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“The skin of the painting”. Why not paint today?

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# “The skin of the painting”

## Why not paint today?

After Hegel had written “The Phenomenology of Spirit”, the idea of death as depletion became an important possibility and as such to be understood as phenomenon itself. This premise influenced many successive theories that lead to a discussion around the idea of the death of art. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century many theories and rumors about painting as a dead art discipline had been propagated. It was common to find articles about the death of painting in renowned art magazines around the globe in the period between 1960 - 1980. Since “White over white”, by Kazimir Malevich, the announcement of the death of painting began to appear in a repeating fashion every 10 years and hence it had been spread like a fever. In my emphasis of this assignment I will treat the critical question that came with it, “Why painting today?”, the other way around: “Why not paint today?”.

I want to focus on Umberto Eco's text that has been written 1955 – 1963, "Two hypotheses about the death of art". We can observe that his text is more about a philosophical question on the existence of art than art theory in itself. I want to point out that the death of painting and other media is just a philosophical approach on art and is in particular not to be confused with an artistic approach. In my opinion, this is a general paradox of most of the texts written about the death of art. We must constantly be up to date and understand that we are living in a post-moment when art already became an industry. Contemporary art can be framed as a conflict of method and its artistic movement is more concerned within its historical justification than its specific aesthetic value. Therefore it's expressing a kind of necro ideology in which it is nothing more than a response to the melancholy caused by the contradiction of the dependent artist within the art structures.

Nowadays the arguments around the death of an artwork can just be understood in a very unspecific manner, because the ongoing discussion avoids the idea of change in aesthetic subjectivity. Aesthetics, as philosophical concept, constantly builds up to a complex phenomena and to a leading path in which we perceive the artistic object. The aesthetic subjectivity is enveloped in this steady change, hence the artwork can not be understood in itself. This notion becomes of subjective significance as soon as we develop texts about art and, even in theoretical arguments, those theorists underestimate the leading

paradigm of the art object that is only perceivable as ephemera.

With the phenomena around it, I want to state one specific example observed by “The Da Vinci Code”, a book written by Dan Brown. In his framework, which includes a review based on some of the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Dan Brown created a fictional quality based on historical arguments. In his way of building up a narration, the symbol of Maria Magdalena is transformed into a suspicious myth that helped his narrative to evolve into a supposable connection between Leonardo da Vinci's painting strategies up to some religious secrets. It can be seen as an evidence on to how the aesthetic subjectivity can be changed on behalf of a shifted view on the object.

Previous mentioned method, as a process through mystification, should to be looked at as an easy way of transformation that can be provided by historical arguments. Herein the artist as writer, Dan Brown, enabled himself to create a new contextual subjectivity that previously had not been existent. The paintings da Vinci's did not change in a way that is objectively perceivable, they rather changed in its subjective aesthetic understanding and thus resulting in a radical shift towards its paradigm about the pictorial object. So it becomes impossible for me to define the aesthetic nature of art, because, as we know, the art object is defined through more than just the simple aesthetic relationship to the usual object; the art object furthermore tends to be within a vibrant change as long as its subjectivity correlates with those of its surroundings.

The questioning regarding the justification of painting began with the prestige role of photography as a new medium of creation. My analysis lead me to conclude, that it was that blossom moment of the bourgeoisie during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what gave photography its dominance. This dominance could previous just be experienced from the realistic, neoclassic stile of the painting, but was from now on affordable to a wider public.

The family portrait was the result of an aesthetic necessity from a social class that grew up on power. The painting was focused on the process of picturing reality and therefore, with the arrival of photography, this kind of painting struggled with its purpose on existence. The photography was a perfect media to fulfill the aesthetic desires of the media class, so the painting only lost its purpose in one specific kind of an aesthetic point of view. With the replacement of that kind of painting through photography, the values of the painting as academic tradition fell into a crisis. I want to point out that this crisis of the painting is not related to the technical advances that arose from photography to reproduce reality, but more to an aesthetic phenomenon that just happened to exist within its

circumstances of social environments.

Marshall McLuhan expressed a relevant perception about media “when”, I quote, “a new medium arises, it takes on the attributes of existing media until it can, essentially, find itself”. It is possible to point out that documentations, as we know about the era before photography, had solely been made through the use of traditional art medias such as painting, drawing, print, sculpture and architecture. Painting, as one of such medias, has had a significant role of aesthetic visualization. While the photography was expanding into other fields like documentation and promotion, it replaced the roles that previously just belonged to the painting. Photography could liberate the way to a journey of aesthetic subjectivity in painting, therefore provided all the markings necessary to release a dramatic change of and into the pictorial object.

According to this argument, the premise doubtlessly ended one subjectivity about paintings, but it is not a new individual phenomenon that appeared, the change of the social subjectivity rather, as it always has been happening, changes the aesthetic subject as well.

I focus now on two painters as an example, which artworks seem yet to be unknown to a wider audience. Both have embraced their work with the understanding of the painting as tradition and both could thereby create a totally fresh art work - Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville. Based on some ideas of different essays, interviews and observations about their complete works, I want to set up a brief comparison in which I'm defining some fresh ideas and positions over the use of the traditional painting.

