

National University of Art Bucharest
Faculty of Art History

Summary of PhD research work

About Artistic Specificity
Experience, Evaluation, Phenomenon

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The purpose of the present PhD paper is to make research on specific features of the artistic language, just as it appears in the phenomenal field of perception, starting from the observation that the present methods of approaching art¹, both in the institutional field and in recent theories having a consistent impact on art in the last decades, omitting important points from the reality of development of the artistic act. According to the phenomenological vision regarding the perception of art, this type of language always sees perception as an individual experience and, although it excludes, it does not limit itself to a read-in based on interpretation and understanding – attitudes which have been instaurated as guiding marks of perception and evaluation of art in specialized thinking and not only of the last half of the 20th century. Based on a piece of observation which, on the one hand, we qualify it as connected to the artistic act, and on the other hand it is inspired by the ideas of the new direction *iconic turn*, to be more specific, the perceiving of art is, before everything, an experience which enriches us, through different means, with a content which can be made rational more or less, wanting more or less to be translated into language, we will try to formulate specific general paths of a type of perception which places the moment of the meeting between a viewer and an artistic object in the first line. By appealing to the support of some authors of the direction *iconic turn*, but also of some ideas from the area of phenomenology and literary essays, we will try, first of all, to change people's focus

¹ A presentation of the directions of thinking that have influenced the discourse about perception in the last century can be found, in the Romanian space, made by Cristi Nae, in the volume *Moduri de a percepe. O introducere în teoria artei moderne și contemporane [Ways of Perceiving. An introduction to the theory of modern and contemporary art]*. Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2013, an edition re-edited and revised by Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2015;

from the consensual approach of perceiving art, with the specific rules of evaluation and decoding imposed nowadays at an institutional level ; we should look at the act of perceiving from the point of view of the phenomenal register, as a unique and non-recurring moment of meeting between a viewer and an object proposed to be viewed from the point of view of art. Once relocated, from this point of view of the artistic phenomenon, once set free from the constraints of the institutional authority regarding the evaluation of a paper taking into account ways of lecturing connected from a historic, economic and politic perspective, these ways have gained more visibility and priority in the artistic field of the last years, new opportunities and attempts to theoretize open up for us, at least from the point of view of signalling them, specific ways of perceiving which are mostly connected to the phenomenal reality of developing the artistic act. The occurrence of these types of perception, whose impact modifies something in the state of spirit of the viewer, can be proven through literary and essayistic examples and also by appealing to the individual experience of each specialist or amateur of art of having experimented at least once this type of contact with a paper. Thus, they put experience first of all, a unique and individual experience that the proposed object sets off in a viewer. Though these types of perception appear as phenomena in the artistic act, they tend to lose its importance once marginalised by specialized literature. In order to state and strengthen one's existence together with other types of perception, it is important to analyze and to find a way of existence in the world of ideas, if these experiences allow being theoreticized. The condition of <<artisticity>> of objects, regarded from this perspective, is under discussion once we look at such cases of perceiving and involves what Rancière integrates in the aesthetic regime of arts: "the way of being specific to what belongs to art, the way of being of its objects"². An attempt to develop this perspective imposes one's reference to art as a specific autonomous language of addressing a person, this attempt does not integrate in institutional consens, nor in linguistic rules, nor in the structuralist ways of decoding images, nor in the definitions of art or aesthetic categories, nor in the reduction to the elements of workshop regarded as a simple demonstration of mastery and virtuosoship. The specificity of this language does not exclude these dimensions, but the mechanisms through which it makes

² Jacques Ranciere, *Împărtășirea sensibilului [Sharing What is Sensible]*, translation by Ciprian Mihali, Idea Design & Print, Cluj, 2012, p. 27.

