

Ph.D. THESIS

The end of art, or the exhaustion of a painting-centred paradigm of art

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1. Starting points

In the first, theoretical chapter of my dissertation, *The end of art, or, the exhaustion of a painting-centred paradigm of art*, I do not offer a general comparison or extensive analysis of theories on the end of art and art history, but concentrate on the related ideas of two authors who enjoyed great popularity in the 1990s, German art historian Hans Belting and American philosopher of the arts, Arthur C. Danto. Their respective positions represent two distinct approaches to theories on the end of art. Following observations on the incapacity of the language of art history to address current phenomena in art (which in his *The End of the History of Art?*¹ he illustrates with the simile of the painting and its frame), Belting expands the idea and reports on the failure of western art history (as a universal discipline of art history). Whilst he continued to maintain these positions, he later turned towards practical issues in art.

The first chapter of my dissertation looks at these investigations of Belting. I dedicate a subchapter to the author's 2001 volume, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*,² which I find is an intermediate stage between the search for a way out that is performed by *The End of the History of Art?* (anthropology being the proposed solution), and the global approach to art presented in the 2010s, in which the anthropology of images is no longer of central significance, but is merely one of the applicable methods. In the final section of the chapter on Belting's position I distil the lessons that are of relevance for the second, practical chapter of the dissertation, which is based on the analyses of exhibitions.

In the last part of the theoretical chapter I consider the observations on the end of art that Arthur C. Danto made in the 1980s, and updated in the 2000s. Of the several possible readings of this theory, I concentrate on the notion that it is immanent to art, and the fact that it is independent of any context; the starting point for my analysis is the idea that Danto's theory is alien to life. In my view, the paradox of Danto's approach is that while he emphasizes the significance for himself of the historical moment (i.e. 1964), and repeatedly claims to have been "at the right place at the right time," he considers the same thing irrelevant for his subject, and treats the historical

¹ Hans Belting: *A művészettörténet vége*. Atlantisz Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2006. Trans.: Katalin Teller.

² Hans Belting: *Kép-antropológia. Képtudományi vázlatok*. Kijárat Kiadó, Budapest, 2003. Trans.: Pál Kelemen.

moment an abstraction in this regard. He takes no account of the social critique of Pop Art, probably the most distinctive among those of 20th-century movements, and the fact that it was powerfully embedded in a social-political context.

I found it important to discuss Danto's theory because not only was it contemporaneous with Belting's diagnosis of the end of art history, but also because I find it a good illustration of how the philosophy of art became, by the end of the 20th century, more and more evidently distant from art itself. Increasingly losing sight of its subject, and working immanently, theory failed to realise that its discourse and set of concepts made it less and less capable of grasping the distinctive character of contemporary art.

2. Theoretical framework

To be able to discuss the characteristics of contemporary biennials, the subject of the second part of my dissertation, I first need to address, in the theoretical section, the question of "what is contemporary?" I briefly outline the major propositions related to the supposed watersheds between modern and contemporary, the three years commonly held in specialist literature (1945, 1965, 1989), and then I partly draw on Peter Osborne's observations with regard to the question of definition. According to Osborne, if we take contemporaneity as a unity of all presents, we can only think about it as a fiction because it can never be experienced in its entirety. He finds "contemporary" a controversial term because it seeks to denote a period in history while this period is not yet history.

What his observations point to is that even though our attempts at making the contemporary historical are doomed to failure, the contemporary is relevant in that it adds something to, or enriches the present when the latter becomes insignificant or infertile.

It is my hope that the case study of the history of the Berlin Biennale in the second part of the dissertation contributes to a new approach to, and a better understanding of, the essential features of contemporaneity.

