

FESTIVAL OF ART OR CRISIS OF ART? THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART OF HANS-GEORG GADAMER AND JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

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Abstract: The article juxtaposes reflections of two contemporary philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and José Ortega y Gasset, on the theme of art. The authors refer to the basic works of these philosophers on aesthetics and the philosophy of art, among them *Truth and method*, *The relevance of the beautiful*, and *The dehumanisation of art*. These reflections revolve around the concept of crisis of art as it was understood by both thinkers. Similarities and differences are pointed out in their assessments of the situation of contemporary art, its nature and function.

Keywords: festival of art, crisis of art, philosophy of art, tradition, play, Hans-Georg Gadamer, José Ortega y Gasset

Festival of art or crisis of art? The philosophy of art of Hans-Georg Gadamer and José Ortega y Gasset

1. Introduction

In undertaking an attempt at philosophical reflections on contemporary art today, it is impossible to ignore the changes that took place in human artistic activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe. This breakthrough concerned the emergence of new forms and new content in artistic presentations, as well as the traditional understanding of the role of art, the relative positions of artist and viewer, and the status of works of art. Even if it seems today that we are familiar with the shape of the new art, interpreting it evidently remains a challenge for us. We still have not dealt with the issues of its essence, meaning and function. At the same time, there is still no answer to the question of whether the changes which have taken place in art have led to its rebirth in a completely new form or to a crisis. Hence our proposal to recall the positions of two prominent twentieth-century philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and José Ortega y Gasset, which may prove helpful in answering these still-unresolved questions. Both thinkers observed and analysed the same phenomena in the arts, but their interpretations of the new art ultimately proved different. Significant and noteworthy is the fact that they focused on the same concepts, which can be variously defined as, *inter alia*, tradition, play, and the meaning of art.

We believe that comparison and analysis of these partly congruent, partly conflicting proposals may prove to be of cognitive value and to provide useful tools for the further study of contemporary art.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer on art

Gadamer perceived, of course, the generally acknowledged crisis of contemporary art, believing that it was the result of transformations that took place in Europe in the nineteenth century when the centuries-old tradition of Western Christian art was interrupted. This tradition had created, in his opinion, a community of mutual understanding and agreement, associated with intelligibility and openness transmitted by the content of the art,¹ constructing a common myth that rendered the truth embodied in the works easily accessible.² The work of artists from the turn of the century and of the classic avant-garde artists who followed them was associated with the gradual separation of the content of transmission from the form, which led to the concept of so-called pure art, assumed to be liberated from contexts and references. As a result, nonfigurative art appeared, making no attempt to respond to usual expectations of the image,

and evoking shock and feelings of alienation from its viewers.³ The crisis of art, which is still being proclaimed today, nevertheless does not prove, in Gadamer's opinion, the 'end of art'; nor does it indicate a transformation of its essence. The crisis consists of a progressive, increasingly profound lack of understanding of art, artists, and works of art, which, by ceasing to be comprehensible, lose their vital human significance. It is thus connected with the disappearance of the obviousness of communication and of methods for the manifestation of truth in works of art. The crisis of art is thus a challenge – a task for audiences, critics, and interpreters. As we read in one of the author's essays in *The relevance of the beautiful*, 'Poets have of necessity become silent. Discreet messages are spoken quietly, so as not to be overheard by a third person, and so the poet's voice has also grown quiet. The poet transmits something to one who knows how – and is prepared – to hear it'.⁴

Gadamer makes no distinction between traditional and modern art and does not consider it necessary to alter the concept or definition of art.⁵ On the contrary, he postulates the need to preserve the continuity of the tradition of culture and art; he declares that art can and should still play the same functions – primarily mediatory, integrative, and cognitive – as it has for centuries.

