

Representation in Art (III)

Representation in Conceptual Art¹

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Let us start with the difference between works of conceptual art and works of non-conceptual, traditional art. It can be said, to begin with, that traditional art can be well displayed as a never ending attempt to articulate beauty via a particular genre/means. The means of tragedy were described by Aristotle. The means of architecture were offered by Vitruvius. The means of Renaissance painting can be distilled from the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci, Tizian and others, the means of Renaissance sculpture are to be discovered within Donatello's or Michelangelo's work. The novel as an artistic genre was established by Cervantes. Similarly in other cases: classicists, romantics, impressionists, realists, symbolists etc. – these are all traditional artistic movements the ambition of which has been the offering of new, fresh perspectives on beauty. Such beauty was always perceived via the senses and naturally – due to the factor of representation – through reason, as well. Conceptual art has given up the sensual factor of a work (according to Kosuth a work of conceptual art exists merely on a conceptual level) and expressed thought is to be the only relevant entity for valuing. Conceptual art is characterized by having – similarly to any natural language – a semantics. “All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the convention of art” as Sol LeWitt says in sentence number 17 (the relationship to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is evident here) of his *Sentences On Conceptual Art*.² Well, we can say that what is normally represented by a work of conceptual art is not what is represented by a shape of a representing (i.e. Peircean icon) or any factual, visible con-

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² Lewitt (1969).

nection, but some abstract idea, a thought (a symbol installed by convention). It seems the conceptualists use the concept of “art” which sharply differs from the traditional one. Let us express our first simple hypothesis:

Our confusion in front of works of conceptual art are caused by the homonymy of the term “art”.

For this reason the most important contemporary attempts at the definition of art are to be brought up.

Homonymy of “Art”

As it has been said in the first essay, until the 20th Century the need for a definition of art had not appeared. Viewers or listeners had clear criterion for artistic value – similarity between signifying and signifier in fine art, literature and theatre, tonality in music. Expressionism and cubism, and mainly conceptual ready-made art brought about the need for an explanation why dissimilar or atonal works are considered works of art. Suddenly, art lost its agelong parameters: ugliness, evil, banality or empty uninterpretable form and often unskillful craft played their roles not as particular elements of the total beauty of an artwork but as dominant components of a positive critical verdict. Due to such a state of things, there were many attempts at a proper definition of art extended in such a way in the 20th Century. Here, let only three of them be mentioned. It is supposed they stand in for the main classes of similar definitions: traditional, historical, and institutional.

In his definition, Beardsley uses the concept of *aesthetic interest* (or *experience*) as a key one even though this concept should have been “the subject of lively and unabated controversy”.³ What is essential for our goal is the concept of *the intention of giving in the capacity to satisfy aesthetic interest* excluding explicitly conceptual art from the list:

So normally the artist has a serious purpose: there is something he wants to do in producing what he produces; and he will have reason

³ Beardsley (2006, 58).

to believe that success is possible. If, for example, it is unlikely that a painter could believe that by closing the art gallery and placing a sign on it he would produce something capable of satisfying the aesthetic interest, then it is unlikely that in closing the art gallery and placing a sign on it he was producing an artwork. We must of course allow for far-out beliefs, however unreasonable; there are painters quite capable of believing that closing the art gallery and placing a sign on it might provide aesthetic experience to someone who came to the gallery, found the sign and meditated on the symbolic significance of this higher order of art that is so self-effacing, so sublimely self-sacrificial that it denies itself its own existence (like Keats's unheard melodies that are sweeter than the heard ones). If this was indeed an intention the painter had in closing the gallery and placing the sign, then I am prepared to classify the closed and labeled gallery an artwork.⁴

What does Beardsley mean by ability to satisfy aesthetic interest? Probably it is our expectation by entering into a gallery: for we normally enter into a gallery to satisfy our innate desire for beauty. A necessary condition is the author's successful intention of inserting beauty into an artwork. It can be concluded from the many passages of Beardsley's article that artwork has the aforementioned property not accidentally (or contextually) but so to speak eternally. In this sense Beardsley's definition can be called a traditional one. Here it is:

A* An artwork is something produced with the intention of giving it the capacity to satisfy aesthetic interest.⁵

Well, that was Beardsley's effort. Now, let us turn our attention to Jerrold Levinson's definition. Here an enlightening analogy offers itself. In semantics – and the concept of semantics is key within conceptual art – there is Saul Kripke's explanation of the meaning of proper names. According to his theory proper names are introduced

⁴ Beardsley (2006, 59).

