



Piet Mondrian, composition II in red, blue and yellow, 1930. Kunsthouse Zurich.

PLEA AGAINST THE DEHUMANIZATION OF ART.

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Painting and sculpture, along with music in another realm, constitute the very origin of human artistic expression; Art understood as the human ability to transform matter based on a preconceived idea of nature, for the sheer pleasure of contemplating the result, and with the purpose of eliciting emotions in the viewer. An Art intrinsic to the birth and evolution of civilized society insofar as it resides in that emotional part of Man, which, along with the rational, sets him apart from the purely animal world.

Over 15.000 years ago, a human imbued with colossal artistic genius painted what we can consider the first Masterpiece of humanity, the cave paintings of Altamira, its mythical bison's. This individual marks a before and after, becoming the best exponent that Man had already reached that turning point that defines him as a civilized being, as he becomes aware of his talent to create and appreciate works from an aesthetic point of view, in line with an emerging sensitivity that allows him to discover the external world from a creative perspective and not merely utilitarian. Then arises a new Man who not only survives in a hostile world, torn between his instincts and his rational side, but also feels the need to listen to the emotions that arise from a feeling akin to Love when observing the natural world.

For all of us who are Art lovers and consider it one of the most distinctive creations of Man, it is infuriating to witness the negationist drift that plastic art is experiencing today. All of us should question whether we are attending to the decline of one of the most primal forms of human expression, which, along with music, awakened in him an artistic sentiment.

How much Art is there in many of the visual representations presented to us today as such?

A work whose execution is purely technological can never be considered Art, no matter how much it may be an expression of our time and conceived by the human mind. An artist be valued needs to demonstrate that innate

talent to translate the idea into a format, identifying him as a Master when he achieves a level of virtuosity unique in his execution. It is not just a matter of the technique chosen to create, although, in my view, some techniques may better reveal artistic genius than others, but rather the mastery of the medium. The pencil, the brush, the chisel, the burin, oil paint were originally new technologies, just as the tablet, photography, or cinema are. The crucial factor is that the person demonstrates skill in handling that technique to express his individuality, and not that technology replaces him, becoming a mere graphic designer, to the detriment of the centuries-old craftsmanship expected of an artist. In this sense, Hockney's drawings and paintings made on his tablet are undoubtedly Art because they flow with the creative inspiration of genius and craftsmanship through his hand; on the contrary, many abstract, minimalist, or conceptual paintings, due to their reductionist spirit, the extreme simplicity of the result they offer, and the ease with which they can be plagiarized, do not possess all the conditions to be considered a work of Art. The relevance that this type of hollow artistic expression still has today, the mass production it undergoes, and the continuous standardization of its forms, have annulled the autograph character as the core element of a pictorial or sculptural work. This has led to a progressive dehumanization and the decline of figurative art; the genre in which artistic genius evolves best, the one distinguished by a result of a unique nature, difficult to imitate and impossible to copy, without losing that indescribable halo that characterizes Masterpieces and impacts the sensitive viewer.

After the upheaval of the First World War, the provocative zeal of the most revolutionary avant-gardes, fueled by profound nihilism, caused a transcendental attack against the very essence of Painting and Sculpture as figurative arts. The outcome of this attack is now experienced to an extreme degree with the emergence of digital art and "performance art", to the point of threatening their very survival as predominant forms of artistic expression. That was the moment when the fatal disconnection between the concept and the artistic form, between the mind and the hand of the artist, was consolidated, leading to the loss of its own identity. This type of art, historically only accessible to those geniuses imbued with the magical power to create beauty with their own hands, shapes a virtual world inspired by everyday reality, no matter how prosaic, cruel, or ineffable it may be—a world capable of eliciting emotions in the viewer.

Since then, we have been experiencing a true paradigm shift due to the sidelining of plastic art by other forms of expression, sometimes of very dubious artistic nature, where the concept takes precedence over execution, bypassing the very essence that defines a painter or sculptor: their manual skill to translate their thoughts onto the material. This loss of relevance in the autograph character of a work, coupled with the predominant role of technology that has given rise to an increasingly global and standardized culture, has granted hegemony to the visual arts—a concept coined in the 20th century that devalues the manual creative process that has always prevailed in Art, focusing solely on its purely visual end result. It equates arts with very different degrees of human participation and favors those with a more technological format, to the detriment of those that originate entirely from human action.

