

REVIEW

**Of the dissertation thesis entitled “21st-Century Art between Value and Price” by
Nikolina Dimitrova Deleva, submitted for obtaining the academic and scientific degree
Doctor in Area 2. Humane Sciences: 2.3. Philosophy. Specialty: Aesthetics**

Reviewer: Prof. Ivan Stefanov, DSc

The meaning of the submitted dissertation is expressed very precisely in its title: “21st-Century Art between Value and Price”. I immediately noticed the name Nikolina Deleva when she published two articles in the journal *Philosophical Alternatives* on some topical questions: how to understand the concept of “contemporary art” in the first article, and the dependence of art on the market and on money in the second. I always pay attention to authors who take the risk of focusing their attention on the currently relevant question: what is happening to art today, under the conditions of its absolute commercialization?

Indeed, in our time no spheres of art could exist and develop without financial support coming from the free art market. But additionally, N. Deleva emphasizes the fact that commercialization has reached a very advanced stage in this century and is now regulating creative trends and solutions in art. Moreover, the author is also interested in the practice and aesthetical theory of art as they are present and developing in the world’s most advanced countries, such as the US, UK and Japan. Thus, an author has appeared who is facing a very significant but also very difficult problem. Given the high degrees of commercialization, can

art express itself in its genuine aesthetic nature or is it simply turning – as everything else – into a commodity?

In seeking an answer, Nikolina Deleva introduces into our national aesthetics a new concept: **commodification of art!** The term has a synthetic meaning: that art has irreversibly and totally been made dependent on money and can exist only as a commodity. This means, moreover, that art can legitimate itself no longer by its primary artistic meaning but by whether it is sellable or not. Thus, as Deleva points out, the spirit of capitalism has penetrated the inner nature of art, making it unrecognizable. And this is true. Here is the significant ultimate conclusion of Nikolina Deleva's research: contemporary art in the Western cultural context has no definite identity, essence, specificity. It is a simulacrum; its value is defined not by the material and perceptual appearance but by a fetish – the symbolic function of evaluation. The production of value is carried out through price, through media and institutional discourse. There is no connection between the work of art and its price. The price is constructed through the market and depends on the symbolic capital of the author, critics, curators, gallery managers, institutions, museum, etc., related to the work of art.

Such negative assessments are already present in the world of aesthetics and art criticism. But I should immediately note that N. Deleva's conclusion is based on a broad range of new empirical facts and theoretical analyses of current Western theory and criticism, which the author is quite familiar with and cites abundantly. Deleva is focused on the subject, refers concretely and in detail to the sources in order to ground her theses and conclusions. That is why I find her author's contribution in the following fact: the dissertation informs us of the present-day state of discourse on the nature and essence of Western art. That is why her work is of topical importance and has the merit of suggesting and inviting us to go back to the fundamental problems of aesthetics. I should remind the reader that, during the 20th century, the leading theme of aesthetics was the search for a new definition of art. We should not

forget that in certain new periods, art – I mean 20th century modernism – was really able to free itself and diverge from the norms and dogmas of aesthetics. But, unfortunately, aesthetics itself is unable to develop outside of a continuing connection to artistic processes. We need an aesthetics that is very close to the turbulent and contradictory changes taking place in the world of art.

The positive aspect of the dissertation under consideration is that the author has followed a definite, expedient logic in order to draw her conclusions. Going back to the first pages and the first chapter of the dissertation, we find an emphasis on an issue that is significant in modern aesthetics: what is the meaning of the concept *contemporary art*. Because, after the old “isms”, there is a continuous stream of new trends, and thus, the “river of aesthetics” forms a kind of delta of different, completely opposed, artistic currents. The author then reaches the important conclusion that, given the complex internal differentiation of that which is aesthetic, it is now difficult and even impossible to define art; the research field of aesthetics today has become a real problem. On page 39, Deleva states categorically, “The designation ‘art’ has as many particular meanings as there are people using it, situations in which it is used, and theories of art. This endless multiplicity of possible significations of the word makes it pointless to seek a single meaning”. Hence, she finds that the concept of art is in a constant course of defining and redefining; it is open, relative, contingent, situational, and changeable (p. 38)”. **Aesthetics passes from the metaphysical to the empirical sphere. There is no precise term for 21st-century art.**

Having made thus assessed the fate of art in the early 21st century, N. Deleva feels obliged (by the logic of research) to also analyze the problem of the value aspect of art, i.e., its internal qualities. In the second chapter, which – evidently as an exception – begins with Stolovich (but could have begun with Prof. Pasi’s study on the nature of values), there follows the general conclusion that the work of art does not possess immanent or transcendental

qualities inasmuch as it is a collage, a mosaic, a pastiche or a kaleidoscope. The aesthetical element proper is lost. The monetary redefinition of art limits the sacralization of the art work (its aesthetical individualization and symbolization) in favor of its commodification, its transformation into a commodity.

