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ART HISTORY AS A THICK DISCIPLINE

Abstract: The text is an attempt to look at art history from the perspective of cultural ontology. Science in general and art history in particular are seen as a kind of practice whose specificity gives identity to particular groups of sciences and disciplines. The practice of the humanities, including art history, is specifically related to signification and is carried out from within axiological situations. A reference to meanings (senses and values), constitutive for the humanities, is made, among other things, through the use of thick concepts, i.e. concepts that are both value expressing and descriptive. As I see it, art history uses specific thick concepts which make it possible to distinguish it from other humanistic disciplines. Seeing the integrating factor in the practice of art history makes it possible, at the same time, to preserve its theoretical openness which corresponds to the openness of human praxis, including artistic praxis.

Keywords: art history, cultural ontology, practice, thick concepts

This text is about art history as a discipline that is an important part of the humanities. I want to take a closer look at the question of art history as practice, and in this context look at the questions of its specificity and the need for some (new) theory that would integrate this discipline. However, it is necessary to start by clarifying the perspective from which I look at these issues.

What is my perspective?

The theoretical background of my text is cultural ontology. It is a concept proposed by Barbara Tuchańska as a transformation of the sociohistorical ontology developed for understanding science by her and James E. McGuire in their book entitled *Science Unfettered*.¹ These transformations are a consequence of philosophical reflection on the humanities and human creativity.²

Cultural ontology belongs to the post-Heideggerian ontology of being, that is, it does not ask what is but how something is (what ways of being does it have?) However, significant modifications are made to the concept Heidegger articulated in *Being and Time*: the individualism of Heidegger's ontology is transformed into a social ontology. Then, culturality as a way of constituting being is introduced into the proposal presented in *Science Unfettered*. At the same time, the perspective remains hermeneutic; acts of understanding are not performed from a 'divine standpoint', but are historically, communally, and culturally situated. More precisely, they are conditioned by situatedness and interact with it. As Tuchańska and McGuire write, "Assuredly, this does not imply a search for universally valid concepts, but rather a search for concepts that refer to our ways of being and are filled with various contents at different times. Our aim in reconstituting the concept of scientific cognition is to find those ontological structures that are conditions of (scientific) cognition as a sociohistorical enterprise."³

Viewed from outside, this approach can be called relativistic. The recognitions that are made within cultural ontology can be (and are) revised. At the same time, I agree with Isabelle Stengers⁴ that relativism *sensu stricto* appears on the basis of positions in which the theorist is able to enter the role of a judge, able to say from outside, to what is relativized what is considered to be truth. In this sense, relativism seems symmetrical to fundamentalism. Such a procedure cannot be carried out in the field of cultural ontology, even though it has its central category, namely the notion of practice. This is because cultural ontology does not recognise the immutable content of practice (what practice is) but tries to understand how practice is. Truth itself is seen in an inseparable relationship with the relations that link the elements between which the question of truth arises.⁵

Practice in the perspective of cultural ontology

In European philosophy we are familiar with at least two important traditions of conceptualizing practice (praxis): Aristotelian and Marxian. The concept of praxis used in cultural ontology refers to these traditions but modifies

¹ J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Science Unfettered. A Philosophical Study in Sociohistorical Ontology*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2000.

² Cf. B. Tuchańska, *Ontologia kulturowa – zarys konstrukcji*, "Diametros" 2014, no. 41, pp. 127-151; B. Tuchańska, *Ontologia kulturowa: kulturowość bycia*, "Diametros" 2014, no. 42, pp. 262-289.

³ J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Science Unfettered...*, p. 139.

⁴ Cf. T. Falkowski, *Dyskurs historii nauki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2020, p. 172.

⁵ Ibidem.

them in a significant way.⁶ While, for Aristotle, praxis is primarily an individual activity, cultural ontology recognises that praxis is a way of being of communities, and thus exists inalienably as collective, collectively. Aristotle's distinction between praxis, i.e. activity whose aim is itself, and poiesis, i.e. activity whose aim is the realisation of a product external to it, is also rejected. The notion of praxis, which is used in cultural ontology, includes both dimensions of activity, thus it refers to "to the entirety of human activity."⁷ In contrast to the way the notion of praxis functioned, for example, in the philosophy of science (e.g., Jerzy Kmita, Leszek Nowak), praxis as understood within cultural ontology is not a kind of 'space' filled by stable sub-practices hierarchically related to each other (e.g., based on the determination of scientific practice by a more basic kind of practice – economic practice.)⁸ Practice, which is the way of being of communities, is a dynamic whole, "a multidimensional whole in which each sub-practice exists in interrelation with other sub-practices."⁹ As such, it is not the simple sum of activities undertaken by individuals,¹⁰ just as communities are not simply collections of individuals.¹¹ "They are wholes ontically described by sociologists in terms of social structures, or networks of social functions (roles) of individuals, or in terms of social interactions that have stable regularities of their own." They are neither supra-individual substances, nor "a field of forces considered in analogy with natural forces."¹² Their being is characterized by openness, changeability and internal tensions. Individuals and communities have a relationship of embracement and participation. "Individual participation in a community is simultaneously an activity of making the community. A community's embracement of its members as persons is also a process of shaping them into agents and actors."¹³

Communities and their participants can, through practice, constitute what they are because they exist historically. Cultural ontology seriously takes the recognition made in modernity that people and the world exist in a contingent and finite way. The historicity of communities and their participants does not have supra-historical sources (divine creation, the absolute developing according to immanent laws, etc.), but is connected with praxis. Praxis is always realised in the conditions that are found (thus it is not arbitrary), but it can transform these conditions. The historicity of communities and their participants,

⁶ Cf. J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Science Unfettered...*, pp. 113-115.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 115.

