

ART AND MORALITY

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Abstract: In the nowadays acknowledged moral crisis in/of art, a split has occurred between the public and some artistic manifestations. Stuck in the so called “radical actionism” - as the artistic short and violent movement developed by *Fluxus* Group during 1960-1970, with origins in the “Viennese Actionism” -, the art segment dealing with contemporaneity, disputing the traditional art as well as social and moral conventions, has created a new area of expression, in which art and life converge, arising questions that go beyond the aesthetic experience, and managing to introduce an ethical dimension in artistic expression. In a plurality of theoretical and practical concerns, the contemporary art has produced repeated attacks on human dignity or animal life. So, the present art manifestations may include people, animals, corps/thereof parts (human or animal), explicit sexual images, psychological abuses as well as references to self-harm. A balance between art and morality, a good – by responsibility in act - relationship between aesthetics and ethics, finally, might generate a different type of visual art, a creative and clean one, able to opening up some new possibilities of expression for humanity.

Keywords: contemporary art, morality, aesthetics, ethics, autonomism, moralism

The issue of moralization through art seems to be one in close connection with the language of abstracted symbols of meta-physical reality, within an imaginary world of immanence and transcendence, used in artistic constructions or religious rites, like a way to describing part of the wisdom of the soul, revealing the beautiful duality between mind and soul.

An infinite world of archetypes and symbols that reveal a spiritual inheritance of the imaginary is created through the construction of the dramatic cult and the increased need for subjectivity expressed through art. In the acknowledged moral crisis of the contemporary art, in its deployment of forces and practices under the new trends and tendencies, we can find a need for returning to a kind of responsibility

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by reconsidering the function of moral values and attitudes for the artists. It is a response to the plurality of experimental and theoretical concerns developed in the video, holographic and inter-communicational contemporary art – through a-centricity by promoting the “low” values of border culture, the art of consumption through grotesque or megalomaniac brilliant and manipulative performances.

Many artistic events of the last decades have questioned the legitimacy of these actions through theories and ethicists’ standpoints that paved the way for a “moral valuation” in conducting the artistic phenomenon, and even in redefining the concept of art. One question is, for example, whether the aesthetic value of an artistic work may be affected by its moral quality¹. In a confused and unstable climate, the art of the ’90s changed its appearance by negating the values of traditional assessment through a dissolution of the abstract symbols and “de-centering” towards the edges, promoting the misshape or the shapeless element and abjection, along with the public exposure of bodily fluids, of dirt, of scatology matter in pieces (of art), by claiming to be a reward of discrimination of the deeper layer of “basic matter”, conceptualized in the theory of historical materialism.

Turning back to the relationship *art and morality*, supported by updated theories through the process of hybridizing teleological and deontological views, we may organize the specialized moral norms for a clear definition in distinct classes of the artistic phenomena, within an art scientific research as regards ethical rules of artist’s conduct. The interrogations of the relationships between art and morality ethics have opened a wide horizon of problems, two decades ago, already shaping a solid philosophical basis in order to relevantly define the contemporary artistic phenomenon.

From the Ancients to the Moderns, the ethical-aesthetic relation has been explored in different ways, but the concept of beauty remained a symbol of morality; because in art one can always feel the need to guide the artistic consciousness within oneself, in order to restore the good(ness) and beautiful(ness) of being.

An applied ethics of visual arts would be roundly rejected by the existing artistic community, bringing out the ‘brutality’ and

¹ See Jasmin Weaver (1998). “In defense of moderate autonomism”. In Michael Kelly (editor in chief), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Volume 3. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

‘censorship’ in the act of creation, as opposed discrepancy between free creation and enforcement of imposed ethical rules. But, we try to stress that art may very well manifests an entitled attitude of considering, no less, the territory of moral virtues, in respect of the excellence of human being, thanks to a renew creative support in reason, measure and common sense. An ethical culture could stay as a reference for art, too; and it would give an alternative to our anxiety emphasized in the last decades’ art that, in a peculiar chaos, with claims and judgments, and in an ongoing psychological, social or individual experiments, the artists purposely created a feeling of insecurity and risk by attacking secular and religious values for vision, imbalance and alienation. It seems that a basic truth is to be forgotten, namely: “man is a virtual ethical being, existing as such, [...] because morality is everywhere competent for the human existence”².

