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Volume 9, 2017

Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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# ***On the Plurality of the Arts***

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**ABSTRACT.** The paper discusses the significance of the fact that art exists in a plurality of art forms and genres. For art production as well as for the experience, the understanding and the evaluation of art works it is important to place them in the context of a specific art form and to have the peculiarities of its material, techniques and conventions in view. Art works cannot be appreciated appropriately if they are taken either only in their singularity or as manifestations of art in general – and this is still the case for contemporary art after the (post-)modern transgression of many artistic rules and borders. However, it is important to conceive of the art forms in the right way: Not in an essentialist manner, as something which can be defined once and for all and has determinable properties and fixed limits. Instead, art forms should rather be seen as traditions. They are multifaceted and dynamic practices of the actualization, negotiation and reconfiguration of inherited conventions, standards, problems and understandings.

## **1. Introduction**

When we want to tell friends or colleagues about a special or valuable encounter we had with art, in order to recommend something, or to discuss it, we never just tell them ‘I recently came across this artwork, I have to tell you about...’ but we usually specify what kind of artwork it was. We either want to talk about a novel we read, or a movie we watched, about a performance or a piece of music. And this is because we are never confronted with art works as such, but always with art works that belong to an art form, a genre or a tradition. Art exists and appears in a plurality of forms, and I want to discuss in this paper for what reasons and in which respects it is important to take this plurality of the art forms into account, in order to reach an appropriate philosophical understanding of the functions, the value and the dynamics of art.

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In the first two sections of the paper I want to point out that we miss out on substantial aspects of art, when we do not have the level of the art forms in (theoretical) view (but either mainly the level of the concept of art in general, or that of the individual artworks); in the third section I want to underline the importance of conceiving of the art forms and their differences in the right way, since there have been some problematic accounts in the history of art theory on the different arts and their respective media.

## 2. Art Forms and Interpretation

The form or genre of an art work plays a major role in its reception and appreciation. We cannot theoretically understand the processes of the experience, the interpretation and the evaluation of art, if we do not take the level of the different arts into account. This is a lesson that results from the account of aesthetic contextualism as brought forward for example by Kendall Walton and Arthur Danto. The basic claim of contextualism is, that an art work is ontologically not just the sum of the empirical perceptible properties of an artefact, but that artworks consist also of relational properties that are determined by its historical, cultural and practical context. The proper experience of an artwork is therefore not a more or less unmediated sense-perception, but it is dependent on an interpretational approach. Which properties and features an artwork consists of must be determined in the course of an interpretation: It has to be decided, on the one hand, which of the empirical properties of the artifactual object (through which the artwork is realized) also belong to the work of art – since some of the properties of the artifact (as for example: the weight of a painting) are not part of the artwork. On the other hand, the artwork possesses properties that the mere perceptual object does not possess (for example, that it is a parody of an older work). A work cannot be properly experienced and evaluated outside of an interpretational approach because without it, it remains unclear, what the object of the experience is in the first place. It is only the interpretation that brings into view the constitutive elements of the artwork and that also means: it's artistic and aesthetic properties.

Kendall Walton in his influential 1970 article ‘Categories of Art’ pointed out, that the categories and concepts of the different art forms and genres are essential aspects of a work’s relevant context. It is of major importance for the (determination) of the identity, the features and the content of a work, to which art form it belongs. Even perceptually indiscernible objects can have different artistic and aesthetic properties and therefore different content and value, depending on which categories of art we apply in our interpretation of them. For only with reference to a category can we tell, which of the works’ properties are – according to Walton’s distinction – standard, which are variable, and which are non-standard. Standard features are the features which are basic or defining features of an art form – for example the flatness of a painting – variable are the features which constitute a specific art work of that art form – the specific shapes and colours of a painting – and contra-standard features do not typically belong to that art form at all – for example that the shapes of the picture are in motion.<sup>2</sup> So only in the course of the application of a category or for that matter of several categories – for example: painting, renaissance painting and still life – can we perceive what properties a work has, which artistic decisions have been made, how original it is and so on. Without seeing a work in relation to art forms and genres we cannot get to grips with a work, we do not know how to perceive and how to evaluate it.

