

Form as an art form

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The title of my paper may seem pleonastic at first glance. Indeed, when form is discussed in artistic circles it is taken for granted that art form is meant. What is more, artists, which includes architects and designers, art historians and critics comprehend the word form as an art form in the fine arts and, in more general terms, as any explicitly, artistically structured information. To be even more explicit, the printed word as well is visual information, yet it appears in the artistically structured information as a surface structured in a particular way and not as a form accessible to reading. Thus, I believe I have at least pointed in the direction of my argumentation by trying, in the most general terms, to discuss the question of art form in the visual arts: the world of visual information constituted by a specific artificial realm of forms which we experience, read, arrange and proclaim as works of art. Here the term form denotes a visual event taking place beyond a clearly defined line dividing the natural universe of forms and the domain of man-made forms, i.e., the defined and selected realm of artistic forms. The shaping process is therefore a conscious, deliberate process of transcending that dividing line. The motives for this act may be very different, ranging from the supernatural to the religions and to the purely artistic. The goal of pure design is the execution of a specific (artistic) vision. I placed artistic in parentheses because design as well can serve quite a practical purpose (industrial design) following its vision, and is ultimately not only artistic. The consequence of giving substance to a specific vision, be it ever so incomplete, is usually the artistic expression producing great creative satisfaction in the artist. For our purposes, artistic expression is the most interesting. It is usually always accessible and therefore the object of many different investigative approaches. On the other hand, creative pleasure, creative satisfaction, creative compulsion or whatever we might call this motivating, compelling, creative drive, does not lend itself to scientific scrutiny and is therefore not important from the expressive viewpoint of artistic achievement.

At this point we have arrived at the work of art proper, i.e., its expression which in nothing but its form. In its form lies a specific message: But what is, in fact, the message. When in a work of art we recognize the performers, establish their interrelations – here I have in mind primarily painting and sculpture – we have succeeded in understanding the depicted theme, but have

in no way grasped its content. The content lies much deeper having to do with the essential characteristic of the work of art – its expression. I would like to introduce at this point another term which may shed more light on the issues at hand – experience. Expression and experience are words currently used as more general terms also in architecture, landscaping and design. Experience is a hierarchically higher notion embracing a work of art in its totality, while the »reading«, the interpretation of the theme, the story line do not come close to the substantive core of the work of art. These may be of some help to the content, but they can not, as a rule, comprehend an artwork in its global dimension.

Content can not be simply equated with beauty. It is true that beauty used to be the chief motivation for artistic creation. More recent times however have ushered in the images and manners which would be considered erroneous by every aesthetic rule of the past. The attained objective would for this reason be exactly the opposite of the goals of artistic creativity of the past: the result of such artistic endeavour would be ugliness, unattractiveness. It was this necessary to introduce, at this point, the notion of experience which is, in terms of content denotation and in terms of beauty/ugliness, more neutral. It allows us to experience everything that is ugly, disharmonious, incomplete, fragmentary, in short everything we were taught by the contemporary fine arts, as an aesthetically fully valid event.

At this point we must ask ourselves how do we approach content? How do we fathom expression? How do we clarify experience? In Antiquity and even in the late Middle Ages people were prepared to believe that beauty laid in the regularity of features in the measure.¹ This meant nothing more than the observance of rules *determīning* relations and proportions. Artistic inconsistencies which occurred due to the passage of time and change in taste – let us simply call them styles – were not understood as the law of evolution. The notion of progress, in our acceptance of the term, simply was not possible because of the very slow evolutionary process, which further buttressed the impression of immutability of social attributes. These discrepancies were understood as the consequence of unskilfulness, primitivism, barbarianism, etc. Consequently such artistic *idiosyncrasies* of the past which conflicted the contemporary aesthetic postulates were rejected, opposed and often scorned. The same aesthetic principle regarding form as a true harmonious arrangement of elements in a work of art was universal and was applied to the classical art of Greece and Rome as well as to Romanesque and Gothic art. The essential changes in terms of form could take place much later, as late as the dawn of the modern age which I place at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Hegel's proclamation of the end of art (He of course meant the

1. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, »Dzieje szesciu pojęć« (1975) and »O doskonałości« (1976), *Istorija šest pojmova* (History of Six Concepts), Nolit Beograd, 1981, p. 212, 214 sq.

