

**PLOTINUS AND CONTEMPORARY ART:  
ART, BEAUTY AND THE UNIFYING POWER  
OF THE SOUL \***

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**ABSTRACT**

Duchamp's legacy in contemporary art is manifest in the increasing importance of the conceptual dimension in art and in the separation of art and beauty. Art as a conceptual or intellectual activity is, thus, dissociated from a sensible appreciation of beauty. Plotinus' metaphysics of the beauty challenges this separation between intellect and beauty by referring beauty to the perception of what is intelligible in the sensible. Accordingly, the thesis of this paper is that Plotinus' metaphysics of the beauty illuminates social and political aspects of art that are of interest for understanding some important trends of contemporary art. In order to support this thesis, I will analyze Plotinus' account of the relation between the sensible and the intelligible, and the concepts of participation and imitation as they appear in *Enneads* I 6[1] and VI 4 [22]. Finally, I will refer to Richard Box's *Fields of Light* (2003) as an instance that clarifies this thesis.

*Key words:* Plotinus, beauty, perception, metaphysics, contemporary art

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\* Paper presented on the Research Graduate Seminar *Plotinus: The One and the Many*, directed by Professor: Fr. Gary Gurtler, S.J., Boston College, Philosophy Department, Spring 2010.

\*\* Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. RECIBIDO: 04.10.10 APROBADO: 18.01.11

## **PLOTINO Y EL ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO: ARTE, BELLEZA Y EL PODER UNIFICADOR DEL ALMA**

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### **RESUMEN**

El legado de Duchamp se manifiesta en el arte contemporáneo en la creciente importancia de la dimensión conceptual del arte y la separación entre arte y belleza. De esta manera, el arte como actividad conceptual se ha desvinculado de la apreciación sensible de la belleza. La metafísica de lo bello en Plotino desafía esta distinción entre intelecto y belleza en tanto que refiere lo bello a la percepción de lo que es inteligible en lo sensible. De acuerdo con esto, la tesis de este artículo es que la metafísica de lo bello en Plotino ilumina aspectos sociales y políticos del arte que son de interés para comprender algunas tendencias importantes del arte contemporáneo. Para sustentar esta tesis, analizaré la explicación plotiniana de la relación entre lo sensible y lo inteligible, y los conceptos de participación e imitación que aparecen en las *Enéadas* I 6[1] y VI 4 [22]. Finalmente, haré referencia a la obra *Campos de luz* (2003) de Richard Box para clarificar esta tesis.

*Palabras clave:* Plotino, belleza, percepción, metafísica, arte contemporáneo

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, MARCEL DUCHAMP strongly influenced the development of art challenging the conventions of the moment. His famous ready-made, as well as his pursuit of an aesthetic of the indifference, not of the beautiful, were results of this critical approach to art. For a long time he refused to produce any artistic object, so that his own life turned out to be his artistic work. He also remarked that appreciation of art depends strongly on the spectator's thinking process, an approach that would lead to conceptual art. In this order of ideas, an important part of Duchamp's legacy on contemporary art is the pursuit of the integration of art and life beyond institutional frameworks, the attention to ordinary objects, the emphasis on the conceptual background of the artwork, and the critique of artistic institutions. Also, it seems to be that because of this influence, the notion of the beautiful has been rejected or avoided. This reaction seems to be the result of considering beauty as the stratification of social conventions in which the conceptual character of art is denied. From this point of view, the notion of the beautiful is supposed to refer either to a certain property conventionally attributed to the object or to a certain feeling or subjective experience which remains dependent on bodily sensations.

However, following Plotinus' approach to the problem of participation and beauty is possible to overcome this point of view, for in this case the beautiful is intrinsically related to the intelligible capacities of the soul. Beauty is considered as a principle of unity and form which has a power derived from the intelligence and, ultimately, from the One. In this sense, beauty is the form that encourages the soul's ascending movement towards the One, a movement in which any subjective or partial approach is dissolved. Art in this case would be important for its capacity to engender an experience of beauty in which the realm of the unifying principle of intelligence is somehow embodied. Accordingly, it will be shown that Plotinus' metaphysics of beauty might help to provide a better understanding of art in which it is connected to life in general. In accordance with this reading, Margaret Miles (1999) suggests the potential relevance of Plotinus for an extended notion of aesthetics that considers social and political aspects of art. Thus, Public and Environmental artists like, for example, Richard Box, would receive important insights from this approach in relation to the metaphysic implications of their work.

