

What is History of Art in the 20th and 21st Century – a Few Theoretical Problems

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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” as well as “crisis in art history”). 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 changes of different ways in which people study, interpret and appreciate art in its richness and multitude of forms.

[Art History; Culture; “Crisis in Art History”]

This paper, which is presented here, should be considered merely as a “draft” for the proper understanding of the situation which confronts art history professionals today. My article was written from the point of view of somebody who possesses many years of practical experience in teaching at the graduate program in art history at the University of Łódź (Poland). The article is organized around several groups of major debates and themes that have characterized the literature of this field of study since the day when important and often incredible changes occurred in this discipline, which arose on the eve of World War II until present-day.

Art History under the Shadow of Nazism

The problem of understanding “Why do we need art history” was one of most important issues in the late 1940s for Fritzl Saxl (1890–1948).¹ Saxl was a distinguished art historian of Austrian origin, who was the guiding

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¹ F. SAXL, Po co nam historia sztuki, in: J. BIAŁOSTOCKI (ed.), *Pojęcia, problemy, metody współczesnej nauki o sztuce*, Warszawa 1976, pp. 14–28.

light of the Warburg Institute, especially during the long duration of mental breakdown of its founder, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), whom he eventually 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 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 more friendly 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*.²

Saxl was convinced, as was Warburg, that visual images could be read as historical documents offering insights into a 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.’³

Saxl also believed that we must accept the dangerous and risky fact of the growing fascination in art and especially art history and that the majority of the 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

² F. SAXL, *Lectures*, London 1957.

³ D. McEWAN, *Fritz Saxl – Eine Biografie: Aby Warburgs Bibliothekar und Erster Direktor des Londoner Warburg Institutes*, Wien, Köln, Weimar 2012, p. 196.

underlined the fact of the distressingly growing interest in art in general in the 20th century, and especially the alarmingly increasing curiosity in the field of art history.

The other mission for art history under the shadow of Nazism, was the discovery that works of art have meaning beyond their purely formal significance as expressions of visual culture. The most important for a distinctive methodology for Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968)⁴ was iconography, the study of the subject matter of works of art that revealed their intellectual content, on a par with and often involving works of literature, philosophy, theology, and other modes of thought more commonly associated with such content. The confidence that artists could speak their minds, as well as their hearts with their hands, transformed art history from an effete exercise in connoisseurship and appreciation into a rigorous and challenging history of ideas with a characteristic Panofsky's methodology, which he raised to the level of a humanistic discipline in its own. Particularly noteworthy in the Panofsky method was his ability to clarify the content of works of art by reference to a wide variety of evidence from other fields. Art was thus no longer viewed as a rare or unique object aloft in the rarefied atmosphere of elitist aesthetics but as an integral part of our cultural heritage, accessible to anyone with the requisite imagination, intelligence, and persistence. The study of visual images thus became an intellectual endeavor comparable to other fields in which words were the medium.

“There are only Artists” or a Redefinition of the Idea of Progress

In order to think through the place of the different paradigm within the modern art history it is helpful, perhaps, to have 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 20th 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.⁵

⁴ Erwin Panofsky was a German and American art historian who gained particular prominence for his studies in iconography, which was his own method presented in 1939 concentrated on the study of symbols and themes in works of art. More: E. PANOFSKY, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York, London 1972.

⁵ T. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1964, p. 123.

Simultaneously Sir Ernst H. Gombrich (1909–2001) presented his influential survey of the history of art entitled *The Story of Art*. The book was first published in 1950 by Phaidon Publishers and it was widely regarded both as a seminal work of criticism and as one of the most accessible introductions to the visual arts. The first two sentences from the book have become a very famous phrase in modern criticism: “*There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.*”⁶ Moreover, in Gombrich’s opinion, one never finishes learning about art since “*there are always new things to discover. Great works of art seem to look different every time one stands before them. They seem to be as inexhaustible and unpredictable as real human beings.*”⁷

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-20th century and the chief theorist and advocate of modernism in the visual arts.

Simultaneously in the field of art itself during the 1950s and 1960s, emerged new artistic directions such as 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 labor. During the 1960s many avant-garde impulses dated back from the beginning of the 20th century were revived, 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 in 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

⁶ E. H. GOMBRICH, *The Story of Art*, London 1950, p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

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).

All the artists and theoreticians mentioned in the paragraph above agreed on only one thing in their reflections on art, that there is no such thing as progress in art.⁸

The Space for New Contemporary Art Practices (New Media and Gender Orientated Art)

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 demands 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 an 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*”.⁹

Also, in the 1970s a young British art historian – T. J. Clark has introduced a new range of themes for art history – the social history of art. His books were 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

⁸ A. BERTINETTO, Gombrich, Danto, and the Question of Artistic Progress, in: *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 7, 2015, pp. 79–92.

⁹ R. KRAUSS – A. MICHELSON, Photography, in: *October Magazine*, 5, Summer 1978, pp. 3–7.

