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Socio-Historical Context and Dematerialization of the Art Object

Abstract: The new socio-historical context of the world, multipolarity, the decentralization and, above all, rapid technological development, inevitably led to a change in the way art is shaped. The new socio-historical context meant putting an end to the linear interpretation of art, often marking it as the end of art. The world is fragmenting; the traditional ways of expressing creativity have been exhausted and perfected technological production is taking over this function. Considering the existing attitudes about the end of art as we know it, we could rather speak about the end of the material, i.e., the end of the art object, but not the end of the idea or the concept itself. Due to the newly emerged social context, the meaning of the artwork has shifted from the material, i.e., from the object to a discursive and abstract field. In other words, the concept, idea, and theory are primary; they form the essence of the artwork, not the object itself. It is about the fact that the world we live in and the discourses – within which artwork is created – have changed due to the aforementioned reasons, and accordingly, the design of the artwork has also changed. Conceptual artwork and related art practices are the best examples of this. Art itself has become an object of enjoyment and contentment in the world of a modern consumer society, globalization, complete commercialization, and popular culture, in which traditional artwork as an art object no longer exists. Instead, in the modern consumer society, all is about experiencing a sensual and pleasant event, whether it is a tourist visit to a museum or attending an exhibition.

Keywords: socio-historical context; art; thought; conceptual art; dematerialization of an art object.

This article aims to shed light on some crucial aspects of artistic practice, such as shifting the focus from what was predominantly sensual, in the epoch before modern and partially modern art, to what is abstract, that is, conceptual in modern and contemporary art. This displacement is a kind of event, and the event as a relation or interaction, as we shall see, is an essential characteristic of art, and therefore of life, in whose discourse – or rather, in the relation and intersection of different discourses – art itself is created. As a platform for this review, I am using the example of conceptual art and related artistic practices. I believe that modern and contemporary art is, first

and foremost, a mental activity¹ that occurs as an intersection of different discourses within the artwork itself, and then between the artwork and the observer. This whole event or exchange takes place in the realm of culture, that is, the society we live in, and this event is always a two-sided process. It explains, describes, and interprets the art, but the art itself influences the process of establishing the society and the culture, hence the image of the world.

From the sensual to the mental and dematerialization of the object in artistic practice – the state of paradigm in modern art

Art in the epochs before the modern, or in the period of Enlightenment, was marked by the dominance of absolutistic and religious motifs, and the artworks in these circumstances appear as a reflection or mimesis² of such socio-historical context. Such art was a one-way dictate of the general picture of society, where the central role was played by the ruler or the church, and the artist could only create within those types of themes. The development of pluralism, democracy, and civil society after the French bourgeois revolution, and the emergence of the first thermo-dynamic machines and industrial society, and then the first photograph, all led to, we could say, a radical change in presentations in the artwork that we now call the aesthetic regime in art.³ The artist gains autonomy institutionally, and, in fact, he does not portray what he sees in analogy, but a subjective impression of what and how the world makes an impression on him, and then his inner world, his spirit, and emotions in which he expresses his inner state, anxieties, loneliness and the devastation of the soul in the world that surrounds him, on the eve of the Great War that follows. This art represents a kind of deflection, that is, escapism from a reality that can now be far better represented by a new medium – photography. It could be said that the beginning of modern art meant the death of the collective style in art, as well as the birth of individual style and the autonomy of art.⁴ The transition from mimetic to the aesthetic regime also shifts the focus in artistic practice from mainly material, corporeal, and sensual

¹ Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990* (Cambridge Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1991, 52). The author tells of the transition of the artist creator into the artist philosopher, that is, he argues that art actually concretizes philosophy. Even earlier, Hegel wrote about the “death of art”, namely that it was definitely replaced by philosophy and science, i.e. with the science of art (see G. W. F. Hegel in *Key Writers on Art: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Chris Murray /London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Franis Group, 2003/, 161). See also Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1997, 13). Danto states here that if we intend to find out what art is we must shift from sensory experience to thought. In short, we need to refocus on philosophy. According to him, the mission of the artist is now complete, and the work has been handed over to philosophers.

² Miško Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik suvremene umjetnosti* (Zagreb, Ghent: Horetzky, Vlees & Beton, 2005), 372.

³ Jacques Ranciere, *Key Concepts*, edited by Jean-Philippe Deranty (Duram: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2010), 124.