Now, in order to facilitate this approach to contemporary artists it is important to keep in mind that Plotinus' metaphysics of the beauty could be easily misinterpreted because it rests on a non-reciprocal relationship between the intelligible and the sensible. This means that the sensible world participates in the intelligible without affecting it. In this sense, as will be shown below, the intellect and the soul are spread all over the sensible world without being divided or cut off from their essential unity. Thus, as Fr. Gurtler points out: "Our language, however, tends to obscure this relation, since we apply the terms, being and everywhere, to the sensible objects of our experience, which are not strictly being nor are any of them everywhere. In this sense, the relation between soul and body is conceived from a standpoint totally different from that of classical modern thought. Indeed, this modern thought considers the material world as essentially united or continuous in extension, while thought is considered as some sort of thing instead of a power.

Plotinus stresses the importance of putting into brackets these assumptions when considering the nature of the soul, which is said to be spread everywhere: "But since we put 'being' in the perceptible, we also put 'everywhere' there too, and since we think the perceptible is large we are puzzled about how that other nature spreads itself out in largeness of this extent" (VI, 4[22], 2, 20-30). Indeed, it seems to be that our habituation to the physical world impedes the understanding of the nature of the soul as principle of life and existence, overlooking the fact that things can just be if united to the All. For this reason, in order to understand the implications and importance of Plotinus' account of the beautiful it is necessary to clarify first how he explains the relationship between soul and body, how the sensible world participates in the intelligible. This question will be approached in what follows considering primarily *Ennead* VI, 4[22].

Plotinus' metaphysics provides an encompassing view of the universe, that is, a perspective that admits the existence either of the soul or of the body: "There exists certainly both the true All and the representation of the All, the nature of this visible universe" (VI, 4 [22], 2, 1-5). The question, then, is how it is possible for the intellect to be related to the sensible if having totally different properties. Plotinus introduces this problem by examining in what sense the soul could be related to the All, for indeed the soul is in the All while still having somehow an individual character. The standpoint for solving this question is an approach to the All as something

that could not be torn apart from itself or placed somewhere: “The really existing All is in nothing: for there is nothing before it” (VI, 4 [22], 2, 1-5). This means that if being something, if being alive, it is not possible for the soul to be separated from the All, for here Plotinus remarks that being could not have interruptions, lapses of not-being, but must have a perfect transparency. “It encounters being, therefore, as a whole; for it was not possible for it to be torn away from itself, and to say that it is everywhere clearly means that it is in being, that is, in itself” (VI,4 [22], 2, 1-5).

Here the universe as a whole is conceived as a living being, a unified soul, so that the soul must be present to the body in a way analogous to the way in which the All is present to the soul. The following passage is very important in clarifying this point: “For in this way they say that the souls are like rays, so that it is set firm in itself but the soul rays sent out come now to one living thing and now to another” (VI, 4[22], 3, 1-5). Indeed, this passage compares the soul to a ray emanating from the All as her source of power from which it cannot be cut off. This means that the power of the All is present in the soul as a whole for it could not have parts, be divided or diminished, since all these properties belonging to physical entities. Thus, the soul is principle of life insofar as it is necessarily linked to the All: it shares the same nature for the soul is in itself unbounded, indivisible and immeasurable. This approach defies the assumptions according to which the principle of life must be encountered in a body, for it is assumed in many modern and contemporary views that for something to exist it must be embodied and be dependent on the body. In fact, for Plotinus, the body is just a recipient of life that could just have a limited participation in the inexhaustible power of the soul.

In keeping with this reading, the relationship between soul and body is based on a comprehension of being as power or energy without matter. Indeed, if we consider light as pure energy but still as determining the visibility of corporeal things, we have a concrete phenomenon that works as a model for understanding this relationship. In keeping with this reading, the soul, as well as the forms, should be considered as expressions of power, energy or life, rooted in the One as the ultimate source of life. In this sense, the soul is a ray coming from the One that has fallen close to the sensible world, which is at the edge of the intelligible region, and so has been caught by a body. Here it should be kept in mind that for Plotinus the body seeks the soul but not the opposite. The mere potentiality of the body

looks for a source of life in order to participate of being. Thus, the body is called a recipient, for it has not life of its own but must look for it.

