ESSENCE *vs.* APPEARANCE –
Picture Space in Modernist Theoretical Writings

Stella Pelše

> "The true purpose of a painting is to represent objects as they really are; that is to say, differently from the way we see them. It always tends to give us its sensible *essence*, its presence, this is why the image it forms does not resemble its *appearance*…"
>
> (Rivière 1992: 184)

This instruction provided by the Cubist critic Jacque Rivière in 1912 seems to introduce a set of controversial issues that covers various fields of human activity, including art theory, philosophy and psychology of perception. The fashionable claim that we always undertake to explore the past in light of some urgent needs of the present is nevertheless a good starting point. The current Western anti-essentialist interpretive strategies provided by the New Art History and post-structuralist philosophy have asserted for several decades that what art can and should do is nothing but to reveal historically contingent meanings and messages, systems of signs reflecting the changing and changeable spaces of social, economical and psychological relationships. The collapse of boundaries between the easily reproducible images and reality itself can be also redefined as the fading of essence/appearance distinction – the postmodern condition has been declared as the condition where appearances, a kind of Baudrillard's simulacra, are indistinguishable from reality; at the same time this distinction might be intensified when the visually perceptible appearances of art are often reduced to the extra-artistic relationships of power as a sort of essence behind or beyond the visible. Some evidence suggests that the post-communist intellectual scene has possibly retained more of a conviction that what is perceptible of an artwork, namely, the realm of its formal structure, can reveal something essential, constant and universally appealing, about man and his place in the world. Whether this could be considered an advantage or a handicap may be a point worth discussing and reflecting on. Anyway, comparatively little has been said on what

exactly it is that enables us to understand an artwork outside its original context of creation and use. Another set of reasons to focus on these issues can be derived from the largely modernist space conceptions abundant in present-day Latvian painting and also the complete silence of theory on these conceptions. Once it was otherwise – certain modes of space construction in the West were surrounded by a vast variety of theoretical argumentation. As a rule, its part tends to increase in significance when artistic practice is no more self-evident and breaks away from public's accustomed mental set and level of expectation. Often invoked criticisms of the modernist canon and modernist myth hardly do justice to the complexity of the situation. The issue at stake is not whether modernist theories have really directed or corresponded with artistic practice but whether these habits and patterns of thinking on art can contribute something to the understanding of the present.

Space construction first of all means a selection of the *type* of relationships on the planar surface of a picture. From the aspect of the formal analysis every painting, past and present, has to deal with space and demonstrate some conception of it – painting has to show some kind of arrangement if it is to exhibit more than a completely flat layer of paint. Although the wide variety of space conceptions in Western painting has been a good reason to glorify the notion of historical change, space perception is the most likely candidate to provide an experiential constant that cuts across different epochs and styles because every human being has to deal with space as he or she has to deal with the world, i.e. perception of space is common to all humans because of being embodied. However, space has not always been singled out as a distinct problem in art-theoretical writings.[1] During the first decades of the 20th century adherents of various modernist artistic trends often stressed the importance of proper space construction, alongside the significance of such formal constituents as colour, line, mass and volume. Picture space was largely treated as a place where the hidden essence of things can be revealed instead of their merely superficial ap-

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[1] It should be noted that this essay is not primarily focused on the vast variety of texts in the Western art-historical tradition that in some sense deals with changing forms of space perception and construction. They had been of crucial importance in order to write a coherent history of art when European classical standards proved their relativity in dealing both with remote cultures and the latest developments of the time. Art history writers such as Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, etc., took recourse to the changing ways of seeing, walking an uneasy tightrope between psychological hypothesis and rudimentary metaphysics (Gilbert, Kuhn 1960: 573).