⁴ Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 17–18.

to what is more abstract and conceptual.⁵ Of course, we can never say that an artwork is deprived of both sensual, material, bodily, as well as of the mental and conceptual. It is about the fact that with this new regime in art and the autonomy of the artist, the abstract and conceptual comes to the fore, and the reasons for this are the aforementioned socio-historical conditions.

Each work of art has always been a set of different discourses that have refracted and interrelated with each other. That set consists of different attitudes, interests, and ideology, as well as the historical discourse of the current epoch.⁶ There is always some material, sensual element that acts as a carrier of such discourses, like text, symbol, or image. One symbol or text always appears together with other symbols, texts or discourses in the work of art, which as such, influences the perceptual sense or the body of the observer, who on the other hand, observes the work of art from the perspective of his own discourses, such as education, interests, social class of origin, relations, etc. Let me paraphrase the words of the American philosopher and art theorist Arthur Coleman Danto, who says that we actually never see the work of art, but the world of art.⁷ This means that the work of art is not only sensual or discursive; it is also a kind of relationship and intersection of all of the above. In that context, there is a kind of interaction between the work of art and the observer, which can be seen as a kind of event.⁸ We can see this principle in particular by the example of conceptual art that seeks the participation of the observer and where the observer is an active participant in the work of art.

Each art is in a way interactive and based on the relationship of the stimulus offered by the artist and the constitutive reactions to that stimulus during the performance of the work. Each work of art is an interactive work in the aesthetic sense, because it is directed towards the aesthetic reaction of the observer or the listener.⁹

The reflection of an image is always in some context, an event is always an event among other events, that is, a text always exists through the absorption of other texts¹⁰, as defined by Julia Kristeva. Artwork always exists through a network of meanings, concepts, discourses, experiences, etc. This exchange always exists, an interaction of meanings. This, in a way, tells us that the sensual, the material, and even physical, have always been inseparable from the mental, abstract or conceptual. In such a set of phenomena, sensuous and discursive, a kind of action is created that affects the

⁵ Arthur C. Danto in *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, edited by Chris Murray (Routledge, London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 78–83.

⁶ Miško Šuvaković, *Diskurzivna analiza. Prestupi i/ili pristupi 'diskurzivne analize' filozofiji, poetici, estetici, teoriji i studijama umetnosti i kulture* (Beograd: Orion Art, 2010), 96–99.

⁷ Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, 19 (October, 1964): 580.

⁸ Šuvaković, *Diskurzivna analiza*, 31.

⁹ Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti* (Beograd: Orion Art, 2011), 328.

¹⁰ Julija Kristeva in Fransoa Val, "Tekst 2," in Todorov Cvetan and Osvald Dikro, ed. *Enciklopedijski rečnik nauka o jeziku II* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1987), 327.

perception of the observer. This effect or affect¹¹ is not only the sensuous effect of artistic discourse but is the whole effect of those sensuous, mental, and all other discourses it possesses. This actually tells us about the complexity or multiplicity within a work of art that, by influencing the observer, influences his subjectivity, and he receives and perceives the work of art from the standpoint of his knowledge, beliefs, and interests that he possesses within the society where all this takes place. The observer thus interprets and completes the work of art, which unambiguously speaks about the mental nature of the work. In addition, that relationship, the dialogue between the sensual and the mental, is actually always in some context, i.e., space of society and culture we live in.

In the introduction to Roland Barthes's 1970 book *The Empire of the Signs*, it says:

A text does not explain images, images do not illustrate the text: for me, each image was a starting point for some kind of visual hesitation analogous to losing the sense that Zen calls Satori; text and images, intertwined, want to ensure the movement, exchange of these signifiers: bodies, faces, letters, and in them, they want to read the retreat of signs.¹²

Looking at the post-World War I era, the horrors and devastation it brought, the world faced sobering and harsh realities. Many beliefs and conventions were abandoned. Art also, in a way, had to start from scratch (Kazimir Maljevic) and reconsider the premises on which it rested. Artists of the historical avant-garde criticize society and its traditions and overrun conventions and stand for the entry of art into life, that is, a greater connection between life and art. The attitude that art represents nothing else but life itself speaks of the importance of the role of the discursive and abstract in shaping the art practice. Artists should now also become thinkers. According to the Ukrainian-Russian philosopher and linguist Alexander Potebnya, art is actually thinking in pictures.¹³

Art and culture are not something outside the discourse, something to which the discourse of description, explanation, interpretation and debate is attributed externally and subsequently. On the contrary, the arts emerge in the midst of discursive practices and their material social and cultural performances.¹⁴

The period after the historical experience of World War I brought a definitive stop to any illusion that the existence of humankind is determined from the outside by something sublime or that man should be governed by something eternal and divine, something transcendent. Humanity, after such sobering, realized that it is left to itself

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, "Percept, afekt i pojam," in *Šta je filozofija?* (Sremski Karlovci: IK Zorana Stojanovića, 1995), 206.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Carstvo znakova* (Zagreb: August Cesarec, 1989), 5.

