DO WE KNOW ART WHEN WE SEE IT? PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATIONS IN AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

Never in history was art more present everywhere and never was it more valuable. Yet, in the wake of Duchamp and Warhol, the understanding of what art is and how it is recognized is more problematic today than any time in history. This paper examines the various approaches to how one recognizes a work of art *as* a work of art. It examines the history of aesthetic theory and the variousways art was defined. In the end it considers the value of the more hermeneutic and holistic interpretations of art put forward by Heidegger, Gadamer, Danto and Beuys.

1. Let us begin with a paradox: Never in history was art more presenteverywhere and never was it more valuable. Yet the question is which values people usually have in mind. A German minister recently expressed this very nicely. When his state considered selling a few Warhols to fill up its empty coffers, he remarked: "A piece of art has value when you can sell it." It's that simple, it's just monetary value.

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On the other hand, I would like to claim that art was never less known than today. How can this be? Consider this scene which I witnessed not long ago in a famous museum of modern art in Munich: I saw a group of people emerging from one of the exhibition halls. Apparently, they had just finished their guided tour through the museum and seemed very exhausted. They then went straight to a corner where tables and chairs had been piled up and wanted to take a rest. Yet before they got there the frightened voice of the tour guide was heard telling them to keep away from what to everybodylooked as chairs and not to touch these objects. So one of the visitors asked with utter surprise: "What, this is art, too?!"

I think this shows that the identification of art works as such and the concept of art in particular have become problematic. It seems that whether or not something is a work of art is no longer obvious or visible in its appearance. In order to find out what we have before us we first need to do some research and enquire into the circumstances of its creation. Usually, we rely on the opinion of art consultants and experts, or a whole bunch of them, a committee of experts. In other words, one has to be told by someonein the know that this particular object is a piece of art. Yet – who is an expert and on what grounds?

2. In 1917 it still seemed clear that such a question could be answered without much difficulty. And that was just what happened when a committee of experts rejected an art work Marcel Duchamp had submittedfor the exhibition of the society of independent artists in New York. The committee claimed Duchamp's so-called art work had violated all the major rules of art and therefore could not be accepted for the exhibition. So apparentlythe knowledge of these rules makes the expert, who in turn has to ensure that the rules are respected. What had happened was this:

What Duchamp had submitted as his work of art came in fact from a shop of sanitary appliances; it was a urinal. His so-called artwork was a simple factory product of a firm called "J. L. Mott Iron Works," it was unaltered by any artistic intervention; and it could not be distinguished from the hundreds of other urinals that were available in shops everywhere. All Duchamp had done was to give it a title, *Fountain*, which was

certainly funny as it hinted at some deeper meaning. And he signed his factory product,but not in his own name, instead he used the pseudonym "R. Mutt", which resembled the name of the manufacturing firm and set off much speculation.Yet the members of the jury were not amused and rejected it in their capacity as experts of art whose job it was not only to evaluate art works but more fundamentally to distinguish art from non-art. But – to make matters more complicated – Duchamp himself was a member of the jury, too, and he had strongly objected to the committee's decision. So, was he no expert?

Later Duchamp explained what for him turned an object of daily use into a piece of art: "Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object."

In other words, Duchamp's main intention was to shift the focus of art from physical craft to thought and intellectual interpretation. For Duchamp it is not so much the physical object that makes it an artwork but the thought it evokes. And that is an idea that can be traced back at least to Hegel's aesthetics where it marked a decisive turning point in the philosophy of art – as we will see later.

It didn't take long until in line with Duchamp's argument, the concept of art was extended in such a way that objects like his urinal would now be regarded as works of "conceptual art." He called them Ready-mades, and this new art category could accommodate any object purchased "as a sculpture already made." They now include pieces such as his Bottle Rack and his Bicycle Wheel and others.

3. April 21, 1964 marks another key moment in the development of the modern concept of art. On this day Andy Warhol opened his second exhibition in the New York Stable Gallery in which he had placed 400 boxes in 2 rooms that seemed to turn the gallery into a ware house. The visitors were amused, irritated, and scornful. Although Warhol's Brillo boxes looked exactly like the boxes one would find in shops and real warehouses, they were not unaltered factory products like Duchamp's

urinal. Instead they were exact imitations of the original boxes, executed on Warhol's precise orders by a carpenter and then painted like the original boxes. Yet for the eye of the beholder they were indistinguishable from their originals and without any specific artfulness or originality. Nevertheless there was one decisive mark of distinction from real Brillo boxes, and that was their location: they were stapled in a gallery and not in a warehouse. In this exhibition Warhol clearly drew on one of the most enduring conceptions of art but only to call it in doubts, the conception that art is the imitation of nature. This tradition goes all the way back to Plato and dominated art history until the arrival of photography and abstract art in the late 19th century.