Under these conditions, the uncertain aesthetic identity of the art work make its *sacred* and *profane* aspects interchangeable, and commodity undistinguishable from non-commodity. The mediating role of the financial market (of money!) in the course of consumption of art works becomes something different. Money becomes a form of new power over art. Based on the collective premeditation and intersubjective consensus as to art perception, mediating monetary signs prove to be the new destroyer of art processes. Without their high price, many works would not be perceived as such, and even less as sybols of prestige. Consequently, under the total domination of financial capital, art is beginning to lose it specificity and remains to be evaluated only in financial terms.

Regrettably, such are the tendencies. N. Deleva has correctly brought into relief the dialectic of the greatly facilitated interchangeability between sacred and profane in art based on the mediating role of money. In this connection, she cites Andy Warhol: “The best art is business” (p. 145). I will add that this is the exact opposite of what Baudelaire said on the matter: in answer to the question, “What is art?” he said, “Prostitution”...

But does money indeed lead to an extremely destructive situation for artistic creation? Is there really no exact word by which to define art today? And most importantly, insofar as we are dealing with the Western aesthetic experience, should we surrender to the self-evident and charismatic quality of the numerous conclusions regarding a fast approaching apocalypse?

Here, I detect a certain astonishment, an enhanced negative mood that has seized N. Deleva under the great pressure of the chaos of negative opinions she is confronted with in her research. The conditions of research in our country do not permit her to visit some of the highly developed Western countries and obtain direct impressions from the creative processes there; she is working from a distance with exclusively critical sources and seems to be overcome by their destructive pathos, which does not allow other lines of thought. To explain this case, I will cite Adorno, who frankly wrote, “In America, I freed myself from my naïve perception of culture, I acquired the ability to perceive it from an external viewpoint”. Adorno recommends the position of an external, that is, objective, observer. It is necessary to have an impartial understanding of, and more precisely, alienation, in Brecht’s sense, from, the material under study, in order to follow one’s own intentions. But when one reads and processes only written texts come from a distance, it is hard for one to guess that they contain a planned mass spontaneity of negativism. And today’s financial capitalism did indeed – through money – enhance and greatly enlarge the scale of rational planning and standardization of opinions, including in the sphere of art.

I must point out the positive fact that, in her text, N. Deleva has demonstrated the ability to observe socio-cultural facts well and objectively. I am thinking about text No. 12, the last but one before the conclusion, entitled “The Price of Freedom: the Business Model of Christo and Jean-Claude”. Everything said there about the art of the two authors is true and exact. Indeed, Christo himself admitted that it was hard for him to explain the nature of his creative work, which was perhaps irrational and useless. But on the other hand, N. Deleva is very objective when she assumes that Christo had successfully adapted to American financial capitalism and had thereby acquired the freedom to express his spontaneous moods and ideas embodied in packages, barrels and cylinders. But should we assess Christo’s work as an

exception from the standard model and not as just another, likewise legitimate, aspect of creation under the conditions of financial capitalism?

Here, I will add that the role of money in the development of creative art since the Renaissance and to this day has not been only negative. The great sociologist Norbert Elias, in his book *Mozart. The Sociology of a Genius*, successfully argues that Mozart, having been rejected by the followers of the musical canon, preferred to be free of the feudal and court dependencies as an artist. In his time, there was yet no free market for musical works and he could not find support for the realization of his talent. Mozart proved to be a genius in advance of his time; that was his personal tragedy as a person and as a musician.

It is true that the free market of financial capitalism is exceptionally powerful today but it is also ambiguous, and the high-flying prices of certain works of art raise many doubts as to the quality of those works. Still, there are quite a few independent artists, like Christo. N. Deleva defines this situation in raising the question (p. 164), “What do we do after the orgy?” In other words, can art be evaluated only financially? She complements the question with the idea, shared by some authors, that new paths must be sought in art.

We may add that Daniel Bell, the well-known theorist of post-industrial society, found the time to write *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), translated into Bulgarian. It is well to delve into this book and the theoretical direction it suggests. Obviously, the cultural contradictions of capitalism are growing, not decreasing. Why and how, remains an open question for aesthetics today. The dissertation we are reviewing brings us closer to this question, an achievement that represents a contribution.

To conclude: Nikolina Deleva’s dissertation analyzes and provokes thought and study on a number of old and new problems related to the functioning and existence of

contemporary art. The dissertation exceeds the minimal requirements for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “doctor” by 60 points (the minimum being 80 points). Nine articles related to the dissertation have been published in scientific editions. We have here a rich in content and topical scientific text that, as a whole and by its contributions, definitely merits a **positive assessment**. The work evidently raises and analyzes questions with which aesthetics may be expected to deal throughout the whole 21st century. It has a **contributive significance** for our science because the growing impact of prices and money is the main trait of global risk capitalism.

I propose without hesitation that the honorable jury **award Nikolina Dimitrova Deleva the scientific degree “doctor”** for her dissertation on “21st-Century Art between Value and Price”.

9 June 2024

Sofia

Reviewer: