

# The Philosophy and Art of Wang Guangyi

## Aesthetics and Contemporary Art

Series Editors: Tiziana Andina and David Carrier

Philosophers and cultural historians typically discuss works of art in abstract terms. But the true significance of art for philosophy, and philosophy for art, can only be established through close analysis of specific examples. Art is increasingly being used to introduce and discuss problems in philosophy. And many works of art raise important philosophical issues of their own. But the resources available have been limited. *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, the first series of its kind, will provide a productive context for that indispensable enterprise.

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# The Philosophy and Art of Wang Guangyi

Edited by  
Tiziana Andina and Erica Onnis

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Industrial Paint (1989), oil on canvas, 120x100cm

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# Grief and the Power of the Mind

Carola Barbero 宝凯乐

*Le bonheur est salutaire pour le corps,  
mais c'est le chagrin  
qui développe les forces de l'esprit*  
M. Proust, *Le temps retrouvé*

## Introduction

At the Spanish Pavilion of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* in Paris in July 1937, the mural-sized oil painting on canvas, *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, was exhibited for the first time. *Guernica* is considered one of the most moving paintings in art's history. It was created by Picasso after the Nazi bombing earlier that year of the Basque village of Guernica, in the northern part of Spain. The emotions it evokes are universal and timeless, hence not necessarily connected to that specific event. In the painting there is a bull with eyes opened in astonishment, a woman grieving the death of a child lying in her arms, a horse falling in agony under which there is a dead man grasping a broken sword from which buds a flower, a woman seemingly scared and carrying a lamp witnesses the scene, while another with arms raised in terror is entrapped by fire.

It is a painting with strong symbolism, and many interpretations have been offered by critics in order to explain it. Undoubtedly it is, as intended by its author, a work reminding humanity how much suffering and devastation war can bring. Hence, it is also a universal symbol of human suffering, fear and astonishment caused by evil and injustice.

Let us start by asking a simple question: If we observe *Guernica* without knowing anything about the Nazis' bombing on April 26, 1937, what do we see?

We see a strong scene emotionally charged with a bull, a horse, some desperate women, a man and so on. We see those emotions represented with force in the painting: they are there, on the canvas, in front of us. They hit us, call us into question, and make us feel uneasy. We catch all the desperation when looking at the eyes, at the tense expression of the faces, at the opened mouths, at those raised arms. We see (and maybe also feel) the emotions there represented.

Needless to say, if we also knew in response to what particular event the painting was created, we would undoubtedly comprehend something more by contextualizing those emotions to the shocking event that took place when the Nazi German and the Fascist Italian warplanes bombed Guernica, the village giving the title to the painting.

According to some, *Guernica* is not only one of the strongest anti-war paintings, but it is also a canvas depicting ancient tragedy and reminding us that “all that we love is going to be lost.”<sup>1</sup> Its being universal explains also why, even if we do not know anything about it, what we grasp by simply looking at it is its powerful emotional force.

There is a famous anecdote belonging to the myth connected to this painting: it seems that, looking at a reproduction of *Guernica*, a German official asked Picasso, “Did you do this?” and the artist’s reply was, “No, you did.” In its simplicity this answer underlines that the tragedy and the suffering there represented are not simply a work of art; they symbolize a universal experience of death and terror derived from a specific historical event. Another anecdote is the one concerning the blood-red tear changing its place on the canvas during the creation but not making the final cut. Why did the blood-red tear continuously change its place? Maybe because a blood-red tear could be everywhere. And why is it not there in the final version? Because *Guernica* is not our past: that tear still bleeds and will bleed forever. When looking at the collapsing Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, a witness of Guernica told that the event was shockingly similar to the one he experienced that April in 1937. *Guernica* is still actual and, unfortunately, our tears will go on bleeding.

Here, what is interesting is that *Guernica* does not aim at speaking about emotions, but at representing them. The same happens with Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, the marble sculpture, the only one ever signed by Michelangelo Buonarroti, and representing the body of Jesus in the Virgin’s arms after the Crucifixion. It is an impressive statue showing the forsakenness of the son on the lap of his mother, his being in the meantime God and man, while Mary is represented as being very young, maybe for her incorruptible purity. This sculpture symbolizes the purest form of love, the one between mother and son, and what is represented is

Mary's acceptance of God's will, together with Jesus's serenity and forsakenness. This work represents strong and deep emotions and, in its calm magnificence, is characterized as a warning against those who, blinded by fury, point at God, questioning him for our tragedies and pains. How can we react in this way in front of the suffering acceptance of the Virgin holding her dead son in her arms? We simply cannot. The body of Jesus is in his mother's arms, and our questions, even if felt as urgent and important, are not legitimate any more. Exactly as in *Guernica's* case, also in this case we see the power and universality of emotions transmitted through art.

