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## WHEN IS ART INTERACTIVE?

**Abstract:** The contemporary Bulgarian art scene is dominated by the parlance of artistic interactivity, whose main goal is seen in overcoming and replacing traditional modes of dealing with art, which consist mainly in its passive (visual) contemplation. The paper combines an analysis of the term “interactive art” with a critical reconstruction of the opposition between the eye and the body, which seems to rest on an incorrect understanding of the historical tradition of Western art as well as on a dubious transfer of a dispute from philosophical metaphysics into the domain of art theory. The conclusion is that in the case of traditional art, in the sense in which contemporary Bulgarian authors understand the latter, there has never been a principled impossibility for the audience to transcend the passive role of the observer. Moreover, interactivity has to be defined much narrower in order to make sense as an autonomous artistic category. The paper ends with a reflection on how history of ideas and philosophy can complement each other when conceptual issues of the kind exemplified by the speaking of “interactive art” are at stake.

**Keywords:** interactive art, art for contemplation, Western European artistic tradition.

In this paper, I would like to take a position that is situated between the disciplines of the history of ideas and philosophy. I hereby pursue the following goals:

1. To present certain trends that have crystallized in recent years both in Bulgarian art and in the debates that are taking place in Bulgaria regarding the place, role and functions of contemporary art. To summarize, one main interest of the artists and the audience is oriented toward a greater role of the interactivity between audience and artwork.
2. To critically reconsider some basic theoretical premises related to the term “interactive art”, which in recent years has become established in Bulgaria and is being instrumentalized among other things for the purpose of conceptualizing contemporary aesthetic and artistic trends.

3. To try to draw some generalizations about the way we should think about the interaction between artistic practices and the accompanying theoretical reflection; the two are not the same and should not be identified accordingly.

In the contemporary debates on the question of the direction in which Bulgarian art should develop, so that it exceeds the limitations of the national tradition, a major role is played by the opposition between art intended for visual perception and, accordingly, for contemplation, and art where the author and/or the viewer's body plays a major role, being drawn into various actions, thus erasing the boundary between a work of art and its audience. An example can be given with the theoretical work of the contemporary Bulgarian artist Venelin Shurelov (Венелин Шурелов), who discusses the need for art to focus on problems and issues that are relevant to the problems of contemporary society (Shurelov, 2020, p. 8). Shurelov of course does not speak as a philosopher, but as an artist conceptualizing his own artistic activity. Nevertheless his example is significant, given that in the quoted text the so-called interactive art is contrasted with the traditional one, in which the artwork functions as an object and is even fetishized (*ibid.*). I believe that the quoted article expresses a way of thinking that has informally dominated the contemporary Bulgarian debate on the visual arts in the recent years.

In this case we are talking about the processes that take place in a particular artistic tradition, but I think that careful analysis is able to reveal something about the proper ways of conceptualizing emerging art forms *per se*. So I will critically trace the genesis of said opposition and try to answer the question of how adequate it is and how much the term "interactive art" itself, understood in the given specific way, is able to become an artistic category, with the help of which we can give thought to various phenomena and trends from the contemporary world of art.

From the point of view of the history of ideas, it is obvious to me that the contrast between looking (and thus the eye, i.e. visual perception) and the body, in its capacity as a direct participant in the processes of the world, sounds very close to a common conception of the history of Western philosophy that contrasts Martin Heidegger with the intellectual tradition that preceded him. To put it in the most simplistic terms, the thesis states that traditional Western, Cartesian metaphysics postulates the existence of two substances – matter and soul – and therefore believes in the objective and ahistorical knowability of the world by the sciences. In contrast, Heidegger's critique of metaphysics overcomes the subject-object divide, declaring untenable the claim that the self constitutes a kind of

tabula rasa, which discovers the external world only in its encounter with it. Subject and world are intrinsically linked; any attempt to take an absolute viewpoint “from nowhere” is doomed to failure.

