

University of Pécs, Faculty of Music and Visual Arts, Doctoral School

Ferenc Gnándt

Fraction,

aka the issue of the liberated spectator in contemporary art

DLA-dissertation thesis

Supervisor: Dr. habil. Ernszt András DLA

2023.

The starting point of the essay, which lingers in the background throughout, is Arthur C. Danto's statement that art cannot really intervene in the development of life, i.e. it cannot change anything.<sup>1</sup> To refute this, I invoke, although not directly, the thought of the emancipated spectator as posited by Jacques Rancière. The central proposition of this idea is that the artistic foundations that have emerged from the theoretical debates of the last century have completely crushed the sensitive position of the receptive being, which must somehow be changed. The essence of this argument is that art must restore the consciousness of the spectator.<sup>2</sup> My premise is, contrary to Danto, that art is in fact capable of doing so, even if it has to leave all the usual conventions behind.

Nevertheless, my thesis does not specifically elaborate Rancière's thought, but merely uses its spirit as a kind of invisible guide. I will attempt to explore whether and how the idea put forward by the French philosopher is feasible. This aim, however, remains hidden all along, and only slowly begins to emerge as the text progresses, to be formulated as a sense of arrival at the end of the essay. To this end, I am introducing various theories into the exposition, which I assemble in the context of unravelling a given work of art in such a way that it eventually justifies the possibility of the hypothesis. The essay is structured accordingly along a series of questions and the answers sought to these questions, to conclude with a specific statement regarding the idea of the liberated spectator.

I have chosen the work<sup>3</sup> of Diogo Pimentão cited in the introduction of this piece of writing at random from the countless works of similar quality. The fact that I chose him has no significance whatsoever. I simply found his work and the methodology of its formation to represent a type of creation that provides an excellent reference point for the development of the theme. On the one hand, it reveals a relationship between creator and recipient that brings us closer to Rancière's spirit. This consists of nothing more than inviting the viewer to work

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Danto: *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Budapest, Atlantisz Publishing House, 1997. Translated by Eszter Babarczy. p. 16. ff.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière: *The Emancipated Spectator*, Kunsthalle, Budapest, 2011., Translated by Miklós Erhardt, p. 11. ff.

<sup>3</sup> Diogo Pimentão: *Fraction (déployée)*, Galerie Yvon Lamvert, Paris, 27/02/2012  
<https://vimeo.com/38558394#> = Downloaded: 2023. 06. 08.

together rather than to relax<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand it leaves the viewer alone to formulate a qualitative value judgment without any explanatory text. Precisely because of this, it is an excellent way to ask the very first question I need to ask about it to start my train of thought. Where does the use of explanatory guides come from in the reception of a creative situation? As a first step, I will approach the question in the context of the changes in the perception of art over the last century, drawing on the book cited by Danto. Ultimately, Danto's train of thought, by referring to Duchamp, comes to the familiar statement, through the self-definitional constraints of art, that what makes an object a work of art today is the interpretation attached to it.<sup>5</sup> He calls those responsible for interpretations "experts", who, despite all their good intentions, have a decisive influence on the judgement of a work. They reveal to us what they want us to see. In doing so, they prevent the viewer - consciously or unconsciously - from establishing a clear relationship with the work of art. This is the influence from which, according to Rancière, the recipient should be freed.

At this point, to counteract this influence, I am introducing an idealistic creative mechanism that can help to free the viewer from interpretation. As a basic premise of this type of creation, I define, on the one hand, its content, which I define as a representation of reality. On the other hand, I will determine the temporary detachment of the creator from the art world, which may justify the fulfilment of the content criterion. To illustrate this, I will highlight one work by each of two other artists - Mátyás Fusz and Endre Koronczai - and present the advantages and pitfalls of this methodology. For further exploration of this issue, I will use the remarks of Horst Bredekamp, who shows how the body has played a major role in the process of creation since the Greek era.<sup>6</sup> Both from the creator and the receiver. Accordingly, in the concluding section of the essay, I will approach the subject from an explicitly bodily perspective. This is in accordance to Henri Bergson's observation that, in order to create works aimed at achieving reality, perception must first of all be developed. In his view, interpretations, and even technical

---

<sup>4</sup> „Pimentão's drawings are indeed a process of engagement with his own body but also with the environment they are placed in.” [ ... ] „Pimentão's work places the viewer in direct relation with an object in the space; an object that does not represent anything, but rather presents itself.” (personal translation)  
<https://kentlertgallery.org/Detail/exhibitions/380> Downloaded: 2023. 06. 08.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur C. Danto: *work cited*. pp. 53, 91 and pp. 147–171.

