

# Space, time, and the arts: rewriting the Laocoon

Sven-Olov Wallenstein\*

Department of Culture and Communication, Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden

## Abstract

The article investigates the role of concepts of space and time in development of aesthetic autonomy and the emergence of the system of the fine arts. Tracing this theme from the paragone debates in the Italian Renaissance, through Dubos and Lessing up to Hegel, it argues that the connection between the arts in terms of a general “aesthetic” theory required the emergence of the subject that unified them in terms of reception, and that this dimension of subjectivity also made possible a fundamental difference between the spatial and the temporal arts. Time as subjectivity and interiority, as opposed to space as objectivity and exteriority, would for a long time define a certain modernity of the arts, and when this entanglement gradually comes to be undone, in a process which is far from finished today, we are perhaps witnessing a new mode of the sensible and a different capacity of the aesthetic to reconfigure subjectivity.

**Keywords:** *Jean-Baptiste Dubos; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel; aesthetics; space; time*

In the Renaissance a series of distinctions were forged, which for a long time formed the horizon for our pre-comprehension of the differences between the arts. These distinctions elaborated and transformed the ancient debate between painting and poetry, but they also introduced a separation, and even quarrel, between painting and sculpture, and in this they prefigured one of the essential articulations in the “system of the fine arts” that came into place sometime around the middle of the 18th century, in the writings of Charles Batteux and the French encyclopedists. These distinctions had a double edge: not only did they continue and considerably extend the ancient debate between poetry and the visual arts, but they also opened up a general difference between two- and three-dimensionality in terms of a division between the respective forms of materiality of painting and sculpture. The arts began to be compared in a complex series of cross-references, and they were grouped together in different combinations, although the overarching sense of “fine art” was still lacking, because the idea of

*techne* as *making*, organized into a poetics of rules, still held sway. The connection between the arts in terms of a general “aesthetic” theory required the emergence of the idea of a *subject* that unified them in terms of reception, and of the mind as an interiority, which had to wait not only for the emergence of the Cartesian subject, but also for the undoing of the hierarchy of the faculties that located *aisthesis* below the capacity for concepts, and for the emancipation of sensibility from its rationalist constraints, which took place in a process leading from Baumgarten to Kant.

The emergence of the subject would also make possible the fundamental difference between the spatial and the temporal arts. Time as subjectivity and interiority, as opposed to space as objectivity and exteriority, would for a long time define a certain modernity of the arts, and when this entanglement gradually comes to be undone, in a process which is far from finished today, we are perhaps witnessing a new mode of the sensible and a different capacity of the aesthetic to reconfigure subjectivity.

---

\*Correspondence to: Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Department of Culture and Communication, Södertörn University, Alfred Nobels allé 7, Flemingsberg, 141 89 Huddinge, Sweden. Email: sven-olov.wallenstein@sh.se

## THE PARAGONE AND THE QUARREL BETWEEN THE ARTS

In what is arguably the founding text of Renaissance art theory, Alberti's *On Painting* (1435), we can see how the "history" unfolding behind the perspectival window is made possible by the becoming-imaginary of the picture plane. This imaginization of the support, which results from the application of the rules of perspective projection, is one of the essential inventions that give painting its specificity and its legitimacy as a liberal art: painting possesses a theoretical knowledge and not just a set of practical precepts, and thus partakes of ideality in a twofold sense, both as program and as a visible artifact.

In the wake of Alberti, these debates grew into a literary genre of its own in the writings of the Humanists, and it received the name *paragone* (comparison), a form of discourse where the different arts fought over the question of priority.<sup>1</sup> This body of texts, which sometimes took the form of dialogues where each of the arts had its particular advocate, eventually established what we, using a modern term, could call the phenomenological ontology of the visual object. The dichotomy between painting and sculpture here attained a theoretical foundation through the manipulation of a series of conceptual pairs such as two- and three-dimensionality, imaginary depth and real space, mental and bodily, optical and visual, which would remain in place until the advent of modernism, and perhaps even until its end. In these analyses of materiality, of the nature of the support, the position of the viewer, and the idealizing function of perspective as a *costruzione legittima*, the metaphysical premises of modern art emerge as a kind of proto-system, and when painters at the end of the 19th century began to question the nature of these conventions, they initiated the latest, although undoubtedly not last, cycle of discourse on representation. The distance between the initial Renaissance debates and the early modernist questioning with its high level of historical self-reflexivity is of course immense; and yet it could be argued that the possibility of the interrogation of the nature of an artistic medium, and the question whether its nature can be immediately read off its material properties or must be understood in terms of a set of historically

shifting conventions, emerge for the first time in the *paragone* literature.

There are two basic sets of questions in the *paragone*, the first traditional, the second strikingly new. In the first, we find attempts to derive the different arts from a common root, often described in terms of the formula borrowed from Horace, *ut pictura poesis*, and to assess their respective claims. In this argument the visual arts are treated as a unity and contrasted with poetry, with the intent of raising one of them, most often painting, to the level of a liberal art. A typical case of this would be Leonardo's proposal that painting is closest to poetry in its imaginative capacity, but that it at the same time, due to the superiority of the eye over the ear, can be said to be the highest art: "If you assert that painting is dumb poetry, then the painter may call poetry blind painting. It may be said, therefore, that poetry is the science that serves as the pre-eminent medium for the blind, and painting does the same for the deaf. But painting remains the worthier in as much as it serves the nobler sense and remakes the forms and figures of nature with greater truth than the poet."<sup>2</sup> Painting and poetry are not different with respect to their ultimate aim, but nevertheless their techniques and effects render one of them superior to the other.