possible specific perceiving phenomena makes this language no longer be placed in the reductive space of interpretation that is allowed by the isolated approach of one of these directions of perceiving art that we have mentioned above. What we consider important in the effort of making the artistic language autonomous is not its placement in a definition or in the parameters which offer axiological ready-made solutions, but drawing the attention on the fact that, irrespective of cultural ideologies or the way in which we choose to place ourselves in connection to a work of art, this autonomy exists and imposes itself at the level of the phenomenon of perception, and it is specifically this which gives the power to fascinate or not beyond words to an image or a work of art; just like we find pieces of explanation in the expressions of the thinking *iconic turn*, producing the irresistible, or, according to the terminology of Luc Marion, excessive meaning, manifested through the thinking's inability of producing interpretative connotations in front of the donated content. Or, to simply produce an experience which is difficult to be translated as language, but which enriches us beyond its limits. An autonomy of the artistic language that we consider available only in this reference frame, it has its place to the same extent also in the similar way in which we can speak about the autonomy of poetic language, already debated and demonstrated by the theory of literature. Reading poetry puts a restraint on the reader, given the specificity of this type of language, inviting one to have a reading experience beyond one's interpretative intentions. The similarity between these two addressing registers, visual-artistic and poetic, is based on their precise quality of saying more things in the same time, of bringing in the reality conditioned by common language and in many cases restrictive, judging from the perspective of the logical dimension, psychic and emotional content connected to the irrational inextricable and which is part of our human abilities and addictions. Therefore, to reduce a visual paper to the intention of the author or to one of its interpretations, convenient to satisfying one's intellect or to its quantification at the level of artistic field is, according to the radical words of Susan Sontag, an act which "toxifies"³ artistic sensibility, thus reducing the possibilities of a work of art to be perceived simultaneously, in its entire content and field of meanings, and also reducing the possibilities of producing a specific meaning. Following the same parallel

³ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1966; Full quotation in Chap. I;

between artistic and poetic language, we notice that the attempt to make the first autonomous, in the context mentioned above, requires an observation of the addressing mechanisms which are the basis of this type of communication, by speculating the subtle dynamics inside the perceiving act.

In the first chapter, we have analyzed the way in which artistic value is attributed nowadays to an object based on the criterion of consens, conceived on social, economic and politic conditions which are specific to art and which impose themselves today as instances of evaluation and the ones that form people's taste. This way of functioning ignores the triad author – work – viewer which is the basis of the artistic act, we have brought arguments why this approach of art does not function according to the phenomenal reality of developing the artistic act at the level of perception because it manifests itself only at an individual level, in all cases. Thus, we have focused our attention towards other theoretical positions which come to support the normal way of developing art as a phenomenon, with the mechanisms and functions specific to this type of language. Among all these, we have appreciated the fact that the ideas from the area of phenomenology and the direction « iconic turn», too little brought forward in specialized Romanian literature, come to support the approach of art as a situation, especially as a meeting point between the viewer and the object proposed for perceiving. This point of view encourages turning one's attention to the experience of perceiving a work of art with the entire ensemble of sensible abilities that engage the viewer, placing it as a factor which has a central position in the artistic phenomenon.

In the second chapter, we have tried to bring forward a series of criteria of evaluation which can be found in contemporary art and which allow the integration of an object in the institutional world of art. Thus, we have identified a few types of artistic criteria such as institutional criteria, the criterion of temporal success, criteria which are linguistic games-like, exclusion criteria and excellence, the criterion of performance, the criterion of spectacular, the aesthetic criterion, the conceptual criterion, the deontological criterion.

In the third chapter, we have developed the phenomenological perspective on perceiving, by appealing to two ways of thinking that we consider convergent. In this respect, we have summarized specific central ideas of the orientation "iconic turn", based on the notions of « presence », « meeting », « the logic side of an image », which speak

about the power of the image which can fascinate or "intrrupt" time (Aby Warburg), and also the idea taken from the thinking of the phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion who calls these perception situations *saturated phenomena*. The key concept that we have tried to extract from these ideas is the one of *meaning*, that the thinking "iconic turn" places around the structuralist systems of representation and decoding images, while phenomenology places it in the service of a content which gives itself to the viewer in exceptional circumstances. The convergence point which is relevant for this situation is thus the problem of meaning specific to artistic language. The fact that the meaning of a paper has been, up to now, decoded in interpretative parameters, this position which the "iconic turn" thinking " has been trying to avoid in favour of the "presence" and of a pure contact with the world, it does not mean that this type of contact lacks meaning, but that we are in front of two different addressing regimes. Starting from a series of observations of Jaques Ranciere, to be more specific what he calls "the aesthetic regime of arts", we have placed the idea of specifically artistic meaning in connection to what Ranciere calls the specific regime of the sensitive. The purpose is to speculate on the mechanisms which are at the basis of this type of meeting mentioned above and to notice the way in which this type of meaning can manifest itself and become the nucleus which gives specificity and autonomy to artistic language.