Yet Warhol's ironic criticism of this powerful tradition gives a new twist to the philosophy of art. His boxes are imitations of the ordinary factory boxes and not identical with the real ones. But they are completely indistinguishable from the real ones and even could be used for the same purpose the originals were made for, i. e. to transport goods. This adds a new aspect to the development of modern art and gives rise to an interesting question, namely: Is art ultimately defined by space? Is it important *where* an object is placed, in a warehouse or in a gallery or a museum? And does this location make all the difference between art and non-art?

In fact that is in essence what the institutional theory of art has suggested. Since the location where art is found cannot be understood outsidea specific social practice and without a specific art theory – and that seems obvious when we think about the history of the art museum – space may be a decisive criterion for distinguishing art from non-art. This is the gist of George Dickie's argument who is one of the main proponents of this theory. He holds that art is defined neither by content nor by method nor origin of production but exclusively by the specific social practices associated with it. In his highly influential book entitled *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca/London 1974, he writes: "A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain

social institution (the artworld)." Without an artworld with its galleries, museums, art journals, auctions, art criticisms etc., art simply doesn't exist. When this artworld places something in a gallery or museum it is turned into a piece of art.

Clearly, this view has much plausibility and requires thorough examination. Yet we may also take it as a symptom of the demise of art as we know it. It may imply that the concept of art has not only been extended but has in fact imploded by its own conceptual weight. And the aesthetic conception of art has finally come to its end. And that is exactly what Hegel anticipated, albeit from quite a different philosophical perspective. In order to fully understand what has happened to art we need to reflect on its beginning and embark on a historical exploration into the philosophy of art and aesthetics.

I.

4. On January 17, 1756 an event took place in Rome that was to change the traditional perception of art and usher in the era of aesthetics. Through the mediation of some influential friends Johan Joachim Winckelmannwas invited by Pope Benedict XIV to visit an inner courtyard of the Vatican where ancient Greek marble sculptures from the period between 350 and 325 BC had been erected which had been discovered in the 15th c. One of them was a statue thought to represent the Greek god Apollo. When Winckelmann saw it, he was dumbfounded and overwhelmed by admiration. Later he summarized what happened to him in his book The *History of Ancient Art* (1764) as follows: "In the presence of this wonder of the arts I forget everything, and I myself assume an elevated position so as to become worthy of beholding it. My breast seems to widen and to rise." Winckelmann saw in the sculpture both "the god and the miracle of ancient art." He was certain that this statue represented "the highest ideal of art among all the works of antiquity." And for this ideal he found expressionin terms that should have the greatest impact on the conceptualization of art: "The most excellent characteristic of Greek

masterworks is noble simplicityand quiet grandeur (*edle Einfalt und stille Größe*) both in presentation and in expression. As in the depth of the ocean the water almost remains calm although it may churn as much as it will on the surface, in the same way the statues of the Greeks express grand and calm souls in spite of all their passions."

Winckelmann was no art expert in the modern sense but rather a theologian and librarian who was interested in philosophy and classical studies. Although he was to become the founding father of archeology, in today's terminology he was an intellectual and an amateur in art. For Winckelmann, what distinguished art from everything else was its ability to directly speak to the whole person in the encounter and to open both their hearts and intellects. Great art causes shock that clearly has religious connotations and initiates deep agreement, delight, and appreciation. And for Winckelmann it is all too obvious that what causes all this is beauty shining through the works of art. Experiencing this beauty doesn't require a theory but rather religious contemplation. In preparing for the encounter with art Winckelmann recommended: "First of all enter the realm of incorporealbeauty so as to get ready for the contemplation of this work of art."

5. Developing these ideas further, objects of art were thought to be beautiful in the emphatic sense of the term as beauty herself is manifest in them and at the same time concealed. In art as a sensually accessible object beauty reveals itself by pointing beyond the object towards the realm of incorporeal beauty. When the modern concept of art emerged with Winckelmann, it was still clear that its foundation was beauty and that beauty signified not so much an aesthetic but an ontological category.

By establishing aesthetics as a new philosophical discipline, the emphasis was – as indicated in the term – on *aisthesis*, sensual perception as a specific organ of world-disclosure over against reason. The ground for this new discipline was laid in 1750 by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) who used the term aesthetics for the first time in the title of his book that was to gain enormous influence far beyond philosophy. It played an important role in Schiller's letters *On the Aesthetic Education*

of Man (1795) and became the main point of reference for Kant's third critique, the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

The perception of art takes place through the senses of which the sense of sight is primordial for the search for truth. What lies open before the eyes does not seem dubitable but is 'evident', obvious, illuminates the mind directly, etc. In these and many similar characteristics of sensual perception the importance of the sense of sight shines through even in modern English, - and even more so in German.

Yet very early philosophy noted that cognitive judgments that are exclusively based on sensual evidence can be false. Even as we see the sun every day rising in the east and setting in the west, science teaches us that in truth this is not so. Although cognition may continue to begin with and from the senses, it does not 'end' with them but has to transcend them towards a theory based on reason, which then becomes the true inner light to guide us. This fundamental connection between seeing and knowing is still retained in the term 'theory' Θεωρια, which has been derived from the ancient Greek verb 'theoran' ϑεωραν: to see.