In the second set of arguments, painting and sculpture must be distinguished as rival arts, and this is a new twist, whereas the comparison between painting and poetry had been established since antiquity. This new division seems to operate along four related axes.

First, we find the question of the *support*, in relation to which painting appears as an art of addition, and sculpture as an art of subtraction. In the introduction to *De statua* (1486), Alberti formulates this idea, although in fact only in order to dismiss it, when he notes that certain people like to include painters in the class of artists who neither model nor subtract, but who add.<sup>3</sup> Michelangelo, when answering to the questionnaire sent out by Benedetto Varchi almost 60 years later asking artists to define the two visual arts, states this point unequivocally: "By sculpture I mean the sort that is executed by cutting away; the sorts that is executed by building up resembles painting."<sup>4</sup> Sculptors remove what is unnecessary and discover the living form hidden inside matter, or its potentiality to assume a form, whereas the painter

adds layer upon layer on an underlying substratum, which thereby is negated, transformed, and finally resurrected as a new and second kind of materiality.

Second, there is the idea of an *optical situation* formulated as a difference between one and several perspectives. The question of the ideal position of the spectator was an issue already in Brunelleschi's first experiments with perspective, and it is later restated in terms of the correct distance that the spectator must assume in order for the perspective construction to function optimally. The difference between the arts here comes to hinge upon the idea that painting appears to have one and only one ideal optical viewing condition, whereas sculpture, due to its three-dimensionality, has several, which is often understood as a sign of weakness or inconsistency. This is strikingly corroborated, although in an *contrario* fashion, by a sculptor like Benvenuto Cellini, when he in response to Varchi's question reverses the normal argument, turns the weakness into a strength, and suggests that "sculpture is seven times the greater, because a statue must have eight show-sides (*vedute*) and all should be equally good."<sup>5</sup>

This polyperspectivism then generates the third question, which relates to what (somewhat anachronistically) could be called the *autonomy* of the work. Here, painting is perceived as less dependent than sculpture on the physical viewing situation, the lighting conditions, the placing in a particular room, etc., since it, as Leonardo proposes, "carries all its elements within itself."<sup>6</sup> Painting internalizes its relations and neutralizes its physical milieu, which inversely implies that sculpture to a large extent is determined by external relations defined by the milieu.

Fourth and finally, there is the issue of *illusionism*. Unlike the external materiality of sculpture, the interiority achieved by painting is "a matter of greater mental analysis . . . [that] compels the mind of the painter to transform itself into the very mind of nature,"<sup>7</sup> the technical dimension of which implies to transform three-dimensional real space, both in the sense of the depicted external objects and of the materiality of the support as a physical fact, into a two-dimensional plane, ideally speaking without thickness, in order to then project an imaginary space, which will be a second-order three-dimensionality. Whereas "the

sculptor creates his works so that they appear as they are," painting, Leonardo claims, is something mental, *cosa mentale*, and it stands over and above sculpture, the latter being an "extremely mechanical operation."<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, the support, the optical situation, interior and external relations, illusionism and materiality, in this sense form a conceptual square that regulates the exchanges between painting and sculpture, and it is precisely this grid that modernist art will attempt to dismantle, but in this process it also provides it with a new authority by projecting it as a historical backdrop against which modern art must assert itself in order to come into its own. This movement will lead from the rethinking of the status of the canvas as a material support in Impressionism, to the dialectic of late modernism and its various attempts to project the picture plane and various versions of "flatness" as the continually dislocated and postponed essence of painting, which would finally usher into the discovery of external relations, real space, and the interaction with the viewer in Minimal art. In Minimal art, the connection to real space will, however, no longer be understood as a reason for the subordination of sculpture to painting, but rather as the task of emancipating both from the constraints of illusionism. The transfiguration of the artwork into the "specific objects" of Donald Judd, determined precisely as *neither* painting nor sculpture (although they look more like sculpture, they are in fact the consequence of an interpretation of paintings of Pollock and Newman, as Judd famously stresses) is the first decisive step in this process, and it would quickly give way to others, which, as we will see, can be read as a violent undoing of the space-time fix of the classical system of the arts.

## TOWARD THE SYSTEM

The renaissance grid, which attains its first systematic organization in Leonardo, and the comparison that juxtaposes the two "sister arts" painting and poetry and derives them from a common root in the imagination, remained relatively intact all the way up to Lessing's attempt to show that the visual and the verbal arts in fact constitute two autonomous domains, which provides the modernist quest for medium specificity with a particular emphasis, although the latter also

retains the internal logic of the renaissance conceptuality within the sphere of the visual arts themselves.

Here I will first delineate some of the decisive steps in this process of idealization as it develops up to the aesthetics of Hegel, where the system of the fine arts achieves its final and self-reflexive form, and where the relation between time and space forms the fundamental nexus that structures the hierarchy.

The two decisive turning points in this development are obviously the formation of the concept of *aesthetics*, from Baumgarten to Kant, and then the emergence of the *system of fine arts*,<sup>9</sup> which as it were circumscribes the corresponding “domain of objects” to which aesthetics can be applied. Leaving the idea of aesthetics aside in this context, we can see how the construction of this system, as we encounter it for the first time in the mid-18th century, displays a tension between at least two tendencies. On the one hand there is a synthetic drive toward unity, which brings together the arts from the point of view of the aesthetic attitude upheld by the spectator, and by the concomitant pleasure that they produce in him, both of which gradually begin to displace the idea of imitation of nature as the key concept. But on the other hand, there is an analytic drive toward dispersal, where the relation between time and space first appears as a threat to this newly established unity. It is only in Hegel that these two aspects are brought together and understood as the two systematic aspects of one integral process, but before we reach the Hegelian synthesis, we must briefly look at two intermediary stages, in the works of Dubos and Lessing, where the dispersive and unifying tendencies interact without being explicitly thought through as such, which produces a series of contorted figures and reflections.

