

**UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS, FACULTY OF MUSIC
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The interpretation of gesture-based painting
systems, with special regard to brushwork and
materials

THE THESES OF THE DLA DISSERTATION

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1. Introduction

Regarding my doctoral dissertation, I find it important to render account of the area to be examined, the topic choice, the problem statement and the path leading thereto.

From the artist's point of view, one of the most important questions is what gesture painting means to me, how and why I represent the opportunities of the inherent formal, emotional and content projections and how the colours, the forms, the spatial systems and the surfaces become the primary forms of visualisation on the canvas in gesture painting.

Gesture painting appeared around the middle of the last century, became dominant primarily in the United States of America and it can be defined as a painting trend belonging to the collective term of abstract expressionism. The term 'abstract expressionism' was first used by Alfred Barr, American art historian, in 1929, in connection with the improvisations by Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky; however, the term became widespread only in the 1950s, upon proposal by Clement Greenberg, American critic. According to Greenberg's theory, abstract painting is a kind of pure painting that is free from everything that is not inalienably inherent to painting, such as narrative or figurativity. Greenberg pinpoints the flat nature and the two dimensions as the inalienably inherent features of painting but he also points out that this impact may not necessarily be evoked only by abstract painting. At the same time, this would be the primary purpose of abstract painting and not the exclusion of visualization and objectivity. *"Abstraction or non-figurativity in itself did not prove to be a momentum that is indispensable for the self-criticism of the painting art, even if this is what excellent artists like Kandinsky or Mondrian thought about it. Neither representation nor visualisation prevent painting art from developing its individuality; it is done by the associations evoked by the visualized things."*¹

¹ Clement Greenberg, *Modernista festészet*, [1960] Laokoón Művészetfilozófiai Folyóirat. no. 7, p. 3, par. 3, http://laokoon.c3.hu/dok/greenberg/12.modernista_festeszet.pdf retrieved: 06.12.2017.

The creator's aspect as a definition in the dissertation is not by accident, and it has a central role from the viewpoint of the dissertation as I am primarily related to everything as a creator and I wish to look at the subject of the writing with a special, contemporary approach and from a painting-oriented viewpoint. Of course, applying the scientific examination methods must also be a condition of the dissertation. In consideration of all these aspects, I wish to form a correct picture about the importance of the topic, which deals with a gesture painting-related problem that is the most essential to me as an active contemporary artist: the importance of brushwork and materials on the surface of the artwork within the gesture systems.

In my own creative approach, the gesture or gesticulation as a possible form of self-expression can be mainly expressed in painting through the material. Material as a surface, its spatial dimension and surface treatment. Various materials offer unlimited ways of visualisation. There are no two identical surfaces due to the interaction of materials, thus there is an infinite variety of brushwork giving a visual experience.

I deem it important to declare that the knowledge and the acquisition of traditional art academic skills is indispensable in working out the independent creative attitude. Cennino Cennini, an Italian painter from the 14th century, wrote in the fourth chapter of his book entitled "Trattato della pittura", the science of painting, translated by Christiana J. Herringham: "*The foundation of the art and the beginning of all these labours of the hand is drawing and colouring*"².

We can only abstract the forms that we know and, in my opinion, it is exactly gesture painting that needs the safest hand and the highest knowledge in order to create a major painting abstraction. Greenberg also used the term "painterliness", which he took over from Wölfflin, who worked out the 'das Malerische' category when examining Baroque

² The Book of the Art of Cennino Cennini, Translated from the Italian, with Notes on Mediaeval Art Methods by Christiana J. Herringham, London: George Allen, Ruskin House, <https://warburg-sas.ac.uk/pdf/cnh925b2209242.pdf> retrieved: 23.10.2017. p. 51, chapter 4

paintings. The term means that the painter's signature and gestures become visible, and it draws the attention to the created artwork with regard to brushwork, forms, contours and colour management, but also in a very direct manner, e.g. by leaving fingerprints and knife marks. Painterliness ignores sharp and closed forms, instead, its visualisation is characterized by spontaneity and dynamic rhythm. Based on this, Greenberg defined abstract expressionism as painterly abstraction. The counterpoint of painterly abstraction is closed abstraction, which is mainly dominated by confined, often geometrical forms.