⁸ Cf. Ibidem, pp. 135, 137.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 135,

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 116.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 111.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 104.

which, at the ontological level, is linked to finitude and the succession of generations, opens the field for the emergence of novelty, which is the basis of three important features of praxis (human action): “unpredictability, uncertainty and irreversibility. If there is a lack of a permanent supra-historical human nature or universal determinants of human action, then it is characterised by unpredictability. (...) In turn, the fact that human action and community practice are self-constituted means that nothing and no one guarantees their beginning, their proper course, and the achievement of their goals, and this means that they are characterised by irremovable uncertainty. Finally, individual finitude and the succession of generations make action and practice irreversible.”¹⁴

Cognition is one aspect of practice. It has undergone a historical process of autonomisation in which it is constituted as an element of sub-practice, for which it is the most important activity, though not the only one. In other words, “it gives birth to scientific cognition and becomes embodied in science as a sociocultural system that produces knowledge. Most importantly, the emergence of science marks transition from individual to social cognition.”¹⁵

From the perspective of cultural ontology, the process of (self-)constitution of science is not necessary and does not take place according to the rules of a supra-historical logic of development. Science is constituted within a practice that is historical, which means – as I mentioned – that it is characterised by unpredictability, uncertainty, and irreversibility. Within this process, science breaks away from philosophy to take the shape of various kinds of sub-practices. The multiplicity of sub-practices that make up science raises the question of whether we are dealing with a single science or rather with sciences? This question is all the more important because it is directly related to the humanities. The process of their constitution, at least in its modern form,¹⁶ is entangled in a dispute about the specificity (identity) of these sciences. This dispute is related to the science requirement to be the only reliable cognitive practice that “gives itself the status of ultimate cognitive authority (...)”¹⁷ Stengers shows that the possibility to make such a claim is related to the fact that scientific practice is constituted by reference to a particular kind of constraints. The first kind of those constraints are directed outside scientific practice and called ‘exigence’ (requirements) by Stengers. The second kind, obligations, bind together the participants of a given scientific practice. Both types of constraints have im-

¹⁴ Tuchańska B., *Historyczność nauki ujęta inaczej*, in: *Ideały nauki i konflikty wartości. Studia złożone w darze Profesorowi Stefanowi Amsterdamskiemu*, ed. E. Chmielecka, J. Jedlicki, A. Rychard, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Szkoła Nauk Społecznych przy IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2005, p. 57.

¹⁵ J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Science Unfettered...*, p. 135.

¹⁶ Cf. T. Czeżowski, *O naukach humanistycznych*, T. Szczęsny i S-ka, Toruń 1946.

¹⁷ B. Tuchańska B., *Historyczność nauki...*, p. 57.

portant functions in science. For example, the requirement from nature obliges natural scientists to ensure that, in a situation of scientific controversy, it is the reference to nature and not their own interests that determines the choice of competing scientific artefacts.¹⁸ Rationality, in turn, understood as obligation, is a kind of a challenge and risk faced by those who want to participate in a given scientific practice. However, rationality can also be treated as a requirement, a demand put forward by a given scientific practice towards other practices. Then it becomes, as Stengers emphatically writes, “a vector of arrogance and infamy.”¹⁹ It is in the context of such a claim that the identity of the humanities is constituted. The answer to it is twofold. One can acknowledge the validity of this demand. Then humanities, if we care about its scientific character, must be cultivated in accordance with the model of science. In the history of humanities one can find examples of attempts to make it non-scientific in such a sense. For example, in the field of historical sciences it was postulated that the so-called Hempel-Oppenheim explanatory model should be used, biological terminology was transferred to the field of art theory, attempts were made to quantify aesthetics. These attempts were met with criticism, in which the inadequacy of such approaches or their limitations were shown.²⁰ This critique generally involves a rejection of the requirement put forward by science. It is then emphasised that the humanities have their own specificity, different from mathematical natural sciences, and therefore must be practised in their own way. However, on the basis of this approach, there is no unanimity as to what the specificity of the humanities should consist in. Following Ryszard Kleszcz, we can distinguish six features which are mentioned as the specific features of the humanities, namely: their subject matter, the role of values in research practice, their sign-like character, separateness at the level of language and explanation, and finally their philosophical and ideological entanglement.²¹

From the perspective of cultural ontology, it seems problematic for at least two reasons to define the specificity of the humanities in terms of its specific subject matter. Firstly, it is due to the fact that it is sometimes defined

¹⁸ Cf. I. Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, transl. R. Bononno, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2010, pp. 50-55.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 53.

²⁰ Cf. E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 1999; M. Wallis, *Koncepcje biologiczne w humanistyce*, in: *Fragmenty filozoficzne. Seria druga. Księga pamiątkowa ku uczczeniu czterdziestolecia pracy nauczycielskiej w Uniwersytecie Warszawskim profesora Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego*, PWN, Warszawa 1959, pp. 308-330; T. Pawłowski, *On Concepts and Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo PAN, Warszawa 1980.