In Dubos’ *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (1719), we see how the focus begins to shift from the artist to the spectator, and how the subjectivist precondition for the aesthetic conception of art emerges. The question is less how an artwork is made than how it is experienced, and what kind of function it serves in the psychological economy of the spectator. We always strive to avoid boredom, Dubos claims, and this is why we seek out spectacles that excite us, even potentially dangerous ones. The point about art and poetry is that they fulfill this need, although in a safe way,

and Dubos introduces a distinction between real and imagined passions, which may have been implicitly at work every since Aristotle’s analysis of *katharsis*, but here becomes an explicit analytic device. When we watch Racine’s tragedies or look at a painting like Charles Lebrun’s *Le massacre des innocents*, Dubos suggests, the depictions of murder and other atrocities only touch the “surface of our heart” (*la superficie de notre cœur*), we do not experience the horror that would overcome us in real-life situations, only a “phantom of passions” (*fantôme de passions*) and a “pure pleasure” (*plaisir pur*) that need no justification in terms of more noble ends, be they religious, moral, or scientific.<sup>10</sup> For Dubos, art is a quasi-reality that engenders quasi-feelings, whereas a perfect illusion would cancel the very sense of art in not allowing for the particular distance that is the essence of aesthetic experience. In this way, Dubos undertakes a fundamental secularization of art and introduces an idea of a pure aesthetic feeling that would eventually lead to the Kantian analytic of the judgment of taste as based on a “disinterested delight.”

When Dubos analyses the relation between painting and poetry, he first determines painting as necessarily spatial and timeless—painting freezes a moment, whereas poetry must develop a sequence of images that cannot avoid forming a minimal narrative. And if the two sister arts convey different experiences, the one being compelled to narrate, the other being unable to do so, it is also because the first uses “natural signs” (*signes naturels*), and not “arbitrary and instituted signs” (*signes arbitraires et institués*) like the ones used in poetry.”<sup>11</sup> Dubos then takes a further step, paradoxical but highly symptomatic of the semiotic ambivalence of the period: the signs of painting are really not signs at all, but *nature*, and this is the proper power of painting, to escape the redundant and otiose sequential order of narration. This also leads Dubos to an attack on allegory, which will find echoes in Lessing: in demanding too much knowledge, and above all of the wrong type, it cannot satisfy our immediate feeling, and to awaken and express such feelings is the true task of the artist.

Dubos’ text points in several directions, and it is more akin to a survey of problems than an attempt to a systematic solution. Many of these ambiguities are indeed dependent on the tension that we

have already noted, between the tendency toward synthesis (unity of the arts) and toward analysis (difference between the arts), both of which would come together in a precarious balance in the idea of a system of the arts. In our second example, Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766),<sup>12</sup> the centrifugal and dispersive tendency seems at first hand to prevail. Lessing dispels the authority of the petrified formula *ut pictura poesis* by way of an analysis, which can be understood as phenomenological and/or semiotic,<sup>13</sup> of how the work of art impacts on the mind, and he prolongs many of the ideas already found in Dubos, above all concerning the respective means used, and effects produced, by poetry and painting in terms of the distinction between arbitrary and natural signs, but he also rethinks this distinction on the basis of an explicit discussion of the relation between space and time. It is in fact only in the phenomenological dimension, where time as a form of interiority comes to be opposed to space as form of exteriority, that the semiological analysis is completed, and the aesthetic signification of the sign coincides with our experience of it as an inner, mental phenomenon. In this, Lessing performs an essential and decisive derealization of the physical substratum of the work, a process of aesthetic idealization, or an aesthetic *epoche* of sorts, carried out through the power of the imagination. The fact that it is easier to fool a man than an animal, as Lessing notes in a reversal of a long tradition since Pliny's account of the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, in fact shows that aesthetic perception is a properly human prerogative, and testifies to a dimension of freedom that pertains to the emancipation from the brute senses. This analysis will receive its final form in Kant, where judging relates to the inner harmony between the faculties of the subject and only in a mediate way to any objective features of the thing.

The crucial point in Lessing's analysis bears on what he famously calls the arts of succession and simultaneity, of which poetry and painting are the main examples (sculpture is strangely enough treated as a subsection of painting, which obviously produces fateful distortions, echoes of which can undoubtedly be heard in many formalist discourses on modernist art way into late modernism). Here too we should note that space and time function like ways of perceiving—"forms

of intuition," as Kant will say—and not qualities pertaining to the things themselves. On a *basic* material level there is no spatiotemporal difference between a painting and a poem, and both are indeed tangible objects just like chairs and tables.<sup>14</sup> It is only on the level of aesthetic intentionality that the aesthetic signification of their difference as art forms emerges, and this will be the respective ways in which they overcome, but in this also confirm, their respective "material limitations" (*materielle Schranken*): the meaning of a poem as an aesthetic object is that it should unfold in time, that its signs should form a sequence of before and after (even though we de facto may be able to look at a poem as one singular form, given in a single moment), whereas the meaning of a painting is that everything should be given at once (even though we de facto always need time, sometimes even a life-time, for the gaze to record all its various parts and their interrelations). For Lessing this means that the reader becomes more active in poetry than the spectator in painting—when Homer describes the shield of Achilles, he tells us how it was fabricated, not how it looks in its finished state, and the sequential structure of the narrative sets off an active and reconstructive response in the reader.

