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CONSIDERATIONS ON THE HUMAN BODY

Liviu Nedelcu (a)*

(a) Ph.D. Candidate, Dunarea de Jos University from Galati, Romania,
E-mail: liviu1962@yahoo.com

Abstract

Texts, language, communication should always be considered in their social context. Texts do not merely The article starts from the premise that the human body is the most complex synthesis of our artistic culture. The iconography of the body reflects the philosophical and ideological development of cultures, whereas its history shows the extent to which aesthetic and legal motivations, emotions and institutions are connected. In order to prove this point I considered mandatory revisiting the main epochs in which significant changes were produced in the visual representation of the human body. The different manner of rendering the body in art depends on social, political and religious contributions which underpin not only a peculiar style in depicting the human body but also the production of a specific way of seeing, as art organizes and describes our perception field. This allows one to trace the shifts in representing the human body and to grasp the meaning behind them, in order to get a glimpse of the main historical periods. The research focuses on several epochs: Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, neo-classical period, nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the changes the human body suffer in the manner it is depicted but also in the way it is perceived. The exhaustive attempt in addressing the representation of the human body throughout centuries is also motivated by the fragmentary relationship the contemporary individual has with the past, sustained by a here and now attitude, having its roots in the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century.

Keywords: human body; artistic culture; visual representation;

1. INTRODUCTION

Being an artist who has constantly been exploring the possibilities of painting as an artistic medium of expression, I ended up addressing the human body as a motive in multiple series of my works. The investigations I have pursued in my studio have always been underpinned by theoretical research. I always thought that a contemporary artist has to be modern and, in order to stay modern one has to be up to date with the historical unfolding of art in order to understand the present artistic trends and to pursue innovation.

Some art movements, developed in the twentieth century, broke with the past and also with the art system (avant-garde movements) or chose to access it in a rather detached manner and ended up, in the opinion of some theoreticians (Jameson, 1991, p. 95), to create an art full of signifiers which lack meaning. Considering mandatory to be in touch with the past in order to meaningfully develop in the



present, I embarked on a research which focuses on the close connection between art and the political, social, technological fields, pinpointing the transformations the representation of the human body underwent along the centuries, in order to reveal the influences projected on art by outside entities. (Przyluski, 1942, p. 85)

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The research makes use of key works in art history, sociology of art, anthropology of art and art theory. The references draw on Erwin Panofsky studies on iconology, Dan Hăulică lyrical approach of main art movements and prominent figures, the writings of Pierre Francastel which cover a wide range of subjects in both history of painting, sculpture and architecture, the work of Alfred Gell which analyses the dynamics of the relationship developed between individual and the surrounding objects, Fredric Jameson's harsh writings on postmodernism and the changes the art underwent in the last decades, Amelia Jones and RoseLee Goldberg exhaustive studies on body art and performance.

The article "Considerations on the Human Body in European Art" is different from the other similar ones for its focus on several historical periods, making accessible an overview of the changes which occurred in the representation of the human body. In spite of a fragmentary presentation, I pursued a complex approach of the topic.

3. ARGUMENT OF THE PAPER & ARGUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE THESIS

The article is, in fact, an investigation of the close relationship between political, social, religious and technological fields and art. The article tries to find answers to the following questions. Which is the most persistent motive in European art? What changes has it suffered along the times? What drove these shifts in representation? What entities were impacted by the unfolding of these changes? Who are the main actors that projected these influences on art? To find the answers to all of these questions one must look at art in the context it was produced in order to understand how it shaped the artwork belonging to that period. Art theorists for example Baxandall stated that there is a clear analogy between culture-specific aesthetics and period-specific aesthetics. The reception of art of peculiar periods in the history of Western art depended on how the art was seen at the time. (Baxandall quoted in Gell, 1998, p. 2-4) One will discover that the ways of seeing change over time.

Briefly revisiting the history of European art and its most persistent recurrent motive aims at proving that the variations on the iconography of the body mirror the philosophical debates, the social and technological changes and the current ideology. The main objectives of this article are to familiarize the reader with the major changes in depicting the human body, with the actors who produced them and the epochs which accommodated them in order to get a glimpse of the peculiarity of these historical periods and the way the socio-political and technological changes impacted on art.

Revisiting European art, both modern and contemporary, confirms the role model of Ancient Greece which imposes its interest in the human flesh. The Greeks were the first to impose the body's natural beauty, presenting nudity as symbol of human dignity, a democratic effigy of original equality. Initially reserved to the male body, nudes in Greek art idealized the triumphs of the athletes in the arena or the representations of the deities in the religious pantheon. Later on, female nudes reached art, hence the endurance to present times of Praxiteles's Aphrodite of Knidos or the famous Venus of Milo. Body harmony was synonymous to the supreme good for the old Greeks.

The pride of the beautiful body showed itself beyond aestheticism and the resorts of a mere sensation: it stood for a serious inalienable sign of civilisation". (Hăulică, 1984, p. 171) The difference between the Greeks and the barbarians, according to Thucydides, is marked in a civilising sense, from the moment nudity becomes rule at the Olympic Games.