I found it important in this part to link theoretical and practical considerations, because I am convinced that understanding, interpreting and analysing (contemporary) art is closely interwoven with the practice of how it is presented. In my view, the biennials of recent decades offer examples of this practice that are often

more relevant than those of single exhibitions, however emblematic. The biennials of contemporary art seem to constitute illustrative cases of the mutual influence of theory and practice, of how certain theories get almost “condensed” in artistic praxis, and how unprecedentedly effortless the transition from theory to practice and vice versa is. I believe the chapter on the spectacular transformation of biennials will also shed some light on the ongoing changes of the artistic paradigms referenced in the title of the dissertation. The original intention behind the biennials was to highlight current tendencies, to offer a view of the state of affairs in contemporary art. They certainly continue to concentrate on conspicuous trends in contemporary art, if they are no longer the sole indicators within today’s institutional framework. I consider the series of Berlin Biennales to have a particular relevance in this regard because it has given increasing prominence, in an institutional setting, to a radical process of the past two decades, the growing immaterialization of art, as well as to a radical social-political turn.

*3. Hans Belting’s *The End of the History of Art?* – almost 20 years on*

Whether despite, or because of, the fact that it was rewritten, Belting’s text is worth rereading as something that is still illuminating and may offer clues to understanding current processes in art. I am to prove as much in this chapter as I analyse important nodes of thought in *The End of the History of Art?* which are both key to Belting’s argument and interesting for today’s reader. One such node is the problem of Eastern vs. Western Europe, which was of central significance at the time of the first publication, and such subjects as the museum and the art market, which were subsequently to become the author’s chief interests.

“Opening towards the world”: this is how my personal summary of Belting’s views on art could be described. The author’s most recent volumes bear a testimony to this opening (in the geographical sense), as do those writings of the past few years that seek to establish a wider context for art, to look upon it in a web of social-geopolitical relations. This contextualization is of significance for me because the part of the dissertation that deals with the biennales is to highlight the various stages of this very “opening.”

3.1 The transformations of the museum

While it is not yet put forward explicitly in *The End of the History of Art?*, by the 2000s Belting became outspoken about the crisis of the museum: he finds that the classical mission of the museum, the communication of the great (Western) narrative of the history of art, which was particularly formative and significant in modernity, is a thing of the past. If the author of *The End of the History of Art?* stressed the necessity of different art historical narratives (a position he still holds in that he now sees this plurality inevitable), Belting now champions the difference of artistic institutions. Belting's current ideal of the museum could be denoted with the term "local individuality." Reckoning with localness, the sociological, geo- and socio-political characteristics of a venue, gains great significance, as does the institution's assumption of an active role that relies on mutuality. In a sense, all this can be contrasted with the passivity of the classical institution of a museum, which Belting did not yet consider an essential consideration in the nineties. In the problem map he outlined at the time, the central issue was indeed how works of art were to attract attention and be present in what sought to be their competitors, the new museums. How were exhibitions to avoid transforming into superficial shows? The subchapter dedicated to the transformation of the museum continues with a digression on the history of institutional critique. In this I want to prove that Belting's demands for a more active participation on the part of the museums are all but self-evident in the light of the intensification of institutional critique towards the end of the 20th century. In this chapter I only touch upon how the idea of "new institutionality," of the flexible institution, influenced the transformation of museums. In the next, analysis-based part of the dissertation, I consider the biennales a structure-making element of the "new institutionality," which can effectively promote the review and transformation of the classical operation of the institution.

3.2 An alternative to art history? Belting's anthropological investigations

As Belting expounds in *An Anthropology of Images*, we are not yet in possession of a science or history of images that would be capable of interpreting and commenting on the images he classifies as either exogenous or endogenous (external vs. internal, extending from dreamscapes and memories to images of reality, as well as visual works of art). In the light of his later publications, especially those on global art, this