¹³ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1992), 275.

¹⁴ Šuvaković, *Diskurzivna analiza*, 17.

and that it can seek its determination only in the immanent, real world, something that philosophers wrote about, like Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote about the disappearance of universal and absolute truth,¹⁵ and Martin Heidegger, who says that the historical experience no longer determines the transcendent, the eternal, but the immanent, the earthly.¹⁶ Such a socio-historical context will inevitably influence the shaping of art in a time where the role of the discourse becomes decisive. Indicative are the words of the Swiss-German painter Paul Klee, who in his diaries¹⁷ says that the objects ‘now perceive me’. Here we see that the social paradigm is changing, i.e., it is no longer the subject who perceives and manages the objects and the world, but it is the world, i.e., the social context is the one that governs the subject. In other words, the object shifts to discourse.

The revolutionary turn in modern art was made by Marcel Duchamp by tearing down the conventions of that time, i.e., by abandoning the importance of the material objects in art and giving primacy to the idea or the concept. With *Fountain*, the essence of artwork shifts from the object to discourse, with that opening a new page in modern art that had far-reaching consequences for its further development. With this piece, Duchamp shows us that the artist is actually a thinker. The paradigm is changing, and this is revolutionary in his work. By bringing an ordinary object from everyday life into the world of art, world and theory come into art. Involving the world and the discursive in the way we understand the world and how we represent it also meant shifting from the sensual, from the subject to the discursive, social, mental, or conceptual. The transition towards understanding the world where the socio-historical context and discourse, the splice of all its factors and their interrelations, establish and shape the subject as a creator of the artistic practice, represents a kind of conceptual-performative turn and a shift from the “art of objects” to the “art of events and performances”.¹⁸

The forerunner of dematerialization in art is the concept of the unseen and hidden in the works of the Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte. His surrealist image *The Betrayal of Images* [*La Trahison des images*], a kind of game, tells us that the material is only an image on this picture. The work of art, for us, is actually an image (representation) and discourse, and not materiality itself. Here we also have a shift from the material, the sensual to the presentation, the image, in other words, the discourse. Already at this point, we can ask ourselves what happened to the material.

Martin Heidegger, with his approach to the work of art, has raised the question of the no-subjectivity and no-objectivity of contemporary art in the time to come.¹⁹ Heidegger himself, back in the 1930s, analyzing the term “event” (*Ereignis*) says that event no longer refers to bestowing – providing beings in an epochal-historical sense. The time has come, or rather, the state, of the end of the history of beings. What remains is the appropriation of events determined by no more than the being of man.²⁰

¹⁵ Sonja Briski Uzelac, “Umjetnost u doba teorije,” in Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik suvremene umjetnosti*, 7.

¹⁶ Martin Hajdeger, *Bitak i vreme* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2007), 93–97.

¹⁷ Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, 1994), 59.

¹⁸ Žarko Paić, *Treća zemlja. Tehnosfera i umetnost* (Zagreb: Litteris, 2014), 63–71.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” in *Holzwege (1935–1946)*, hrsg. von Friedrich-Wilhelm v. Herrmann, Verlag Vittorio Klostermann (Frankfurt am Main, V. Klostermann, 2003), 1–74.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (Frankfurt am Main, V. Klostermann, 1989).