<sup>6</sup> Horst Bredekamp: *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, Typotex Publishing House, Budapest, 2020., Translated by Edina Nagy, pp. 9–45 *passim*

exaltation, are all intended to compensate for the weakness of perception.<sup>7</sup> Since perception is an absolutely bodily and not an intellectual process, an approach that explores the relationship between the body and qualitative judgement is needed.

This is the basis of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics. His main hypothesis is that by practising body awareness, both aesthetic perception and the quality of aesthetic execution can be developed, which can ultimately (also) bring about changes in self-awareness.<sup>8</sup> My thesis is that the development of self-awareness can create the possibility of what Rancière calls for, i.e. the viewer regaining his or her consciousness. To this end, of course, I consider the role of art to be crucial. That is to say, unlike Danto, I consider it to be capable of having an impact on the life of the individual. To achieve this, all we need to do is refresh our relationship with our bodies - both on the part of the creator and the receiver - and develop a way of living and working based on an inner experience rather than on externalities. I find these statements to be in line with Byung-Chul Han's assertion that today's man is under societal pressure to chase an ideal self-image instead of focusing on finding his true self.<sup>9</sup> I apply this statement not only to everyday life, but also to the fine arts. In this light, I contrast the type of artist who proceeds along conventions (ideal self) with the type of artist who concentrates on experiencing the supposed whole (real self). For the possibility of an encounter with the real self to be realised, I will conclude by presenting Shusterman's practical ideas for this.

Throughout the text, the thoughts on the subject are not presented as unfalsifiable statements. The literature used for this essay is not particularly unexpected, almost all of it being familiar to those who think about the visual arts. Therefore, what is expressed in it remains at the level of assumptions throughout, and the slightly different conclusion is only a stable whole because of the specific way the literatures are read. For this reason, it can be stated that the majority of the work does not contain any previously unknown lines of thought, and that its novelty is expressed in the final section. Shusterman's somaesthetics is a very young discipline, and as such it is still regarded with a great deal of scepticism. At least in the visual arts. In theatre, dance and music, and more recently in architecture and design, the attitude towards it is

---

<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson: *Creative Evolution*, In *Ibid. General idea of the evolutionary process. Essays and Lectures*. L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2012. Translated by András Dékány pp. 106–115 *passim*

<sup>8</sup> Richard Shusterman: *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. JATEPress, Szeged, 2015. Translated by Sándor Krémer, Rita Antoni, Botond Csuka, Róbert Pavlovski, Ágnes Konkoly, Zsuzsanna Bodóné Hofecker, pp. 127–150.

<sup>9</sup> Byung-Chul Han: *The Burnout Society*, Typotex, Budapest, 2019., Translated by Dóra Miklódy, Ágnes Simon-Szabó, pp. 87–88. ff.

much more friendly. Many areas have been using Shusterman's ideas for years, even employing a dedicated practitioner.

It seems that the visual arts are a little behind in this respect. My thesis can therefore be seen as a kind of call to action. There is an interdisciplinary approach to the creative process, which, although it is not data-driven, may contain segments - especially in the practical field - that could open up new paths for both creators and recipients.

Accordingly, the following statements are expressed in the dissertation:

- The basic position of art that has emerged from the theoretical debates of the last century has completely overwhelmed the sensitive position of the receptive being, which must somehow be changed.
- According to Danto, art is incapable of doing so, because it cannot change anything.
- In my view, Danto's statement can be refuted if the place of the act of qualitative judgement is defined in relation to the body rather than the spirit.
- In the course of the idealistic method of creation proposed, the creator periodically detaches himself from knowledge, i.e. he shuts out the interpretive, comparative aspects of his spirit, so that his perception of quality is transferred exclusively to an inner experience guided by his senses.
- This detachment is not to be confused with the phenomenon of passive resistance, but rather with the exercise of Nietzschean exclusionary instincts. Thus, instead of placing his gaze or his mind at the mercy of external stimuli, the creator directs it in a sovereign manner. In this sense, in opposition to the state of *vita activa*, he articulates by his action the necessity of reviving *vita contemplativa*. This can be seen most clearly in the way in which he shifts from the profane homogeneous conception of time to the Bergsonian duration, i.e. he immerses himself in the realm of the time of the sublime. (Byung-Chul Han)
- In the process of compressing the intangible experienced by reason of the suspension, i.e. the neutralisation of the intellectual aim, into a work of art, this intangibility will be expressed in the resulting work, strictly not in narrative form.
- These works generate in the viewer an uncertainty at the level of self-assessment, which shifts his or her identity out of the comfort zone of the belief that it is unassailable. The experience of