As is well known, and as the history of philosophy extensively shows, art and emotion<sup>2</sup> have had a long, rich, and often complex—when not even difficult—relationship, since it was not easy to see if the one had a role in favor or against the other. For instance, should we maintain that one of art's duties is that of communicating emotions? Should we consider it good to approach art from an emotional viewpoint, or should we see art conveying emotions as being somehow ambiguous or even blackmailing? Chinese artist Wang Guangyi defends a strong and sharp position in the debate concerning art and emotions, maintaining powerfully that emotions should be removed from works of art in order to allow for rational analysis of the themes/subjects represented by the artist. According to Wang, emotions are dangerous, therefore they should be removed by art. His position is based both on the old dichotomy between reason and passion, and on the idea that abstract and amorphous figures should be more rational and appreciable than fully blooded and emotional ones. But is he right? Should we really extirpate emotions in order to understand and rationally appreciate art?

## Art and Emotion

A philosophical tradition dating back to Plato and Aristotle has profoundly reflected on these questions and, as is well known, different (and often opposite) answers have been suggested.

Plato, in Book X of his *Republic*, strongly criticized art,<sup>3</sup> first from an *epistemological* point of view—insisting that the artist does not really know what he is creating, and that his knowledge is a third-order one (at the first level is the knowledge of forms, typical of the philosopher; at the second level is the craftsman, who gets inspiration from the form to build the physical object; and at the third level is the artist's knowledge, which is a mere imitation of the physical realization of the form). Second, from an *emotional* point of view, by stressing

the fact that we, as rational beings, should be able to control passions and desires with our reason, hence we should not stimulate the irrational part of our soul, as for instance dramatic art does (by feeding our irrationality and making us more similar to children who notoriously are unable to distinguish fiction from reality). According to Plato, therefore, art should be treated with suspicion both for what has to do with the kind of knowledge we can derive from it and for the emotions it evokes in us. The emotional side of Plato's critique is precisely the one maintained by Wang Guangyi in favor of emotion's extirpation from art.

But would that be the right move? Should we see rationality and emotion as one against the other? Should we really favor abstraction and lack of any feeling and emotion? Aristotle thinks we should not. In the *Poetics*, he does important work with art, knowledge, and emotions, achieving results quite distant from Plato's. The only point in common between the two is that art is seen by both as *imitation*; but, whereas for Plato its being so underlines a strong and puzzling epistemological weakness (since art is imitation of an imitation), for Aristotle art's imitative nature emphasizes a distinctive feature of mankind, the one thanks to which we begin learning and enjoying knowledge. Furthermore, the kind of knowledge art does impart to us is a special and highly philosophical one, since differently from history "poetry is more concerned with the universal, and history more with the individual,"<sup>4</sup> that is why art actually discloses the domain of possibilities. Art does not concern reality, actualities, but things that "might happen," and this tells us something absolutely important, not only as far as knowledge is concerned, but also for what has to do with emotions since, as a matter of fact, it is because we know that art represents real-world possibilities and therefore is not actual, that we can truly enjoy and contemplate artworks, thinking and feeling accordingly.

Actually, *pace* Colin Radford,<sup>5</sup> we appreciate artworks precisely because we know that what they are representing is merely possible and not actual. This distinction between the artistic and the real domains allows us to contemplate and really appreciate what is represented in the work without having to think about consequences, as happens, instead, when we relate to reality. Art appreciation, hence, is an opportunity to reflect on what is in front of us, to enrich our experience, and to learn from it. We do not behave irrationally in responding to art, but as Aristotle exhaustively explains, in responding emotionally to art we somehow experience (thanks to the *catharsis* of the emotions there represented) those emotional states and learn something important. From here directly comes the central role played by emotions in art appreciation and in art definition as well.



Nevertheless, art is an emotional experience, not only for consumers, but also for art producers, as Romanticism<sup>6</sup> has taught us by defining works of art as the expression of their creators' emotions. Provided it is all but easy to say what an *expression* is,<sup>7</sup> we can assume that works of art express, besides ideas and convictions, emotions, too. Actually, there is a strong sense according to which what the artist does is *expressing himself* in his works.

