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MEANS AND ENDS IN CONCEPTUAL ART

Keywords: *philosophy of literature, conceptual art, aesthetic appraisal, appreciative experience, perceptual art, non-perceptual art, artistic context*

Abstract: *In this paper I intend to look at how a vocabulary borrowed from the philosophy of literature about the appreciative experience of literature can illuminate the approach to the appreciation of conceptual art. I will mainly focus on the British philosopher Peter Lamarque's proposal that the appreciative experience associated with the reading of literature is similar in characteristics to responses to all art including conceptual art. After I present key concepts of Lamarque's proposal I will try to argue that a casual urban scene, if perceived as art could become a work of art (even though temporarily only). The paper ends by suggesting that for something to be perceived as art (the extreme case would be an object like a readymade) it does not necessarily need to have an internal identifiable aesthetic quality but it needs to be perceived in an overt conscious effort that distinguishes between the mere object and the work via contextualisation. The role of the artistic context is essential in the appreciative experience of conceptual art.*

Preamble

Let us imagine that you are going to visit your aunt who lives in a small run down area behind 'Gara de Nord' in Bucharest. You have been there before a few times and you vividly recall the decaying walls and peeling colours of the wooden gates. Just before you turn into her street, on the corner between Vespian St. and Banat St. you see a white porcelain toilet, right in the middle of the street. Your first reaction is of revulsion: 'How undignified some people are! How could someone throw away their old toilet in the middle of the city? Why not take it to a rubbish dump? How very inconsiderate for neighbours!' All these or some similar thoughts pass through your mind in a few seconds. But then, after your first reaction a different kind of response seems to be demanded by the scene in front of you. You cannot immediately explain this change in your response. You find yourself looking at the toilet and its immediate surroundings with an almost aesthetic inclination. The fading blue of the wall behind the toilet seat, the sun reflected in the porcelain and the decaying surroundings seem to constitute a melancholic urban portrait of contemporary life. You are taken aback by your response to the scene, because your response is an art response and then you rationalise and think about the possibility

that this could be the work of a conceptual artist who intended to present an idea about consumerism and moral decay in contemporary life in a work within a 'naturalistic' setting. When you turn the corner there are two possibilities: one, your aunt's street is empty, nobody in sight and you go on with your visit or the other, you find a sign (or the artist himself) confirming your suspicion that what you have just looked at was a conceptual piece.

This might not appear to be a plausible story but it did happen. Indeed one day when I was walking around Gara de Nord, I had this extraordinary encounter with a toilet in the middle of the city. I stooped, looked at the scene and after a while I decided to take a photograph of the ensemble. Why did I photograph the scene? Well the main reason was an aesthetic one; I was intrigued by this scene of interior intimacy which seemed cut off from its usual domestic framework (the bathroom) and planted in broad daylight on a street as an affront to a particular type of decency. The person who did drop the toilet on the street could have been an artist or not (most likely he was an insensitive citizen of the capital) but maybe this is irrelevant. What is important is my reaction, an aesthetic impulse which made me take the photograph and regard the scene as having aesthetic potential. The main question arising from this story is: Can an object or event become a work of art without an artistic intention behind it? There are many natural scenes, events or objects to which we respond aesthetically but we do not consider them works of art. Can an object be a work of art if a small group of people would consider it so? Would the toilet scene become an art work if I had called other people to look at the scene in a particular way? Would a certain attention (an aesthetic attitude or a disinterested attitude) to the features of the scene be sufficient for an art experience?

I. Lamarque's Key Concepts

Peter Lamarque in his article *On Perceiving Conceptual Art* discusses how the appreciation of literary art can be compared with the appreciation of conceptual art. His key concepts regarding the perception of arts in general are:

- 1) The distinction between **perceptual art** and **non-perceptual art**.
- 2) **The perceptual level which** is subservient to **the conceptual level** in conceptual art
- 3) The role of **the aesthetic** (Is art necessarily aesthetic? Is the aesthetic necessarily perceptual? The distinction between **non-aesthetic** and **anti-aesthetics means**)
- 4) The distinction between perceiving a **work** and perceiving a **mere physical object**
- 5) The role of **conceptualisation in perception of all art**

I will briefly present Lamarque's distinctions and raise a few questions without attempting a detailed analysis of Lamarque's conceptual schema but intending a general presentation of some of his concepts regarding the appreciation of arts and its problems.

