

A Study of the Parallels between Visual Art and Music

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The Big Misconception

By

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For Nataša.

Throughout history, visual and aural art have always run hand in hand. If Rembrandt, loosely speaking, offers to the eyes what Beethoven does to the ears, then Velasquez could run parallel to Mozart, Monet parallel to Debussy and so on. But what about Warhol, Koons and Hirst? To whom do they compare in the world of music?

Allow me to ask the question from the other side: Who runs parallel to Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, Lady Gaga...?

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FOREWORD

Are you weary of “contemporary art?” Do you feel like you don’t understand “contemporary art?” Could that be the reason why you’re so fed up with it? Do you often find people working within the field of “contemporary art” to be silly? Relax and take a deep breath... The reason you don’t get “contemporary art” is because there’s nothing to get.

“Ha! Excuse me? What about Damien Hirst’s shark embalmed in formaldehyde? What about Tracey Emin’s messy bed? Or Sarah Lucas’ Christ made of cigarettes, Ai Weiwei’s sunflower seeds and the kiosks and huts by Marjetica Potrč? And what is post-gravity art? Isn’t it true that curators, theoreticians and gallerists claim these to be exceptional works of art, made by exceptional artists? How can I possibly understand these things?”

Do you understand Michael Jackson, Madonna, Britney Spears, Einstuerzende Neubauten, or the Sex Pistols?

“Sure, no problem there. They’re all contemporary pop, rock, metal, alternative and punk musicians who perform by singing, dancing and playing musical instruments. What do Jackson and Madonna have to do with contemporary art?”

Just think for a moment: If aural art comes also in fun, trivial forms (Michael Jackson, Britney Spears...), then the same must apply to visual art (Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons...). If we put this slightly differently: The same practices and concepts that Warhol and Koons represent within the field of visual art, Jackson and Spears represent within the field of aural art, of music.

“Huh?”

Yes, Koons, Warhol and many others produce trivial, entertaining visual art. These concepts are more or less clear in the world of music, so there is less confusion there, but there is not so much clarity in the world of contemporary visual art. Curators, gallerists, theoreticians are for the most part confused. That is why any given art magazine would feature, for example, Damien Hirst, Alex Katz and Thomas Scheibitz side by side, all mixed up. That’s like reading about Lady Gaga, Foreigner and Beat Furrer, one after the other, in a single issue of a music magazine.

“Furrer?”

Yes, he is a representative of “high end” contemporary music, a complex and “sophisticated” music which is an art form unto itself. Violins and such. What’s important to keep in mind is that just as there’s complex, progressive “serious” contemporary aural art, there’s also complex, progressive “high end” contemporary visual art. Both these art forms are obscured. But for different reasons: The latter is being pushed into obscurity by the art establishment itself.

The core of the misunderstanding lies in the fact that many gallerists, curators, artists, collectors and theoreticians approach trivial contemporary art (the kind that dominates various Biennales, museums and galleries around the world) as if it were “high end” contemporary art. Rich people who buy Jeff Koons believe him to be the Michelangelo of today. Examples of this mentality are demonstrated in the short TV interviews with wealthy contemporary art collectors, hosted by the art critic, Robert Hughes.¹

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/thefineartblog/videos/507166462630473/>
Once available on Youtube, the clip is now only accessible through Facebook.

In the clip, older gentlemen are seen discussing their collections of Koons, Hirst and Warhol, with due respect. Alberto Mugrabi, a wealthy art collector, labels Warhol as “one of the most visionary artists of our time.”²

Would Mugrabi have similar words for Michael Jackson?

Probably not.

Do these gentlemen, who buy works by the most notorious contemporary artists, buy tickets to the late-night concerts of Madonna, Britney Spears or Lady Gaga?

Probably not. They probably fancy Beethoven, Mozart, and they may even go to the concerts of music by Lutosławski or Grisey, presuming all the while that their art collection is a contemporary reincarnation of the “high end” and “visionary” works by artists like Rembrandt and Bernini. What they don’t know or understand is that their acquisitions are, in fact, visually equivalent to trivial—commercial or non-commercial—contemporary music.