A question arising here is: How could the body look for life if not having life already? The body has the minimal expression of life by being part of the world soul and so being ordered by the intellect. The question here is that nature's order and life is still unconscious, just latent, without the intervention of human souls<sup>1</sup>. Thus, being in a state of unconsciousness, nature is far away from intelligence and stand as a dead body in a state of mere potentiality or adaptability.

But how did that which approached approach? Since there was an adaptability present in it, it had that to which it was adapted. But what comes to exist in such a way as not to receive all soul, though all is present, but not to it, like the other animals and the plants receives as much as it can take: as when a voice says a word, and some partake of the word along with the noise of the voice, some only of the voice and its impact (VI, 4 [22] 15, 1-10).

Regarding this passage Plotinus emphasizes that the soul is quiet and perfect and cannot be substantially affected by the body. The body, on the contrary, as mere potentiality or adaptability is affected from the outside and so is awakened to look for a participation in living things. Ugliness, pain and evil [in relation to the soul] come to be present to the soul, for the body brings divisibility and dispersion, characteristics that are opposed to the being of intellect. In this context, the body is an evil for the soul because, being other, it comes as a disturbance for the perfect unity of the soul. This means the soul will never belong to the body even when being partly in communion with it.

Thus, even though the real self of man is in the region of the intelligible, while being related to the body, human beings are ambivalent entities fluctuating between unity and dispersion. For this reason, Plotinus states that when being in a body "another man" is added to the man existing in the

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<sup>1</sup> This reading of nature as unconscious life has been suggested by Fr. Gary Gurtler S.J., in the lectures of the Graduate Seminar: Plotinus, *The One and the Many*, at Boston College, Spring term, 2010.

realm of the intelligible. In this context, the role of human beings within Plotinus' metaphysics is to function as a bridge between the sensible and the intelligible, so that a major (conscious) unity is brought forth in nature, maintaining a movement that goes back and forth in relation to the One. Of course, this does not mean that the soul is supposed to be attached to nature but the opposite. Given that the soul has fallen in a body, what Plotinus calls the descent, she can only begin her ascending movement to the One by bringing unity to the body. How is this unity achieved? Considering that the body is just a recipient of the soul it works as an antenna picking up the soul's power and life. The soul is the immediate source of intelligibility and life graspable by a body in its search for unity. The problem, at this point, is how to understand the connection between soul and body, so that it is possible for the soul to keep being an intelligible substance keeping its unity.

In order to understand this connection, Plotinus poses the example of a hand controlling a piece of wood in *Ennead* VI, 4[22], 7, 10-20. Indeed the hand moving the piece of wood acts as a unity, the whole of the hand is at work in this movement. Now, in this movement the hand has the power in the body as a whole, not just in one part and not in other. This example shows the hand as source of power, and the piece of wood as mere recipient of that power, without the hand being modified by the object controlled: it does not have to become of the same material of the wooden piece in order to move it. Moreover, the hand's power is limited by the body in the sense that in this case what the hand is able to do is limited to the range of what the body is capable to do or resist. What is noteworthy in the example is that the hand's powers are not determined by the plank. Of course, this example might be limited and inappropriate because is based on physical objects and so can also be misleading when trying to understand what an immaterial entity is. However, this example is important in order to understand that the soul's powers are not limited by the boundaries of physical objects, an insight that will be important when analyzing Richard Box's work at the end of this essay.

In this order of ideas, when thinking about the forms as beams of light emanating from the One we must immediately avoid the idea of a spatial center or spatially different rays. In this sense, as was shown before, the soul is an energy or power, in continuity with the life of the universe as a whole, not a static and separated entity. This means that when captured by a body the soul remains as a whole, complete and unlimited. So, any

limitation of the power of the soul comes as a limitation of the body but not of the soul. The soul is connected to the whole but seems to be disconnected because her sight is addressed towards the body, so that her own energy can only be partially actualized. In this case, what happens is some sort of optical illusion. The soul used to see the body as something divisible, limited, separated, finite, ends up considering herself as having those characteristics. This is a delusion for the proper nature of the soul is to be indivisible; for this reason, when not directed towards the body the soul remains complete in a state of self-sufficiency.