²¹ R. Kleszcz, *Problem osobliwości nauk społecznych*, “Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria” 2004, no. 3(51), p. 142.

in different ways, e.g., as (1) 'man', who is the object of interest in medical, biological, theological and other sciences, (2) 'culture', because every object of study is cultural in a sense²² or (3) 'history', because historicity appears in all types of sciences, for example cosmology or evolutionism in biology.²³ It also seems problematic to distinguish the humanities due to the presence of values or value judgements in them, and this is because the philosophy of science and methodology of sciences have recognised the presence of values and value judgements at different stages of research work in science as such.²⁴ Various objections may also be formulated to the other features listed by Kleszcz. Thus, it can be shown that all cognition has the structure of a hermeneutic dialogue and is the understanding of meanings, that certain forms of nomological explanation and idiographic cognition are present both in natural sciences and in the humanities,²⁵ that scientific practice is at least partly entangled in a worldview, relating at least to what ideal of science is accepted.²⁶

From the perspective of cultural ontology, grasping the peculiarity of the humanities becomes possible not when we ask what the reason for this peculiarity is, but when we are interested in how the humanities are, what their way of being is. Following Tuchańska, we can then see that the difference between natural science and the humanities is based on the fact that the former exists as a practice dealing with what has a meaning (to us), and the latter as a practice focused on what meaning is.²⁷ To clarify this distinction, it is necessary to devote a few words to how meaningfulness is thematised on the grounds of cultural ontology, that is, how meanings are understood as how they are,

²² If we recognise that natural science itself is a certain cultural phenomenon that neither had to come into existence, nor take the shape it took by virtue of some supernatural laws, that in laboratories phenomena are transformed into techno-phenomena (artefacts), we will recognise the cultural character of natural science and the artefacts created within it. This does not mean, however, that they do not have a cognitive character, or that they are freely constructed by scientists. On this issue, see e.g. I. Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I...*; L. Fleck, *Crisis in Science. Toward a Free and More Human Science. Discussion on 'Science and Human Welfare'*, *Science*, July 8th, 1960, in: *Cognition and Fact – Materials on Ludwik Fleck*, ed. R. S. Cohen, T. Schnelle, D. Riedel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster, Tokyo 1986, pp. 153-158.

²³ Cf. B. Tuchańska, *Nieuniwersalność praw nauki, historyczność wszystkiego i specyfika humanistyki*, "Prace Kulturoznawcze" 2010, no. XI, pp. 15-26.

²⁴ Cf. A. Lekka-Kowalik, *Odkrywanie aksjologicznego wymiaru nauki*, TN KUL, Lublin 2008.

²⁵ Already Wilhelm Windelband was fully aware of that. Cf. Idem, *History and Natural Science*, trans. by J. T. Lamiell, "Theory and Psychology" 1988, no. 8(1), pp. 5-22.

²⁶ This is not a trivial matter, as Stefan Amsterdamski demonstrated. The accepted ideal of science translates into accepted ways of measuring results achieved in science, decisions on funding, free or paid access to publications, open or not open distribution of research results, etc. Cf. S. Amsterdamski, *Tertium non datur? Szkice i polemiki*, PWN, Warszawa 1994.

²⁷ B. Tuchańska, *Nieuniwersalność praw nauki...*, p. 24.

rather than what they are. Simply put, meaning exists as that which mediates interactions between us and the culturally structured world of our lives. This means that, viewed from the perspective of cultural ontology, we see that “meaning is universal and characterises everything”,²⁸ and the notion of meaning cannot be reduced to the realm of language alone, as it also includes axiologicality, symbolicity or conceptuality. The ontological understanding of meaning as a medium for our interaction with the culturally structured world of our lives, proposed by Tuchańska, brings together two themes present in Martin Heidegger's philosophy of *Being and Time*. The first theme refers to useful things (that what is handy), with which Heidegger associates the concept of reference. It is the totality of references (serving-to, harmfulness, usefulness, applicability...) that constitutes the structure of a useful thing. The second theme refers exclusively to *Dasein*, with which Heidegger associates a world of meanings that is revealed in the openness of understanding, structured by prior knowledge, by the place from which one understands (theoretical and practical interest), by the prejudices conveyed by language. Tuchańska believes that this Heideggerian distinction is something artificial even on the grounds of his own philosophy. He shows himself “that the range of references of a given tool can be extended in ways that have no ontological limits, and that other entities can be co-discovered with it [...]”.²⁹ According to Tuchańska, the rigid separation of references and meanings in Heidegger's philosophy is a consequence of another separation: that of science from the everyday world of life. However, both these separations are not necessary and, from the perspective of a consistently relational ontology, they seem untenable. “If one considers interactivity to be the universal ontological structure of being,” she writes, “then one sees no reason to limit the structure of reference to handiness as a way of being of things.”³⁰ Moreover, it seems that any being that has a structure of connection is 'realised in some references', and references are linked to meanings. Thus, even the use of a useful thing is hermeneutic, requiring the understanding of the sense of what it is intended for.³¹ These considerations lead Tuchańska to adopt a notion of meaning which emphasises that it exists simultaneously as reference and as sense. Therefore, relations and interactions in which entities define themselves are entangled in sense “inseparably connected with human understanding, and this very sense, thanks to which entities enter ‘the sphere of intelligibility of being,’ provides an entity with intelligibility for someone other, which is defined by its connection with other entities. To emphasise the

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 21.

