
SELECTED EXTRACT

MODERNITÀ E CAMPO DELL'ARTE

Per una sociologia critica dell'arte contemporanea italiana

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Editorial Note

*This selection brings together passages from *Modernità e campo dell'arte* chosen to convey the core of the research: the transformation of the artistic field in Modernity, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological model, the relationship between autonomy, power and legitimation, and, finally, reflections on the Italian contemporary art system. The passages are taken from the original 2010 edition and are presented without retrospective updates.*

Notes, figures and some intermediate passages have been omitted where they were not necessary to the continuity of the reading.

MODERNITY AND THE ARTISTIC FIELD

Without regretting the utopian disinterestedness of culture, which may have had its value in the age of the Enlightenment and Kant but today appears rather anachronistic, the transformations of our society allow us to reflect sociologically on the contemporary artistic field at a time when the economisation and spectacularisation of culture have redrawn its boundaries, bringing it into line with the logic of other social fields. Without expressing particular aesthetic judgements on these phenomena, in the following pages I will attempt to analyse, with particular attention to the studies of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the metamorphosis of the contemporary Italian artistic field, understanding it within a broader social process that originated with the advent of Modernity and was consolidated with that of so-called postmodern society.

In the cultural sphere, the advent of Modernity and its flow of contradictions, as expressed by Pascal or described by Baudelaire and, more recently, by Harvey (11), was fundamental and crucial, since it was only with Modernity that the epochal transition took place from the cultural, artistic and religious uniformity typical of the Middle Ages, based on Roman Catholic universalism, to the cultural pluralism typical of the modern age, based instead on recognition of the legitimate existence of a plurality of states, cultures and different religious confessions. Before Modernity, traditional society was characterised by a well-known cultural homogeneity, also dependent on the crucial role played by culture and art in supporting established power, which was thereby legitimised and promoted through them (12). This function of propaganda and legitimation obviously has a much older and firmly established tradition: one need only think of Roman art, or earlier still of Egyptian art, to cite familiar examples.

The cultural homogeneity typical of traditional society also had direct effects on the social order, as demonstrated not only by faithful adherence to artistic canons but also by the observance of a rigorous and disciplined way of life (13). Likewise, in traditional society the uniqueness and homogeneity of art were evident: art was still regarded as a craft activity, the product of a workshop, and appreciated not so much for its historical-artistic, and therefore aesthetic, value as for the preciousness of its materials, the high quality of its workmanship, its ability to confer prestige on the patron or owner, and its

didactic and catechetical capacity to mediate between the material and the spiritual, between man and God, between the earthly and the otherworldly.

Thus, in the premodern world there was no doubt about the existence of a single art and a single culture, just as there was no doubt that these were located in the most important centres of society - the aristocratic class, courts and cities - from which they then spread towards the peripheries, reaching smaller towns, rural areas and, finally, the people (14).

If we observe the cultural field in the nineteenth century, when the processes set in motion by the advent of Modernity had become consolidated, we can see that this cultural uniformity had definitively disappeared, leaving in its place the existence of at least “two” cultures (15): one that looked with interest at progress and at processes of economic, social and cultural modernisation, and another that viewed with concern the expansion of modern industrialised, bureaucratised and urbanised society, with its low-cost culture increasingly dependent on the mass production of cultural goods, maintaining that the most important, significant and original cultural expressions are not the product of pure reason, intention or knowledge but of instinct, feeling and intuition, as Schopenhauer would say (16).

If we examine the cultural field more closely, focusing specifically on the artistic sphere, we see that it was precisely in the nineteenth century that this field reached the conclusion of a process which, as we shall see more clearly in the following chapters, began with the Italian Renaissance - which exalted the charismatic representation of the artist, endowed with an innate and incommunicable creative force, and the aristocratic image of the work of art, understood as the unique and irreproducible product of an exceptional individual - and matured with the Industrial Revolution, which opposed the singularity of the unique object to the serial production of identical objects. It was particularly in fin-de-siècle France that the artistic field achieved autonomy from the rules that for centuries had limited and regulated artistic activity, freeing itself from dependence on patrons, academies and commissioners.

The Realists were initially the ones to break with bourgeois conservatism. For them, art could no longer hide in an imaginary world dense with ideals destined to remain unrealised forever; rather, it had to document reality in all its most intimate and even unpleasant contradictions. This tendency continued and became particularly strong with the Impressionists, who not only changed the subject

but, with their free and rapid touches of colour, also changed the very way of painting - en plein air - while creating a market for their own works.

Suddenly, therefore, all those investigations centred on perspective, rationality and the careful and meticulous study of human anatomy, which from the Renaissance onwards had for centuries been one of Modernity's central concerns, lost interest and prestige in favour of new tendencies and new forms of research. These emerged as art abandoned many of the functions previously attributed to it and took as its sole reference the field itself, its historical evolution, its premises and its principles (17). These considerations will be explored further in the following chapters; here, in this introductory discussion, they serve only to support the claim that by the nineteenth century it was no longer possible to speak of cultural homogeneity, but rather of at least "two cultures", just as there were "two arts": two opposing groups of artists.

On the one hand were consecrated artists tied to tradition and to the established power that supported and protected them in exchange for legitimation and consensus; on the other were rebellious positions that rejected artistic tradition and, consequently, bourgeois values. In their view, artistic excellence should not be confused with the ability to master artistic canons but, by breaking with the linear development of tradition, should embody novelty, authenticity, personality and charisma, anticipating as far as possible the future tendencies of the field.