The nude and image of the human flesh, along with the overcoming of prejudice in various époques, will display many cases of deformations. Christian art in the first centuries AD, then the art of the Middle Ages came with profound changes in the representation of the human body. Nudity almost disappeared from artistic themes and the concerns of the artists during the respective period; only the depiction of the Adam and Eve couple endured as symbol of the original sin or the Judgement Day scene when resurrected humanity awaits its verdict in the divine trial of the divorce of good from evil. In Christian art, the human body was not related directly to the real world and bore little resemblance to it,

circumscribing to a transcendent universe. The anatomical plot was subjected to mental schemes, and not anatomical guidelines.

Regarding art and figuration, the Middle Ages can be characterised by the succeeding of the two great systems of representation: the Byzantine and the Gothic one. As starting point for a formal stylisation, the Byzantine system draws on the fixed articulations of the human body, whilst the Gothic one dissociates qualitative representation of movement by the conventional structure of the bodies. Despite all these, not the entire art of the Middle Ages may be labelled as free of illusionist intentions with an intended dissociation of the representation of realistic bodily structures from movement.

Renaissance, which meant the spiritual rediscovery of man, reintroduced nude representation in fine arts as essential entity of the universe and not as element of sin. Although they aimed at resurrecting the spirit of ancient nudity, the Renaissance artists created a new vision on the human body. The analysis and the anatomical study following nature imposed an image of the nude which was closer and closer to reality. The science of the nude as a specific Italian discipline was brought to perfection by the creations of Renaissance titans such as Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Nude becomes since 16th century, sort of an intellectual emblem, when the human body is imposed as one of the main elements of Western artistic education. This emblem is similar to the case of the perspective approach of composition. The artists in question approached ideal forms of the body and space, a result of a learned meditation taking into consideration the presence and the position of the viewer. The study of anatomy revealed to the artists the possibility to handle science, as well as a certain intellectual elevation, thus switching from the area of mechanical art to the field of liberal arts. Nude and the human body will triumph in the era of Renaissance as an expression of intellectual ambition.

Anatomy, in search of proportions on the study of form, proposed elements of geometric idealisation. The proportions of the human body were postulated as model for architects by Vitruvius and plenty of comparisons were made between architectural elements and the human body, revealing a condition imposed in relation to the great doctrine of macrocosm-microcosm. The image of man with his hands stretched and height that can be circumscribed to both circle and square, fundamental figures of the universe, is the product of the fusion between cosmological traditions.

The image of Leonardo's *ad quadratum* and *ad circulum* man is symmetrically represented. Symmetry was understood and applied differently in works of art throughout time. Despite the prevalence of symmetry in the architecture and sculpture of the great epochs, in the case of Egyptians' painting, "care for an exhaustive enumeration of the elements of information rules over absolute regularity in balancing elements within the limits of the figurative plan, hence implicit symmetry of the object rather than figuration". (Francastel, 1972, p. 242) Erwin Panofsky, in a study on Egyptian art showed that the artists of the period understood art as an objective transfer in raw matter of a spiritual, eternal reality susceptible to a double approach, namely sensitive and intellectual. (Panofsky, 1983, p. 130)

The 18th and 19th century come with profound changes in the representation of the human body. The court art of the 18th century created a new nude model, an exponent of an equally daring and refined eroticism. Artists such as François Boucher or Jean Honoré Fragonard painted compositions of mythological themes, portraying sensuous nudes at the edge of the licentious.

The neoclassical period at the beginning of the 19th century preferred the heroic nude, bearer of high moral virtues. Walking on the footsteps of their great forerunner, Nicolas Poussin, the French Jean Louis David and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres were the creators of the classical nude that idealised anatomical data to display perfect human prototypes. Although sometimes artificial, because of too learned seeking, these nudes mostly dominated the taste of the century.

Towards the end of the century, Edouard Manet breached this consecrated model, imposing, in compositions such as *Breakfast on the Grass* and *Olympia*, nudes without any mythological connotation simply inspired from real life with anatomical effects and disproportions inherent to a live model. Vehemently contested during their time, these paintings marked the onset of Impressionism, an artistic movement that revolutionised the art of the end of the century and decisively influenced the artistic creation from the beginning of the 20th century.

