

СТАТЬИ / ARTICLES

EMBODIED MEANINGS AND NORMATIVITY. SOME REMARKS FOR A NEW CONCEPT OF ART

Tiziana Andina

University of Turin, Italy

The contemporary art world – namely, the current artistic and cultural situation, which emerged at the beginning of the Twentieth century – has led to a process of profound rethinking of the relationship between art and law. This relationship is inherent in the very concept of art and is as old as the history of the arts. In particular, the relationship between art and law, as it has structured itself from the beginning of the Twentieth century, has two vital functions – one of which is intrinsic to the concept of art, the other being extrinsic – the understanding of which is essential to investigate the contemporary art world.

Keywords: Art, Ontology, Embodied Meanings, Normativity.

ВОПЛОЩЁННЫЕ ЗНАЧЕНИЯ И НОРМАТИВНОСТЬ. НЕСКОЛЬКО ЗАМЕЧАНИЙ К НОВОЙ КОНЦЕПЦИИ ИСКУССТВА

Т. Андина

Туринский университет, Италия

Нынешняя художественная и культурная ситуация, характерная для современного мира искусства с начала XX века, привела этот мир к процессу глубокого переосмысления отношений между искусством и правом. Это соотношение заложено в самой концепции искусства и так же старо, как и история искусств. В частности, отношения между искусством и правом, как они сложились с начала XX века, имеют две жизненно важные функции, одна из которых внутренне присуща концепции искусства, другая имеет внешнее происхождение. Понимание этих функций играет существенную роль в исследовании современного мира искусства.

Ключевые слова: искусство, онтология, воплощённые значения, нормативность.

The aim of this paper is to close the gap between contemporary and, so to speak, traditional arts. My view is that this gap was produced due to the lack of comprehension that both the experts and common sense have of so-called contemporary arts. Within the field of descriptive metaphysics, my goal is that of drawing a broad definition of the notion of art, one that also includes all types of artworks that have called for a revision of our taxonomies, mainly through a reconsideration of the relation between art and reality. In order to achieve this goal, I will briefly present the theoretical problems addressed by philosophy when reflecting on contemporary art, and I will explain the reason why these problems need cooperation between philosophy and law in order to be tackled.

I will then present some ideas for a new definition of art, through a particular application of the concept of normativity.

1. Exploring the Gap

I would like begin by referring what are the problems to be faced by the scholars who are dealing, in jurisprudence, with works of art, especially the contemporary ones [Ajani, Donati 2011]. These problems are not raised just from the perspective of scholarship: in fact, our common sense has also been asked to change its “standard” view on art. Let me explain what I mean by telling you a short piece of popular cartoon series: “The Simpsons”¹. In this episode, Homer Simpson, the protagonist of the series, is trying to make a DIY barbecue. After many misadventures that frustrate his ambition of making a nice barbecue, Homer tries return the whole thing to the store. As he’s driving, a car accident causes the load to fall into the road and Homer decides to run away without worrying about it. The next day, a young woman, who is an art dealer, visits Homer at home asking him for the permission to organize an exhibition with his “work” – without a doubt, it is a work of art.

We will not follow Homer in his personal experience in understanding what it means to be an artist and creating works of art: here we just want to underline the existence of a common sense view about contemporary art. Such view is well expressed by Marge, Homer’s wife, almost at the end of the story. To be an artist was Marge’s dream: to realize this dream she attended very good schools and practiced a lot, and now Homer, without having done anything, is defined a great artist. This makes no sense.

¹ The Simpsons. Season 10. Episode 19.

Homer's answer is also inspired by common sense: in his view, to be an artist means to be able to realize well-made art works, which represent reality in a clear way. In a word, in Marge's works of art things look like they are in reality. They are a reproduction of reality – a form of *mimesis*. An important legitimation to this intuition came from Plato's *The Republic* (book X): drawing his metaphysics of the universe, Plato classified works of art as copies of things, which are themselves copies of ideas. Comparing to the perfection of the ideal reality of ideas, the reality of the material world is less perfect. At the lowest level of perfection, therefore, we find works of art: at the end of the day, they are copies of real things that are, in turn, copies of ideas.

It is not my aim to discuss this position in order to distinguish – for example – the role played by philosophy from that played by common sense within this dispute on the real nature on art. My aim is different indeed and rather focuses on those cases in which the Platonic framework seems not to work – in particular over the Twentieth century.

