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International Conference  
***The Age of Art***  
***Aesthetics and grammar of contemporary artistic languages***  
University of Florence  
7-8-9 November 2019

• **KEYNOTE SPEAKERS – ABSTRACTS**

**Sandro Scarrocchia (Milano)**

*Sulla nozione di "grammatica storica" in rapporto ad Alois Riegl e alla Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte*

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C'è del sistema nel grande lavoro teorico compiuto da Riegl che sembrò a Julius von Schlosser asistemico. E forse in nessun'altra opera il carattere di questo lavoro emerge con più forza come nel doppio ciclo di lezioni confluito nella postuma *Grammatica storica delle arti figurative*. La Grammatica è un crocevia di diversi filoni di ricerca dell'autore e delle tendenze coeve in campo artistico (movimento delle arti applicate, post-impressionismo, secessione, espressionismo, astrattismo) e in quello critico-storiografico (puro-visibilismo, storia dell'arte senza nome, scienza dell'arte). In questo contributo si cerca di rileggere la Grammatica all'interno del sistema-Riegl e soprattutto in relazione alle sue ultime opere dedicate all'industria artistica, alla nascita del barocco, alla ritrattistica di gruppo, alla conservazione dei monumenti. Un sistema che sgretola il concetto di valore artistico e pone su nuove basi la nozione di eredità culturale.

**Carole Talon-Hugon (Nice)**

*Art under control*

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Following many decades of formalism, self-examination, or transgressive art, the art world finds itself plunged into a global context of moralization.

So, in 2018, the Avignon theatre festival was dedicated to social questions: feminist interests, gender issues, plight of immigrant etc., and the Palermo *Manifesta* devoted itself to ecology. To this new form of artistic militancy, new forms of censorship have been added.

Can art assign itself ethic goals, and can it be judged by moral criteria?

**Diarmuid Costello (Warwick)**

*Photography as an Art*

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This paper considers the implications of recent debates in philosophy of photography for understanding photography as an art. What I call the "Orthodox" view tends to force a trade off between photographic purity and photographic art. Because the automatic nature of photographic transcription excludes the beliefs and intentions of the photographer at the moment of recording the scene, it looks as though photographic purity comes at the cost of photography's standing as art. Assuming, that is, that we look to art at least in part for what distinguishes a particular artist's subjectivity, conception of salience, outlook and so on. What I call "New Theory" understands the nature of the medium more generously, forcing no such trade off. Because photography is not

exhausted by the transcription of the scene from world to image, other dimensions of the photographic process (including the construction of the scene, the formation of an intermediate light image, post-production, and so on) count as internal to “photography proper”. But is New Theory right? Demonstrating that it is requires an argument that does not implicitly presuppose the truth of either Orthodoxy or New Theory. I provide such an argument by showing that — even on the Orthodox view — the photograph cannot be reduced to the moment of exposure. Since this is not yet sufficient to generate an image that can be visually appreciated. I then consider the implications of this for photographic art through several case studies drawn from recent photographic art practice

**Beryl Graham (Sunderland)**

*An Aesthetics of Interaction and Participation? New Media Art, and Histories of Exhibitions*

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Participatory art is much discussed, by theorists including Claire Bishop and Nicolas Bourriaud, but how might new media art, which has the inherent behaviours on connectivity, computability and interaction, inform these debates? How can art critics and historians deal with this post-medium condition of behaviours, and avoid a hype-cycle of misunderstood terms such as A.I. and Open Source? Artworks by YoHa, Rafael Lozano Hemmer, Osman and Omar Khan, and Thomson & Craighead are discussed, and help to establish critical categories for different kinds of participatory system. How can histories of exhibitions dealing with interaction and participation inform the curation of new media art involving these behaviours? Exhibitions of broadly conceptual or immaterial work such as *Information* (1970) and *Les Immatériaux* (1985) lead to an examination of exhibitions where participation is key, including *Body space motion things* (1971 and 2009), *Serious Games* (1996), *010101* (2001), and *The Art of Participation* (2008).

**Pietro Montani (Roma)**

*Rules of Interactivity*

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In my presentation I will examine the immersive, multimedia, multisensorial and interactive requisites linked to the contemporary artistic experience from the standpoint of philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of technology. I will propose, in particular, linking the salient phenomenon of interactivity with the concept of *technical creativity* and develop a hypothesis whereby one can only speak of interactivity true and proper in those cases in which the rules of the art installation can be *modified* at least in part. After discussing some exemplary case studies, I end by showing that the new digital technologies foster the emergence of a form of writing, accessible to all, in which word and image are coordinated in a modality that I call “intermedia” rather than “multimedia”.

