

MOSAIC AS AN EXPERIMENTAL SYSTEM
IN CONTEMPORARY FINE ART PRACTICE
AND CRITICISM

MARCELO JOSÉ DE MELO

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Abstract

This thesis examines the conventional definition of mosaic and argues against the dominant narrative that subordinates it to painting. It asserts the specific character and general applicability of mosaic as a paradigm for image-construction, presenting the necessity for rethinking mosaic, in terms of both practice and theory, as a constituent presence affecting consideration of certain practices within contemporary art.

More specifically, this thesis argues that the principles of mosaic art, characterised by compositions made through the use of partible serialised units derived from an additive method of construction that is pertinent to art and technology, inform a fluid paradigmatic art category that can be traced back to antiquity and experienced through actual environments, such as in architecture, and in the virtual environments of recent digital technologies. This category is identified in the research as the *mosaic* and presents a formal set of concerns that provide a new analytical framework for particular debates on sculpture and installation art that is also relevant to art education and digital aesthetics.

The methodological approach used here combines qualitative research that draws on art-historical literature, with visual evidence extracted from artworks through the analysis of formal compositional elements. Philosophically, the study uses a Deleuzian rhizomatic approach to undermine specific art-historical hierarchies. It is also influenced by Laura Marks' concept of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, underpinned by an understanding of how historical clues and visual evidence inform a historical horizon constituted of folds. Furthermore, it relies on a space for experimentation that bridges the divide between art and science, in keeping with Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's concepts of graphematic and representational spaces.

This practice-based PhD advances mosaic as an experimental system, conceptually and experientially, embracing the historicity of mosaic as well as its phenomenological ramifications. It proposes a new aesthetic formalism for the digital age by tracing a particular way of structuring the visual where mosaic principles enable the passage from the actual built environment to the image-based virtual environment of digital technologies. Through modernist experiments with the grid, in combination with the use of elemental units of composition, this thesis argues that the ancient tessera has evolved into the contemporary voxel.

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and contemporary art around the world and what exists is usually relegated to the confinements of a historical practice. Is it possible that millennia of mosaic tradition have vanished from sight in contemporary visual culture? The present thesis argues otherwise.

The mosaic medium has a history that is over five thousand years old yet it has not been taught widely by degree-granting educational institutions in the UK, the USA¹ and other Western countries. Except for Italy² and France,³ mosaic art and practice do not seem to be a main subject of interest. Compared with painting and sculpture, mosaic seems to occupy an insignificant position. According to Marshall McLuhan (2011 [1962]:145), a misunderstanding about 'mosaic form' both in 'art and experience' is widespread and this merits further research; for him 'the evidence is much needed.'

It is interesting that analogies to *mosaic* populate the world so vastly that we take mosaic art for granted and pay no attention to how these analogies came into existence. For instance, if the word mosaic is typed into a search engine such as Google⁴ it is possible to see how semantically the word can encompass a great number of things that are loosely brought together under the generic umbrella term of *mosaic*, from web browsers to solar panels, while reference to mosaic in the world of contemporary art is, at best, limited.⁵ Examples of mosaic art are rare; there are only a few institutions⁶ dedicated to collecting and even fewer are investigating contemporary manifestations of mosaic work. Mosaic is considered a historical practice and is rarely part of important contemporary art collections, including those of applied art or even craft-based collections.⁷ In Italy, the climate for contemporary mosaic is more favourable and tiling

¹ In the USA, two MA dissertations have been found through this research: Brown, 1958 & Newman, 1965.

² *Accademia di Belle Arti di Ravenna* has a BA and a MA devoted to mosaic art within the fine art context (ABA, 2014: 1 & ABA, 2016: 1-2). Bologna, Venice and other universities in Italy offer an average of one hundred hours dedicated to mosaic within their design courses.

³ Mosaic is taught at *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and Lyon (ENSBA, 2013: 65-76).

⁴ Due to a dynamic use of algorithms based on the user's activity on Google, the research results of this platform can vary considerably, and in my case, the word mosaic tends to return an expected number of results linked to artworks and artefacts that no longer shows how diversified a generic search on Google used to be.

⁵ The academic study of contemporary art, the production, exhibiting and collecting of contemporary art.

⁶ The Vatican Museum Contemporary Art Collection and the MAR in Ravenna are the better-known collections.