A point that was certainly discovered by Plato and that is independent of any particular cultural mind-set is that, in order to state something about art, it is necessary to state something about the relation between art and reality. In Plato's view this relation consists in copying, not just mirroring, parts of reality creating some objects, which become in turn part of reality. The arts of the Nineteenth showed us basically two things: the first one is that the Platonic way is not the right one to understand art, and the second one is that, despite the mistake, the Platonic intuition is correct – to understand the very nature of art it is necessary to look deeply into the relationship between art and reality. Indeed, it is this relationship that has been investigated by contemporary arts and especially by the Avant-Garde.

How was this investigation carried out in the Nineteenth century? My sense is that artists either introduced new confusion inside our taxonomies or unveiled some mistakes that were already present in them.

I'm going to recall some examples briefly, as all the cases raised by customs officials make this lack in our taxonomies particularly evident. We can cite at least three different situations, in three different moments in time and three different places in the world².

Imagine the scene. It was 1926, at the customs of the United States. *Bird in Space* (fig. 1), a sculpture by Costantin Brâncuși, arrived to New York by sea. Upon inspecting it, customs officials challenged the idea that the strange object was a sculpture, seeing as it in no way resembled

² Cfr. Andina 2013 for a more expanded discussion.

a bird. For this reason, they refused to categorize Brâncuși's creation as a work of art, preferring to consider it a kitchen utensil.

They therefore applied to it the taxation that was normally reserved for merchandise, while works of art were subject to fiscal exemption. As expected, Brâncuși was outraged and the matter was brought to Federal court. Thus began one of the most notorious trials in the history of art: 'Brâncuși vs. the United States'. Edward Steichen, the photographer who had bought the sculpture, explained the affair to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder of the Whitney Museum in New York who, upon realizing that the case would become a formidable judicial precedent, offered to cover the legal fees of the trial. Six members of the jury redounded in Brâncuși's favour: Edward Steichen, sculptor Jacop Epstein, the editor of the journal *The Arts*, the editor of *Vanity Fair*, the director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and art critic Henry McBride. Marcus Higginbotham represented customs. The US government had two jurors as well: sculptors Robert Aitken and Thomas Jones. The state defended the customs officials, recalling a prior case: 'United States vs. Olivotti' from 1916, in which the only artefacts that qualified as works of art were those that were recognized as imitations of objects in nature.

The following are a few lines from the debate: Jude Waite asks Steichen 'What do you call this?' Steichen responds: 'I call it what the sculptor calls it, *oiseau*, which means bird'. Waite continues: 'How can you say that it is a bird if it does not resemble one?' Steichen: 'I am not saying that it is a bird, I am saying that it looks like a bird to me just as it was stylized and named by the artist'. Waite replies: 'And the only reason for which you say it is a bird is because he (the artist) called it one?' Steichen: 'Yes, your Honor'. Waite persists: 'If you had seen it on the road, would you have called it a bird? If you had seen it in the forest, would you have shot at it?' Steichen: 'No, your Honor' [Biro 1995].

The trial came to a close on 26 November 1928 with the acknowledgment that Brâncuși's work, *Bird in Space*, was in fact a work of art.

In this case we have an artefact, a sculpture, which does not resemble an object that customs officials are able to identify clearly. The object, which has no clear identity, brings some confusion into the taxonomies of the officials who consider the artwork as a mere material object – knives have a similar shape usually.

Now let's move to a different place. The problem is similar: *Brillo Boxes* (fig. 2), Andy Warhol's famous sculpture exhibited in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York, disembarked in Canada in 1965 in the care of art merchant Jerrold Morris. Customs officials yet again classified

them as products, specifically boxes from a grocery store, and applied to them the corresponding taxation. Their confusion, in reality, was understandable: grocery stores were full of Brillo boxes, containing sponges for cleaning pots and pans. An expert was therefore consulted, Mr Charles Comfort, director of the National Gallery of Canada who, having seeing Warhol's work in photographs, supported the opinion of the customs officials: *Brillo Boxes* was not a work of art.

The scene is only apparently the same: this time, indeed, the resemblance, the mimetic relationship between the artwork and the material object, is not in question. The *Brillo Boxes* are too similar to Brillo Boxes in grocery stores to be works of art. In the *Brillo Boxes* case the customs officials followed a line of reasoning that is contrary to that used in the case of Brancusi's sculpture. Brancusi's sculpture, in fact, did not resemble the part of reality it was named after. Here, the question is quite the opposite: are the Brillo Boxes made by Andy Warhol too similar to the ordinary objects drawn by James Harvey, an artist and a quite well-known designer, to be works of art?