R. G. Collingwood, in his *The Principles of Art*,<sup>8</sup> presents his expression theory and argues that art should be seen as the expression of the artist's emotions: art is for her/him a medium for communicating her/his feelings. According to this theory, the artist shapes his emotions in the artwork, and people understand it as far as they understand and recognize the very same emotions of the artist's, or rather as far as their imaginative experience is identical with the one the artist had when creating it. Therefore, experiencing works of art means experiencing the very same emotions expressed by the artist in the work itself. A quite strong critique to Collingwood's position comes from those arguing that, whatever expression is, we should not confuse a genetical with a structural approach—that is, we should judge the work of art as such and therefore not consider the process thanks to which the artist has created it.<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of fact, what, for instance, a painting expresses, is given by what is represented, by the colors used and by the style, and not, instead, by the artist's state of mind or intentions. Nonetheless, even if what the work of art is, is independent of the artist's state of mind, in order to properly understand what artworks do express we need know something about the period when the work was created.<sup>10</sup> As Jenefer Robinson explains,

The artist who made it, the individual style of that artist or the general style within which he worked, as well as facts about the artist's class, race, gender, and individual psychology may all be relevant to determining what is expressed by the work. So it's hardly surprising that we cannot tell a work is an expression of bitterness, disappointment, and exasperation in its author just by paying close attention to "the work itself" independently of its wider context.<sup>11</sup>

## Art without Emotion

Explicitly against any form of expression theory of a romantic sort, Wang Guangyi's strong idea is that the artist, far from expressing his emotions in his works, should be deliberately and explicitly unemotional. Therefore, art is not

the expression of the artist's emotions: as a matter of fact, emotions are erased from the artwork by explicit intention.

Nonetheless, leaving aside what the artist does, and what he means by what he does, let us concentrate on the work of art. The work, once created, might be seen as expressing something quite independent from the artist's intentions (think about those artists who cannot be properly said of having intentions, for example, insane artists like Vincent Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and Louis Wain): actually, the artist could have had no intention of expressing any emotion by his work (because he had no true intentions or because he had in mind something different from what he was actually doing), nonetheless the work of art might express something anyway. Artworks, once created, can be seen as autonomous objects with their form and their content and, consequently, they can, as a matter of principle, express emotions their authors were unaware of, and they can convey emotions even if their authors had no intention of expressing anything at all by means of them.

This intrinsic expressive character of artworks is the attribute thanks to which we are authorized to make inferences about the work articulating emotions, since what it is individuates what it says. Its content corresponds to what the work transmits; and it can communicate emotions also in its saying there is nothing to express emotionally, or that the emotions have been deleted from faces and bodies but, nonetheless, sadness remains, and nothing else matters.

This is exactly what happens in Wang Guangyi's *Red Rationality: Revision of the Idols* (1987), wherein he does reinterpret Michelangelo's *Pietà*, by intentionally removing, erasing, deleting any sort of emotion (see Figure 1.1). The marble statue representing the Virgin hugging her dead son and expressing in the meantime sorrow, desperation, and resignation is transformed into an oil on canvas of 160cm. x 200cm., where some amorphous figures stand (in the back of a red grid).

According to Wang's intentions, in that transformation emotions have been erased. In order to remove any temptation, even the faces, traditionally considered the mirror of our emotional situation,<sup>12</sup> have been deleted, and what we see are these soft blue/grey bodies bent over and stooped. Nevertheless, the colors used and the form given to the bodies could be identified, without any forcing, with the trace of that erasure. As a matter of fact, even if there are no suffering, resigned, or calm faces anymore, what we see in this abstract scene inherits something under the emotional point of view from its original model. Despite Wang Guangyi wanting to represent people (originally having emotions but) without emotions, his painting offers us a clear trace of that erasure, and

what we have is still something concerned with emotions that are somehow present, even in their being shown as absent.

### Erasing Emotions/Evoking Emotions

The point is: Does Wang's reinterpretation succeed in replacing the dead Christ and the grieving Mary with soft and faceless figures standing out in a wasteland? In view of his move—based on the conviction that emotions are tendentious and therefore should be taken out of works of art in order to keep a neutral position—of stripping emotions from that classic tragic image by using these strange and featureless figures, are we willing to interpret it as a *true alternative view*? And, if so, which view would be this *alternative view*? It seems that simply erasing people and emotions by transforming them into lumbering puppets meandering in a wasteland does not mean properly to offer an alternative view, this is just an attempt to erase the previous, emotional view. But then are we right in considering Wang Guangyi's *Red Rationality: Revision of the Idols* as articulating the way the scene represented in the *Pietà* appears to someone wanting to eliminate any emotional state?

Wang, believing that emotions are dangerous, wants an art deprived of any emotional dimension, and for this reason he aims at conveying his intention of not expressing any emotion. Nonetheless, the main problem with this painting transforming Michelangelo's masterpiece into a wasteland populated by amorphous figures is that emotions do not seem to be really erased. Do not these figures communicate sadness? Is not the wasteland a strong symbol of grief and desolation? Are not these bodies transmitting dereliction and abandonment? What Wang's painting seems to show is that a work can express emotions even if its author did not want to.