We’re dealing with the fundamental misconception which inspired the title of this study.

If you really want to own a Michelangelo of contemporary art, you should treat yourself to a sculpture by the Slovenian sculptor, Jakov Brdar.³ Brdar is the Michelangelo of contemporary art.

² *ibid.*

³ A Slovenian master of figurative sculpture, born in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1949. Powerful and original, some of his work is on display in various Slovenian cities and towns.

INTRODUCTION

*“No, it wasn’t love at first sight.”*¹

—Simon Schama on Mark Rothko’s paintings.

It must have been 2010, when I went to the Philharmonic Concert Hall in Ljubljana to hear a part of *Les Espaces Acoustiques*, a six-part cycle by the French composer, Gerard Grisey. I found his music, imbued with an indefinable futuristic beauty and a complex but stable structure, mesmerizing. A Slovenian composer, Larisa Vrhunc, briefly explained the theory behind Grisey’s “spectral music.”

If we roughly transposed her musical theory into the world of painting, we could formulate a theory for the mature works of painter Mark Rothko, even if they were painted some 20 years *before* Grisey composed the *Les Espaces Acoustiques*.

Sometime after the concert, I ran into a documentary on Mark Rothko, hosted by British historian, Simon Schama. Very early in the film, Schama says that, in 1970, he was interested in Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and rock ‘n’ roll.

*“The idea that art should be solemn was a turnoff. A bit like being made to go to church.”*²

He goes on to say that his discovery of Mark Rothko came by chance at the Tate Gallery in London, when he accidentally walked into the wing

¹ <https://vimeo.com/92417721>

² *Ibid.*

featuring his paintings. Schama sat and stared at Rothko's work, as if he were in trance.

*"Something in there was doing a steady throb, pulsing."*³

After seeing his documentary, I was hit by an avalanche of questions about the development of, and current circumstances in, contemporary art. I've always felt that we live in an era of great confusion, so my reaction to serious intellectuals studying Yoko Ono, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys or Damien Hirst is either:

- That there is something wrong with me since, in contrast to the intellectuals and art elite, I see nothing noteworthy in the works by Hirst, Beuys and other "big" names;

- That there is something wrong not only with contemporary art elite's works which, by rule, consist of trivial art junk, but also with the intellectual elite, for taking it seriously;

- That there is a series of misconceptions at work here.

Schama's documentary triggered in me an idea to put music, or rather the products of aural art, in parallel with "art," the products of visual art, in order to develop a clearer picture of what we are really dealing with in the field of "art."

By the way, have you ever noticed that people almost always associate the term art with visual art? As if music were not an art form. Indeed, when people discuss art, they usually philosophize about *visual* art.

Drawing parallels between the two art worlds makes sense also because the situation in the field of music is less chaotic and far easier to comprehend. Try placing Gerard Grisey alongside Michael Jackson, and you will fairly quickly realize they don't belong.

³ Ibid.

But, if you look at any overview of 20th century art, Rothko, Warhol, Tapes and Beuys are placed within the same framework, one next to another, as if it were about the development and continuity of the same phenomenon. Although the reasons that led to this chaos seem complex, they are really simple, as I will demonstrate further on.

One of the reasons for this confusion lies at the cross-section of these continuities, most of which don't hold up on close examination.

The skeleton of this theory is based on my writing from the 2011-2015 period that was published in the form of columns on the website of Slovenia's national television.⁴ While some of my findings from the past proved to be valid, others needed to be revised or further expounded on through additional arguments.

This study is made up of three parts, all of which can be read independently of one another or in order. Each part offers a specific explanation behind the state of art today, while also refuting, modifying and complementing the foundations upon which "contemporary art" is "built." The three parts can of course be read in a continuous manner.

The second part shows what really happened to art (it exposes its true nature by way of parallels) after we had complied with the ideas of theoreticians and artists listed and discussed in the first part. The third part further illuminates the specific categories from Part Two.

