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# The Limit – Generator of Expression Forms in Painting

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## *Abstract*

The fast pace at which the forms of expression developed in the art of the 20th century mirrors the evolution of society and hence the ideologies underlying it. The problematization of the concept of "limit", a leitmotif serving as a landmark around and beyond which new postulations or contestations of foreshadowing forms/concepts ventured, may be a novel point of view on the evolution through time of morphology and stylistics in art and a good means for performing a radiography of the "symptoms"/"figurations" of the present. What is our current position on the concept of "limit" in art?

*Keywords*: limit, painting, visual art, stylistics, morphology.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of style in painting, as legitimation of new forms of expression, was considered by Heinrich Wollflin in 1911 as being split between purely formal concepts, which focus only on the optical ways of representation belonging to a certain epoch, and the content concepts, which indicate the manner in which these ways of representation come to express a feeling, an idea or a concept, due to the different relationships that the eye and the soul/reason has with the world, respectively (Wollflin, 1968). In his turn, Erwin Panofsky gave his opinion on this in 1915, when he stated that the relationship the eye has with the world is a rapport of the soul with the eye's world (Panofsky, 1980): the object that is "visited" by eyesight only takes shape through the soul, feeling and reason, therefore it cannot be separated from the psychology of its age.

In addition, he considers that the general moment of a particular style - the way of expression that is typical for a certain epoch – expresses the super-individual thinking of an entire epoch, as the feeling of an individual is absorbed into the general feeling. Therefore, art is not defined merely by a certain contemplation of the world, but by a certain conception of the world, which places individual works into a "spirit of the age", determined by an unconscious force that updates and distributes the same potential essence to different degrees (Panofsky, 1980).

Panofsky shows that culture is not only a "common code" for particular ideas, but rather a set of previously assimilated particular ideas that serve as the starting point for the creation of an infinity of particular schemes that can be applied to particular situations. So we are talking about a "program of the artist with the world" (Bourdieu, 1967), which does not have to be expressed intentionally and consciously, because it can express itself without expressing a conscious will of individual expression.

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Freedom, which has been at the heart of all revolutions, all time-specific ideological reformulations, is also in art the essential cell for the artist's convention with the world and with the possibilities of self-expression. Freedom gains meaning only under the threat of it becoming limited, but this can also become manifest as a will for limitation. The ontological ambiguity or the seemingly antagonistic relation between the meanings gives birth to problematizations that go beyond the immediate duality of meanings, gaining complexity and subtle nuances.

In the semantic analysis of "limit", from Greek – the noun *péras* (which means: limit, margin, extremity, end - timewise), built from the root *per-*, Gabriel Liiceanu discovered four semantic lines, meaning: the limit, overcoming the limit, the journey between limits, and especially experimenting with the limit (Liiceanu, 2005).

Keeping this guideline revealed above, the problematization of the "limit", for the purpose of facilitating the visualization of diverse approaches to it in the context of the art of the 20th Century, can only start with the immediate, positive, formational meaning – of "limiting" the form.


2. The limit as delimitation – the first condition for the appearance of form

I associate this moment of "form Genesis" with art's preoccupation for abstractization at the beginning of the 20th Century, when the process of gradual simplification of the form, already begun – through flattening or blurring, with Courbet or Manet, with Impressionists, Neo-Impressionists, Post-Impressionists and continued by the avant-garde movements through various procedures of changing the figure for the purpose of revealing it as more profound, more intense or more complex (Fauves, Cubists) – reaches its maximum freedom from it (from the object) through the practices and theories of artists such as Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, Malevich, etc.

It is worth noting, nevertheless, that this phenomenon – essentialization / synthesization / simplification of forms at the level of figural representations, has always existed. We find it in the first attempts people made to capture the image of the elements of the surrounding world, going through all stages of history until our age, with few exceptions, such as is the case with Mannerism and Academism.

The existence of a cultural conceptual substrate, whether religious, scientific or social, made the ways of expression in art "obey" them, become their reflections or *(pre-)figure* them; thus, the priority was not the virtuosity of execution or depiction, but rather the anchoring to other planes of existence, the transcendence beyond "pure visuality", crossing the border/limit of forms, even if this was not deliberate but implied.

Instead of copying nature, primitive man drew a face in a few simple forms; the Egyptians represented things as they knew them, not as they saw them; the Greeks and the Romans introduced the idea of synthesizing volumes; the Medieval people emphasized their expression in order to facilitate the passing beyond them, and for the Asian culture the final aim of forms was found in the essence of their contemplation.