Of course emotions in *Red Rationality: Revision of the Idols* are quite different from, for instance, the ones depicted by Romantic painters (think about Eugène Delacroix's works, created in a realistic style and with characters full of emotions, conveying violence and passion), and they are also different from those typical of the Expressionists who, presenting the world from a totally subjective perspective, distort their characters by accentuating the emotions they are expressing. An interesting characteristic of Expressionism is that it makes clear how something can be represented as abstract and be, in the meantime, full of emotions, and this is important especially if considering that Wang sees the lack of concreteness and of a definite form as a sort of guarantee against a

possible emotional impact. Actually, there is no strategy able to keep us safe from emotions and their power. Emotions are always around the corner, quite independently from the author's beliefs.

Let us consider again the intention of erasing emotions. Wang sees emotions as a very difficult business and thinks that maybe erasing them from works could be the right move in order to avoid any danger and be sure that rationality will be safeguarded.

Just erase emotions, and you will be safe. Interesting idea, but maybe not the correct one. Simply *removing* what we think to be the origin of the problem is not always enough to solve the problem. And this for three reasons: (1) maybe what has been removed was not the origin of the problem; (2) maybe there is no problem to be solved at all; (3) maybe we do not really know what needs to be removed.

By recalling the philosophical tradition and the ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle, we have already emphasized how (2), following Aristotle's *Poetics*, could be maintained, specifically insisting on the fact that emotions, far from being identified with a danger, could be seen as a treasure, both for what concerns aesthetic experience and the development of our understanding.

Number (1) focuses instead on what has been removed in order to erase emotions. Wang has deleted human traits and facial expressions from the characters of his painting but, nonetheless, emotions are still present in it: colors, forms, landscape, and structure do transmit emotions as well. Actually, *Red Rationality: Revision of the Idols* is sad, livid, and hopeless even if there are no crying eyes, resigned faces or whatever. This happens because the represented scene may be sad and desperate, despite of its author's will: actually, emotions are still and powerfully in that desolate land where amorphous figures meander.

The last reason, (3), stresses a point that has to do with the relation between art and emotions. Where are emotions in artworks? What is their function? Does the author need emotions in order to create? According to Henry Matisse, emotions are what make possible the act of artistic creation itself: "If one hasn't always emotion, what then? [...] When I came in here to work this morning I had no emotion, so I took a horseback ride. When I returned I felt like painting, and had all the emotion I wanted."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Matisse believed emotions are necessary in order to create. Maybe this was just *his* need and not a universal one.

Nonetheless, the one concerning art and emotions certainly is an intricate matter, and of course it is not something that can be solved by a simple erasure. Why? Because emotions in art, are in principle everywhere. So, even if the

author has no intention to communicate any emotion through and by his art,<sup>14</sup> the artwork itself might still have an emotional impact. This is what happens with *Red Rationality: Revision of the Idols*: actually, even if we have no more emotions concerning Jesus and the Virgin Mary as happens in Michelangelo's masterpiece, we still have a sense of loneliness, sadness, and desperation.

This is an important aspect of the question explaining why, as viewers, we stop in front of this artwork and are gripped by grief even if faces and bodies have been erased. Emotions, exactly like love, are in the air, and there exist no intention or eraser able to remove them once and forever.

## Notes

- 1 This was M. Leiris' idea according to what Russell writes, 2003: 129.
- 2 Matravers, 1998: "Great art provides some of the most valuable experiences it is possible for us to have. Such experiences engage many aspects of our mental life simultaneously: filling our senses whilst at the same time making demands on our intelligence, our sympathies, and our emotions," 1.
- 3 Plato, *Republic*, X, 595a-608b.
- 4 Aristotle, *Poetics*, IX, 1451b, 11-14.
- 5 Radford, 1975. In this paper Radford argues that our being moved or, in general, having emotions towards artworks in an evidence of our being incoherent and inconsistent. However, far from being irrational, when we react emotionally to artworks we prove of having understood and appreciated it exactly for what it is, i.e. an artwork, as Weston (1975) underlines.
- 6 Wordsworth and Coleridge, 2006: "Preface."
- 7 As J. Robinson (2005: 231-2) underlines: "Some works seem to *express* their author's emotions; others which are not expressions of anyone's emotions nevertheless have *expressive qualities*; some works are simply *expressive* without expressing anything in particular; or perhaps they are played or performed expressively whether or not they are themselves expressions of anything."
- 8 Collingwood (1963 [1938]).
- 9 Hospers, 1970: 221-45; Tormey, 1971.
- 10 As E. H. Gombrich has existensively explained in his *Art and Illusion*, London: Phaidon, 1962.
- 11 Robinson, 2005: 249.
- 12 Ekman, 1999: 301-20.
- 13 H. Matisse, as quoted in an interview with Clara T. MacChesney (1912), in *Matisse on Art* (1995) ed. by Jack D. Flam, 66.
- 14 Novitz, 1995: 199-203.

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