As we know – common sense is generally very sensitive to this idea – our naive taxonomies make a distinction between the class of works of art and the class of material objects. How is it possible – this is the implicit question posed by the inspectors – that something resembling so closely a very common object could be a work of art? At the end of the day, we know that – as Walter Benjamin said – works of art must show at least *some* proprieties that they don't share with ordinary objects. An artwork must be original, not reproducible, and unique. The *Brillo Boxes* by Warhol were produced in series, in a huge number of exemplars, inspired by – not to say, copied from – ordinary boxes. So, what has to be said about our ontological distinction between the class of artworks and the class of ordinary objects if – as it seems – there are some artworks which are identified by the same proprieties as ordinary objects?

Let me make another example, showing another problem with our taxonomies: this time it is the work *Icons* (fig. 3) that is passing through European customs. These are works made with fluorescent lights symbolizing the icons of our time, and Dan Flavin, the American artist, exhibited them in some of the most prestigious museums in the world. Nevertheless, as was described by The Guardian, customs officials in the European Community determined that Flavin's works were light fixtures and, accordingly, they had to be subjected to the corresponding toll (meaning no offence to the art world).

The art gallery, on the contrary, declared them to be works of art, asking that they be subjected to a value-added tax (VAT) of 5%, as

stated in Chapter 97 of the British Common Customs Tariff. After having interpreted the tariff table and having identified no correspondence between the imported objects and the categories featured on the list, British customs authorities refused to allow either object to be classified as a work of art. Both objects were subjected to what was then the standard rate of 17,5 % and to a customs fee of 3,7 %. Following the gallery's opposition, the London court stated that the objects are works of art, and confirmed the applicability of the requested tax breaks. The conclusion of this incident is noteworthy: a few EU member countries, whose customs offices had dealt with similar cases, brought the case to the European Commission that, on August 11 2010, issued a Regulation (no. 731/2010) in which it is stated that the sculptures by Dan Flavin cannot be classified as art, but rather as "wall light fittings".

As you may note, this case is very similar to the Brillo Boxes case: the customs officers considered the fluorescent lights to be ordinary objects. This is why their (and our) taxonomies do not allow for the possibility that an ordinary object could be also a work of art, without it having any visible property.

2. Arguing towards a new definition

I hope that now the framework is quite clear: during the Twentieth century most of the artistic production was thought to mess up the accepted division between ordinary objects and works of art. What was the aim of this? In philosophical jargon, we call an operation of this kind a meta-reflection on the meaning and extension of the concept (i.e. art), targeted to reconfiguring an idea or even a definition of the concept. The artists evidently wanted to question the traditional view: for them, the relationship between art and reality is not a relation between a model (reality) and a copy (the work of art).

Certainly works of art are part of reality, but not in the same way as – say – the mirror image of *Monna Lisa* is. The relation between art and reality is the core of the definition of art that was questioned throughout the Twentieth century. Within this context, it would have been very odd if philosophy had not attempted to respond to a problem posed by both the art world and the whole of society.

Now, before starting with my argument for a new definition of art, I would like to address a couple of methodological points. The first one concerns some expressions I will use in my argument. I will adopt a basic ontology composed by three classes of things: natural objects,

artefacts and ideal objects. By artefacts I mean all those objects that are entirely created or partially modified by an intentional activity.

I will adopt a wide conception of normativity: I will claim that normativity corresponds to the awareness that something can be correct or incorrect, but also that certain judgments can be better than others.

Finally, a few words about my general perspective in philosophy of art: in my idea, it is not a concern of philosophy to establish “what is art and what is not”, what object is an artwork and what is not. In other words, it is not a task of philosophy to prescribe a normative position, that is, a set of rules in order to distinguish what is art from what isn't. Instead, philosophy may do a good job in showing good arguments to explain the current state of affairs in the art world. In other words, I prefer a descriptive metaphysics to the prescriptive one. My view therefore is in the field of the descriptive metaphysics and my goal is that of drawing a broad definition of the notion of art, including all types of artworks that have asked for a revision of our taxonomies mainly through a reconsideration of the relation between art and reality.

So, now I would like to present the definition of art on which I have been working, along with some reasons to explain why normativity plays a central role in drawing a much more functional definition. My definition is the following:

A work of art is a [1] social and historical object, [2] an artefact, which embodies a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace [3] upon a medium that is not transparent.