Without a doubt, the most important aspect in hermeneutical reflections on art is that art has a relationship with the truth, that it is a cognitive experience, i.e. one that expands human knowledge and self-knowledge.⁶ According to Gadamer, contact with art leads to the 'occurrence of truth'. At the same time this is not the truth we deal with in modern science; it is not a question of so-called objective truth or about reaching a specific unappealable meaning. Truth in hermeneutics is dynamic and fluid, much like man, who is a finite being, entangled in history, tradition, and events. The truth accessible through the experience of art is a kind of transparency (Greek *aletheia*, about which Heidegger wrote) revealed through dialogue, the viewer's encounters with tradition and all that concerns the work of cultural transmission. Gadamer speaks in this context of a fusion of horizons, about the collision of what derives from the past with what constitutes the present perspective of the viewer. It is important here to emphasise along with Gadamer that this is a question of a real experience that transforms the interpreter.⁷ One must therefore clearly distinguish the experience of art from aesthetic experiences of a personal and subjective nature. The experience of art means active involvement, participation in a dialogue and openness to the 'surplus meaning' the work reveals. There is no place here for the acquisition of knowledge, only for a never-ending process of dialogue. The experience of art is merely one of the varieties of knowledge, one of the types of hermeneutic experience – which, generally speaking, means the experience of interaction with tradition, of remaining open to its message and accepting its claims. However, the experience of art is also distinguished by hermeneutics in terms of the exceptional language of communication and the exemplary

³ See H.-G. Gadamer, *Sztuka i naśladownictwo* in: idem: *Rozum, słowo, dzieje. Szkice wybrane*. Warsaw: PIW, 1979. ISBN 83-06-00152-4. p. 128.

⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Czy poeci milknę?* in: idem: *Poetica*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2001. ISBN 83-87456-70-5. p. 102. Here, it is worth adding that the basic premise of this reflection is that the reception of art is directed by the sense of expectation. Thus, hermeneutics encompasses aesthetics. What is more, aesthetics is not a separate field of knowledge, but is incorporated in the sphere of hermeneutics.

⁵ In *Aktualności piękna* [The relevance of beauty] Gadamer clearly states that 'inherent in every work as such is a complex game of reflection which constitutes a challenge. For this reason, the dichotomy between art of the past, which is to be enjoyed, and contemporary art, whose refined artistic means force us to cooperate, seems false to me'. H.-G. Gadamer, *Aktualność piękna*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶ See H.-G. Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda. Zarys hermeneutyki filozoficznej*. Warsaw: PWN, 2007. ISBN 978-83-01-14230-8. p. 153.

⁷ We read in one of the essays: 'as an experience of authenticity, as assimilation, which includes the moment of transcendence, the experience of art is, in the proper sense, experience, and again and again one must accomplish the resulting task: the task of incorporating it into the entirety of one's own research in the world and one's own self-understanding'. H.-G. Gadamer, *Estetyka i hermeneutyka* in: idem: *Rozum, słowo, dzieje...*, op. cit., p. 125.

¹ See H.-G.: *Aktualność piękna. Sztuka jako gra, symbol, święto*. Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1993. ISBN 83-85505-15-6. p. 8.

² See H.-G. Gadamer, *Koniec sztuki?* in: idem: *Dziejnictwo Europy*. Warsaw: Fundacja ALETHEIA, 1992. ISBN 83-85277-04-8. p. 44.

manner of manifesting the truth in artistic creations. The specificity of the language is based primarily on the fact that art speaks to the viewers in a very powerful way; the sense of the truth of a work of art, though never fully expressible, appears as if obvious. Gadamer writes: 'we have [here] more than an expectation of this sense; something that I would like to call infection with the sense of what is said'.⁸ Moreover, art addresses each of us. It is not an elite phenomenon, designed for a narrow audience, but rather seizes the attention of viewers in the form of a sensation of authenticity, which is always current and modern.⁹