As is affirmed in *Ennead* I, 6[1], love, beauty and happiness are related to this condition of the soul as essentially one. What is desirable, lovable for the soul is what belongs to her nature: to come back to her original source of unity would be her major desire. In this respect, in *Ennead* VI 4[22] Plotinus suggests that the ascending movement of the soul towards the One is something that would be somehow necessary. Indeed, being essentially life, it is not possible for the soul to be cut off from the major source of life. For this reason, having her source of life in the Intellect, the soul could not wish to be part of dead, which comes along with the body. As stated in *Ennead* VI, 4 [22] 16, 25-35, to be dispersed in the body, paying attention to the body would imply for the soul to limit her power to the minimal expression: would be like using a very big fire to burn just a little thing. Because of being rooted in matter, which is mere potentiality, the body is in a state of potentiality which makes it ugly or devoid of form. In this sense, the soul will not be fulfilled if only paying attention to the body and its needs.

Thus, the body as recipient of life limits the extent to which the soul can manifest her powers in the physical world. If addressed towards the body the soul would just have a very limited perception of the whole universe, far lower than what is reachable by the mind and the imagination left alone. The senses define the range of potential experience human beings might have, but not the range of what exists. Technological devices, as well as the comparison with other animals' potential perceptions, clearly show that what is perceivable by means of the body is just a very narrow view of the world. This might be the kind of situation Plotinus has in mind when stating that the body receives the soul's power according to its own limitations and adaptability.

Now, this comprehension of the relationship between mind and body brings some problems relevant to understand the notion of beauty and its relation to art. First of all, if the soul's power is not limited in physical terms, why does Plotinus state that every soul is just related to just one body? Secondly, if the body is essentially characterized by dispersion and divisibility, is it possible for the body to be combined with other bodies in order to strengthen and intensify its own perception of the world? This questions might be of importance for an aesthetic approach in art is supposed to transform matter in order to let an image to appear, in doing so human perception is transformed.

In relation to the first question Plotinus answers that the physical limitation of the soul will be determined by the body, not by the soul. This means that the reason why just one body can be attached to one soul is dependent on the fact that once a body catches a soul it blocks the entrance for others to reach the same soul: "It is because that body must approach the soul, if it can, but the one that has approached it and received it has it" (VI, 4[22] 6, 1-5). In this regard, Plotinus finds the way to save the singularity of experience, though maintaining an essential communicability between all souls at the level of the intellect. Indeed, the body brings to the soul the singularity of perceptual experience as something that somehow isolates the soul from other souls. However, although the particular experiences create differences, the soul remains connected to the rest of the world as principle of judgment and intelligibility. Indeed, perception would not be possible if somehow the different things to be perceived were not somehow united, and this phenomenon is expressed in language. This means that even corporeal things are partaking of unity, a unity that is brought forth by the intellect imprinting its life to the cosmos soul.

Now, the body as physical is essentially dispersed and divisible, which means it cannot have boundaries established once and for all: the possibility of mutilation or death are dependent on this situation. Thus, what does Plotinus mean when stating that a soul is just related to a particular body? It seems unlikely that the answer would be that the soul is related to "one body" because unity does not belong to body as that body. In addition, when does the body start partaking of the soul: for the body as body is very different at the moment of conception, birth, childhood or youth. *Ennead* VI, 4 [22] offers some clues to answer this question. Indeed, in this treatise Plotinus insists on the importance of understanding the soul is in the body

as a whole, so that there cannot be one soul feeling the pleasure in the finger and another feeling pain in the head. Therefore, Plotinus seems to suggest precisely that the soul is the one bringing unity to the body, for the body as such does not have a principle of unity. This comprehension of the problem would locate Plotinus quite close to Aristotle. In this respect, it is important to recall that for Plotinus the possibility of unity and life comes from outside of its nature as physical body. In VI, 4 [22], 13, 5-10, Plotinus' argument for stating that body cannot participate in body is based on the fact that it is not possible for anything to participate of what already belongs to its nature. In this order of ideas, we could say that unity must come to body from the intellect because unity does not belong to the physical nature, which is essentially divisible and disperse. So the human body if being perceived as a unity has received this unity from the intellect, a unity that of course could not be defined in physical terms: the form of man would not be something physical.

The possibilities of what could become real are derived from the intellect, which is eternal and unbounded, but not from the body, which is essentially limited and perishable. From this point of view, the relation to the body is, on the one side, a limitation, and, on the other side, the possibility of actualizing a major unity on nature. For this reason, sense perception is a function of the soul by means of the body, for perception implies unity: "It is the soul which strictly speaking perceives" (Emilsson, 2008: 24). Thus, the extent of what is perceivable in body is limited by the body's capacities but not by the soul, which is unlimited and essentially transparent to everything which exists. In this respect, as is shown in the passage below, the soul could expand itself to cover whatever is the extension of the body, or whatever additions it might have.