All three conditions are jointly necessary, and my idea is that conditions [2] and [3] meet both in the sphere of normativity.

Let us start with the first condition: ***A work of art is a social and historical object.***

The first condition puts forward two ideas: for an artwork to exist, a social system and the art-world are jointly necessary. What does this mean? Basically, that artworks are artefacts, namely products of human intentionality, which are made in a certain time by people who aim say something to someone else. The relevant point at this stage is this: a further element seems to be necessary in addition to the existence of a social system; this element is the art-world which, in my perspective, is necessary to include contemporary art in the definition of art.

But what is the art world, and why do I suppose it is necessary to include it to draw a new, broader definition of art? That of art world is a vague concept that, because of its very vagueness, can help us better understand the idea that a social context is necessary for an artwork

to exist. I will adopt the definition sketched by the American philosopher George Dickie to describe the art world:

“The core personnel of the art world is a loosely organized, but nevertheless related, set of persons including artists (understood to refer to painters, writers, composers), producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics for publications of all sorts, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others. These are the people who keep the machinery of the art world working and thereby provide for its continuing existence” [Dickie 1974, 438–439].

American philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto used the concept of art world for the first time in a 1964 paper. His aim was to underline that an artwork is made up not only by formal proprieties, but also by other properties, some depending on the cultural and historical context, others depending on the narrative of the history of art; both groups of properties meet the intellect, not the senses.

Danto never formulated an institutional theory of art, that is, he never intended to say that what is art merely depends on the cultural context. He intended to say that there are several factors (which nowadays are certainly of increasing relevance) that constitute the inner nature of an art work, and that the comprehension of these factors is as important as the comprehension of the so-called formal or aesthetics qualities.

Elsewhere [Andina 2013, 48 ss.] I have defined the art world as a quasi-institutional entity: the art world resembles an informal institution (that is to say, a social practice or an organization) that functions thanks to ingenuous and unwritten rules. The actions performed by such a quasi-institution are of a different type compared to those performed by institutional entities. Actions performed by institutional entities take place in an endless amount of cases: marriage, university degrees, certification exams, professional practice, the stipulation of a contract and so forth. In each of these examples, a particular institution (the church, the State, a professional association, etc.) has the power to transform an action, or even an object, into something else, by attributing to it a particular function – think of when a wall becomes a political border, or when the “I do” of a bride and groom turns into a legally valid promise. The fact that we have an ingenuous and, for the most part, vague concept of art world at our disposal still legitimizes our supposing that it is, essentially, *something* or, in other words, a certain type of entity. It is, in fact, an entity that ‘emerges’ from (and, therefore, is bound to be dependent on) the elements that form it.



Fig. 1. Constantin Brancusi, 1876–1957. Bird in Space. Sculpture. 1941. The Museum of Modern Art. ID Number: 81503. Source: Image and original data provided by the The Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.moma.org>



Fig. 2. Andy Warhol, 1928–1987. Brillo Box (Soap Pads). Sculpture. 1964. The Museum of Modern Art. ID Number: 81383. Source: Image and original data provided by the The Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.moma.org>

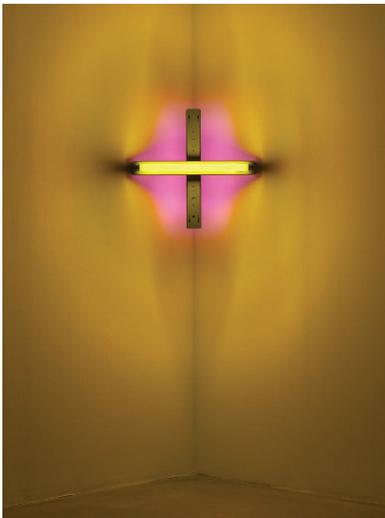


Fig. 3. Dan Flavin, American, 1933–1996. Untitled. Sculpture. 1968. The Museum of Modern Art. ID Number: 80966. Source: Image and original data provided by the The Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.moma.org>

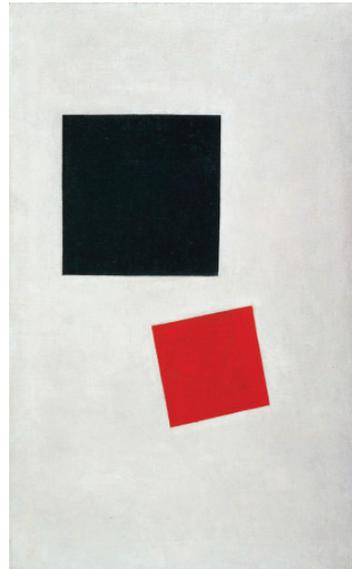


Fig. 4. Kazimir Malevich, 1878–1935. Painterly Realism. Boy with Knapsack – Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension. Painting. 1915. The Museum of Modern Art. ID Number: 80383. Source: Image and original data provided by the The Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.moma.org>