pearances. The notion of space became a battlefield where the debates about essence and appearance could be played out. Mostly related to the Cubist theories, picture space and its relation to essence and appearance also often resurfaced in later 20th century thinking on art. The quasi-philosophical wording of essence and appearance, widely used in the early 20th century writings, already points towards a baffling contradiction – if essence is identified as presence and described as sensible, i.e. perceptible by the senses, what are we supposed to identify as appearance and how does it relate to the senses, at least, to the sense of sight? But why should one assume that objects "really" are in some profound sense different from the way we see them? Or, more precisely, can we trace the origins of this separation? The spatial characteristics of things seen and depicted had been conceived as proving the worthlessness of artistic image as such because of their accidental and, subsequently, transient nature. The abovementioned quote by Rivière in fact could be placed in a long line of comments, for example, upon the statement already found in the X Book of Plato's *Republic*:

"…you may look at a bed from different points of view, obliquely or directly or from any other point of view and the bed will appear different but there is no difference in reality. [---] The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of the true existence; he knows appearances only." (*Republic*, Book X, Plato 1994: 35, 38.)

Searching for essence as what endures of an object apart from its accidental and sensational properties derives from the need of the human mind to find something stable, immutable in the ever-changing world, to ensure that there is something that remains of the perishable appearances of an object. Although it can be doubted whether we can ever cogently separate a thing from its properties, the idea of the constancy of things can also explain the very possibility to perceive objects in spite of visual distortions.[2] However, these limitations of depiction were later reversed by Plotinus who attributed to art the potential to reach the essence of things by correcting and supplementing the flaws of natural

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[2] "It is particularly the assumption of the constancy of things which has proved its worth to animal and man. We look out into the world with the confidence that thing out there will be more likely to change its place than its shape and that its illumination will vary more easily than its inherent color. The Aristotelian distinction between 'substance' and 'accident' is nothing but the codification of this faith in a stable world, modified by such accidents as the angle of vision, the reflection of light, or the change of distance." (Gombrich 1996: 230.)

appearances. European art theory had constantly relied upon organised, per-fected, idealised appearances as the way to approach whatever may be thought of as essential about the depicted objects. The historian of art theory, Moshe Barasch, has thus summarised the further historical deepening of the gap be-tween perceptual and conceptual elements:

"There is, however, a profound difference between knowing that visual experience may mislead and even using this fact in certain ways (as in foreshortening) and the awareness that physical reality as such is altogether different from our sensual experience of it. In the Renaissance, at the beginning of what is often called modern times, the intention was to lump together, perhaps even to unify geometrical space and the space of human experience. [---] By the end of the nineteenth century, intellectual development had reached the opposite pole: there could be no harmony between the space of geometry and the space of sensual experience." (Barasch 1998: 36–37.)

On the one hand, truth became the invisible business of science; consequently, what art is left to explore is the particular domain of the senses. On the other hand, specific stylistic developments on the threshold of the 20th century, namely, the reaction against impressionism as a purely visual description of the world, prompted questioning and doubt of the role of vision as the main instru-ment of artistic creation.

Bearing the above-mentioned split in mind, where exactly did the modernist writers attempt to find the essence of objects – in the space of geometry or in that of sensual experience? What kind of relationships can we discern between sensual and geometrical spaces, from the one hand, and essence and appearance, from the other? A vast variety of theoretical writings at least suggests a certain set of technological means to approach the essential. Renouncement of the European tradition of the one-point perspective and three-dimensional spatial illusion in general was the central theme found in early modernist writings, al-though there had been many variations upon this subject. In general it motivated the undoing of the too-accustomed look of the world, leaving the beholder more to do and supposing that he does not need a copy of things he is already familiar with. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger gave a very general and far-reaching definition of what art should do – in fact, the very idea has been developed by numerous writers on modern art:

"From the fact that the object is truly transubstantiated, so that the most accustomed eye has some difficulty in discovering it, a great charm results. The picture which only sur-

renders itself slowly seems always to wait until we interrogate it, as though it reserved an infinity of replies to an infinity of questions." (Chipp 1968: 215.)

Some visually familiar aspects of the human surroundings nevertheless retained their significance. One of the most philosophically oriented writers on Cubism, Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, developed a complex system of how to render the essence of things visible. He, for example, proposed creating a "plastic view" where objects would be defined against each other and against the background instead of their submission to the perspectival illusion. He related the object's form and its position in space to the primary qualities (in the sense of John Locke), leaving to the mind of the spectator the incorporation of secondary qualities, such as colour and tactile qualities, into the object. But the resulting "plastic view," in his opinion, will fail to represent things from the outer world, i.e. one would only see an arrangement of planes, cylinders, quadrangles, etc. So Kahnweiler pointed to the necessity to include recognisable and undistorted objects into the overall composition: "Combining the 'real' stimulus and the scheme of forms, these images construct the finished object in the mind" (Kahnweiler 1992: 207).

