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A Definition of Art

Let us say it straight away: art is the human activity that makes us realize that life is more important than art. It is a paradox. Since the beginning of time, human beings have invented and created a material and non-material *artistic* culture that distracts us from reality so that we might see and understand it more clearly. The term *art* is an open-ended *floating signifier* habitually used to speak of different things depending on the context. Often qualified by adjectives, it is defined by difference: from the medieval distinction between the liberal arts of invention and intellect – knowledge of which makes us free – and the more manual mechanical arts, and the modern distinction between fine arts and applied arts, all the way to the contemporary distinction between the *visual arts* and those of literature and performance. The *arts* in the plural encompass a host of fields including dance, theatre, literature, music, cinema, painting, sculpture, architecture, photography and design. The word is commonly used for positive appraisal, when we speak of something being *state of the art* or an authentic *work of art* to indicate its great quality. A great actor, opera singer or even chef is called an "artist." The etymology leads us back to the Latin *ars*, meaning the artisanal ability to make something with skill and a mastery of technique, which is in turn close to the Greek τέχνη. The most common use of the word *art* today thus corresponds to the earliest and original one.

At the same time, the word is also employed in a limited sense. In this more specific sense – like a synecdoche, where the whole represents the part rather than the part the whole – the word *art* is habitually used to refer to what were known as the *fine arts* in the West from the 18th century up to the beginning of the 20th. The roots of this are to be found not in antiquity, but in the earliest historical writings on the arts, including Vasari's *Lives* (1550), the cornerstone of modern art history. Vasari starts by describing techniques and materials as in a manual of artistic practice, following the example of Pliny the Elder, and then goes on, "as a painter," to write about the lives of practitioners of the "arts of design," a term that encompasses architecture (the most useful art and therefore the highest for him), painting and sculpture. He uses the words *belle arti* (the Italian equivalent of "fine arts") but in the sense of pleasing, well-wrought, graceful, fitting, appropriate (*bello* comes in fact from *bellus*, derived from *benulus*, a diminutive of *benus*, from *bonus*).

Leonardo da Vinci instead saw painting as something mental (perspective in painting is geometry) and it is thus the Renaissance that saw the birth of the idea of art as an activity that is not only mechanical, that wins its freedom by rising to the state of a form of elevated understanding in which Aristotle's *poiesis* (taking things from nature and transforming them) is combined with the practicality of painting or sculpture, thus moving towards the modern concept of art as a form of empirical philosophy distinguished from the applied arts or religious art. *Ars*, *scientia* and *ingenium* were all required of an artist in the 16th century. This crystallized with the emergence of the idea of the autonomy of the work of art and of aesthetics as the philosophy of art two centuries later, coinciding not only with the birth of art history (study of the object thus evolving parallel to the object itself) but also with the detachment of the empirical natural sciences from art, which also took on the characteristic of constituting the artist's form

of *expression*. In particular, the first half of the 18th century saw Winckelmann's examination of the evolution of Greek art and development of a theory based on the idea that the goal of art is to attain beauty, which artists achieve by selecting from nature what they need in order to create a work by using the faculty of imagination.

Art is described in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) as a form of conscious and intentional imitation of the beauty of nature on the part of creative genius, with no other purpose, whereas natural beauty is created by nature with no awareness or aesthetic intention and often for a specific purpose (an idea now strongly challenged by studies into the non-human creativity of nature). The *fine arts* and the associated idea of the autonomy of art were thus born out of the separation of utility and pleasure, science and art.

For Hegel, art offered a path to "aesthetic freedom" and the museum was the place where this could happen (public museums as we know them were born shortly after the French Revolution). For the rising middle class of the period, art was the necessary and contemplative counterpart of the functional products of industry, even though aesthetic criteria could be applied to their design. This concept arose from the same generation that invented the Enlightenment and parliamentary democracy, a society of producers at the dawn of industrialization and the market economy and, at the same time, a society of thinkers that was to develop the sphere of contemplation and free time. They needed a clear demarcation between productive and non-productive activities. This elite idea of art thus forms part of an almost spatial categorization of time and is still accepted today in many circles, especially the most conservative. Use of the term *fine arts* was plunged into crisis, however, with the revaluation of the applied arts and popular culture at the end of the 19th century.

Embracing an aesthetic more in keeping with modern life and reality, the early avant-garde movements in the first half of the 20th century rejected the idea that art must be "beautiful," as attested by Boccioni's *Antigraceful* (1912–13) and Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). The combination of the idea of the work of art as independent of its functionality and the idea that it too must be part of productive work with a purpose is not too far from the 20th-century Freudian vision of art as the sublimation of repressed urges or indeed of the work of art as a kind of game (Donald Winnicott) that radically redirects and reformulates the rules of a functional system through different use of the same, without following the original purpose for which they were developed. Almost as though the elaboration of repressed impulses (Freud) or of trauma also through defunctionalization or refunctionalization (Melanie Klein) were fundamentally a useful function (at least to mental balance).

The evolutionary and avant-garde idea of art is based on the concept that art advances through innovations that come step by step to negate the very definition of the art that precedes them, constantly redrawing the boundaries of the artistic field. One of the most lucid expressions of this view was put forward by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970):

The definition of art is at every point indicated by what art once was, but it is legitimated only by what art became with regard to what it wants to, and perhaps can, become. [...] Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. [...] It is defined through its relation to what it is not.

