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The Work of Art in the Times of Late Modernity by Gianni Vattimo

Abstract

The paper describes the situation of art works in the times of late modernity by presenting Gianni Vattimo, one of the most important representatives of modern hermeneutics. Art's historical narrative has collapsed due to civilisational transformation – mainly thanks to the invention of technological means for the mass reproduction of images. Two of the primary traits of art works from a traditional perspective – originality and authenticity – have nowadays been undermined. Vattimo calls this phenomenon 'an explosion of aesthetics'.

Key words

Vattimo, modernity, explosion of aesthetics, reproduction, post-historical art

Contemporary philosophy has attempted to define the crisis of modernity in many ways. One of the most interesting approaches to this issue is the conception of Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo, who in his major work *The End of Modernity* diagnoses the twilight of a modern cultural narrative based on the paradigm of science. On the one hand modernism has proved merely to be echoes of the past; on the other, we are not used to hearing anything else.

In his description of late modern reality, Vattimo uses the Heideggerian term *Verwindung*, which can be understood as farewell, resignation or

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distortion¹. The modernist narrative identified the material world as a homogeneous substance, whose arché might be discovered, analysed and then 'translated' into the language of science. Each version of a scientific description could have been replaced with another one more actual and therefore more credible. As Vattimo notes: "modernity is in fact dominated by the idea that the history of thought is a progressive 'enlightenment', which develops through an ever more complete appropriation and reappropriation of its own 'foundations'. These are often also understood to be 'origins', so that the theoretical and practical revolutions of Western history are presented and legitimised for the most part as 'recoveries', rebirths or returns"². Always when we retreat from modernity as a narrative, we separate from it, and transform it at the same time. Thinking in terms of *Verwindung* simultaneously represents a certain tradition and engages a creative, ambiguous dialogue with the past; which might sometimes be ironic. By dint of deconstruction and hermeneutics we can discover new versions of well-known narrations about us and the world we live in. According to Vattimo's perspective, thinking and ontology became weakened in the post-metaphysical era of philosophy in late modernity. Reality lost its substantive nature, because we can reach only its interpretation, which initiates a return process: it impacts both the subject and the object.

A specific relevance can be noticed between the notion of art and the modernist worldview. At the moment the theocentric paradigm collapsed in European culture, man began to explore nature with a strong belief in the power of his own reason; something that had been limited by the authority of the Church for many centuries. The same applies to the creation of aesthetically valuable objects: they are no longer brought into existence for almighty God, but because of the author's will serving himself or to art for its own sake³. Both phenomena – the domination of art as an historic narrative and scientific worldview – function approximately from the advent of the Renaissance to the 20th century, as has been noted by, e.g., Hans Belting or Arthur C. Danto⁴. The end of their reign is a part of the collapse of grand narratives.

¹ See: G. Chiurazzi, "The Experiment of Nihilism. Interpretation and Experience of Truth in Gianni Vattimo", [in:] *Between Nihilism and Politics. The Hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo*, eds. S. Benso, B. Schroeder, New York 2010, pp. 21–24.

² G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. J. R. Snyder, Cambridge 1988, p. 2.

³ See: H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott, Chicago 1997.

⁴ See: A.C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton 2014.

The death of art is one of many different 'events' that occur to the post-metaphysical subject. Vattimo warns us against understanding the idea of the death of art as a strictly defined fact. It is impossible to establish exactly when art ended because this notion does not relate to the actual exhaustion of humankind's creative potential as one might expect. Andy Warhol's exhibition 'The Personality of the Artist', which took place in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York and which became the direct impulse for Danto to formulate his conception of the end of art, was only a symptom of the global phenomenon sensed and described by many thinkers at the same time. Vattimo notes that the death of art is "an event that constitutes the historical and ontological constellation in which we move. This constellation is a network of historical and cultural events and of the words which belong to them, at once describing and co-determining them"⁵.