I take it that this tells us two things: besides the seeing with the eyes of the body there is another kind of seeing that is a spiritual and intellectualseeing with the eyes of reason. This Platonic tradition is still alive in Winckelmann's submerging into the realm of incorporeal beauty. In Plato's philosophy this originally religious conception took on an ontological dimension and was placed at the very center of philosophy. Beauty is an attribute of pure being at the core of all reality that can only be approached by the intellect. Yet this beauty is not so much a defining characteristic of art but of the appearance of the human being in which beauty becomes most visible and can then be imitated in a work of art such as Winckelmann's Apollo. Although this beauty manifests itself in the human body, it is above all the human soul where it resides. This conception of ontological beauty invites us to an ascending movement from things that are beautiful for the eyes to the beauty of being that is only dimly perceptible to the soul. In the *Symposium* Socrates has Diotima summarize this grand vision as follows: "one goes always

upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautifulcustoms, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful (...) If someone got to see Beauty itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not pollutedby human flesh or colors, but if he could see the divine Beauty itself in its one form? Do you think it would be a poor life for a human being to look there and to behold it?" (211-212)

This ontology stands still in the background of medieval philosophy and the conviction that more than in art works true beauty is found in the beautiful structures and harmonies of the cosmos. It is not in art where this beauty shines most significantly but in the world as God's creation whose order signifies the eternal wisdom of God not for the physiological eye of the body but for the intellect and the eyes of faith. The order and structureof creation can then become the standard by which all art has to be evaluated. It is this context we must keep in mind when we try to understand Winckelmann's religious overtones in his art appreciation. Great works of art are stepping stones for the imagination towards ontological beauty beyond the visible.

6. In spite of this tradition, the 18th c. marks the beginning of what may be called the secularization of beauty. In this process beauty is being stripped of its ontological dignity and turned over to aesthetics. Yet this produces another kind of paradox, the paradox of art before art. What will from now on be regarded as art was for many centuries not art but something else, objects of religious worship or rituals for example or expression of social standing that had their places in public and private life. The modern concept of art is in fact the product of aesthetics projected back onto the whole history of humankind, from so-called cave art of prehistoric man to the statues as ritual offerings in athletic competitions to medieval religious representations of biblical scenes and holy persons for worship and ritual. It is noteworthy that – as Paul Oskar Kristeller

remarked – no philosopher of antiquity wrote a systematic treatise on the fine arts nor attached any importance to them in epistemology. In view of the rise of aesthetics in 18th-century Europe Nietzsche recognized that its standards were in fact projections onto objects that in their times were not regarded as art but had quite different functions: "Winckelmann's and Goethe's Greeks, Victor Hugo's Orientals, Wagner's Edda-personages, Walter Scott's 13th-century Englishmen – one day the whole comedy will be revealed. Historically, it was all false beyond measure, - but modern."

7. From the perspective of the modern concept of art it is indeed astonishing that in Greek antiquity there was no place in the temple of muses for the fine arts. Precisely those arts are missing among the muses that became the paradigmatic representatives of art in 18th-century aesthetics.In the temple of the muses we find neither a muse for painting, nor for sculpture, and not even one for architecture. Instead all types of poetry have their specific muses. There is a muse for *epic poetry*, and one for *comedy*, and another for *tragedy*, and a muse for *theatrical dance and lyrics*. It is therefore hardly surprising that the elevation of painting to high art that began in the Italian Renaissance took inspiration from poetry and literature in general.

The aesthetic appreciation of art implied, on the one hand, that the temple of the muses be expanded to accommodate the new muses of the fine arts and on the other hand, that the ties traditionally linking the arts to crafts and sciences be severed. Thus the emergence of aesthetics in 18th-century thought laid the ground for the institutions of the museum as the specific place for the appreciation of art. The temple of the ancient muses was called the *museion*, which in its secularized form has become the modern museum.

The growing distance to what were previously called the 'liberal arts' that represented the educational standard of a free man changed the ranking of the fine arts from an originally quite inferior status that even excluded them from the canon of the liberal arts. They gained their new and higher status by proving that they required more than technical skills based on rules that could be learned. This led to a new self-understanding

and appreciation of the artist as a man of genius and inspiration who would do more than imitate nature.

8. This struggle for artistic recognition is nicely put in Michelangelo's remark: "one paints with the brain not with the hands" [*Si pinge col cervello, non colla mano*]. This remark clearly draws on the powerful platonic and neo-platonic traditions that in true art beauty itself becomes visible. This beauty is, however, not the aesthetic beauty of the 18th c. but the incorporeal beauty of being as such, the beauty of cosmic order, the beauty of the ideas. The artists of the Renaissance claimed for themselves knowledge of this beauty that they saw hidden in matter, e.g. in the marble, and that they had the ability and authority to liberate from its corporeal, material confinement. This is the point Michelangelo makes in his famous poetic line: "Not even the greatest artist can think of what lies hidden in the marble, but only the hand that completely obeys the mind is able to reach the image in the stone."

Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concettoc'un marmo solo in sé non circonscrivacol suo superchio, e solo a quello arrivala man che ubbidisce all'intelletto.

Exactly the same idea we find in Plotinos, the 3rd-century AD foundingfather of Neo-Platonism. In the section of intellectual beauty in his famous Enneads he makes his point with the following illustration:

"Suppose two blocks of stone lying side by side: one is formed, quite untouched by art; the other has been minutely wrought by the craftsman'shands into some statue of god or man, a Grace or a Muse, or if a human being, not a portrait but a creation in which the sculptor's art has concentratedall loveliness. Now it must be seen that the stone thus brought under the artist's hand to the beauty of form is beautiful not as stone but in virtue of the form or idea introduced by the art. This form is not in the material; it is in the designer before it ever enters the stone; and the artificer holds it not by his equipment of eyes and hands but by his participation in his art."

Obviously, Michaelangelo was fully aware of this philosophic tradition.At the same time, he knew that even an artist of his standing needs employment,and in this regard was not much different from any artisan or craftsman.In a letter of July 20, 1542 he complained bitterly about Pope Paul's III pushing hard for the completion of the frescos for his private chapel while he was similarly pressed by the heirs of Pope Julius II to finish the monumentalsculptures for the pope's sepulchral monument. In this context his remark points out that the artist needs to have a clear head free from any worries about food and employment and free from psychological pressure.

Yet the remark, however casual it may appear, has a deeper meaningin that it claims artistic freedom and autonomy and thus expresses a new self-understanding of the artist. The artist is about to move out of the shadows of the craftsman and employee and to regard himself as someone who is exclusively guided by his artistic vision and by his spirit; he himself sets the standard and defines the rules. In this way Michelangelo's remark points well beyond its historical context and anticipates the conceptions of Romanticism and of the artist as genius (*Genieästhetik*). This concept stands at the center of Kant's philosophical aesthetics. For Kant great art is the work of a genius who produces according to his own ideas and without following established rules or standards. He is truly and almost divinely creative by producing works never seen before that open up new perspectiveson humanity and human self-understanding. Yet he does the work of nature by revealing its hidden beauty. Thus the genius is "a favorite of nature" through whom "nature sets art its rules" and we must be able to regard art as if it were nature. As Gadamer has explained this point, the genius places the products of art on a par with natural beauty. For "artistic beauty there is no other principle of judgment, no criterion of concept and knowledge than that of its suitability to promote the feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive faculties. Whether in nature or art beauty has the same a priori principle, which lies entirely within subjectivity."[3]

9. Let's pause for a moment and look back on aesthetics. The historicaldevelopment of art appreciation shows a deep ambiguity. On the one hand, it searches for a common denominator in all works of art, for some kind of essence that is identical in all diverse works throughout history. This essence was thought to be visible in and represented by beauty, in other words: art is beautiful, and that unites all individual works of art. In this regard aesthetics educates us to distinguish art from non-art by the beauty that shines through them. Beauty is what elevates works of art above works of daily necessities, of products of craft and of technology.

Yet on the other hand aesthetics cuts the very ties that bind it to an ontological conception of beauty and that dominated the philosophical appreciation of art from Plato up to the Middle Ages and beyond. Instead the emphasis of modern aesthetics is not on ontological beauty but on the experiential appreciation of the individual art lover. In this sense modern aesthetics oscillates between essentialist conceptions of art and an aesthetic of reception. Beauty is no longer an ontological category but – now in the emphatic sense of the term – an aesthetic category; that is what I called the secularization of beauty. And as a result art becomes a matter of taste. The sense of taste is that specific sensorium by which we distinguish, at an exclusively individual level, things we like from those we don't. In 18th-century empiricist philosophy aesthetics is grounded in taste, and that means in the senses (*aesthesis*), and turned into a matter of likes and dislikes, or individual preference. And it reduced beauty to a matter of subjective delight and pleasurable feelings. Art is what causes delight and evokes elevating emotions.

