

ALEKSANDRA ŁUKASZEWICZ

## THE ARTWORLD VS ART\*

### INTRODUCTION

Being asked my opinion on what is Art, I cannot respond just from one perspective, neither from the perspective of the theorist, or from the perspective of the creator. Being immersed in art and culture throughout all my life, I earn my living by lecturing on philosophy and theory of art, writing papers, participating in conferences, and managing research projects. However, I trained first at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan in the field of Photography and Intermedia. I continue also to create photography, photographic and other artistic objects (sometimes also performances) usually in the form of a gift for my closest family and friends. For a few years I also exhibited some of my work, usually in my hometown, Szczecin.

Thus my perspective on art is twofold, and I would like to present both.

### PERSPECTIVE OF THE THEORIST

#### COMMODIFICATION OF ARTWORK IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY (CONTEXTUAL THEORY OF ART, INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF ART, AND THE ARTWORLD)

Since the 1960s, the Artworld has been stuck on market thinking, providing response to the question of what is and what is not a work of art only through self-

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reference. This approach was enabled by the contextual theory of art from Arthur Danto, who introduced the term “the Artworld” referring to the theoretical context of the work of art as “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art.”<sup>1</sup> Danto’s main thesis on the perceptual indiscernibility of a work of art from not a work of art allowed him to argue for the artistic character of such works as Brillo Boxes by Andy Warhol, plywood boxes looking like cartons of washing powder of the familiar brand present in supermarkets of the United States. Nevertheless, he was already aware that accepting this thesis, by supporting only artworks in theoretical concepts, makes it difficult to judge values of the artworks.<sup>2</sup> This was later criticized extensively by Joseph Margolis, who showed Danto’s thesis brings him either to incoherence or to paradox, because it is not possible then to discern the artwork from a forgery — which according to Danto is plausible<sup>3</sup>— though this did not much influence the broader field of art theory and art criticism, due to Margolis’s sophisticated philosophical language.

George Dickie, following Danto’s idea of defining an artwork by means of its direct context, which is the Artworld, explained it in institutional and economic terms, further overlooking values of artworks other than economic.<sup>4</sup> While these theoretical approaches are informative and provide tools to analyze forms of functioning within the Artworld of artworks, artists, curators, galleries, museums, art academies, etc., they have limited reach. They do not give space for discussion of aesthetics, artistic and human values of the artworks in question, nor do they explain the meaning of art’s presence throughout human history.

Postmodernism in art theory has brought with it depreciation of values, mostly aesthetic and human ones, because only artistic and institutional references were necessary to argue for the artistic character of the piece. In conjunction with market machinery for the economic valuation of art, especially visual arts, it opened the door for the mass production of pieces I prefer to call ‘artistic objects’ rather than works of art, which are subject to economic speculation and investment. This is proved by the crisis of art critique prepared as promotional material for the artist (or a gallery/museum etc.) rather than as a profound analysis of the value of the piece, because such materials have become devalued in art press.

Postmodernism in art and in culture has already been transcended to a large extent, as its characteristics inherently called for this reaction. For example, we

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Danto, „The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 580.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 580-581.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Margolis, “Farewell to Danto and Goodman,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 4 (1998): 354.

<sup>4</sup> George Dickie, *Art and the aesthetics: an institutional analysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974).

can observe the comeback of painterly technique at academies of fine art in Poland (like from studios of Jarosław Modzelewski at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, or of Katarzyna Szeszycka from the Academy of Art in Szczecin). The focus that is put on the painterly aspect, on aesthetic values, and on the workshop is contradictory to the postmodern perspective, and rather aligned with the modernist one as understood by Clement Greenberg. The mechanism of the devolution of tradition about which Greenberg writes, analyzing abstract American painting (especially Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting,<sup>5</sup> which looks both backward and forward, opposing the current state of art development and looking back into a traditional search for aesthetic and painterly values) seems to be active, evidenced in the search for such within contemporary art.

RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE (BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE, FLUXUS, PERFORMATIVE TURN, ART ACTIVISM AND ART COMMUNITIES)

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to commodified artworks there exist performative traditions focused on spontaneous art creation to inspire community, stemming from activities concentrated around the Black Mountain College and Fluxus movement on one side, and from the other arising out of anthropological theatre in the spirit of Antoine Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba. These trends focus on the ritualistic side of the performative activity, not necessarily framed as theatre, but as actively transforming social reality by these anthropological ritual origins. Apart from the theatre environment, in the field of visual arts the performative side of artistic activity is also emphasized. This took hold in the 1940s and 1950s, and is thematized as the “performative turn”. Performativity, as defined by Richard Schechner<sup>6</sup> and Erica Fisher-Lichte,<sup>7</sup> indicates two sides: as relevant to performing onstage, and as to performing in ordinary life, stressing their continuity.<sup>8</sup> This approach, linked to postmodernism, supported blurring the difference between high art and popular art as well as between art and everyday life, however in doing so omitted commodification of the artworks, as conspicuous in

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<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Obrona modernizmu: wybór esejów*, trans. Grzegorz Dziamski and Maria Śpik-Dziamska (Kraków: Universitas, 2006): 63–70, 90–94.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Schechner, Victor W. Turner, *Between theatre & anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985)

<sup>7</sup> Erica Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge introduction to theatre and performance studies* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> “Performing onstage, performing in special social situations (public ceremonies, for example), and performing in everyday life are a continuum.” Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, London, New York: Routledge 2002), 143.

visual arts, by treating art as an event in its own right.<sup>9</sup>

Schechner and Fisher-Lichte allow one to think of art through activity, as doing something and operating on cultural meanings, but it is worthwhile to supplement this with the concept of performativity — as found in John Austin's philosophy of language, showing that some sentences do not have descriptive function, but they actually change the state of affairs, they transform the life of the persons involved in the situation of the utterance<sup>10</sup>—and apply it to visual arts. This is because visual art can be understood as based on various communicative modes, not only language as such.<sup>11</sup> By these means it is possible then to perceive images as visual product of intentional gestures<sup>12</sup> to better understand their symbolic effectiveness.

Performativity, approached on the levels of performance, performing, and on the level of symbolic agency, is an important part of artistic life throughout the 20th century. Performance experiences of the late 1960s and 70s contributed to the spread of art activism,<sup>13</sup> and its importance is still visible; through feminism, anti- and postcolonialism, as well as pacifism, art activists continue to confront various ecological and socio-cultural issues, not representing them, but engaging in order to create a difference.<sup>14</sup> These kinds of practices in the field of contemporary art are conceptualized by Nicolas Bourriaud with the term 'relational aesthetics' as introduced in his book, first published in French in 1998 and translated into English in 2010.<sup>15</sup> 'Relational aesthetics' is not a normative theory, but a descriptive one, from the perspective of art curator and art critic. Bourriaud rightly indicates that contemporary art works on relationships, with human relations mediated by technology as a subject of artistic transformation. This can be shown true on such cases as Oliafur Eliasson "The Weather Project," exhibited in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern Gallery when Bourriaud was the

<sup>9</sup> Erica Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge 2008).

<sup>10</sup> John L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Language, as Umberto Eco pointed out, is a specific kind of a communication code based on double division, while there exist also codes apart from verbal and aural: iconic, iconographic, perceptible, tonal, communicative, and others. Umberto Eco, *Nieobecna struktura*, trans. Paweł Bravo and Adam Weinsberg (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2003), 170.

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandra Łukasiewicz Alcaraz, „Obraz – akt wizualny”, in *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*, ed. Lilianna Bieszczad (Kraków: Libron, 2013), 321–332.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Duncombe and Steve Lambert, *The Art of Activism. Your all-purpose guide to making the impossible possible* (New York: O/R, OR Books, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Eliza Steinbock, Bram Leven, and Marijke de Valck, eds., *Art And Activism in the Age of Systemic Crisis. Aesthetic Resilience* (Uitgever: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2010).

main curator. The immense artificial sun is not in this case the subject of artistic transformation, but a means to transform human relations – explicit in visitors’ behaviors within the gallery, as they collectively admired the sun and the atmosphere of the sunset. Relational aesthetics is the response to postmodernism, and its disappointment with the modernist promise of utopia. It offers the possibility of engagement without any totalitarian vision, in a series of discrete artistic activities which have transformative power in localized settings, with global echoes though internet connections.<sup>16</sup>

Defining art from such perspective, it is convenient to adopt the pragmatist perspective as put forward by John Dewey in the 1930s<sup>17</sup> and developed by Richard Shusterman<sup>18</sup> in the 90s, explaining that aesthetic experience influences a person’s overall life. John Dewey and his principles of progressive education, through practice and understanding of art as experience, was also a reference point for the Black Mountain College. From this point of view, art is a specific kind of creative experience with performative character. This is the perspective that I adopt, while observing commodification and economic processes which are taking place in the field of visual arts, counteracted by community art experiences —like those stimulated nowadays in Poland by International Laboratory of Culture in Sokolowsko, or by Warsaw Bauhaus around Walter Gropius Granary in Drawsko Pomorskie.