**Annette Jael Lehmann (Berlin)**

*Wider Frameworks. Blurting in A & L and other Projects by Art & Language*

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*Blurting in A & L* is a printed booklet whose content is a dictionary with blurts or »annotations«. The annotations were written by american members of Art & Language Ian Burn, Michael Corris, Preston Heller, Joseph Kosuth, Andrew Menard, Mel Ramsden and Terry Smith between January and July 1973. *Blurting in A & L* paradigmatically presents the discourse and the dialogue practice of Art & Language. The members of Art & Language intend to abandon the separation of competences between artists, critics and observers, and to transform the art-world into a system of communication between contributors with equal capabilities of reflection. This presentation will investigate this practice as a call for wider frameworks of the presentational forms conventionalized within the

systems of art and art exhibitions, and the ways of coding art itself were antithetical to a conception of art practice as discourse-oriented.

Art & Language designs what is, in its time, a new pluralistic framework and tests the possibilities of embedding it into a world which may or may not be the art world. For the members of Art & Language, these experiments with a conception which exposes the context conditions of one's own practice, amounted to a call for a change in and of those conditions which were already institutionalised. In this case study a variety of activities come into view which are practically and critically upon the concept of art, but which are at home neither in the studio nor in the gallery, instead Art & Language promised a social base in shared conversation. That conversation in turn transformed the practice of those involved and generates other kinds of work.

**Andrea Mecacci (Firenze)**

*Pop Goes Hyperreal*

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The processes of contemporary aestheticization have deeply modified the aesthetic experience of everyday life. In mass consumerism the very notion of art has become a suspended dimension between acceptance of the cliché and rejection of the new. The paper seeks to investigate the notion of "hyperreality", which Eco introduces in the account of his journey into the American imaginary of the mid-seventies and which Baudrillard reprises a few years later as the guiding concept of contemporaneity, a notion representing one of the key grammars for the historical understanding of the transition from pop (the art of consumption) to postmodern (the consumption of art) in which the falsification of artistic content is shifted into the average criterion of aesthetic pleasure.

**Andrew Benjamin (London/Monash)**

*Meaning, Movement and the Body: Grammar and Gesture*

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The aim of this paper is to address the question of the relationship between grammar and gesture within the work of art. Gesture is a term that is essential in order to understand the movement of the body. Movement however is always located. While location need not be absolutely determining, location constructs particularity and in so doing brings the gesture's material presence into play. For example, the movement of the body in theatre while demanding that real consideration be given to the differences between the theatrical text and the performance, needs to be distinguished from the body's movement in both sculpture and painting. Differing materials are involved in each instance. While working with the assumption that meaning is effected by the operative presence of materials, the paper will address the way in which gestures are organized –hence the possibility of a grammar of gesture -within painting and sculpture. Recourse will be made to the work of Aby Warburg.

- **SHORT COMMUNICATIONS – ABSTRACTS**

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**Aesthetic irreproducibility in contemporary art practices**

Almost any kind of human activity and artifact could be today a potential *medium* of an artwork, but only a small subset of artifacts are mostly used to depict and document them (namely, pictures, videos, texts, shortly: multimedia and semiotic objects). Since a significant part of our acquaintance with cultural products happens through reproductions and documentations, these constitute

an interesting bottleneck in which an artwork's aesthetic impact *in presence* could be conveyed through its reproduction (that is, *in absence*) with very different degree of fidelity, depending on the artistic medium.

From this starting point, in my contribution I will try to define the notion of *irreproducibility* of aesthetic experience, distinguishing it from the traditional issue of artifact reproducibility. The main aim is to outline a typology of the various kind of irreproducibility of aesthetic experience and to draw some implications for the aesthetic discussion concerning contemporary art. Depending on the type of art medium, we can define the difference (or the "ratio") between the aesthetic experience in presence of the artwork and the aesthetic experience in its absence, that is, in the presence of its reproductions or documentations. These differences could depend on ontological, material, practical reasons, or on the technological means of reproduction.

I will try to argue that the application of different "strategies of irreproducibility" testifies the urge to escape the replicability of aesthetic experience and the desire to generate forms of uniqueness and exclusivity in the fruition of art. Public aesthetic engagement in presence and irreproducibility are thus strictly connected.

