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IMAGINATIVE ART E ACTUAL CRITICISM IN ROGER FRY

ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

The present work traces on a chronological schedule the most important steps of Roger Fry's critique, from the beginning as connoisseur in the end of the 19th Century, through the formalist season of the Twenties, till the formalism crisis and his thoughts on the method and the practice of art criticism in the latest years.

This research moves around, from a critic point of view, not only on the rereading of the first contribution on Renaissance Art published by Fry, but also on some unreleased manuscripts, from which some quotes are submitted, that furnish a full documentary repertoire, not explored so far, through which we can build up the study of the ancient Renaissance Masters that for the young connoisseur Fry represents the first field test of his aesthetic sensibility.

As we focus the attention on the exaltation of the emotional-imaginative artistic component, the constant main focus of Roger Fry's texts, the work goes on in the close examination of the events that saw Fry involved first in his job as curator, then as advisor at the Metropolitan Museum in New York where he worked from 1906 to 1910. But America offered Fry the chance of a very important meeting for the modernist development of the critic thought. In Boston he came across Denman Ross who promoted a new art science epistemology through his book, *The Theory of Pure Design* which inspired in some way Fry's *An Essay in Aesthetics* (1909), always considered as the fundamental text of his formalist thought.

The two Post-Impressionist exhibitions organized by Fry at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1910 and 1912, represented the turning point of the modernist update programme, both for Londoners art taste, still stuck at Impressionism and for English culture and Art Institutions in Edwardian England.

Children of the hardest Victorian Age, Fry and the other members of the so called Bloomsbury group tried to do their best to create the fundamentals to build up a free, modern, open minded society that would change the social lifestyle and the art events promoted by a brand new generation of modern artists. Among these, Fry's most appreciated artists were Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. As a painter Fry himself experimented new artistic techniques and pictorial styles with them, in particular inspired by the Cezanne's and Matisse's painting.

The final part of the work, which is more theoretical and methodological, deals with Fry's formalism as possible "method" for the modern art criticism. Fry worked in all his last production on a necessary theoretical and critical revision of his own theory, from which the urge of a methodological systematization emerges clearly, searched by Fry in that time but unfortunately still not fulfilled in 1934, year of his death.

Through the study of numerous articles of the 1920s, the *dilemma*, so it was defined, of Fry's formalist theory emerges in all its complexity. The encounter-clash of form and content in the late Fry becomes the main theme which leads him to different conclusions compared to the past times, although we still can trace a hint of the early Fry.

Fry's critical theory can't be considered a systematical or methodological whole. For that reason what encouraged the entire work was the wish to recover the essence of a critic discourse, that comes from an attitude, a reflective approach of vigilant aesthetic reception related to art, not from a reliable method based on unmistakable principles. For someone that represented a boundary that Fry couldn't overcome.

As we put our effort to restore Fry's formalism criticism, taking into account his limits, we better refer to "actual criticism" rather than "formalist method". A practical criticism in which through the direct *vision* of the work of art the spectator might grasp the imaginative truth of the artist, the essence of his visual message that requires clear and authentic words to be understood, just like the lines, the forms and the colours of his pictures. Probably, the ultimate aim of Fry's career was his wish that everyone would possess this "form vocabulary".

The work ends with a general recognition of the critic fortune of Fry's formalism in the Italian critical debate from the Thirties to the post war years.

From different perspectives the elasticity of Fry's theory has made him a theorist of "pure visibility" – Croce; a critic of taste and not a real theorist – Lionello Venturi; an aesthetic of inconclusive theories – Ragghianti; an art critic humanely involved in the cause of the "socialism of art".

So Fry's ideas on art and criticism are democratically open to different interpretations and we can still recall his thought nowadays, because his thought is naturally free from the firmness of the other methodological systems of the art history.