This account is close to the perspective of Hermeneutics and to the German tradition of reader-response criticism, two traditions which also conceive of artworks as interpretable objects, that only come to life through the reactions and readings in the course of the reception process. Art works can be seen as moves in an ongoing game of art production and art reception. An art work stands in a historical cultural context in which it addresses an audience with specific expectations, patterns of interpretation and standards of evaluation. Art works can endorse or subvert the preexisting standards and thus stabilize or change the context for the production of future artworks. In this perspective the relevant artistic and aesthetic features of an artwork are also determined against the backdrop of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Walton 1970, section II.

a context of historical and cultural conventions und norms. Whether a work is correctly seen as affirmative or subversive, as original or epigonic, as provocative or ironic depends on the respective expectations and preconceptions that are in place and on the way a specific work deals with them. And these expectations are not or at least not only expectations concerning art (as such) but expectations concerning specific art forms and genres. This is the case because the context of expectations and preconceptions is established and shaped by former encounters with works of the respective art forms and genres.

### **3. Art Forms and Evaluation**

The reference to the different art forms and genres is not only important for the understanding of the processes of interpretation and appreciation but also for a philosophical reflection on the value of art. I think that an investigation into the aspects and sources of the value of the practices of art has been often passed over in the philosophy of art of the last half century. This was partly due to a predominant engagement with the project of giving a definition of the concept of art. The innovations of the avant-garde and postmodern art and the emergence of new art forms and styles like abstractionism, conceptual art, performance, installation art and appropriation art rendered some traditional definitions of art, that drew on aspects like beauty, sense perception, skill or representation obsolete. Because of the larger variety of artworks and their properties (and also: because of the lack of certain properties) it became more and more complicated to identify the properties, that all artworks share, which pushed theory in more abstract realms of higher order relational properties.

But in order to get the aspect of value into view, it seems to be necessary to turn (also) to some features of works and practices that might not be shared by all and every art. It might be the case that we find the relevant potentials and functions of art in relations and processes that apply not universally, but that are characteristic for certain art forms and art practices. Therefor it can be a fruitful endeavor to analyze the different art forms with respect to the question, how they specifically engage us, what

they do to and with us, and what kinds of experience they evoke. Different arts address different aspects of our cognitive, emotional and corporeal being, and they can therefore address and grapple with different dimensions that are of fundamental significance for our everyday being-in-the-world. To understand the value (or the values) of art one has to analyze the ways in which the practices of art are correlated with other non-artistic social and cultural practices. In this respect (of the dimensions of our being-in-the-world) the different arts seem to have various ‘centres of gravity’: Narrative arts or the structure of narrativity are for example suitable to address us as intentional agents who have to make decisions and to evaluate situations, alternative courses of action and the behaviour of others. It is easy for narrative art to thematize, represent or invent complex constellations of characters and situations of acting, intending and decision-making and thereby to make explicit or transform the usual beliefs, dispositions and normative orientations that belong to our everyday perspective as agents. And this is the case, because narratives already play a major role in our self-conceptions, our planning and our engagement with others. In the same way we can point out other ‘centres of gravity’ for the other art forms or media. Music seems to be more bound up with emotion, pictures with ways of perceiving the world, dance with our embodied being in the world, with space, movements and intersubjective (or intercorporeal) relationships and so on. Thus different arts and art works let us experience different things; and they also let us experience ourselves in different ways. We therefore find the facets and sources of the value of art, when we analyze in which dimension or aspect of our being we are addressed by different arts and works, and how the engagement with these works leads to insightful, constitutive, transformative or subversive experiences with regard to the respective dimension.

#### **4. The Dynamics of Art Forms**

However, the fact that the different arts and media are characteristically bound up with typical sorts of engagement and experience should not lead to a definitional or essentialistic account of the different arts and media as we

