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MONUMENTAL PAINTING AS PERFORMATIVE ACT WITHIN REALM OF RITUAL

Summary: In this essay, the author uses an interdisciplinary approach to analyze the place and role of monumental painting as a form of artistic expression both in historical context and in the context of modern social trends. The basic research problem in this essay is the question of the existence of a performative aspects of monumental painting placed in the context of ritual acts in contemporary society. To respond to this problem, the author believes that it is necessary to make deconstruction of the relation between monumental painting and these performative acts of religion. Also, according to the author these performativity of monumental painting must be understood on three levels of performativity - Performativity of a painter, Performativity of a painting, Performativity of an observer. The essey is structured according to these tree levels.

The author argues that there are two planes of monumental painting, which are not excluding one another. Therefore, there is no separation of these two levels - physical determinants of monumental painting and cognitive contexts. In addition, the performativity of monumental painting is also considered from the aspect of semiotics. Starting from that, the very importatnt fact is the existense of significant connection and unity between symbols and paint, words and paint, as well as the important role and symbolism of space and symbolism of colors in the monumental painting. The essay points out that art is not merely imitation of external form but its goal is also the inner form, inner spirituality.

According to the above, the author argues and concludes that contemporary monumental painting which is deprived of religious spiritual aspect should be marked as performative one.

Key words: monumental painting, performativity, religion, ritual, symbolism

A place and role of a monumental painting as a form of artistic expression in historical context and also in context of contemporary social trends is a very complex, authentic and interdisciplinary issue. For these reasons it is necessary to analyze it from the point of interdisciplinary approach in this essay. A call and mission of one painter is to find and express artistic sensibility and to synthesize the epoch of creation by it and at the same time to leave behind as his/her inheritance a work of art which can be recognizable as a sign of the times. Comprehended within these terms the monumental painting could be defined as a syntax of gnoseological- ontological and physical space. At the same time its character should be apprehended within a semantic symbolic discourse.

Iconological methodology locates fundamentals of monumental painting within a realm of myth and religious rituals. Its main objective is to address the question of existence of performative aspect of monumental painting placing it within the context of ritual acts in contemporary society. To reassess this problem it would be important to deconstruct the connection of monumental painting and these performative acts of religion. Therefore one must underline existence of strong connections between not just monumental painting, but the painting itself in its most extended meaning, as a medium of visual expression and rituals' practical aspect. Rituals are of performative character, they imply an action. They are usually connected with pagan cultures, but Christian church, too, has its own rituals, just like contemporary world has its own ones. Some of these rituals are derived directly from pagan customs.

Monumental painting (frescos, mosaic, icon, miniature, stained glass)together with Church rituals, humans formed integrated unity. Performativity of monumental painting should be understood in the context of succession of three levels of performativity.

- Performativity of a painter
- Performativity of a painting
- Performativity of an observer

In this essay main ideas would be elaborated in the context of specific geographical areas in Serbia. It is important to emphasize that monumental painting is deeply ingrained in religious tradition in Serbia. On the other hand, on different level it is also connected with certain Slavic pagan ritual acts. This specific interconnection and entangledness of religion, ritual and arts has formed the image of monumental painting that we know as such in our contemporary world. Therefore by deconstruction of these abovementioned connections it is possible to underline the performativity of monumen-

tal painting as its main characteristic. Therefore by deconstruction of these abovementioned connections it is possible to underline the performativity of monumental painting as its main characteristic.

Realm of ritual

Before elaboration of the problem of performativity of painting in Medieval period of Serbian and Byzantine history one must emphasize a shift that had happened with growth of Christianity in Serbia in that period. This shift meant Christianization of pagans but also penetration of pagan rituals into Christianity. Emphasizing spiritual aspect as a ground basis of monumental painting one should take into consideration strong threads that connect certain aspects of pagan rituals and Christianity in its vast scope. Therefore the pagan customs also penetrated the Orthodox Christianity in Serbia. Some examples of these pagan customs can be found in the contemporary world in their original forms (e.g. a custom of bringing the Yule log into the house). One of characteristics of pagan Serbs was possession of small figures called "kumir" which represented deity i.e. a particular mythical predecessor. They were considered as family guardians. In the period of the growth of the Orthodox Christianity the icon replaced „kumir“ and took over its role. In similar sense a particular Saint depicted on the icon became the family guardian. The icon is more than a mere representation, it is its own epitome. Its metaphysical meaning could be apprehended only through a unity of the Church, its rituals and prayers. Even though the pagan rituals differed among themselves, they were all products of human activity. Pagan Slavic tribes used totems for visual expression. But on the other side of the world indigenous Australians Aborigines draw images on the sand as visual expression. Questioning performativity of painting Barbara Bolt analyzed this realm of indigenous Australians and their rituals. She stressed that the Aborigines drawings on the sand had played important role within numerous rituals¹ and as Bolt said "Ritual activities produce reality."² Inner aspects of rituals such as totems, color, sound or words have made unbreakable bonds among themselves and they indeed do 'produce reality', but the reality that distinguishes West-European way of comprehension of the world. Regarding this, it would be good to resort to Florensky and his divine description of the Church liturgy. He depicted the liturgy in such keen way where he empha-