²⁹ B. Tuchańska, *Ontologia kulturowa: kulturowość bycia...*, pp. 266-267.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibidem.

inseparability of the connection between sense and reference, we can say that sense is the content of reference. Ultimately, this means that the differences of senses determine the differences of different ways of being of a given entity, as well as the differences of references inherent in these different ways of being and the connections of the references. It is senses that distinguish being-to-this from being-to-something-other [...].”³² They structure any action that involves something existing for us as having meaning and value. It is worth noting here an important difference between myself and Tuchańska. Namely, Tuchańska locates values among meanings and claims that axiological situations are part of situations of understanding. Meanwhile, with reference to Heinrich Rickert, I believe that all situations in which we perform acts of understanding and act rationally are axiological situations. For all judgments that we form in acts of understanding there are testimonies for or against the truth (or other value) being revealed. Our attitude towards the revealed meanings is active; the power of truth alone, of good alone or of beauty alone does not enslave us, does not automatically make us truthful, reliable, honest, good, etc.³³

Natural science and the humanities relate to meanings in two different ways.

The practice of natural science is an objectifying practice that has been constituted in the course of processes that neutralise the individual subjectivity of scholars. This process of depersonalisation means that a community of scholars is introduced in place of the limitations and conditions of the subject of a researcher – a community with its own rules and procedures, de-subjectivised mathematical structures and idealisations, and the research process itself becomes mechanised (humans cease to be essential to data collection and instruments are free from many human weaknesses), which standardisation is associated with. The meaningfulness of what is studied is objectified.³⁴ In contrast, the practice of the humanities neutralizes the objectivity of meaning. The humanist scholar examines texts, works of art, everyday objects, etc., as that of which being is meaning, i. e. as that which is significant, ugly, beautiful, symbolic or representing. And they do, this from within the situation in which they find themselves structured by historicity, community, axiology and culturality. To put it crudely, neither the living meaning of what is being studied, nor the subject who makes this recognition can be erased from the practice of the humanities. All instruments – from dating techniques in archaeology, through

³² Ibidem, p. 268.

³³ Cf. A. Bobko, *Wartość i nicość. Teoria wartości Heinricha Rickerta na tle neokantyzmu*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, Rzeszów 2005, pp. 76-85.

³⁴ Cf. B. Tuchańska, *Historia nauki...*, p. 65; B. Tuchańska, *Nieuniwersalność praw nauki...*, p. 25; J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Science Unffetered...*, p. 284.

methods of examining the chemical composition of pigments, to tools of the so-called digital humanities (still) need to be completed with a “humanistic coefficient” whose presence cannot be bracketed.³⁵

Cognition in the practice of the humanities

Cognitive activities are at the heart of scientific practice. The fact that scientific practice is specifically related to cognition does not, of course, mean that it is exclusively a cognitive practice. It is constituted by various elements, such as teaching, administration, popularisation, implementation, performing expert functions in the media or political bodies, shaping disciplinary and domain boundaries, etc.³⁶ This makes the identity of a given scientific practice determined not only by cognitive considerations, but also by its institutionalization or other phenomena studied by sociologists and historians of science. In the perspective of cultural ontology, cognition as an aspect of scientific practice is situated, dialogical, axiological, cultural, and historical.

Cognition is situated because we are not given the opportunity to see from a divine point of view, located outside the system to which the phenomena we study belong. We always learn from within the world we live in, which is filled with such and not other research instruments, methods, ways of evaluation, etc. The conditions that we find are both constraints and conditions of the possibility of undertaking cognitive activities; they are also subject to historical transformations.

Cognition is dialogical, i.e., it takes place in relations and interactions within the framework in which the objectification of meanings, interpretation of texts, reading of inscriptions provided by measuring instruments, conversation (including polemics) with other participants of scientific practice, etc. take place. The hermeneutic notion of dialogue used on the grounds of cultural ontology allows us to see that the relation of the researcher with the existing knowledge, ideals of science or methodological rules has a circular character, i.e., it cannot take place without reference to tradition, but tradition itself cannot exist if it is not assimilated, updated.³⁷ Therefore, the dialogical nature of scientific cognition does not mean that it “simply and exclusively refers to the achievements of other scholars”³⁸ and thus can be reduced to mere discourse. We are dealing with such a situation, perhaps, in philosophy. Not only dialogi-

³⁵ Cf. B. Tuchańska, *Nieuniwersalność praw nauki...*

³⁶ J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Science Unfettered...*, pp. 139-140.

³⁷ J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Sytuacja poznawcza – analiza ontologiczna*, in: *Porozumiewanie się i współpraca uczonych*, ed. J. Goćkowski, M. Sikora, Wydawnictwo i Drukarnia Secesja, Kraków 1997, p. 152.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

cal (discursive) elements, but also technology or experience are constitutive for scientific research.³⁹ Scientific cognition is realised in an indelible relation with that which is external to a given scientific practice in a way that is binding for it (i.e., Stenger's conception of requirement).

Cognition is axiological because acts of understanding reveal meanings-values in relation to which we assume a particular position.

Cognition is cultural because the recognition of meanings-values, their affirmation or rejection, and the ways that lead to their unveiling are carried out from within culturally structured communities.