1) Perceptual and non-perceptual art

Some could argue that literature is a non-perceptual art while music, painting, sculpture are perceptual arts. Lamarque says that literature is a non-perceptual art open to aesthetic descriptions. Aesthetic descriptions he says, involve: *sensuous aspects* (fine writing, elegant phrase, vivid images), *formal features* (structure, organization and unity) and the *consonance of means to ends* (the question about how the two aspects are used to achieve some literary purpose). Following Lamarque's distinction the main question arising is: 'Is conceptual art perceptual or a non-perceptual art?' or a more radical take on Lamarque's proposal: 'Is this dichotomy between perceptual and non-perceptual arts a source of confusion or a source of enlightenment?'¹

2) Conceptual art and its perceptual level

A lot of conceptualists from the late 50s argue that there is no perceptual level in a work of conceptual art. What does it mean for a conceptualist to deny the perceptual level? The most famous example is an article, from 1968 called *The Dematerialisation of Art* in which Lucy Lippard and John Chandler suggest that the dematerialisation of art 'it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete'. Of course, here the perceptual level does not mean the perceptual access to the work but a rejection of an essential characteristic of a work of art: the importance of the aesthetic appearance of a work. On the other hand, a lot of late conceptualists agree that even a conceptual piece has a material form which is an inescapable fact. I would argue that most of the contemporary artists whose work has a conceptualist dimension accept and use the aesthetic. For example, artists like: Rachel Whiteread, Anya Gallaccio, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and Angela de la Cruz. Even more conceptualists as Simon Patterson, Martin Creed or Richard Long can be accused of falling prey from time to time to the aesthetic. It is tempting to compare conceptual art with literature because of the apparent non-perceptual aspects of both. But no matter how much the conceptual artist wants to escape the visual/the material form (otherwise the trap of 'aesthetic look'), conceptual art, I would argue, is still part of the visual arts domain, therefore mainly a perceptual art. Lamarque says that in conceptual art the perceptual level is subservient to the conceptual one. Indeed, nowadays there seem to be very few pure conceptualists – most of the works of conceptual art are works of art with a strong embedded conceptualism.

¹ See James Shelly's article 'The Problem of Non-Perceptual Art'

3) Distinction between a work of art and a mere object²

Lamarque discusses in his article Leibniz's Law ('If two things are identical then they must share the same properties') as applied to aesthetic properties of works of art. If we take as an example Duchamp's *Fountain*, the object – the urinal – is *perceptually* indistinguishable from the work. How did the urinal become a work of art? If taken from the museum and placed in a public toilet, would it still be a work of art? Lamarque argues in another article entitled 'Work and Object' that: 'To view an object as a work it is to view it aspectively, in the sense of attending in perception to selected (art related) aspects of the object' (Lamarque, *Work and Object* 142). Moreover, he argues that 'Works are species of cultural objects, whose very existence rests on essential possession of fairly complex intentional and relational properties' (Lamarque, *Work and Object* 160).

In the same article he introduces a number of desiderata for an 'ontology of works' which he considers 'commonsensical and desirable' underlining that each desideratum is fiercely disputed in aesthetics:

Works (of art) are *real* not ideal, entities [...]; they are *public* and *perceivable* [...]; they possess their properties *objectively* [...]; they are *cultural objects* [...]; more specifically they are entities tied to *human acts* and *attitudes*; they are *created*, for example by artists; they can *come into* and *go out of existence* [...] and their identity conditions, being value-laden, are distinct from those of functionally-defined artefact and physical objects in the natural world. (Lamarque, *Work and Object* 146)

A mere object does not have (at least at the moment of perception) any art aspects that can be perceived or implied in the way it is experienced. A work of art is or has the potential to be experienced in an artistic way. This seems paradoxical, because the urinal and the *Fountain* is one and the same object. In a quotidian context it is just an object, but viewed differently, looking at its art related aspects: being placed in an art context, being invited by an artist to look at it in an artistic way, being a protest gesture etc. it becomes a work of art. In the experience of conceptual art Leibniz's Law does not collapse but stretches the meaning of things or properties.