10. Yet since taste is something private and not a matter of dispute and argument, such move seemed to turn art over to subjectivism and complete arbitrariness. Empiricists like David Hume were well aware of this danger and tried to answer it by pointing to taste as some kind of anthropological constant. On this account taste was not simply a subjective sensation but a unique form of generalized experience not available to reason. As the cook has developed a special sense of taste to examine

food, so humans developed a special sensibility for art appreciation that sets its own standards. Hume thought that these rules of taste provided an almost universal standard for all humanity. If people in fact deviated from them, it could only be due to some defect in their physiological constitution and the organs of perception. Although the objects we find agreeable or ugly must have something that causes such feelings, it was clear for Hume that just as sweetness or color are not in the object but in their effects on human perception, so it is with beauty:

> [B]eauty like wit, cannot be defin'd, but is discern'd only by a taste or sensation, we may conclude, that beauty is nothing but a form, which produces pleasure, as deformity is a structure of parts, which conveys pain; and since the power of producing pain and pleasure make in this manner the essence of beauty and deformity, all the effects of these qualities must be deriv'd from the sensation.[4]

11. Kant, however, did not accept that judgments about art could be exclusively based on taste or derived from subjective sensations. For him even taste is not anthropologically determined in human nature but has evolved in a cultural history of comparable experience. Furthermore our judgments about art are usually not merely private statements about personal likes and dislikes but intend general approval. When I judge: 'This statue or this painting is beautiful', my judgment has two dimensions. On the one hand, it expresses my private taste and appreciation, but on the other hand, I expect that others will agree with me and thus my judgment claims universal agreement. For Kant judgments about art are neither judgments of cognition nor merely matters of individual taste. Aesthetic judgments are not scientific in that they add new facts to our knowledge. Though they express an individual's reaction in the encounter with art, they are not mere expressions of private feelings of pleasure and delight. Instead, they reflect the harmonious state of our cognitive capabilities and what Kant interprets as the 'free play' between imagination and

understanding. Thus the pleasureexperienced in art results from this 'free play' between our cognitive and imaginative faculties that constitute humanity's intellectual capacities, and for this reason judgements about art make general claims. Art doesn't merely satisfy individual needs nor answers to personal preferences; art is not a function of utility. Instead, art is 'free' in the emphatic sense of the term and without serving specific interests.

These ideas gained great influence on the Romantic Movement and equally inspired artists and art critics. They could also explain the differencein pleasure and appreciation derived from products of the mechanical arts (or factory products for that matter) and those from the fine arts. The former satisfy specific needs and the pleasure derived is a direct function of their products' utility. Yet works of art have their own incomparable identity and inner perfection. They are not appreciated because they are useful but their only 'usefulness' lies in the delight and pleasure they arouse in the beholder. As Karl Philipp Moritz (1756-1793) has pointed out: "In contemplating a beautiful object …I roll the purpose back into the object itself: I regard it as something which is completed, not in me, but in itself, which therefore constitutes a whole in itself, and pleases me for its own sake…Thus the beautiful object affords a higher and more disinterested pleasure than the merely useful object" (1785).[5]

12. In Hegel's philosophy, art played an even greater role than in Kant. And he rejected its sensualist interpretation as well as Kant's formalismand his appreciation of beauty in nature (*Naturschöne*) over beauty in art (*Kunstschöne*). Art was now placed firmly within the evolution of the human mind and regarded as one of the mind's highest manifestations and as such a representation of the absolute itself. As you will recall, philosophy for Hegel redraws the steps of the spirit in and through history, from its historical beginnings in Chinese and Indian thought up to its modern manifestations and to Hegel's own philosophy. Art, religion, and philosophy are the highest forms of the Spirit's self-manifestation that works in and through history and finally gains self-consciousness in humanity.

The true origin of art therefore is the self-understanding of man as a thinking and spiritual being: "The universal and absolute need from which art springs has its origin in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness, i. e. that man draws out of himself and puts before himself what he is and whatever else is. Things in nature are only immediate and single, while man as spirit duplicates himself in that (1) he is as things in nature are, but (2) he is just as much for himself; he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the strength of this active placing himself before himself is he spirit."[6] (31)

For this reason Hegel understands the artist neither as a favorite or protégé of nature nor as someone who creates unconsciously as if in trance. Although all artists need natural talent, their creative process is more defined by thought and reflection than by exercise and skill. The greatest art is not found in beautiful landscapes or scenes of nature or their artistic imitations but in creations of the mind. "The aim of art must lie in something still other than the purely mechanical imitation of what is there, which in every case can bring to birth only technical tricks, not works, of art." (45)

As creations of the mind they rank higher than natural beauty and its artistic imitations. As Hegel put it in a famous phrase, art represents the sensible side of the absolute, it is "the sensual appearance of the Idea" (*das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*). And that gives art its incomparable dignity, but at the same time defines also its limitations. Insofar as beauty is revealed in art as a representation of the Spirit, it is the sensual appearance of the Spirit that discloses itself in art while at the same time retreating from it. Its sensual manifestation attracts and pleases the intellect while directing it beyond the sensual forms towards its pure manifestation in thought alone. In historical development the forms of spiritual manifestation correspond precisely to the evolutionary stages of the Spirit's own development in humanity. Art therefore participates in the ascension of mind and spirit that gives all history its teleological drive towards ever higher perfection culminating in self-consciousness. Art history is not merely some kind of chronologically arranged coming

and going of artists and their respective styles but follows its own inner logic as the evolution of mind and spirit.