Cognition is historical because it is an aspect of the practice of human communities that are historical. Like them, it is open to novelty associated with the creative dimension of human action. I wrote earlier that novelty is related to the finitude of individuals and the succession of generations. In the context of science, "An ontological condition for producing novelties is interruption of continuity. Breaks in continuity cannot be recognized, however, from inside the very process of creation; from inside there is only continuity through modification of what already exists. So, novelties exist only for the externality of the creative process; they can be recognized from outside, and external activity is necessary for their affirmation – that is, for the constitution of their being."⁴⁰ With an interruption of continuity comes a transformation of constraints, a claim made by the real 'material' of innovation, to use Stengers's term. As she writes: "[...] for the talent of innovators is to transform conditions into constrains, in other words, not to submit to existing relations of force but to rework the implications, at least partially. It is after, and only after, the new set of relationship among all parties – human protagonists, technological devices, nonhumans, and so on – has been stabilized that we will be able to identify the factors explaining innovation (stakeholders, satisfied needs, reliability, profitability, etc.). In short, why and how, and in what sense the innovation 'works'."⁴¹

The specificity of art history

From the perspective of cultural ontology, art history acquires its identity during a process of self-constitution in which heterogeneous, not exclusively cognitive elements are linked. This is reflected in works attempting to give an account of the history of this discipline, which are essentially divided into two types. Some of them focus on the activity of individual art historians and/or

³⁹ Cf. Ibidem.

⁴⁰ J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska. *Science Unfettered...*, p. 320.

⁴¹ I. Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I...*, p. 43.

institutional elements, other ones focus on fundamentally changing propositions of practicing this discipline.⁴² My aim here is not to write a historical account of art history within the theoretical framework set by cultural ontology, I will only point out that a factual representation of ontological notions would require a relational analysis, neither purely biographical, nor purely institutional, nor theory-centric. Instead, I will try to grasp two aspects of the cognitive practice of art history that seem to me to be specific to its peculiarity, inalienably polytheoretical or polymethodological.

The first peculiarity concerns the status of concepts that appear in the field of art history. I propose⁴³ to understand 'concept' starting from its understanding on the grounds of logic, i.e., as the general meaning of a name. By 'concept' I do not mean either a mental representation of something or an ideal being, but I understand it as an intersubjective "arrangement of the content of understanding that we associate with names and things (references)",⁴⁴ which is irreducible neither to names, nor to references. The contents of concepts understood in this way do not have to form a compact whole; neither do they have to be an exhaustive set of essential features of the set that forms the scope of the general name. They can form a 'family' in the Wittgensteinian sense; they are heterogeneous, dynamic and open (they can transform), just as the practices in which concepts are entangled are dynamic and open. They are a response to what we are confronted with, they refer to a problem, to something that may come from outside the world of our life, something new.⁴⁵ In this sense, they are a medium through which we can enter into relations with living signifiers in a cognitive situation.

The heterogeneity of the content of concepts may take the form of their peculiar duality, unrecognised in the positivist philosophy of science, which carefully distinguished between judgements about facts and judgements about values, the former of which could belong to the language of science, while the latter could not. As it seems, the rigid fact/value division cannot be maintained, and in language in general, but also in the language of the sciences, unless we want to arbitrarily truncate it, the close relationship between facts and values is revealed in the so-called thick concepts, which are at the same time representational concepts and value concepts. The field in which the existence of thick concepts was initially made visible was (meta)ethics, but their occurrence

⁴² As an example: A. Bochnak, *Zarys dziejów polskiej historii sztuki*, PAU, Kraków 1948; M. Bryl, *Suwerenność dyscypliny: polemiczna historia sztuki od 1970 roku*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2008.

⁴³ Cf. Bogusławski M. M., *Humanistyka z perspektywy ontologii kulturowej*, WUŁ, Łódź 2018, pp. 22-25.

⁴⁴ Ibidem., p. 22.

⁴⁵ Cf. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *What is philosophy?*, transl. H. Tomlinson, G. Burchell, Columbia University Press, New York 1994.

was soon noticed, for example, in the field of reflection on art, an instance of which can be found in Frank Sibley.⁴⁶ The existence of thick concepts makes it perfectly clear that hermeneutic situations are axiological situations. This is both because epistemic values are values and because concepts can relate us to non-epistemic, ethical or aesthetic values.

In⁴⁷ the language of more traditional methodology, it can be said that at least some of the concepts functioning in the language of science have partial rather than equivalent definitions. On the level of actually practised science, there are various reasons for this state of affairs, starting from insufficient development of scientific research on a phenomenon, to the specificity of a certain type of concepts, which makes it impossible to formulate their full definitions. Tadeusz Pawłowski gives as examples the concepts of beauty and kitsch, so important for the scientific reflection on art (with the reservation that in this case we are dealing with a family of notions whose definability differs), as well as the concept of Art Nouveau" (in Polish: secesja, secesyjny). Other examples of concepts having a partial definition are such notions as camp, glamour and vintage, which Wioletta Kazimierska-Jerzyk is perfectly aware of in her monograph *KAMP GLAMOUR VINTAGE. Contemporary Aesthetic Categories*.⁴⁸ In all these cases, an attempt to close these concepts definitively runs the risk of creating concepts that are either inadequate or scientifically useless. What is more, the inflexibility of the indicated notions shows that not only representational notions, but also thick concepts are open. As for the latter, openness concerns their representational aspect and their valuing aspect. Pawłowski – *avant la lettre* – has managed to show that this is the case with the notion of *Art Nouveau*, which, at least at the time when he wrote the book, was partially defined and entangled in different acts of valuation, from negative to positive.⁴⁹ The same is true, I believe, of the concepts to which Kazimierska-Jerzyk devoted her monograph. They indicate not only the existence of a certain property (camp, glamour, vintage) ascribed to objects, but they are also acts of valuation, not only aesthetic.⁵⁰ At the same time, they are incomplete both as far as their representing and valuing part is concerned.