⁷ In October 2015, a year after the start of this research, The *Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam* displayed *Tree* (1920) a mosaic work by Jacoba van Heemskerck alongside works by Vilmos Huszár and Mondrian. The mosaic is part of the design collection of the museum. However, it is listed under *painting*. The *Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum* in Rotterdam has mosaic works by J. T. Prikker which are not usually on display.

companies such as Bisazza⁸ and Sicis⁹ maintain design collections dedicated to mosaic. However, these are essentially showrooms to promote their interior design products to a growing international market.¹⁰

The main aim of this research is to show that mosaic art, and its principles, inform not only the domains of contemporary art, but also contemporary visual culture and digital technologies. The current state of fragmented iconicity is a direct consequence of thousands of years of mosaic practice, from Ancient Mesopotamia to the Byzantine Empire and beyond. The influence of mosaic is so deeply engrained that an interdisciplinary approach is required to reveal how it occurred. The examples are plenty and point towards a new interpretative model that this thesis articulates, as well as a new contemporary materiality where mosaic principles are a driving force.

This thesis is divided in three parts: part one, consisting of chapters one, two and three, is a contextual overview that maps out the field of investigation, provides a review of literature and reconceptualises the term mosaic for contemporary use; part two, consisting of chapters three, four and five, addresses a moment in history within which mosaic principles enfold and become a language applied to painting and are further developed three-dimensionally within sculpture by the historical avant-gardes; and, part three, comprising of chapters seven and eight, analyses contemporary practice by discussing aspects of particular works of the 1980s generation both in Britain and Brazil. It also discusses the new materiality of mosaic within digital aesthetics and presents a reflection on my own practice.

Chapter one begins with a methodological statement that outlines my creative strategic approach in relation to the analytical elements of the thesis and the propositional aspects, both in terms of new thinking through mosaic and its effects upon practice. It introduces the research question and the concept of experimental systems and how it functions in the production of knowledge through artistic research. It is a notion that places materiality and the artwork at the centre of the investigation based on ideas developed by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. This concept of experimental systems is combined with the rhizome developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and the mosaic approach by McLuhan that provide an overarching methodology for the

⁸ <https://www.bisazza.it> (accessed 24.07.2018).

⁹ <http://www.sicis.com> (accessed 24.07.2018).

¹⁰ Another example of recent market interest in mosaic materials for interior decoration was the purchase of Orsoni Smalti, a Venetian company founded in the 19th century, by the Trend Group in 2003. <http://www.orsoni.com> (accessed 24.07.2018).

research. This chapter also provides a rationale for how the contextual material is dealt with and clarifies the historiographical path. It also discusses the relationship between the practical work and the written component of the thesis, evidencing how they operate alongside each other in the context of an experimental system of research.

Chapter two contextualises mosaic as it is conventionally understood historically. It discusses mosaic's additive method of picturing, the basis for my approach to making – a section that is illustrated by historical mosaics and contemporary works from the mosaic art scene in Ravenna, as well as my own work. This chapter proposes a re-evaluation of the notion of scale in mosaic based on the concept of point-horizon discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002) [1945] and explored by Alex Potts in *The Sculptural Imagination* (2000). This chapter also highlights the hierarchical issues involved in the study and analysis of mosaic work, evidencing the need for a reconceptualization based on a mosaic-centred approach that is not subservient to painting theories.

Chapter three further develops historical and methodological issues and provides a synthesis of various cognate concepts such as the grid, *kunstwollen* and modulation as well as additive synthesis and the electronic mosaic, thus enabling this thesis to produce a new concept of mosaic that operates beyond the conventional limits of its understanding. In this way, the chapter presents the concept of the *mosaical* within fine art, defending the categorical value of mosaic.