may not even be necessary, I think. The essential premise of the anthropology of images, which also lays the foundation for the significance of anthropology in Belting's subsequent studies, is that the "place of images" is the individual herself, as she is the one to perceive images as such, to make them what they are. However, Belting thinks that anthropology is to play a key role in the interpretation of images not only because it is essentially a science dedicated to the study of the "vehicle of images," but also on account of the content of images, because their meaning is provided by these anthropological contents. They are called into being by subjects beyond time, such as death, the body, and time itself. One of the most important threads of the volume, by means of which Belting also attempts to attain the goal of this work, the release of the concept of the image from traditional, narrow schemes of thought, is devoting especial attention to the medium that represents the image. Supports have been present in art history only as regarded genres and materials, i.e. as the media of art; by contrast, they are of far greater importance for the history of images, guaranteeing as they are the presence and visibility of images. My chief interest in Belting's anthropological investigations was to what extent they could be used for the interpretation of examples from contemporary art, as the author himself suggests repeatedly. I find, however, that the analyses of works of art which Belting considers as "contemporary" examples feed on the great narratives of modernity, rather than questions of existentialism, the unending cycle of birth, life and death, problems of artistic self-representation, relations of "me and the other," questions of internal and external time, etc. Contrary to the intention of the book, Belting's actual purpose, to use in the analysis of contemporary art the anthropological "method," as an alternative to art history, has remained unfulfilled for me, and not only in the case of his carefully selected illustrative examples.

3.3 New Visions – World Art vs. Global Art

Belting considers that the two main characteristics of global art are the contemporariness and a specific postcolonial attitude, that takes over the place of the hegemonic center-periphery dichotomy. As opposed to the colonial concept of "world art", that is based on the division of self and other, the "global" attributive points toward the fact that there is an intention to transcend the distance between the Western and the world art. This change of concepts in Belting's opinion became possible and necessary because the art after 1989 lost its geographical borders and

basis, and it became global art. The appearance (especially on biennials) of an art that lacks boundaries also caused the loss of the privileged status of the western art and art history. But it is also true that this unified and independent art world has already been broken into different artworlds, and is present in new, polio-centric artistic regions. These worlds are replacing then under the name of global art the world art. This practice of the global puts in the place of the until now compulsory idea of art the national, regional, and cultural connotations. For its creation – beside the existence of mega-exhibitions - the increased mobility of the art society (exchange programs, scholarships, artist collaborations) and of the institutions (managers, curators, art dealers, international/online auctions, etc.) is also of crucial importance. In order to understand this process, the profound change of the contemporary art scene, I will use Hal Foster famous essay, *The Artist as Ethnographer?* In 1996, well before many famous contemporary art theoreticians the author analyzes the methods artists use when they step out of the field of traditional creative activities in order to become active actors of society's transformational processes. In Foster's view this is the reason why the “need for fieldwork” has been expressed by artists, who tried to fill the position of the “participating observer”. The author believes that artists (and somehow critics also) envy the position of ethnographers and working methods, because these have proved much more effecting in achieving those goals that reach beyond art itself. I consider, that Foster's critical attitude towards using non-artistic methods to achieve non-artistic goals is very fruitful. However it is important to note that during the period (almost 20 years) passed since the publication of Foster's essay brought such changes both in the practice and the institutions of contemporary art, that make some of Foster's critical arguments irrelevant. At the end of the sub-chapter I will briefly present Belting's position towards ethnography, where means not only the adaptation of a methodology. He considers much more ethnography as an indispensable subject in the training of specialists in art, curators, because it could help them in the understanding of knowledge transfer between different cultures. As I will talk later about the curatorial activity and attitude in the 21st century, I will not discuss this topic in detail here.

3.4 Outlook: *Parallel Stories: A Different Approach to the End of Art*

A paper dealing in any way with the end of art and art history (in our case emphasizing the social turn of art) can not afford not to mention Arthur C. Danto, an author who has brought up the issue almost in the same time as Belting (in the middle of the eighties) , and as such is often referred by him. However it is not accidental that he is mentioned only aside in this paper, and is not in the center of the theoretical argument. As I have only concentrated to those statements of Hans Belting's analysis of the end of art history that seemed connectable to the second part of the dissertation, in the same way I will treat Danto's philosophical approach very briefly, because I don't consider it a starting point for my own train of thought. The main focus of the chapter deals with the paradoxical phenomenon, that Danto, who was a recurring author and affiliate of the most important and socially engaged journal of the period, *October*, was able to develop a theory that completely sidelined the contextual nature of art, its embeddedness in the socio-political realities. His analysis describes the changes that took part in art as an inner necessity or logic. According to this view art exists cut off from all social realities, and only follows its own laws. For me the basic point of Danto's train of thought is questionable, because it is based on the assumption that the trigger of artistic evolution (which is in the same time the warrant for the continuous development of art history) is a movement aiming the revelation of art's essence. But is this statement really acceptable? Or rather we should say that this evolution was motivated by the constant thrive towards new possibilities, towards the widening of the artistic spectrum? The paradoxical nature of Danto's theory resides on the fact, that he considers his theory as having a general validity, but in the same way it is evident, that is crucially grounded in a specific historic period, namely the sixties. So Danto delivers a general validity to an art theory that is based on the American art of the sixties, more precisely on the ideology of pop art and especially Warhol's *Brillo boxes*. This is why it is extremely surprising that he completely leaves out the possible changes of context, of reception circumstances, of attitudes towards art. If we consider the changes of art have been affected not only by immanent factors, but the influence of social, cultural, sociological circumstances is also crucial, than we have to accept Danto's art theory only as an “earlier theory”.

However it was important to include Danto's theory on the end of art in the dissertation, because in the nineties Danto's theory mirrored in a clear way the

position of art theory and philosophy regarding the crisis of art and the history of art. In my opinion the strongly “practical” nature, the overemphasis of the social context, of the socio-political situation in the contemporary writings in art theory published in the nineties is also due to those art-immanent theories like that of Danto.

4. The Canonical Role of the Biennials – the Berlin example

4.1 Definition issues

The starting point of the second part of the dissertation is the statement, that in fact we don't really know what biennials are, what the title is referring to. Not only it is not copyrighted, but there are not even defining criteria or minimal rules for it – the most we can say, that there are expectations towards it. As there are no formal rules or frames, often the big format artistic shows use the notion without any conceptual background, they only opt for it due to its marketing value.

Of course there are pros and cons related to the biennials. They are most often criticized for two reasons. The first angle focuses on its “spectacular” character, according to which the biennials are only a part of the superficial experience-culture, and as such are specific creations of the late capitalism. From this comes the logic consequence that as such paradoxically they represent a threat to the development of “real” art. The reason for this is that due to them there is the risk that only spectacular works will prevail, those that are willing to accept without any critical concern the most fresh and actual artistic trends or fashions. The other critical point deals more concretely with the actual display of the biennial, and refers to the presentation and thus reception of individual artworks. According to this view in the multitude of works shown at a biennial the individual work has no possibility to prevail, the ideal circumstances for its presence and reception are simply not created.

There are three main positions arguing *for* the significance of the biennials. The most important of these is that which argues, that the biennials enforce the experimental and critical side of the exhibition production, because they are the only ones that have the possibilities for certain modes of presentation. In this way – according to the second argument – biennials represent a vital alternative in the system of museums and other artistic institutions that are not capable of a direct and flexible reaction to the changes in artistic evolution. The third argument emphasizes the political, racial,

ethical and identity issues, and argues that the biennials are more sensible to some social problems, than the more “neutral” museums and other permanent, traditional institutions. It is also important to acknowledge, that an unquestionable merit of the biennials is that they attracted attention to the non-western artworld. The attention to the surrounding local context and needs is also an important characteristic of the biennials. However I am well aware that these positions are in fact abstract statements in the sense that their validity can be checked and analyzed only after each biennial. Taking into consideration all this, in the dissertation I will consider in the dissertation the biennial not as a unique mode of exhibition, but rather as a specific “genre”, which has typical genre boundaries, that can be flexibly modified.

4.2 Main Characteristics of Contemporary Biennials

If we would like to categorize the characteristics of the biennial, we can put them into two main categories: “practical” and “theoretical”.

Regarding the practical specifics in my opinion one of the most important tendencies of the past years is that the exhibition-like nature (that is the presentation based on individual artworks) has been somehow neglected in the favor of the creation of a discursive space. We can call this a transition from the display, from the exhibition platform to that of the dialogue. Other “practical” characteristics are: the dispersion, the presentation on multiple locations; the emphasis on the local traits of the city or region, where the biennial takes place; the adaptation to the locations, the site-specificity.