The three parts of the study can be read in continuous fashion but in random order, as each of these three parts illumines any and both of the other two.

⁴ Accessible at: <https://www.rtvsllo.si/kolumne/zgodbe/bostjan-jurecic/520/arhiv>

This study arrives at a tight conclusion, which is not a dimensionless point, but is narrow enough to defend the core of the theory from being challenged systemically.

Special attention must be placed on the second part which draws parallels between visual and aural art. Although similar texts⁵ comparing music and “art” can be found online, they are largely superficial, often beside the point, or severely lacking in accuracy.

When seeking parallels, it would be reasonable if we abided by the following:

- The parallels should/must be based on conceptual and subsequently morphological similarities and overlaps. More precisely, we should/must look for and at the conceptual and consequently morphological core of work by either painters or musicians.

- Conceptual and morphological points of overlap can only be more or less accurate or consistent. Finding parallels is about approximation. Mathematical precision and rigidity can have no and therefore has no place in our study.

- Less formal and personality-related similarities and points of overlap can help drive a parallel home and lead to a sharp conclusion. For instance, we may stumble on the King of Pop music while searching for a parallel for the king of Pop Art. Perhaps we will stumble on introvert musicians (with Asperger’s syndrome) while talking about introvert visual artists (also with Asperger’s syndrome), and so on.

⁵ <http://www.talkclassical.com/9111-parallels-between-art-music.html> This is a hyperlink to one of the forums on the subject.

- Consistent compliance with these rules demonstrates, time and again, that music follows visual art with a delay. The most frequently observed time lag spans 20 years, though it could vary in either direction.

Could this time lag be a necessity?

Such a claim would, of course, come under question.

How do these parallels arise, why should this time lag be there and what causes it?

One explanation for this phenomenon would be somewhat esoteric, metaphysical, so it should be taken with a grain of salt: We will assume at this point there are ideas which are pure singularity and are the driving force behind everything we do as humans. Undifferentiated, they rest in Plato's sphere of ideas (the Indians call it *sahasrara chakra*, sometimes they refer to it as the seventh chakra), which is located above the head, meaning above the intellect which is the last sanction that is still deemed human.⁶ When ideas leave their nest above the top of the head and enter the head, they become thoughts which, after undergoing a transformation process, manifest themselves in a material form. In arts, the originally singular ideas manifest themselves in different media. They will manifest themselves as singular in time, while occupying space, which applies to visual art. (Sculptures stretch in space, paintings deal with space by way of projection on the flat surface. Sculptures and paintings are by their nature perceived all at once, though.) Or, they will appear stretched in time, like music, which is singular in terms of space. Time is a necessity for music to be composed and performed. Put simply, music needs time.

⁶ Indian philosophy talks of six main chakras that can be seen as parts of conscience and therefore these six chakras together comprise most of human conscience. The descriptions of the lower four chakras interestingly strongly correspond with Freudian descriptions of the unconscious, subconscious, ego and superego. The sixth chakra, located on the forehead, governs human intellect.

As said before, this is a rather metaphysical explanation.

Also, the following needs to be stressed: When we talk about parallels, we don't by any necessity mean influences. This works the other way around also: The idea that what we call influences is possibly the source of parallels can not by any necessity be ruled out. (Just a quick point though: If parallels were about influence, we would also have to ask ourselves why it is that only visual artists influence musicians, albeit with a 20-year delay, and never the other way around.)

Musicians will sometimes say, though, that this or that piece of music was influenced by a certain painting, and sometimes a visual artist will admit to having sought inspiration in music. Such statements should be received with caution as they are arbitrary and, in any case, such statements will have no bearing on the study before you. Overall, "influence" isn't the subject of this study.

What we're interested in are the parallels, *regardless* of whether the source of these are influences or not, which means that we are interested in the *determinable* conceptual and morphological points of overlap.