And yet a hand might control a whole body and a piece of wood many cubits long, or something else, and what controls extends to the whole, but is not all the same divided into parts equal to what is controlled in the hand; the bounds of the power, it appears, extend as far as the grip, but all the same the hand is limited in extent by its own quantity, not by what of the body it lifts and controls. And if you were to add another length to the body which is controlled and the hand was able to bear it, the power will control that too without being divided into as many parts as the body has (VI, 4 [22], 7, 10-20).

This passage shows that insofar as the soul's power has its source in the Intellect it could not be diminished or physically bounded. For this reason, it is possible for the soul to perceive the connections between this particular body and the whole of the universe, even beyond the scope of what is perceptible only by the means of our limited human body: this is why our perception of the world is not just limited to what our body as such can do, but is also extended by means of art and knowledge in general. Indeed, the soul could perceive the whole of the universe if not merely addressed towards the body. As Margaret Miles remarks, despite the fact of recognizing the singular value of each entity, in Plotinus' view there is a radiation of being all over the universe in which communication and interaction is kept as essential to life: "The commonality of the various entities is the basis for Plotinus' theory of the continuous circulation of being through all living beings. Each entity catches, absorbs and is formed by reflecting the being above it. It's all done with mirrors" (1999: 35). This metaphor of the mirrors, which is indeed suggested by Plotinus as will be shown below, could complement the previous image of the hand, illuminating the role of matter in Plotinus' system. As the image in the mirror does not have its own substance, the body has not any substance or being without being related to an intelligible being. At the same time, but in a different level, the intelligible being is ultimately a reflection of the One. This approach to the universe as a set of mirrors brings forth the problem of imitation, and the relationship between image and original, which are essentially Platonic. Indeed, it could be thought that an image could have an existence independent from the original, a point in which a discussion on painting will be very appropriate.

But if someone were to say that it is not necessary for the image to be dependent on anything in the original –for it is possible for a likeness to exist when the original is not there from which the likeness is taken, and, when the fire has gone away, for the heat to exist in what has been heated –first of all, as regards the original and the likeness, if one is talking about the likeness made by the painter, we shall affirm that it is not the original which made the likeness but the painter, since even if some painter makes a self-portrait it is not a likeness of himself; for what made the painting was not the body of the painter or the [bodily] form which was represented; and it is not the painter but this particular disposition of the colors, which should be said to make this particular likeness. This is not in the strict and proper sense the making of likeness and image as it occurs in pools and mirrors, or

in shadows –here the image has its existence in the strict and proper sense from the prior original and comes to be from it, and it is not possible for what has come to be to exist cut off from it (VI, 4[22], 10, 1-20).

This passage states that the existence of any sensible being is directly derived from the power of the intellect, as a shadow is dependent on the person who produces it. In this sense, it could be said that there is an essential intelligibility and connection in everything which is alive. However, beyond this point, it allows clarifying to what extent the power of the intellect has an influence on the world of corporeal things, to what extent it could be extended over them. Indeed the example shows that what is produced by art could not have a life in itself if being limited to its corporeal character: the colors as something physical or material cannot produce anything with its own life cut off from the source of its life. What is reproduced in the painting is a dead thing if the painter is not there to bring unity to the arrangement of colors and if the spectator is not there to bring unity to the image. The image in itself of the painting would be nothing more than a lifeless arrangement of materials. Therefore, as Perl (2007) affirms, here form, and so life, is what responds to the intentional gaze of consciousness. Thus, the interesting point about the images in pools, mirrors and shadows, is that they appear connected to their source of life so that their unity with the rest of the world is preserved.

This approach to the notion of participation, which is finally related to the problem of imitation and the production of images, brings forth the question of beauty. Precisely, for Plotinus the perception of beauty is the very experience of the unity of the world that is dependent on form. Indeed, being in the body and having forgotten her origin, the soul desires to be united to what appears beautiful and rejects what appear ugly and obscure. Plotinus' explanation of this phenomenon is based on the principle according to which things always look for something like them. The experience of beauty manifests the soul's recognition of what is akin to her and her origin: a reminiscence of her original being as a perfect unity. Thus, as well as the shadow follows the body that produces her and keeps the imprint of it, the soul naturally follows the traces of her original source, which is the intellect and, ultimately, the One.