The meaning of artistic creation can, beyond anything, to lead us to wellbeing and beauty enrooted in the values of balance, order and harmony.

New policies of the consumer society influenced art towards the profit tendency in production-promotion-distribution-consumption. It manipulated the archetypal character of the object of art towards an object with an exchange value, as a merchandise of the production of the worker artist, as well as alienating the artist by means of an upheaval of the moral-centrist-historical values. Productions of contemporary art enter a schizoid competition of denial, recycling the content of abstract symbolization of metaphysical reality, which builds - through “re-ordering” in “re-creation” - the aura of the object of art, the unique value of ‘microcosmic’ matter of re-made universal creation or an aura gained through understanding, awareness and re-naming the poorly managed single material, downgraded in terms of content and utility forms (the ready-made), a form of disintegration of the abstract qualities towards alteration, similar to death, in the existential cyclicity.

The awareness of the moralizing role of symbolic values by means of such an ‘aura’ could restore the notion of art in a moral re-employment of artistic consciousness, the hope of our return to moral values deeply rooted in the fundamental harmonic consciousness, in relation to the laws of nature (that do not show all the bowels and

² Vladimir Jankélévitch (1989). *Le paradoxe de la morale*. Romanian translation: *Paradoxul moralei*. Echinox Publishing House, Cluj –Napoca, 1997, p.8.

secretions of which it is made up), always preparing captive contemplations for the being. Becoming aware of, understanding and respecting the harmony of the universal beauty remain the ideal of our human ascent, by imitating the supreme and true creation through love.

The artistic creation, governed by an aretology with the unity of Good and Beauty, is wanted to essentially touch the contemporary art, even to redefine the concept of “fine arts”, accepting the trendy values such as performance and profit, but using the “performance of meditation to guiding man’s behaviour and activity” and thinking about the “profit” related to the ethical human value, enacting the principle of “righteous action”, respectively the principle of “following the nature with its law of harmony”³.

A science of virtue can be beneficial not only in the social field, but also in artistic productions, where one can easily observe “signs of an ethical psychopathology: unrestrained feeling, wildness, rudeness, lack of faith, despair, catastrophic visions, lawlessness, aggression”⁴, a departure from moral values, from good measure and order, eventually from the so much desired state of wellbeing as moral health/equilibrium. Without a minimal wisdom in art, without a beautiful mind, a clear conscience and moral will, without love, the humanness/fulfillment man’s excellence remains just an illusion.

Stuck in a “radical actionism”⁵, the art segment dealing with contemporary art - in an attempt to go beyond the traditional sphere of aesthetical understanding and creation – makes a shift towards an excessive dependence of man by the area of IT communication networking, with a serious risk to lose the deep spiritual and moral coordinate of being in the world; *homo communicans* estranging more and more by the complete *homo moralis/ethicus* and *homo aestheticus*.

A series of art works causing great public scandals in recent decades has paved the way for contemporary philosophers towards the development of the first ethical theories supporting the idea of taking into account some ethical rules of behaviour in contemporary artistic actions, opposed to the autonomists who remained convinced that art

³ Carmen Cozma (2004). *Introducere în aretologie. Mic tratat de etică / Introduction to Aretology. A Short Treatise of Ethics* (2nd edition). Iasi: “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibidem* p.19.

⁵ The term “radical actionism” describes a short and violent art movement, developed in 1960-1970, by the *Fluxus* Group, that is today continued and known as: Happening, Performance, Body Art.

can only be judged by aestheticians and only on the basis of the aesthetic principles.