eclipse of traditional, stylistically comprehensive concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.) in fact marks the very first application of scientific methods to the humanities and the arts. If historians – Les Bolandies already in the 17th century wanted – without impediments we can here use the term scientifically – to verify the historical sources which were to attest to the sanctity of saints, we may also trace the notion of a scientific approach to art back to the close of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Initially it was a matter of investigating the historical patterns for the needs of ever more exact replicas of Antique art and later of the various historical styles. Still later, scientific methods, namely the observation of the formal characteristics of artwork, were used to establish authorship and date of production. Form thus became the object of scientific scrutiny. At this point we must note that it was precisely the Vienna school of art history in the tradition of Wickhoff, Riegl and Dvořák² which excelled in the detailed observation of formal changes in the work of art itself, as well as in the broader, comprehensive formal clusters. The Slovene scientific investigation of art also belongs to this school.³ Form therefore abandoned its traditional area of generally valid, more philosophically than rigidly formally defined framework and became a sensitive gauging apparatus for all kinds of categorizations. Time had come when form in its new role had to shift over to an area of a new system of categories, in other words, to develop a conceptual device for lower and higher levels of classification. The word form now became the decisive element in the definition of style. In other words, only through meticulous observation of artistic form and with the new historical and curatorial orientations was it possible to discern the differences which were not based on the random differences of the artists' hands in the various periods, but could be placed on a common denominator, a joint, formal kinship which the science of art named style. In general terms, the historical styles, as the key determinants of the major artistic shifts, took shape. Let us leave aside the fact that already by the end of the 19th century there was no clear-cut term for Romanesque, or that authors can not agree on the exact boarder between Renaissance and Baroque. What is essential is that we do distinguish between styles as the most general formal category of a given age; that we distinguish between the different regional styles (Italian Renaissance/Nordic Renaissance, and even narrower styles); and that we discern details of a personal style which permits us to establish the author of a work of art and consequently its significance in the advancement of artistic individualism.⁴ However, this procedure was not

2. Julius Schlosser, »Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte: Rückblick auf ein Säkulum deutscher Gelehrtenarbeit in Österreich«, *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Instituts für Geschichtsforschung*, Wien, 1934, Erg.-Bd. 13, Heft 2.

3. Nace Šumi, »Pot in aktualne naloge slovenske umetnostne zgodovine«, *Pogledi na slovensko umetnost*, Ljubljana 1975, p. 13-27.

4. On the contribution of the Vienna School of art history, cf. Schlosser, *op. cit.* We should

purely mechanical. It is precisely the evolution of ideas on style, in the spirit of the Vienna school of art history, which shows that its prominent representatives always kept in mind the necessary spiritual background which led Max Dvořák, the last eminent representative of this school, to proclaim the art history on styles as the history of the spirit.⁵ It is rather paradoxical that at a time when the word style cries out to be written with a capital letter, when it exalts in a very romantic way the spiritual unity of the period, which could alone give rise to a common, unified style,⁶ there was no chance whatsoever of the emergence of a single, comprehensive style. Excessive individualism and the emerging materialism of modern times was blamed for this failure. Can one therefore speak of a paradox, namely that the period which discovered style, stylistic changes, the so-called stylistic advancement, – which the well justified methodological path drew into the dangerous waters of Darwinism – could only give rise to styles, but not to a Style? The answer is no. It is simply a matter of a »natural« phenomenon: The same spiritual process which made 19th-century art dependent on the past and committed to Style, could not, according to its inner logic, produce Style on its own. The explicitly rational character of thinking at the turn of the century, in conformity with its logic, produced two orientations: the formulation of a Utopia, in our case a visionary prediction of a new, all-encompassing Style which of course presupposes a new spiritual unity in one of the ages of the future and the belief in a new omnipotent style which would be simply designated and implemented by order. We know all too well where such attempts occurred in the present century. But reality is different. Already at the beginning of the century the apparatus of classification, which was elaborated by art experts and applied to the different and concurrent historical styles, failed; the path from here to the personal style and back, by way of artistic trends, currents, etc., was simply lost. Form as a significant point of departure for the vast expanses of style has become significant only for brief excursions into its immediate vicinity. It remained essential for the evaluation of a work of art as the vehicle of message, but in now way suitable for exclusively formal interpretations. All kinds of iconological methods, psychological investigations, psychoanalytical approaches to the spiritual background of form and many others were necessary. These attest to the inadequacy of a purely formal approach from the viewpoint of the all-encompassing style. Consider a situation where architecture in terms of different styles, was broken down, after several

mention Heinrich Wölfflin's main work *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe; Das problem der Stilentwicklung in der neuern Kunst*, (1915), Basel/Stuttgart 1956.