Indeed, in *Ennead* I, 6[1] sensible beauty is presented as the perception of unity of form, in opposition to the Stoic comprehension of beauty as

an arrangement of parts. This unity of form is to be perceived at a first glance: this means that recognizing a body as beautiful implies a direct experience, not a mediated one. When perceiving something as beautiful it is not necessary to bring concepts or linguistic categories, for as Miles (1999) suggests, this is something that happens at the level of perception. In this regard, for Plotinus there is a positive experience of the beauty related to the sensible. However, bodies appear sometimes as beautiful and sometimes no, so that being beautiful is an attribute accidentally related to them as bodies. This ambiguity of sensible things encourages the soul's search for a more perfect projection: the surface of sensible things, with its essential dispersion, does not suit perfectly to reflect the nature of the soul.

Sensible things are beautiful because they partake of form but are also rooted in matter, which, as was shown before, is mere potentiality or adaptability without intrinsic order. Matter is absolute ugliness, which is what remains hidden to the soul but still is partly manifest in sensible things, for they resist to become perfect actualizations of the intelligible (I, 6 [1], 2, 15-25). Maybe this is why the experience of sensible beauty is striking or shock, for sensible beauties are like half-dead phantoms contrasting with the original life of the soul, something that is suggested in the following passage.

When sense-perception, then, sees the form in bodies binding and mastering the nature opposed to it, which is shapeless, and shape riding gloriously upon other shapes, it gathers into one that which appears dispersed and brings it back and takes it in, now without parts, to the soul's interior and presents it to that which is within as something in tune with it and fitting it and dear to it, just as when a good man sees a trace of virtue in the young, which is in tune with his own inner truth, the sight delights him (I, 6 [1], 3, 10-20).

This passage is also remarkable for showing that perception of beauty implies somehow a paradoxical situation. Indeed, as well as it is not expected from the young to be virtuous, for it does not belong to its nature, it is not proper of the sensible thing to be beautiful for it is essentially dispersed and divisible. In this respect, Plotinus relates the experience of beauty to a mixed sensation of pleasure and shock that moves the soul towards its original source of unity. In this order of ideas, the example of the young in which there are some traces of virtue hints to the next step in the ascending movement of the soul, which refers to the beauty of actions,

but also remarks the experience of beauty as something puzzling. Even though the experience of beauty in relation to virtue is the experience of true beauty, it is still characterized by wonder and shock. This characteristic of the experience of beauty is explicitly stressed as follows:

But there must be those who see this beauty by that which the soul sees things of this sort [virtues], and when they see it they must be delighted and overwhelmed and excited much more than by those beauties we spoke of before, since now it is true beauty they are grasping. These experiences must occur whenever there is contact with any sort of beautiful thing, wonder and shock of delight and longing and passion and a happy excitement. One can have these experiences by contact with invisible beauties, and souls do have them, practically all, but particularly those who are more passionately in love with the invisible, just as with bodies all see them, but all are not stung as sharply, but some, who are called lovers, are most of all (I, 6 [1], 4, 10-20).

In this order of ideas, Plotinus remarks that the soul experiences a commotion by the appearance of something beautiful, something similar to what happens to someone in love in front of the beloved. This remark is important for it defines the way in which the soul experiences the longing for its unity. This unity is related to the soul's essential connection to the Intellect. Accordingly, Plotinus suggests that everybody somehow perceives the beauty, the unified form of things, but not everybody is equally moved by this perception. This is the purpose of the training or education in the beauty: to make the soul acute for perceiving its own unifying power, following those who reached higher points in these matters. This is why we must be informed by those in love of intelligible beauties, maybe artists and philosophers, about the nature of it, for even sensible beauty does not rest in the physical object but in the forming capacity of the soul which brings unity to the body. Therefore, it could be said that the purpose of art would be to instigate or generate this shock in the spectator in order for he to be able to recognize the beauty inherent to the soul and the world as a whole.

Coming back to the previous contrast between the images in the mirrors and the images in painting, it might be stated that the beauty perceived in sensible objects is precarious because it is dependent on the soul and the intellect. However, even though sensible beauty is dependent on the soul is not totally suitable to the soul. Sensible images are ugly insofar as they

cannot be totally attached to the soul forming a perfect unity; they remain alien to the soul's nature. For this reason, while dealing with sensible things the soul appears ugly, for in this case the soul is somehow divided.