The details of Heidegger’s critique of Cartesian dualism are well known – a useful reconstruction of it is to be found on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy website (Wheeler, 2020), where, among other things, a special article dedicated to the specifics of Heidegger’s aesthetics is available (Thomson, 2019). At this point, I am unable to go into detail about the German philosopher’s conception of art and his claim that artworks reflect on the cultural and axiological “picture” of a given social community at a particular moment in history, which is at least arguable as to its ability to capture some basic intuitions of the interested artworld public. In any case, Heidegger makes use of the opposition between the work of art, which we perceive as an entity separate from other social and cultural practices, converting it thus into an object of aesthetic perception, and true art (*ibid.*, see Section 2.2. “Heideggers Critique of the Aesthetic Approach”). I do not claim that every contemporary Bulgarian author and critic does refer explicitly to these specific theories, but I am of the opinion that attempts to break with a – real or imaginary – tradition of alienating the viewer from the artwork should be thought of in the light of the various intellectual fashions that have dominated our artistic and academic community since 1990. A major part in the course of this process has been played by the reception of Martin Heidegger’s philosophical project of overturning the subject-object dualism.

As a next step I will go straight to some critical remarks that are relevant when attempting to transfer said philosophical dispute to the realm of art. First, here we are dealing with a discussion that, as is usually the case in philosophy, is far from reaching its final resolution (which perhaps will never happen anyway). At the risk of further oversimplifying the exposition, I will say that in today’s philosophy of mind the so-called dualism remains one of the possible options with respect to the mind-body-problem and it has its supporters. The German philosopher Holm Tetens, for example, discussing the peculiarities of philosophical argumentation in his book of the same name, ranks linguistic dualism among several other options for the treatment of the philosophical problem in question – eliminative materialism, functionalism, etc. (Tetens, 2004, p. 274). The conclusion is that unlike the development of the other sciences, where the new encompasses but also elaborates on what has been reached so far for the understanding of a given slice of reality, in the case of philosophical metaphysics it cannot be said that a given account can undo what another aims to achieve. For better or worse, philosophical knowledge progresses in a completely differ-

ent way than scientific knowledge: over time, different positions and theories become more and more precise, able to more fully “map” the conceptual interdependencies that make up our thinking. However, the fact that theoretical reflection always remains underdetermined by empirical data means that it is difficult to arrive at a unified and definitive philosophical vision of the world. Like advances in chess, knowledge of the different types of positions in the game is increasingly refined, with no universal algorithm devised that leads to victory every time. This issue is very convincingly dealt with in Pigliucci (2016), where the specific differences between natural science and philosophy are elaborated in detail.

To repeat, for me the important question is what justifies the transfer of philosophical problems into the sphere of art? If we assume that in the place of “art for contemplation” should come “interactive art”, then the analogy with philosophical debate is fundamentally inadequate, since there, as we have seen, progress does not consist in replacing one system unconditionally with another.

Second, it is fundamentally questionable to what extent looking, i.e. the visual perception of fine art, not only has its origins in, but in some way reflects the claims of Cartesian metaphysics. As is very well known, the viewer’s gaze within the art world is never innocent, and this is probably even true of those examples of “first” art that have played such an important role in a number of theoretical debates in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the one about the definition of the term “art”. We do not need to resort to elaborate theories to convince ourselves of the truth of the claim that, as a cultural practice, visual arts emerged long before Descartes and his metaphysical convictions. Even if we assume that the French philosopher was fatally mistaken in his aesthetic views (though I am not aware that he has ever spoken on this point), this would tell us something only about the quality of his theory and is far from proving that he influenced thinking about art in Europe over the last four centuries. In principle, it does not sound very convincing to assume that Descartes has almost single-handedly somehow succeeded in steering the development of art in a direction that should be overcome today. Neither a theoretical analysis of the ways in which we learn and use the concept of art nor empirical data are compatible with generalizations of this kind.

A further major problem in this case is the fact that the visual perception of art is only thought of as a cultural phenomenon, not a biological one. In contemporary philosophy, there are numerous attempts to apply the knowledge and discoveries of the natural sciences, especially cognitive science, to the arts. The processing of visual information by the eye and the brain, respectively, is being studied, and empirically detectable reac-

tions of the human organism in its interaction with art are being sought. These problems have been presented recently in a concise and accessible way in the section on “art and science” in Noel Carroll’s and Jonathan Gilmore’s volume on the philosophy of fine art and sculpture (see quotation below), where light is shed on various debates that deal with the relationship between the visual arts and the findings of neuroscience. Attempts to reduce art, and therefore culture, to processes occurring at a biological level in the human brain can certainly be seriously criticized – something similar is done, for example, by David Davies who, when discussing the relationship between empirical data and philosophical reflection, claims, that “[...] the principal philosophical task is to arrive at a codification of the practices thereby evidenced” (Davies, 2018, p. 74). I agree that the goals of philosophical analysis are fundamentally different from those of empirical science, but this is not the important point here. I would like to emphasize that the reasons for conceptualizing visual perception exclusively in terms of its real – or imagined – susceptibility to ideological constructs are far from clear. Such a perspective is highly simplistic and one-sided; the natural sciences offer a very different interpretation of the phenomenon, with which, regardless of any stipulations and remarks, modern theory should comply.