⁵ Beardsley (2006, 58).

into a chain of communication by the rite of an initial designating:⁶ This can occur as the act of baptism, introducing a name by ostension or introducing a name by a definite description. Names of objects introduced in one of those ways are to be spread within a language community. After some time, the usage of the name within the community will stabilize and the connection of the name to its bearer/referent is, as time goes by, guaranteed by the causal handing over of such instruction on how to use a given name. So if community of speakers uses the name in such a way that it refers to the individual who was subjected to the act of baptism, the act of communication is intact and the name is used correctly. An example: we have still been profiting from the rite "Let us call him Plato!" which took place many centuries ago in ancient Athens. Analogically, Levinson's definition is built on the basis of a historical chain of signifying.⁷ According to Levinson

(...) crucial idea that artworkhood is not an intrinsic exhibited property of a thing, but rather a matter of being related in the right way to human activity and thought. However, I propose to construe this relation solely in terms of the *intention of an independent individual* (or individuals) – as opposed to *an overt act* (that of conferring the status of a candidate for appreciation) performed in an *institutional setting* constituted by many individuals – where the intention makes reference (either transparently or opaquely) to the *history of art* (what art has been) as opposed to that murky and somewhat exclusive intuition, the *art-world*. The core of my proposal will be an account of what it is to regard-as-a-work-of-art, an account that gives this an essential historicity.⁸

Levinson gradually offers three definitions. The final output is the third one. Here it is:

A** X is an artwork at $t =_{df}$ X is an object of which it is true at t that some person or persons, having the appropriate pro-

⁶ Kripke (1990, 91 – 96, 117).

⁷ Levinson (2006, 35 – 46).

⁸ Levinson (2006, 35).

proprietary right over X , nonpassingly intends (or intended) X for regard-as-a-work-of-art – i.e., regard in any way (or ways) in which objects in the extension of ‘artwork’ prior to t are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded).⁹

An objection immediately occurs – what about recursivity? In other words: how was the first object historically baptized – “Let this in front of us be called art!”? Levinson offers the following definition based on A^{**} :

Initial Step: Objects of the *ur*-arts are artworks at t_0 (and thereafter).

Recursive Step: If X is an artwork prior to t , then Y is an artwork at t if it is true that some person or persons, having the appropriate proprietary right over Y , nonpassingly intends (or intended) Y for regard in any way (or ways) in which X is or was correctly regarded.¹⁰

If we link Levinson’s definition to the aforementioned comment according to which the “crucial idea that artworkhood is not an intrinsic exhibited property of a thing, but rather a matter of being related in the right way to human activity and thought” then it is not clear what exactly such “correctness” means within a situation when mental entity, i.e. particular perceiving, decides what should be “correct”. Levinson believes that – on the contrary to definition A^* – every conceptual artwork (ready-mades, drift wood) is counted as a member of extension A^{**} for a condition of their arthood is mental, individual, hence weak: there is a necessary condition of appropriate proprietariness and an author’s nonpassing intention on the one side, and the sufficient condition of particular regarding-as-art in tune with the recipe of previous particular regarding-as-art.

First, there is the phrase “intends for”. This is to be understood as short for “makes, appropriates, or conceives for the purpose of” so as to comprehend fashioned, found, and conceptual art.¹¹

⁹ Levinson (2006, 40).

¹⁰ Levinson (2006, 42).

¹¹ Levinson (2006, 37).

Here, the double-dealing face of definition A** proves: for one thing, the author's intention opens the door for conceptual art; for another, it is not facile (it is rather counter-intuitive) to imagine a chain of communication of "arthood" which will "standardly" unify Giotto and drift wood into one class.