We must also mention both world wars, in relation to the aforementioned time lag, since they possibly exerted some influence over it. Especially the Second World War, which consumed all of Europe and was in this respect even worse than the First. From the end of the 1930s through the 1940s, Europe was producing far less art than it had in other periods. Did the war therefore shorten or lengthen the time lag? Or did it leave it intact? Could it be that the gap in art production was all but inevitable, considering the concepts out there (floating in the sphere of ideas) couldn't be realised or materialised in wartime?

Some will seek to substantiate claims about art through the demand for evidence of mathematical precision and rigor. An American philosopher,

Arthur Danto (more on him in further chapters) proposes a mental experiment, by which he implies that *The Polish Rider* by Rembrandt could very well be a coincidental product made by a centrifuge.⁷ Danto knows that the probability for this is infinitely small, of course. But if it is not possible to refute such a possibility with mathematical precision and rigor, then every discussion about art, according to him and other think-alikes, is relative and nonbinding and every and any statement about art is possible, sensible, viable and real.

But, in art theory, very few things can be mathematically proven. Especially what is essential to art cannot be mathematically proven.

The problem in finding evidence in art theory has always been linked to epistemology and not to mathematics or other hard sciences. It's always been linked to knowledge and concept formation: What do we know and how did we obtain this knowledge?

Therefore, this must be stressed again: Nothing essential about art can be proven or disproven by applying the principles of mathematics or hard sciences.

This theory before you sets “art” against music and arrives at conclusions based on the parallels drawn between the two. It doesn't have to define art in order to refute innumerable claims about “contemporary art” and its nature. In this lies its strength. It will lead to concrete conclusions, even though it operates within a field of relativity and comparability.

⁷ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, 1981.

PART I

APPARATUS

German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is said¹ to have adopted his triad of “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” from Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Much is unclear, however, about this process of adaptation and, in a few instances, even the name of another German philosopher, namely Immanuel Kant, is mentioned as one of the originators of this triad. It is generally believed that the triad was taken by Fichte from Heraclitus, who derived it from ancient Indians...or came up with it at about the same time as did the Indians. But who came first is not important. What matters is the content of the discovery. What matters is whether the concepts hold water or not, and mostly whether they relate to reality or not. Let’s stay pragmatic.

In Hegelian philosophy the triad represents the three stages of dialectical process. Thesis gives rise to a reaction, an antithesis, implying that something might be missing or is assumed to be missing in any posited thesis. The tension between these two is then resolved in the synthesis.

The Indian concept is somewhat different from that of Hegel. The Indians consider the “world” to be a “play” of three “Gunas.”

Varying from one text to the next, the interpretations of these Gunas are largely useless, because they are reminiscent of what Hegel thought of as “pre-conceptual:” Tamas Guna stands for inertia, darkness, laziness... Rajas Guna for action, passion, energy... Sattva Guna for harmony, light,

¹ Polona Tratnik, *Konec umetnosti*, Koda, 2008.

knowledge...² Mircea Eliade, a religion specialist, philosopher and historian writes, in his book, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*³ that, “in every physical, biological, or psycho-mental phenomenon, all three Gunas exist simultaneously, albeit in unequal proportions.” This “play” may very well result from this inequality and imbalance.

Such descriptions of Gunas are poetic, but useless in practice.

Various descriptions of Gunas can be streamlined as follows:

In the absence of energy, Tamas is a state of *peace*.

In the presence of energy, Rajas is a state of *unrest*.

In the presence of energy, Sattva is a state of *peace*.

This structure is analogous to Hegel’s triad of thesis, antithesis, synthesis.⁴ This makes for a complete circle, which implies that Sattva Guna is accessible only through Rajas Guna, and never directly from Tamas: One cannot reach the state of lucidity (Sattva) directly from sleep (Tamas), but rather through action (Rajas).

A triad following this order has a wide area of application. Jurij Selan, a painter and philosopher, writes in his PhD⁵ about how a mathematician, Alan Sokal, sent an article on “postmodern physics” to Fredric Jameson, the editor of *Social Text Journal*. The article claimed and proved, ostensibly,

² Alban Widgery, *The Principles of Hindu Ethics*, 1930.

Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 2004 p 55

Georg Feuerstein, *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga*, Shambhala Publications, 1997

Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana*, SUNY Press, 1998, 110

³ Slovene edition, Študentska založba Publishing House, 2011, original *Le Yoga, immortalité et liberté*, Editions Payot, 1954, 1975, 1991.

⁴ Jurij Selan indirectly discerns the aforementioned triad in his PhD *Fine Art between the Primary and Secondary Discourse*. The occasionally-used term “interim” is analogous to Hegel’s synthesis.

⁵ Jurij Selan, *Art between the Primary and Secondary Discourse*, 2010. Available at: http://pefprints.pef.uni-lj.si/588/2/Jurij_SELAN_Likovna_umetnost_med_primarnim_in_sekundarnim_diskurzom.pdf

that physics is just another cultural study, a social construct, which means, for example, that there's no such thing as gravity outside of the gravity discourse. Jameson was thrilled to publish the article. But Sokal went on and simultaneously published another article elsewhere to explain that the first article was nothing but a hoax. By doing that, he wanted to find out how much genuine arrogance was sheathed in *Social Text's* apparent liberalism.

How does that relate to Gunas?

"The play of three Gunas" can be applied to this "play with physics." It's simple: Once upon a time, there was gravity outside of a discourse (never within). It was tedious, tough and unyielding, "heavily" present, irrespective of what we discourse-oriented beings thought of it. That's *peace*, for there's no *energy*. It's Tamas, Hegel's thesis.

Then someone said that gravity exists only within the discourse, and never outside of it. That gravity out there was just our construct, a social agreement. The introduction of this *energy* launched a discussion, which resulted in *unrest*. This is rajas, the stage of Hegel's antithesis, complete opposite.

Finally, *peace* resurfaced again, only this time it was *peace* reliant on *energy*. It turns out that gravity does exist outside of the discourse and is also a subject we can discuss. And this is what we can call a lucid state of Sattva, the synthesis.

In other words, there's gravity defined by its own *physical* "weight," and there's a social sphere that makes the discussion about gravity possible. Gravity, therefore, comes with a *con-text* which is what we generally call the social sphere, and which makes gravity a part of a social framework.

The triad of Gunas is, as noted before, a highly applicable concept: If we replace “physics” and “gravity” with “art” and “*Mona Lisa*,” respectively, what do we get?

1.1.1. Gunas and the Art (of Comprehension)

The misconception of “contemporary art,” for which the critics are often held accountable from the “contemporary art” proponents’ point of view, can be beautifully translated into the “play of three Gunas.” There are two types of artists who are misunderstood in real time by the rest of the world: Geniuses and lesser artists. If the former are misunderstood because their insight or knowledge is superior to that of others, then the latter are misunderstood because they have no insight. If the former produce ingenious content by bringing the language of a chosen medium to a new level, then the latter will invariably fail at delivering any sort of content, even within the medium of their choice, because they lack proficiency in any media, and subsequently their language.

We will therefore describe this fragment of reality through the “play of three Gunas,” as follows:

a. I don’t understand, (because) it exceeds the capabilities of my comprehension. (Tamas Guna, thesis, peace due to lack of energy)

b. I understand (that) it doesn’t mean anything. (Rajas Guna, antithesis, unrest due to the presence of energy)

c. I don’t understand, (because) it doesn’t mean anything. (Sattva Guna, synthesis, peace due to the presence of energy)

A theoretical fourth Guna cannot be constructed, therefore it doesn’t exist: It is impossible to “understand what exceeds the capabilities of my comprehension.”

The situation can also be described as follows: Imagine standing before an excited Japanese man who's trying to convey something to you. You have no clue what he's talking about. Japanese exceeds your capabilities of comprehension. Standing next to you is a translator, who translates everything to appease you. Suddenly, the Japanese man starts jabbering. You don't understand anything. That's when the translator says: "It's just jabbering, it doesn't mean anything." You say: "I get it. It doesn't mean anything." The jabber continues, only this time you stay calm and collected: "The reason I don't understand is because it doesn't mean anything."