#### PERSPECTIVE OF THE CREATOR

For me as a creator of art, art creation is a kind of approach to the world and others, expressed not in a functional form. It is deeply rooted in ritualist, though secular, perspective and has transformative symbolic power. It is a kind of “magic” that either gives spiritual support and protection, or changes relations between the words and the worlds, by means of constructing narratives from images, objects, and words. This kind of approach cannot be active and effective to indefinite climax because the world forces more utilitarian forms of being in everyday life. Triggered by some deep perceptual and spiritual experience, it unfolds —adding something to reality, leading to production of some artifacts which are not the essence of the art, but rather its trace, evidence, and residue.

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<sup>16</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *The radican* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> John Dewey, *Art as experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist aesthetics: living beauty, rethinking art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)

These objects have enchanted ideas which, due to procurement of the artifact, can be symbolically active in the world for the sake of others' good. For this reason, I hardly ever organize exhibitions; most have been in my hometown, where I do not have to strive for achievement of artistic laurels, as I can create gestures within the intimacy of physical, cultural, and spiritual spaces I inhabit. The objects I realize are created as gifts to my close family, relatives, friends, and colleagues, those to whom I want to gift something of immaterial value: such objects are just transmitters for beauty, memory, protection, and deeper understanding of relationships that underpin the external current of events.

A specific variant of this approach happens inside creative communities of friends, when I can realize performances involving others, responding to the specific moment in time (social, political, or astral) and entering a direct relation with them via symbolic transformations. In both cases, my art creation is very ritualistic and anthropological, not aiming to reach the art market, and also for this reason it is quite often excluded from the Artworld. This is of little concern for me (though the lack of recognition as an artist hurts) despite the fact that analyzing art as a specific aesthetic, transformative experience rooted in human cultural evolution establishes the basis to argue for the artistic character of my activities. Nevertheless, I feel at peace with myself, noting the convergence of my theoretical perspective on art and my practical activity in the field, hopefully a sum total of benefit to others.

#### INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS — REGARDING THE LIMITS OF THE WESTERN ARTWORLD

The separation of art from other spheres of human activity, enclosing it within the boundaries of the Artworld, started long before the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was sanctioned by Immanuel Kant's division of human reason into the spheres of cognition, morality, and aesthetics. This led to, in the long run, the isolation of art and aesthetics (which should not have practical effect<sup>19</sup>) and the creation of the ideal of Pure Art in modernism<sup>20</sup> (which should not have any practical implications polluting its purity). However, as Krystyna Wilkoszewska, the Polish philosopher who introduced transcultural perspective into Polish aesthetical reflection, pointed out: "No culture has separated art from all other areas of hu-

<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Krytyka władzy sądzienia*, trans. Jerzy Gałecki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2004), 82.

<sup>20</sup> Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *O czystej formie* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Zet 1932).

man activity as strongly as our culture has done.”<sup>21</sup> Still, Western understanding and art is not universal, it is only claiming to be universal. Of course, this belief can be invalidated theoretically, but the real-life experience of art created contemporaneously in non-European cultures is much more striking. It is through direct contact with other cultures that one experiences a significant deconstruction of the concepts and statements of European aesthetics—they lose their obviousness, which opens new, previously unforeseen possibilities.

During the realization of art-based research projects in cooperation with African countries, especially with Kenya for the past few years (since 2018), I have learned that there the idea that art can or should be just for art’s sake is completely foreign and incomprehensible. Artists are treated as spiritual guides, as moral authorities, making visible the unseen important aspects of social, political, economic, and individual life, giving by means of their art sense and beauty to the world.<sup>22</sup> Beauty is not so depreciated in East Africa as it has been in the field of contemporary Western art, echoing Joseph Kosuth’s critique of aesthetics in art as superficial ornamentation focusing on conceptual content;<sup>23</sup> it still has transcendental value, connecting to other levels of reality that can be perceived as referring also to truth and to goodness, though not in a Platonic ideal way.