Plotinus draws a contrast with the ugly soul, the soul directing its sight towards the base and obscure realm of sensible things, in order to recognize better the state of a pure soul. This contrast reveals that for the soul to be pure and beautiful needs to become similar to God: to remain quiet in the direct contemplation of her own creative power, which comes from the Intellect. Indeed, the soul is beautiful thanks to the intelligence, whereas the activities and the bodies are beautiful through the intervention of the soul. As is suggested in *Ennead* I, 6 [1], 6, 30, spreading the energy of the intellect, and so touching sensible things, the soul turns them beautiful. The puzzling question is that intelligence and soul share the same nature, while the sensible things are alien to the soul.

This is why Plotinus goes further in the inquiry about the cause of beauty beyond the realm of the sensible. In this ascending movement Plotinus encounters virtue as something beautiful in itself, not as something beautiful by participation, for participation implies a difference in nature. In this sense, the actions and activities of the soul would be beautiful as direct projections of the soul's power that are not separated from her nature. This is an important remark, for it implies a first approach to a non-imitative comprehension of art in which the self as such is somehow considered as a work of art: for Plotinus the soul has to become beautiful in order to be able to perceive the beauty of the world (I, 6 [1], 7, 25-30). Moreover, since beauty is eminently referred to virtue it has explicit political implications, for beauty is not merely referred to a passive contemplation but also to an action of the soul. Thus, as is stressed by Miles (1999), it is necessary a training, some sort of artistic development of the soul in order to reach higher levels of perception of beauty. After the recognition of sensible beauty, first you have to see the goodness occupations and then to pay attention to those who realize good things and finally turn your sight towards your inner self so that you can see your own beauty. If it is not possible for you to recognize your own self as beautiful, then you have to work in your own soul like a sculptor (I, 6[1], 9, 5-15). Finally, a move beyond the intellect is necessary for reaching the perfect unity with the One, even though up to this point the soul does not appear as an individual soul anymore and loses its consciousness as something different from the All.

This account of the ascending movement of the beauty, and its relation to Plotinus' approach to the soul-body relationship, might have important implications for understanding contemporary art. First, the comprehension of the soul and of form as active powers of life in unity with the universe as a whole provides a model for understanding art connected to life in general, that is, not limited to the framework of Museums or Cultural institutions. Following the contrast of the painter and the mirror mentioned before, it could be said that for Plotinus art is better if revealing the world's inner life instead of producing inert objects or images. In this sense, while being rooted on the sensible art must be understood as the manifestation of intellectual powers instead of being considered as the imitation or production of bodies. Thus, while producing art man is called to reveal the intelligible unity of the world in which its inner communicability is exposed.

Indeed, trends of contemporary art related to institutional critique, environmental or public art could be enriched with Plotinus' approach to art. In order to illustrate this point I would like to focus on Richard Box. Indeed, Richard Box's *fields of lights* (2003) seem to correspond to the conclusions stated about Plotinus metaphysics of beauty. One of these works consists in 1301 fluorescent tubes which are "planted" near to power lines so that the tubes glow by catching –without requiring wires– the energy spread out in the air over the field. This work shows how a source of energy is capable of generating light without needing a specific physical point of contact, like that provided by a wire.

An interesting phenomenon related to this field of fluorescent tubes is that, as Richard Box states, the spectator affects the light if being in proximity of the bulbs; for human beings "[...] are a much better conductor than a glass tube" (Box, 2003). This phenomenon is worthy of notice for it reflects the intrinsic connection between the object presented and the spectator, both presented under a holistic perspective. Recalling the previous account of the powers of the soul bringing unity to sensible things, in this case it is clear that the work of art cannot be approached as an object detached from the environment. Surprisingly, this holistic understanding of art, which in this case is applied to contemporary art, might also be reinforced by drawing a comparison to some interpretations of Plotinus's influence in Byzantine art. For this reason, I will refer briefly to some conclusions already established by Fr. Gary Gurtler in his article 'Plotinus and Byzantine Aesthetics' (1989).