The three-dimensional illusion was also partly admitted if complemented with the geometrical treatment of objects that signified the creative, organising activity of the human mind, as in the defining statement of the Cubist theoretician Guillaume Apollinaire:

"Cubism differs from the old schools of painting in that it is not an art of imitation but an art of conception which tends towards creation. In representing conceptualised reality or creative reality the painter can give the effect of three dimensions. He can to a certain extent cube. But not by simply rendering reality as seen, unless he indulges in *trompe-l'œil*, in foreshortening, or in perspective, thus distorting the quality of the forms conceived or created." (Apollinaire 1992: 182.)

Such devices as foreshortening and perspective were paradoxically blamed for being both too simple and natural, and too arbitrary and conventional – the simple rendering of something "as seen" was at the same time conceived as an arbitrary way of distorting its real image[3]. It is also hard to decide where exactly to

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[3] "Taken up by Erwin Panofsky, Nelson Goodman, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others, the issue of the conventionality of perspective has become commonplace and "played a major role in the critical assault on painting as an art form, in the field of film theory, ideology-critique, and in feminist and psychoanalytic theories of the image and the gaze." (Wood 1998: 480.)

draw the line of that "certain extent" permitted for the effect of three dimensions. Repudiating the rules of perspective, theorists nevertheless conceived of the notions of *spatiality* and *depth* as revealing the essential about things if detached from the cage of the rigid European tradition. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger wrote:

"…the convergence which perspective teaches us to simulate cannot evoke the idea of depth. Moreover, we know that the most serious infractions of the rules of perspective will by no means compromise the spatiality of a painting. Do not the Chinese painters evoke space, despite their strong partiality for *divergence*?" (Gleizes, Metzinger 1992: 190–191.)

Here the perspective is again blamed for its failure to create a convincing illusion of depth. In a sense the aim was set to render the world *as perceived*, but in a more profound and true manner, i.e. sensation should include more than the merely visual appearance is capable of revealing: "To establish pictorial space we must have recourse to tactile and motor sensations, indeed, to all our faculties" (Gleizes, Metzinger 1992: 190–191). The idea that vision alone is not responsible for the perception of space could be surely derived both from the latest findings of scientists and psychologists and from the statements, for example, of Adolf Hildebrand and Alois Riegl who strove to restore the significance to the sense of touch. A similar idea appeared in Jacques Rivière's explanation of the notion of depth:

"Perspective is not the only way of expressing depth. …depth is not pure emptiness; one can attribute a certain consistency to it, since it too is occupied by air. The painter will therefore be able to express it otherwise than by perspective – by giving it a body; not by suggesting it, but by painting it as if it were a material thing." (Rivière 1992: 185.)

The reduction of space to a material thing could be contrasted with another widely current idea of the Fourth Dimension as the new measure of perfection of the picture space – in Apollinaire's pretentious wording, it was the dimension of infinity that allowed the very essence of the objects depicted to be approached and, consequently, the old aesthetic notion of the sublime to be evoked.[4]

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[4] "Metzinger declared that their ideas in painting necessitated more than the three dimensions, since these show only the visible aspects of a body at a given moment. Cubist painting … needed a dimension greater than the third to express a synthesis of views and feelings toward the object. This is possible only in a 'poetic' dimension in which all the traditional dimensions are superseded." (Chipp 1968: 223.)

A considerable element of discord among the theorists themselves hinders a smooth definition of modernist, or even Cubist space conception. To complicate Apollinaire's statement that Cubism sharply differs from the old schools of painting we can quote Pablo Picasso's statement that

"…art has always been art and not nature. …there are no concrete or abstract forms but only forms that are more or less convincing lies. [---] Cubism is no different from any other school of painting." (Picasso 1992: 211.)