Every now and then, the world spits out a new art movement or an individual artist, which we "fail to understand" because it marks a new landmark in the history of art, because it's innovative. Impressionism is one such example. Although it was long met with resistance, Impressionism, at long last, redeemed itself for having invented a new painterly form that pushed painting to what was considered a revolutionary level at the time. Getting a grip on its painterly form was time-consuming and required lots of practice. But, under the scrutiny of conservative critics, these new artefacts were doomed to "misinterpretation," because no one truly knew how to look at them, let alone "see" them.

By the end of the 20th century, this has often precipitated a logical induction: Because (sometimes) critics used to be wrong they must (probably) always be wrong. What follows is that there is now a class of collectors who look for negative reviews of any given art phenomenon believing that a negative critical review by default means an ingenious artist.

There are plenty of art forms out there today which we fail to understand because they're beyond our comprehension. But are you sure that the art establishment feeds us with precisely this type of art? If so, then the world today really abounds in "superior" art forms, considering the number of

contemporary art museums, galleries and Biennales. This situation also implies that art geniuses are churned out on a conveyor belt.

Or, could it be that some art forms are “beyond our comprehension” simply because “there’s nothing to understand?” And could that also mean that most of the art that the art establishment feeds us with falls within this category?

1.1.1.1. Comprehension and Miscomprehension in Detail

“The whole thing implies that there’s an absence of self-reflection in the Slovene consumers of culture, who will, in an infantile manner, admire only the things they themselves fail to fully comprehend.”

—Mojca Pišek in *Dnevnik* newspaper, on the Neue Slowenische Kunst exhibition in the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana, July 30th, 2015.

“What I find is extremely pretentious, but on examination, a lot of it is simply illiterate, based on extraordinary misreading of texts that I know well (sometimes that I have written), an argument that is appalling in its casual lack of elementary self-criticism, lots of statements that are trivial (though dressed up in complicated verbiage) or false; and a good deal of plain gibberish.”

—Noam Chomsky on postmodern philosophy celebrities.⁶

A well-known, erudite art curator and gallerist from Ljubljana told me that she had once held a week-long conversation with a Slovenian contemporary visual artist of international renown, eager to understand his

⁶ Available here: <http://www.mrbauld.com/chomsky1.html>

oeuvre. But by the end of it, she understood just as much she had at the beginning of their chat. Nothing.

When I visited London in 2012, I met up with Jeff, a recent graduate of the prestigious Goldsmiths Art School. I mentioned Damien Hirst in passing and his response was: *“I don’t get Damien Hirst.”*

Some years ago, I introduced a noted Ljubljana-based painter to the “action” work by a visual artist, Istvan Huzjan. When I explained that, while traveling from Amsterdam to Ljubljana, Huzjan stopped every 100 kilometres to rent a square meter of land and document everything, he blurted out: *“I don’t get it.”*

Germaine Greer chided renowned art critic Robert Hughes (known for his harsh criticism) about his writing on contemporary art: *“Bob, dear, Damien Hirst is just one of many artists you don’t get.”*⁷

These are just a few examples of alleged fails at understanding art. Their common characteristic is that they are all very explicit in nature.

It’s intriguing how often the “contemporary art” critics will face a remark of how they don’t “get” specific contemporary artworks or artists. This is more norm than exception: When a critic trashes a certain work of art, its proponents will, implicitly following the logical induction from the previous chapter, say that the critic *“doesn’t get it”*.

If we were to deconstruct this situation, we would ask ourselves what exactly, according to the proponents of “contemporary art,” does our strict contemporary art critic fail to understand:

1. the artwork,
2. the text accompanying the artwork,

⁷ Available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/sep/22/1>

3. the “con-text of time and location” in which the work was created and in which it stands. This could very well be reducible to the text that comes with the work of art.

That means that there are only two answers to the question: “What does our critic fail to understand?”