The most important “theoretical” characteristics are defined by the strong aspiration to include into the biennial's concept the global ambitions and the discursive elements (symposiums, extended publications). It is more and more common to see those “unfinished” biennials, where the event is only an initiative, when the biennial and its side programs are only meant to be the starting point of a longer and wider process. Sometimes series of debates, workshops begin that are continued well after the biennial itself is closed; sometimes the “result” is achieved only after the actual exhibition is over.

After a general introduction and the brief presentation of the main characteristics of the biennials I continue the dissertation with the presentation of the differences of the

“modern” and postmodern” biennial, that is the Venice and Havana biennials. Regarding contemporary biennials I consider the latter as being the main model.

4.3 The Berlin Biennial Between 1998-2012. - Case Studies

The history of the Berlin Biennial is a good field of study if we want to analyze all the aspects related to the so-called “biennial dilemma” that has been discussed in the art theoretical literature of recent years. Beside that this story of the Berlin-biennial gives an insight also to the changes of the curatorial positions occurred during this period of time. In Berlin all the positions have been witnessed: the egocentric resolution aiming to present a best-of selection of contemporary art; the highly theoretical approach; and the socially engaged statements. We could see the whole palette of curatorial attitudes of the past 15-20 years, from one person management styles to curatorial self definitions based on group identity. The goal of this overview is to present the evolutionary process that has been lived by this exhibition organized every two year for a period of 2-3 months. We could see biennials focusing on exotic sites, or special artworks and events; or some that have organized presentations of internationally highly priced artists; or others that concentrated on works that have negated the work of art itself and the whole concept of art and exhibition.

4.3.1 Close Neighbors: Theory and Practice

The third Berlin biennial organized in 2004 is a perfect example for the theory-centered curatorial statement, which was based on one of the most defining art theories of the past 10 years, Nicolas Bourriaud's aesthetic of relations. This is why this sub-chapter deals with the most important definitions and theoretical arguments of the relational aesthetic. In the background of this aesthetic we can find the context of human social relations and their sociological frame as Bourriaud considers art a relational form that is capable to generate these relations. According to his thesis art – especially those works produced in the nineties that were based on intersubjectivity – are able to create real communities, thus enhancing the political performance of social integration. One of the main merits of the works emphasizing the importance of human relations is the recreation of a certain kind of immediacy, that is especially important – according to the author – in the ever more impersonal world of the last decade of the 20th century. For Bourriaud it is not the quality of relations or the

reasons of their becoming is of interest, but the creation of the relation in itself, and the circumstances of this coming into being. For him those interpersonal, heart-felt, convivial relations are important, and thus he does not deal with the relation of the individual to the community, or with that of the small community created by the art or artistic situation to the whole society. In Bourriaud's opinion art created new strategies for personal approach and closeness. However it is clear that those social relations that have come to life through a work of art and that are analyzed by him, are viable only in very concrete, particular and timely strictly limited communities, and are not possible on a wider scale.

Bourriaud does not take into consideration the obvious fact that at the events of the artistic society there are no new communities formed, but instead we can see micro-communities composed mostly of people who know each other quite well. This is why the dialogues are not convivial, but directed by specific rules. The dominant majority of the artistic experiments analyzed by the author take place in artistic institutions, which means that the playful realization of the utopia of creating communities and social integration is already included in one specific community. Bourriaud perceives the experiments that matter for him in front of a idealistic, utopian and schematic social model that constitutes the background for this laboratory-like approach. And this is why it has to be considered as apolitical, because nothing is more apolitical than demanding the creation of a certain kind a community, but the characteristics of which are completely left out of sight.

4.3.2 The Defining Artistic Practice of the New Millennium – the Dictatorship of Participation

The Berlin Biennial has not been an exception: the works or artistic practices based on participation that are more and more prevalent in contemporary art have also been present in Berlin. This sub-chapter presents the different forms and appearances of the participatory practices.

Collaborative arts bears in his name the act of participation: it describes such a creative methodology where in the process of creation more people, a whole community is involved. In these situations often the idea of authorship is put under scrutiny, and the difference between a hierarchical or a democratic creative model is debated.