In the beginning of my DLA studies, I focused on the forms of the instinct-triggered projections of gesture systems and on their visualisation partly in a narrative manner. Visualizing the narrative gesture form language within abstraction carries the easy-to-understand, specific formal interpretations, which can promote the possibility of acceptance. For me, the problem of interpretability and acceptance of the artwork also took a central place within the stages of creation as the brushwork systems appearing on the surface of the painting, the diverse applications of traditional and less used materials in painting as well as the layers and surface projections established by them are important areas of observation from the standpoint of apperceptibility. Importance is carried by the context of the rich surface arrangement, thickening material systems as well as the protrusions and the almost spatial experience of cracks and confluences applied with the content and with the emotional projection. In the criticism of Antoni Tàpies' collection exhibition in Madrid in 2013, Ben Wiedel-Kaufmann wrote that "*one can perceive a kind of sensual pleasure in the way the sand grains sit in the paint.*"³ This sensual pleasure and each wince of the creator's manifestation pervades the multi-layered surfaces that are rich in materials. The painting gestures are also important in the works of Antoni Tàpies, although he is mainly considered as the best known figure of material-brushwork painting. To me, the surface created with one or two

³ <https://abstractcritical.com/article/antoni-tapias/index.html> retrieved: 15.10.2017.

layers and from the same material looks in most cases raw, empty and unworked.

Creating the surface structure of the artwork appears in me as a natural need. Surfaces that are rich in material usage almost breathe, have a depth, create a complex space and drag you into themselves.

The process of creating the artwork is an important aspect of the examination, starting from the thought, through the applied materials to the final state of the piece. Looking from the phases of creation, I find the changes in various statuses of the artwork to be important, especially when viewed from the aspect of interactions between the artwork and the creator as well as the creator and the artwork. How does the artwork affect the creator during the process and how does the creator shape the artwork? According to my hypothesis, the knowledge and the high-level use of various painting and industrial materials and diverse painting techniques are of key importance in creating the artwork.

From the viewpoint of the artist, several factors must be examined to decide what materials to use for creating the artwork. Perhaps the given period is of vital importance in the first place, i.e. what tools are available. We can discover new connections between materials and new relationships can be created, still there is a given set of tools that, despite its constant changes, squeezes us within the given framework. Let us just think of the cave paintings made by the prehistoric man, the tools that medieval monks used to create the colourful, decorative initials as well as the industrial paint cans and the technical procedures of Jackson Pollock, American abstract expressionist artist of the 20th century.

We can declare that the given age is decisive but individuality is just as important. The opportunities are available to anyone but only few people use them according to the given contexts. The experimenting approach must be an indispensable part of creative life, from where random recognitions come in a natural way. Then, these randomly created material relationships must already be integrated into our toolkit by applying them

in a direct and conscious manner. Within gesture painting, we can separate action painting, automation, tachisme or even calligraphy, and we can also say that a kind of order-seeking can be spotted besides full spontaneity that excludes consciousness, for example, with Jackson Pollock, who said: “” *when I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing.*”⁴

2. Approach to the central topic of the dissertation and its examination methodology

From the perspective of research methodology, it is inevitable to apply the traditional examination tools, what I find important here is, for instance, the wide knowledge of the related literature, the importance of research methodology notes and what is even more essential, that we analyse the relationships with the help of not only interdisciplinary but also multidisciplinary research methods. Interdisciplinarity is important in the context of apperceptibility because the connection between fields of science is important with regard to relationships. In this case, multidisciplinary means the multitude of research sets and relationships.

The relationship between the paint itself (the materials used upon the creative work) and the artist is a very essential aspect of approach from the perspective of the dissertation. In his book entitled “What Painting Is”, James Elkins writes that “*the paint on the canvas captures the finest and most tense gestures and reveals whether the artist was standing, sitting or squatting while working.* Paint is a tool that can be used to depict the artist’s motions as well as the imprints of their body and thoughts.”⁵

The issue of apperceptibility, i.e. interpretability is a coherent system of thoughts. In my opinion, looking at the subject from the aspect of unity between the creator and the artwork offers the chance for in-depth

⁴ Elizabeth Frank, [1983], *Jackson Pollock*, Abbeville Press, p. 68

⁵ James Elkins, [2000], *What Painting Is*, Routledge, New York, London, p. 5, par. 1

empirical research. Apperception is a Latin word and it means sensing. “... *a new sensing related to the prior experience, to the person’s accumulated knowledge and to their given state of mind.*”⁶ I wish to set up a system of arguments that examines the subject in a complex manner, through its real impact mechanisms and circumstances.

As a creator, I primarily look at artworks based on empirical experience. A fine art work is a manifestation that is published in printed, digital and other forms and thus it gets confronted with the viewer and raises an experience that represents a feedback also in itself. A *feedback* analysis is generated, for example, an unlimited set of feedbacks on the Internet. The examination covers processing feedback on online surfaces and interpreting their relevance. A part of the examination covers personal consultation, empirical research and various forms of encounter with the artwork. On the other hand, its methodological extension covers the review of direct *feedback* chat analyses and publications. Bourriaud says that the artist initiates a dialogue through the form, i.e. the artwork, so he believes that the point of artistic activities is to build connections between individuals. How does the recipient meet the artwork? One must find the opportunity to meet and to accept the created artwork. The visual range, the perceived range – where the artwork appears – keeps changing. It may depend on the viewer’s current status, on the current set of relationships that surround the viewer, on the social and existential position of the individual and on the environment. Numerous effect mechanisms can be observed between the artwork, the creator and the recipient. According to Nicolas Bourriaud “*The change in the function of artworks and in the presentation method witnesses the ‘urbanisation’ of the artistic experience. ... The artwork is much more like an experienced, encountered time (period), the opportunity of an unlimited dialogue.*”⁷

