

Call for Papers

# *Progress!?*

## The Crisis of Progress in Art: Alternative Paradigms and Models

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The open call for the *Progress!?* conference an interdisciplinary forum devoted to a critical re-examination of the debate on the relationship between art and progress. The “progressive” conception of artistic languages now appears largely outdated and confined to a historicized modernist interpretation (Lippard, 1984). However, thanks to its semantic openness it’s still possible to reflect upon its meanings. A broader inquiry may in fact prove fruitful, opening the way to unprecedented readings. This is especially true when going beyond the Western and optimistic notion of linear progress, thereby making room for decentered perspectives.

Maarten Doorman (2003) compares philosophy’s approach to progress to the Second Labour of Hercules. As with the Hydra, the more one attempts to cut its heads off, the more they proliferate. Indeed, the subject is so ramified across its multiple dimensions – scientific, social and technological – as to appear inextricable.

The conference adopts two different perspectives as a theoretical basis. On the one hand, it adopts the historical–artistic perspective; on the other, the historical–philosophical one. These should offer fertile ground for overturning the habitual narratives of progress, beginning with an examination of its diverse historical interpretations and assessing alternative paradigms.

A preliminary terminological distinction appears necessary to frame the use of the term across the different domains considered. Progress is understood as an internal evolution of artistic languages (Gablík, 1976; Gombrich, 1971); as an expansion of humanity’s cognitive capacity (Vico, 1744; Hegel, 1807); as an expression of social justice (Turgot, 1750); finally, as a key dynamic of scientific and technological development (Anders, 1956; Benjamin, 1935). According to the first paradigm, the debate on the progressive linearity of art occupied the theoretical discourse for a long time, but it gradually reached exhaustion. It has repeatedly proven impossible to link an alleged «perfection» of art to objective criteria – for example, to a greater mimetic adherence to reality, as emphasized

by Gombrich. At the same time, the same reasoning cannot be applied to the rationalization of representational codes (such as perspective) or to the evolution of optical devices (for instance, photography).

Gombrich also recalls Baudelaire's position, which expresses radical distrust in the notion of progress as a «lamp without light, an invention of contemporary philosophy, patented without guarantee of Nature or Divinity», and even more inadequate as a parameter for the evolution of artistic languages, defending a firmly subjectivist view according to which «the artist is born only from himself» (Baudelaire, 1855).

In the second half of the Twentieth century, the debate on progress underwent a further bifurcation. On the one hand, we witness Clement Greenberg's conception of an evolutionary property internal to artistic languages. On the other, we witness the impulses and radical ruptures with the modernist paradigm that characterized the new waves of formal invention within neo-avant-garde practices. Such debate also appears central to the formation of a "post-Greenbergian diaspora" (Kester, 2004), which coincided with the flourishing of political practices. Thus, the logics of conceptual and linguistic invention and innovation reveal their fragilities within a discourse that attempts to incorporate social perspectives. As Lippard notes, «the whole evolutionary basis of modernist innovation, the idea of aesthetic 'progress' [...] that pervades contemporary avant-garde art and criticism, is also blatantly class-based and has far more to do with technology than with art [...] because such innovations take place in a context accessible only to the educated elite».

These positions, among many others, seem to suggest the inexistence of a proportional relationship between the technical refinement and the capacity of the artwork to intercept the urgencies of its own time. If that is so, where does the "progressive" variable of art reside – and does it exist? Is it still possible to rethink progress in a way that does not coincide either with formal innovation or with the dominant aesthetic paradigms? And in which ways can philosophy assist this enquiry?

Giovan Battista Vico's thought (18th Century) is particularly relevant in this regard. Vico interprets history as a progressive but spiral movement, characterized by a cyclical repetition of three stages. Art, and more precisely poetics, occupies the second stage and it's conceived as the means to know the world. Exercised by creative imagination and poetic wisdom, this third stage can construct "fantastic universals" – an analogical and figurative re-elaboration of experience.

Hegel situates art within the dialectical movement of the Absolute Spirit toward its full and complete manifestation. He considers art to be a crucial moment for understanding the immanent historicity of the Spirit and its progressive evolution, as well as a transitory phase. This latter corresponds to the stage of the thesis and it is inferior to religion and philosophy due to its nature of sensuous intuition. The philosopher thus sees in the «death of art» a necessary surpassing toward more adequate and rational forms of understanding. Danto, for his part, identifies in the death of art – a concept he postdates to Hegel, aligning it with the end of the avant-gardes – a possibility for emancipation and liberation. This corresponds to the inauguration of a post-historical epoch in which art would finally break free from established canons and experiment, relinquishing the idea of progress as a linear direction to follow, detaching from the philosophical aspiration to represent reality and gaining awareness of its own means (which, as Greenberg also argues, definitively frees it from the mimetic paradigm).

In this context, Merleau-Ponty's position is also significant. He contrasts the unfolding of Hegelian Absolute Spirit – «which would act in us without us and perceive in our place» – with a theology of expression composed of individual persons and individual acts of expression. Here, each work is a coherent deformation that interprets the relationship with reality and a gesture that takes the past up and extends it into the future, thus sustaining a movement that advances without relying on blind or unfounded faith in absolute progress.