Yet Hegel claims that art has reached its climax and arrived at its highest form, while the mind has gone further and has emancipated itself from art as its means of self-representation. Although the production of art will go on, its purpose and function have changed, since it can no longer meet the conditions of spiritual self-awareness and reflection: "[I]t is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone (….). The beautiful days of Greek art, like the golden age of the later Middle Ages, are gone." (10) When art is being exposed to thought and critical reflection it loses its immediacy and can no longer evoke the emotional and intellectual responses of the unmediated encounter. "We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit. No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God, the Father, Christ, and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer." (103) In other words: "art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself."

> Consequently the conditions of our present time are not favorable to art. It is not, as might be supposed, merely that the practicing artist himself is infected by the loud voice of reflection all around him and by the opinions and judgements on at that have become customary everywhere, so that he is misled into introducing more thoughts into his work; the point is that our whole spiritual culture is of such a kind that he himself stands within the world of reflectionand is relations, and could not by any act of will and decision abstract himself from it. (10-11)

II.

1. Needless to say, many have interpreted Hegel's skeptical remarks about art as a pronouncement on the demise of art and its end altogether. The continued production of art works was therefore thought to represent nothing more than the hollow repetition of experiences from the past. When the Nazarenes of the early 19th century attempted to subordinate the visual to the conceptual, particularly by placing art in the service of religion, they seemed to confirm Hegel's view. Hegel's aesthetic is, however, largely ambiguous. It presupposes a universal essence of art, and charges philosophy with revealing in it the essence of the spirit. This process transforms art into a form of self-disclosure of the spirit. As such it gave rise to two rather incompatible developments. On the one hand it could be claimed that art had indeed come to its end and nothing important could be expected from it. On the other hand, art could be seen as liberating itself from the fetters of its aesthetic conceptualization and gaining a complete new self-understanding.

2. If it is true – as I have tried to show – that our traditional conception of art is the product of 18th-century aesthetics, then it is not surprising that it should have been based on presuppositions that we no longer endorse. As will by now have become clear, by the term "traditional aesthetics" I mean something along the lines of William Kennick who put it like this: Traditional aesthetics is "that familiar philosophical discipline which concerns itself with trying to answer such questions as the following: What is Art? What is Beauty? What is the Aesthetic Experience? What is the Creative Act? What are the criteria of Aesthetic Judgement and Taste? What is the function of Criticism?"[7] As the question 'Is this art?', from which I started my reflections, confirms, art is no longer identifiable as the imitation of nature nor as the representation of beauty or even of divine perfection. In a time when garbage installations can be found in galleries and presented as art works alongside works by Praxiteles or Rembrandt, the concept of "art" has changed drastically.

The provocation of the new art is caused by its rejection of the traditional concept that presupposed that art had to have an essence that could be clearly defined and that shines through all of its works regardless of historical or cultural contexts. Yet as I tried to show this assumption was problematic from the outset as it might exclude works that in other times or cultural periods were clearly regarded as art. In our time, however, all defining limits have been removed and anything can be declared art. This dissolution of boundaries, which has been greeted by many contemporary artists as a liberation from the fetters of aesthetics, has, however, also been regarded with suspicion as art may become a completely arbitrary affair that can include anything and exclude nothing. Something without an essence doesn't have a definition either.

Definitions of art, however, would presuppose a logically homogeneous set of objects whose principle is being sought. Arthur Danto compared this endeavor with looking for some kind of species such as the species of zebras all of which have something in common that can be defined. Yet as Wittgenstein has argued this is not possible for art objects. On his view it is as impossible to define art as it is impossible to produce one single definition for all the plays and games in the world. In a well-known remark he says: "Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don't say: 'There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' – but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For when you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that." "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way." [8]

Many art critics accepted Wittgenstein's view and began to search for family resemblances in anything that was presented as art. This would identify all diverse objects, happenings, performances, actions, and installations

as members of one large family, the family of art. Yet as Arthur Danto has pointed out, unlike members of natural families art objects lack any of the 'natural', genetic lines of connections real families have and which explain the phenotypical resemblances among them. In the case of art this seems not possible and it remains unclear for what traces one should look.

3. As an alternative, an intuitive approach to art and art objects has been suggested by William Kennick. He agrees that art cannot be defined and that it would lead to nothing even if it could. It isn't necessary either, since all of us have an intuitive understanding of art. He compares this intuition with St. Augustine's famous remark about time: everybody knows what time is as long as he is not asked to provide a definition of it. Similarly, "We do know what art is when no one asks us what it is; that is, we know quite well how to use the word 'art' and the phrase 'work of art' correctly." He illustrates this in the following thought experiment: "Imagine a very large warehouse filled with all sorts of things – pictures of every description, musical scores for symphonies and dances and hymns, machines, tools, boats, houses, churches and temples, statues, vases, books of poetry and of prose, furniture and clothing, newspapers, postage stamps, flowers, trees, stones, musical instruments. Now we instruct someone to enter the warehouse and bring out all of the works of art it contains. He will be able to do this with reasonable success, despite the fact that, as even the aestheticians must admit, he possesses no satisfactory definition of Art in terms of some common denominator, because no such definition has yet been found."[9]