⁶ Új Magyar Lexikon 1., Fourth, unchanged print [1960], Akadémia Kiadó, p. 136

⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relációesztétika*, [2007], Műcsarnok Kiadó, Budapest, p. 13

3. The importance of the central problem statement of the dissertation

The painter's gesture system is to be interpreted as a part of a wide circle of thoughts. Gesticulation as a set of motions can be interpreted in communication as a method for presenting various forms of self-expression. I believe that gesture is related to all perceptible stimuli and must be their elementary part. Each form of gesticulation can be analysed and carries great importance with regard to communication. The painter's gesture also belongs to the wide conceptual system of gesture interpretation, which, as I see it, is organically related to the examination of brushwork systems and materials. I am highlighting the fact that the painter's gesture system must be examined and interpreted within the complexity of the term.

For me, gesture painting as a definition of style and painting technique exactly means what and how I as a creator bring onto the canvas. I do not create artworks along current political relations or social phenomena or perhaps fashion trends, and I do not "draw" concrete, easy-to-read forms. Instead, I am much more excited about the relations between the paint layers accumulated on the canvas, the fine and detailed languages of form inside them and the endless number of manifestation opportunities implied in the materials. To me, this is exactly like an endless playground where there are no limits and the opportunities are endless (just as Bourriaud said: "Artistic activities are like a game").

The painter's gestures cannot only be interpreted with regard to gesture painting because the brushwork on the surface of the artworks, the tracing and the touch always carry the unique stylistic marks of the given painting trend and the given creator.

The examination of this problem area is also justified by the evolutionary history. There are several different painting techniques that can be described in an exact manner. Their evolution and history can be studied

but I think that our age does not set any limits to their free usage and to their mixture with new materials. In this manner, the painter's palette can be regarded as endless. The material sets that can be found in nature or even in the industry can all be applied in individual painting technical procedures.

No matter what painting technique we talk about, pigment, i.e. powder paint surely has an important role. Raw pigments are also important in contemporary painting with regard to brushwork and surface stratifications. Let us just think again of the prehistoric cave paintings where, as far as we know, the pigment materials occurring in nature were first used for artistic purposes. The prehistoric man basically used earth colours as well as calcite and mud but they used a surprisingly wide palette of colours (ochre, manganese, red earth, iron oxide, charcoal), produced them from materials obtained from their environment and fixed them with fat or blood.

The first reference to oil as a painting agent was made in a textbook entitled *Schedula diversarum artium* written by Theophilus, a monk and painter who lived in the 12th century, but it was only used as an oily ingredient of tempera paint up to the 15th century. The science of making paints was the basis of painting up to the 19th century because the artists themselves had to prepare the desired colours until premixed, preservable and storable paints came out in tubes. Jan van Eyck, the famous Flemish painter is regarded as the inventor of oil paint as he found out how to slow down the drying of oil paints by adding flaxseed oil and lacquer. This procedure was further developed in the 16th century by the Venetian Vecellio di Gregorio Tiziano, while in the 17th century Rembrandt Van Rijn and Peter Paul Rubens brought it to perfection and came up with what is considered as the basis for the oil paints used today.

The painting palette was further extended in the 20th century: the demand on integrating industrial paints into fine arts increased. The concept dates back later than the birth of Jackson Pollock's dribbled canvases, in fact, Pablo Picasso was already experimenting with industrial paints in the early

1910s. These paints were obviously cheaper as they were planned for large surfaces. As can be seen, the connection between the financial value and the aesthetic value of paint ceased to exist with the cooperation of industrial paint and fine arts. The new rank of industrial paints provided paintings a new kind of materiality, especially in American paintings after WWII. The spraying technique borrowed from car production and the use of metal paints multiplied the impacts of the abstract surface (let us just think of Frank Stella's "Aluminium Paintings" series. For example, enamel paint was first used by Robert Rauschenberg on ungrounded canvas, and it already became an approved procedure for minimalist painting in the 1960s.

James Elkins said that painting is just pure chemistry: knowing the materials and compounds applied on canvas and mixing them in the appropriate proportions. He held the view that a painting is an example of the relationship between water, stone and chemistry as the basis for all creations is water, stone (or its crushed materials) and various chemicals. This statement also refers to the aforementioned chain of thoughts, namely that the artist had to know about chemistry and about various chemicals and materials in order to create artworks. However, this is not necessarily the case today, we are now comfortable and we can easily access everything that we need.