Conceptual art and dematerialization of the art object

The position that works of conceptual art can be done by anyone, simply based on written instructions, was essential for the American artist Sol Lewitt who, as one of the first theorists, defined conceptual art back in 1967 in the following way: “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses this form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”²¹

Tony Godfrey argues that issues of conceptual art are actually questions of the very nature of art.²² With this opinion, Joseph Kosuth also defines the very essence of art in his early manifesto on conceptual art – *Art after Philosophy*.²³ The idea that art should reconsider its own nature emerged as a possibility with the influential art critic Clement Greenberg and his vision of modern art in the 1950s.²⁴ Greenberg argued that pure abstract painting was the logical and necessary conclusion of modern art, but this left no space for conceptual movements. The purely artistic criterion (flatness) proved to be a kind of narrowing of the role of the concept, that is, of the idea in art. Abstraction itself was an expression of the visual world, that is, a world of colors, lines, and abstract forms. This narrowing of the role of the concept must, sooner or later, have – as a result – a resistance reflected precisely in the reverse process, in emphasizing the role of the idea and concept in art. However, the pure abstraction and conceptual art were not as opposed as they are very often considered to be. Both sought to redefine “the role of the viewer.” The 1960s Conceptualists tried to redirect the focus from the visual to the conceptual. They championed artworks that would not speak to one’s senses but to one’s mind.²⁵ With the advent of art based solely on linguistic text, i.e., language, in the 1960s, conceptual artists as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and the English group Art & Language began a far more radical rethinking of art than it was previously even possible. One of the first and most essential things they reexamined was the general assumption that the role of art was to create a special kind of material objects.²⁶

Emphasizing the importance of the concept, i.e., the idea required the abandonment of traditional media of artistic production. The idea thus became autonomous for determining and defining conceptual art, i.e., it was an analytical-conceptual turn, which was an important step in the liberation of art from the traditional understanding, which insisted primarily on the sensual and material. Arguable and open to the

²¹Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, 10 (1967): 79–83.

²² Tony Godfrey, “Conceptual Art,” <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/conceptual-art.pdf>, acc. August 29, 2019.

²³ Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, 18.

²⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1992), 754–60.

²⁵ Sol LeWitt writes: “Conceptual Art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions,” in Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, 10 (June 1967): 79.

²⁶ Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy,” reprinted in Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art: Themes and movements* (London: Phaidon 2002), 232.

debate could be the attitude that the over-emphasized role of the idea or the concept could diminish the importance of the sensual or the visual in favor of the idea. Another problematic side was that the concept, as an idea, could exist on its own, without paper, i.e., without the material, in the very head of the artist. “Generally speaking, the moment something is considered a work of art, it becomes an object of interpretation. To lose that interpretation means to become an object again. This interpretation is a function of the artistic context of the work.”²⁷

The attempt to reduce art merely to ideas or ideas presented through words whose visual component is negligible was open to question as well. If the word exists in writing, it still survives in its material and visual form. If there were only an idea or a thought, without the material component, it would lead to the possibility of the work being lost. Nevertheless, such attempts in conceptual art were significant because they represented an examination of the boundaries of art. “A work of art is vain if its truthfulness does not depend on references to the world, but on the ways in which its elements are linked together and their consistency with the definition of art or the work of art.”²⁸ In fact, not quite everything can become art, but a urinal can become a *Fountain* with a completely different, displaced, metaphorical, and Dadaist meaning. The same goes, not only for things but also for events, words, pictures. All of this can now be put to use in conceptual art. Practically, anything can be incorporated into conceptual art if we are to shift and reinterpret their usual meaning. In other words, by bringing such objects into the art world, they no longer have the meaning they used to in the ordinary, practical life.

Proponents of the traditional conception of art continue to support the traditional presentation of the image of the world, or so to say, “they are staying on the safe side” as if nothing had changed in the socio-historical context for more than a hundred years. They have a hard time accepting this kind of free and open art, which is a displaced and transgressive interpretation of everything that the artist, practically, encounters, such as moving and still images, reproductions, texts, documents, objects, events. Fans of traditional art prefer art that does not confuse them, in which everything is known and clear, which does not disturb them, so to say, one that does not need to be ‘thought’ about. The problem is that nowadays, a painting without concept or idea has become routine, and art with the concept and an idea is necessarily transgressive, deconstructive in relation to the stereotypical image of the world. In fact, without a good and current idea, today, art becomes a banal and boring routine.

As for the primacy of conceptual art and theory over aesthetic, according to Joseph Kosuth, the approach to a work of art as an aesthetic value (read: beautiful) is not only obsolete but also irrelevant. He approaches the work of art as an idea and claims that objects, i.e., objects from the conceptual point, are irrelevant to state of the art. Ideas or concepts themselves are relevant as artwork.²⁹ Therefore, he sees art in ideas

²⁷ Arthur C. Danto, “Artworks and Real Things,” *Theoria* 39 (1973): 1–17.

²⁸ Miško Šuvaković, *Konceptualna umetnost* (Beograd: Orion Art, 2012), 219.

²⁹ Joseph Kosuth, “Titled (Art as Idea as Idea),” in *Art Conceptuel I*, Michel Bourel red., Jean-Louis Froment dir., (Bordeaux: CAPC Musee d’art Contemporain de Bordeaux, 1988), 98.

that need to be changed. The rise of conceptual art and its ability to reflect on itself, regardless of the object and aesthetic (read: beautiful) function, is one of the reasons that led to the so-called end of the history of art, i.e., history of art as we knew it until then, with the object as the main carrier of art.

Contemporary art, therefore, often refers to the disappearance of the object, that is, the material and the sensual due to new socio-historical conditions in the world, multipolarity, decentralization, technological development, which inevitably lead to the redefinition of art itself. This new context represents a radical stop to the linear interpretation of art so far. This is not primarily a question of art itself, but of society or culture. The world is fragmenting, the traditional ways of expressing art have been exhausted, and the perfected technological production is taking over this function. For a long time, the artwork hasn't had the role of mere reflection, but rather, it primarily refers us to the thinking and the discursive, that is, to the context that surrounds and shapes the work of art. Given the existing attitudes about the end of art³⁰ as we know it, we could rather say it is the end of traditional attitudes and discourses that can no longer explain, describe and interpret state of the art today. Even if we could talk about the end of art, it could be said that it is actually the end of the material, corporeal art object we had before, and not the end of ideas, spirit, or concept in art. According to Kosuth, objects are irrelevant to state of the art.³¹ Here, we could refer to Hegel and his work *Lectures on the Fine Arts* (1828) and the argument that “art is a thing of the past.”³² With this attitude, Hegel, in a way, prejudiced Marcel Duchamp's artistic work at the beginning of the 20th century, which was based on a concept, i.e., an idea, and later on, the conceptual art. One might say that today we have a transition of the artist, as someone who creates a work of art, into a philosopher, theorist and thinker. In a way, art concretizes philosophy.³³ Based on this context, we can actually speak not of the end of art, but about a new paradigm that separates contemporary art and the art of the future from art as it traditionally was and as we have thought about it. Art has, in fact, reached its post-historic status³⁴, and a historical change in the production of artwork has taken place. Danto takes as an example Andy Warhol's work from 1964 *Brillo Box*, for which he says that it is “the end of art.”³⁵ This work is an appropriation, i.e., takes up the same object that was in mass consumption. This way Warhol, like Duchamp before him, puts the concept, idea, and theory before the object. Concept, idea, and theory are primary and they form the essence of a work of art, not the object itself. According to Danto, if the identity of art can no longer be determined visually, then almost all previous attempts in

³⁰ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

³¹ Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, 26.

³² Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, Vol. 1, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 11.

³³ Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, 52.

³⁴ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 21.

³⁵ Danto, “The Artworld,” 580–81.

history to determine art have failed, and therefore, art must be defined by some other value.³⁶ That actually represents the end of defining art as we previously have, in a linear or narrative way. “We must begin with a new policy in art institutions that will recognize that the meaning is forever shifted from the image to the discursive formations within which the image resides.”³⁷

Contemporary art and the discourse

Logically, the question arises as to what is the role of thought in contemporary art in the conditions of the digital technological age, which introduces us to a completely new relationship between time and space. The acceleration that technology brings to us, the completely new discourses of the global world, its fragmentation, geography, singularity, decentralization, gender, sexual discourses, interconnectedness by modern technology, etc., seems to go beyond all that man has ever encountered in history. We are confronted with the age of computer science, which inevitably, like all previous epochs, provides a platform for the development of art in the current socio-historical context. The question arises as to whether and what kind of art is possible in today's conditions when at every turn, we encounter an endless multitude of different images, enabled by modern media technology (computers, mobile phones, TV, commercials, etc.). Is the essence of art today, first and foremost, in the conceptual, thought-provoking, social, event, experiment, engagement, or in the sensual, material, which the world of presenting, or representation, due to the development of modern-day media, has so banished and dulled it so much so that it no longer carries the essence and problematic of the picture of the world we live in today? It may seem like a paradox, but in the midst of such superior reproduction technology, perhaps art today is only possible as an event at one time and in one place, just as at the time before the first photograph existed, and art came into being in the age of its mechanical reproducibility so that we can understand Walter Benjamin's discourse. As a reminder, he wrote that because of the mechanical reproducibility, a work of art loses its original 'aura', which we can only see when we look at the original work at the place where it is located (at one time and in one place).³⁸ The question is, in fact, is a true work of art today left only with the (intangible) aura, i.e., with the affect it produces?