1. the art object alone, or
2. the text that comes with it.⁸

Addendum 1. The counterpoint would be to argue “what’s not to understand about works like Tracey Emin’s messy bed, heaps of dirt with mirrors—the work by Slovenian artist Ištvan Huzjan at the 2015 Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts in the International Centre for Graphic Art—or an embalmed shark by Damien Hirst?” How is it possible that our critic (or anyone else, for that matter) doesn’t understand these pieces? How is it possible “not to understand” a shark in a tank or a messy bed? A messy bed is just an unmade bed, something every human can identify with, and therefore “get.”

Can we turn this debate in another direction and ask if the same critic would understand *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt, then?

What does it mean to “understand” *The Night Watch*? To understand could mean having the ability to replicate. Most critics, we can be sure, don’t have the skill to reproduce *The Night Watch*. But does that imply that they don’t “get” it?

By contrast, it can be argued that critics, just like anybody else, are capable of replicating most of the works by Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst.

⁸ In his PhD, *Fine Art between the Primary and Secondary Discourse*, Jurij Selan uses term “secondary semantization” as an analogous to term “text.”

So, if “not getting it” is directly related to the ability to replicate, then our critics obviously have a very deep understanding of Hirst and Emin but fail to “get” *The Night Watch*.

Perhaps “not getting it” means that our critics don’t know what to “look” at or how to “look” at art. The problem is similar to the one above. What do our critics, as per the proponents of “contemporary art,” fail to see while tearing apart Emin’s messy bed or Hirst’s shark?

Let’s approach this from a different angle: What is it that the proponents “see,” and critics don’t? Let’s bring the Impressionists into the discussion at this point as they were also not “seen” right in their time.

It is often assumed, based on the initial critical rejection of Impressionists, that Hirst is rejected because he is not “seen” or looked at properly, which is exactly what happened to the Impressionists. That doesn’t follow logically.

Critics did eventually open their eyes to the Impressionists which, at the risk of sounding ironic, hasn’t (yet) happened to Hirst. It probably never will, since there is nothing notable about his works we would fail to see.

Addendum 2. “Not getting it” may also mean “not understanding” the accompanying text. We will explore this further down the road, for it can be argued that this type of “lack of understanding” is linked to the texts that accompany the contemporary artworks in question.

More precisely, we should ask ourselves what within that text is not comprehensible to our critics, what is the nature and the intent and function of the text that comes along with the artworks. The text in this sense is anything and everything that surrounds any work of art. This means anything written or said about an artwork, including the physical surroundings of any artwork, which can be easily reduced to text. Let’s point to an example: The famous shark in formaldehyde by Damien Hirst was

shown at the Tate Gallery in London. This very fact can be reduced to text which serves to amplify the artistic meaning of said artwork.

Or we can ask the question what *in relation* to the accompanying text do critics not understand? This very study exhibits how, in the 20th century, texts accompanying works of art received a very specific function, one that will be expounded upon in chapters to come.

What exactly do, therefore, our critics fail to understand in the eyes of the “contemporary art” proponents? Is it the text that comes with the specific work of art, or is it the work on display?

P.S.: You will often hear the proponents of “contemporary art” talk, or deliberate at great length, about the *ideas* behind contemporary works of art. But because ideas fall into the realm of metaphysics, we can’t really talk about them as such, nor can we verify the claims as to what ideas by themselves mean, and how they in this sense reflect in the artwork in question.

“Contemporary art” proponents will sometimes resort to clever nonsense. Kaja Kraner,⁹ a Slovenian sculptor and theoretician, ponders the materiality of nonmaterial or minimally material works, and presents them as works of art which are, “in the strictest sense, material or materialised, yet the content and form of an artwork is not that or there which or where it is materialised.”

Finally, we can approach discussing ideas, (deep) thoughts or the “materiality of nonmaterial works” from a different angle: Ideas will, in one way or the other, eventually manifest themselves in a material form as an artwork, which is actually the only tangible form that will enable us to trace

⁹ Third volume of *Šum* contemporary art magazine, Društvo galerija Boks, 2014. Available at: http://sumrevija.si/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/sum3_web_single.pdf