Slide 1. Street sign "dead end"



Slide 2. Works by Clet Abraham

The art world exists because museums, artists, artworks, consumers and an art market exist. The institution of the 'art world' is founded upon the union and the integration of all of these elements. In certain cases, this relation seems to be bidirectional: artists like Duchamp exist precisely because an art world exists, and works of art such as *Bottle Rack* exist because museums and collections such as the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation exist. Moreover, museums and foundations have been allowed to do what they do by the art world itself, even though the contrary also holds true – the Rauschenberg Foundation exists because works like Duchamp's exist, and must be conserved and passed on.

In general, art theories refer to two different types of institutions: following Jeffrey Wieand's classification, 'A-institutions' and 'P-institutions' ('A' stands for action and 'P' for person) [Wieand 1981, 409–417]. An A-institution is one that produces actions whose tokens are 'instantiations' of a particular kind of action. These kinds of institutions distinguish themselves from others because they produce actions that are governed by rules: two people who wish to be joined in marriage can only do so within an institution where certain rules have been preemptively accepted and sanctioned. In other words, an A-institution produces a sort of *conventional act*. P-institutions, conversely, are understood as 'quasi-persons', or as agents: they perform actions and can be called upon to account for them. In general, P-institutions act through members who operate by themselves (examples might include state officials, the bishops of a church or the managing director of a company). A State may celebrate, say, marriages through its officials and therefore can perform institutional acts. Some of these acts can only be performed by a certain type of institution: in Italy, for instance, marriages can also be celebrated by a P-institution, such as the church, while institutional acts, such as a declaration of war, can only be performed by the government.

In short, the distinction between A-institutions and P-institutions marks a distinction between institutions as acts (or as types of acts) and institutions as agents. Whereas in Dickie's theory the art world is made by both type of institutions which play a role in transfiguring a material object into a work of art, I think that art world in many cases provides some instruments to the artists in order to complete its creation and to the public in order to perform a better comprehension of the art works. In both cases, the art world is indeed an instrument to better perform the creation or the interpretation, but it is not the real maker of the work of arts. It is not through a performative act made by the art world

that art works are such, but the art world is nonetheless necessary to provide the background for the creation and the comprehension of the art works.

Thus far for the first condition. Now let us come to the other two conditions:

A work of art is a social and historical object, [2] an artefact, which embodies a representation, in the form of an inscribed trace [3] upon a medium that is not transparent.

The second condition refers to two elements. The first one is the “artefactuality”: works of arts are artefacts, that is, material objects created or altered through an intentional action performed by human beings. The relationship between artefact and reality is not, as in Platonic metaphysics, a mimetic one; however it is centred upon representation – something that lies at the core of human life. While it is true that perception and representation are both at the core of our experience of the world, it is also true that the artistic representation is structured in a peculiar way, compared to the non-artistic one.

The most important characteristics of the artistic representation are two: to work properly an artistic representation doesn't need to necessarily be realistic, nor does it have to grasp reality as it is. However, the artistic representation (depiction, as it is called in philosophical language) has to embody the artist's rough view. Works of art (along with our beliefs) carry representations that are intentional. This means that while in epistemic activities we are dealing with the truth, in depiction artists have no obligation to deal with the truth. We do not need to carry out any sort of inquiry ‘into the world’ in order to understand *Don Quixote*; to stick to the text and follow the plot is sufficient, as well as convenient. Certainly, if we were to possess subsidiary knowledge of the life of knights errant, our understanding of the novel would improve, but we would not have so much as an additional ounce of knowledge. Works do not say anything about the world if not incidentally and, as is often said, accidentally. In other words, a tourist is not likely to choose to walk the streets of Manhattan by relying on Aner Shalev's novel *Where New York Ends* instead of a Lonely Planet travel guide. The novel could, perhaps, be extremely accurate in its representations of the city, but whether it truly is so is a question that concerns the author's choice.