For now, let us return to recursivity as well as analogy. Let us suppose that Plato had a pervert namesake, a womanizer, a drinker who never wrote a line of text. The names of both men were handed down from person to person, from generation to generation. Nevertheless, Plato-the philosopher fell into oblivion in the dark ages. All links of communication concerning him were suddenly lost. So the chains of communication were put back to Plato-playboy and were spread by Kripkean in a causal way. Various grapevines and legends circulated about Plato and his way of life. Such a state of things persisted until the early Renaissance when a work by a man named "Plato" together with his detailed biography was discovered in an Athens wine cellar. After that hardly anyone would doubt what kind of a man Plato in fact was. All men would get to know that Plato was a man of exceptional diligence and talent. Platonian scholarship would thrive. But what is a matter of a fact is: all Platonian scholarship would be about Plato-playboy. For every reference of Platonian scholars would end at Plato-playboy. In the case Kripke is right, the correct reference to "Plato" would begin only through the wine cellar discovery and all what was written on "Plato" before would have been necessary to annul.¹²

The analogy between Kripke and Levinson is apparent. Because the condition of a "correct regarding" of an "arthood" a mental one both for a creator and for a perceiver, a historical chain of regarding arthood appears in every moment of time as hopelessly vague. The reason is clear: there is nothing in an artwork what would serve as *tertium comparationis*; e.g. something which has the ability to satisfy aesthetic interest (see definition A*).

Anyway, Levinson's definition is an explicit attempt of making George Dickie's institutional definition better. Here is the first version of the institutional definition:

¹² See Tichý (1988, 267 - 270).

A*** A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has been conferred upon in the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (artworld).¹³

Promptly, it was objected¹⁴ that social institutions have exact criteria setting requisites for occupying a role within them which have to be implemented by every candidate (a rake, a bike, a criminal cannot become the president of the Czech Republic, for example: the first two are not human beings, the third does not fulfill the condition of honorability). Social institutions also require criteria for performing certain procedures (e.g. ordaining can be made only by a bishop within a Catholic church). Nothing like that is known in the artworld. That is why the artworld is not an institution in *sensu stricto*. However, it seems that the sufficient condition of A*** is dependent on an analogy with social institutions. In other words, the second condition of A*** presupposes something which does not exist. Dickie admitted this objection. Instead, the analogy he identified is the concept of *art circulation* with practices including complex relations among artists and their public. In this sense Dickie puts the sufficient condition for every candidate of being artwork in this way:

A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to the artworld public.¹⁵

Dickie denies possible circularity of the definition. He states that a kind of circularity or “inflectivity” is to be a characteristic feature of all cultural concepts. Even if the definition was correct as to the circularity, another essential objection appeared: is such a theory a real theory of art? For it seems Dickie’s definition trivializes the whole business in such a sense that its model can be used for defining any “complex, coordinated, communicative practice”, e.g. for Aesthetics itself: we will set that “aesthetic work is a discourse of a kind created

¹³ Dickie (2006, 47 – 54).

¹⁴ Beardsley (1976, 202).

¹⁵ Dickie (2006, 53).

to be presented to the aesthetic public" and subsequently some "inflective" concepts will be introduced where the word "art" is replaced by the word "aesthetics", the word "artist" by the word "aesthetician", the word "artword" by the phrase "the world of aesthetics". Dickie does not tell anything about art *as* art. He maintains that art belongs to the stock of complex, coordinated, communicative practices. It is interesting, to be sure. But is it the definition of *art*? Does the definition offer a distinguishing criterion of art from non-art?

The three definitions mentioned are examples of homonymy of the term "art". The public traditionally enter into galleries with anticipating the term "artistic" not standing for the traditional approach mirrored in definition A* and its aesthetic interest – desire for beauty – is to be fulfilled there. Its surprise and doubt regarding art as a whole are caused by the fact that the single term "art" stands many concepts rather than for a single one: not only traditional A*, but also A** or A*** (probably more), sociological definitions which do not refer to anything beyond art, therefore essentially circular. The lesson for surprised traditionalists is a lesson in Semantics.

We will remain in the field of Semantics. It is the key concept as to the role of representation in conceptual art.

Represented: semantic content

It is not our goal to debate whether this or that conceptual author is in a way connected to a traditional view of art or to what extent and in which particular work. Here we are interested in conceptualism as a whole, its common core, and such a Hegelian totalized outlook can be, as we know, unfair at some border cases. But border cases aside.¹⁶

¹⁶ On the differences between particular authors see Aue (1971). It could be objected that there are such cases of conceptual art which are semantically univocal, instructive and autonomous. This can be answered in the following way: if this is a matter of fact then such a work should not be counted as a conceptual one; in other words, if it is univocal, instructive and autonomous and not semantically contextual then it is a work of traditional art.