Although Kennick's thought experiment may appear plausible, it doesn't prove the role of intuition as the sole criterion for recognizing art. Being able to pick out some art works from those that are not could be the result of training, socialization, or education by which we become familiar with the established canons of art appreciation. And as long as this canon remains stable and unaffected by cultural revolutions, or paradigm shifts in art recognition, it may serve us as a reliable guide in distinguishing art from anything else. Yet as Duchamp's example shows such canon and its internalized criteria of art recognition were of little help when he revolutionized the art world by claiming art status for his urinal.

4. Another option is supplementing it with theory and reflection. This alternative can even draw on Hegel's conception of art as the sensual appearance of the idea insofar as it tries to free the idea from its material enclosure. Then Hegel's project would truly have succeeded and the borders that separated art from philosophy would have been removed completely. On this view art is constituted by theory and reflection that alone give meaning to its material realization. In other words, what a particular object really is may no longer be found in it as an artistic object but only in the reflection of it and accompanying texts.

For Arnold Gehlen this new conception of art is most obvious in abstract art. The arrangement of colors on the canvas appeals as much to the senses as it does to the intellect and understanding. Yet the intellectual part seems to dominate as this art requires reflection and theory to be distinguishablefrom non-art. In this sense art has been transformed from something appreciative by and through the senses to something for the intellect: for this concept Gehlen coined the term reflective art, *Reflexionskunst*.

And indeed, if you go to an exhibition of modern art you will usually be provided with heavy catalogues and other reading material that are supposed to guide your appreciation of the art works on display. The implication seems to be that only through reflection, theory, and thought can art be identified and distinguished from all the rest. Without theory an object all by itself doesn't reveal its status as a piece of art. Yet when this happens and an art work can no longer be recognized as such, the traditional concept of art is no longer valid and needs to be replaced.

For Arthur Danto this implies that art has indeed some kind of essence and can be defined. Yet this is not some species nature and gives it is content, but is rather formal. He calls it art's aboutness: all art is *about* something that wouldn't be there without it. Yet what that is the artwork itself can only reveal partially and indirectly; it needs interpretation and art theory. Art makes statements *about* the world, our perception of it, and *about* ourselves, and that gives it its specific character, its 'aboutness'. "To perceive something as art, requires nothing less than an atmosphere

of art theory, knowledge of art history. Art is a matter whose existence depends on theory."[10] Art shows something that needs our attention and interpretation.Usually this has been indicated by the title of a work of art. Take for example Breughel's 'Fall of Icarus'. Without its defining title, which is a piece of additional theoretical information, it would not be clear what the painting was about. Although we would expect that it is indeed 'about' something, the art work as such would not reveal it. "Without art theory black paint is merely black paint and nothing else. The art world cannot exist without theory, since it is logically dependent on theory." Art works need interpretationin order to be art works. And therefore they can be more than appears to the senses when we encounter a work of art as sensual object.

In spite of Wittgenstein's objection, Danto claims that art has an essence and a common denominator and for this reason it can be defined. It is its 'aboutness'. This formal and rather content-less definition of art can accommodate all the various traditional views of art as the representation of beauty, as the imitation of nature, as expression, as arousing our cognitive and imaginative faculties, or as the manifestation of Idea and Spirit without claiming exclusivity for any one of them. Instead it integrates the process of defining art as a constitutive dimension in the creative process of the artist and in the receptive encounter with the art object. This turns art into an open-ended process whose only guiding principle is art's aboutness: All art is about something that becomes as it were accessible in its physical and sensual realization, instigating an open-ended hermeneutical process. While art presupposes art theory, theory can no longer stifle the creative process. Danto's formal definition of art as 'aboutness' precludes theoreticalinterventions in the artistic process. Anything can be art that has been endowed by its creator with meaning and thus sets in motion a process of interpretation.

5. In a similar move both Adorno and Heidegger found the defining significance of art in its ability to provoke thought. For Adorno art signifies a riddle that sets the intellect to work in trying to unravel it and in that way to understand more about itself and the world in which it exists.

Works of art "are constitutively in need of a philosophical interpretation of the 'truth-content'", without resulting in some kind of "explicit, propositional judgment." Yet philosophy "is not to solve the riddle of art's truth-content, but to extrapolate what is insoluble in works of art." "Works of art do not assure us of anything," and the task of philosophical interpretation can only be to "exhibit the way in which they open the possibility of the new by implying determinate criticisms on what is and has been."[11] In this sense works of art open a utopian perspective that enriches our perception of the world and provides a measure of critique of the prevailing social conditions of life.