So, the radical moralism argues that “the aesthetic value of art should be limited or reduced to the moral value of a work of art”⁶, while the radical autonomism brings argument of aesthetic nature to sustain the complete freedom of expression, saying that it is inappropriate to apply categories of moral valuation of a work of art, the aesthetics being the only standard in this regard.

A return to the moral values of art could regenerate the contemporary artistic act with reference to the wisdom in art, to a beautiful mind, a clear consciousness; the moral will and even the value of love are aspects without which “the existence” would remain an illusion; out of these, the artistic creation would not lead to the ultimate goal of “perfecting man towards excellence”⁷. From virtue to vice, from good to bad, from information to misinformation and manipulation, the contemporary art accompanies attitudinal and behavioural trajectories in society and politics, becoming a star by searching visibility as a final goal. If we assume that in Plato’s age the art “had instrumental value as a means of moral education”, we see that the moralism has historical roots in the ancient philosophy, as opposed to the modern Kantian theory, where the “artistic value is distinct and autonomous; the moral value being a non-instrumental consequence”⁸.

During the last decades of the 20th century, we find a need to (re)turn to true moral values, in order to restore the intrinsic value of the artwork. An ethics applied to contemporary visual arts, a “science of virtue” would certainly be topical in art, providing support for artistic creation in producing authentic values, like an alternative to the part of contemporary art defined by accusatory approaches and sentences, intentionally transmitting insecurity, risk, violence, etc.

The meaning of human creation should lead us towards balance and order, harmony, wellness, perfection and beauty. New contemporary economic values have negatively influenced the art, orientating it towards a consumerist competition. Being aware of the trap of not considering the moral values and virtues, that art so desperately needs, it can bring to light the aretological principles helping to avoid

⁶ See Richard Posner (1997). “Against ethical criticism”. *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 21, Number 1, pp.1-27.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

anarchic confusions and perversion of artistic language in general. The moral and ethical standards, the human virtues, the idea of good and beauty must again govern arts, redefining the concept of “fine arts”.

An ethics with applications in art could essentially mark the excellence, the quality of competence, the sense of value, its honesty and the status of the artwork in society. Wisdom in art proves to be precisely an act able to respond, positively, to our ideas, aspirations and beliefs.

Many public debates between autonomists and moralists are at stake concerning the problem of elaboration and application of ethical norms to the contemporary artistic creation. It is obviously that, in public art events, some basic rules of moral and civic behaviour must be followed, to diminish “the signs of an ethical psychopathology: unrestrained feeling, wildness, rudeness, lack of faith, despair, catastrophic visions, lawlessness, aggression”⁹.

The nowadays artists’ means and manner of expression have made the necessary background for the contemporary philosophy to study the newly created phenomena with special attention given to ethics *and* aesthetics such as: Gerard Genette, Louis Pinto, Jacques Poulain, Arthur Danto, Chuck Dyke, Richard Schusterman, Terry Diffey, Noel Carroll, Richard Posner, Jerry Levinson. They tried to elaborate philosophical investigations of the causality and the results of the changes in contemporary art, in terms of moralism and autonomism.

The present “moralistic” claims that “the aesthetic value of a work of art should be determined or reduced to its moral value”¹⁰, while the “autonomism” argues by following the idea that “it is inappropriate to apply categories of moral valuation to an artwork, the aesthetic being the only valuation standard”¹¹.

In “Ethical Criticism of Art”, Richard Posner is wondering about the “moral assessments applied to art works”¹² without being described as “aesthetic valuations”. In his turn, Berys Gaut argues that “good art does not enrich man ethically, and bad one does not corrupt him”. Sometimes, an ethical flaw can count as much as an aesthetic one matters. Moralists argue the opposite, and for them, all art has a moral

⁹ Carnen Cozma, *op.cit.*, p.19.

¹⁰ Richard Posner, *op. cit.*

¹¹ See, for example, the writings by David Foster Wallace.