Coming back to the opening passage where Rivière has stated that in order to express objects as they are an artist must eliminate lighting and perspective, and he must replace them with other more truly plastic values, Gleizes and Metzinger had strongly objected that the suppression of chiaroscuro and traditional perspective would help to uncover some truly essential and absolute form of an object. Although adhering to the Kantian idea that the visible world only becomes the real world by the operation of thought, they at the same time stated that

"an object has not one absolute form, it has as many as there are planes in the domain of meaning. Geometry is a science, painting is an art. Does it ensue from this that we should follow the example of the Impressionists and rely upon sense alone? By no means. We seek the essential, but we seek it in our personality, and not in a sort of eternity, laboriously fitted out by mathematicians and philosophers." (Gleizes, Metzinger 1992: 190–191.)

Gleizes's and Metzinger's emphasis on the essential to be found in artists' personalities can be interpreted as a very important component of modernist legacies that today resurface as the largely increasing role attributed to subjectivity, although the idea of a freely creating individual had become discredited as a historical construct. Locating the essential in artists' personality implies a considerable amount of freedom that could also embrace more traditional stylistic devices of *not* suppressing lighting and perspective. A similar ambiguity towards third dimension figures in Clive Bell's conception of significant form: "What we must say is that the representation of the three-dimensional is neither irrelevant nor essential to all art, and that every other sort of representation is irrelevant" (Bell 1992: 115). In other words, the significance of form is not directly preconditioned by a certain type of spatial solution.

One of the most widely popularised and debated issues, closely related to the problem of the third dimension, was that of the relationships between space and

time as pertaining to art. Jean Metzinger has written on Picasso: "Whether it be a face or a fruit he is painting, the total image radiates in time; the picture is no longer a dead portion of space" (Metzinger 1992: 178). The idea of essence was allied with the idea of rendering movement in the picture and opposed to the rigidity of "dead space" identified as mere appearance. The intention to do away with space to the extent of the complete dissolution of painted objects could be found in Futurist writings:

"To paint a human figure you must not paint it; you must render the whole of its surrounding atmosphere. Space no longer exists: the street pavement, soaked by rain beneath the glare of electric lamps, becomes immensely deep and gapes to the very center of the earth." (Boccioni *et al.* 1992: 150.)

There are no more distinct boundaries between object and space, one is turned into the other, resulting in objectified space and spatialised objects. This anti-spatial (or super-spatial?) tendency could be related to the immensely influential conception of French philosopher Henri Bergson according to which only an uninterrupted flow of consciousness has the status of true reality:

"The separation between a thing and its environment cannot be definite and clear-cut. There is a passage by insensible gradation from the one to the other; the close solidarity which binds all the objects of the material universe, the perpetuity of their actions and reactions, is sufficient to prove that they do not have the precise limits which we attribute to them." (Bergson 1978: 278.)

The depiction of the essence of objects in respect to time appeared as an equivalent of a kind of visual synthesis, known as the much-debated and also refuted multiple viewpoint theory. Rivière has stated that "the knowledge we have of an object is, as I said before, a complex sum of perceptions. The plastic image does not move: it must be complete at first sight; therefore it must renounce perspective." (Rivière 1992: 185.) It could be even concluded that the difference between the sharply opposed terms of essence and appearance is really a matter of degree only; essence is not a fundamentally superior and unknowable Platonist idea, but the sensible essence, a sum of single perceptions, each of them classified as appearance. Finally there appears to be no unbridgeable gap between appearance and essence or, put differently, between seeing an object and knowing its essence. One can also notice residual elements of classical aesthetics here, for example, the suggestion of Rivière that the object must always be presented from

the most revealing angle recalls numerous likewise art-theoretical recommendations, Aristotle's and Lessing's being among the most prominent.