Plastic art represents the most intrinsically human form of artistic expression and, along with music, the oldest, whose evolution and progress go hand in hand with humanity's awareness of the surrounding world. It contributes to transforming people into beings who form opinions about what they see and feel, with a vocation for transcendence through their works. From the Altamira to Picasso, Art has evolved as a result of the interaction between the human mind and its manual ability to create beauty, interpreting nature in a personal way to leave a lasting testament to its existence. Beauty cannot be understood in Art except within the prevailing aesthetic canon of each era, intimately linked to its decorative aspect, and can only be considered as such when it possesses a degree of expressiveness that overwhelms the viewer's spirit, due to the masterful technical quality manifested by the creator of the work. All these values substantiate the civilized nature that defines the origin of Art: the need for transcendence, through the awareness of transience that pursues humanity and is overcome through artistic creation. The great Masterpieces, true landmarks in the history of Painting and Sculpture, are the result of this unique symbiotic exercise that resides in those geniuses endowed with the exceptional gift to represent their impressions of the natural world in an ineffable way. Only when these artistic creations reveal the imprint, the stroke, and the spirit that define their artistic personality, do they attain the status of uniqueness.

Although the Renaissance elevated the individual, especially the artist, above the craftsman, granting a preeminence to the mind over manual

activity, the most cherished works had to correspond to the hand of the master or at least a level of quality in their execution taught in their workshops and academies. A faithful reflection of this is the numerous sketches we still have regarding the process of configuring Masterpieces, where, if possible, the stroke of genius is even more perceptible as a material expression of its spirit. All periods in the history of Art signify the triumph of new artistic ideas. The Baroque brought the surprising, the monumental, theatricality, contrast, grandiose forms; the eighteenth century focused on artifice, delicacy, and tonal softness; Romanticism centered on human sentiment, the poetry of the unfinished, the vigorous and resolute stroke as an expression of the mind of the creative genius; Impressionism represented progress towards the manifestation of the visual, light transforming the reality of things, creating a different stage based on what the human eye perceives. We arrive at Picasso, the genius who threw the stone, shattering the traditional conception of artistic language. Each of these periods produced iconic works representing progress in Art, all of them autographic expressions of the genius that conceived them, something inherent in the concept of a Masterpiece.

Until the early 20th century, new production processes had not affected the magical nature of figurative arts, as the work directly executed by those artists imbued with artistic genius continued to be considered exceptional—a rare and highly valued gift. The Industrial Revolution did not signify the end of decorative arts; quite the opposite, it exalted by contrast the handmade work reserved for the enjoyment of an elite that could appreciate and acquire it. Just as "prêt-à-porter" fashion, mass-produced in the 20th century, can never artistically match or be held in the same regard as "haute couture", where the masterful touch of the designer is fully expressed—an art that is currently on the verge of extinction, transformed into a fashion advertising performance. The concept of an autograph work, understood as one entirely executed by the artist, has always been synonymous with excellence and quality. Its evolution runs parallel to the progress of art, breaking molds and creating new canons, but always the result of the integration between the innovative mind and the talented hand of the artist. When we contemplate one of the bison from Altamira, the Descent from the Cross by Roger Van der Weyden, the Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch, Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, or any of Rembrandt's self-portraits, we are

captivated by the inherent and unrepeatable qualities of these works. Due to the superior ability to visually represent the spirit surrounding matter, we elevate their creators to the status of great masters.

The emergence of avant-gardes in the early 20th century, as a result of the consolidation of photography and the actions of two geniuses who have undermined the foundations of traditional art the most—Picasso, by creating Cubism as an entirely new artistic language, and Kandinsky, by laying the groundwork for the division of Art into abstract and figurative—led plastic art into a creative void and the depreciation of artistic genius, as conceived since the Renaissance. The visual arts evolved toward a simplification of forms where the artist's hand was no longer a priority, in favor of an increasingly conceptual and cosmic art, and therefore detached from the world of nature. An attempt doomed to failure in its endeavor to represent the unknown through the unintelligible, peering into the abyss of the absurd, where there is no sense of progress within the medium itself, and where the human creative process loses importance.