this displacement is ultimately what, as an unforeseen consequence, triggers a self-exploration focused on self-reflection and self-perception.

- Through this mapping, the recipient can reach a stage where he or she can formulate independent value judgments about him or herself. In other words, over time, he or she can gain a clear, uninfluenced sense of self. This is in fact the fulfilment of Rancière's expectation that the viewer can regain the self-consciousness he has lost under external pressure.

And at the same time, the possibility of the artistic act as a manifestation of life is fulfilled, which can serve as a refutation of Danto's condemnation.

- In general, the works of art produced in accordance with the idealistic method of creation cannot be sharply distinguished from other works of art, i.e. they cannot be distinguished from the rest by their external characteristics alone. Their difference is internal - that is to say, it is not datable - and I define this difference in terms of content, as an attempt to represent reality, which is essentially activated by the desire for autonomy.

- The body, as a biological factor, plays a central role in the act of both creation and reception. (Bredenkamp) Movement has a direct and decisive influence on thinking, and thus the physical has a mind-forming power. The key word is periodicity. Accordingly, the body gradually emerges from the background and, shaking off the hitherto generally accepted marginal approach, takes a position of prominence against the mind.

- In order to promote the idealistic type of creation outlined above, the act of perception must be developed first and foremost. Since perception is fundamentally bodily, it follows that development must be conceived explicitly in terms of the body and not in technical terms.

- Shusterman's somaesthetics, by theorizing body awareness, asserts that through the continuous monitoring and coordination of specific bodily skills at the individual level, we can improve both our aesthetic perception and the quality of our performance.

- The creator that practices body awareness can thus become capable, by suspending himself from conventions, of creating a work of art in which the intangible reality is expressed, which can generate in its spectator a desire for pure self-knowledge. In this light, it can be argued that the application of a creative method approached from the direction of the body, with a direct effect on the individual, can contribute to the fulfilment of Rancière's wish, i.e. to the recovery of the viewer's self-consciousness lost under external pressure. For this reason, too, it is possible for

art imbued with body-consciousness to be able to touch reality, and thus to bring about a life-changing transformation.

## Bibliography

Arthur C. Danto: *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Budapest, Atlantisz Publishing House, 1997. Translated by Eszter Babarczy

Byung-Chul Han: *The Burnout Society*, Typotex, Budapest, 2019., Translated by Dóra Miklódy, Ágnes Simon-Szabó

Henri Bergson: *Creative Evolution*, In *Ibid. General idea of the evolutionary process. Essays and Lectures*. L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2012. Translated by András Dékány

Horst Bredekamp: *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, Typotex Publishing House, Budapest, 2020., Translated by Edina Nagy

Jacques Rancière: *The Emancipated Spectator*, Kunsthalle, Budapest, 2011., Translated by Miklós Erhardt

Richard Shusterman: *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. JATEPress, Szeged, 2015. Translated by Sándor Krémer, Rita Antoni, Botond Csuka, Róbert Pavlovski, Ágnes Konkoly, Zsuzsanna Bodóné Hofecker

## Internet Sources

Diogo Pimentão: *Fraction (déployée)*, Galerie Yvon Lamvert, Paris, 27/02/2012  
[https://vimeo.com/38558394#\\_=\\_](https://vimeo.com/38558394#_=) Downloaded: 2023. 06. 14.

<https://kentlerygallery.org/Detail/exhibitions/380> Downloaded: 2023. 06. 14.



<https://mome.hu/hu/hirek/uj-esszekotet-veres-balint-es-richard-shusterman-szerkeszteseben>

Downloaded: 2023. 06. 14.