Art, according to Gadamer, can be aptly described by three concepts: game, symbol and festival. The game concept reveals the processual and hypersubjective nature of the truth of art; it also points out that art is a communicative phenomenon that involves participation. A game deeply engages its participants, and thus changes their perception of the world; the colloquial perception of reality is, in the experience of art, suspended.¹⁰ A game, in order to exist, requires seriousness, but at the same time, because it is not associated with daily hardships and responsibility, induces a sensation of lightness in the participant. The symbolic nature of art means that the process of its interpretation is infinite and inexhaustible. Art turns out to be a mysterious game of revealing and concealing meanings. The meaning of a work may be revealed if an effort is made to discover it. The viewer must be acquainted with the language of art, must learn to read the work – and this depends on 'performing constant hermeneutic movement, which controls the expectation of a sense of the whole'.¹¹ Thus understood, art serves as the recognition of reality, expansion of horizons, enrichment of the individual, as well as the construction of a universal area of understanding. Works of art connect people with one another and bind them in a common dialogue. The third element of the definition proposed by Gadamer, festival, encompasses and expresses all of the above-mentioned elements of the experience of art. The festival concept also emphasises, above all, the exceptional possibilities of the integration of art: the ability to simultaneously express the individual and the universal; the past alongside the present. It also indicates the specific temporality of the experience of art: festival time is, so to speak, time fulfilled, as it is fully filled with festivity. Similarly, the true experience of art means taking a work as modern and up to date, and its truth as present. Moreover, Gadamer declares that art teaches us a specific way of being, one that does not prolong itself and which is probably the 'finite rightness, suited for us, of what we call eternity'.¹² The festival concept thus points to the transcendent and to communion.

3. José Ortega y Gasset on art

The catchphrase 'the end of art' appearing in European culture from the beginning of the twentieth century found expression as well in the thoughts of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. This slogan was one of the manifestations of the crisis of twentieth-century European culture proclaimed by Ortega y Gasset. In works such as 'The dehumanisation of art' or 'Art in the present and past tense', the philosopher analysed the aesthetic moment and ideological changes in art, as well as the resulting sociological consequences. According to the Spanish thinker, the crisis of the entire contemporary culture, and art in particular, was inextricably linked to the condition of European societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At that time, the status of the artist changed, art changed, and the viewer changed as well. Contemporary artists broke away from the art of the past because a new type of viewer had appeared. The viewer, for his part, had changed his attitude to

contemporary art because it had departed radically from the artistic canons of the past.

For Ortega y Gasset, art was one of the most significant sociocreative factors: it had a real impact on the formation and development of societies. Therefore, Ortega y Gasset considered the examination of art from a sociological point of view to be a useful tool for understanding the phenomenon of contemporary art. The new art, in his view, was antipopular by definition: it emerged in order to divide society. The antipopularity of this art lay in the fact that it was addressed to a narrow audience. The radical opposition to traditional popular art was a deliberate process, achieved through an intentional break with the rules of communication between the artist and the viewer previously in force, the rejection of past canons of art and a departure from realist and naturalist presentation. The philosopher wrote that 'Each work of [contemporary art – ed.] evokes in the public an interesting sociological phenomenon. The audience immediately divides itself into two groups: one, not very numerous, favourably inclined, and the second, very large, decidedly hostile. (...) Thus a work of art operates similarly to social forces, under whose influence a shapeless mass of people is divided into two distinct and hostile castes. (...) Each work of art causes differences of opinion: one likes it, another does not; one likes it more, another less. (...) However, in the case of the new art, the rift is much deeper; it is no longer a matter of individual differences in taste. It is not that the majority dislikes the art of young people, while the minority likes it; the point is that the majority, the masses, do not understand this art'.¹³ In the lack of understanding of art arising in the first decades of the twentieth century, Ortega y Gasset recognised the same basic distinguishing aspect, which, at the same time, qualitatively divided society into two groups: insiders, who were the artists themselves as the authors of their own works, along with a culturally and intellectually prepared elite; and the uninitiated, that is, the masses.¹⁴