Chapter four focuses on the influences of mosaic principles in painting at the turn of the 20th century, when the tessera is repackaged for modernity by the historical avant-gardes. It is a period when mosaic becomes an experimental method in painting that subverts the naturalistic tendencies propagated by the European fine art academies, shattering the paradigm of the single-point perspective inaugurated in the Renaissance. This chapter focuses on two main geographical areas: the first is France, exploring Post-Impressionist practice and its deployment of colour theories in painting through the notion of additive synthesis. This section pays attention to three artists in particular: Georges Seurat, Paul Signac and Robert Delaunay; the second location is Russia, focusing on the influence of the Russo-Byzantine revivalism of the 19th century on the Russian avant-garde. It is an analysis based on Maria Taroutina's thesis *From the Tessera to the Square* (2013) in which she evidences how mosaic work propelled Mikhail Vrubel to knowingly reproduce tesserae in oil paint in several of his works. This section evidences how the tessera that enfolded within Vrubel's work unfolds in Kazimir

Malevich's Suprematism as architectural modular units. This experimental climate affected other parts of Europe such as Germany and the Netherlands, regions that are also visited in this chapter through an exploration of works by members of the Bauhaus and the group *De Stijl*. This section pays particular attention to the work of Johan Thorn Prikker and his connection to both Josef Albers and Piet Mondrian. In short, chapter four traces the mosaical as it enfolds and unfolds in painting within a historical horizon, highlighting the implications of mosaic for contemporary fine art practices and digital aesthetics.

Chapter five continues to trace how the Russian avant-garde explored mosaic principles and iconicity through a drive towards three-dimensionality and the sculptural form. It considers the issue of *faktura* and pays close attention to Vladimir Tatlin's constructive process, based on material heterogeneity, and Aleksandr Rodchenko's material homogeneity and the concept of modularity. This chapter also introduces the phenomenological dimensions of architectural mosaic and the embodied experience of viewing, which are further developed in chapter six. The final section of chapter five presents a discussion of assemblage, which focuses on the way that the material heterogeneity of mosaic icons within Tatlin's work unfolds as assemblage and acquires its own categorical value in an exhibition curated by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961.

Chapter six explores how the concept of modularity coupled with seriality becomes the focus of attention of the sculptural debate through Minimalist practice. It discusses site-specificity and how mosaic principles influence aspects of installation art by addressing the phenomenology of viewing. This is undertaken through a comparative analysis of mosaic work and Minimalist art. This chapter concentrates on the work of Donald Judd and Carl Andre suggesting an alternative reading of their production: an experimental yet unconscious mosaic practice.

Chapter seven brings the debate up-to-date by discussing material modulation in contemporary practice and connecting it to the current drive towards digital aesthetics. It evidences the influences of mosaic on digitality and explores what can be described as an increasing rematerialisation of the pixel through traditional means and 3D-printing, as showcased in works by Daniel Rozin, JODI, Jonathan Wright and Shawn Smith, among others. In terms of material modulation, this chapter explores works by artists of the 1980s generation such as Tony Cragg, Antony Gormley and Julian Opie in Britain, and José Damasceno in Brazil. It also introduces my practice highlighting works

that connect the ancient modulation technique found in geometric Roman black-and-white mosaic floors to contemporary encoding methods such as QRs and barcodes.

Chapter eight is a reflection on my own practice developed through the articulation of the Brewery Tap gallery in Folkestone, an old pub converted into a project space. This chapter articulates how art practice can produce knowledge through research. It further develops the notion of experimental systems within my practice and evidences how continued iteration can generate unexpected results derived from the research itself and can reveal new paths for production and future conceptual avenues to explore.

As an overview of contents, it is good to note that the methodological framework and the supporting literature are not used in isolation, but can be divided into four groups: Firstly, the writings of Daniele Astrologo Abadal, Bruno Bandini, Daniele Torcellini and Renato Barilli help to locate the current debate on mosaic art, connecting it to contemporary art practices and digital aesthetics; Secondly, the writings of Paul Crowther, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Laura U. Marks, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Marshall McLuhan offer the philosophical framework needed for conceptualising the transhistorical importance of image making and artistic production. Their concepts help to dissolve art-historical hierarchies and evidence how ideas and materials enfold and unfold within a historical horizon; Thirdly, Philippe Bruneau, Katherine Dunbabin, Rosalind E. Krauss, Giorgio Vasari, Maria Taroutina and Meredith Hoy, among others, are employed to trace mosaic techniques and historical influences. They also enable an understanding of how mosaic has unfolded in contemporary practices and data visualisation, mapping out how the intellectual climate opened to a broader frame of reference; Lastly, the writings of Briony Fer, Miwon Kwon, Michael Schwab and Richard Sennett, among others, serve to locate my practice and provide a theoretical framework for the production and analysis of my artistic output.