As the category of art emerged at the decline of the Middle Ages from the sphere of sacrum, which penetrated every field of human activity, so it now becomes absorbed once again by a different, still impossible to define, 'absolute'. The post-historical⁶ work of art in contrast to its purely modernist predecessors surrenders its own autonomy. Instead of striving to fulfil aesthetic criteria, which would provide it with a place in a gallery, a museum or any other socially established institution, it exceeds or invalidates the traditional value system. Vattimo calls this phenomenon an 'explosion' of aesthetics⁷. From this moment art starts to transcend its own limits more than ever before; especially the borders of its own disciplines. Performance, land art, street theatre: these are just a few examples of the post-historical generation of hybrids that successfully replaced their pure genre predecessors. The source of their success is, e.g., the ability to adjust to new circumstances, but also the capacity to influence their own surroundings. An example of such creative coexistence might be the political murals painted by British street artist Banksy, which always stay in a reflexive relationship with the place where they appear. The picture of a hole in the wall separating the Gaza Strip from the rest of the world, through which one can see a paradisaical beach, is not only an ironic commentary on the Middle East conflict, but also an aesthetic manifestation of the hope for finding a solution to

⁵ G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁶ 'Post-historical': the way Danto used this term – 'after the collapse of historical narrative'.

⁷ G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op. cit., pp. 53–54.

this horrifying situation – perhaps not by political means, but because of art. In opposition to the romantic idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the post-historical synthesis of disciplines takes place in an uncontrolled, hard to predict, sometimes self-contradictory manner. Art is far from meeting the rigid criteria of aesthetics that are the result of current trends or a manifesto. Rather, it focuses on the materialisation of a certain sense using all the required means, techniques and strategies that can help achieve its aim.

One of the consequences of the explosion of aesthetics is the undermining of two fundamental values of art: authenticity and originality. The rapid development of technology has enabled the reproduction and distribution of works on a scale that Gutenberg would not have dared dream of. This, which used to be an effect of hard work and supernatural talent, has nowadays become a privilege for everyone. In the era of post-historical art, the artist's strict relationship to his work is not a necessary condition for creation. Due to technologies that enable unlimited reproduction, art is less and less identified with the medium or sensory impressions caused by it. The work of art leaves the world of matter and enters the sphere of meaning. In this way it loses its unique quality that separates it from the rest of the objects belonging to the order of everyday reality; as Walter Benjamin noted: "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalise by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence"⁸.

Benjamin, whose writings were often used by Vattimo as the basis for his own research, saw a great danger in the phenomenon of reproduction not only in the categories of aesthetics but also in ethics. A work detached from its author easily succumbs to manipulation; in the same way that it can happen with a quotation taken out of its original context, which might adopt a new, unexpected meaning, sometimes contrary to the intentions underlying the text. This is especially noticeable in the case of recording the performing arts. The author-performer is inseparable

⁸ W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", trans. H. Zohn, [in:] *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. C. Cazeaux, London and New York 2000, pp. 324–325.

ably bound to its work, because a person on stage uses mainly itself to embody the desired meaning. In view of the unity of time and place inherent to the theatrical situation, the spectator receives the message as it is constructed by the author-performer. What will happen further with it is a matter for the audience's interpretation. In the case of a movie or recorded performance there is space for the intervention of third parties. We know from Eisenstein's experiments that, because of film editing, one picture may have several different meanings depending on the adjacent pictures. As an artistic medium, theatre provides the performer with the possibility to lead the spectator's attention more independently, and has a greater impact on the processes of associations occurring in the spectator's consciousness. In this situation the actor has a more precise influence on the overall reception of the work being at the same time its subject and object. Cinematography limits or totally rejects this prerogative, reducing the performer to the function of an element in a message that someone else utters. In this case, responsibility for the work's ultimate formation belongs with the director, film editor, producer or whomever obtains access to the recording.

