

Joaquim Braga

“Imagination and Virtuality. On Susanne Langer’s theory of artistic forms”

For Susanne Langer, art objects are true virtual entities, and, therefore, aesthetic theories must always take into account the distinction between the “actual” and the “virtual”, as well as the relations between these two modalities in the individuation of each art form. She moves away from a purely psychologist analysis of the work of art, based solely on the relationship between artist and viewer. Instead, it grounds her aesthetic theory in the symbolic construction of the art object itself. To this end, the author begins by relying on the concept of “Schein”, present in Friedrich Schiller’s aesthetics.

As the aesthetic-artistic illusion implies a conversion of a material object into something purely apparent, the process that is at its core can be described as the form which the art object articulates the perception with the imagination. So, there is, here, first, a transformation of the “actual materials” in “virtual elements”. As imagination has an active role, it is also due to it that the transformation of the material dimensions in the virtual existence of the art object is initially possible. If, for the plastic arts, the “virtual space” is the basic structure of their images, for music, on the contrary, it is the “virtual time” that, first, defines the articulation of its elements.

The idea drawn by Langer that aesthetic “imagined feelings” depend on a kind of suspension of the actual materiality of the artwork in favor of their virtual elements may, however, raise a number of issues. In particular, one can question whether this assumption does not yield a dematerialization of the art object. So, where lies the main problem with the materiality of the medium in Langer's theory? From an aesthetic point of view, we can precisely place it in the seminal passage of the actual to the virtual.