The title of the essay comes from the Laocoon sculpture, dating from the first century BC, although for a long time perceived as a much older work, which was rediscovered in Rome in 1506 and put at display at the Vatican, and ever since then had been the object of numerous interpretations and literary descriptions. What triggered Lessing's argument was however his immediate predecessor Winckelmann, whose 1755 essay on the imitation of Greek works in painting and sculpture contains a famous passage on the Laocoon, whose temperate and moderated expression of the utmost pain and horror he understands as a consequence of the "great soul" of the Greeks, their sense of measure, and of an ethos that privileges a "noble simplicity and still grandeur" over violent passions.<sup>15</sup> Lessing does not dispute the analysis of the withheld character of the emotions, but rather wants to explain them through a formal analysis. Whereas poetry can depict pain in its entirety, throughout its successive stages, the visual artist, due to the nature of his medium, must pick a "privileged moment," which is why he must subject to more

severe rules of balance and measure in order to steer clear of the ugly and repugnant. Poetry thus has a much larger domain than the visual arts, since it is capable of “dissolving” (*auflösen*) space into the movement of an inner time-consciousness, which produces a distance that allows the real to be reflected intellectually, and in this overcomes the “material limits” of art in a more complete and fulfilling way. Homer, Lessing suggests, is able to create both visible and invisible things, whereas visual artists must limit themselves to what is visible, which produces a degraded representation of things like the gods: the visual artists must show us the cloud that hides the god as if it were a material screen, whereas the writer, who draws on the abstraction inherent in words, may present us with the idea of the non-visible, and in this he can also direct our attention to moral and psychological processes that the visual artist can only allude to indirectly through outward signs. This is the root of poetry’s superiority, which for Lessing is part of a whole normative system with erotic, ethical, and political consequences.<sup>16</sup>

In this way Lessing uses the space–time divide as a way to create a hierarchical separation between the arts, and this idea will become increasingly important as the system of the arts approaches the theoretical completion that we find in Hegel. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, a systematic answer to the question of how we should conceive of their unity and difference becomes possible on the basis of this divide: the arts will form a hierarchical order, whose organizing principle is the gradual overcoming of “material” limits, underway toward a purified spiritual existence, which however does not simply repudiate materiality, but incorporates, comprehends, and transfigures it.

## THE HEGELIAN HIERARCHY

In the hierarchical system of the fine arts that Hegel established in his *Aesthetics*, the singular arts are understood as specific embodiments of the Idea, i.e. as ways in which it becomes a sensuous and individual shape. This hierarchy is based on the capacity of the idea to permeate and spiritualize matter, i.e. the substratum of the work, but also on the corresponding capacity of the substratum to achieve a spiritual existence. Each of

the fine arts is thus interpreted on the basis of its medium (stone, marble, color, sound, and language), of its respective material carrier, which all have their contingent features, but still can be organized into a meaningful hierarchy extending up to poetry, which at the end of spirit’s upward journey finally erases its medium, or more precisely gives it the status of a pure *means*.

*Architecture* is the first of the arts, the beginning of art, which means that it is characterized by externality. It is tied to the materiality of the earth, its medium is resilient and opaque, and only provides access to the spirit in terms of an interior difference. From the point of view of finality, it has its essential end outside of itself, since it must serve, relate to an exterior end—dwelling, shelter, religions functions, which all come from somewhere else. This is why architecture from the outset is a symbolic art form, and the spirit in its first stage is still unconscious, incarnated in stone and heavy materials that serve as an outer shell for an inner and hidden signification. The Egyptian pyramid is one of the prototypes for this first stage of art, but Hegel also provides us with several other examples: at the beginning of art, there is an irreducible empirical multiplicity of forms, a dispersal of chronological inceptions that all in a particular and contingent fashion attempt to speak the language of spirit.

The beginning can however not remain within itself, but already points ahead toward the subsequent form: as a symbolic art form, architecture procures a site for the god in the form of a temple, into which he enters as “the lightning-flash of individuality striking and permeating the inert mass, and the infinite, and no longer merely symmetrical, form of spirit itself concentrates and gives form to something corporeal.”<sup>17</sup> This second art form, the result of the lightning of spirit, is *sculpture*, where the beauty of the divinity merges with the human form, and the work becomes a self-sufficient presentation of the ideal, which is what leads Hegel to label it “classical.” The advent of the classical implies that architecture withdraws into a ground, as in the Greek temple where it supports the figure of the free-standing sculpture, and in this ways “serves” the subsequent art that in fact sublates it. In the eternal young man, the Greek *kouros*, a general individuality appears, the idea fully permeates its sensuous substratum, and produces, in a phrase

that rings of Winckelmann, “the independence of the Divine in its lofty peace and tranquil greatness, untouched by the disunion and restriction of action, conflicts, and sufferings” (625). But Greek sculpture has a decisive limit, since its individuality is still as it were *general*, and it lacks the infinite negativity of freedom and the for-itself. For Hegel, this lack is reflected in the empty eyes of the statues and in the absence of gaze, which is what allows man’s true individuality to shine forth: “His glance is what is most full of soul, the concentration of his inmost personality and sentient subjectivity. We are at one with a man in a handshake, but still more quickly in his glance. And it is just this clearest expression of a man’s soul that sculpture must lack” (732). In painting, on the other hand, “what appears by means of the shades of color is the expression of the subjective either in its whole inwardness or in its varied contacts with things outside and the particular interests, feelings and passions that they evoke” (732). First through the use of color, then through the face as the locus of the gaze, and finally through the performance of central perspective, which dematerializes the picture plane and opens an imaginary space, painting is through and through *cosa mentale*, as Leonardo claimed, it sublates the three-dimensionality of sculpture, and as a higher form of “mental” analysis—an analysis carried out *by* consciousness, but also is an analysis that dissolves the thing *in* consciousness—it carries its relations inside itself.