One of Benjamin's most prominent writings, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, was published in the 1930's, when the spirit of the times was saturated with the threat of burgeoning totalitarianism. The climate of that time can especially be sensed in Benjamin's musings about the propaganda usage of images. At some point, when the image can become the property of anyone able to operate the required technology, the meaning of the work might easily be transformed, e.g., as happened on the one hand with Andy Warhol's pop art or on the other with agitprop. In the case of fascist parties, the main object of manipulation was the architecture and sculpture of ancient Rome. Historical forms and symbols taken out of their original context and put in a new one serve the ideological purposes of a political group. "The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system"⁹. The aestheticisation of politics was a phenomenon relevant to the politicisation of art, which became a domain of communism in the Soviet Union. As

⁹ Ibidem, pp. 336–337.

long as art was attached to the concepts of authenticity and originality, it remained safe in its own world. Unearthed from the foundations of tradition it became easy prey for propagandist manipulators.

According to Vattimo the omnipresence of mass media led to the decentralisation and dispersion of control structures. Contrary to what was said by Adorno and Horkheimer, telematics disenabled the consolidation of authority. The emergence of new communication channels, primarily including the opening and constant expansion of cyberspace, contributed to an explosion and proliferation of points of view. As a consequence one consistent narrative becomes displaced by the contamination of interpretations. The same thing happened to the dominant form of subjectivity, which succumbed to diffusion in the discursive chaos. "If, in the world of dialects, I speak my own dialect, I shall be conscious that it is not the only 'language', but that it is precisely one among many"¹⁰.

However the adjustment to the circumstances of neoliberal capitalism caused some major damage to the ethical aspect of the aesthetic layer of modern society. The mass reproduction of images turns works of art into commodities that can be bought at shopping centres. Nowadays images are consumed as food products. According to the rules of capitalism free market expansion happens at the expense of quality. This refers to the observer's perspective as well. In the past, limited access to art forced the viewer to take a longer and more thorough examination of a work, something that resembled a meditation in allowing one to feel the aura of an object. Whereas now on a mass scale we see an opposite approach to the visual aspects of our culture: contact is brief, and instantaneous. The question of what may be hidden under the surface of an image becomes neglected in the frame of everyday perception. After the collapse of grand narratives art lost its religious-contemplative attribute, something Benjamin anticipated. Conversely, however, bidding farewell to the cult of aura provided potential receivers with unlimited access to high culture, which for centuries was unavailable to the majority of the population due to economic and social reasons.

An example of the creative usage of mass reproduction technology might be the case of '*Sztuczne fiołki*' (Eng. 'Artificial Violets'), which is a series of comic rebuses published on the Internet¹¹. The basis for each image is a recognisable work of art (mainly European figurative paint-

¹⁰ G. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. D. Webb, Baltimore 1992, p. 9.

¹¹ See: <https://pl-pl.facebook.com/SztuczneFiolki> [accessed: 4.07.2016].

ing), which is complemented by an ironic comment referring to the current political situation. One of the rebuses was made on the basis of Edgar Degas' *The Bellelli Family*. In it we see a middle-class family in a Biedermeier living room, where the youngest daughter asks her father why Jesus was crucified. He answers: "for offending religious feelings". Another example could be the image of Byzantine Christ, deploring Polish neo-fascist organisations. The relation between such a picture and the original painting is equally interesting and ambiguous. One may see in this strategy an instrumentalisation of art that can be compared to those mentioned above. However, the author of *'Sztuczne fiołki'* openly admits that he uses classical paintings to express his own, as he calls it, leftist point of view, which seems to be quite popular among other Internet users¹². Nevertheless there is no political agenda or any other social project that would be forced through the works of art used by the author of *'Sztuczne fiołki'*. Rather, it becomes an aesthetic platform for people who share the same type of visual sensitivity, sense of humour and have the particular intellectual predispositions necessary to decode a single rebus. Another aspect of this project worth noting is its educational impact. Classical works of art receive a second life, in front of a hundred thousand viewers. Although it might be uneven compensation for the loss of Benjamin's aura, it is good to ask about the influence of any other more conventional strategy for promoting high culture by state institutions.