¹² Berys Gaut (1998/2001). “The Ethical Criticism of Art”. In Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics. Essays at the Intersection*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.182-203.

dimension in its composition. “Sometimes the moral qualities held by a work of art can be aesthetically relevant or its dubious features can morally contribute to the aesthetic value of the work”¹³. The author observes that “intrinsic ethical flaws contained in a work of art cannot have real effects on the public, the ethical defects resulting from attitudes directed towards the subjects manifested can be ethically harmful”; and, obviously, even worthy from a moral point of view, some works are an aesthetic disaster. Gaut offers three distinct dimensions for his theory:

- a) pure aesthetic qualities may include moral qualities (a moral beauty argument);
- b) pure ethical qualities can include aesthetic qualities (the radical moralism theory);
- c) a central aesthetic merit in art is the ability to learn, especially about morality (the “argument-response-deserved” that focuses on the property of attitudes manifested in the works of art).

It is possible that the virtuous or vicious character manifested by the artist in his creation contributes and influences the beauty or the ugliness of the work; so, the aesthetic beauty appears in equation with the moral character of the message sent by the artwork.

For Berys Gaut the true work of art could teach us about morality, because art is particularly effective in giving “emotional responses characteristic to the ethical response and it would be hard to deny the imaginative aesthetic relevance actually engaged in art”.

Reviewing the Berys Gaut’s book *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, Daniel Jacobson states that the “moral beauty has always undermined some aesthetic merits in a work of art” and the “art cannot solve the moral problems by means of its object”. He claims that this approach is fundamentally flawed and the consequences of such a policy would be the cause of what is happening today in art contesting the statement of philosopher Berys Gaut who, he says, reaches these conclusions “by means of a system that develops a purely imaginative and empathetic process.”¹⁴

If the philosopher of art Noël Carroll was considering that “the work of art that contains improper moral premises prevents people from

¹³ See Berys Gaut (2007). *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Daniel Jacobson, Book review: Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. In *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, March 2008; <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23394-art-emotion-and-ethics/> [accessed 06.20.2014]

having aesthetic experiences”¹⁵, Rob van Gerwen stresses the confusion in the debate between autonomism and moralism: the autonomists “refer to a work’s artisticity”, while the moralists point to the “moral nature of a work’s represented contents”¹⁶. According to this author, the “ethical autonomism” allows the moral valuation of the work of art, without sacrificing the aesthetic autonomy, viewing the artistic merit as a moral category, which has art criticism as a form of critical valuation. In this regard, Berys Gaut says that “some moral flaws cannot get over the aesthetic merits, only critical art can judge the aesthetic and moral considerations and that together they will contribute to the final verdict ... [this is the] argument, answer, merit criterion”¹⁷.

Contemporary debates on this subject are still urgently needed to remove ambiguities about moral norms which can be violated or not, in the current artistic productions and actions, and to elucidate the dilemmas that finally produce a split between the public and art.

By using arguments, sources, specific cases, the debates on art and morality, on aesthetics and ethics lead to a proper artistic education for the creators/performers, distributors and public of “fine arts” in a consumerist society. A basic learning in the ethical culture and the artistic production would be welcome in order to contribute to a healthy moral conduct in the social space. A guide to the best artistic practices could have a good applicability in the system of education at large, within the field of contemporary art, especially for children who are too much attracted by computer games – mostly being bloody and macabre games – and, by consequence, they miss something important for a real, both ethical and aesthetical, human life opening towards an aretaic becoming with the chance for the achievement of the human excellence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This work was co-financed from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013. Project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Competitive Researchers in Europe in the Field of Humanities and Socio-Economic Sciences. A Multi-regional Research Network

¹⁵ See Noël Carroll (2010). *Art in Three Dimensions*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Rob van Gerwen, “Ethical Autonomism: The Work of Art as a Moral Agent”. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Volume 2, 2004; quod.lib.umich.edu [accessed 01.15.2013]

¹⁷ Berys Gaut (2007), *op.cit.*

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