By problematizing the relationship between art and progress, the conference also seeks to address the decline of the myth of progress intended as a scientific and technological drive for social improvement, especially in the second half of the Twentieth century. From this perspective, in the post-atomic society, one can observe how artists' interest has gradually shifted toward notions of obsolescence, failure, and crisis, rather than maintaining that of linear progress. The need to formalize a new condition of existential instability has inevitably overturned an optimistic vision of technological progress. This includes a perspective on the potential extinction of the human species, which opposes to the mindset of progress intended as «a very special idea of 'eternity,' that is, the idea of the uninterrupted improvement of the world; and also a very special defect, namely the incapacity to conceive of an end» (Anders, 1956). An increasing number of artworks began to emerge from the questioning of their own materiality, codified through destructive and entropic processes (Gustav Metzger, Jean Tinguely, Body Art, Land Art), thus posing a concrete challenge to the critical positioning of progress in contemporary thought.

Conversely, technological progress can also trigger a phenomenon of democratization in art through the possibility of its infinite reproducibility, as Benjamin observes. On one hand, this makes art more accessible. On the other, it alters its reception by producing a «reception in distraction» while conferring to it new social and political functions that enable mass dissemination and, in the worst-case scenario, transform it into a tool of propaganda. In citing Benjamin, it is also necessary to evoke the image of progress rendered in the *Angelus Novus*: the wind that blows to drive the angel away from the ruins left by the catastrophes of history. In this image, progress appears as the force propelling the angel towards the future, preventing it from «recomposing the shattered», on the other from halting, albeit involuntarily.

One can also examine the resonance of these positions with Enlightenment's thought. In his Sorbonne writings, Turgot proposes an original theory of progress grounded in the democratization of art, advocating the encouragement of creativity across all social classes in the name of the common good. In this context, a comparison with Thomas Mann's idea of apoliticism is instructive. In the name of progress, Mann asserts the absolute autonomy of art and of the creative spirit from political interference. Adorno, in a similar way, draws a distinction between the cultural industry (and mass art), which he condemns for its complicity with the system, and avant-garde art, to which he gives a liberatory function. In fact, avant-garde art challenges dominant logics of control, denounces the fragmentation of the world and the failure to reconcile the individual with society and provides a space of freedom as a possibility for an utopian and a redemptive alternative.

It becomes clear that scientific and technological progress, like the artistic one, are not characterized by a linear and constant movement. In this regard, Kuhn's perspective is particularly significant. Scientific progress does not proceed through a linear and cumulative growth of knowledge but develops through revolutions that mark profound ruptures with the previous models. Normal science operates within a shared paradigm until the emergence of insoluble anomalies generates a crisis that undermines the existing theoretical framework. It is in the subsequent revolutionary phase that the dominant paradigm is replaced by a new conceptual framework, demonstrating that scientific and technological development does not follow a continuous and progressive trajectory, but proceeds through discontinuous leaps and radical transformations.

Feyerabend further radicalizes Kuhn's critique of scientific and technological progress, transforming it into methodological anarchism. According to his theory, science does not follow a fixed method and progress does not represent

a rectilinear and inevitable path, but a historically contingent proliferation of heterogeneous theories. From this perspective, art and other forms of knowledge also possess equal epistemic dignity, insofar as they contribute to the understanding of the world without being subordinated to the scientific method. This implies a vision of a free and democratic society in which science does not hold a monopoly over knowledge nor does it assume a dogmatic role. On the contrary, science coexists on equal terms with art as an instrument to produce truth. For Feyerabend, indeed, both art and science are intrinsically creative and «anarchic» activities, united by the absence of any predetermined method governing their development. Both proceed through experimentation, rupture, and unpredictable innovation, without adhering to universal rules nor to rigid methodological criteria. In this view, knowledge advances through freedom of exploration and plurality of approaches, rather than through conformity to fixed norms.

The conference originates from several discussions within the doctoral working group in Philosophy and Cultural Heritage Studies at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. It is open to other faculty members, researchers, and doctoral candidates.

The conference is organized by the Chair of the History of Enlightenment Philosophy, the research group *Filosofia in movimento*, and the editorial board of the journal *Astérisque*.

### **How to participate**

Proposals (title, abstract of approximately 300 words, essential bibliography of up to 5 titles, and bio-bibliographical note) must be sent by January 10, 2026, to: Gaia Bobò (gaiabobo@hotmail.it), Antonio Coratti (antonio.coratti@gmail.com), and Giulia Quinzi (giuliaquinzi@gmail.com).

Proposals in Italian and English are accepted. Although in-person participation is strongly encouraged, Zoom connections may be arranged in special cases. Any additional questions can be sent directly by email to the organizing committee.

### **Time-table**

January 10, 2026: abstract submission deadline

January 27, 2026: notification to selected speakers

April 13-14, 2026: provisional dates for the conference

## Indicative bibliography

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