For Heidegger art has the power to disclose the world and our involvement in it. In other words: art is world disclosure. As the world is not a given, not an object but rather the horizon within which any object can appear, it is not a possible object of knowledge. It can only be disclosed indirectly, for example in our moods and emotional responses to situations, or by exposing us to the many cultures throughout history each of which opens up a world of its own by providing us with a web of significations. Art is no longer – as in its aesthetic tradition – understood as expressing the artist's own life that can elicit similar responses in those who encounter it, but opening perspectives on our common world. Heidegger illustrates this in his famous interpretation of Van Gogh's painting entitled 'A Pair of Shoes' in which Heidegger recognizes a farmer's shoes and about which he writes:

> A pair of farmer's shoes and nothing more. And yet. [*Ein Paar Bauernschuhe und nichts weiter. Und dennoch.*] (….) From out of the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth… The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and the earth's unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.[12]

Van Gogh's painting thus discloses the world of the farmer that seems enclosed in it and opens up new avenues of experiencing the world in which we live. Art's power of world-disclosure is intrinsically linked to the artwork itself whose truth-content is not found in some abstract ideas or philosophical interpretations but in its sensual realization. Truth and world-disclosure happen in the specific and concrete of the artwork, not in the abstract. Thus art is not simply a vehicle of thought, but its truth is embodied in its physical manifestation as this specific work of art.

6. I conclude my reflections with another defining moment in the development of art and its conception. In October 1985, one year before his death, Joseph Beuys exhibited an artwork in a London gallery that would have seriously challenged Kennick's intuitive approach. In fact it was an art installation that Beuys gave the title 'Plight'. It stretched over two rooms whose walls were completely covered by 284 double-layered felt rolls one and a half meters in height. These rolls created a claustrophobic atmosphere in which all sound was absorbed. This reinforced the impression of being completely isolated from the outside world. In these otherwise empty rooms a concert grand piano had been placed together with a thermometer and a writing tablet. This installation was later bought by the Centre Pompidou in Paris where it is now located.

Already in 1966 Beuys had created a similar installation in which the grand piano too was completely covered in thick felt including the closed keyboard. At one side Beuys had stitched in red threads a Swiss cross. Visitors reported that the installation initially caused anxiety. The disturbance gradually gave way to a more solemn mood when they began to understand that this instrument, created to produce sounds of music, had been forcibly silenced and turned mute. Apparently Beuys succeeded in gradually calming the turmoil of passions his installation had at first aroused and in transforming it into a meditative sentiment the longer people exposed themselves to the artwork. The soundless and mute piano that usually evokes a world of music and happy moments of musical performances now aroused feelings of loss and deprivation while at the same time provoking a chain of thoughts that almost assumed sensual qualities.

In an interview at the opening of the exhibition Beuys interpreted 'Plight' as,

> the result of an experiment about a special type of laboratory whose purpose it was to extend the bounds of art. I draw on the vital human sense of temperature, since I reject the materialistic ideology of the fine arts which tends to reduce everything to a confrontation between subject and object. It is not the business of art to make understand something intellectual. Since that can be achieved much better by a logical series of propositions. Instead I want people to experience the fields of energy by which they themselves are constituted. For this purpose I not only appeal in my art to visual perception but at the same time also to the sense of balance, temperature, smell, emotion. It is necessary to insist on touching on all the fundamental human faculties: thinking, feeling, willing.[13]

Clearly, in Beuys and like-minded artists art took a further step away from traditional aesthetics towards a holistic experience that only the activation of sense and thought together can achieve. While Duchamp had a similar agenda that moved the boundaries of art, Beuys was not satisfied with simply turning art into thought and thus leaving the dichotomy of subject and object, reception and production untouched. For Beuys art was not an object but an open-ended holistic experience without barriers and exclusions.

END NOTES

[1]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Aus dem Nachlass der achtziger Jahre*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, eds. Berlin/ New York: de Gruyter, 1967-2004, III, p. 644 (my transl.)

[2]Plotinos, *Enneads* V, 8, tr. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page (http://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/ancient-greece/plotinus/enneads-5.asp?pg=87)

[3]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, New York: Bloomsbury Publ., rev 2nd. ed., 2004, p. 51.

[4]David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739] Oxford: Clarendon, 1896, p. 299

[5]Karl Philipp Moritz, *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Poetik*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962, p. 3

[6]*Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, 31.

[7]William Kennick, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind*, vol. 67, No. 267 (Jul., 1958): 317-334, 317.

[8]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. GEM Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1968, §§66-67.

[9]*Mind*, 321-2.

[10]My transl. from the German edition: Arthur C. Danto, *Die Verklärung des Gewöhnlichen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991 (orig. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1981)

[11]Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 1998, 104-5.

[12]Martin Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerks", in: *Holzwege*, Gesamtausgabe 5, Frankfurt: Klostermann, p. 19.

[13]Quoted by Ruth Baumgarten, *The Guardian*, London 19 Oct. 1985.

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