It has been said that conceptual art, by regarding artworks as conventional symbols, substitute natural language. However, from the representational point of view this fact complicates an explication why a *urinal* or a *snow shovel* (these notorious musketeers stand for all here) should be artworks. These *ready-mades* were not made as intended artworks, but instead they were chosen as artworks among others products of the same type. In attempting at an explication of their value both theory of similarity and the wider theory of representation (stronger conventionalist as a theory of socially negotiated meanings) collapse. Nevertheless, these works are parts of the modern western art canon. Maybe a kind of weaker conventionalism should be an acceptable way of the explication of their value:

A is a conceptual artwork =df A has content (is about something).

By the phrase "to have a content" it is to be understood a given work has to denote what a given work is about. The goal of competent critics is to discover and introduce such content to others by describing it. Let us call theories explaining value of works as vehicles of conventionally decodable meanings *semantic theories*.¹⁷ Unfortunately, from the very beginning it is clear that the aforementioned definition extends the extension to the realm of triviality because every entity in the Universe is – in a way – about something. In extreme cases it says about itself that it says nothing. Then, the relation among the theory of similarity, representation and theory of semantic content can be seen as a simple relationship of inclusion: whatever is similar represents. But not all that represents is similar. Whatever representation is, it has semantic content. But not all that has semantic content represents: there are various ways how to be about something.

¹⁷ This label offers itself. Conceptualists can be seen as authors or philosophers without using natural language. Nevertheless, they often read later Wittgenstein internalizing his skeptical view on natural language borders. In this way conceptual art can be seen positively as a specific attempt at expressing unexpressable – the ultimate goal of total art. See, in particular, Carroll (1999), Godfrey (1998), Kosuth (1990), Wood (2002), Young (2001), Meyer (1972).

According to the theory of semantic content, nothing that does not have the property *to have coded content* can be an artwork. *Hamlet* is about hesitation (at least in Lawrence Olivier's interpretation), Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is about defiance and courage, Milos Forman's movie *Amadeus* is about mediocrity and talent, Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Gimpl the Fool* is about wisdom, evil, and literature, Picasso's opus magnum *Guernica* is about the horror of war. OK. But what is – in comparison to the aforementioned artworks – a *urinal* or a *snow shovel* about? What exactly do they represent? Do they involve an instruction for decoding themselves? Our wariness at answering mostly springs from their serial origin: they are not aesthetically intended artifacts but *objects trouvée*, indistinguishable from their brothers and sisters – other *urinals* and other *snow shovels*. Normally, Duchamp did not make them as works of aesthetic interest (see definition A*). His creation lies in finding and exhibiting them in an art gallery.

Nevertheless, our aesthetical skepticism, if any, could not lead into fatal defetism. The concept *to be about something* can be inspiring. In some nontrivial sense, the concept explains what differs Duchamp's *urinal* or *snow shovel* from the other, non-artistic, although indistinguishable serially manufactured shovels and urinals. The distinguishing feature is the *context*: ready-made objects have a natural property to be located at a certain place at a certain time under certain circumstances and under some intention by someone who is accepted as an artist by other artists (see the aforementioned definition A***).¹⁸ Well, Duchamp's objects are about something. About what? The most widespread answer is that both (and many later) are *about art itself*, *about what is art as art*, *about what artifactuality as a necessary condition for being artwork means*, *about the meaning of art*, *about discrepancy between an ideal of art and everyday artistic practices*, *about humor in art or parodization themselves* – if seen as sculptures, *about possible multiplication their tokens and so on*. Probably the best description of “aboutness” of conceptual art is offered by Kosuth: art is about art – it is uninformative, pure trivial “tautology”:

¹⁸ There is proper sociologizing definition of art in the background – Dickie's or Levinson's or similar essentially based on the social context.