The third form, which is also the first “romantic,” i.e. Christian shape, is thus *painting*, which pushes the process of idealization one step further, so that the support itself becomes transparent. The perspective construction not only renders something visible, but has to do with visibility as such, with a light that does not simply fall on the object from the outside, but is located inside the things themselves, and is expressed in color. Its object is “no longer God as God, as the object of human consciousness, but this consciousness itself,” and it “permits the spiritual to shine clearly through itself” (625). Here individuality is presented as such, and not only as a general concept: the portrait displaces the abstracted individual of classical sculpture, and the naïve and non-reflected unity of the classical is opened up by the infinity and negativity of self-consciousness.

The fourth form is *music*, which overcomes the exteriority of space, and moves into time as a form

of interiority: the sound is a vibration and a temporal passage, and music does not remain like an external object, but is sublated into consciousness and memory. Music for the first time takes us beyond the physical reality of the plastic arts in the direction of a pure temporal ideality—an architectural, sculptural or painterly work remains locked into space, mute and enclosed in its corporeal form, which is what gives it its obverse and opaque dimension, whereas the material of music perishes and is absorbed in consciousness. As the second romantic art, Hegel writes, music is the “obliteration not of one dimension only [as in painting] but of the whole of space, purely and simply, this complete withdrawal, of both the inner life and its expression, into subjectivity” (889). Such a dematerialization is however achieved at the price of an almost complete absence of conceptuality; the negation of space only leaves us with time as the empty form of the concept, or an empty subjectivity as the mere form of interiority, but does not yet provide us with a conceptually articulated content.

At the top of the hierarchy, we find *poetry*, which unites the ideality of music with a semantic dimension. In this way poetry becomes the most universal of the arts, and it traverses all of the historical art forms to an equal degree. This linguisticity is also what draws it close to philosophy—it shows the ideal nature of conceptual language from the *other side*, as it were, where the concepts are still caught in sensuous shapes and are still unable to develop freely in the medium of thought.

Whereas Hegel’s analysis of poetry has been abundantly commented, and the sections on architecture, sculpture, and painting have all gotten their fair share of attention, the crucial role played by music in this hierarchical schema has gone curiously unnoticed (perhaps due to some of Hegel’s rather unappreciative remarks on the relative stupidity of musicians and composers). With respect to the conceptual grid established by Lessing, we can however see the key function of music: here, we for the first time transgress the “material limits” of the plastic arts and step into a temporal ideality. An architectonic, sculptural, or painterly work remains in space, it is mute and enclosed in its physicality, and always has an obverse and opaque dimension, whereas the stuff of music passes away and sublates itself into

consciousness. If painting is Christian, then music in a certain way already belongs to a Cartesian modernity: by causing matter to vibrate, it generates tones that takes leave of geometric extension, the *res extensa*, in order to form a resounding *res cogitans* in the “theoretical sense” which is hearing, more ideal than sight since it unfolds in the pure movement of temporalization which is the foundation of the soul. Time as pure negativity, as transition and passage, Hegel writes in another context, is the same thing as the founding structure of self-consciousness, “I = I.”<sup>18</sup>

Time sublates space, hearing sublates sight in an inward movement that leads from external materiality to the “inner sense” of the subject: such is the logic of sense that structures the Hegelian hierarchy. Unlike the kind of materiality of the first order that pertains to the visual arts, music immediately negates its own phenomenal appearing and produces a purely spiritual comprehension—and this purity is what pushes ahead toward the fulfillment in poetry, where the spiritual vibration of soul acquires a definite form, whereas music only registers “certain outlines of being—its ebb and flow, its growth, its upheavals, its turbulence,” as Merleau-Ponty will say much later.<sup>19</sup> Music lifts space into time, its vibrations transform matter into waves and flows that release a kind of theoretical ether that will lodge subjectivity, although this subjectivity also requires a definite shape and order, which can only be given by the semantic content of poetry.

In this way Hegel provides the systematic hierarchy of the arts with an ontological foundation (they are objectifications of spirit’s increasing self-possession), but he also carries out a kind of proto-phenomenological analysis that correlates each art to a certain configuration of the senses, and to different sensor-motor schemata. Each of the arts is open toward the other, their limits are porous and osmotic, and yet they remain different in their functions for the spirit and in the kind of experience they yield. Architecture wrests a human spatiality from the opacity and closure of the earth, sculpture and painting delineate the two successive stages of the human figure as the bearer of an universal subjectivity, music opens the interior of man as the site of the ideal, which poetry then fills with nebulae of still-vague concepts that are finally sublated by the conceptual

grasp of philosophy, where they are emancipated from their particularized linguistic materiality.

To become a philosopher would then in a certain sense—which is the production of *sense* as the element of philosophy, as opposed to the *senses* as an empirical dispersion of thought—imply nothing more (or less) than to either think poetry *in* its concept, i.e. as a movement that leads from the sensuous presence of language toward its level of pure ideality, or to start from the philosophical concept *of* poetry and then descend to its sensuous level—both of which mean to sublimate it, and in the end amount to the same. This is the source of one of Hegel’s most fundamental objections to the Romantic idea of a poetry that would surpass philosophy and produce a non-conceptual intuition of the absolute: poetry, and a fortiori all other art forms are already from the outset determined to be sublated and to pass over into their essence, which lies in the conceptual power of thought.

## REWRITING LAOCOON

Modernism will on the one hand attempt to transcend and invalidate all of these distinctions, but on the other hand also initiate a new quest for their common root, which is reflected in a continual oscillation between the transgression of media and the step into general idea of Art, and the insistence on a teleological process in which every art form is called upon to specify and circumscribe its own sphere of competence, which is understood both as given by “material limitations” (the physical structure of the support, the particular quality of pigments, brushes, chisels, etc.) and by a set of evolving conventions (preparation of the canvas, the techniques and styles of drawing, modeling, etc.).