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### **The Revealed Grammars and the Evolution of Contemporary Artistic Practices**

In today's art, semblances and visual aspects of the works are not the only main aims. Being not only inclined to the production of images, many contemporary artists show that processes and, ultimately, human industriousness are pivotal. In particular, the spread of conceptualist practices has contributed to the full expression of aspects that usually, in traditional art kinds – from painting to theatre, from sculpture to cinema – remain in the background. This is evident considering the works of numerous artists who give greater importance to ideas, actions and human relationships rather than to visual forms of works: Adrian Piper describes the possibility of making art making explicit the references that guide the activity and artistic production; Marina Abramović highlights the vital dynamism that pervades the artistic activity; Vito Acconci assesses the possibilities to obtain an action space that favors the interaction; Joseph Beuys means action as a manifestation of the transforming force available to human beings; Bruce Nauman considers his direct actions marked by a certain immediacy. The new artists' generations do not contradict these approaches: Margaux Bricler works on the tension between the extreme and the poetics; Christian Falsnaes investigates the possibilities arising from situations and human relationships; Riccardo Arena expresses narrations and tensions through the relationship between spaces and geometrically defined materials.

Is it possible to establish what these practices have in common, making them different from the traditional ones? How could the transformations of the practices be described in accordance to these changes?

Starting from these questions, this paper aims to show how the notion of 'artistic grammar' could be fruitfully employed for the purposes of an ontology of contemporary arts.

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### **Architectural Language**

One of the first attempts to make cities readable was Otto Neurath's ISOTYPE project during the interwar period. Neurath applied his picture language from its original social-economical context to cities in order to help people develop a way finding method. Way finding method means an environmental system of user experience designed for orientation [Lynch 1960].

The fundamental questions of a theory of navigable cities relate to the problem of complex architectural meaning. The underlying conceptual framework of such a theory, however, is in need of further development and refinement, because much of the terminology used for describing architectural meaning is *ad hoc* or insufficient.

We propose a conceptual framework for architectural meaning on the basis of the speech act (Austin 1962, Searle 1969) and picture act theory (Kjørup 1974, 1978; Novitz 1975, 1977). Our theory of object acts accounts for the production of architectural meaning on the basis of *how* we understand interpret architectural locutionary acts (buildings) in the context of their production and use. The various types of contents, or *what* is conveyed by buildings and cities, will be accounted for and analysed in this conceptual framework in order to provide a systematic theory of the rich variety architectural communication.

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### **New materiality and old syntax (under the skin of Ed Atkins)**

Responding to a question of “*Age*” of *Art*, I would like to look at new elements of grammar in contemporary artistic expression, so as to tackle on the ways an aesthetic experience is formed and structured in times of inextricable entwinement of technology and artistic intuitions. In so doing, I will lean on the age-old scholastic postulate, according to which “art is the right reason of things to be made.” Using the example of Ed Atkins’ art pieces or “renders,” in particular from his 2016 work “Safe Conduct,” I will first elaborate the elements of his artistic expression, and then the reasons and particularities of a grammar in creation: an artistic practice necessarily drawing on new technologies, entire worlds of new devices that alter, modify, warp or straighten “the right reason of things to be made.” Mapping the possibilities of new tools (CGI, AI, Facialschift Real Time, etc.) and their capacity to build up new aesthetics, I will attempt to identify what is irretrievably lost of the “old” artistic syntax, how it survives and is reborn in this new creative process. It would seem that the main challenge of Ed Atkins’ artistic practice is the “right reason” of the constitution and de/constitution of meaning of things through an immaterial approach to their old materiality.

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### **Elective Affinities – Alois Riegl and Walter Benjamin**

Alois Riegl’s work has influenced thinkers ranging from Benjamin, Lukács, Panofsky, Feyerabend, Deleuze, and Guattari. Benjamin lists Riegl’s *Late Roman Art Industry* as one of the ‘four great works of German scholarship’ which have ‘remained alive’. Recent research on the historiography of art has explored Benjamin’s engagement with Riegl’s work. Benjamin’s methodological affinity to Riegl is evident in his emphasis of the objective work over the individual and in his recognition of the significance of the work in deciphering cultural transformations.

Riegl’s concepts and methodology remained vital for the development of Benjamin’s thought, beginning with *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and continuing to ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’. ‘The Rigorous Study of Art’ is an incisive analysis of Riegl and the Viennese School: Riegl’s study is an ‘epoch-making work which applied with ‘prophetic certainty and sensitivity the insights of expressionism’. ‘Indeed, in the last four decades, no other art-historical book has had such a substantive and methodologically fruitful effect’.

In *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, drawing upon the studies of original sources of different languages in the field of linguistics, Riegl sought to provide a ‘grammar’ for artistic languages and their common lineage. Analogous to linguistic studies of specific roots within language (phonemes) to discover patterns of linguistic evolution, art history could study visual elements common to painting, sculpture, architecture, and decorative art to discover the common principles of artistic



development. Benjamin's application of Riegl's approach to the historical conditioning of perception to connecting minor motifs with broader cultural transformations in his study of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* is a continuation of Riegl's project of discovering the artistic grammar.