It is for this reason that we can understand an image – let's say, a representation of the Sphinx – without having to ask ourselves if a lion with a human head really exists in an Egyptian desert. In general, then, we understand an image (that is to say, we classify it adequately, or we

identify its representational content) without knowing if what it depicts actually exists; we understand its meaning and this is enough.

The third condition is about the way in which a depiction can be embodied in a medium: this marks the singularity of each work of art and determines its artistic quality. My sense is that this third condition needs to be further investigated if we want to better explain the definition. Differently from all forms of scientific knowledge which are used to embody representation in structured and articulated concepts, works of art embody rough ideas, not only using words but also several others media. And in those cases in which words are used, we have to remember that they embody intentional representations. In any case, the intentional representation embodied is structured in such a way that the work of art usually says something on a double level: the artist says something about something (the first level) through representation, and the medium, which is composed by representation plus the physical qualities of the object, says something about the world (that is, a specific culture, a particular historical era etc.). Let me try to explain by referring to some examples.

A cross is an age-old semantic object with a history that predates its use throughout Christianity. If we consider its modern-day meanings, those which we are able to decipher without the help of reading guides, the following come to mind: the death of Jesus, the presence of a church, a hospital, a cemetery or a tomb, a pharmacy, a street intersection or a dead-end street. The matter is quite simple, and can be formulated in these terms: for what reason is the first cross, depicted in slide, not a work of art, while the second and the third, depicted in slides, are one?

The cross in the first slide represents a dead end on a street sign (slide 1), while second slide depict two works by imaginative and polyvalent French artist Clet Abraham (slide 2). In his cross, the artist evidently embodies new meanings. In Abraham's work, the road sign in the shape of a cross becomes a real cross. Hence the first image, which displays a stylized body hanging from a pole, with no way out, just as the dead-end street depicted on the street sign, and second image, which cites the most classic and widely known deposition from the cross. What is the difference between these and normal signs that also have representative content? Abraham's representations are contained in a medium, that is, a canvas, which says something about the idea of sacredness in the postmodern era: hanging on walls and found along the streets of Florence, the signs are looked at because of what they are and not only because of the classic meaning that they embody (the warning of a dead-end street).

Abraham's signage (along with many other works in contemporary art) is particularly rich as it presents a stratified plurality of meanings. There are the meanings exemplified by the street sign and those implemented by the artist: both meanings are greatly akin. The cross is a dead-end road: a man who has been crucified or who is taken down from a cross, and lies in the arms of a grieving mother, represents the expression of that which is, in the most definitive of ways, inescapable – death. There is no trace of transcendence in the representation of a man hanging from a cross depicted on a street sign, nor is there in its exposition to the distracted passers-by. Here it is not a sacred place that conserves and protects the power of that symbol. This fact, in particular, makes it clear how the medium not only embodies the depiction by the artist, but also plays a central role in doing this in a way that says something about the culture in which Abraham works. A culture in which art is made popular and accessible through the popular use of its icons, including religious ones. These icons are not used to offer a figurative narration of the stories of the Christianity; rather, this narration is reconfigured to say something about the era in which such reconfiguration takes place. In *The Open Work*, Umberto Eco says something similar where he says that works of art give us pictures of reality that hold “as epistemological metaphors”. Eco rightly notes that works of art possess a double semantics: in fact they are epistemic metaphors, which means that they say something about something through representation and that they say something through the structure of their body, the medium: “<...> art, as structuring of forms, has its own ways of talking about the world and man; it may happen that a work of art makes statements about the world through its topic – as in the subject of a novel or a poem – but first of all, as form, art makes statements about how it is structured, showing the historical and personal trends that have led to it and the implicit worldview manifested by a certain form” [Eco 1989, preface].

3. Normativity

Now that all the conditions that make up my definition have been explained, I would like to come back to the question of normativity. I mentioned that, ever since Duchamp introduced the ready-made in museums alongside traditional works of art, the ontological question has become urgent. Stated differently, the important caesura determined by contemporary art, specifically by the Dada movement and Abstract Expressionism, seems to really question the idea that the access to the understanding of art is given by sensibility. The whiteness of the urinal,

i.e. the properties of the color white, was certainly not the reason that prompted Duchamp to present a urinal built in series at an art competition. As the artist himself explained, he didn't expect the audience to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of *Fountain*, quite the contrary. If anything, the opposite was true: Duchamp was interested in the *anesthetic* dimension, since his goal was to create a work of art prescinding from the use of traditional aesthetic properties, first of all beauty.