¹ B. Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation The Performative Power of the Image*, I.B. Tauris, London New York, 2004, p. 141

² Ibid., p. 171

sized a unity of “*movements of the officiating priest...swing of censer... aroma, fiery wafting of the atmosphere... synthesis of church visual, song poetry.*”³ As N. Mislser stressed “he implied that the liturgy was religious ritual, the enactment of religious performances.”⁴

Performativity of painter

First, one must underline the existence of two plains of monumental painting. Large dimensions of the wall paintings such as mural, frescos and mosaic imply a physical determinant of monumental painting as one plain. And the other plain should be understood in terms of a cognitive context – as the icon. It is important to underline that they do not necessarily exclude each other. Within this essay there would be no explicit separation of these two plains of monumental painting. Icon, fresco, mosaic, miniature - they all go together. There is a historical connection between the wall painting and icons. They are similar on many grounds and one of them lies within a process of preparation of a board for the icon-painting i.e. its “conversion into the wall”⁵ Both the fresco and the icon are integral parts of an integrated unity as it was aforementioned. It should be taken into consideration that monumental painting in Serbian medieval art was not comprehended only within the realm of religion but also outside of its confines as an artistic esthetic value. This particular religious or better to say spiritual aspect of monumental painting has been diminishing in the contemporary world lately.

Question of performativity of monumental painting partially lies in its spirituality. Painter of the icon has had to be someone who was religious, monk or specialized courts’ painter. In the very beginning usually skilled monks were the icon- and fresco- painters. Such monk - painter was the one who unveiled secrets and introduced hidden and revealed the truth. In regard to this it is necessary to cite Jovan Damaskin who said “*all images reveal and make perceptual those things which are hidden.*”⁶ While painting an icon the monk – painter was directing his thoughts toward God. The same case is with masters of wall painting. By painting the wall compositions in the

³P. Florensky, *Beyond Vision, Essay on the Perception of Art*, Ed. by Nicoletta Mislser, Reaktion Books LDT London, 2002, p.109

⁴Ibid.,p.98

⁵B.A.Uspenski, *Poetika kompozicije Semiotika ikone*, Nolit, Beograd, 1997,cit P.Florensky,p. 283

⁶M.Barasch, *Icon Studies in the History of an Idea*, New York University Press, New York ,London, 1992, cit J. Damaskin, p.205

Church the painters were meant to participate in liturgies and collective prayers. Being in a monastery meant to live under the rules of the monastery. Prayer was one of everyday activities, a road toward transcendental and metaphysical truth. Those prayers were something as the monk-painters' personal rituals before the process of painting. Ritual activities of the medieval monks were also small preparations for painting such as preparation of the wall, board and set of pigments on palette as inevitable rituals of every painter. This leads us to a conclusion that the process of preparation for painting has always been performative one.

In this context it is also necessary to add that Bergsons' theory of time, of "homogenous time where particular moments succeed each other", or a statement of a Serbian painter Milan Vosarevic that „painting is thinking“ indicate that the process of painting can be conceived as performative one as a continuum in time.

Performativity of painting

In this essay performativity of monumental painting is observed also from the aspect of semiotics. Painting could be conceived and comprehended as a complex dialogue of symbols and signs. Dual pair word - image is an important aspect for understanding performativity of painting in the context of medieval Serbian art and in the context of contemporary world. When approaching monumental painting from aspect of semiotics it is necessary to take into consideration a connection between symbol and painting. Ancient civilizations used symbols for visual expression and communication. In polytheistic religions the images of animals were often symbols for Gods. It was the same case with Christianity. Often sacral paintings have depicted Christ, as a lamb, and most common symbol of Christianity the cross and fish which were embodiments of transcendental aspect of symbol. It was the word and image, symbol intrinsic facets that have indicated its performative character. Performative aspect of a symbol lies within its embodiment of ontological, in its ontological lies within itself. Thus symbol embodiments itself. In this way the symbol embodies itself.