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### **The age of Internet memes: Forms and contents of the leading contemporary visual language**

Among the so-called “viral” contents that spread online, mainly as captioned pictures and videos, Internet memes — “meme” (/mi:m/) being a neologism coined by English evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) to designate “cultural genes” — stand as the most popular macrotypology, due to their icastic, synthetic qualities (they feature a striking, “whimsical” element, according to Shifman; a “punctum”, in Barthes' terminology) and easiness to be modified and appropriated (they are modular “serial syntagms”, in Geninasca's, they are “rickety” [It. *sgangherabili*], in Eco's). This appropriation may be implemented according to three main memetic “radicals” (to take up Frye's terminology), which outline a both chronological and syntactic-pragmatic typology (a digital update of Lévi-Strauss “bricolage” and Genette's “hypertextuality”):

- (1) *Sharing* — Internet ready-mades, clichés or memes “at the zero degree” (to quote again Barthes); e.g. *emoticons, rage faces*;
- (2) *Remixing* — Template, formulaic or symbiotic memes; e.g. *image macros, meme icons*;
- (3) *Remaking* — Mimetic memes; e.g. *video fads, flash mobs, challenges*.

Coming out from the subcultural guts of the Internet (pre-dating the Web-era; emoticons were invented in 1982 on Usenet, a precursor of forums), such a conceptual, visual, and cultural form has overcome its original borders, becoming an established, institutionalized and widespread form of communication even in mainstream culture; Facebook has recently assigned to the most classic *top-bottom-text* template (*image macros*, originated around 2007) an ontology of its own.

In sociolinguistic terms, memes are employed to build up phatic and identity values — rather than communicating specific referential pieces of information — within communities of practices, wherein members challenge each other as regards their both encyclopaedic and textual competences, mainly for humour, playful, parody, and satire purposes. Nonetheless, in recent years, what we may call memetic communication has “de-generated” (has gone far outside its original borders as a textual genre), becoming a kind of meta-macrodiscursive palimpsest; namely, a cultural infrastructure upon which many other ones are being implemented (art, politics, religion etc.); including the outcomes of the so-called “post-truth” *Zeitgeist* (conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, misinformation, fake news etc.).

The paper aims at addressing how Internet memes as a cultural form are capable to translate contemporary culture into spreadable tokens and how such a growing form of literacy is affecting the way in which we communicate everyday over the social media; in other words, it is argued that memes are capable to both mirroring and shaping our contemporary imagery and imaginary (more than often in a subtle, surprising fashion).

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### **The Great Challenge of Performance Art: Creating an Ontology**

The “problem” of Performance Art is intrinsic to its own nature: the art is unique to each event of its performance, extremely ephemeral, and evanescent. So how is it possible to preserve and “safeguard” it? This question has sparked a heated debate among theorists and contemporary art curators, and now represents one of the biggest challenges of Performance Art. Artists and specialists have attempted to answer this question through two distinct solutions: i) the technological reproduction of performance, which depending on the media used can become photo-performance, video-



performance and cyber-performance; and ii) the re-performance, conceived, for the first time, by Marina Abramović.

Both approaches desire to find the appropriate tools to create an ontology of Performance Art, which should be observed and analyzed from a dual point of view: the “essentialist” and the “documental-theatrical”. The “essentialist” point of view considers performance in a narrow sense (performance is seen as an art that always happens in the present time and “starts” from the immediate, intimate and energetic interaction between artist and audience); the “documental-theatrical” point of view is instead related to the technological reproduction and the re-performance, through which we can preserve the memory, build a narrative and define an history of performance.

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### **The Artistic Language of Conceptual Art**

This paper addresses the language of conceptual art (considered as an art historical category) to argue that it's constituted of material, stylistic, aesthetic and thematic elements.

It begins with an example: The author once presented a lecture that posed the question of its status as an artwork, in which the question was answered with reference to the font in which the presentation was delivered – a *visual clue* for *conceptual* content. However, addressing a philosophical question through its content is also indicative of the artistic language of conceptual art.

It's suggested that such a language can be divided into two headline sets of topics, which combine to signal meaning, locate the aspects of the work to be given critical consideration and to place the work comparatively with other similar art productions.

These are (i) visual tropes such as typeface font, office equipment, slide shows, photographs, pencil drawings, graph paper, and institutional settings; and (ii) thematic tropes of presenting theories through languages, investigating the nature of ‘artwork’, concurrent embodiment and meta-representation of that embodiment, de-personalisation of expression, dematerialisation of medium and using all of these elements to explicitly posing of a question through an object.

The paper concludes by suggesting that these elements have become settled art historical tropes, which, when used individually in isolation of that language in contemporary works, can operate as Barthesian ‘myths’ providing a shortcut to establish meanings that can often valourise positions actively conflicting the original project(s) of conceptual art for which the language as a whole was constructed.