5. Max Dvořák, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistgeschichte: Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*. This is a selection of his important treatises edited by Johannes Wilde and Karl M. Swoboda, München 1924.
6. Izidor Cankar, »Razstava moderne dekorativne umetnosti v Parizu,« *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino*, Ljubljana 1925, pp. 104-108.

centuries of evolution, into its fundamental formal elements: surface, cube, sphere, cylinder, opening ... into painting and sculpture which also experienced the disintegration of their mimetic substance into less and less coherent surfaces and volumes; when finally there is no more beauty and ugliness, no more ordered elements, no more unity; it all becomes »mood«, abstraction; no more image or sculpture; no more shapes, only *artfulness*,⁷ if it is at all possible to talk about it. Perhaps it is merely a matter of professed selection of artfulness in a specific natural or artistic environment. In short, modernism confronts us with a host of different artistic events which are ever so slightly linked to the traditional definitions of form as bequeathed to us by history. For the needs of the criticism of modernist and avant-garde trends, several new forms of critical evaluation had to be devised along with the formal categorical apparatus. A major obstacle emerged with the shift of the artistic focus away from the object of art i.e., the work of art and towards the artist himself. The basis of evaluation is this no longer, or at least no longer exclusively, the artwork itself with all its formal ingredients, but the artist and his actions.⁸ The yardstick is no longer the artistic or the aesthetic, but the ethical; it deals with the artist's personality as a whole, his life, or as we have already stated several times, his existence in the manner of art. It is true that the work of art is still revealed to us in terms of its formal attributes, these however becomes incomprehensible outside the context of the artist's decisions, mentality, education, in other words, outside his personal mythology. Today these questions can be answered satisfactorily only by trend-setting art criticism. All others remain for the time being inadequate. Nevertheless form still seems, in connection with style, such a crucial scientific tool that the profession of which I am a part, finds it hard to neglect. In the interwar period and in our country during the post-war period the formal view, the observation of formal changes acquired a significant new and essential dimension. Strict observation of formal properties of works of art and their stylistic arrangement on this basis was coupled by the structural approach. This is the view of the »cross section«: the traditional definition of the stylistic attributes is enlightened for the side. The specific formal composition is contemplated also from the general vantage point, and we introduce into our judgement the impression of the whole, the atmosphere, the context or the ambience, revealing a deeply rooted and crucial *inner stylistic principle*⁹ beneath the surface of the stylistic language or stylistic labelling. In marginal areas, outside the artistic mainstream, an artist can often use more traditional, conservative formal tools and still manage to express himself in a contemporary way. This formal and

7. Edvard Zajec, »Orphics: Computer Graphics and the Shaping of Time with Color«, *Leonardo, Electronic Art Supplemental Issue*, 1988, pp. 111-116.

8. Pierre Restany in an interview for the revue *Start* no. 320, Zagreb, 25 April .981, p. 19.

9. Šumi, *op. cit.*, p. 19 sq.

structural methods proved successful in the specific historical artistic trends. We try to develop it also in the contemporary art criticism along with trend-setting criticism and have high hopes to succeed because in the opposite case there would be no reason whatsoever to seriously address form as an art form.

more ordered elements, no more unity it all becomes 'mood', 'moodiness', 'moodiness' if it is at all more image or sculpture, no more shapes, only 'atmosphere'. It is at all possible to talk about it. Perhaps it is merely a matter of professed selection of artifice in a specific natural or artistic environment. In short, modernism confronts us with a host of different artistic events which are ever so slightly linked to the traditional definitions of form as pedantically taught by history. For the needs of the criticism of modernist and avant-garde trends, several new forms of critical evaluation had to be devised along with the formal categories. A major obstacle emerged with the shift of the artistic focus away from the object of art, i.e., the work of art and towards the artist himself. The work of evaluation is this no longer, or at least no longer exclusively, the artwork itself with all its formal ingredients, but the artist and his actions. The verdict is no longer the artist or the aesthetic, but the ethical; it deals with the artist's personality as a whole, his life (as we have already stated several times, the evidence in the domain of art, it is true that the work of art is still relevant to us in terms of its formal attributes, these however become incomprehensible outside the context of the artist's biography, mentality, education, in other words outside his personal mythology). Today these questions can be answered satisfactorily only by trend-setting art criticism. All others remain for the time being inadequate. Nevertheless, form still seems, in connection with style, such a crucial scientific tool that the profession of which I am a part, finds it hard to neglect. In the interim period and in our country during the post-war period the formal view, the observation of formal changes acquired a significant new and essential function. Strict observation of formal properties of works of art and their stylistic arrangement on this field was coupled by the structural approach. This is the view of the 'cross-section': the traditional definition of the stylistic analysis is originated for the 1950s. The specific formal composition is contemplated also from the general vantage point, and we introduce into our judgement the impression of the whole, the atmosphere, the context or the ambience, revealing a deeply rooted and crucial 'stylistic principle' beneath the surface of the stylistic language or stylistic language. In marginal areas, outside the artistic mainstream, an artist can often use more traditional, conservative formal tools and still manage to express himself in a contemporary way. The formal and

1. Edward Tufte, "Of Visual Complexity and the Dumbing of Time with Charles Sussman," *Graphic Arts Quarterly*, vol. 1988, no. 11, p. 11.
 2. Peter Krečić, "Aesthetics for the 21st Century," *Journal of Art History*, 2004, p. 19.
 3. Ibid., p. 19.