When the most prolific spokesman of this second tradition, Clement Greenberg, gives on of his first programmatic essays the title “Towards A Newer Laocoon” (1940), he places himself in the tradition going back to Lessing, if not even further back, and the modernism that he defends assumes as its task to clarify and entrench each art within its own sphere. The task Greenberg sets himself is to understand why the process of modernism, at least now, in 1940, appears to lead in the direction of abstraction and purism, as a reaction against earlier attempts to transcend the division between the arts and unify them in a



synaesthetic model. The predominant feature of the present moment, he argues, is an increasing resistance within visual art to literature and to the priority of “subject matter,” and in this he draws on previous arguments by Roger Fry and Clive Bell, with their doctrine of “significant form,” but more distantly also on the division between the arts of succession and juxtaposition as defined by Lessing. The emancipation from the compulsion to tell stories—indeed from the whole tradition of *ut pictura poesis*—begins in Courbet, Greenberg suggests, “the first real avant-garde painter,” who “tried to reduce his art to immediate sense data by painting only what the eye could see as a machine unaided by the mind.”<sup>20</sup> This process of emptying out was then taken further in Impressionism, which reinforced the emphasis on the medium itself, and on pure visual and optical data.

But at the same time there is also an opposite tendency toward a merging of the arts, above all through the influence of music, which because of its immediately non-referential nature could appear as the model for the other arts, and Greenberg provides us with a broad synoptic view of several divergent tendencies, which in the end would seem to prohibit the very idea of something like a unified modernist movement. But in spite of this confusion, and almost as if through a kind of Hegelian cunning of reason, there appears an essential result. It is first when music comes to be understood as a *method* rather than a particular *effect* that the different paths converge: “Only by accepting the example of music and defining each of the other arts solely in terms of the sense or faculty which perceived its effect and by excluding from each art whatever is intelligible in the terms of any other sense or faculty would the non-musical arts attain the ‘purity’ and self-sufficiency which they desired; which they desired, that is, in so far as they were avant-garde arts.”<sup>21</sup>

This purity first and foremost comes across in the “acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art,” which for Greenberg here becomes equivalent to its “opacity,” above all in the visual arts, but also in poetry, whose medium, unlike everyday language, proves to be “sub- or supralogical.” The medium of the visual arts is however easier to separate from the sphere of everyday signification than the medium of poetry, and this is why they have

been able to attain a much more “radical” purity: “Painting and sculpture can become more completely nothing but what they do; like functional architecture and the machine, they look what they do. The picture or statue exhausts itself in the visual sensation it produces. There is nothing to identify, connect or think about, but everything to feel.”<sup>22</sup>

In Greenberg’s successor Michael Fried, the implicit temporal dimension of the “exhaustion” of the work in the “visual sensation it produces” appears in a more explicit fashion. His seminal essay “Art and Objecthood” (1967) stresses unequivocally the ideal and instantaneous quality of authentic modernist art: its task is to lift us out of everyday temporality (which Fried understands in terms of “presence,” the ongoing and uniform flux of mundane experience) and introduce an epiphanic moment that places us before a “presentness” that is also a “grace”—not unlike the *nunc stans* of classical ontotheology from Plato and onwards, the now as eternity that transcends time precisely because it is the origin of time, the source of the movement of temporalization. This seemingly remote association is in fact established already by the motto of the essay, drawn from the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards, speaking of how we at “every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen had we seen him create the world at first.”<sup>23</sup> Opposing himself to Minimalist art, which opens for an interplay between presence and absence, and transforms spectatorship into a corporeal and above all temporal event, Fried calls upon the true modernist artwork, which “at every moment [...] itself is wholly manifest,”<sup>24</sup> capable of compelling the conviction that we are faced with a true value, in an experience that itself is immediate, intuitive, and direct. The minimalist artwork, on the other hand, generates a free-floating and distracted “interest,” never the immediate, irresistible, and irrevocable experience of quality, which is what drives minimal artists to supplement this threatening void with statements and theories, in short: with language. In this, the challenge they pose to modernism is much more profound than the one of Pop art, Fried proposes, the latter being little more than an “episode in the history of taste,” whereas Minimalism “seeks to declare and occupy a position—one that can be formulated in words.”<sup>25</sup> The track of associations that was

established in Lessing still remains in place, even though the enemy is no longer the French academic discourse of *ut pictura poesis*, but minimalism and an emerging conceptual art, for which the intersection between image and word was to become increasingly important.

For those who opposed Fried, the same set of associations applied, although as it were traversed in the opposite direction. In his often-cited review of the posthumous collection of Robert Smithson's writings, Craig Owens famously suggests that we in the case of Smithson can observe a fundamental displacement of visual art from the visual to the field of language. In Owen's perspective, Smithson's work with texts and images, ranging from the early non-sites and text-photo essays to the later monumental projects, constitutes a kind of Baroque practice that allows for a return of the repressed unconscious in late modernist art, the "eruption of language into the field of the visual arts."<sup>26</sup>

The contemporary moment is undoubtedly characterized by the almost complete withdrawal of the discourse of medium specificity, from the advent of conceptual art and the "dematerialization" of the art object diagnosed in the late 1960s,<sup>27</sup> and the entry into a generalized space of "art" that can no longer be defined on the basis of material properties of any given art form. The historical importance of conceptual art was to liberate the perception of the art object from most of the traditional notions and oppositions that had structured it: reading and looking, thinking and feeling, the framing of the object, the contemplative position, etc. Similarly the undoing of the "aesthetic," contradictory and inconclusive as it was, opened up artistic practice toward a new indeterminacy, where the limits of "poetry and painting" were the first that had to be questioned. This did not mean that such limits were no longer drawn, only that they ceased to be predicated upon specific morphologies of the object, and that they lost at least some of their a priori status.