In the third chapter, we have isolated specific cases of perceiving as an experience regarded from the point of view of <<iconic turn>> thinking, that is specific situations in which perceiving a work of art has such an impact on the viewer that it can temporarily make the act of thinking and the one of usual language fade away, in the register of logics. It is what Marion calls *saturated phenomena*. Based on the examples that we have brought from the field of literature, fiction and literary essays, but also on the experience of each viewer of having experimented at least once such a meeting with an artistic object, we have drawn the attention upon this type of contact having the purpose to signal that it is an important part of the artistic phenomenon, consequently, it should benefit from special attention. These situations allow a specific perception type to appear, offering the work a specific power over the viewer, but also the ability to enrich a person with an experience which has a meaning which surpasses or it cannot be fully recovered through the means of discursive language.

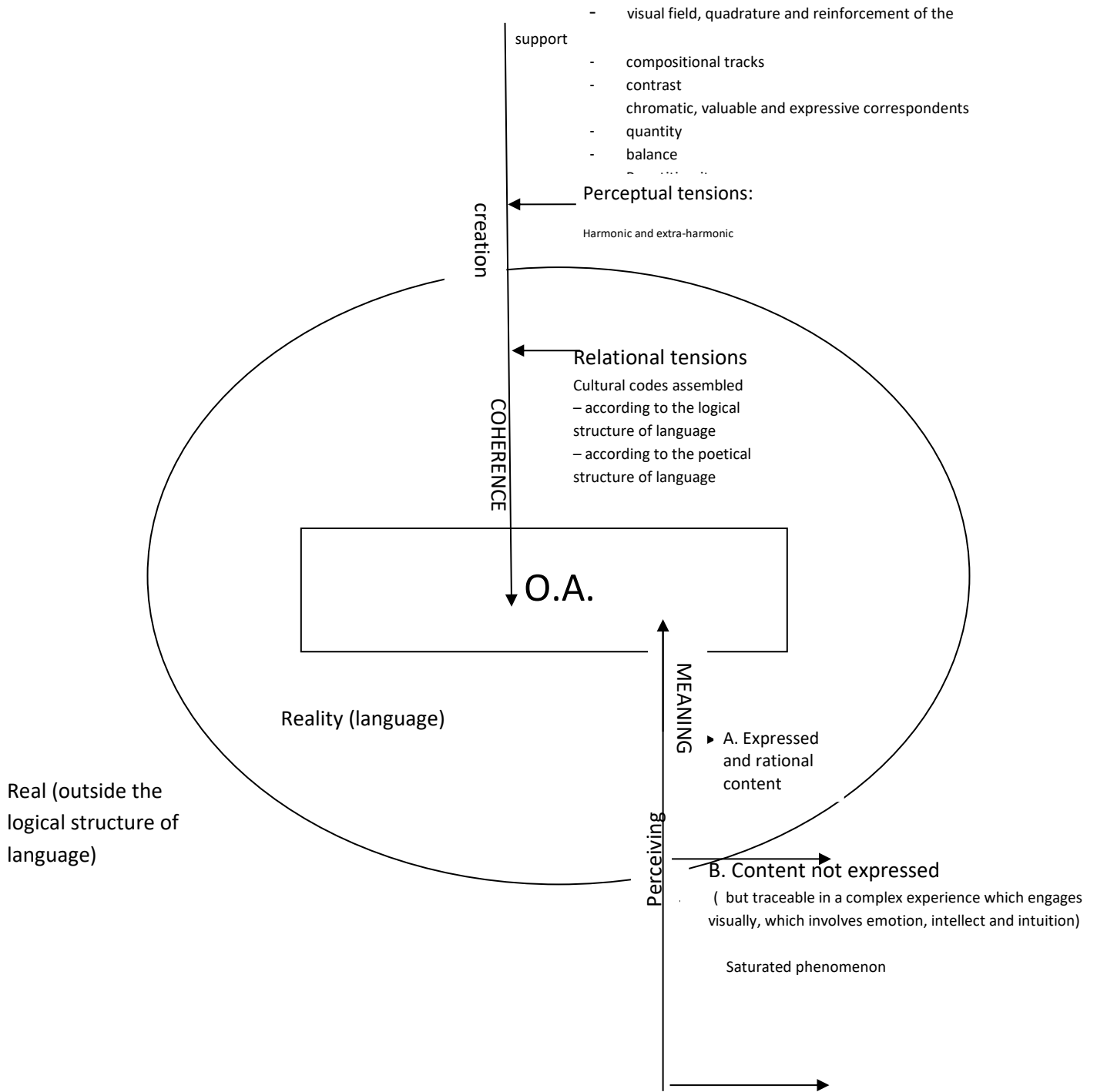
What is interesting to notice is the specificity of this meaning that we have isolated in our previous chapters and, implicitly, of this type of language that contains, but cannot be reduced exclusively to an approach from the perspective "the life of forms", nor to a perspective which envisages an issue strictly connected to the morphology and syntax of artistic practice. This is what we have developed in the chapter dedicated to poetic language, starting from a series of authors such as Roman Jakobson, Viktor Şklovski, Jan Mukarovsky, William Empson, inside this chapter, we have made a series of analogies between the poetic language and the artistic language at the level of construction and the nature of meaning.