The pursuit of "anaestheticness" is what distinguishes ready-mades from abstractism in which – think, for instance, of the works by Kazimir Malevič (fig. 4) – color is still a determinant element (which, in our example, identifies the poetics of the Russian artist). In other words, Malevič's abstract paintings are surely closer to figurative paintings than to *Fountain* and other ready-mades: in fact, for the latter it does not seem possible to appeal to any judgment of taste and, consequently, there seems to be no aesthetic normativity to which to refer. The hypothesis that I intend to verify at this stage is that the issue of normativity in contemporary art is subject to a revision of the definition of the very concept of art.

The key point in the case of the judgment of taste is the question of its universality, and therefore its normativity. For a long time, aesthetic normativity has had as its prerequisite the idea of beauty: as stated by Immanuel Kant, we expect that anyone who has seen or will see the *Mona Lisa*, can only find it beautiful and, therefore, can only express the exact same judgment. It therefore seems that there is a tension between the idea that judgments of taste, i.e. judgments that generally relate to matters subject to taste, are subjective (i.e. depend on the subjects that formulate them), and the idea that they aspire to achieve broad, even universal, consensus. In other words, they seem to be both subjective (individual) and objective (normative). So the judgment of taste claims to be normative, i.e. to establish itself as a rule that applies to everyone, not just the one who formulates it.

However, since artists freed themselves from beauty – as shown paradigmatically by Duchamp – the bond between art and the universality of the judgment of taste has become problematic. In the reshaping of the concept of art that I'm sketching here, the traces of meaning and the body of the artwork are fundamental, while the aesthetic properties of the medium are secondary. In other words, the artwork may or may not be beautiful – whatever that means – therefore it may or may not exhibit aesthetic properties, but the latter are not a necessary condition for its identity. It follows that there is no normativity of the judgment of taste that can be applied to contemporary art.

Let me make another observation from the point of view of the history of the concept. One of the most successful readings of all events and self-transformations that art has imposed on itself in the Twentieth century is the one formulated by Arthur Danto, on the basis of what had already been somehow intuited by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he foresaw that art's fate was to be resolved in philosophy. In *The End of Art*, Danto argues that the Avantgardes, which pushed art to revise the limits of its own definition, brought it to reach the extreme limit of its possibilities, or rather, of its own development. That's why art won't have a progressive development such as the one reconstructed by Vasari, but will rather be the expression of single individuals.

The same conclusion is also found in a work by Sara Fanelli exposed at Tate Gallery, London. The 40m-long work recreates the timeline of Twentieth century art history illustrating it through the names of its most important movements and artists. Significantly, from year 2000 onwards Fanelli reports in her timeline only artist names. The history of art, as a history of progress, perhaps has come to an end, at least according to what we can see from the historical perspective in which we find ourselves. What must be noted is that throughout the Twentieth century art has lost its possibility to call for the universality of the judgment of taste as well its historical and progressive development. Danto suggests not to look at these losses with nostalgia: after all, the counterpart of all this is a great gain, that is, the almost absolute liberty that artists have won, breaking the canons, cultural traditions and finally freeing themselves even from the demands of their patrons.

Our post-historical dimension allows us to draw a conclusion as to the issue of normativity. From our historical perspective, we know that the normativity of the judgment of taste is not about art, and on the other hand we have also reached a more meaningful understanding of the concept of art. We know that the visual arts, in their various forms, belong to the domain of sensible cognition and we know that the trace of meaning is of decisive importance to a work of art, more than its aesthetic properties. An artwork can be neither beautiful nor ugly, but it has to mean something. A great part of our relation with an artwork and our ability to interpret it consists precisely in developing a meaningful interpretation of the semantic trace, which manifests itself in the work in the form of a non-argued narrative.

In contemporary art, therefore, it no longer makes sense to refer to the normativity of the aesthetic judgment, while my sense is that certainly normativity exists for what concerns the ways in which the semantic trace is incorporated in the artworks. An artwork really works – i.e. is

successful – in all those cases in which the significant trace is embodied in appropriate ways so that the viewers can have some kind of cognitive response, which can sometimes be also characterized in emotional terms.