The problem faced by current aesthetic theory seems to be the complete inversion of the one that Hegel faced at the end of the classical tradition: for him the issue was to rescue the arts from their empirical dispersion and contingency, in order to prove that they were worthy of a philosophical reflection; today consensus states that there is no such thing, indeed *should* not be such a thing, as a

"system of the fine arts," that the arts are diverse practices linked together by historical contingencies rather than by any inner necessities. This centrifugal tendency is further emphasized by the contemporary development that transforms the individual work into something more akin to an event or a node in an informational network than an autonomous entity, as can be seen in the emphasis on the archive, on various forms of documentation (photographs, charts, written instructions, etc.)—a process that has been analyzed by Benjamin Buchloh in terms of an "aesthetics of administration,"<sup>28</sup> or, using another vocabulary, by Miwon Kwon as the transformation of the phenomenological and/or institutional site of the work into a "discursive" site: the work is an overlay of different places and times whose co-existence only appears in the discourse that holds them together.<sup>29</sup>

What would it then mean to rewrite the *Laocoon* today? The claims once made by Lessing, which Greenberg could propose to resuscitate in 1940, with Fried as the last successor in the late 1960s, seem hopelessly outdated in the age of virtual reality, and the overlapping, synthesis, or perhaps confusion, of the arts appears as an everyday fact that calls upon no further reflection. And yet it is equally true that the "limits of painting and poetry" have not simply disappeared, but have been transformed both into objects of investigation and tools for the practice of art. Just as the visual arts have become temporal through and through, so the linguistic arts have turned to a fundamental spatialization, within which the emphasis on "writing" as "spacing" in the 1960s perhaps still constitutes the theoretically most productive moment, but which began already in Symbolism, most visibly in the textual strategies of Mallarmé.<sup>30</sup> "Art" as a generic activity no longer obeys any ethical and/or aesthetic imperatives emanating from a discourse on medium specificity (of the type: one must acknowledge the "integrity" or "resistance" of *x*, for instance the picture plane), but rather uses the memory and archives of accumulated "specificities" as a reservoir, and the current use of the history of cinema in the visual arts would be a particularly interesting and complex case of this.

And on a more general level, in spite of all these momentous shifts, it remains true that the displacement of space and time that occurs in the

electronic image-world, the accelerating loss of presence and its reconstruction on the level of the simulacrum—which at the end of the 1960s appeared as an violent and almost apocalyptic loss of the real, for instance in the writings of Jean Baudrillard, but today has almost become part of our pre-reflective life-world—must itself be *experienced*, that the withdrawal of sensibility itself must become sensible, if only in the mode of deprivation and negation. And finally, maybe such a loss or retreat should not even be construed as something negative, but rather as that which gives thought, as that which, by withdrawing space and time from the subject, by uprooting the experience of subjectivity from its phenomenological anchoring, allows for an openness in which thought may again unfold. It is true that “sensibility” and the “aesthetic” are terms inscribed in a series of oppositions as old as Western metaphysics itself, of which Heidegger, Derrida, and many others keep reminding us. But just as the invention of the “aesthetic” in the 18th century—for which the space-time divide as understood by Lessing, and then by Hegel, was one of the essential tools—implied the possibility of a different “distribution of the sensible,” as Jacques Rancière says, and cannot be understood simply as an internal and as it were “local” reorganization of inherited conceptual building blocks, the contemporary undoing of these conceptual articulations should suggest new avenues for aesthetic theory. A contemporary *Laocoon*, were it to exist, could not be predicated upon a priori separation of the senses and of space and time as the divide that organizes levels of ideality, but must acknowledge the *constructed* quality of such a divide, and the fact that it also makes possible a subjectivity that does not precede it, but follows upon it, without simply being the effect of any direct technological causality.

In this way, the questions of perception, of the body, temporality, etc., in contemporary cinema, visual arts, and architecture indeed still have a decisive phenomenological dimension, which both is and is not the same as the one opened up in Lessing’s *Laocoon*—the question being what kind of changes phenomenology and the vocabulary that it was instrumental in producing as well as stabilizing, predicated as it was upon an idea of time as interiority as opposed to space as exteriority, need to undergo if it is to provide useful

tools for the analysis of subjectivity as it appears at the beginning of the 21st century. An essential task of aesthetic theory today would be to lay the groundwork for the construction of such a mode of analysis.

## NOTES

1. The debate would continue more than half a century, and in 1546 the humanist Benedetto Varchi circulates a questionnaire asking the most illustrious of the contemporary artists, among them Michelangelo and Cellini, to make their views on this issue public. He compiles the answers into a large survey, which even had a further successor in Raffaello Borghini’s *Il Riposo* (1584), which is the most complete survey of the arguments. The answers to Varchi’s questionnaire can be found in Paola Barrochi, ed., *Trattati d’arte del Cinquecento* (Bari: Laterza, 1960–62), vol. 1, 59ff. A classic study of the debate is Erwin Panofsky, *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts* (The Hague, the Netherlands: Nijhoff, 1954). See also, Moshe Barash, *Theories of Art: From Plato to Winckelmann* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 164–74, and the commented extracts in Lauriane Fallay D’Este, ed., *Le Paragone. Le parallèle des arts* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992).
2. Martin Kemp, ed., *Leonardo on Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 20–21 (In McMahon’s ed., *Treatise on Painting*, No. 30, 36, 31). Leonardo in fact consistently draws on the same argument that we will find developed in Lessing, although with the opposite conclusion: painting can show the beauty of the body, or the impact of a scene, in one single glance, Leonardo says, whereas poetry, dependent on hearing, which is “as fleeting in its death as in its birth,” must proceed in a sequential order that always leaves “voids” between the parts and “dismembers the proportions”; cf. *ibid.* 23–4 (McMahon No. 37, 42, 30, 42, 40). For Leonardo this shows the superiority of painting, whereas Lessing mostly understands sequential order as a sign of the supreme power of poetry; he does however note that it also imposes a limit, since it means poetry can only show beauty indirectly, and in this he echoes Leonardo.
3. See Alberti, *On Painting and Sculpture*, ed. and trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), 2. Alberti’s classification is in fact complex, and he suggests that sculpture can be understood in three ways: some sculptors work in wax or clay, by both adding and taking away; a second group use only subtraction that removes the “superfluous” mass of stone and discovers the figure hidden inside it; and finally there are those who only add, by imparting form onto a mass, such as silversmiths. This third kind Alberti dismisses as irrelevant to theory, and he notes that the analogy between them and painters is

- misleading, since the latter's application of color to a surface in fact serves the end of imitation, and they use "another method peculiar to themselves." In spite of this, for subsequent writers the distinction between subtraction and addition came to structure the opposition between sculpture and painting, perhaps due to the fact that it had roots in ancient philosophy as well as Christian theology; cf. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, IX. 4. 147; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, I. 6. 9; Dionysius Areopagita, *Mystical Theology*, chap. 2. The neo-Platonic influence was relayed through Ficino, who translated and commented Dionysius, and described both man and world as statues carved by God.
4. Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte*, 82.
  5. *Ibid.*, 80–1.
  6. McMahon ed., *Treatise on Painting*, No. 46; omitted in Kemp.
  7. *Ibid.*, no. 48; omitted in Kemp.
  8. McMahon, No. 54; Kemp, 38 (McMahon, No. 51). "Mechanical" should here be understood in terms of the opposition between *artes mechanicae* and *artes liberales*, the first of which remains caught within matter without being able to comprehend it by way of intellectual principles.
  9. The classical analysis of the emergence of this system is still Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951) and 13 (1952).
  10. Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (rpr. Paris: ENSBA, 1993), I, § 3, 10.
  11. *Ibid.*, I, § 40, 133.
  12. *Laocoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1964).
  13. For a semiotic reading, see David Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
  14. Here we must sidestep the crucial differences pertaining to levels of "bound ideality," as Husserl would say. A particular painting is on another level not an *exemplar* of the painting, although it has a particular ideality of its own, whereas the poem can be reproduced in many different exemplars, all of which are of equal value as exemplars of an "ideal" entity that can assume an infinite amount of instantiations in various media. See, for instance, Husserl's discussion in *Erfahrung und Urteil*, § 65, and Jacques Derrida's comments in *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, trans. John P. Leavy (Stony Brook, NY: Nicholas Hays, 1978), 71–3.
  15. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1964), 20f.
  16. See the discussion in W.J.T. Mitchell, "Space and Time: Lessing's *Laocoon* and the Politics of Genre," in Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), and the general discussion of the place of the sign in Enlightenment culture in Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon*, 35–42. The incomparably most subtle analysis of this complex, with Rousseau as the main example, still remains Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, new corrected ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
  17. *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 84. I have occasionally modified the translation.
  18. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, § 258 (and Hegel's subsequent "Anmerkung"). Jacques Derrida provides a careful analysis of this temporal function in "Ousia et grammè: note sur une note de *Sein und Zeit*," in Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 44–52.
  19. "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 161.
  20. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 29. Greenberg's development as a critic and theorist can of course not be reduced to these initial statements, and yet there is considerable consistency in his path, from the early texts in the 1940s through the successive analyses of "American Type Painting" after the war and his programmatic claims for the superior status of "Modernist Painting" in the early 1960s, to his various later comments in the last seminars and lectures. For a careful analysis of this development, see Thierry de Duve, *Reading Clement Greenberg Between the Lines* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1996).
  21. "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 31f.
  22. *Ibid.*, 34.
  23. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148.
  24. *Ibid.*, 167.
  25. *Ibid.*, 148.
  26. Craig Owens, "Earthwords," *October* no 10 (Fall 1979); rpr. in Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 45. The reference to the Baroque—which sets up a dialog with the historical context of Lessing's *Laocoon*—is indirect, and mediated through Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a process of linguistic decay in *The Origin of German Baroque Drama*. In fact, Smithson himself references both the classical *Laocoon* sculpture (which he juxtaposes to a work with the same name by Eva Hesse) and Lessing's analysis; see the brief discussion in Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 169f. Similarly, Rosalind Krauss opens her *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1981 [1977]), 1–3, with an extended reference to Lessing, and concludes the book with a chapter on the "new syntax for sculpture" (where Smithson plays a key

- role) showing how the distinction between succession and simultaneity is dismantled in minimalist and post-minimalist sculpture.
27. To these proposals many objections were raised, particularly concerning the idea of dematerialization. That the work is invisible, as was argued by representatives of the British group Art & Language, does not mean that it is not material—so for instance in the work of Robert Barry using carrier waves: they are invisible although by no means immaterial.
28. See, Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* no. 55 (Winter 1990).
29. See, Kwon’s analysis of this process, which leads from the “phenomenological” site of early minimalist sculpture, through the “institutional” site of the 1970s, to the “discursive” site of contemporary art, in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002).
30. For a discussion of the implicit connection between Greenberg’s modernism and the idea of a pristine writing surface in Mallarmé, see my “Surface and Inscription: Mallarmé, Greenberg, and the Unity of the Medium,” *Site* 9–10 (2004).