In the subchapter about tensions, coherence and meaning, our purpose is to elaborate a discussion based on a schemata, in our attempt to build a solid structure inside which artistic language can exercise its autonomy and specificity. The schemata is based on three directions. The starting point is the process of artistic creation with its specific features (reinforcement, support, contrasts, chromatics, textures and everything which is connected to the visual field determined by the artistic object). The central point contains all the mechanisms which are inherent to an artistic object, and the final point is represented by the viewer, with the entire ensemble of perceiving complexes. These three directions are connected to two areas, Real and relity, thus separated by Basarab Nicolescu. The process of creation contains, underneath its artistic intention, all the mechanisms of visual addressing to the consumer of art (perception, colour, contrast, rhythm), which can be harmonically structured (depending on the natural perception abilities of the viewer) or extra-harmonically (in opposition with the above-mentioned characteristic). Arranging them in the composition of the visual object having an auctorial intention determines a specific degree of syntactic and semantic coherence. As we have noticed in the previous chapter, coherence has an artistic nature when it determines and is structured on tensions (mechanisms of artistic addressing oneself, which can be structural and relational).

In this respect, we can speak about a meaning of artistic nature. The nature of meaning (be it artistic or not) is offered through the means of its referee, meaning if it sends us to the Real or to Reality.

In the area of perception, the meaning of a work generates content which can be expressed or is ineffable, but can be traced at the level of moods (a complex ensemble of feelings, mood, intuition). If the referee of meaning is in Reality, we can speak about denoting a content which is rational-like, which can be expressed and we are dealing with a case of signalling. If the referee of the meaning of a paper belongs to the Real, meaning outside the logical structures of language, the mechanism is one of signalling, and the chances that these structures trigger a saturated phenomenon are high. The meaning of the work generates in this case an ineffable content, but which can be traced at the level of mood, or having a non-rationable content (but which can be traced by phenomenological donation), this case happens rarely and its appearance cannot be totally controlled. The appearance of the last-mentioned situation in the phenomenological field of perception can be, beyond a unique artistic experience, an important evaluation criterion for the viewer, at an individual level.

