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There was a time when it was widely understood what art was and how its achievements should be assessed. We call this period the golden age of art history, when the discipline simultaneously refined its theoretical tools (Fiedler, Riegl, Wölfflin) and began opening a space for visual culture (Panofsky, Warburg). There was also a time when it could no longer be determined with certainty whether something was a work of art, let alone whether it possessed value. This period spans roughly fifty years of the twentieth century, from Marcel Duchamp to Joseph Kosuth. Today we live in an era in which virtually anything can be interpreted as a work of art and, consequently, as an unquestionable value. Art history, once the indispensable point of departure for the analysis of artistic objects, has, through its insistence on disciplinary narrowness, largely forfeited its epistemological significance. Accordingly, the unlimited range of definitions regarding what a work of art is and what it can become—between the experience of its "exceptionality" and its banal "omnipresence"—cannot be attributed solely to the creativity of artists and their ability to transcend reality, but also to the manner in which discourse on art has evolved. Even when art theorists employed tools borrowed from other disciplines, that discourse was largely conducted within the impermeable boundaries of individual post-structuralist theories. While it should not be denied that the path toward the contemporary version of "turf policing" (Mieke Bal) was nevertheless paved with good intentions, it must also be assumed that conversations about art were a fortunate consequence of the broader democratization of Western societies, according to a simple formula: the greater the degree of individual freedom, the more art, and the more critical insight. It is nevertheless believed that such a linear progression, as noble as it may be in principle, has contributed more to the commodification of art and theory than to the forms of knowledge that might emerge from their productive encounter.
With the VCS Call for Essays "Art Theory Now", the guest editors, Krešimir Purgar and Mirela Ramljak Purgar, seek to promote research on specific themes, including the following:

1.
The possibility of attributing power to the artwork through the language of theory may be explored in a manner analogous to the way W. J. T. Mitchell and Horst Bredekamp attribute power to images. Both authors speak of images as though they possess a form of agency. The question to be considered is whether Mitchell's heuristic metaphor "What Do Pictures Want?" can be expanded into the question "What Do Artworks Want?" If the desire of the image exists only within a network of relations between image and viewer, does this "intimacy" also apply to the artwork? Conversely, if Bredekamp believes in the actual operative power of images, can we also speak of an inherent performativity of the artwork, even when it requires complex discursive interpretation? Do

the anthropology of our relationship to art on the one hand, and the ontology of the artwork's agency on the other, delineate a space that a new theory of art should seek to occupy?

2.
Art theory has not yet sufficiently explored the vast interpretative territory between Martin Seel's phenomenology of the artistic object and Lambert Wiesing's phenomenology of the perceiving subject. Seel confronts us with the question of what happens to the artwork when we experience it aesthetically, while Wiesing asks what happens to the observer during that experience. If combined into a complementary model, they yield a theory in which the artwork appears as an event and the observer appears to him- or herself within that event. A similar shift toward presence can be found in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. He criticizes the dominance of the "culture of meaning" in the humanities and argues that we have neglected the dimension of proximity in what is given to experience. Juliane Rebentisch occupies a somewhat different position in that, through the example of installation art, she suggests that the viewer becomes part of the space of the work, yet in such a way that aesthetic appearing does not abolish critical reflection but rather stimulates it. Might the exploration of this theoretical direction demonstrate that phenomenological insights can provide new meaning to formal analysis—and vice versa?

3.
The time has come for art theory to engage more fully with the concept of "atmospheric spaces" developed within the framework of the so-called New Phenomenology. For Hermann Schmitz, subjective feelings such as fear or pleasure are atmospheres that permeate a given situation; emotions "spill into space" (Gefühlsräume). Building on Schmitz, Gernot Böhme defines atmosphere as the "ecstasy of things"; aesthetics is therefore no longer limited to works of art but encompasses the entire organization of everyday sensory experience. Tonino Griffero describes atmospheres as "quasi-things"—phenomena that are not material objects, yet possess their own phenomenological presence and are felt prior to any reflection or interpretation. Have the sensory, the affective, and the spatial become the new frontier of contemporary theory?