In Latvian art theory one can find very few occasional remarks related to the construction of picture space. In the early 1920s, several more or less modernist-oriented writers on art had emphasised the picture's formal elements in opposition to the deep-seated inertia of naturalism as the depiction of "outer" appearances of things. It was contrasted with some kind of "inner" vision which could thus be distanced from the illusory spatial principles. The leftist poet and art critic, Andrejs Kurcijs, in his manifesto (Kurcijs 1923)[5] repeated the main ideas of Cubists when he wrote:

"A Cubist represents objects as they are, not naturalistically but according to the visible and invisible formal laws of reality. Table as it is. Nothing else. Not the surroundings and all the stuff related to that table, such as lighting and colour relationships. He does not paint impressions, but "things in themselves." But where should an artist stop on his way towards "things themselves," where has he sufficiently distanced impressionism and naturalism?" (Kurcijs 1923: 18.)

Although he supported modernism in general as far as it dismissed the outdated Realistic and Impressionistic idioms, he did not accept the idea of complete abstraction. Admitting that Suprematism might be the most consequent trend to reach "things themselves," Kurcijs agreed with the Russian avant-garde artist, Ivan Puni, (Puni 1923: 20)[6] that this way one indulges in empty and schematic play with geometrical figures. "Abstract" and "mechanical" formalism has to be contrasted with creativity and intuition; at the same time Kurcijs proposed a clear aspiration towards a rational, even mathematical organisation ("intellectual

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[5] Andrejs Kurcijs's essay titled *Aktīvā māksla* [*Active Art*] was one of the few elaborated modernist manifestoes in the Latvian intellectual milieu. He derived the terminology of "activism" and "active art" from the German literary trend and complemented it with the artistic principles of Fernand Léger and French Purists. Although later Kurcijs became a convinced Marxist (he already emphasised in *Active Art* that artistic creation must be a form of participation and intervention in social processes), in his exhibition reviews he mostly went on to support modernist-inspired idioms, such as flattening and geometrical treatment of objects, and to promote innovative experimentation.

[6] Puni concluded that movement transmitted in the Suprematist painting, such as in Malevich's work, tends to be unorganised, chaotic and fragmentary. Puni's work had probably served as an authoritative source for Kurcijs; at the same time he disagreed with some of Puni's statements, for example, his reliance on the indisputable authority of taste.

order") of picture space that had to replace the anarchical overtones of pre-war modernism.

This European-wide call to order of the 1920s brought a kind of return to the third dimension as an integral part of the human perception. The Purist theoretician Amédée Ozenfant wrote:

"The third dimension (depth) is never absent from any plastic work, even in a simple drawing, since this drawing *suggests on one plane the limits of different planes*. It is never absent even in a canvas covered with patches of colour, since formally the diverse colours appear to be on different planes. ...there are Cubists who declare they have depicted the fourth dimension and abolished the third, in the process of supplanting perspective. As if you could play around with perspective, and the volume of substantial objects, just on the basis of fashion or some decree." (Ozenfant 1992: 224.)

The illusion of depth became in a sense essential to painting because of its inevitability. At the same time the treatment of space in Neo-plasticism by Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg exhibited a far more rigid stance to establish two dimensions and to avoid any traces of illusionary space with its opacity and vagueness: "Neo-plasticism has found the new reality in painting, by abstracting the outward appearance and only expressing (crystallising) the inward essence." (Herwitz 1993: 111.) Piet Mondrian constantly repudiated the "three-dimensional corporeality of appearance" and spoke of the great hidden laws of nature which art establishes in its own fashion:

"these laws are more or less hidden behind the superficial aspect of nature. Abstract art is therefore opposed to a natural representation of things. But it is not opposed to nature as it is generally thought. It is opposed to the raw primitive animal nature of man, but it is one with human nature. It is opposed to the conventional laws created during the culture of the particular form but it is one with the laws of the culture of pure relationships." (Mondrian 1992: 371–72.)

In a similar way Clement Greenberg defined the picture space by recourses to flatness and two dimensions as what is essential to painting *as painting*. Thus the theory of painting had in a sense abandoned the ambitions to seek for the essence of things and formulated instead the essence of painting itself as the material qualities of its medium. So Rosalind Krauss has defined the spatial qualities of the grid, the emblem of modernity that is ubiquitous in the art of the 20th century while appearing nowhere in the art of the last one:

"The grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. …those two planes – the physical and the aesthetic – are demonstrated to be the same plane…" (Krauss 1996: 9–10.)