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 his publication “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.¹⁰ Clark’s success in realizing this program is debatable and doubtful: 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).¹¹ All these issues became important in 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 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 has gone 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.¹²

By the early 1990s, the development of computer graphics and the advent of the World Wide Web provided a new platform for novel artistic productions. Key names of this period include Lynn Hershamn Leeson,

¹⁰ T. J. CLARK, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France – 1848–1851*, London 1973; T. J. CLARK, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London 1984.

¹¹ T. J. CLARK, <http://arthistorians.info/clarkt> [2019–08–12].

¹² To read more: K. ARCIMOWICZ et al., *Gender w sztuce. Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej*, Kraków 2015; A. JONES (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture*, London 2003.

Ken Rinaldo, and Roy Ascott. In the 21st century, new media art defined as a genre that encompasses artworks created with new media technologies, including digital art, computer graphics, computer animation, virtual art, Internet art, interactive art, video games, computer robotics, 3D printing, and art as biotechnology, started to be one of the most important part of artistic activities. Those, nowadays new media art is a dynamic field of the arts that offers never available tools for artistic expression.

Art History in Crisis?

In the 1980s and 1990s new and quite significant question in the field of history of art has emerged: is “*modern art – monument or mockery*”?¹³ To illustrate this, one needs only to 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 a 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* [...]”.¹⁴ Stephan Zagala, Senior 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*”.¹⁵ 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*”.¹⁶ Within this context then, 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-

¹³ D. COTTINGTON, *Modern Art: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2005, p. 1.

¹⁴ G. DELEUZE – F. GUATTARI, *What is Philosophy?*, New York 1994, pp. 172, 177, 198.

¹⁵ S. ZAGALA, Aesthetics. A place I’ve never seen, in: B. MASSUMI (ed), *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari*, London 2002, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

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”.¹⁷

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 *objects 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 vitrine. 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.

Simultaneously with the problem of defining what a contemporary work of art truly is, occurred a problem related to the crisis of scientific discipline, which is the history of art. Donald Preziosi in his article entitled *A Crisis in, or of, Art History?* proposes to enrich the existing framework of the discipline by incorporating into it the study of “*the history, theory, and criticism of the multiplicity of cultural processes that can be construed as enframing; an accounting for objects, and their subjects, with all that might entail*”.¹⁸ There is no metalanguage which permits art historians to formulate theories independently of this framework. The theory is unavoidably relativized to vantage points within the framing practices. So Preziosi does not propose to step outside the disciplinary framework; his rethinking is meant to enrich and improve it.

A similar approach to the issue of overcoming the crisis in art history can be found in Hans Belting’s book – *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*. In his opinion artists today are reconsidering their own tasks, the surviving possibilities of such media as painting and sculpture, considering the historical legacy of art. Therefore Art historians are testing different models of telling the history of art, not the history of an unchallenged evolution but the history of ever new solutions for the ever new problem of what

¹⁷ COTTINGTON, p. 99.

¹⁸ PREZIOSI, p. 2.

makes an “image” and what makes it a convincing vision of “truth” at a “given moment”.¹⁹ Finally, the problem of the status of contemporary art demands the general attention of the discipline – whether one believes in postmodernism or not. Thus, in Belting opinion “*Only an attitude of experimentation promises new answers*”.²⁰

The “Iconic Turn” in Art History

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.²¹ 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.²² 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 center of gravity from the theory *Bildwissenschaft*, the term used to describe the wide range of image theories prominent in Germany.²³ 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 19th century Charles

¹⁹ H. BELTING, *The End of the History of Art?*, Chicago 1987, p. xii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

²¹ 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”. To read more: W. J. T. MITCHELL, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago 2005; G. BOEHM, *O obrazach i widzeniu. Antologia tekstów*, Kraków 2014.

²² M. RAMPLEY et al. (ed.), *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Leiden 2012.

²³ A. ZEIDLER-JANISZEWSKA, Visual Culture Studies czy antropologicznie zorientowana Bildwissenschaft? O kierunkach zwrotu ikonicznego w kulturze, in: *Teksty Drugie*, 4, 2006, pp. 9–30.

S. Peirce suggested thinking of the icon, as an icon resembles the thing it represents.²⁴ 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 exponents of *Bildwissenschaft* have emphasized its links to art history, visual studies have, 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 technical means but also as instruments that are altering 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.²⁵ 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”.²⁶ 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

²⁴ T. L. SHORT, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, Cambridge 2007.

²⁵ S. SCHADE, Zur verdrängten Medialität der modernen und zeitgenössischen Kunst, in: S. SCHADE – G. C. THOLEN (Hrsg.), *Konfigurationen. Zwischen Kunst und Medien*, München 1999, pp. 269–291.

²⁶ P. BOURDIEU – A. DARBEL, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*, Cambridge 1991, p. 56.

that charismatic ideology which, in making “*an encounter with a work of art the occasion of a descent of grace, 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*”.²⁷

At this point we must not forget a French curator – Nicholas Bourriaud. In 1997 he published an influential book called *Esthétique Relationnel*, 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.*”²⁸

Bourriaud saw artists more as facilitators than makers of art and regarded art as pure 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.

