
Of Idea in Art: In the Guise of an Introduction

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The collection of articles in this special issue of *RACAR* is devoted to the theme of Idea in art. It expands upon a session on the same topic held at the October 2010 UAAC conference, which took place at the University of Guelph in Ontario.

Mindful that the notion of conceptual art is not so new as it might appear, and that artists did not wait until the last century to affirm the essential character of concept, Idea, or thought at the matrix of the artistic process, the organizers of the original session aimed at most to elucidate a few of the landmarks of a long history, one almost identical to that of the history of art history. Since the appearance of the concept of *disegno* in the sixteenth century in art theory's infancy, Idea in art has undergone a number of modifications—from the birth of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, to the nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement, and then ultimately to contemporary redefinitions of art. It seemed reasonable then to ask whether these most recent avatars of Idea in art truly initiate a new history or whether they remain nevertheless dependent on a genealogy which they ceaselessly reinscribe.

This question is addressed variously in the seven analyses assembled here, which consider Idea in the art and writings of Benvenuto Cellini, Federico Zuccaro, Nicolas Poussin, John Everett Millais, James McNeil Whistler, Max Liebermann, Barnett Newman, Joseph Kosuth, and a number of other artists, to say nothing of the work of the numerous art historians, critics, and philosophers mentioned in this dossier.

These few circumstantial remarks, completed by the presentations of their authors and the summaries of their contributions, might suffice to introduce this series of studies, were each limited to illustrating a well-known theme wherein the stakes were clear and distinct. But this is not the case. For of what Idea is it a question and of what art? Why do these two words appear in the singular rather than the plural, and why are they capitalized—Idea explicitly and art implicitly? Reading and rereading the studies gathered here brings with it the realization that they are not so much about presenting or introducing *Idea in Art*, and satisfying thus superficial social demands, as that introduction is the very subject of the issue as a whole: how Idea is successively introduced and reintroduced into art, surreptitiously or by forced entry, to the point that art history itself may be summed up to be, in the final analysis, little more than the history of the introductions of Idea into art.

Injecting Idea into art is that toward which all discourse on art has always tended, even before the appearance of art in the sense in which it is understood today. The first endeavour at such an introduction ended in defeat: in order to claim for itself a place in the republic of Plato, art would have had to partake of Idea, but the fine arts did not yet exist nor did the

creations of the avant-garde, and ideas were not what filled philosophers' thoughts; rather, they were a separate reality. The Idea, Plato's Idea, is neither an ideal, always somewhat utopian, nor a thought or product of the imagination whatsoever; it is reality as such, in essence and in permanence, it is the aspect of the real which the theoretician can see and think. For there can be no thinking or thought, and thus no truthful discourse, about what changes ceaselessly and what sometimes is, and sometimes is not, indeed about what is but semblance and illusion, shadow and spectre. Art is too far removed from Idea, from the platonic real, including the Idea of the beautiful, to be theorized or even to express ideas: it is nothing more than a set of mimetic or reproductory techniques, a visual sophistry which, causing reality to be forgotten, constitutes a threat or an obstacle to the search for the true and the good. Idea begins as radically exterior to art, which is banished from its world. Since Platonism implies fundamentally the condemnation of art as incompatible with Idea, it follows that no art theory worthy of that name could have developed before the Renaissance.

During the Renaissance, on the contrary, a metamorphosed concept of Idea contributed to the birth of art theory, as Erwin Panofsky demonstrated in *Idea*. His celebrated, now canonical, essay establishes multifariously the unifying thread of the collection of articles presented in this special issue. The fact that this period also witnessed a return of neoplatonism in the writings of certain authors variously connected to the world of art has fostered the belief that Early Modern art and its theorization were inconceivable from any other point of view, though logically the neoplatonic position precludes the philosophizing and theorizing of art. Several of the studies gathered here demonstrate that this is far from the case, and that the introduction of Idea into art—beginning specifically in the sixteenth century, but persisting into the age of classicism—can only be understood on the condition that one sets aside neoplatonic prejudgments, as the articles touching on Cellini, Zuccaro, and Poussin and Fréart suggest. Ultimately, Platonic Idea does not emerge unscathed from its successive attempts to introduce itself into art and art theory: rebaptizing Idea as *disegno* makes it possible for art to infiltrate Idea and transform it, instead of the reverse.

This reversal, in actuality inevitable given the original incompatibility of Idea and art, intensifies throughout the nineteenth century as is shown in the articles on Lady Elizabeth Eastlake and on the German painter and theorist Max Liebermann. Art continues to assert its autonomy and to withstand the invasive introduction of Idea, whether by affirming the qualities proper and intrinsic to painting in the face of sermonizing and arbitrary criticism in the first instance, or in the second by

avoiding, through a new synthesis of the imagination, the conflict in which idealism and nationalism sought to enclose it. In both cases it is definitely art that in fact ends up absorbing Idea, which had first sought to impose its domination by intruding where it did not belong.

In the case of modernism, conceptual works which speak resolutely of and for themselves, those of Beauséjour and Kosuth for example, resist similarly efforts to inject Idea into art. All this nevertheless takes place as though Idea and drawing, as the confrontation of Greenberg with Panofsky reveals, retained a scarcely tapped prestige that art needed to appropriate by claiming its autonomy, obtaining its emancipation, or coming of age, as though ultimately art history were also nothing other than the history of gestures of resistance to Idea, whose hold art loosens only by eluding, subverting, and circumventing its intrusive partner.