

National University of Arts Bucharest

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

THE ARTISTIC MEDIUM AND THE DEATH OF PAINTING – AN ENQUIRY

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Image, artistic medium, specificity, *looking back*, painting, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laocoön, Enlightenment, T. S. Eliot, tradition, Clement Greenberg, Modernity, Formalism, planity, three-dimensionality, Daguerreotype, photography, history, photogram, photomontage, collage, automatism, digital software, image editing, Adobe Photoshop, digital, Minimalism, Postmodernism, dialogue, David Salle, death of painting, technique, art.

SUMMARY

The aspect that distinguishes this particular analysis of the concepts of artistic medium and the end of painting, from other similar endeavors, is its linking to my own artistic process and the fact that this study is conducted by a visual artist. This characteristic conferred particular traits to this research of the concept of artistic medium, a very complex subject addressed most of the times in studies and various fields dealing with the emergence of the new media.

Inspired by Rosalind E. Krauss's essay "Reinventing the Medium", written in 1999, I pondered that the two major subjects addressed in this study, can be approached through a specific analysis method – *by looking back*. Krauss develops this research method - *looking back* -- in order to have a fresh perspective on the path that led to the convergence of art and photography in the 60's, but looking at it "from this moment at the end of the twentieth century when such a 'triumph' must be bracketed by the circumstance that now photography can only be viewed through the undeniable fact of its own obsolescence."¹

Looking back at the works I made between 2011 and 2013, I'm able to identify a turning point in my artistic path, a *0 moment* that made possible a reconfiguration of my own artistic values and myths. This research proves it. *Looking back*, I'm able to sense a gradual awareness of the importance of the medium, resulting in a decreased interest for the subject

¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium", *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter, 1999): 289-305, p. 289

or for the narration, aspects easy to identify in the works made before the completion of this study.

The aim of this research is to underline a few key moments, relevant in the thesis's general architecture and nonetheless in my studio practice, from the complex history of the concept of artistic medium.

Chapter 1. lists some of the earliest utterances of the concept of artistic medium, together with the opus belonging to the first theoretician that questioned this complex theory. His name is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the literary work I'm referring to, was written in 1766 and is entitled *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*.

By examining the differences between modern art literature, more precisely, written in the eighteenth century and that of earlier times, we can conclude, "that only the eighteenth century produced a type of literature in which the various arts were compared with each other and discussed on the basis of common principles, whereas up to that period treatises on poetics and rhetoric, on painting and architecture, and on music had represented quite distinct branches of writing and were primarily concerned with technical precepts rather than with general ideas."²

Along with the eighteenth century, important modern esthetic concepts such as taste and sentiment, genius, originality and creative imagination "assume their definite modern meaning."³ Therefore, the idea that an inherent, distinct and clearly bounded area belongs to each individual art originated in this particular century.

In this particular context, *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, was an attempt "to redefine poetry and painting and to assign to each its proper boundaries."⁴ It was also a counter argument made against the "shallowest judgements" and, "fault-finding

² Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (I)* in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 12, nr. 4 (Oct., 1951), p. 497

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ Rensselaer W. Lee, "Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting", *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Dec., 1940), pp. 197-269, p. 202

criticism”⁵ that were present in the field of art critical analysis, typical of the eighteenth century.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T.S. Eliot wrote “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”⁶

To him, the term medium acquires two distinct connotations, designating the artist on the one hand, with ”his vocation to move unhindered between two worlds become in this description much like each other: the present, and the ’present moment of the past’”⁷, the one who communes with the dead, “who for him are not dead, but ‘already living’”⁸; the poet is a medium, “a psychic, necromancer or shaman”⁹ who ”mediates across the frontier between the physical and the metaphysical”¹⁰

On the other hand, as Geoffrey G. O’Brien indicates, Eliot employs the term medium to denote the past – the backdrop in which both the poet as well as his wording are located.

The term artistic medium generates a puzzling diversity of enunciations, suggesting the fact that, in most cases, reference is made only to its distinct materiality. In that perspective, we agree with the fact that the matter out of which Michelangelo sculpted the art work entitled *David*, is marble, even though Shelley’s Esaak choice of words seems simplistic and, I might add, a bit proposterous. We just cannot put the equality mark between the concept of artistic medium and the raw material out of which a work of art is created.

The medium specificity thesis, which stated that an ”artwork, in order to be successful, needs to adhere to the specific stylistic properties of its own medium”¹¹ was exacerbated during Modernism and associated with Clement Greenberg’s name, has its origins in Lessing’s

⁵ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, p. x
<https://archive.org/stream/laocooneessayupon00lessrich#page/n15>

⁶ T. S. Eliot, ”Tradition and the Individual Talent”, *Perspecta*, Vol. 19. (1982), pp. 36-42. p. 37

⁷ Stan Smith, „Proper frontiers: transgression and the individual talent” în „Giovanni Cianci, Jason Harding, ”T.S. Eliot and the idea of tradition”, Cambridge, p. 26

⁸ *Ibidem*

⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

¹¹ Emma Bee Bernstein, ”Medium Specificity”, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/specifity.htm>

Laocoön. This particular thesis was born, “almost at the same time that the distinctions between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic and between the fine arts and the practical arts crystallized.”¹²

While the major subjects of Lessing’s *Laocoön* are painting and poetry, around which the author organises his argument on the distinction between media, Greenberg, borrows Lessing’s thesis, and focuses exclusively on the plastic arts.