The visual representation of mental or phenomenological concepts without connection to external reality does not offer enough variety and becomes repetitive to exhaustion. Its deliberate renunciation of the figurative element prevents any assessment of the artistic quality, both spiritual and material, of the work since there is no objective reference to test the author's representative ability—no anchor to the reality of things that reveals intentionality, leaving the meaning of the creation to the free will of a viewer exposed to all kinds of intellectual manipulations in the realms of art criticism and the art market.

Abstract art, in its quest to somehow express the origin of the universe, epitomizes this creative collapse. Piet Mondrian's grid series, the compositions of Marc Rothko, or those of Paul Klee, perfect in their simplicity, brilliant in their revolutionary conception, genuine challenging proposals immersed in the obsession of denying the figurative form, while they surprise and greatly captivate with their beauty upon initial contemplation, paradoxically, they form the model against which one must react, as they closed the circle of artistic progress. On the other hand, Marcel Duchamp's conceptualism reinforces this artistic senselessness to the extent that his "ready-mades" could only be considered a simple "gag", a mere ironic wake-up call through which the artist mocks the absurdity to

which art has come, if Duchamp's Art did not had the undeniable and corrosive influence on contemporary art, opening the Pandora's box to the most unsuspected installations whose intention is to shock the viewer with a manifestation of the denial of art itself as a creation of civilized man.

Only by returning to the foundations of Art, can we continue its evolution and break free from the dead end that the avant-gardes have led us into. In this sense, the plastic art of the 20th century also signifies a constant challenge to provide a complete response to the creative void brought about by the uncontrolled eruption of abstract art.

Picasso, the artist who sowed discord by reducing artistic representation to cubes, squares, or circles and by setting multiple perspectives, aware of the danger of pushing his ideas to the limit, manages to rid himself of the creature he had engendered. He abandons the unintelligible coldness of analytical cubism (up to 1912) to return, through the much more understandable synthetic cubism (up to 1915), that is to an artistic exercise based on the observation of the natural world. In this realm, the eroticism of the human form regains prominence in his mature work through a language as disruptive in its kaleidoscopic approach as it is subject to the reality of what he sees and feels as a man, storing it in his artist's memory. Not without reason, clarity, and a certain pessimism, the great wizard of modern art showed the utmost disaffection for the avant-gardes that sought to succeed him, particularly for American abstract expressionism, which replaces the conscious stroke of the artist with fortuitous dripping.

In parallel, movements emerge as reactions to the denaturalization of art, such as Freudian surrealism from Dalí, Magritte, and Chagall in its more expressionistic formula. These offer alternative artistic solutions to the world of abstraction, providing painting with a new discursive code where figurative Art takes center stage. It unveils the deepest emotional recesses of the human being through forms that only gain meaning in the world of dreams. The technical quality demonstrated by these artists in their work places them in a privileged position as authentic icons of figurative art in the 20th century, even though, due to the effort and craftsmanship involved in their pictorial execution, they may not have had the desired impact in a 21st century dominated by what is easy and commercial.

Francis Bacon, the only artist of post-war art capable of advancing from Picasso's pictorial dialectic without excluding figurative channels, offers us

the most immediate and raw representation of human existential anguish. Trapped in the lightness of being within his complicated psyche, the human figure is enclosed in larval forms that protrude from backgrounds rich in magnetism, all with the purpose of creating a sense of guilt in the spectator. The viewer attends, as if he were in front of a showcase, the public sacrifice of the ordinary man. Grunewald is present in his triptychs, but above all, Velázquez, in his ability to paint deformity in the most beautiful way. Probably, Francis Bacon is the last great Master of plastic art, certainly of the 20th century.

In the 1930s, urban realism emerged with Hopper, coexisting in the USA for decades alongside abstract expressionism by Jackson Pollock and the figurative existentialism of Balthus, paying homage to the great classical masters. More recently, Lucian Freud's portraits with a Nordic chill and Hockney's optimistic realism, now acclaimed as one of the most sought-after contemporary artists, present figurative responses to the devastating artistic landscape of their time. In some measure, they signify a search for a lost past; undoubtedly, due to their artistic quality, they could have served as references and models for future generations if their sphere of influence had achieved a level of universality capable of containing abstract art, which, representing values common to all cultures, has globally consolidated itself as the art of the moment in the early 21st century.