can find it for example in Lessing's 'Laokoon' or Clement Greenberg's plea for a 'Newer Laocoon' (with respect to modernist art). As I said above it is important to take a look at the differences of the arts with respect to what they can do with and for us, and that means to consider the characteristic structures, powers and potentials of different art forms. But this can be done only through a retrospective survey of the forms and achievements as we can find them in the variety of the existing works of an art form. We can only analyze what has been realized within an art form *so far* – but this does not supply us with sufficient evidence or reasons to determine once and for all the limits of an art form or medium, which explicitly is the task that Lessing sets himself. Lessing and in a similar way Greenberg want to point out the essential features of the media and materials of the arts and with this determine the limits of what can be done within an art form. In this perspective an art form or a medium is presented as an inventory of specific materials, forms and techniques which can be applied, and which determine what is possible and what is impossible to achieve in the medium. This goes along with a normative claim and an ideology of purity. Art works are according to Greenberg supposed to stick to the means and possibilities of their own medium to succeed. If they try to realize something, which is assigned to the realm of possibility of a different art form, they tend to fail and produce something of minor value. In this sense Greenberg wants to show in his art-historical analyses how problematic the mixture and confusion of the tasks, forms and contents of the different art forms have been throughout the centuries. He sees it as a basic problem of many art movements in history that they aspire to other art forms. In this case an art form hides its own medial basis, or, to put it differently, it just uses it to achieve a result that is typical for another art form. By 'pretending' to be something else, Greenberg suggests, an art form loses its substance and relevancy. This is why he praises the development of modernist art as a process of an increasing distinction and purification of the different art forms. According to Greenberg, in the collages of Picasso or in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock the art form of painting got rid of all the distorting and distracting literary, sculptural or musical tendencies and influences that it had acquired in the past. Thus modernist art focused

(again) on what made it special – on the characteristics of its own medium.<sup>3</sup> In its emphasis on flatness as its main characteristic, painting finally came to itself, it made explicit, what has to be seen as its essence.

Greenberg's notion of medium-specificity has often been criticized and rightly so, for his conceptions of art forms and media are too narrow and too static. There is no conclusive definition of the essence of an art form, and it is not the main task of an art form to self-reflectively deal with its medial condition, nor is this medial essence the main normative standard for the evaluation of single works. That does not mean that Greenberg does not correctly describe an important thread in modernist art: the reflexive investigation of medium and means has in fact been a dominant interest of modernism, and it was quite correct to evaluate the respective works with regard to their achievement in exploring their own condition. Greenberg's mistake was to take what is only one specific moment and tendency in the historical development of an art form among others as something that is defining and conclusive.

Instead of such an essentialist and static notion of the art forms we need a more open conception that is able to grasp on the one hand the complexity and the historical dynamics of an art form and on the other the relationships and exchanges with other art forms. Such more dynamic notions of art forms and media have been brought forward for example by Adorno and by Dewey and recently as well by Georg Bertram and Daniel Feige.<sup>4</sup> Media and art forms are in that perspective not seen as determined inventories of forms, topics and techniques but they are historic and transformational processes. Their internal dynamic stems from a specific relationship between an art form as general category and the individual artworks as concrete realizations of that art form. Artworks are not just tokens of the type of their art form, and there is not a fixed and explicit set of criteria according to which an object can be subsumed under the class of an art form. The tradition of an art form builds the basis and the backdrop

<sup>3</sup> Accordingly he states: “[P]urism is the terminus of a salutary reaction against the mistakes of painting and sculpture in the past several centuries which were due to a confusion.” (Greenberg 1986 [1940], p. 23.)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Adorno 1979 &1997, Dewey 1980 [1934], Bertram 2014 and Feige 2015.

for the production of future artworks, but it does not determine what a new art work will look like and what it can do. A new work can always be original and surprising – it can always transform or modify the characteristics of an art form.<sup>5</sup> Art forms and artworks stand in a dialectical relationship. Art works can only be produced and understood on the basis of the given materials, conventions and expectation that characterize a specific art form – but they are also forces that transform and reorganize this structure.

Because of this features we can say, that the arts have the form of traditions as conceptualized by Hans-Georg Gadamer or by Alasdair MacIntyre.<sup>6</sup> Art forms receive their elements as a kind of heritage, which is then applied in new and different ways by the individual works. In this perspective every (or at least every strong) artwork can be seen as a specific contribution or statement in an ongoing process of negotiation regarding the always open questions, what it means to be a work of this peculiar art form, how this art form should be continued and what the essential features, tasks and standards of this art form are. In a living tradition we can expect no unity or consensus regarding such questions, there is always a variety of different suggestions, in which the inherited elements and potentials are selected, evaluated and actualized in a different manner.<sup>7</sup>

This perspective fits very well with Adorno's historic conception of material. The material of the arts is according to him not some neutral and unhistorical empirical stuff as for example colour for the art form of painting, sound for music, or stone, glass and steel for architecture. A material is always already shaped by the former realizations within an art form and it is therefore charged with history, it is a specific constellation of relations of colour or of sound. A material can be seen as the sediment of forms, relations and techniques as actualized in the former works of an art

<sup>5</sup> Dewey states accordingly: “[T]he exact limits of the efficacy of any medium cannot be determined by any *a priori* rule, and [...] every great initiator in art breaks down some barrier that had previously supposed to be inherent.” (Dewey 1980 [1934], p. 235)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gadamer 1990 [1960] and MacIntyre 1981, esp. chp. 15. Cf. for the conception of art forms as traditions also Feige 2014.