Paradigmatic is the statement of the French philosopher Michel Foucault that life is actually a work of art:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something that relates only to objects, not to individuals and life. That art is

³⁶ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 193.

³⁷ Victor Burgin, “The End of Art Theory,” *The End of Art Theory, Criticism and Postmodernity* (Hampshire and London: MacMillan Education Ltd, 1986), 202.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Umetničko delo u veku svoje tehničke reprodukcije,” in *Eseji*, ed. by Miloš Stambolić, (Beograd: Nolit, 1974), 114–27.

something specialized, or something that professionals who are artists, do. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why can lamps or a house be an art object and not our life?³⁹

The French philosopher and art theorist Yves Michaud accurately portrayed and described the state of contemporary art in the so-called *triumph of aesthetics*, that is, its transition to a gaseous state in which art is present in everything around us, e.g. in fashion, commercials, electronic media, museums, etc.⁴⁰ It is simply everywhere, in the air around us, as if it has gone into complete immateriality. This thus confirms the dematerialization of the object in contemporary art, i.e., it emphasizes the importance of the intangible and thought-provoking as well as the transition of art into a kind of aura, which can again, be manifested firstly on an example of some kind of event. Art has become an object of enjoyment and satisfaction of the masses in the world of contemporary consumer society, globalization, the complete commercialization of everything, popular culture, where *there is no longer the traditional work as an art object*, but rather a pleasure based on the experience of a sensual and pleasant event, whether it is a tourist visit to a museum or attendance to a sporting event. Such art can only give us endless repetition within popular culture and society, but on the other hand, art through some kind of social engagement, event, cultural activity, experiment, and keeping in mind the character of openness and uncertainty it carries, provides some possible perspectives. Michaud thus paints for us the whole paradox within contemporary art, as well as the society in which that art occurs.

It can be concluded that the shift of the focus from that of the sensual, corporeal or material from pre-modern art to that of abstract or conceptual in the modern and contemporary art of the 20th and 21st centuries is evident. There are many different reasons for this. Some of them may be the development of society, technology, the historical maturity level that humanity has reached, etc. All these different discourses, that is, their relationship and intersection, contributed so that the conceptual, mental, and theoretical take center stage, that is the way one conceives things and the world around him. This does not mean in any way that the sensual, material, and bodily are abolished. Without it, as an integral and unbreakable part of any artistic practice, there would be no art, and of course, no life. The thought is what defines man as a social being, and thus the art we create, explain, describe, and interpret with the discourses of life. A work of art will always be and interlacement of the various discourses it possesses within itself, mental and conceptual, as well as those sensual, material, which will all again, in different ways, affect us discursively and sensually, and it will all take place in the field of the society and culture we live in.

What led to the abandonment of static, molded and linear systems within social formations (Foucault) and turned into a kind of fluidity, instability, avoidance of

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Critical Assessments*, ed. by Barry Smart (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1994), 407.

⁴⁰ Yves Michaud, *Umjetnost u plinovitom stanju. Ogljed o trijumfu estetike* (Zagreb: Ljevak, 2004).

concretization, dynamics and rhizomatic structure of the world (Deleuze), primarily thanks to the technological development, all this led to contemporary art being a practice which is, above all, directed less towards the materiality of the work of art itself, but more towards the mental, that is, discursive. In other words, we can freely claim that these reasons also led to the dematerialization of the art object.

Contemporary art is the art of an aura, event, fluid context, and a virtual world without stable supports. That art is art without materiality. It is just a performative aura behind which only performative affects remain. Art today, firstly, appears as an event, as something in between, in which, in fact, there is no longer a dichotomy between the signifier and the signified. The essence is in the evasion, or relationship, itself. The signifier is dictated by social constructs, the essence of the artwork is, we could say, in the ever-present art of the massive and popular culture that surrounds us everywhere, but not in the material. These are museums, shopping malls, full sports stadiums, squares, the aura of that enjoyment and the world of consumers, and the affect it produces.

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Article received: December 12, 2019

Article accepted: January 31, 2020

Review article