4.
If we focus on institutional regimes, such as Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, we recognize a struggle for a new purpose of the artwork and a desire for the meaning of art to reside in exposing dynamics of power through the tactics of Situationist micro-utopias. Claire Bishop, by contrast, argues that Bourriaud is mistaken in assuming that interaction and participation are inherently positive and emancipatory. Democratic societies, she contends, are structurally marked by ongoing conflict, opposition, and inequality. Relational aesthetics therefore risks legitimizing a mere aestheticization of sociality while failing to provide sufficient grounds for the artwork to be experienced as a political instrument. From the perspective of art theory, should this debate be reopened through the lens of new arguments and the antagonisms of late capitalism?

5.
The possibilities offered to art theory by the assimilation of important posthumanist themes invite further exploration. We are thinking, for example, of Donna Haraway's approach, in which we see the potential for artworks to be understood as entities that blur and deepen the boundaries between humans, technology, animals, and the environment; and of Rosi Braidotti's reflections, which can open artworks toward the concept of the nomadic and posthuman subject, directing

attention to processes of becoming, transformation, and the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Should these concepts be reserved only for art that directly employs artificial intelligence, biotechnology, cyborgs, and nonhuman actors, or could they also benefit more "traditional" forms of art, which, under the conditions of the techno-genesis of virtual worlds (Žarko Paić), must necessarily be viewed through a different lens?

6.

Timothy Morton's theses are particularly stimulating if they help us understand artworks as encounters with complex ecological networks and with what he calls "hyperobjects"—systems that exceed human perception, such as climate change, global pollution, and species extinction. Naturally, it is not suggested that art must explicitly refer to hyperobjects (although it already does so to a considerable extent), but rather that theory itself may view artworks as hyperobjects. Similarly, theory might adopt from Bruno Latour the idea that artworks are the result of planetary entanglements involving humans, new materialisms, and adaptation to the climatic regime of the Anthropocene—all of which constitute the contemporary world that inspires us through anxiety as much as through possibility.

7.

It is particularly useful to investigate how technological, social, and phenomenological processes influence the interpretation of artworks. For example, how might the artificial aesthetics of Lev Manovich and Emanuele Arielli, as well as Yuk Hui's cosmotechnics, be employed as analytical and hermeneutic tools for interpreting artworks that are themselves neither algorithmic nor explicitly concerned with questioning the technological foundations of contemporary life? In other words, can debates about technology contribute to a reconfiguration of art theory? Or, what new possibilities emerge through Andrea Pinotti's concept of the An-icon, which understands contemporary virtual worlds as the realization of a millennia-old human aspiration to abolish the boundary between what is real and what is merely represented?

The subjects proposed here should not be understood as thematic limitations but as inspiration and encouragement to expand the scope of art theory beyond established disciplinary canons. Contributions are invited that engage with both systematic and ad hoc theories; theories immanent to particular artworks, artists, broader trends, or specific critical methods; theories addressing urgent issues articulated by artworks; theories reflecting the instability of the contemporary subject; and theories advocating radical anachronism and discontinuity. The term "art theory" is therefore employed here in a deliberately broad sense, as a free critical practice that does not submit to established models but remains open to the multiple trajectories of serious thought.

Operational Guidelines:

Scholars interested in participating are invited to submit a proposal no later than 15 January 2027. The proposal should be approximately 300 words in length, including an essential bibliography, and should be accompanied by a 100-word biographical note. All materials and correspondence concerning the publication should be sent to the guest editors and to the journal's editorial office at the following email addresses:

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Those who submit proposals will receive a response by 20 January 2027 and, if their proposals

are accepted, will be required to submit their contributions by 15 March 2027. Contributions should be between 8,000 and 10,000 words, including notes and bibliography. The journal's editorial guidelines can be consulted and downloaded at https://vcsmimesis.org/norme-redazionali.

Articles should be accompanied by an abstract of 200 words, three to five keywords, and a bio-bibliographical note of no more than 100 words referring to the author or authors. The abstract, keywords, and bio-bibliographical note must be provided in both English and Italian. Articles may be written in English or Italian. Articles may be accompanied by images, provided that the author or authors ensure that they hold the necessary reproduction rights.

Articles will be evaluated according to a double-blind peer-review process. Referee reports will be sent to the authors by 5 April 2027. If the referees consider a contribution suitable for publication subject to revisions, the authors will have until 19 April 2027 to submit the appropriately revised version. For all matters not specified in this Call for Essays, reference should be made to the journal's policy, which can be consulted and downloaded at https://vcsmimesis.org/norme-etiche.

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