The interest in "seeing" appeared in Renaissance, when the use of scientific methods such as the use of perspective, rendering volumes in *trompe l'oeil*, the use of *sfumato*, the interest for depicting expressions and movements, settled at the level of methods/knowledge in the most accurate representation of what could be observed (Gombrich, 2007).

That is why the deliberate reference to the "limit" as to a pole which has to be repositioned constantly according to the various connotations it has repeatedly been assigned, starts to take shape with the process of expressing the form detached from the figure, up to pushing the latter to the *limit* of the most purified representation, which allows a statement such as

*"something exists in so far as it has a boundary, a margin"* be understood in its most literal sense – the way in which a dot, a line, a surface stands out from the background.

Questions such as "What is art?", "What is the aim of art?", "How far does art go?" (Ruhrberg, Schneckenburger, Fricke & Honnef, 2005), which revealed the deeply experimental character of the preoccupations linked to its configuration, investigated the nature of art and the human experience in relation to it.
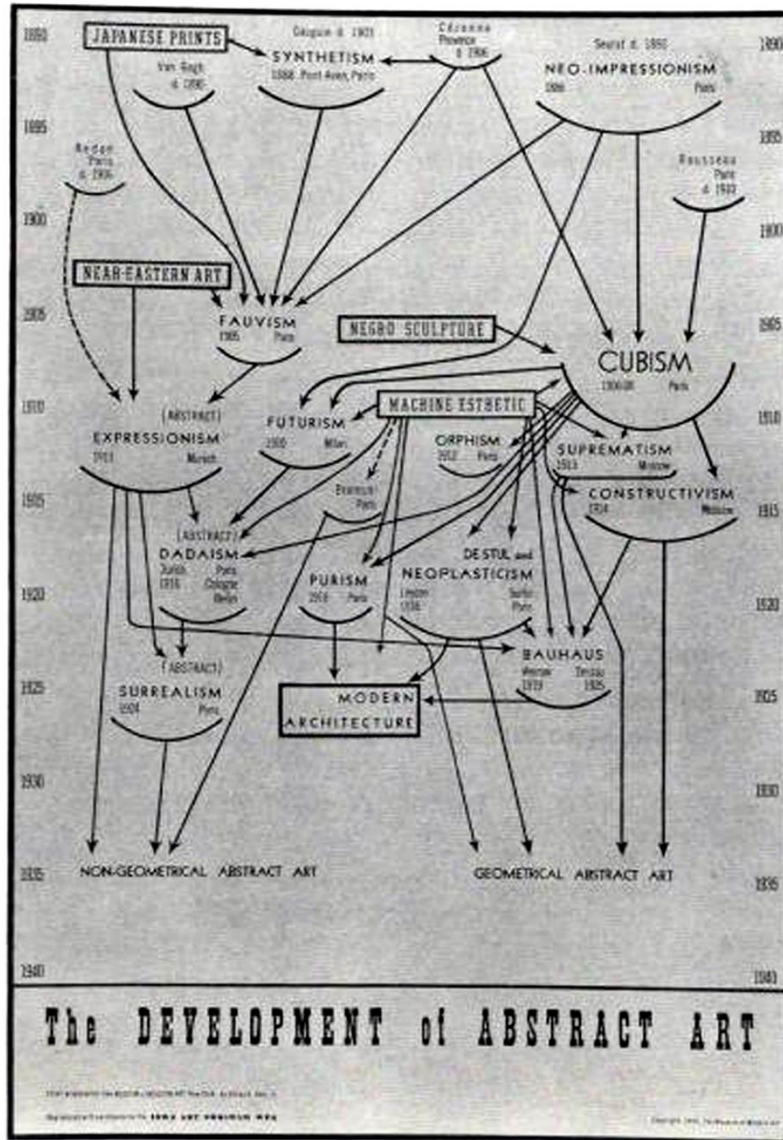


Picture 1. Alfred H. Barr, *The Development of Abstract Art* (1936); chart
prepared for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract* Art catalog,
Museum of Modern Art, New York (Fernie, 2008).

The art of the first half of the 20th century had this role of experimenting with different possibilities of "formation", of finding their identity in relation to their own *boundary*. It was the moment when artists became aware of the notion of style and began their experiments, each new movement flying the flag of the new <-ism> (Gombrich, 2007).

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It is no surprise that artists turned their attention to the models of expressivity and simplicity transmitted by African or Oriental art. What had been lost because of the interest in technique and virtuosity was found here in the intensity of expression, the clarity of structure, the technical simplicity (Gombrich, 2007).

Artists are forced to look for originality in the expression of forms, as in the well-known examples such as Van Gogh, Cézanne or Gauguin, in order to be able to express themselves in a more powerful, deeper or truer manner, noticing more than reality reveals at first glance: going beyond the limits of the physiological functions of the eye, we are taught to "see" more, differently, really. The shapes and colours are a kind of stimuli for some effects, sensations, psychological reactions and seem to perpetuate beyond them, beyond the visible. In time, in the following decades, they gradually replaced the *subject* and eventually the *object*, although at the time of the three artists mentioned above and in their case the form is not abolished but rather *trans(-)formed*.

Van Gogh introduced the taste for an art that was less refined but more direct in shapes and colours; Gauguin, Matisse and the Fauves built figures with very simple elements, flattening the figure until it became a decorative element; Cézanne introduced the way of perceiving nature through cubes, cones and cylinders, with the perception of the most characteristic aspects of the object – this interest was developed to their simultaneous perception in the case of cubists (de Micheli, 1968).

Still, it may seem surprising that, beyond what seems obvious "at first glance", beyond the immediate meaning of the word, through "limit", i.e. *delimitation, boundary, margin*, the closer we get to a higher purification of forms, the less we understand the periphery of the form, its visual expression, in relation to the margin, and more to what is defined from the inside out. Brâncuşi was fully convinced by that when he stated - what is real is not the external form, but the essence of things. Starting from this truth, it is impossible for anyone to express something essentially real by imitating its exterior surface (Brâncuşi, 1926).

Form is the expression of the inner content, colour has its own possibilities of "giving form", in itself, and it can have a taste, a perfume, sonority, as concluded through Kandinsky's creations and theories.

The switch to the involvement of other sensory organs in the expression through painting and in its perception played a key role in substantiating abstraction, but also in the evolution of the media for expression in visual art. Thus, to many artists, sound became a possibility to get access deeper, more to the *inside* (Pintilie, 2002).

Kandinsky frees colour from under the drawing, making it *vibrate* in accordance with the sonorous vibration in music, obtaining autonomy through itself. Klee expands these possibilities to the line, which gets force of expression in itself (many times with reference to music – see the "conductor's baton"). The representatives of Orphism based their program exclusively on the relation to music, Mondrian expressed the fast pace of New York through the jerky rhythm of jazz music, Duchamp proved that using the content of colour tubes was the same as using them as objects (ready-made), both already manufactured (Osborne, 2010), which led to building sonorous objects, literally, for example in the object "With hidden sound".

But to still remain within the "limits" of pictorial form, we must cast a last glance on the end point of the form purification process to which art was more and more oriented, through the attempt to completely eliminate the suggestion of three-dimensionality in Mondrian's painting, and even more so, through the way in which Malevich gave up the representation of objects to record the sensitivity released by any allusion to the visible world, in his "Black square on a white background".

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There are no strictly flat bi-dimensional images, despite Malevich's or Mondrian's best efforts: the distinction between the objects and the empty space around them still remains; the limit (in the sense of dismissing the form) was not overcome. On the contrary, the sensation of spatiality is created: the geometric figurations give structure to space beyond the limits of the painting (in Malevich's work) or they float through an indeterminate space (in Mondrian's art), announcing the painting's exit from the bi-dimensional and its crossing over to the "real" space.


3. Overcoming the limit: The postulated limit and the contested limit

Joining forces with the senses of hearing, smell and taste, the artist's eye expanded to becoming a question mark regarding the origin and foundation of art, and took the next step forward, losing some of its concreteness and figureness, instead gaining some *reality*, in the laboratory of matter and in the time of protohistory.

The will to delineate, as a possibility for forms and their specificity to appear, is no longer a necessity; now, the eye placed on the "surface" of things, on the phenomenon, is in "pre-transition", touching the layer of primordial elements – especially the *liquid* element – in their non-determination and in the abstract potential of infinite germination, before effectively passing into the reality of the physical space.

The process of legitimizing the various approaches in painting continues after the Second World War, through the postulation of the full and unencumbered freedom of "choice" (Mercioiu, 2013) as an act that depends solely on the artist's intention towards the materials used and the methods employed in their manipulation – idea already professed by Duchamp.

Subsequently transferred into New York's buzzing atmosphere, this freedom becomes apparent in painting through a succession of "manifesto gestures" that seem to target only the boundaries to which one can push the relation between painting and the limits of "its specific character" – flatness, according to Greenberg's theories (Mercioiu, 2013). Paradoxically, the postulation of these limits also led to a separation from these in certain cases. On the one hand, the conservation of painting's specificity is predicated; on the other hand, the liberties taken at this time, such as discarding the key tools for painting, such as the brush and the palette, pave the way for fusion/dispersion of things.

The colour becomes a fluid/amorphous/vibrant substance which is the main reason for its placement inside the painting, through variable procedures which are valuable in themselves (as impulses that express, whether in a conscious or an unconscious manner, some moods). In the case of Abstract Expressionism, these procedures are the ones in which colour is laid, layered, dripped, let flow, trickle, etc. What happens on the canvas is no longer an image, but rather the consequence of an action, of a gesture through which artists work together with the accidental.

These practices have often been associated with Formalism (a Russian theoretical school of the 1915s – 1930s), the belief of which was that the *form gives the content*, but which was also attributed the idea of *form devoid of content*. However, irrespective of how these artists chose to express themselves, they experimented with their ideas through the way in which they chose to produce the object; the line of thought was formed with the acquisition of a practice, thus the object was a participant in the dialectics.

Minimalism seems to eliminate everything: painting with no subject, no forms, no movement, and no subjectivity. Only colour/matter reduced to essential structures – line, point, square, rectangle, all of them firmly articulated. Matte or shiny surfaces produce different vibrations, providing the painting with its own lighting system.

Frank Stella uses other forms for the canvas – circular or polygonal, which, together with the disposition of the colour bands, give the suggestion of three-dimensionality that eventually has a concrete spatial deployment, although the artist still calls them paintings. So, the painting surpassed the limits of the bidimensional support, by eliminating the distinction between bi-dimensional and spatial, blending the attributes of genres and illustrating the reaction to Greenberg's theories.

At the same time, in Europe, the same transition from painting to the raw physical reality is taking place! Cancelling the distinction between what is and what is no longer art/form, leads to a prolongation/incorporation of the actual reality in art, as in Dubuffet's *Texturologies* series, in which the artist wants to display the raw presence of matter, of the soil, borrowing work techniques from bricklayers in order to texture the newly-plastered walls which could evoke all sorts of indeterminate textures, but also galaxies or nebulae, depending on the viewer's interpretation capabilities.

Laying aside any kind of cultural and intellectual pretentions, he opts for an art that is spontaneous, raw, torn as materiality from the real/physical context. Now animated, matter itself lives more purely, yet again, in the world of idea and sentiment. The difference between what is and what is not art is rendered by the "result of an intention" (Eco, 2002).

Fontana punches holes in his canvases, so that the eye can literally see through them and go into the physical/spatial reality beyond them. For him, the "spatial era" must find a correspondent in "spatial art" (Little, 2005).

Pierre Soulages animates matter through the "immaterial", while giving colour to non-colour – to the amorphous matter of the black, which still remains, physically speaking, the most sensitive to light. Thus, he paints with light, reducing the artistic gesture to the concrete physical reaction.

With Ives Kline, the painting materializes through the manipulation of elements of nature, turning into a substance that can be applied with the help of "living brushes". The artist becomes a conductor/choreographer of the other's involvement (co-participants, public, etc.), eventually transforming it into a liquid substance that can be literally consumed in the empty space of an art gallery.

Now art can be created collectively, it can be experimented through all the possibilities of the body, both as a manifestation and as a reception, it is, as Georges Maciunas defines it, "the state of flux in which all arts melt together" (Fride-Carrassat & Marcade, 2007). Or better yet, we witness the appearance of a new art, non-art: the non-production of paintings and objects, anti-music, anti-poetry in favour of actual fragments of reality, life as raw matter. Art=Life (existence).

In my opinion, the last attempt to go beyond the limit in reference to painting belongs to the *Support-Surface* group, which, towards the end of the 70s, brings into discussion the systematic elimination of all subjective practices, taking as reference the canvas and the frame (separately) to reflect on the conventions of the painting, on its materiality, deconstructing it and dispersing it into space, until reaching the *allusion* to traditional pictorial means and of the support itself. Through these approaches to what we might call "reminiscences of painting", they make reference to the practice behind the painting: the subject will remain evacuated and therefore the "painting" remains neutral.