4) The role of the aesthetic

Lamarque's distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic is not the same as aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. For example, he considers that the ugly, the repulsive, the ephemeral, kitsch, the banal, the ordinary are anti-aesthetic means but they are not outside the sphere of the aesthetic. He justifies his position by arguing that artists who self-consciously turn against the aesthetic are still making an aesthetic choice (he emphasises

² The distinction between a work and a mere real thing was made famous by Arthur Danto in his book *The Transfiguration of Common Place*.

that this is one of the reason why people find conceptual art suspect). Lamarque argues that any work of art as opposed to a text or mere object is part of the aesthetic sphere even though it employs anti-aesthetic means; for him, in conceptual art, the appraisal of the **effectiveness (consonance) of means to ends** is what sets the work in the sphere of the aesthetic.

5) The role of conceptualisation in the perception of all art

What I called an **overt conscious effort** is an ability to distinguish between an object and a work of art. The problem becomes very complicated when we encounter readymades. How can we experience them as art? Lamarque says that what makes the difference is the importance of having knowledge (perceptual or imaginative) of how we experience objects. ‘What I know affects what I experience’. Knowing that we are looking at art, it will (implicitly) affect our experience of the object encountered.

To look at a readymade and decide that is a work of art depends on the knowledge that what we are looking at is art. Lamarque remarks that there is something which all art experiences have in common: the ‘experience of art *as art*’ and that ‘There must be something that counts as perceiving (or experiencing) conceptual art *as conceptual art*.’ I would argue that the knowledge that we have when encountering a work of traditional art seem primarily due to same intrinsic aspects of the work (in most cases something will tell us that what we have encountered a novel, a poem, or a musical piece). Of course, I refer here to a competent reader, viewer, listener (who already has some knowledge of art history and cultural issues – what I mean is that this doesn’t take place in a cultural vacuum). In conceptual art matters are more complicated, the knowledge of what we encountered seems to be the result of a complex artistic context not the detection of some intrinsic properties (although the detection of these properties are not excluded from the conceptual art experience). The experience of art *as art* involves at least the knowledge that we are encountering art and this is what I call the role of conceptualisation in the experience of all art.

II. A mere object becoming a work of art

The urban scene described in the preamble, if perceived *in a certain way* could become a work of art. There are many ways of discussing this possible artistic transformation:

- i) There is an ‘official’ conceptual framing of the scene – an artist may find the scene as it is or create it and invite the public to look at it. He could give it a title and maybe write a text about it.
- ii) One realises the artistic potential of the scene and invite other people to look at it.

iii) Another artist decides to decoupage the whole scene and take it from outside indoors into an art gallery.

iv) You transform the area by making it a public work, a kind of permanent exhibit supported by a gallery, museum.

In all cases (i-iv) even though the initial encounter with the urban scene was part of quotidian perception, the artistic context imposed by the viewer changed the way we appreciate this urban scene.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that Lamarque's concept of the appreciative experience of all art *as art* is very useful when we talk about the experience of conceptual art. Looking at Lamarque's conceptual framework I found interesting parallels between the appreciation of literature and of conceptual art. These parallels maybe can help us to demystify some of the conundrums of the artistic experience of conceptual art. This is a beginning to the debate between extreme internalists (aestheticians that consider that aesthetic properties are intrinsic to the work of art – in literature the ones for whom the text is sacrosanct) and extreme externalists (who believe that there are no such things as intrinsic aesthetic properties, for whom only the context is important). The experience of traditional art has a powerful internalist explanation while the experience of conceptual art has a devastating explanation through an externalist approach (the Institutional Theory of Art advocated by Arthur Danto and George Dickie or Peter Lamarque's theory of consonance of means to ends).

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