Connection of word and image could be seen through a dialectic prism. Icons and frescos have been covered with writings (inscriptions). These texts were usually signatures or the names of titular Saints in the icons or frescoes. They were predestined by canon laws, but their most important attribute was that they were the very soul of the icon. Iconographic content of scenes has been determined by text of "enchiridions". All scenes have been depicted

according to a predetermined text from Bible or different sermons. As Serbian monumental painting developed, the depicted scenes became more narrative and in some instances they lost their monumentality.

Monumental paintings of medieval period in Serbia have been characterized by width and strength of expression in the composition of the painting

In this context it would be appropriate to cite S. Radojčić who said: „Every particular scene as a figural composition was painted within confines of their own widths of conception, but grand themes that are presented within thin red confines are presented subordinately to more monumental ones for purpose of accomplishing a grandiose unity of the composition within a general idea of unity of painted space.“⁷

Icon, mosaic and fresco connect spiritual space and physical worldly space. Uspensky equalized terms 'icon' and 'painting' to within his elaboration of semiotic and ontological aspects of the icon. If an icon bridges two spaces and if the icon is the same as painting analogous to this sacral painting, there is comprehended in its vast scope a frontier between two separate spaces - metaphysical and physical ones. In the context it is also appropriate to cite Plato: ***“Objective of fine art is more than representation and imitation of external form. Its objective is inner form, Eidos, hence harmony in an object is not a mark of the object as such, but a reflection of its inner spirituality. It is embodiment of deity”***⁸.

Monumental painting comprehended within its physical dimension is closely tied to space. Regarding this Florensky indicated that visual images of spiritual or sacral could have only come to life within the environment that has the same conditions as the environment from which they originated from.⁹ Role of space is important in the embodiment of painting. In medieval period in Serbia architectural space of a church determined the scope of monumentality of the painting. Large plains of the church walls covered with strong monumental figures depicted in shallow spaces succeeded each other in a continuous flow. Together they embodied as united the space of symbols and physical space.

In medieval period in Serbia and Byzantium the icons and wall composition were constructed under by the rules of reversed perspective. It is the opposite way of depiction of space in comparison to central perspective of the age of Renaissance. In ancient periods before the Christianity reversed

⁷ S. Radojčić, Uzori i dela starih srpskih umetnika, Beograd, p.47

⁸ S. Versic, *Filozofska Istrazivanja* 131, 2013, p.556

⁹ P.Florensky, *Beyond Vision Essay on the Perception of Art* Ed. by Nicoletta Misler, Reaktion Books LTD London, 2002, p. 103

perspective had been used by ancient civilizations that were familiar with mathematics and geometrical rules. The reversed perspective had been continuously utilized before it was ceased in the age of Renaissance. Therefore Florensky pointed out that painters of these periods intentionally omitted rules of central perspective in visual expression.¹⁰ One of characteristics of the reversed perspective is a postulation of incessant movement of observer. This movement also contributed to distortion of form.

Frescoes from these periods also reflected the painters' talent for summation of different points of view i.e. they depicted one object from different angles and movements were depicted by using multiplication of postures. Considering this particular characteristic of Byzantine and Serbian medieval religious art it seems that in case of this aspect they preceded ideas of modern artists.

Reversed perspective unfolded a distinct way of perception, while European-western philosophy imposed central perspective as the only way of comprehension of the physical space and whole world in general. Objects were seen as inscribed in space and not in unity with the space. Conversely in medieval Byzantium religious art painters: felt, urged to depict intrinsic spatial unity. Distinct elements of painting were not necessarily exact copies of their physical prototypes. There was no need to copy "reality", they questioned it. Florensky made comparison of the icon and children's drawings. It is very peculiar how different perception of a child there is. Children intuitively use the reverse perspective. This provides an evidence of confinement of human perception by the rules of central perspective. By overstepping of these confine, new way of comprehension of painting work has emerged, starting with Impressionism. This gives an answer to the question how monumental painting predestined position of painting in the contemporary world.