Art in the twentieth century therefore lost the unifying, integrating nature so characteristic of the art of the previous era. It ceased to be an experience bearing the hallmarks of universality: the viewer could be not just anyone, but only selected individuals. Contact with new art has become special time, but also time that the viewer spends on his own. Every experience of this art is alienating in the sense that while in contact with it, the viewer is left to his own devices. Thus there is no more historical continuity of style; the achievements of tradition have been suspended, and simple references to human reality are no longer functional. The experience of art becomes a personal challenge for the individual, who decides either to submit to the new rules of the game, or, as Ortega y Gasset said, rejects the new and incomprehensible art.

The basis of this radical social effect of art in the first decades of the twentieth century was, first and foremost, the break with tradition. According to Ortega y Gasset, this was a critical moment, which, however, did not mean the 'end of art' in general. What ended irrevocably was the art of the past. The distinction Ortega y Gasset introduced between the 'art of the past tense' and 'contemporary art'¹⁵ is of key significance here. The art of the past was, for the philosopher, synonymous with traditional imitative art, which 'is an art in the full sense of the word only inasmuch as it is still present, fertile and innovative'.¹⁶ And because, as the philosopher said, the potential of this art became exhausted in the second half of the nineteenth century, it had ceased to create or evolve. It should be noted, however, that Ortega y Gasset did not depreciate the art of previous centuries. He claimed that the pleasure we derive from communing with this kind of art (and undoubtedly we still derive pleasure from the works of Michelangelo, Rembrandt and

⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Estetyka i hermeneutyka*, op. cit., p. 125.

⁹ cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Estetyka i hermeneutyka*, op. cit., p. 125.

¹⁰ We read in *Prawda i metoda* that 'the game is set in a different, introverted world, where, however, it is a product, situated, as it were, within itself and not measuring itself according to something external to it'. H.-G. Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda...*, op. cit., p. 171.

¹¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Aktualność piękna...*, op. cit., p. 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹³ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Dehumanizacja sztuki*, in: idem, *Dehumanizacja sztuki i inne eseje*, Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1980. ISBN: 83-07-00056-4, p. 280.

¹⁴ cf. J. Ortega y Gasset, *Bunt mas*, in: idem, *Bunt mas i inne pisma socjologiczne*, Warsaw: PWN, 1982. ISBN: 83-01-02820-3.

¹⁵ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Sztuka w czasie teraźniejszym i przeszłym*, in: idem, *Dehumanizacja sztuki*, op. cit., pp. 266–8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Velázquez), comes from the life of the tradition in which it is situated, and not to its aesthetic value; he called this 'archaeological pleasure'.¹⁷ The art of the past is therefore still present in our lives, but it exists in a spectral dimension, continually placed between quotation marks. Contemporary art is no longer a continuation of the tradition. Programmatically, it assumes a departure from the dead canons of the past and the elevation of man above his human dimension, detaching him from reality by means of its conscious deformation. Therefore, Ortega y Gasset wrote of two arts, radically different from each other, causing the rift between past and present to become enormous. The end of traditional art irrevocably closed a certain chapter in the history of human artistic activity, but it also opened completely new horizons. The moment of change, of which Ortega y Gasset was the witness, was undoubtedly a critical moment, pregnant, however, with potential for the continued existence of art in general.