Lucian Freud insisted on the priority of the painters undiluted taste, as he explained his requirement of the models, whose aura must be the starting point for his excitement. Before the work is concluded, however, they drop away, and the pictures are all about the feelings of it, all he thinks what is worth preserving and all he invests with it.

Freud's work will leave to posterity the vulnerability of potency of the people portrayed, in the manner of Rembrandt and Degas. The difference may be that he has taken them on unshackled, and so no longer protected, by the privileges and burdens of traditional society with expectations attached to roles, relative wealth, age and decorum. In some measure the people who agree to be painted forego the ordinary protection of the confidence. Once stripped, they and the artist have a chance to tip the balance against the orthodox control and egocentricity of the painter. The pressure is towards a perilous interpenetration of exteriority and interiority, physicals form and feelings, couched in the illusionistic,

classical framework of oil paintings. The results are very silent and very grand, so much so that they pervade and disturb most observers' own nervous system. And make some people transfer themselves, imaginatively, to the situation painted.

While Freud's painting are more into a disturbing artwork and the brake relationship with orthodox aesthetic ideology of the traditional society, Jenny Seville is more interested in a female's concept of beauty. Because she think that beauty is always associated with the male fantasy of what the female body is. She doesn't think there is anything wrong with beauty. It is just what women think is beautiful can be different. And there can be beauty in the individualism. If there is a wart or a scar, this can be beautiful in a sense when you paint it. It is a part of identity, Individual marks.

Jenny Saville has indeed returned painting to its origins at the same time she has made it new. In *Migrants* she moves courageously into unexplored territory, armed with the unexpected. Out of the recalcitrant raw material of the burn books, the unbearable medical pictures of damage bodies horribly garlanded with tubes and wires, out of the candid snaps of murdered corpses and traumatized heads. In the most literal sense, to a more diverse imagery that imagery of trauma and violence of the visual diet provided by our new media. She has constructed new and provocative opposition, offering a feast for the eyes and stimulating jolt to the mind. Above all she has recreated painting in the image of our own ominous and irrational times. And that in itself is not small achievement.

The most relevant about Saville's art is the format. Her artwork is nuanced for a huge frame and how she considers that she is not controlled by the pictorial past she is so often and so knowingly engages with. This is the return to painting mediate by photography.

With the ideology of the conceptualism arrived the possibility to understand the painting through just the description of an object. This possibility seems limited and, because this suggestion lacks objective conditions - there is not one specific experience between the object and the subject -, has created a new way to interpret the painting as act, as material, as time and as a part of a process. The painting, which has been understood as mere object, hanging finished on the wall, started to become a questionable object that has been made by a gesture and will be able to work in different positions and contexts. Its meaning is not limited to the mere image it contains, so it rather is leading into a field that opens the relation between the pictorial object and the social subject. This argument marks somehow a new step. We should not think of the object as a goal, we rather can think of the relations among the object and every phenomenon around it. On one hand the radical position of the conceptualism opens up a new

way of perception for the painting. On the other hand, confronted by the painting, it becomes quite obvious how unsubstantial the radical orientation of the conceptualism is and a metaphoric description to conceive every little detail of a painting becomes incapable of doing so.

Furthermore, according to the phenomenology, one phenomenon is not purely understood in its own nature, it is rather the convolute product of many other phenomena. During my study of painting, it was necessary to think about how a practical reason for the existence of painting becomes constructed. How are the connections to such pulsating factors like economy, politics and society? As art can not be looked at as a corpus apart from the economic system, I want to talk about the market. Economy is one of the reasons that made the existence of art possible. The existence of art is suppressed by a social structure within relations of the capitalist market. This may sound cynic, but as long as a high demand of paintings exists in the global market, the painting will always be present. A global industry of exhibitions is unable to survive with the mere funding provided by the government, despite all the questions about its traditions, ethics etc. Painting really shows its effectiveness in this way as a consequence; as the porn industry is in need of beautiful bodies, the art industry is in need of paintings.

The issue that I have been developing in this essay is maybe less relevant, considering the situation of contemporary art, but, I think, it somehow aims to have an understanding about the new ways of art. Art today has a particular impact on people, influenced by speculation about monetary value of artworks. The role of the cathedral in the past is substituted by the art museums today; huge, cozy and beautiful places. A big Industry of art, moved by sensational news like that:

“Celebrated artworks are so much more than beautiful pictures. The likes of Michelangelo, da Vinci, and van Gogh were as much masters of allegory and symbolism as they were of paintbrush and canvas, and their masterworks, which hang in revered museums around the world, have been poured over by historians and curators for years. Though instantly recognizable, many contain secret meanings, unsolved riddles, and even hidden images in their many layers of oil and varnish. “

So I'm finishing my essay with three open questions:

- Why should I not paint?
- Why should I believe in art theory?
- Why should I be an artist?

Guillermo C. Rodriguez

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