The criterion that legitimates art is also based on dialogue with the history of art, which can be more or less conscious. In the European tradition, consciousness of one's actions is important and bound up with free will. In the West, art is an intentional construct verified externally and also by the future imagined in contrast to a present already viewed as past. Among the various disciplines, art is the most intent on calling its own boundaries into question. As a result, during the 20th century, the definition of what constitutes art came increasingly to be based on the nominalist criterion that works of art must be created in contrast to previous works by people who call themselves *artists* and must be circulated and presented first and foremost in the spaces assigned to this field, namely art galleries and museums, capable *de jure* of conferring the status of art on what is located there. The disciplinary boundaries of the field are defined by the world of art itself, hence the emergence of the figure of the curator in the late 1960s. In other words, it has been hard to define art since the second half of the 20th century precisely because it is redefined through the works produced by artists.

In line with this *open* approach and with the desire to dispense with any military connotations of the word *avant-garde*, the term *visual arts* was taken up in the second half of the 20th century. Painting, sculpture, drawing and artistic photography were joined under this heading from the late 1960s by *installations* based on viewer involvement and participation (a development of the *environment*), *happenings*, *performances*, spatialized video installations, installations in which the spatialization of sound prevails over the sonic aspect, and so on. With the enlargement of the field of artistic means and techniques of a not necessarily visual nature, the adjective *visual* was gradually dropped by the end of the century, giving way from the 1980s to *contemporary* (a term born earlier, coeval to cognizance of the *hic et nunc*, the "here and now" of the atomic bomb and the opening of the Nazi death camps – i.e. the idea that it is possible to be present at an event and aware of it at the same time – *cum tempore*, in a state of absolute presence). More recently, this has given way to terms like *advanced art* and *research-based art*, arriving in the second decade of this century, during the era of globalization, with the current decline of the adjective *contemporary*, which vacillates in favour of the relative copresence of different contemporaneities, and the *activist art* of today, based on a return to the idea that art must have some direct social or environmental utility.

Despite the postmodernist theories of the end of originality that predominated in the 1980s, defining the quality of the work of art today greatly depends once again on the ability to invent new forms of art and hence on innovation, something regarded as outmoded at the end of the 20th century.

Above all, we now find ourselves faced with a new paradox. While the artist's awareness of producing art in contrast with the art of the past is essential to the very definition of the term in the West, artists in postcolonial contexts came during globalization to pose new questions that require new definitions. It is only recently that their activities have been absorbed into *contemporary art*. As artists wishing to work in this field, which is western in origin, they have accepted its definition. But precisely because the field of art has excluded all the artefacts of their past (defining them as ethnographic because that were not created as works of the fine arts), they are now criticizing the field of art from the inside and seeking to break through its boundaries. In doing so, however, they are repeating the *avant-garde* artistic act *par excellence* and the operation is therefore accepted by the field of contemporary art as a paradoxical consequence. If the concept of art was born together with the history of art, the entrance of contemporary art into postcolonial contexts is accompanied step by step today by the

radical renewal of the art-historical canon now underway. The univocal, teleological, linear narrative created during the Renaissance and that became established in the 18th and 19th centuries, which runs from the prehistoric era through Mesopotamian and Graeco-Roman civilization and medieval, Renaissance and baroque art up to present-day modernity, has in fact already been challenged in favour of a plurality of narratives interwoven like a spider's web, where art is historically recontextualized and complicated by the presence of Big Data and connections between geographical areas. It cannot be taken for granted that the history of art will proceed in this direction after Covid-19, or that the field of global contemporary art will continue along the path laid down since the 1990s.

Above and beyond mere nominalism, I have always thought that in this vast space where anything whatsoever can serve as material for art, the quality of a work of art is measurable by means of a tautological criterion of its correspondence in subject or content to the form, materials and technique involved. A great work of art is one in which the materials adopted, the form, the content, the form of the content, the content of the form and the technique employed are all correlated and convey the same message. In other words, if the task artists set themselves is to examine how perception is transformed into knowledge, their success is directly proportional to their use of the very object they are investigating as the means and technique of their investigation. Colour is investigated through colour (abstract art), representation through representation (figurative art), gesture through gesture (performance), society through social relations (relational art) and verbal language through words (conceptual art). As a result, art is nothing other than a sort of *incorporated ontology* of correspondence to reality. While a philosopher like Heidegger examines what a thing is by analysing the functions of a jug and using words to describe it, an artist will address the same question by making a jug and perhaps pouring something into it. There is something magical and miraculous in this, in the way that Kentridge's erasure of one drawing and creation of a new one in graphite on the same worn and tormented sheet of paper is *identical* to the erosion of the South African landscape through mining and the erasure of black bodies during Apartheid. What counts is neither the subject matter nor the technical mastery of the work, but the miracle of the absolute correspondence of one to the other, their unitary identity.

Will this discipline called art exist in the future? I do not know. It does exist, however, for the time being. Disciplinary fields emerge and vanish in the course of history. Today, despite Kant, a great deal of attention is focused on the non-human creativity of plants and the other species of animals suggesting the possibility of languages, intentionality, games and art.

For the artist, art is done for the pleasure found in the creative process of making and experimentation to transform one thing into something other than the original and to be surprised, the work of art being more than the sum of its component parts. There is a mystical element midway between religion, mystery and mystification itself. Artists are traitors and liars, sardonic and solitary. They use different tools and many games. As less logic is required of them than of those working in other fields, they are free to act and experiment with things they know little about, like dilettantes. They transform shapeless matter such as cloth, clay, pigments, ideas, gestures, sound, and algorithms, learning how to use and manipulate their material by taming or collaborating with it, and they experience great satisfaction when they know it can be manipulated.

Today, during the coronavirus epidemic, I asked the Egyptian artist of Armenian origin Anna Boghiguan what art was for her. She answered, "Everything that is life. Or death. We are all artists."

Art is therefore something that exists and does not exist. When the artist dies, the work of art lives on. Art is a passport to eternity but also proof of our finite nature. Something like transubstantiation.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev,

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