A schemata of the artistic language. Tensions, coherence, meaning, referee



Mechanisms of artistically addressing oneself (tensions, coherence, meaning, referee)

In the subchapter dedicated to the viewer, our purpose has been to identify, in the relationship with the precious schemata, the factors which determine a specific perceiving mechanism and which can be manipulated, at the meeting between a skillful management of the practician and an availability for the sensitive as far as the viewer is concerned, so that specifically artistic meaning is produced through specifically artistic language. Thus, we have mentioned conditions of perceiving which have an archetypal nature, making us think about symbolic thinking and archetypes, just as they appear in the case of C.G. Jung and Aniela Jaffé, perceptual conditioning, re-found in the studies of Rudolf Arnheim, and socio-cultural conditioning, quoting a series of authors such as John Berger and Gillian Rose.

The last chapter, addressed to the viewer, is a brief representation of the forms through which this instance takes part at the artistic act, which is visual, logico-interpretative or experiential.

We have summed up by saying that it is difficult to reach a conclusion regarding the experience of perception and evaluation in art, especially when we refer to contemporary art. During the past century, a large series of theoreticians, both from the analytic aesthetics field and from the one of continental aesthetics have tried, as we have seen, to trace guiding marks regarding this topic which is rather controversial. Our endeavour did not have as focus point the opening of an elaborate discussion regarding this problem, but to trace some lines, in the first place, some ideas through a small radiography regarding the guiding lines which are present in the contemporary artistic field. Afterwards, our purpose is to trace and follow the elements which can sketch a clearer vision regarding the mechanisms of construction of the artisticity of objects, this artisticity determines a particular case of perception. What makes a work of art be considered artistic is, as we have seen, established at the level of consensus, in most cases an institutional consensus, and the individual experience inside the perception act is frequently left behind.

Still, there are, as we have noticed in the phenomenal sphere of perceiving, several levels of perception that we can take as guiding marks. One of them has been analysed in the present research paper, to be more specific, we are referring to that particular case of perceiving which introduces the viewer in a state of bewilderment, called *a saturated*

phenomenon by Jean-Luc Marion. It is characterized by a suspension of connotative abilities, of judgment and prejudice regarding the work of art, leaving room for pure intuition to become a phenomenon marked by the ineffable. The experience of perceiving a work of art, though it is well-rooted in the way in which our visual organ conditions us, does not suppose this determination exclusively. In the act of perceiving, a series of personal factors are also involved, they are deeply subjective, connected to the way each individual rapport oneself to the world which surrounds one, but they are not rational, by people's tendency to explain themselves everything they see, this is an important dimension of the act of perceiving. Other important factors which contribute to the individual experience of perceiving are formed by the conditions which are connected to our visual perception, presented either as natural or acquired during our evolution in time, but also depending on the geographic and cultural background of a person. An important piece of observation is that there is what we call the artistic specificity of objects, determined not as much by validating them by the institutional field of art, but by the way in which they function at the level of the viewer's eye. This artistic specificity has, as we have seen in the case of poetry, its own mechanisms of functioning and construction of artistic meaning, starting from the reinforcement of the support and the elements which are connected to professional deontology (the internal standards of creation and artistic production), to the way in which these elements introduce themselves into the subjective instance of the viewer. This instauration can manifest itself inside the rules of predicative language (with the mechanisms of making rational / of interpreting the artistic experience), or in an ineffable way (when every other connotative meaning is suspended in favour of a supersaturation of meaning). When it appears, we can notice the fact that the criteria of artisticity are always present.

Still, we have noticed that, at the level of phenomenal experience, the perception of our eyes, the affective and rational perception happen synergetically, their delineation being possible only in a methodological environment. What is really important is the fact that this ensemble of constitutive factors of the act of perceiving always produce a reaction (be it positive or negative, reduced or exaggerated) as far as the viewer is concerned. From this amount of reaction possibilities, the appearance of the saturated phenomenon inside perceiving can be an evaluation mark at a personal level, because when we are dealing with

the phenomenologic given, the viewer becomes the subject of a process which produces a change of mood in its position towards the work. This change manifested subjectively is important, because it makes the difference, at an individual level, regarding the way an individual perceives the works he/she has witnessed, among the ones that produced a state of grace inside of him, by inhibiting all interpretative prejudices and suspending every act of making the process of perceiving as rational as possible, and the ones that did not make this thing possible. What is still a mystery is the way in which this state of grace appears, despite our attempts of quantifying its appearance in this phenomenon.

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