Nicolas Bourriaud in his latest book "The Exform" pinpoints the real reason of the scandals ignited by the famous works of Courbet (*The Origin of the World*) and Manet (*Lunch on the Grass*). In his opinion the works reveal the gap between real and the ideal, between matter and ideology. (Bourriaud, 2017, p. 80) „In turn – Edouard Manet – experienced the same rejection with his "Lunch on the Grass"

inasmuch as the ideological basis legitimating the painting had been removed, history and myth expelled, and the idea of the pastoral concerto banished, the public could no longer see anything but two students in the company of women of ill repute.” (ibidem, 2017, p. 81)

Despite belonging to the avant-garde group of the impressionists, Degas had been an admirer of Ingres since his youth. To the impressionism promoted by Monet or Renoir, he opposed a substantial objection: the exact sensation is in fact of the mind, before being a visual one; there cannot be another way to see without a new means to think. For Degas, the artist is not a receptor, a screen that projects “the immovable movement of Creation”; the painter is a being capable to capture reality, to bring space close to him. In his works, the space of life, the one beyond the painting is to be continued in it. (Argan, 1982, p. 320) For Degas, the human body cannot be an abstract entity, always the same one; its actions have physical and psychic causes that the individual sometimes is not aware of.

Modernity had to come for the deformed body and its breaking into pieces to stop being the place of symbolic or narrative organisation. Pablo Picasso was equally considered the greatest innovator and destroyer of 20th century art; he distorted and metamorphosized the human body until it stopped being nude and became an almost abstract symbol for the intensity of psychic feelings. It seemed it reached the threshold of non-figurative art and would disappear as artistic subject. New currents brought it back to the pipeline. Surrealism which was concerned with the richness of oneiric states and the mysteries of the unconscious drew on the theme of the nude as an essential subject. (De Micheli, 1968, p. 191) Artists such as Salvador Dalí, René Magritte or Paul Delvaux prioritised the nude in their creation. Hyperrealism employed the nude to achieve images in which he presented as thoroughly as possible the motive in order to compete with photography.

The expressionist paintings depict the tragedy of the tough years for Germany and Austria. Otto Dix’s painting, “Three women” draws on the myth of the three graces. Stylisations, the rhythm of the drawing, the interest and curiosity for anatomy prove that taking on illustrious models reflects the perfect recall of art history while simulating its oblivion. (De Micheli, 1968, p. 262) Expressionist nudes propose a game of densities, of the pondered imbalance of forms, either too thick or too thin.

The creation of another great artist of the 20th century, Matisse, reflects the faith that art may still hold the supreme truths of existence, the infinite harmonies of the universe. For Matisse, the beauty cannot be a finite form, but a continuous and rhythmic one. Human bodies stretch and bend themselves in a rhythm that transforms them and their particular beauty, a physical, not cosmic one, which cannot be broken from its space of movement. (Argan, 1982, p. 93)

Frankness defines the contemporary attempts in question where the most important ones aim at reviving the language of the human body, often going as far as the casting (Segal or Kienholz). Body Art pushes frankness even further replacing the image of the body in fiction by the living body itself, as material, as readymade. (Landstrom, 2018, p. 61) Since Documenta 5, Rudolf Schwarzkogler proposed a sort of “narcissism of the ugly”, and Lucas Samaras’s demonstrations, dating from the same period, also proposed to us an “exasperating autobiography of the body”; an autobiography of meaningless events based on late Dadaist slogans. Some advocated that “Everything is art”.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As in the period prior to contemporaneity, the object materializes the behaviour of an epoch; it contains utility values and social ones from which some of its aesthetic qualities derive. Performance art and body art best mirror the relationship between art and the socio-political field, as it was developed against the logic of late capitalism and its harmful effects. Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Marina Abramović’s works aimed at restoring the capacity of empathy and blaming the violence of Vietnam War. (Goldberg, 1988, p. 181)

Drawing on their bodies as materials for art production, was an attitude opposing the limits of traditional mediums of expression but also a response to the way the capitalist system impacts the art market, transforming the artwork in a commodity. Employing the body made possible to elude the requests of the market, to create something quite difficult to be sold, as the only ephemera left were photographs / video footage and thus challenged the status and the material nature of the artwork. (Jones & Warr, 1998, p. 25)

5. CONCLUSION

Briefly revisiting the main developments in the history of art, the oldest communication of thought, one notices the presence of the human body as one of the recurrent motive which records the changes in depiction which took place during the centuries. (Francastel, 1970, p. 123) As nothing can be more direct, natural and present in our concrete experience, than the human body, its constant presence in the artists' explorations comes naturally. At a closer look one can discover that the relativity of conventions in rendering a peculiar subject is nowhere else more present than in the case of this motive, hence the particular interest in the topic. The changes in representation were driven by various factors: socio-political, religious, philosophical.

In order to engage in a deep understanding of the artwork behind one's eyes, is important to also analyse the artwork in the context it was produced, to move further from the detached contemplative experience. The artwork has a seminal role in communicating thought between people and acquiescence of aspirations and needs by every era. The artist does not only record sensations, but also a show of objects taken over from outside in his individual activity. The human eye is not an isolated sense, we only see what we know, and the retina does not show more than a gathering of immediately identifiable objects in a well-established framework. We perceive and distinguish only those things that correspond to determined demands by the levels of culture. In this case, the object seen depends on other forms of knowledge.

By means of what has been previously presented, we may argue that art facilitates the fixation of images that contemporary man forms in his mind or experience in society; artists are creators of forms that will then serve as language of the time in which they live.

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