This direction seems to be the last in an evolutionary chain of the issue of painting vs. the work surface, when the "canvas" is still taken as reference (be it only in a conceptual sense). The constituent materials and the technical processuality behind the paintings are also getting closer to an end point: pushing the borders towards new territories has got to the point of their dispersion.

Pop Art (starting with 1965) brought forms belonging to mass culture (comics, advertisements, etc.) into art, through the new artistic practices that had already been prefigured. Thus, artists created serigraphic transpositions, combine-paintings and collages, and the process of integrating life into art, of owning the "real", was realized together with the New Realism, taking the shape of the compressed cars in the case of César or of leftovers abandoned on a table in the case of Spoerry (Gombrich, 2007).

The '70s were also marked by what we could call "reportages" of urban everyday life, a sort of painting based on pictorial transpositions of photographic projections, images with reference to cinematographic framing or propaganda posters, usually in matte acrylic colours. *Narative figuration* (1964-1965, France), *Hyperrealism* (1965, The U.S.), *the New Subjectivity* (towards the end of the '60s, in England, France and the U.S.) did not alleviate the need to return to painting.

The processuality of the evolution of forms that used to be "internal", which had continued in a sort of inertia up to the *dispersion* of the painting through Support-Surface, beyond the threshold considered the pre(-)figuration of Postmodernism – Pop Art, would enter under the influence of what would be felt as an "outside threat" from social forces such as "the power" as a factor of molding individual and cultural identities through the economic and social forces exercised. The undermining of social values hierarchies and cultural meanings, the refusal to develop concrete theories on social progress (proven illusory), would lead to a permanent sensation of insecurity, a lack of landmarks and of perspectives.

## 4. The journey between limits

In regard to painting, due to its total destructuring, its rebirth became possible, but only in a retroactive sense (in the sense of "starting over from the beginning") in which the focus is not on crossing the limits but on the journey between certain limits understood as a series of meanings, without a definition of what is certain (Perry & Wood, 2004).

In the late '70s, international trans-avant-gardes: The new Fauves / German Neo-Expressionists (Germany), the Italian Transavantguardia (Italy) and Bad Painting (the USA) brought the idea of returning to individual values, to affirming the painter's individuality, where the main objective was to reconnect with primary instincts, amending the good taste and intellectualism. The main themes in this period were: violence in big cities, the stigma of recent history, consciousness, homosexuality, as well as mythological, religious, narrative and metaphorical representations.

Stylistically speaking, artists were oriented to expressionist gestures, the brush was used brutally through pulp painting and visible brush strokes; figures are fragmented, fractured. Many times, the colours are also raw, applied directly from the tube, vivid and aggressive, *fauves*.

Although contemporary art generally does not adhere to the disciplines and the values of progress, it represents the survival of archaisms that could not be eliminated by progress.

At the same time, it is noted that Anselm Kiefer's art for instance managed to have such public success not only by returning to culture, history and literature, but by assimilating the avant-garde "lesson" as well, by widening its range of manifestation, by using photos and manufacturing books, besides the conceptual practices.

If the '70s illustrated the age of "-isms", the '80s saw the development of "neo-" styles (Neo-Mannerism, Neo-Fauvism, Neo-Expressionism, etc.). Millet (2017: 53) explains that "If this new painting made reference to the past, then it revisited especially those modern current which had been neglected, set away from the dominant axis. Thus, German painters stated that they were descendants of the expressionism from the beginning of the century, while the Italians in

Transadvantgarde followed the example set by De Chirico and Novocento art, of mixing tradition and modernity in an ambiguous manner. Moreover, it was quickly noticed that this *return to painting* did not prevent the appearance of other tendencies, such as Simulationism, which refused to set avant-gardes aside and retied the links between minimalism and conceptual art or continued to explore the resources of the ready-made object".

In the '90s, the phenomenon that was Young British Artist practically described the state of affairs of art in that particular context when even the idea of a group or a program seemed to lose contour. Gathered, promoted and authenticated by the will of a single person (by collecting their works, so according to commercial factors more than anything else), beyond the stylistic features and the media used (extremely varied), they were characterized by an ironic attitude, detachment and the will to succeed and to attract attention through any means necessary. Although the artists were influenced by conceptualism, painting remained one of their preoccupations, together with ready-made objects and images taken from media and advertising.