The “paid collaboration” is a simple case, as participation is voluntary, but as there is financial compensation involved, we can not really talk about a democratic structure. If we don't focus on the ethical dimension, but rather we analyze the aspects of the participation itself, we can see that in these cases we face a directed, hierarchical participatory model. The management is in the hand of the artist, he is the author who instructs the participants, who simply accomplish his instructions; they are not empowered to take individual decisions, to influence the situation itself. So we can not really call this model participative, controlled participation in my view is much more adequate. So it is true, that the participants are not completely passive, as they are actively performing the work of art, which is thus the creation of a community, but this community still operates under hierarchical relations. The artist does not give up his/her individual artist position for the sake of the community, the work can not be interpreted as being collaborative.

As an example for real collaborative approach, where the actors coming from outside the artworld are completely involved I analyze the works of the Austrian group called *Wochenklausur*. The activity of the group is so important for me because its members use the potential of artistic creativity, ingenuity and specific problem solving capability to solve such problematic situations that other instruments or not capable to overcome. Their working method relies on research, as they start a project only after extended preparational and orientational phase, and the “solution” always comes in the form of communication, dialogue or mediation. They consider as their task to find solution possibilities, alternatives for a community, or just to point out some ways of moving forward. In my opinion the functioning of the group can point out the essence of socially engaged art: it is not the problem solving or the implementation that counts, but it is the act of presentation of possibilities, the novelty of approach towards the problems that matters. It is clear, that artistic creativity, this specific human capital is maximally exploited here, but not only for its own sake, because it is always capable of creating something bigger than itself.

4.3.3 The Seventh Berlin Biennial

The analysis of the 2012 Berlin Biennial is the longest case study of the dissertation. The curator of the Seventh Biennial, Artur Zmijewski moved towards the extension of political art both from art theoretical and practical point of view in such a

way, that he was able to leave behind the notions of visual aspect and formative, aesthetic values. Which would not be a problem at all, if he had been able to put weight on it. Naturally he terminated the notions of classic artwork and exhibition, which meant a radical step in the history of the Berlin Biennial – but there has been not much more that he was able to achieve beside that. Zmijewski's concept was directed towards an unconventional exhibition from the start, but he was not interested in the problems of the boundary crossing nature of the real political intervention. The initiative became problematic by the fact that the invited activist and civic movements were not able to give posture to the exhibition, because they were not radical enough. And the artworks coming from more classical genres were not specific enough to take over the control of the form and content. In connection with the Seventh Biennial we can bring in the ideas on the aesthetic and the political of one of the most commonly quoted philosopher in contemporary art, Jacques Ranciere. He describes politics as a thrive for the distribution of the sensible. If we follow this train of thought, than the goal of the activists invited to the Biennial by the curator had to be exactly the distribution of the sensible through the occupation of public spaces, and thus the achievement of a more powerful presence and visibility. In this regard their Biennial presence has double meaning and significance. On one hand it signals that the activists had found a new medium in the battle for visibility, but on the other hand we can interpret this development in the sense that they have given up the ambition of the distribution of the sensible by entering in the autonomous territory of the museum. The contemporary art museum is an accepted territory for any kind of taboo destruction, until it says inside the walls of the institution – so this exactly why the activists closed in the museum will not be able to create a fourth system, envisaged by Ranciere.

In this chapter, in the form of a case study I assess the issue of responsibility, which is usually only a side problem in the case of an artistic exhibition or biennial. The thing is that the statements formulated here do not bear the same weight as if it were uttered in the “real” world, they can be easily labeled as being metaphorical or abstract. In the same way I consider problematic the viewer participation or integration in the case of the seventh (or any other) biennial. Often there is very few information, superficial knowledge for a real engagement of the spectator. The frames of an exhibition however make possible and even encourage such an attitude, especially due to the fact

that the actual problems seem abstract, and we do not feel pushed towards a substantive action or reaction.

Whilst I consider the basic approach and actual realization of the Seventh Berlin Biennial as problematic, in fact I am also grateful to this exhibition entitled *Forget Fear*. The reason for this is that it helped me to at least partially clear up all these issues, and this is especially important nowadays, when as consumers of the actual trends of contemporary art we take many of it granted, and thus we don't feel the necessity to search for answer or solutions to them.