Currently, the rising popularity of African contemporary art in the global art market causes many Kenyan artists to follow and reinterpret Western influences (like Salvador Dali, whose influences are directly present in Castro’s paintings, Marc Chagall present in Jak Katarikawe’s, Francis Bacon in Beatrice Wanjiku Njoroge’s, or Jean Michel Basquiat in Jesse Nganga’s works<sup>24</sup>). These artists do not lose focus on deeper issues, especially concerning African identity and post-

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<sup>21</sup> Krystyna Wilkoszewska, “Ku estetyce transkulturowej,” in *Estetyka transkulturowa*, ed. Krystyna Wilkoszewska (Kraków: Universitas 2004), 12 – trans. into Eng. by A.L., Polish orig.: „Żadna kultura nie oddzieliła tak silnie sztuki od wszelkich innych dziedzin ludzkiej działalności, jak uczyniła to nasza kultura” .

<sup>22</sup> Susan Wakhungu-Githuku, ed., *Visual Voices. The Work of Over 50 Contemporary Artists in Kenya* (Nairobi: Footprints Press 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Kosuth, *Art after philosophy and after: collected writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Interesting interpretations of such influences were precisely traced by two of my students in their Bachelor's Degree Diplomas in Painting, within the project “Transcultural Perspectives in Art and Art Education” TPAAE (2020-2024) MSCA-RISE H2020 (Grant Agreement: 872718): 1) Izabela Jamrozińska “Wpływ Jeana Michela Basquiata na współczesne malarstwo kenijskie na podstawie prac Jessego Nganga” [The influence of Jean Michel Basquiat on contemporary Kenyan painting based on the works of Jesse Nganga], Academy of Art in Szczecin, 2021; 2) Maria Sowińska “Analiza twórczości Beatrice Wanjiku w kontekście malarstwa Francisca Bacona na tle sztuki Kenii” [Analysis of Beatrice Wanjiku’s work in the context of Francis Bacon’s painting against the backdrop of Kenyan art], Academy of Art in Szczecin, 2021.

colonial problems, but they tend to be eclectic. This situation is understandable in light of the fact that painterly tradition is not the African tradition: though images exist in African cultures, they are mostly on textiles and human bodies; it is important to gain self-confidence to create art without a feeling of inferiority in referring to one's own tradition. This is now followed, for example, in painterly work conducted at Academy of Art in Szczecin by Anne Mwiti, PhD, with the supervision of Łukasz Skapski, who draws from Maasai face paintings as the basis for artistic investigation of her mixed (Maasai/Meru) ethnical roots and identity. Mwiti refers to the theoretical approach of Homi Bhabha on liminality, which he calls the third culture in the context of postcolonialism, the fissure between colliding cultures, giving rise to something different and new, something unrecognizable, a new area of negotiating meanings and representation.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from this intellectually refined approach in Kenyan art, there is also a trend, represented best by Richard Onyango's oeuvre,<sup>26</sup> who paints mostly buses and other transport vehicles, as well as his deceased wife Drosie.<sup>27</sup> Onyango, who is self-taught, paints images from his memory and from love, the deepest reasons for drawing and painting, as depicted in the legend of the young Corinthian woman who sketched the shadow on the wall of her departing lover in order to remember him.<sup>28</sup> Combining precise drawing with strong emotions, Onyango achieves a combination of hyperrealist representation and romantic expressionism.

This shows me that any art creation surging from love or memory, the art that wants to contribute to others' individual and communal lives, is art that raises from the heart and is an offering aimed at some good, not just at pushing up prices at the art market and visibility in the Artworld (although not despising financial remuneration, especially if one does not earn one's living in other fields, as I do in this hypothetical).

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<sup>25</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Onyango, *The Life and Times of Richard Onyango* (Nairobi: Kwani Trust, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> See short documentary film produced within the TPAAE project, by Łukasz Jastrubczak, Małgorzata Mazur, Zofia Wollny and Richard Onyango, *Kangalika – a short stromy of Richard Onyango*, November 5, 2020. Zenodo. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4247247.

<sup>28</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Historia naturalis*, ed. Joyce Irene Whalley (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982); for the discussion see for ex.: Robert Rosenblum, "The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism," *The Art Bulletin* 39, no. 4 (1957): 279-290.



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