Adopting a more general perspective, it is necessary to ask whether, in the history of art, one can speak at all of the abolition of the old by the new. Is it not more adequate to assume that as a result of extremely complex processes of a cultural, aesthetic and intellectual nature, the historical development here is expressed in the displacement/marginalization of some artistic and aesthetic norms and expectations (“paradigms”) by others? As in philosophy, so in art, there are developments and accumulations: it is obvious that we are not in a position to “rewind the tape” at will, resurrecting in all its peculiarities, for example, the age of Mannerism. Ultimately, however, nowadays happenings and paintings exist as co-equal artistic phenomena, rather than being situated in a diachronic, much less teleologically organized, line of historical progress. Different artistic forms are no doubt capable of realizing a variety of purposes, but experience shows that expanding the repertoire of possibilities for relating to other spheres of life does not put an end to the tradition that has already been formed and continues to exist.

From the point of view not only of the direct participants in the processes in the modern world of art, but also of the interested (i.e. professional) public, it is necessary and also valuable to have both art for viewing and art in which the viewer – in whatever form – can participate. For quite a few representatives of contemporary Bulgarian art, whether they are artists,

critics or theorists, the latter is more important than the former (see Shurelov's article quoted above). In agreement with what I have just said, however, I am of the opinion that the real progress lies not in moving entirely into the paradigm of interactive art, but in enriching the existing aesthetic landscape with it. According to Jerrold Levinson's article (Levinson, 2017) it is exactly at this point that the positions of the artist and the "aesthete" differ in a fundamental way. Levinson's analysis reminds us of the important fact that the various inhabitants of the art world pursue their own interests, which do not always overlap (*ibid.*, p. 483) – an interested observer may welcome a diversification of the artistic forms in a given cultural context, ignoring the practicing artist's perspective, which usually tends to remain exclusive and shaped by a "tunnel vision" (*ibid.*, p. 482).

The sociological observations made so far should be supplemented by a conceptual analysis, to which I intend to devote myself in the remaining part of this text. As is well known from the work of Dominic McIver Lopes, the very term "interactive art" is quite problematic. Taken too broadly, interactivity loses its sharpness and ceases to do philosophical work (Lopes, 2001, p. 67), because ultimately every engagement with a work of art is in some way interactive – the reading and interpretation of a novel, for example, in which the reader's body obviously plays a very minimal role, requires a cognitive effort, the activation of the imagination and so forth, so here we are already justified to talk about a manifestation of activity on the part of the audience. Lopes therefore proposes a much narrower definition of the term (Lopes, 2010, p. 37), generally defining as interactive the audience-induced change in the structure of the work's so-called vehicle (be it a narrative, a visual image, a musical structure, etc.). Further distinctions follow, e.g. between "strong" and "weak" interactivity, the differences between which are explained by using analogies drawn not least from the field of computer (role-playing) games. A similar account of interactive art is offered by Shelby Moser in the volume by Carroll/Gilmore already mentioned. In contrast to Lopes, she uses the terms "digital" and "interactive" synonymously (Moser, 2023, p. 52), directing her efforts again towards the formulation of criteria with the help of which artistic interactivity can become an operative category which could be implemented in our commerce with art. Without going into details, I would like to stress that both authors speak of interactivity in terms of the modification of the medium of the artwork, but not the effect this process has on the physical state of the viewer (i.e. the interactor). Provoking a bodily reaction on the side of the audience can certainly be an element of the overall conception of the particular work, but obviously does play a minor role in the philosophical analysis of the notion of artistic interactivity.