Meditation on color in Byzantine and Serbian monumental religious painting was atypical. Color was perceived through a prism of symbols and light. Florensky elaborated in his essay *Celestial sign* a symbolical aspect of the term color¹¹ and spoke of different ways of its comprehension. He explained it through a term "*Sofia*."¹¹

According to Florensky colors emerge within a collision of light and molecular grains of dust, light beams and terrestrial particles.¹² He also

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 208

¹¹ Ibid., p. 119

¹² P.Florensky *Beyond Vision, Essay on the Perception of Art* " Ed by Nicoletta Misler , Reaktion Books LDT London, 2002 "those gorgeous colours that adorn the vault of heaven are non other than the means by which inseparable light and fragmented matter intersect.", p.119

stressed that light was continuous-“*God is light, and not in a moral sense, but as a judgment established by perception, a spiritual, yet concrete, direct perception of the glory of God. In contemplating it we behold one continuous, indivisible light. Light has no further definition other than that it is unalloyed, pure light, in which 'there is neither darkness nor singleness.'*”¹³Florensky referred to light as a light without darkness that was the ground for the icon-and fresco-painting. Icon and frescos have been painted only within the register of light. They don't have painted shadows. There is no particular source of light, they radiate light. Binary opposition of light and dark does not exist in the register of monumental painting of the Orthodox Christian church.

To underline symbolic aspect of color it would be good to point out main characteristic of the icon-painting, utilization of thin gold sheets. Gold has been comprehended as a symbol of light, of God- “*God is the light*”. Fresco painters have started at one point to imitate golden background of the icon. It was a color which connected physical and metaphysical space.

In regard to this comprehension of the light without darkness one can address Barbara Bolt , who suggested different kind of comprehension of the world within ‘dazzling light of Australia’.¹⁴ She proposed new way of mapping of the world within the light space. Within contemporary discourses spiritual aspect of the light as divine light is abstracted.

Question of performativity of monumental painting and painting in general lies within psychological facets of color and light. Flat monochrome plains of monumental painting of Serbian and Byzantine monasteries had been predecessors of modern flat colored canvases of 20th century which explored response of the observer to particular color.

Observer

As it was mentioned before the reversed perspective required the movement of observer. In order to perceive whole painting the observer had to be in constant movement. He/she became an active participant within the whole process of comprehension of monumental compositions. The observer's movement was analogous to a succession of depicted images. The observer was influenced by the unity of light, color, poetry and aromas. Thro-

¹³Ibid., p.121

¹⁴B.Bolt ,*Art Beyond Representation The Performative Power of the Image* , I.B.Tauris, London New York 2004, p.171

ugh religious rituals and common prayers believers transcend the spiritual peacefulness that led to God. Performativity of the observer lies within him/herself, within his/her openness to metaphysical truth. Utilization of the reverse perspective positioned both the painter and observer within inner realm of seeing. Observer was as well as painter perceived together with depicted reality. The observer stands vis-à-vis to him/her self.¹⁵ It was essential that the observer was someone who was active, who participated. In this way the observer could comprehend the image and relieve it numerous times and yet it gets incessantly transformed. This indicates a temporary character of sensation. External influences changes the converted inner sensation of the observer which causes the change of preserved image.

Conclusion

As it was previously mentioned in this essay, a semiotic approach of understanding complex intrinsic threads of monumental painting gave an insight of transcendental character of these threads and their empirical values. Following the analogy which questions performativity of medieval Serbian monumental painting one could conclude that contemporary monumental painting which is deprived of religious spiritual aspect should be marked as performative one. It is obvious that the Byzantine monumental painting preceded contemporary modern contemplations on metaphysical truths. In contemporary world painting work comprehended within its vast scope became the symbol itself. Sometimes it oversteps symbolic determination. It becomes an extended medium of visibility. Complexity of painting work lies within its dialectic construction that penetrates physical space. In this case one must recall Pollock's paintings that are evidences of the unity of painting language and physical space.

In the contemporary world the more a painting work oversteps physical confinements of canvases, boards or walls, it gets closer to its origins. It becomes its own epitome.

Even though there is a strong influence of the Byzantine heritage in modern Serbian art, modern painters have not wanted to rebuild it and its religious aspect. Their objective has been to traverse its dialectic within artistic language of modern times. Metaphysics of contemporary world lies in a different realm than the one of medieval times.

¹⁵B.A.Uspenski, *Poetika kompozicije Semiotika ikone* Nolit, Beograd, 1997, p. 265

To underline continuum of more creative comprehension of the world it is appropriate to cite a statement of C. Greenberg who said “Byzantine painting and mosaic moved from the beginning toward a vision of full color in which the role of light and dark contrast was radically diminished.”¹⁶. This indicates an advanced way of comprehension of the world within discourse of the Byzantine art. With the beginning of 20th century these illuminating ideas came to light in the western European world.

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¹⁶C. Greenberg, *Art and Culture, Critical Essay* , Beacon Press, Boston, 1992, p.162
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