Deliberate transgression of the rules of authenticity and originality became one of the creative strategies in the post-historical epoch. This may give unexpected and fascinating results at times, as can be seen from the story of Han van Meegeren, one of the most prominent forgers in history¹³. The Dutch artist demonstrated an enormous predisposition towards painting from childhood. However, his career was halted by the unflattering comments of critics, who mainly accused him of lack of originality. As revenge van Meegeren decided to test their competence and began to falsify Dutch masters' paintings. It is worth noting that he not only counterfeited existing works, but also prepared new ones, which were intended to be discovered under mysterious circumstances after

¹² See: *Mam w sobie duże pokłady wściekłości*, an interview with the author of "Sztuczne fiołki", [online] http://wyborcza.pl/1,75248,15498803,Sztuczne_Fiolki__Mam_w_sobie_duze_poklady_wscieklosci.html [accessed: 4.07.2016].

¹³ See: F. Arnau, *The Art of the Faker: Three Thousand Years of Deception in Art and Antiques*, trans. J. M. Brownjohn, London 1951.

centuries of latency. One of van Meegeren's greatest successes was the painting *Supper at Emmaus*, which was accredited to Vermeer. Critics proved the authenticity of this canvas unanimously. After various transactions the painting was finally shown at the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, where it became the main attraction at an exhibition organised for Queen Wilhelmina in 1938. The newly-discovered painting drew everyone's attention. The forgery was revealed only in 1945 when the allied forces found some canvases hidden by the Wehrmacht in a mine situated 50 km from Salzburg. There were works by Botticelli, van Dyke, Velázquez and Vermeer's *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. The investigation led to van Meegeren, who chose to admit to the fraud instead of being sentenced for collaboration with the Third Reich. The lawsuit took place in 1947, and as a consequence he was sentenced to a year in prison.

Since that moment, interest in original van Meegeren works has increased highly, along with their price. The paradoxical success of the all-time forger lies in the fact that *Supper at Emmaus* still hangs in the Boijmans Museum. With, however, a small difference: the painting was relocated to the contemporary art section. The irony of this story manifests, i.e., in the fact that that lack of originality, of which van Meegeren was accused at the beginning of his career, became the reason for his fame and – warranted or not – a place in the history of European art.

Supper at Emmaus shows that perhaps the work of art understood as an object gifted with a unique aura might not be the most important element of an aesthetic situation. According to Vattimo, the work of art is not a material structure that can be localised in time and space. As is explained in Heideggerian ontology – the work of art is not an object; it is an occurrence that is closer to Gadamer's play than Cartesian substance. It is a process that remains under the influence of everyone who is concerned with it, and its aim is to create circumstances of non-discursive experiencing of truth about the world in which it emerges. Every test for implementing this experience in language might function only as its interpretation. Understanding the sense of *Supper at Emmaus* by van Meegeren as a work of art demands knowledge of the context of its origination. It seems that in the world of art it is not so important how it is done, but what it can say about the world it comes from.

The reception of post-historical art exceeds the conception of a work of art as an artist's statement or an experience of a particular aesthetic value. Of course both aspects should be considered as important elements of an artwork, but they are not always located in its centre. The

work of art becomes a lens through which we can observe ourselves, and the world that we are immersed in. The omnipresence of images provokes radicalisation of the strategies for reaching out to the observer, what Benjamin defined as *Schock*, which is understood as dislocation from the fixed patterns of everyday reality. In his opinion this function was fully accomplished by the Dadaists, but cinema also, by dint of advanced image processing, is able to achieve this effect. Vattimo sees a convergence of this category with the Heideggerian term *Stoß*, which is understood as the impetus triggered by a work, bringing someone into a state of fear and awareness of the finiteness of his being¹⁴. Juxtaposition of these two distinctions reveals a need for and the possibility of existential experiencing of art in a time of advanced technicisation. Its reception must therefore exceed the formula for a one-sided reading out of the author's intentions or for contemplating particular aesthetic values. In a society of constant communication a much higher priority seems to be the temporary space of tension between the observer and the author of a work. By dint of this circumstance the subject is provoked into a permanent oscillation between the version of oneself thus far reached and the proposition realised due to encounter with the Other.