The essence of the art of the first decades of the twentieth century became, according to Ortega y Gasset, the phenomenon of dehumanisation he described. Dehumanised art is the art of intellectual pleasure, a game based on the concepts of irony and metaphor. Traditional art, loaded with humanising elements, had been depleted, heavy, pathetic and serious. The new art began to operate mainly through irony, which often took the form of self-mockery. At the same time, it fled from pathos, seriousness, missionary zeal and transcendence. As Ortega y Gasset wrote, this art was 'sophisticated fun devoid of any seriousness and pathos, in which only its true lovers should indulge'¹⁸ and added that 'all modern art becomes understandable and in a sense great if we can acknowledge it as an attempt to restore youth to the old world. Other styles in art should be considered in the context of dramatic social and political movements or deep religious and philosophical currents. In contrast, the new style is rather closer to the triumphs of sport and play'.¹⁹ Thus Karolina Golinowska states that 'avant-garde art was for Ortega y Gasset autonomous play of a sort, devoid of deeper meaning'.²⁰ Art was supposed to be a game that had nothing in common with the sphere of human emotion, a game of pure aesthetic values, unusable and impractical, whose participants were representatives of a spiritual aristocracy, appropriately responsive to receiving it, aware of its antitraditional turn, willing to learn the principles of the new art. Becoming acquainted with the rules of the game of the new art was, for Ortega y Gasset, essential. The idea of art as an ironic game between the work and the viewer was not yet widely accessible. Art had become a hermetic experience, accessible only to the chosen few. Ortega y Gasset drew attention to the advancing process of elitisation of the new art, which, in the moment of crisis of the traditional aesthetic values of democratic, egalitarian societies, was its only salvation.

Dehumanised art, according to Ortega y Gasset, also meant the flight of artists from forms reflecting life. This flight was a departure from the traditional imitation of reality, in order to create new forms that, as Ortega y Gasset would say, were as dissimilar as possible to the fragments of human reality: 'It's a question not of painting something completely different from a person or house or mountain, but to paint a person who would be as little like a person as possible; a house that would take from a house only what was needed to complete its metamorphosis; a mountain which, deprived of its surface, becomes a cone, as a chrysalis is transformed into a butterfly. For the contemporary artist, triumph over human material is a source of aesthetic pleasure'.²¹ The artist of the new art had turned against reality. He had decided on its deformation, that is, on the destruction of its 'human' aspects.

But could art on such a basis preserve any cognitive value? It seems that the process of dehumanisation did not deprive art of all sense. An extremely difficult task lay before the artist: his

aim was not to bring imaginary worlds, devoid of all meaning and sense, to life. In rising above human reality, moving away from the realism and naturalism of representations, the artist had to create purely artistic art – but art possessing content which constituted the ground of new meanings. The cognitive value of the new art was based on meanings that were no longer simply a way to recognise a work based on the similarity of its content to reality, as was the case in traditional art. Contemporary art was supposed to create new entities, aesthetic objects that lived in the objective space of the artistic world, which differed from physical and psychological reality. Paradoxically, this art thus became doubly unreal. Firstly, it was not real, in the sense that it was new and differed from what was real. Secondly, the aesthetic object that was its creation had the capacity to deform true reality. The meaning of the new art appeared, therefore, at the moment of recognition of the purely aesthetic value of the work.

Ortega y Gasset identified this aesthetic object of the new art with a metaphoric object. Metaphor was, at the same time, another essential feature of dehumanised art. Importantly, however, the dehumanising metaphor was not merely a decorative tool or a highlighted element of the reality being presented. The aesthetic metaphor deployed by the new art 'eliminates the realistic elements by disguising them and making them into something completely different',²² additionally dragging into the light of day everything that had previously been confined to the realm of taboo. Metaphor and the concept of taboo are closely linked: metaphor as a manifestation of the dehumanisation of art mercilessly exposed the hidden emotions, instincts, imaginings, ugliness and visions of the subconscious previously confined to the realm of taboo. Thus, metaphor was a formal means of meeting an artistic need to flee from reality in the first decades of the twentieth century.