The only figurative movement from the recent past that still has a global resonance today, due to its perfect integration with the world of consumerism, advertising, and social demands, is Warhol's Pop Art. However, it acts purely as a mirage since its creative process is subjected to photography, making it an endless source of inspiration for future generations dominating the visual arts. Paradoxically, part of its success in this new century comes from the influence it has had on the art protest of certain graffiti artists, with Banksy being their major exponent.

Where can we glimpse a substrate of resistance that could support the survival of figurative art in the 21st century?

The most mediatized artist-sculptor of the moment, Jeff Koons, though somewhat kitschy, represents, in some of his works, a return to classicism, and Hockney remains a stronghold of figurative Art with his colorful landscapes. However, both have been so perfectly integrated into the

system that it is inevitable for their figurative message to lack the necessary power to be considered a "pièce de résistance".

In my opinion, for the germ of art to firmly root itself in society again, it needs to be more combative, return to its origins, emanate from its essence, and emerge unabashedly in opposition to the system that has dehumanized it. In this sense, I would lean more towards urban art. An artistic genre that, due to its independent and assertive nature, could serve as a hotbed of incipient rebellion against the dominant establishment, bringing new life to the figurative medium, as its painting draws from the immediacy of a message that, to impact, needs to be intelligible. Among them, successors to Basquiat, a mythical figure playing the role of "enfant terrible" and antihero, stand out. Also, many African-origin artists whose art triumphs today, supported by the prevailing "goodism". The somewhat childlike, primary, simple, more emotional than intellectual nature of their painting takes us back to the origins of plastic art, connecting with the most atavistic part of humanity, which adds substance and originality to their art. I would like to think of a gradual incorporation of these street artists into the studio, engaging in an inspiring dialogue with the great masterpieces in our museums. As long as they don't lose their spirit of rebellion, don't succumb to the dictates of technology, and, above all, learn the ancestral craft of plastic art, they can serve as a breeding ground to create, with a renewed sense of progress, the foundations for the return of an art much more connected to humanity.

The development of digitization, artificial intelligence, and the metaverse has accentuated the process of dehumanization, simultaneously solidifying visual art as predominant in our days and as a purely virtual economic asset, akin to money, whose sole purpose is speculation. Its flagship is the NFT, a symbol of a fully monetized society that bases its value and speculative game exclusively on being a digital work whose file is guaranteed as unique by blockchain technology, but which, in no case, protects it from being replicated, nor values the artistic result of the work itself. Painting and sculpture increasingly play a secondary role, immersed in their creative poverty, dazzling only when some works reach astonishing prices at auctions; a type of art constantly surpassed by new formats, such as installations or "performance art", completely detached from everyday life; an art that denies its decorative character and does not value the

enjoyment it provides to the possessor; an art susceptible to being stored by collectors that loses all integration into the human environment.

Art has dehumanized because, in its creative process, humans are no longer fundamental, to the extent that nowadays, artificial intelligence can create works with complete autonomy, making humans less creative, less sensitive, less intellectually active, ultimately, less artistic. We can only hope for the awakening of a powerful resistance and that the craft has not been lost forever, as happened centuries ago in the Middle Ages because only then will new geniuses emerge to offer us a new opportunity to contemplate Art with a capital "A".

Art has ceased to be the expression of man as an individual, although it fully mirrors the society, we live in. Does this affect its consideration as Art?

Although many will object, in my opinion, it does affect it to the extent that it degrades the humanistic conception of Art that has been shaping our heritage since the Renaissance. A concept that sanctifies its creative process and the inimitable result obtained, elevating its creators to the status of protagonists in the History of Art.

However, today's globalized, technological society, staunchly defending Western principles of freedom and equality, has reformulated the concept of Art to its measure so as to cover any type of expression that can be valued by the public, based on the idea that each society has always defined what is the art of the moment.

Today, the world can boast that anything can be considered as Art, with the only condition that it expresses a politically or socially correct message.

The history of Art, with the perspective that time provides, without moral constraints, will eventually render its verdict, separating what can be considered timeless Art from what is merely the expression of an era.

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