Andre Grabar's analysis of Byzantine art attempts to show that inverse perspective is the result of the influence of Plotinus' metaphysics of art. Inverse perspective involves the viewer by positing the vanishing point behind him, contrary to Renaissance techniques that put the vanishing point in front of the viewer so that he is detached from the vision of reality. Grabar argues that this effect of inverse perspective coincides with the interest in encouraging a vision of reality as a whole, an approach contrary to that of the realistic imitation of nature in which vision is fragmented. This means that Byzantine art attempts, in accordance with Plotinus aesthetics, to consider "[...] the work of art is a mere point of departure for a metaphysical or spiritual experience" (Gurtler, 1989: 276). In this context, Gurtler points out that although Grabar's general interpretation is correct his sustaining evidence needs to be revised. Indeed, Plotinus' accounts of vision, according to his Greek background, provide a realistic account of visual perception "[...] not necessarily inimical to three dimensional representation" (Gurtler, 1989: 278). However, this realism does not coincide with the detached attitude of Renaissance's perspective but with a point of view that considers an all-encompassing whole: "For Plotinus the subject cannot be a mere observer, but must be involved in the very environment which he perceives, and the object, on the other hand, cannot be a mere datum or image of perception, but must constitute with the subject the perceivable world" (Gurtler, 1989: 279). From this reading of Plotinus comprehension of image it could be concluded that indeed what matters in this case is not a specific technique, like inverse perspective as opposed to Renaissance perspective, but the world view behind it. Considering the account on intelligible beauty in *Ennead* V, 8[31]4-6, and also the arguments of *Ennead* I, 6 [1], Gurtler states that for Plotinus the beautiful is intended to be part of an education process in which the intelligible, the forms, are perceived. Accordingly, Byzantine art are would clearly coincide with Plotinus aesthetics, for it tries to present a symbolic view of the objects, contrary to Renaissance art that emphasizes the spatial and temporal dimensions of the image.

Following Gurtler's reading of Byzantine aesthetics, it could be seen more clearly why contemporary practices in Art would coincide with Plotinus' metaphysics of the beauty. The interest in creating a work that involves the spectator and the attempt to encouraging an intellectual approach to Art. Indeed, as was suggested above, in *Ennead* V, 8[31] Plotinus will emphasize the importance of intelligible beauty, considering

that sensible beauty have its roots in a rational principle or intellect itself: “For Pheidias too did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible” (V, 8 [31], 1, 35-40). This passage is noteworthy because implicitly synthesizes what has been stated all over this paper: the informing principle of sensible things comes from the intellect, art in this sense is the visible expression of something invisible, as is the case of Zeus appearing in a sculpture. The passage also emphasizes that the form is something understood, not merely seen with the senses.

In consonance with the previous remarks, Box’s work explicitly shows the intrinsic unity between different elements of reality: power lines, land, bulbs and human bodies. This intrinsic unity is shown to be possible beyond the spectrum of what is potentially visible by means of the body. In this sense, something invisible becomes perceptible thanks to the intervention of the work of art. The work itself, like the image in a mirror, proves to be dependent on the rest of the environment, making evident the life spread out in the world as a whole.

Nevertheless, since “[...] the beautiful whether in nature or art, is designed to change the spectator” (Gurtler, 1989: 282), the important thing is to understand in what sense this kind of work of art encourages the spectator to pursue a more elevated beauty, that of the intellect. Here it might be important to come back to Duchamp to draw a comparison. Marcel Duchamp criticized the painting that is just addressed to the retina for it encourages a passive attitude of the spectator (Cabanne, 1987). For this reason, the painting in *Glass* turns out to be an alternative, for in this case, there is not much to see in the surface of the object. Thus, by addressing the spectator’s sight towards the invisible, what could just be thought, Duchamp attempted to encourage an intellectual or conceptual work.

In similar fashion to that of Duchamp’s work, Richard Box creates a work that is focused on the invisible. Indeed, the puzzling thing in the work is that there are not wires connected to the bulbs so that the source of energy is not visible: in this sense, the spectator recognizes that an important part of the work is not perceivable by the senses. Furthermore, the work reveals that the power lines surrounding the work (the physical conductors of the energy) cannot contain the whole of the energy, for if that being the case the bulbs could not be illuminated. Thus, the work encourages the spectator

detachment from the body in different levels: neither the wires, nor the bulbs or the human bodies can contain the energy circulating in the field, it exceeds any physical limitation. Now, in contrast with this precariousness of matter, the artist's power is revealed by its capacity to grasp consciously the inner unity of the world, so that he is capable to bring new life to these corporeal elements: the landscape acquires a new unity in which the power lines are harmonically integrated to the land, the people living there, and the eventual spectator who enters the field. In sum, following Plotinus' approach to the notion of the beauty, it is to encourage an experience of the beauty of the world: an experience in which the soul recognizes his unifying power beyond the apparent separations of corporeal things.

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