⁴⁶ F. Sibley Particularity, *Art And Evaluation*, in: idem, *Approach to Aesthetics. Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. J. Benson, B. Redfern, J. R. Cox, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 88-103; K.-U. Hoffmann, *Normativity and Thick Aesthetic Concepts*, "Aesthetic Investigations" 2016, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 319-327.

⁴⁷ In this paragraph I draw on the findings of: T. Pawłowski, *Pojęcia i metody współczesnej humanistyki*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków, Gdańsk 1977, pp. 9-32.

⁴⁸ W. Kazimierska-Jerzyk, *KAMP GLAMOUR VINTAGE. Współczesne kategorie estetyczne*, WUŁ, Łódź 2018.

⁴⁹ Cf. T. Pawłowski, *Pojęcia i metody...*, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Cf. W. Kazimierska-Jerzyk, *KAMP...*, *Zakończenie*, where the different ways in which the concepts of camp, glamour and vintage are entangled in morality are pointed out.

The existence of thick concepts forces us to consider the question of whether it is possible that the representational layer of concepts is closed, while the valuational layer remains open. Such a situation seems to me more probable than the opposite one; for one can exhaustively state the essential features defining a given phenomenon, but take a different valuing stance towards it, which is connected, among other things, with the diversity of functioning axiological systems we deal with, changing tastes, transformation of aesthetic values and promotion of new values, including aesthetic or artistic ones.

Without getting into a methodological dispute about whether the humanities, including art history, have theories in a strictly methodological sense, or whether they operate with looser systems of statements and concepts, as Pawłowski wants, from the fact that the concepts used are at least in part unclosed, their subset cannot be closed, and practitioners use partial definitions, one can conclude that art history needs theoretical tools which will not artificially close these concepts, but will allow for their multifaceted perception. It also means that the practice of art history as a discipline requires its students to be able to relate to different types of rationality,⁵¹ i.e., to act reasonably, based on certain principles, standardised in specific codes, procedures, rules, methods and criteria of measurement or evaluation. What deserves special attention in this case is the ability to apply the principles of (1) conceptual rationality, i.e., care for the precision of used notions; (2) methodological rationality, i.e., conscious and therefore justified application of specific theoretical approaches, and (3) axiological rationality, i.e., ability to justify the chosen object of study and to argue in favour of the diagnoses made.

Secondly, it points to the connection between art history and practices external to it, through which novelty can appear in the field of art history. For Tuchańska, McGuire and Stengres alike, novelty in science emerges in relation to what is external to a given scientific practice. Novelty appears as an “interruption of continuance”⁵² which cannot be recognised without reference to that which is external to a given scientific practice:

“Breaks in continuity cannot be recognized, however, from inside the very process of creation; from inside there is only continuity through modification of what already exists. So, novelties exist only for externality of the creative process; they can be recognized from outside, and external activity is necessary for their affirmation [...]”⁵³

⁵¹ On this issue cf. R. Kleszcz, *O racjonalności: studium epistemologiczno-metodologiczne*, WUŁ, Łódź 1998. It is worth noting that the concept of rationality is not, from the perspective of cultural ontology, the ontological concept that the concept of dialogicality is. Rationality is related to factual practices and is a way of factual concretisation of dialogicality of cognition.

⁵² J. E. McGuire, B. Tuchańska, *Science Unfettered...*, p. 320.

⁵³ Ibidem.

Stengers shows that what is ultimately external to natural science is 'nature', which is a requirement for the natural scientist.⁵⁴ For the art historian, externality appears in two ways. First, as an artistic practice and, secondly, as technological novelty and novelty within other scholarly practices.

Art practice is that element of externality of art history which makes it possible for art history to exist as an autonomous field of research. Art history must be sensitive to novelties emerging in the field of art practice, that is, it must be able to recognize them, to understand them and to evaluate them intelligibly. Therefore, it must have a sufficient degree of theoretical inscrutability. It is in this context that Pawłowski emphasised the importance of partial definitions as a methodological tool useful in aesthetics or history of art, noting that "concepts change under the influence of new currents or directions in art, as a result of new aesthetic and artistic values being promoted, or as a result of discovering facts that shed new light on phenomena that have not been fully known so far."⁵⁵ This new light on phenomena already recognised in some way can also appear in art history as a result of practices other than artistic practice, but also external to it, for example as a result of archaeological discoveries or the emergence of new research instruments that make it possible to study the physical characteristics of artistic artefacts to which there was previously no access.

The role that artistic practice plays for art history is similar to that of 'nature' for natural science. Stengers emphasises that although scientific practice transforms phenomena into scientific artefacts, it does not do so arbitrarily and not all artefacts have equal status. Some contribute something to science, others are considered a mistake. The judgements that are made about scientific artefacts are made within the requirement of knowing 'nature' itself, which is supposed to protect the practice of natural science from decisions based solely on the interests of scientists. In situations of controversy or uncertainty, this reference to 'nature' allows one to choose between competing scientific artefacts. In the case of art history, the situation seems to me somewhat more complicated. The meaningfulness of artworks cannot be objectified in the same way as it happens with 'nature'. They are inseparably connected with the researcher who recognises them from within his own cognitive situation, which opens him up both to the work and to the values correlated with it, and to the creators: to their intentions, values which they experienced and which give structure to the works they created, traditions in which a given work was formed and functioned, growing in meanings, etc.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ I. Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I...*, pp. 50-52.

⁵⁵ T. Pawłowski, *Pojęcia i metody...*, p. 24.

⁵⁶ Cf. Tuchańska, B., *Dlaczego prawda? Prawda jako wartość w sztuce, nauce i codzienności*, Poltext, Warszawa 2012, p. 253.

Unless one is an advocate of interpretative anarchism, a reference to a work of art and the artist who, from an ontological point of view, creates with their whole person, constitutes a certain form of requirement for the art historian who must be able to show in what sense his/her interpretation is related to a given work of art and to the artist – their intentions, the values they experience, or to the tradition from which the work originates. In the language of hermeneutics, we are dealing here with a dialogue between the researcher – art historian, who comes from within his/her own cognitive situation, and a work of art, which invites the researcher to an interpretative game. It brings its rules along with the tradition from which it emerges, but which the researcher takes up limited by his own cognitive situation. For this reason, ‘the work itself’ never speaks; its presence is precisely something that obliges, and not something that determines the only possible interpretation. Of course, artistic practice constitutes a binding externality not only for art history, but also for art sociology, for example. However, these disciplines do not address artistic practice in the same way, and it is the difference in requirement that gives each discipline its specific identity. Sociology of art refers to artistic practice in the context of social functions that art performs by considering the social context of creative processes or referring to works of art as markers of the functioning of society.⁵⁷ On the other hand, art history looks at artistic practice with the help of concepts which are entangled in the context of (not only) artistic and aesthetic values, and the requirement concerns interpretations (an element of which are evaluations, e.g., contained in thick concepts) of what happened and is happening in the field of artistic practice.

Last but not least, if artistic practice is to be a field of novelty, creativity demands from the art historian that the theoretical tools he/she uses should be flexible, open to change, able to react to the novelty that appears in the field of artistic practice. It is an important requirement, though – as it seems – one difficult to fulfil, as Kazimierska-Jerzyk points out when she writes that the rhetoric of values is not innocent: changes of values are often not accompanied by a change of the scale of evaluations on the basis of which acts of assessment are made.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ P. Kisiel, *Miejsce socjologii sztuki wśród nauk o sztuce*, “Principia” 2004, no. XXXIX, pp. 205-217. The problem of the relation of social history to historical sociology, and of both of them to the social history of art, requires a separate discussion, but Jan Białostocki’s intuition that art history takes into account social context in order to account for “differences in the artistic character” of works of art seems to be important (J. Białostocki, *Historia sztuki wśród nauk humanistycznych*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo PAN, 1980, p. 122).

⁵⁸ W. Kazimierska-Jerzyk, *KAMP...*, p. 65.

If I am right that openness is an inalienable element of the practice of art history, then its inalienable polytheoreticality must also be recognised. This becomes even clearer if we see, following Mieke Bal, that concepts play the role of 'abbreviated theories' in the humanities. Polytheoreticality appears in art history as a result of different types of rationality present in it, the openness of concepts both in their representational and valuational layers, and the aspectuality of our cognition. We can use here Michel Serres's formulation and say that polytheoreticality is a kind of panopticism, and such a multiplied view is also a kind of supervision over what is being watched: one guards the boundaries of the phenomenon under study and tries to preserve its purity. The scientist, therefore, Serres writes, resembles Argus, who has been given the role of both an observer and supervisor: "An excellent example of perfect vision and lucid skin, Panoptes would today have been highly prized for his penetrating view of the world and for his careful experiments. He would have held the first place in our laboratories, in our observatories, and even out in the field. [...] The observation of things or the surveillance of relations. There is a huge difference."⁵⁹

These two types of activity break down, among other things, into research in the exact sciences and in the human sciences, from whose domain, according to Serres, we have excluded objects and considered that the human world is constituted exclusively by human relations.⁶⁰ This division partly translates into how, from the perspective of cultural ontology, the process of self-constitution of the natural sciences and the humanities is perceived. However, his criticism of the panoptic theory and his plea to see the role of objects in the human sciences is a valuable warning against the human sciences being closed theoretically, and immune to the circulation of concepts and tools coming from outside them. Inter- or trans-disciplinarity, which can also be understood as the ability to build a box with theoretical tools selected because of the object of study, is a necessity today, also in the field of art history. Without it, it would be difficult to cope with such phenomena as bio-art, the link between artistic practice and laboratory practice, or art relating to the Anthropocene (including the specific spaces of Anthropocene museums).⁶¹

⁵⁹ M. Serres, *Panoptic Theory*, in: *The Limits of Theory*, ed. T. M. Kavanagh, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1989, p. 26.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁶¹ Cf. M. Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje. Sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2012; Bez granic. *Przetworzone ciało-poszerzony mózg-rozproszona sprawczość/Beyond Borders. Processed Body-Expanded Brain-Distributed Agency*, ŁAŻNIA. Center of Contemporary Art, Gdańsk-Łódź 2019; E. Twardoch-Raś, *Sztuka biometryczna w perspektywie filozofii post- i transhumanizmu. W stronę estetyki postafektywnej*, WUJ, Kraków 2021; "Kultura Współczesna" 2021, no. 1, vol. *Muzeum antropocenu*.

The identity of a discipline in crisis

To put it somewhat jokingly, it is difficult to be a discipline belonging to the humanities without a recognised theoretical, methodological and paradigmatic crisis, etc. History of art is certainly one of those disciplines in the context of which the word 'crisis' appears, just as there are proposals how to overcome it. Mariusz Bryl has brilliantly shown how the intensification of polemics has led, since the 1970s, to the emergence of what he called the polemical history of art.⁶² At the same time, he himself conducted a polemic against this tradition and put forward arguments for the development of the approach proposed by Brötje, which he saw as genuinely alternative to it. This is an existential-hermeneutic approach, which is oriented "not at the creation of a socio-cultural space of dialogue and understanding between individuals (whether belonging to the same or different communities), but at the evocation of a space of communication between the individual and that which conditions them – not on a socio-cultural plane, but precisely on a plane that transcends these relations,"⁶³ allows for the distinction of works of art and their affirmation in art history, and thus for the establishment of art history as a sovereign discipline. But the sovereignty of art history as a discipline can also be approached if one remains on the ground of the polemical tradition of art history, by reference to the worldview of values, "which assumes values as the condition of existence and survival of a given community".⁶⁴ At the same time, Bryl clearly indicates that these are not values belonging both to the ethical and cognitive order.

What can we say about these postulates looking at art history from the perspective of cultural ontology?

Firstly, cultural ontology allows us to see that the reference to values is a constitutive element of the practice of art history. It is done in several ways: in selecting the object of research as taking a specific position in relation to what the researcher recognizes; through the selection of concepts, some of which are thick concepts, which link description and valuing; through taking a specific position in relation to requirements and obligations which link art history to art practice (also when it is an element of the distant past, as I mentioned), but also to other social practices. The researcher may be unaware of these references. He/she may keep them silent. He/she can make them a subject of self-reflection, which allows him/her to build a relative distance from both the assumed tacit knowledge and the choices he/she makes, for example ideological ones.

⁶² M. Bryl, *Suwerenność dyscypliny...*

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 691.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 690.

Secondly, from the point of view of cultural ontology, the conditions to which the researcher refers are communal and historical. They are transcendent to individuals in the sense that individuals find them, are born, socialise, live in certain conditions. One experiences their externality and objectivity, for example, as obligations to be fulfilled if one wishes to belong, for instance, to a community of researchers in general and art historians in particular. At the same time, they are not unchangeable: they are created in community practice by successive generations. And a change of these conditions brings new questions to works of art, and in this way makes their new interpretation, an element of which is evaluation. Postcolonial research, for example on 17th- and 18th-century Dutch painting, is an excellent example of this. A reference to these historically changing conditions does not take place instead of creating a space for socio-cultural dialogue, but together with it.

This involves, thirdly, the recognition of the dialogical nature of cognition, which is not reduced to the level of actual conversations, but takes place in relations and interactions, and precisely in this sense has a social nature. These interactions may take the form of disputes; they may be a dialogue with the methodological tradition or with the tradition of reception of a given work, and so on. Each time, however, they bind the work of art, the researcher and the community to which he or she belongs, and the identification made by the researcher says something about the work of art (its author, the times it came from) and does something to the socio-cultural space in which the researcher lives.

It is time to account for the phrase used in the title of this article: art history as a thick discipline. It is intended to evoke associations with both thick concepts and Clifford Geertz's notion of thick description.⁶⁵ It is due to the fact that I am deeply convinced that an art historian, in his or her research practice, makes thick descriptions in which different layers of meanings (meanings-values) are revealed in a dialogue with the world of art. It is so, I believe, even in the case of extremely formalistic approaches which attempted close reading limited to formal elements of a given work. The thickness of description is related to the specific requirements and obligations that bind the art historian to artistic practice. But it is also connected to the functioning of thick concepts in art history, which not only make the seemingly descriptive discourse thick through its relation to the world of values, but which, at the same time, bring into play different types of rationality and their associated modes of justification. Finally, art history seems to me to be a thick discipline due to its openness, e.g. conceptual or definitional, which entails the openness of approaches function-

⁶⁵ Cf. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York 2000, pp. 3-30.

ing within art history to revisions, shifts of emphasis, changes of valuation, the necessity to search for new methods of conceptualisation, etc. Consequently, the art historian resembles Argus with his skin covered with eyes-concepts, eyes-methods, eyes-theories. Nevertheless, he or she has their own identity, just as art history has its own identity. It has it as a participant in a specific practice which has its own requirements and obligations, its own thick concepts, but also its own university chairs, conferences, journals – places where the process of forming successive generations of art historians takes place.

Translated by Dawid Misztal

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HISTORIA SZTUKI JAKO DYSCYPLINA GĘSTA (streszczenie)

Tekst jest próbą spojrzenia na historię sztuki z perspektywy ontologii kulturowej. Nauka w ogóle, a historia sztuki w szczególności widziane są jako rodzaj praktyki, której specyfika nadaje tożsamość poszczególnym grupom nauk i dyscyplinom. Praktyka nauk humanistycznych, w tym historii sztuki, w specyficzny sposób związana jest ze znaczeniowością i dokonuje się z wnętrza sytuacji aksjologicznych. Konstytutywne dla humanistyki odniesienie do znaczeń (sensów i wartości) dokonuje się między innymi poprzez stosowanie pojęć gęstych, a więc takich, które są jednocześnie pojęciami wyrażającymi wartościowanie, jak i pojęciami opisowymi. Jak sądzę, historia sztuki posługuje się swoistymi pojęciami gęstymi, które pozwalają wyodrębnić ją spośród innych dyscyplin humanistycznych. Dostrzeżenie czynnika integrującego w praktyce historii sztuki pozwala jednocześnie zachować jej otwartość teoretyczną, która odpowiada otwartości ludzkiej praxis, w tym praxis artystycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: historia sztuki, ontologia kulturowa, praktyka, pojęcia gęste

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