As an eyewitness to the changes in art which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ortega y Gasset was sure that art, on the threshold of that century, had been launched on a road from which there would be no turning back.²³ The crisis of previous artistic values, associated with the crisis of contemporary European culture as a whole, became for him an impulse to reflect on the new direction of human artistic activity. Ortega y Gasset, who was one of the heralds of a catastrophic vision of the future of the human world in its previous form, nevertheless did not surrender to utterly defeatist thinking. In analysing the contemporary artistic phenomena, he created a prophetic vision of a new kind of art – art that, breaking with tradition, faced not only the task of developing completely new formal methods, but also the challenge of forging a new identity. According to Ortega y Gasset, the identity of the new art – the art of the present – was based on the concept of dehumanisation, whose artistic implementation entailed real sociocreative consequences. The new art had become an art for selected individuals, an elite game in which each player was on his own. The polarisation of society and the negation of the unifying ideals of traditional art had therefore become the tangible results of the activity of contemporary artists. Ortega y Gasset saw the new art as a kind of intellectual entertainment for selected individuals who undertook the solitary trouble of understanding it. Thus, it seems that dehumanised art became liberated and enslaved at the same time – liberated first of all from the canons of the past, its utilitarian nature and the obligation to imitate. At the same time, it fell into the trap of elitism, which had the potential to lead to the total alienation of artistic practice and the gradual disintegration of the insulated, hermetic world of art.

4. Conclusions: festival of art or crisis of art?

These considerations concerning contemporary art lead to the conclusion that neither philosopher has any doubt about art being an intellectual experience, expanding the cognitive horizon of the individual. Through it, we can expand human

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 273.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 275.

¹⁹ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Dehumanizacja sztuki*, op. cit., p. 319.

²⁰ K. Golinowska, *Sztuka doby kryzysu*, in: *Kultura-Historia-Globalizacja*, Vol. 8. 2010. ISSN: 1898-7265. p. 70.

²¹ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Dehumanizacja sztuki*, op. cit., p. 295.

²² Ibid., p. 304.

²³ See N. A. Michna, *Wielka Awangarda wobec kultury masowej w myśli José Ortegi y Gasset*, Cracow: Libron, 2014. ISBN 978-83-64275-66-1. p. 138.

consciousness and develop knowledge about ourselves and the world. However, it is necessary to make an effort to benefit from what art offers. Taking the trouble to understand it is indispensable, especially in view of the artistic phenomena that appeared after the period of the Great Avant-Garde. Ortega y Gasset remains an intellectual elitist and stresses that this enriching experience of art is available only to a few. Contemporary art, by definition, divides society into those excluded from the world of art and its privileged participants. On this issue, Gadamer remains more cautious, encouraging us only to respond to the appeal, addressed to everyone, to participate in the world of art. His statement is rooted in basic hermeneutical assumptions to the effect that conscious acceptance of transmissions of tradition and culture is necessary for one to understand the world, oneself and other people.

Gadamer thinks most seriously about human artistic activity, and thus comes near to the ancient approach to art, treating it on a level with philosophy as one of the possible ways to reach the truth about reality. Ortega y Gasset seems to occupy the opposite pole; for him, art is frivolous, ironic game lacking a metaphysical dimension. Art invites us, in his view, to join an intellectual game of exploring dehumanised forms, beneath the surface of which there is no longer any room for the truth about the real world. Thus, the Spanish philosopher is close to the postmodern recognition of art as a free-and-easy intertextual game.

Ortega y Gasset sees in art a form of entertainment for the elite, operating, as it were, on the edge of everyday human activities. In contrast, Gadamer formulates the postulate of 'aesthetic indistinguishability,' leading to the conclusion that the experience of art should be an important and necessary part of everyone's life.

It is not our intention to pass judgments on the merits of each position. The summary of the views of Gadamer and Ortega y Gasset we have offered here is further evidence of the unlimited potential for the interpretation of contemporary phenomena in art. The opening of the interpretative horizon of art took place along with its autonomisation, implemented by Immanuel Kant, and today the horizon seems to be continuously expanding. The role of not only the modern audience, but also the entire set of critics and aestheticians, is to respond creatively to the challenges art poses us. This, in our opinion, was the approach of both Gadamer and Ortega y Gasset. Both thinkers treated statements about the alleged crisis of art as an exercise in thought and undertook attempts to provide creative responses.

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