A work of art is a composition of reality such that it allows us to transgress the spectrum of everyday experience. Aesthetic qualities in their so-called natural state are somehow distracted. By virtue of artistic composition they become condensed and sharpened, allowing the observer to discover new aspects of reality that are usually overlooked. As Vattimo notes: "to rediscover the truth of art cannot even remotely mean to 'prosify' poetry, to derive statements from pictorial works, and so on. Less banal are those positions that insist on the truth of the work as, in Heidegger's words, an 'opening of a world'"¹⁵. Vattimo understands the "notion of the work of art as the 'setting-into-work of truth'"¹⁶. One of its most fundamental aspects is that one cannot *a priori* define the rules of its preparation. Each time it needs to be rediscovered and then, based on specific examples, we can reconstruct the artist's principles and priorities. In the triad artist-work-art the last element is the final effect of a process that happens each time from the beginning. "Where and how does art occur? Art – this is nothing more than a word to which

¹⁴ See: G. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, op. cit., pp. 45–61

¹⁵ G. Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation. The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. D. Webb, Cambridge 1997, p. 67.

¹⁶ G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op.cit., p. 61.

nothing real any longer corresponds. It may pass for a collective idea under which we find a place for that which alone is real in art: works and artists¹⁷. Every epoch needs to elaborate its own apparatus, which will be used to describe the works produced at that time.

According to what has been written above we can see two major aspects to the death of art: a) works of art have become less autonomous and substantial than they were until the arrival of modernism; b) the mass media play an increasing role in shaping the world of art. The consequence of these phenomena is the aestheticisation of reality as described, e.g., by Wolfgang Iser¹⁸. The image of our world is extensively mediated and filtered by the Internet and other channels through which we receive information. This unexpected global circumstance has shaped a new way of perceiving, which Vattimo calls 'distracted perception', after Benjamin¹⁹.

The traditional model of perception demands a real information correlate, a fact that could be taken as unquestionable. Unfortunately, verification of what comes to us by the media would have to become an aim for its own sake, something like a life calling, which involves all existence. Much more comfortable, and de facto in these circumstances the only possible solution, is acknowledging the conglomeration of virtual information as the only image of reality that is given to us. Perhaps this is the moment when Nietzsche's 'prophecy' about the true world becoming a fable has just materialised²⁰.

One of the most important distinctive qualities of the post-historical epoch is the lack of possibility for a revolutionary breakthrough. Of course, this does not mean that in the world of mass production of images changes do not occur; quite the contrary. They do, more than ever before, but have lost their fundamental meaning. As Vattimo notes: "Human capability to order nature through technology has increased and will continue to increase to such a point that, even while ever-newer achievements have become possible, the increased capability to order and arrange simultaneously makes them ever less 'new'. In a consumer society continual renewal (of clothes, tools, buildings) is already re-

¹⁷ M. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", trans. A. Hofstadter, [in:] *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. C. Cazeaux, London and New York 2000, p. 80.

¹⁸ See: W. Iser, *Undoing aesthetics*, trans. A. Inkpin, London 1997.

¹⁹ G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op. cit., p. 61.

²⁰ See: F. Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer", [in:] *Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann, London 1977, p. 485.

quired physiologically for the system simply to survive. What is new is not in the least 'revolutionary' nor subversive; it is what allows things to stay the same"²¹.

According to the strategy presented by Vattimo – mainly in *The Transparent Society* – the activities of the subject in the late modernity should be more focused on those things that are local and temporary, leaving solid metaphysical foundations behind as an historical concept. Against enlightenment aspirations about discovering universal truths we should listen intently to what is accessible here and now. A path that might be especially interesting and important for further research in the field of aesthetics seems to be the role ascribed by Vattimo to art. In the process of discovering oneself and creating the space of common encounter with the Others, artistic creation manifests more resistance to the structures of authority, which are easily reproduced by every political project. Moreover, art emphasises those aspects of subjectivity that have been marginalised by rational paradigm. Imagination, taste and affects can turn out to be much more useful in the struggle with the mechanisms of oppression rather than intellectual constructions. The end of grand narratives, especially metaphysical thought, provokes a search for new solutions that are more practical, verifiable over a shorter period and accessible to individuals with highly differentiated identities. By acknowledging the limitations and complexity of this situation we may begin the unpredictable journey of discovering new forms of being among the Others, in which art may have an especially important role.

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