The problem is that, since there is no longer a single and unitary conception of art, Modernity, as Bourdieu says, leaves room for struggle among the agents of the field to draw or shift the boundary between art and non-art, between true artists, worthy of being publicly and officially exhibited, and the others who, rejected by juries and official venues and therefore labelled amateurs, may be considered genuine nonentities insofar as they do not exist from the point of view of legitimised art history. In other words, Modernity institutionalises anomie: the existence of institutions competing with one another for artistic legitimacy and recognition.

AUTONOMY, FREEDOM AND SOCIAL SPACE

The autonomy of the field, as theorised by Bourdieu in his early works, must be understood as the greatest possible freedom of expression recognised both to the artist and to the work. The moment a work is exhibited and therefore shared with others, producers or viewers, it begins to live within a cultural and social space containing political, economic and religious aspects and values different from those of the person who produced it. It therefore provokes different reactions, but also discussions and debates that help the field itself to redefine its boundaries, its principles and its history. To censor a work of art or an exhibition, to suppress possible debates and discussions, means eliminating the conditions that allow the dialectical development of the field itself, as well as the exercise of those freedoms that our society defends only when convenient.

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The concept of field, whether understood as a field of struggle, a magnetic field or a playing field, has a number of constant characteristics: the struggle among the agents of the field, *illusio*, the stakes, the struggle between the two principles of hierarchisation of the field, and the logic of distinction. According to Bourdieu, the field is structured essentially around the struggle among its agents to redefine - by restricting or extending - the boundaries of the field, to possess its specific capital (a struggle for power), and to define the legitimate stakes (a struggle for legitimacy), and therefore the legitimate values, norms and definitions of art and the artist.

ART, POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

On the basis of these tendencies, we have said, paraphrasing Bourdieu, that with Modernity, since cultural homogeneity and unity no longer exist, anomie becomes institutionalised: institutions coexist in competition and struggle with one another for artistic legitimacy. The sociologist can therefore no longer tell a universal history or formulate a long-range social theory, but can only capture the state of the struggle at the particular historical moment in which a given social phenomenon is analysed or studied. This, in short, was the intention that guided the second part of the book, devoted to the study of the Italian artistic field in recent decades.

If until the 1970s a critical attitude on the part of art towards bourgeois society prevailed not only in the Italian field but also internationally, from the 1980s onwards bourgeois society seems no longer to have been called into question but accepted in all its aspects, resulting in an unprecedented commercialisation and spectacularisation of art (1), accompanied by increasingly substantial economic, advertising and marketing investments. In this regard, we have traced the process through which, beginning precisely in the 1980s, the figure of the artist-manager became established, oriented towards the promotion and enhancement of his or her own image and work.

Bourdieu's concerns about the economisation of art undermining the autonomy of the artistic field were therefore not unfounded; they were based on processes still under way when he was writing and destined shortly afterwards to reach a highly controversial stage (2). This demonstrates that the course of history is by no means linear and irreversible, but can be called into question at any moment. If we understand the history of the artistic field as struggle, we must accept the possibility that even the part of the field considered particularly controversial because it is opposed by those in power may in some way overturn the system that has prevailed until then, promoting another more consistent with its own values and ideas.

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The study of art from Bourdieu's perspective therefore represents a form of analysis that is not only social but also political, illuminating those processes and relations of power and privilege that remain hidden because they are experienced as natural, and demonstrating that even in leisure time inequalities can be automatically reproduced when they are not called into question. Leisure therefore

becomes, especially in so-called late Modernity, a terrain of struggle in which new identities can be affirmed, cultural autonomies expressed, and cultural and social conflicts generated.

The book has thus attempted a practical application to the field of contemporary art using Bourdieu's model, which, as we have seen, remains fully applicable to the study of social reality: from the production to the consumption of cultural and artistic goods. With these final considerations, however, I would like to return to the concept of the autonomy of the field, both because it is precisely this autonomy that is most affected by extra-artistic influences and threats and because, especially in his later works, Bourdieu himself questioned this aspect, supporting artistic forms of "resistance". From this point of view, the study presented here has revealed differences from the formulation originally proposed by the French sociologist.

Following the reduction in public funding and the search for new sources of finance, private patrons have not only acquired greater centrality, using art to convey messages instrumental to other fields, but the "canonical" role of the museum has also changed. First of all, its function of the "sacralisation of art" has diminished in favour of the promotion and legitimation of ultra-contemporary art, increasingly at the service of the most powerful market and commercial forces.

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In other words, today the artistic field no longer aims primarily at autonomy from other fields but, even at the level of production, prefers overlaps between different areas and combinations between subfields, including those belonging to different fields. Bourdieu himself probably became aware of this change, even if he did not explicitly address it: in his later writings on art he seems no longer to believe in the autonomy of the field and supports artistic expressions such as those of Hans Haacke, which articulate political propositions within the artistic field precisely with the intention that these may bring about changes in the political field.

As we have seen, in Modernity nothing is destined to last forever; everything fluctuates among the contradictions that mark reality, and by observing them in the present we read the world and its representations sociologically. The subtitle of the book reads "towards a critical sociology of contemporary art", precisely in an attempt to reawaken that reflective and critical capacity that has accompanied much of human history. It is not a matter of rejecting well-being or progress, but of establishing a more mature relationship with them, mediated by our reflections.

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