Elkins said about interpreting a painting that there is also a deeper relationship between a painting, chemistry and its apperceptibility; for the artists it is a kind of "spiritual, meditative" chemistry as they use and, to a certain extent, know and mix the materials but not at a laboratory level. The recipient and the art critic only perceive the artwork visually and in most cases they have not even smeared their fingers with any paint so they cannot have the type of perception that the artist has.

The object, the artwork itself, has to be examined in the context of the dissertation. What is the role of an artwork and what will happen to it? Will it stay forlorn in a studio for good, will it be reproduced in some form, will it become known to the public, does it have any *raison d'être* in

terms of museology, will it be purchased by a collector or will it ever be displayed at all. The artwork is a time capsule, a print of the artist's momentary emotions. The artwork is an implicit message. The intention of the dissertation is inductivity, i.e. the dialogue itself, raising tension and generating a need for interpretation.

In the case of abstract, gesture paintings, there is no clear-cut consensus on the interpretation because there is no concrete figure, it has no narrative, at best there is no didactics either, and there is hardly any specific reference point. The viewer must join the process of interpretation and acceptance in an additive manner. The question arises whether there is a need at all for consensus in the surveyed topic. It is for certain that cognitivity is needed to ensure that the artwork can be apperceived and interpreted, and this definitely needs an encounter between the artwork, the recipient and the artist.

Perhaps the biggest problem comes from the lack of openness and general indifference, where gesture painting appears as some hard-to-interpret thing. The importance of the problem statement also affects the area of education because the reasons for the aforementioned indifference and for the problems with openness come from the roots of cultural education. In my experience, the recipients have difficulty with approaching the creator's emotions and the message conveyed in the gesture-based painting system.

4. The social impacts of the dissertation subject and its role in education

Under social impact I primarily mean the role taken by the interpretation of artworks in education. If we look at the interpretation of the gesture systems from this point of view and generally the acceptance of abstraction itself as a genre, I hold the view that it must be classified in the less known, less accepted and less understood category. Recipients have difficulty with accepting what they cannot attach to a specific experience, form or emotion at first sight.

The social aspect of the dissertation subject means that we examine whether the hypothesis contains any forward-looking answers to the earlier posed questions. I believe that understanding, receiving and accepting works of fine art has a positive impact on society. We need to generate a demand for enjoying and accepting artworks and to open a channel for acceptance in social groups where this is not existing. Schools have an enormous role and responsibility in ensuring that enjoying and interpreting artworks should be integrated into our everyday life in a natural way.

In terms of education, the need for educating visual culture and working out a wide spectrum of vision must already be introduced at primary school or at kindergarten. In my judgment, a negative trend can be observed in education in this regard. I think visual culture as a subject is in most cases suppressed by other subjects, and this must be changed. We must provide the opportunity to see the artworks and we should make them available on an everyday basis. The more often I see an artwork, the more open I will be towards understanding it. Knowing, interpreting and accepting the artwork is both a moral and a theoretical issue.

5. Thesis

According to my way of thinking, gesture-based painting systems should be primarily examined through interpreting brushwork and materials. The painter's l'art pour l'art communication is a dead-end street; at the same time, a free space must be given for manifesting the artistic self-expression. The resolution of the dilemma can be interpreted in its interactions. The dead-end street of the creator's l'art pour l'art communication means for me that the artist of the 21st century cannot refer merely to emotional intuitions in their artworks, spontaneous creator projections excluding consciousness are no longer sufficient, even the language of form within abstraction must have a content, it must be built consciously and the artistic self-expression must be concentrated in the artwork in an absolutely direct and understood manner that cannot be questioned in professional terms.

Figurative painting was squeezed to the background in the second half of the 20th century, and simultaneously with this many new materials were introduced to the painters' toolkit; this relationship can be interpreted in a way that if the artwork does not show (anything), then we are forced to concentrate on the materials, forms, gestures and their relationship with each other. Experimenting and the internal drive for renewal must dominate to ensure that the artist does not become a mechanic creator and does not create objects as a matter of routine.

6. Final conclusions and summaries of the dissertation

There is huge literature on the researched topic, on gesture painting, on the painters' material usage, on various painting technical procedures, on abstraction and on the issue of interpretation and acceptance. Interpretation is important and relevant from the viewpoint that I intend to examine, i.e. expressly through the importance of brushwork and materials within gesture painting as well as through their relationships.

There are numerous artworks within the examined area that are not properly channeled, and there are few appropriate interpretation opportunities. In the course of my examination covering the art of Western painting, I focus on the topographical preferences, on relevance in terms of space and time and on the individual aspects of interpretation.

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