Along with Greenberg’s writings, painting, especially abstract painting, “achieves the perfect expression of medium-specificity and purity - purity being the ideal state of medium - specificity, the work as uncontaminated by the influence of other media.”¹³

Arguments can be brought against the medium specificity thesis, especially after observing the fact that the term medium “seems too contaminated, too ideologically, to dogmatically, too discursively loaded.”¹⁴

At least from a lexical standpoint, the term artistic medium could be replaced by the word *automatism*.

Chapter 2. In the context of this paper, the analysis of the concept of artistic medium, together with the questioning of the recurring phenomenon of the death of painting, would be impossible without raising the question of photography and the reshaping of the arts that it caused.

Those assessed in this chapter, shall make reference to a few key moments from the history of photography - of whom, in 1917 Paul Strand said that “is the first and only important contribution thus far, of science to the arts”¹⁵ – in order to be able to assess the impact it generated onto twentieth century as well as contemporary art.

This research addresses the significant changes that have occurred with the advent and proliferation of photography, with the revolution within the arts and esthetics it generated

¹² Noël Carroll, “The Specificity of Media in the Arts.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1985, pp. 5–20. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3332295. p. 5

¹³ Emma Bee Bernstein, *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ Benjamin Buchloh, Preface to Rosalind Krauss, “A Voyage on The North Sea. Art in The Age of The Post-Medium Condition”. Thames & Hudson, p. 5

¹⁵ Paul Strand, “Photography” in Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work. The Complete Illustrations 1903 – 1917*, Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH, Köln, 1997, p. 780.

because “photography destroyed the bond that had tied art to cult and ritual, which, in their turn, had produced an aura providing the very life conditions of traditional art and justifying its concomitant aesthetic.”¹⁶

The birth of this new medium threatened the universal consensus on the question of art and non-art, countless debates on photography, from the first half of the nineteenth century, addressed the issue of art within the new medium.

Investigating the photographic phenomenon, I’ve questioned some of the most important moments from its short history.

In this connection, the issues approached within this chapter are pictorial photography, Chronophotography, the Photogram and Photomontage which constitute a sort of *Digital Method*’s prehistory, especially to the raster graphics editor Adobe Photoshop.

From studies carried out by researchers concerned about the distinction between the analogue and the digital, it emerges that an artifact made without computational processing, can have digital features. The digital – an analytical and perceptual category – has the potential to be, especially when it’s applied to artistic phenomena, detached from the particular traits of contemporary hardware and software. In the information age, painting has to relate to computational technology – which has come to influence all forms of cultural production – by adopting it or, in spite of this evidence, rejecting it.

Titled *A postmodernist dialogue with David Salle*, Chapter 3 calls into question the way in which Postmodernity perceived photography and its integration in the artistic approach specific to postmodernist painters like Salle. The importance of the photographic image in his artistic endeavor could be observed as well as the omnipresence of this type of image within the architecture of his opus.

I invoke this dialogue with Salle’s work in order to emphasise the presence of photographic images and processes in both our oeuvres and the fact that this observation further justifies this particular conversation.

¹⁶ Heinz W. Puppe, “Walter Benjamin on Photography”, *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1979, pp. 273–291. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23982301. p. 274

In the same order of things, this dialogue is justified by the recurrence of techniques such as collage and pastiche, as shown in the subchapter **3.3** titled *The dialogue as method of artistic production – a case study*. Without any claim of a total and impenetrable communication with the oeuvre belonging to just one artist, from the subchapter listed above, stems out the fact that this whole process becomes a sequence of citations that, passing through Salle's work, reaches a variety of artistic movements and the art of many artists.

In order to visually prove these claims, I described the path that the image of a dove, from Magritte's work travelled, stopping first in Salle's oeuvre and then in my own artistic production, the painting *Let's sit down and have a good cry*, made in 2018, being a good example.

Chapter 4. The reason why *Possible man* – the title and subject of the first version of this research, submitted in 2011 - failed to materialise, was the fact that I became aware of the lack of a personalized critique on the vulnerabilities of painting.

The paradox established by constantly announcing the death of painting and by the certainty that painting still has a place among the arts – that it cannot disappear as long as artists still make paintings – prompted me to assign the last part of this research, to the phenomenon of the death of painting. Nourished by such ideas, even a rather grim occurrence, like the death of painting, suddenly becomes malleable, fertile.

The perspective out of which I'm analyzing this particular phenomenon, implies a historical account of some of the most important moments that marked the troubled twentieth century.

Looking back, I was able to point out the fact that the end of painting can be felt deep down, among the intimate structures of each artist, that moments of conversion and evolution exist and that some of these artistic experiences can be felt like a shock. The last part of this research, makes these observations apparent, along with the evidence that I overcome such an experience. All this is a justification of my present oeuvre.