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Plasticity as visual artistic stake of the geometric structures

(Mihály Jenő Bartos, *Composition in Painting* (2nd edition, revised),
Iași, Polirom, 2016)

Mr Jenő Bartos's book discusses the artistic act from the professional perspective of the syntactic arrangement of retinal language elements. In this context, the composition is engaged as an architectonic system based on the need of reinforcement capable of rigorously supporting the construction of a work of art. Beyond the strictly methodological aspects, visual composition, seen as the modern science of arranging scopic elements (point, line, form, colour), is treated as a structural system with two organically coupled directions: 1) a "load bearing", visual one, which must satisfy the natural (physiological) conditions of perception, 2) a cultural dynamic function (seen as plasticity), based on the elasticity of the for-mentioned structure – with the technical role of order generating geometric support – elasticity which permits their permanent adaptation to various scopic formal situations¹.

The disciplinary engagement of composition in this manner means, in short, that compositional structures are both geometric structures as well as plastic ones. Thus, they offer both the technical support as well as the seen, artistic quality to the work of art. If from a methodological point of view, plastic structures can be understood as a shell of geometric structures – the visible exterior of the work of art – the stake of expressive plastic unity of a work's meaning, seen as the artistic goal of a syntactic order, involves another kind of relation that goes beyond the methodological one.

Within the compositional framework described in this book, plasticity fundamentals the artistic autonomy of the artistic act, just as a work of art (as a plastic space) "represents the state of a self-sufficient universe, equivalent to the real one" (18) The organic independence of this universe, as a self-consistent and self-sufficient alternative to normal scopic perception of the world, is outlined by the plastic identity of the painting, understood as an auctorial act defined by compositional logic. In other words, the professional stake of ordering elements in a painting (an author's compositional stake) is always plasticity, seen as a special channel for visual relations between people, which, in order to arrange plastic space, calls for a

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constructive formula which strives to streamline both the objective and the subjective components.

According to Mr. Bartoş, objectivity means constructive elements of a technical structural nature – geometric structures, ordering principles; grammar of language – while subjectivity is understood, following its normal auctorial logic (creative personality; the infinite representation of natural shapes), as a human motivational availability inherent to any artistic act, which must be compositionally administered according to artistic autonomy norms within the plastic space. Under these conditions, subjective factors only manifest themselves through objective ones.

When looking at the relations between subjectivity and objectivity, the objective visual structures² are seen as *virtual objective structures* (17). This means that the objectivity of the scopic physiologic grounds for the constructive organisation of a pictural space – present in the professional training as a set of schematic methodological rules for space organisations – represents the source and the guideline for building the artistic as a possible quality of a visual representation (which situates that representation in an alternate space to the one based on the normal visualisation of the surrounding environment), quality which can be obtained by the author, only individually, based on the operationalization and not on the simple presence of methodological schemes in the work of art.

In other words, the endless possibilities of plastic operationalization of technically objective structures engage them as a possible generator of understood artistic quality, in this case, as a particular visual situation that can appear only when an author succeeds in transcending the technical methodological character of this structure. Following this, artistic quality is a virtual quality of these structures that is the result of turning them into artistic structures, moulding process in which the technical objectivity of compositional structures is redefined as plastic objectivity.

This type of composition implies the simultaneous administration of two types of objectives (a) a technical and (b) an artistic one that is, constructively speaking, independent, which infers that artistic objectivity ratifies technical objectivity as a source of its quality. The methodologic rigor of such an order means especially the acceptance of the differences between the precise normative power of a technical ruleset and the generous offer given by the principle seen as a possibly artistic, infinite and different from the norm. This means that the constructive norm only works in a qualitative way if understood as a plastic composition principle that “ensures the optimal fundamental framework and the necessary conditions for the evolution of forms in a plastic space” (92) and not as a “recipe”.

For Mr. Bartoş, the rules of composition: a) unity and diversity; b) order and disorder; c) Harmony (symmetry, proportion, balance, rhythm) –

manifest themselves as three *plastic principles* that work as is, not individually, but within a dynamic relationship which implies finding a solution for the polar contradictions within the first two rules through the unifying nature of the third – harmony – where “The plastic order includes (naturally) the obligatory presence of harmony...” (95). Plastic principality means, in this case, that none of the three has, artistically speaking, normative independence. In the absence of their harmonic unity, separately, they can only represent quantitative norms – as an accounting, taxonomic presence within the work, of a technical ruleset being fulfilled – whereas their harmonic unity means “... the special qualitative state of the order principle,” (96) which can engage the act of painting as a form of reflection over the harmonic order of the world.

With the relatively new resurrection of painting as a medium for contemporary artistic expression, Mr. Jenö Bartos’s plea for order, seen as order of the plastic space – which implies a disciplinary aura for composition, different from its old, well known methodological quality regarded as useless by both old and new avant-gardes – could mean a solid professional guideline for those interested in building a visual work of art through the plastic operationalization of points, lines, forms and colours.

Notes

¹ For example, the reinforcements of abstract works – the hidden geometric structure of a painting which determines the order with which visual elements are represented (for abstract painting, they are the point, line, form, colour) – are based on the same normative guidelines as very realist works. What differs there is that, using the same ruleset, the points, lines etc. are arranged in such a manner that they portray recognisable natural forms.

² In the field of professional theory, the objectivity of these structures is basis on which the whole grammar of retinal language has been based (in its modern scientific form). The norms for articulating scopic language elements follow the objective logic of structural perceptive conditioning imposed by the human visual apparatus. See Johannes Itten, *Kunst der Farbe Subjektives Erleben und objektives Erkennen als Wege zur Kunst*, 1983, Otto Maier Verlag Ravensburg, p. 21.