It was the feeling I had about the gap between materials and ideas that led me to present a series of photostats of the dictionary definitions of water. I was interested in just presenting the *idea* of water. I had used actual water earlier because I like its colorless, formless quality. I didn't consider the photostat as a work of art; only the idea was art. The words in the definition supplied the *art information*; just as the shape and color of a work could be considered its art information... In this series, I went from presenting an abstraction of a particular (water, air) to abstractions of abstractions (meanings, empty, universal, nothing, time).¹⁹

Or think about the following sentences describing Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (real chair, its photography 1:1, and its dictionary definition alongside; evident allusion to Peirce's model of a sign):

An example of documentation, where the "real" work is the concept – "What is a chair?", "How do we represent a chair?". And hence, "What is art?" and "What is representation?". It seems a tautology: a chair is a chair is a chair, much as he claimed that "art is art is art" was tautologous. The three elements that we can actually see... are ancillary to it.²⁰

Considerations of this kind about various features of art can occur in perceiving or interpreting *the urinal* and *the snow shovel*. But caution is needed: when your partner asks you to clear snow from a pavement lending you a *non-Duchampian* shovel, you should not be tempted to interpret your snow shovel as an artwork. Because your serially manufactured shovel isn't about anything. The same for any urinal: meditation over a pub urinal can have dangerous consequences. Again: a serially manufactured urinal is about nothing. It is easy to generalize. An argument stating artistic exclusivity of *Duchampian* objects has the form of an argument to the best explanation.

1. A urinal and a snow shovel are ready-made – serially manufactured – things.

¹⁹ Kosuth (1969, 23).

²⁰ Godfrey (1998, 10).

2. *Duchamp* (the artist pronounced as an artist by artworld experts) chose a particular *urinal* and a particular *snow shovel* from their ready-made serials and exhibited them as artworks.
 3. *Duchamp's* urinal and snow shovel were accepted as artworks by artworld experts.
 4. Other urinals and snow shovels were not accepted as artworks by artworld experts.
 5. *Duchamp's* urinal and snow shovel are exclusive because they are about something.
 6. If artworld experts believe that x is about something then x is an artwork.
- \therefore *Duchamp's* urinal and snow shovel are artworks.

A common feature of the arthood of conceptual art is their need of interpretation. It is a necessary condition. Where is a sufficient one? It is meaningful to ask what such works are about. It is not meaningful to ask what ordinary, unchosen urinals and snow shovels are about; they do not have semantic content in the same way how such content was given to Duchampian things.

Conceptual artists realize that *art itself as a meaning of all works* trivializes the whole business. Theory of representation collapses. Conventional ambiguity leads to random interpretation. To make an interpretation univocal, to give works a way, authors accompany their works by verbal legends serving as interpreting addenda. Examples. A work of the Czech group Ztohoven is about the possible misuse of personal identity data. A work by Federico Díaz is to be about a new kind of intimacy; another one of Díaz's works mixes your personal aroma in front of his golden tear and – later – such perfume will remind you *any* emotion you experienced when sitting in front of the tear. Any emotion, what else: from the standpoint of representation, such work does not offer any guideline for univocal interpretation. Without a verbal clue decoding is completely up to the audience. Anything goes.

If the theory of semantic content, however, has a deeper ambition than an explanation of only one branch or art, a difficulty appears. In

traditional art *being about something* is only necessary condition. Here, it seems conceptualists states that *being about something* is both necessary and sufficient condition for whatever to be an artwork.

1. All artworks require interpretations.
 2. Whatever what requires interpretation has to be *about something*.
- ∴ All artworks have to be about something.

It is immediately clear that *to be about something* as a sufficient condition for being art is too weak, far too wide. Being about something does not specify art from other signifying systems which are *eo ipso* about something. What is missing is extra *distinguishing* sufficient condition. That brings us to the beginning: traditional art believed that anything represented should be transformed into *something beautiful*. This fact distinguishes representational practices of traditional art from representational practices, say, traffic signs. As everybody competent knows, the following poem by Emily Dickinson surely does not belong among traffic signs:

I died for beauty, but was scare
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
'For beauty,' I replied.
'And I for truth, - the two are one;
We brethren, are' he said.

And so, as kinsmen, met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

Finally, a short summary. Conceptual art has been profiting from a puzzling homonymy of the term "art". In such a way, it enjoys a respect which traditional art has gained. As a necessary and sufficient condition of arthood the property *to be about something* is stated. How-

ever, such condition trivializes art. This lapsus is to be avoided by accompanying conceptual works by verbal addenda having the goal in specifying interpretation. But this appears to be a category mistake: such works want to communicate through inadequate means – it is not clear why they do not use a natural language. They appear as authors without literature.

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