<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre very convincingly stresses, more than Gadamer does, the importance of conflict and controversy within a tradition.

form and as such it confronts the artist with specific conventions, tensions, obstacles and tasks, which he has to take into account and to work on in his own production. Artistic production is then the process of reshaping and further determining an already determined and shaped material. This perspective can be also complemented with a conception of the historicity of the discourse on art and art forms. The historic transformation of the art forms is essentially accompanied by an interpretative and evaluating discourse that is also in a state of flux. Ensuing from the individual artworks the critical discourse explicitly considers how to understand and to assess them appropriately. In this many-voiced critical discourse is also negotiated, what the features and the standards of a specific art form are – and what the right concepts and theories to describe them.

Such a dynamic conception of art forms and media and the discourse on them is much more suitable for the description and the understanding of the various relationships between the different arts than Greenberg's static and essentialistic conception. The phenomena of overlap, mixture, exchange and influence among the different arts are not correctly described as mere distractions from the essential properties or as normatively dubious. It belongs to the condition of the art forms that they are part of a complex constellation of interplay between a multiplicity of arts. Firstly, art forms as traditions are for themselves not defined by one medial or structural feature: They are not either narrative or representational or musical. Pictures and music can be narrative, novels and poems have musical qualities; the phenomena of ekphrasis and concrete poetry show the pictorial potentials of literature and so on. As (re-)actualizations of traditional elements and forms, artworks can focus and stress some of these features and can put them into new constellations. Artworks can in this way investigate the different aspects and potentials of the complexity of an art form and explore at the same time the relationships, tensions, similarities or differences with the other arts. Furthermore, artworks of different art forms influence each other. There can be achievements in one art, that leads to new interests and tendencies in another. And there is also an inter-artistic complexity in our discourse on art: not only do we use a lot of (more or less) metaphoric terminology in which we transfer categories from one art form or one aspect

of experience to another but also the acquaintance with and the experience of some artworks can change our approach to both: new artworks of the same kind but works of other art forms and genres. We sometimes see or interpret artworks under the impression or in the light of artworks of another art, and thereby find aspects of form or significance that we otherwise would not have recognized. The relationships of and the exchanges between the artforms and their discourses are therefore central aspects for the understanding of the practices, the dynamics and the achievements of art.

And this is still true for the contemporary state of art, which has been called by Rosalind Krauss and others, the post-medium condition.<sup>8</sup> Because in Modernism and Postmodernism nearly every border between the different arts and between art and life has been crossed, and every limit of a single medium and art form has been transgressed and left behind, we are according to this position in a state of ‘Nominalism’ in which the categories and conventions of the arts do not play a substantial role anymore. Artworks therefore should be seen really as just that, works of art in general, which cannot and should not be assigned to a specific form or tradition anymore.<sup>9</sup> I think this diagnosis of a state of nominalism is at least partly a consequence of a too narrow – namely the Greenbergian – conception of art form and medium. A lot of contemporary works can certainly be interpreted as a movement away from the techniques and conventions of the established art forms, but only in the light of a narrow and static conception of art form are we inclined to interpret this movement as a complete overcoming and distancing from the art forms. A more complex and dynamic conception of art forms gives us more leeway to see these works as also being connected and in continuity with the traditions of the art forms.

Although it has to be admitted that the landscape of art has become increasingly diverse and complex, and although in some cases it is hardly possible to tell, to what kind of art an object belongs, and some works even evoke and thematize the problems and pitfalls of such a categorization, it is nevertheless necessary to draw on the traditions of the art forms to

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Krauss 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. On this discussion Rebentisch 2003 and 2015, esp. chp. 3, and also de Duve 1998.

determine, which ways of interpreting, experiencing and evaluating are possible and appropriate. Also in contemporary art, the different forms, moves and features of art obtain their significance from their relation with the historical development; and the process of reception and appreciation would be uprooted and without orientation without reference to traditional art forms and artworks.

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