For my purposes, it is important to reiterate that I do not deny the existence of art in which the audience is somehow involved and invited to participate directly, nor that I doubt the value and meaning of such art. On the contrary, it may very well turn out that an artwork, which the viewer does not just look at (that is, contemplate it, as René Descartes probably would have done...), but does something, plays a very important role in making sense of a number of cultural, political and social processes taking place in the contemporary world. But the important question from a philosophical point of view is whether interactive art understood in this specific sense can be conceptualized as a separate category.

Let us return to the notion of the “body”, which obviously plays a major role in the postmodern thinking, being opposed to the non-participating eye of the adherent of traditional metaphysics. In the analysis of the term “interactive”, as it is used in contemporary Bulgarian discourse, it remains fundamentally unclear whether the body – be it the body of the author or that of the spectator – is thought of as the subject of the respective work or as a factor in the appreciation of the latter. We would hardly find anyone who would dispute the claim that there are masses of varieties of art forms and practices, both pre and post Descartes, in which the spectator becomes a participant on a corporeal level. Dance is just one example, but the same is true in cases where the artwork is part of a ritual – e.g. the worship of icons in an Orthodox church, processions with icons, etc. The active role of the audience is a necessary element of *some* artistic traditions, but not of art in general. Bulgarian contemporary art, for example, discovered the body in various manifestations since the early 1990s, in which a major role has been played precisely by the questioning of the norms and conventions of the socialist period, in which art was understood as the traditional forms of painting, sculpture, etc. Of course, such trends and their significance cannot be explored without taking into account the historical and cultural context of their emergence and development, and here one cannot help but acknowledge that the socialization of the body for aesthetic purposes is an important moment in the course of the synchronization of Bulgarian art with the cosmopolitan tendencies (see Zankov 2019). But such observations are of a historical/empirical nature and do not help us much in our search for the conditions for the adequate use of the term “interactive art”.

Either way, if we shift the historical gaze from these particular examples towards those artistic periods and phenomena that do not belong to the context of “high” art, we find that there has never been a monolithic tradition requiring the viewer to passively contemplate art. Moreover, it is obviously an incorrect historical generalization that only modern art

forms have thought to make the spectator a participant. We arrive at the problem that has preoccupied more than a few philosophers of art from the second half of the last century onwards, which consists in the observation that neither conceptually nor in purely empirical terms should the world of art be thought of as obeying universal rules that apply once and for all and everywhere.

Finally I will present one more remark, which may sound trivial, but seems to me quite important in this case. If we proceed from the assumption that there are interactive tendencies in contemporary art, taking Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics, then one of the conditions for defining the phenomenon as an autonomous artistic and aesthetic category is postulating in the audience an explicit awareness of the philosophical debate in question and of its particularities. It seems to me, however, that in actual practice one is unlikely to find many spectators/participants who attend a performance or happening with the thought that they are having a metaphysical dispute with the Cartesian tradition, and that through their actions they are presenting first-person counterarguments against this specific dualist ontology. At best, these issues are the domain of a very small circle of authors and viewers, and it is generally debatable whether the latter have the necessary professional knowledge to be able to go beyond the parameters of the specific work and address a range of objections and criticisms of the kind I present in the current paper.

In conclusion, it can be said that the reconstruction of the ideological genesis of the talk about interactive art, taking place in the contemporary Bulgarian intellectual and cultural context, is a different task compared to the attempts to define it as an appreciative kind (again in the terminology of Dominic Lopes, see Lopes, 2010, pp. 17–18). The encounter of peculiar difficulties in the course of this endeavor, of course, in no way means that the interest of contemporary Bulgarian artists in the body cannot and should not become an object of research interest. However, the latter should maintain awareness of its own historical and sociological character. Following the distinction made by the British philosopher Derek Matravers between “contextual” and “acontextual” questions that can be asked regarding art understood as a social practice (Matravers, 2014, pp. 4–5), the research in this case should focus on the particularities and dynamics of the specific context, without pretense of arriving at statements about art in general.

Thus, in the end, we come to the fundamental question, whether and to what extent the introduction of new artistic and/or aesthetic terms only reflects, or also influences the processes actually taking place in the world of art. There is an obvious difference between the identification of certain artistic phenomena, which, as we have seen, is often served by insuffi-

ciently precise formulations, and the systematic theorizing on the latter. I hope that with my paper I have been able to shed more light on the way in which, at least in my view, the history of ideas and philosophical analysis should complement each other when the here and now of the art world is under scrutiny.

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