All possible subjects were depicted in painting, in all their forms, in all media and with all known or innovative techniques. The artists used the figurative (Saville, Hume), the geometric (Hume) or both combined (Hume); minimalism, geometric and gestural abstraction, successively or at the same time (Davenport); the abstract and/or hyperrealism (Patterson, Brown); lyrical abstraction was combined with the decorative (Rae); lettrism with the optical (Davies); Pop Art influences, Expressionist influences, Superrealist influences, kitsch, etc. were recontextualized. Oils, acrylic paints, industrial varnishes were used on all types of formats (Fride-Carrassat & Marcade, 2007).

The formal possibilities of contemporary art "grow as fast as Fibonacci's sequence" (Millet, 2006). If the most radical Modernists considered that the newly-invented forms and techniques made the traditional ones become old-fashioned, this is no longer the case: new technologies can stay next to marble sculptures, video installations next to figurative or abstract paintings.

This "fluidity" of means of expression, facilitated by the process of limit dispersion which made any stylistic *fusion* and any media possible, illustrates on a deeper level what is happening in society generally. Zygmunt Bauman believes that the concept of "liquid modernity" or "liquid society", which starts to gain shape together with Postmodernism, marking "the end of the great narratives" that aimed to attach a model of order to the world, brings with it the "crisis of the state" as freedom of autonomous national decision as opposed to the power of supra-national entities (Bauman, 1999). Together with the crisis of the state, there comes another crisis: that of ideologies – the impossibility to appeal to that community of values that takes the individuals' necessities into account and allows them to feel part of a whole, of a community. Erasing all limits equals losing all anchor points.

5. Experimenting with the limit – "trial", "test"

Up to this moment, we have witnessed the ever-greater degrees of freedom that forms of expression have had over the course of time in relation to what could be based on a "limit" – what was to be amended, detoured or abolished, going so far as to lose trust in even the possibility for evolution/finding a solution/orientation (absolute fluidity), because once amended, even the intention to find a solution met a crisis, by "transforming utopian criticism in the criticism of utopia", utilizing the words of de Duve (2003: 326).

When we look at a larger cultural and social context, we find much wider *symptoms* of what was mentioned above. Umberto Eco observed that "together with the crisis of the concept of community, an unstoppable individualism appears, in which nobody is anybody's travel companion" (2016: 7). Although *fluidization* (globalization) gave birth to a hybrid culture, it will

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create a rather homogenous world which, paradoxically, divides more than unites, creates separations instead of offering openings, eventually leading to progressive spatial segregation, separation, and exclusion. One often mentioned example from the art world is that in all art museums everywhere on the globe there are the same types of works belonging to the same artists, despite the desire to overcome social and geographic boundaries.

Nevertheless, one must not forget the historical conditions that determined the appearance of *fluidity* at a social level, imposed by the need to counter the rigidity of totalitarian ideological schemes which were meant to impose an ideal human and social model on reality; those schemes did not prove to be a success.

Thus, the question of de Duve "Can artistic activity maintain its critical function if separated from the object of emancipation?" (2003: 327) is still asked – situating contemporary art into what one might call "a blockage", "going around in circles" or "position between limits", and this is paradoxically happening at a time which boasts "the elimination of limits", as, from a philosophical point of view, freedom cannot be experienced in the absence of limits/anchor points, which in fact equates with the loss of freedom, which is subject to recurrent "trials", "tests", even "suspension".

Pushed by the desire to transcribe the world as it is, with its inhabitants and their instincts, Millet consider that modern art is "tended towards the dissolution of its own specificity in order to better blend with the world" (2006: 80), for the purpose of revealing certain truths about it. Yet, a very simple rule of man's capacity to perceive things says that people cannot really observe a problem when they are involved in it, so without distancing themselves from it to a certain degree. It is also what Catherine Millet remarked, saying that when the rule of breaking the boundaries between art and life is applied *ad litteram*, the limits of art become the rational, moral and political limits set by society. In her own words: "Caught in the world's reality, the artwork bounces against the limits this imposes on it" (2006: 99).

To keep the freedom gained in the modern era, without necessarily going back to its principles, art would need to take a minimal distance from it, by assuming a symbolic function in relation to it, instead of "melting into it". One of the functions of contemporary art is to discover and move that core of humanity that religion no longer takes care of and which science cannot take into consideration (Millet, 2006).

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