces the phenomena that “technically” led to the expansion of the artistic field in the period from the Enlightenment to late modernism (Gesamtkunstwerk, avantgarde, objets trouvés, Beuys’ “*erweiterter Kunstbegriff*”). In the central part of the discussion, he looks at the model of the “artistic arena” and its transformations, which also date back to the time on the threshold of the new millennium. In the third part, he addresses the nature of the relationship between art and the – wide and high – boundaries of its intellectual-historical paradigms.

Reflection of contemporary design at the level of an aesthetic approach is addressed by BARBARA PREDAN. In her study **Through the Other Side of the Looking-Glass. In Search of Meaning in the Language of Design**, the author set herself the task of investigating how the emerging discipline of design can “intertwine” with the existing verbal language of the community and ultimately compose new forms and meanings within that language. The research led her back to the theoretical musings of John Ruskin, the Victorian art critic and thinker. In the heyday of industrialisation, he stood at the crossroads between the new and the old. He recognised the emergence of a new discipline, but chose not to use the “language of progress”, i.e. the utility

of industrialisation, to make sense of it, but rather drew from nature. The author underpins this orientation with reason and sees her goal as a signpost for “design breakthroughs” even in our highly technological times.

The contribution **Non-hierarchical Media Connectivity in Contemporary Drama and Theatre** by TOMAŽ TOPORIŠIČ deals with the aesthetics of cohesion between dramatic and non-dramatic performance practices. The subject of his study is media connectivity, nomadism and contemporary transmedia transience. In his research, he notes that the live stage and mediated performance are no longer understood as ontological opposites, and that the exploration and transgression of boundaries between live performance and non-dramatic performance in the performing arts have produced some new strategies that are creative, expressive and have borne fruit in the long term.

Art Theory Studies

Art Theory Studies is a broad field consisting of various disciplines such as visual theory, visual technology, art history, art theory, design history and theory, as well as conservation and restoration theory. The field covers a wide range of contents. These are represented in this publication in the following order.

From the field of design history and theory comes the research paper by PETRA ČERNE OVEN entitled **Articulation of Language through Design Transformation. Historical, Technological and User Contexts**. Here, the author examines the processes that enable the transition from the mental level of language (thought) to its auditory forms and from these to the forms mediated by visual signs (visual semiotics). In the paper, she first introduces the basic concepts of visualising verbal language (so-called “graphic language”), its components, design strategies and possibilities of expression. The problem she addresses is primarily visual literacy, the level of which, as she notes from documentation, is paradoxically not increasing, even though we live in a world of hypertrophic visuality. The author’s discussion culminates in an appeal for the systematic improvement of visual literacy through education, the starting point of which she sees at the interface of linguistics and typography as well as other disciplines involved in the process of creatively transforming language into a visualised form.

The research conducted by the authors PETJA GRAFENAUER, NATAŠA IVANOVIČ and URŠKA BARUT entitled **The Archive of the Slovenian Association of Fine Arts Societies** in the 1950s and Early 1960s and the Desire for an Art Market falls into the field of art historical documentation. The discussion, based on the study of archival

documents of the Slovenian Association of Fine Arts Societies between 1934 and 1959, reports on the intentions and initiatives of the members of DSLU to gradually establish an “art market” in Slovenia during the aforementioned period, which would be roughly comparable to this kind of market in Western Europe.

The activity of conservation and restoration of works of art has undergone remarkable development in recent decades according to BLAŽ ŠEME, researcher in the field of conservation and restoration, in the paper entitled **Axiological and Teleological Dimensions of Art Heritage Protection in Conservation–Restoration Theory**. The author’s contribution aims to present the role of theoretical thinking in current conservation and restoration treatment. Using examples from the conservation and restoration of wall paintings in Slovenia, the main theoretical ideas of this kind and their transformations are presented. The author finds that the essence of these theories is that when deciding on the conservation and restoration treatment of artworks and their practical implementation, their aesthetic and historical potential should be given priority.

From the field of art theory comes a debate entitled **The Experiment of the OHO Group in the Field of Conceptual Architecture**. Here, its author NADJA ZGONIK looks at the working methods of the conceptual group OHO. In particular, around 1970, when the group, on the initiative of architect Niko Lehrman, accepted the challenge to participate in the planning of the new Argonavti entertainment centre and hotel in Nova Gorica. The author traces the group’s creative part in the project through a report preserved in the provincial archives of Nova Gorica (infographics, 18 art between practice and theory ways planned through the spaces, interior furnishings, colour studies for interior design, park design, etc.). The author notes that the essence of their contribution is contained in two basic Oho-esque concepts – the myth of the quest for the Golden Fleece and the Argonauts, and the concept of the “time ship” – which the author then uses to trace the group’s creative contribution to the design of the Argonavti entertainment centre and hotel.

Theatre Studies

The publication of academic texts at hand includes three research reports or papers from the field of Theatre Studies.

The first is a discussion by BLAŽ LUKAN entitled **Text as Stage or Reading Performance in the Light of Performative Economy**. A reading performance is the execution of a dramatic or theatre text in public in the form of a reading. In his contribution, the author assumes

that a reading performance is a performance genre in its own right and not merely a preparatory act or a surrogate for the “real” theatre. The author shows that the reading of a (theatre) draft is part of the staging process, but at the same time has long been a form of presentation practice in which both the writers and the performers as well as their co-creators present themselves. The paper considers reading as a theatre performance and deals with its “performative economy”. It first critically evaluates it and then proposes some performance possibilities that are not yet or not sufficiently used by reading performances.

The second presentation is the paper by ALDO MILOHNIĆ entitled **Current Contributions to the Theory and History of the Theatre of Resistance**. Here, the author discusses some highlighted historical and contemporary examples of theatrical and performative practices of resistance (from the Ljubljana Workers’ Stage and the partisan theatre groups during the Second World War to the activist performative performances of Marko Brecej). The first part of the discussion presents the paradigm of the theatre of resistance through historical examples, while the second part focuses on the analysis and conceptualisation of the performative work of Marko Brecej.

The Theatre Studies section and the book as a whole conclude with the paper of BARBARA OREL entitled **Curation in the Field of the Slovenian Performing Arts**. As the title suggests, the focus of the study is on the question of curating in the field of the performing arts, especially in the Slovenian cultural arena, and on the profile of the curator that developed internationally in the 1980s and early 1990s in the context of contemporary performing arts festivals and art centres characterised by a transdisciplinary, transnational, transcultural and transinstitutional hybridisation of artistic practices. In her contribution, the author focuses both on the phenomenology of hybrid performance genres (e.g. performance-exhibition) and on issues of Slovenian terminology closely related to this phenomenology.