It seems that after the triumph of the ideal of utmost flatness the problem of picture space itself had become outdated – the artist became free to use and mix whatever spatial principles he liked. But various Neo-Dadaist reactions have since the 1960s strongly shifted the focus of discussions towards real space as the necessary condition for truly innovative artistic practice. Instead of suggesting tactile values on the planar surface art was openly encouraged to explore them directly, according to an intrinsic logic of development. For example, the sculptor George Segal influenced by Pop Art has thus commented upon these issues:

"Keep the integrity of the flatness of the surface, somebody said. But then somebody else said, oh regard … the implied psychological tension between the two and three dimensional. …I decided that I didn't understand anything about flat versus three dimensional space and why not use real space, and if a Cubist painter was picking up his mandolin or his cup and turning it around in his hand, I could walk around an object and examine it and see it from many points of view." (Segal, Kaprow 1992: 168.)

A host of Neo-Avant-garde trends, including installations, happenings, Land Art, etc., have all become supported to manipulate real space as the only site of the creative action and intervention[7].

If we return to early modernist ideas of picture space, they exhibit a body of contradicting claims that later happened to fracture into irreconcilable opposites, revealing an ambiguous fluctuation between differing solutions that were supposed to stand against and overcome different problems. If the theory-laden geometrical construction of space was promoted to oppose the supposed passivity of the imitative tradition, the path towards the essence of things was also defined as sensation-based and intuitive, contrasted with any rational rules or canons reminding of normative Classicist aesthetics and, by extension, of the intellectual nature of science and philosophy in general. Numerous scientific advances, such as the discovery of n-dimensional geometries, X-rays, the theory of

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[7] "Today painting and static sculpture are no longer wholly satisfying. We need an art of greater energy. We need an art of total environment. [---] Old art depicted space as uniform and enclosed. New art perceives space as organic and open. Old art was an object. New art is a system. …it reveals the actual space-time rhythms of reality." (Sharp 1995: 317–318.)

relativity, etc., have been coupled with artistic developments. Although it can be plausibly argued that modern art and modern science have developed along similar patterns[8] despite their isolation into separate domains since the Enlightenment, modernists did not demonstrate consistent and elaborated theories. They can be explained as a tapestry of differing voices that may contain their grain of present actuality. Claiming to portray objects in the world in order to reveal something essential about them by synthesising both certain wilful distortions and selected elements of visual reality, they suggested synthesising the universal and sensory elements; in fact, they proposed the sensory *as* the universal. If Plato in the *Republic* treats the vision of the true existence as impossible – so blinding that no one can hold to it –, early modernist theories still demonstrate the bold and optimistic ambition to make that essence of objects visible, to empower art as the only sphere where essence and appearance can be reconciled. On the one hand, this claim today seems to belong to the history of art-theoretical ideas, while on the other hand, it may be worth recalling in order to balance the current idea of permanent flux and change as the only essence ever to be detected in art. That may be an extension of modernism's subjective arguments at the expense of the universally significant ones. The often proposed modernists' stress on the sensory faculties might point towards what Paul Crowther has named as the relational examples of the generally valid reciprocity principle between body and world[9]. That could allow the trans-historical dimension of art to be conceived, which is necessary for the very notion of historical specificity to be meaningful.

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[8] "The properties of abstraction and flatness ... as major stylistic characteristics of modernist art are a natural consequence of applying an analytical and reductionist attitude or strategy to the problems of picture making. Analysis breaks the original complete scene into parts or separate dimensions of visual experience; reductionism is the concentration on or the preoccupation with the refinement of one dimension or aspect, such as color or form." (Vitz, Glimcher 1984: 18.)

[9] "Such exemplars include the reciprocity of part–whole, present–past–future appearance, figure–ground, presence–absence, actual–possible, real–ideal and containment–excess... What these twentieth-century art movements have done, in effect, is to move through theory and practice to the revelation of that dimension which makes systematic visual reference possible. The conditions of iterability are themselves made visually iterable." (Crowther 1997: 24, 228-229.)

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