Let me reach the conclusion with an example. Ursula Biemann is a Swiss artist who tries to render through her lens both the psychological and social dynamics of migration (*Sahara Chronicle*) and the transgenerational effects of phenomena like the exploitation of natural resources and climate change (*Deep Weather*). Biemann deals with video art and, more precisely, with what the artist defines “video essays”. To clarify this neologism we might refer to the idea that art, all art, embodies meanings. Biemann seems to be convinced of this to the point of comparing her production (video) to a category that normally does not refer to art genres but rather to scientific works (essay). *Deep Weather* (2013, video 9’) is a video essay, which is different from a video story. The aim is not simply to record facts – which typically happens with news reports – but to offer a worldview related to the facts recorded. This means that the artist is fully aware of the artistic scope of her work as well of the aesthetic scope that makes the artistic one even more powerful.

Another interesting element concerns the use of the emotional element, which is generally very present in art and which we would expect to be present, even more significantly, in works such as those by Biemann, as they address issues with a high emotional impact. Yet, the artist decides to make her work unemotional: if the mass media tend to underline the emotional aspect of these issues through a violent use of images, Biemann presents the *problem* in eminently critical terms. While the emotion is reduced to zero, the two video essays are strongly characterized in aesthetic terms. They are certainly very beautiful, not only made using sophisticated techniques, but also endowed with a strong aesthetic element.

It is Duchamp’s artistic project that allows *Fountain* to become an artwork, and that project marks the difference between *Fountain* and any other Bedfordshire urinal. In the same way, Biemann’s project marks the difference between a skillful shooting of migrants landing made by a reporter and Biemann’s video. In all the cases we have examined the artistic project is fundamental and involves both the work on art’s own expressive potential – in other words, art’s reflection on its being a medium – and the representations through which the artist manifests his or her worldview.

Now, it is evident that the ontological variety of contemporary art implies a multiplicity of forms and ways in which the incorporation

of the conceptual trace takes place: a filmic documentary work has different characteristics and therefore different ways and possibilities of incorporating meaning from those of other forms of visual art, for example sculpture or painting. Video art, like performing art, allows the artist to incorporate the traces of more complex and, in some way, more structured narratives. I introduced the idea of *conceptual trace*, which I prefer to that of *concept*, because even with the most explicit and structured narratives such as Biemann's works, it is evident that a reality shown and told in artistic ways – involving an articulate project and a complex narrative – is different from the philosophical reflection on the same reality. The trace embodied in artworks is a signifying element that the artists inscribes in the work and that viewers complete in their own ways, which can be more or less sophisticated and elaborate. The interpretative boundaries, the argumentative and logical structure of the meaning exposed, the use of the emotional element: all these things mark a difference between the significant trace embodied in artworks and the conceptual structure found in philosophy.

Biemann's video essays express their meaning in a very simple and direct way, while for people to understand something of the trace of meaning that Duchamp incorporated in *Fountain* it was necessary that the artist wrote down his poetics. Which makes *Fountain* a less successful work than *Deep Weather*. It is likely that no human being would understand something about *Fountain* unless she has studied it, read about it or met Duchamp in person. On the other hand, none of this is needed to understand that *Sahara Chronicle* addresses the status of human rights and the policies of their application.

There is double normativity in Biemann's video essays: the first regards the structure of the medium, the second concerns the structure of the semantic trace embodied in the medium.

The work doesn't speak to us at the emotional level, and the dyscrasy between the narrated horror and the unemotional way in which it is narrated is so evident that it has to be the outcome of a specific artistic choice. The combination of these two elements makes it so that the semantic trace of Biemann's work is grasped through an evident communicational short circuit: the tragedy is detached from emotions but juxtaposed to the weakness of the normative and theoretical framework of Western culture. From this weakness derives a staggering ethical and political sloth.

After all, Biemann adds nothing to the chronicle of migration: she goes through it, follows it closely, renders it accessible to the audience in a short time. Nevertheless, there is only one way to respond to this

artwork, as it demands both a universal and an individual response: we must question the foundations and meaning of Western values and, ultimately, reconsider our idea of humanity.

REFERENCES

- Ajani, Donati 2011 – *Ajani G., Donati A.* I diritti dell'arte contemporanea. Allemandi, 2011.
- Andina 2013 – *Andina T.* The Philosophy of Art: The Question of Definition. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Biro 1995 – *Brancusi contre États-Unis, un procès historique, 1928.* Ed. Adam Biro. Paris, 1995.
- Dickie 1974 – *Dickie G.* Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis. Cornell University Press, 1974.
- Eco 1989 – *Eco U.* The Open Work. Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Wieand 1981 – *Wieand J.* Can Be An Institutional Theory of Art? *The Journal of Aesthetics an Art Criticism.* 1981. 39 (4). P. 409–417.

Материал поступил в редакцию 29.10.2015