The Dilemmas facing the Current Generation of Art Historians

The power of attraction of pictorial art has nowadays increased immensely and consequently:

According to Rene Huyghe – philosopher of aesthetics: “*Art 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.*”²⁹

However, the dilemmas which are faced by the contemporary generation of art historians are yet even more significant because not only the interpretation of the work of art is a problem nowadays but also the proper kind of contact with the artwork. 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. These “Night of Museums” are often adorned by truly “cultural” events such a music concert of pop stars or railway tickets of Intercity trains sold at half price on this day for all museums visitors (to receive

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ N. BOURRIAUD, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon 1998, p. 14.

²⁹ A. McCLELLAN, *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, Oxford 2003, p. 3.

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 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 DailyArt³⁰ – a Polish educational application for smart phone, which in a very accessible form and properly translated into an English language describes conveniently the values and merits of an individual work of art. The observations are captured in a straightforward 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 very 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 a genuine work of art, does it have the true Walter Benjamin's “aura”³¹ and quality? The answer to such a question seems quite obvious, the artefact 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 using 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

³⁰ DailyArt, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.moiseum.dailyart2&hl=pl> [201908-12].

³¹ Walter Benjamin in his well known essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) identifies the perceptual shift that takes place when technological advancements emphasize speed and reproducibility. The aura is found in a work of art that contains presence. The aura is precisely what cannot be reproduced in a work of art: its original presence in time and space. He suggests a work of art's aura is in a state of decay because it is becoming more and more difficult to apprehend the time and space in which a piece of art is created.

staff, by the net programmers or by the ordinary users of the Internet themselves.

The immanent homogenization can however be recognized as *aporia*, 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 showing the wealth of realism and the complexity of various phenomena. Therefore the common experiencing of art by means of the “Museum Nights”, through various smartphone art applications or by belonging to this special part of the Facebook community interested solely 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, who create “*the feeling of social solidarity, creating the outstanding, distinctive, fragmentary, voluntary, the and at times temporary cultural worlds through the dedication to their common consumptive interests*”.³² These problems often defined as the thesis about modern tribal society concentrate on the new types of ties and forms of socialization (e.g. the post-traditional communities and the subculture of consumption). These new types of communities and whole societies are built around the leading cult brand or pop culture texts, the virtual communities in which the main “*building or construction factor*”,³³ 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 the 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 an immanently “culturally homogenized” art receiver.

And this is where the importance of art historians appears vividly. Art historians must serve the role of the connecting link between the world of high artistic culture, which demands numerous complicated competences ex. the knowledge of ancient mythology, holy attributes, painting

³² E. J. ARNOULD – C. J. THOMPSON, *Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research*, London 2005, p. 873.

³³ R. V. KOZINETS, The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online communities, in: *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39 (1), 2002, pp. 61–72.

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. extraordinary, splendid 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.

Conclusions

Summarizing the problem concerning the question what is the history of art in today’s world – it seems quite clear that the old antagonism between art and life has been resolved, because art has lost its secure frontiers against other media, visual and linguistic, and is instead understood as one of the various systems of explaining and representing the world. All this opens new possibilities but also new problems for a discipline that has always had to legitimize the isolation of its object which is art, from other domains of knowledge and interpretation. In terms of continental philosophy, nowadays much interest has been shown in the different formal interpretations of visual images done by Jacques Ranciere, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze. However, with the magnificent exception of Deleuze their interest in the image is mainly in terms of broader societal and cultural implications, rather than what certain artistic style discloses in relation to the more concrete human experience. In fact, these thinkers offer few sustained discussions of specific paintings in terms of their detailed phenomenal structure. Many art historians and curators alike agree historical conceptions of art have become irrelevant to the social function that art’s institutions are now called upon to perform. Already mentioned above, Hans Belting reminds that contemporary art is “post-histoire”,³⁴ where any development of art from within its own discipline has become impossible.

I sometimes feel concern that the atmosphere of uncertainty associated with the continuing rhetoric of crisis of art history as a discipline may prevent students from preparing themselves for the wearisome work in the archives. Moreover, in some publications, the so-called positivistic study approach contained in the primary sources, as well as a formalistic approach, may be considered as very suspicious. This is not to suggest that art historians are to abandon the work of art as their primary object

³⁴ BELTING, pp. 4, 10, 14.

of inquiry, nor are they to borrow from social history or other disciplines what they ought to find out for themselves, but it is necessary to somewhat modify the profile of education for the contemporary students of art history and for example to introduce the obligatory online courses as a part of university lectures, or the elements of creative writing about art, all this in order for our graduates to be able to effectively compete on the modern-day, very difficult and complex work market. However, for me, it seems that the loss of the historical aspects of art history is one of the major problems within the field because, as the recently deceased art critic Robert Hughes noticed: "*In art, there is no progress, only fluctuations of intensity.*"³⁵

³⁵ R. HUGHES, *The Shock of the New*, New York 2013, p. 376.

