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# “What, After All, Is Art?”: The Perplexing Question and Art Education

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*Abstract: Art education literature has not given great deal of attention to that which constitutes the very content of art education, i.e. art. This reluctance to deal with art seems justified, given that there exists no overall accepted definition or interpretation of what art actually is. In this paper, we shall argue that, despite the difficulty, it is absolutely necessary to try to understand and reflect on the multidimensional and polyvalent phenomenon of art. We shall claim that without a deep understanding of the nature, the role and scope of art, the field of art education can not be adequately delineated. Without this understanding, questions about the kind of objects and values which should be studied within art education are held over, its content risks being hetero-defined and its special contribution underestimated. Beginning with an understanding of art as a complex phenomenon, deeply implicated in historical and cultural transformations and changes, this paper argues for the necessity of a critical rethinking of art. We shall try to show that the question “what is art?” is a key question in order to draw attention to the multiplicity and the open nature of the artistic phenomenon, upon which our educational choices will be found. Our object is not to impose one and only answer as a unique and unwavering option, but to describe an educational condition which recognizes the multiple practices and the many points of view as parts of the organized activity and knowledge about art, while putting them under critical examination.*

Keywords: Re-thinking Art, De-definition/Re-definition of Art, Art Interpretation, Aesthetic Experience, Art Education

## The De-definition of Art

**A** STRANGE BUT otherwise quite fascinating court trial took place in America in 1926. The parties were, on one side a sculptor named Brancusi and the United States on the other. The court was asked to decide whether the artist should pay the import taxes imposed by customs on his works, a collection brought into the country for a personal art exhibition. Although American law waived import duties on all items considered works of art, a customs official decided that the Brancusi sculptures didn't fall into the art category and levied the high duties applicable for commercial products. The sculptor took the case to court. During the greatly publicized trial noted artists, intellectuals and art critics took the stand for or against Brancusi, placing before the judges a troublesome issue: when an object is a work of art?

If we were to classify the arguments presented during the trial we would arrive at two distinctive groups, which represent two contradicting aesthetic perspectives. The first seeks to answer the question “what is art?” from “within”, based on a set of properties an object needs or doesn't need to have to be considered an object of art or not. The second group

tries to answer the same question from “outside,” based on the aesthetic response of the observer.

How are we positioned between these two perspectives and more importantly, how is this dilemma going to be presented in a school environment within the context of aesthetic and art education? There are many problems and dead ends in both cases. If we seek to answer the question “what is art?” adopting a formalistic perspective, we risk ending up with standardization and repetition of aesthetic models. Moving in the opposite direction, we run the risk to arrive in a form of relativism where the artistic property is related to a subjective and arbitrary decision.

Both of these perspectives will consistently lead us to an impasse unless we take the time to consider what is the essence of our educational intervention, what fuels it, gives it meaning and replenishes it. And this is none other than our effort to study and comprehend the art phenomenon by coordinating the act of teaching with artistic act as well as with critical reflection relative to art. Students’ involvement in art making, being the basis of art education, can’t be defined unless intertwined with a number of issues, procedures and knowledge concerning both the processes of creation as well as reception, providing them (the students) with the means to construct a complete and cohesive picture.

However, the very nature of these processes resists a normative teaching approach, i.e. one that would begin by subscribing to a rigid theoretical instrument, which in turn would be used to rigidly define the method to create and perceive a work of art. Inherently this attitude would be limiting and restrictive in character and arrive at a dead end, since it’s not possible to convey a comprehensive picture of visual arts without taking in serious consideration the multitude of approaches and radical changes that have taken place in this field as well as the rapid developments occurring of today.

These developments and changes relate to the grand adventure of art, which began in early 20<sup>th</sup> century with modernism and the abrupt reorientation of our notion as to what art is and what art does and ended with the declaration of its annihilation. Artistic innovations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a frenzy of successive experimentations, testing the limits of the artistic field, to the extend of maximum dispersion and the realization of what some thinkers described as the death or end of art (Vattimo<sup>1</sup> for example) while others saw it as the departure of art from its history (see Belting; Danto, 1987; Danto, 1997<sup>2</sup>). Historical avant-gardes questioned the status of art. They placed traditional forms and art making techniques under

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Vattimo doesn’t view this ‘end of art’ in a negative way; on the contrary, he decides to investigate the positive aspects opening up for art at the time of its death or its ‘decline’, associating it with the end of the metaphysical era. He positions art in the world of mass culture and places the artistic products in the space reserved for art work, which reveals the truth of the age in which we live connecting it with the ephemeral traits of a fleeting, weakened existence, with a weak Being. This, according to Vattimo, is its positive contribution: the artistic product is the only manufactured product which inscribes ageing as a positive event, inserting itself actively into the determination of new possibilities of meaning (see Vattimo: chapter 3).

<sup>2</sup> According to Arthur Danto, art, or rather the history of art, reached its end when it turned to a kind of self-interrogation and undertook a program of revelation of its real essence. This turning point coincides with modern art, which orientated itself toward a re-examination of its own nature and proceeded to a Kantian critique of its own conditions of possibility. Art entered thus its pure philosophical phase; it became self-conscious and launched out into a series of experiments, through which it looked for an answer to the question about its own essence. But it failed. And it failed because it tried to find an answer that it was of a philosophical order, i.e. not up to it to give. After that, art could not go any further in its investigations about itself; its course toward its final goal stopped. The history of art came to its end. The art, which comes after, is acting beyond its history; whatever happens in the domain of the arts after modernism is an ‘after event’ or an ‘after-the-end-event’.

scrutiny and sank it into a crisis as they reformulated the question about the definition of art as a problem but they didn't reach the point of confusion which would make art an event without discernible limits and would lead in the process Rosenberg called de-definition of art<sup>3</sup>. Art took this direction during the '60s. Since then and through a series of successive movements, avant-garde currents or simple periodic trends of artistic fashion there was a decisive reversal: the singularity of art works was lifted (i.e. Warhol's duplicates) and the individual character of the aesthetic experience was denounced (pop-art, happening, Fluxus, conceptual art etc, etc) leading to the questioning of art as it had been defined within the context of modern tradition as well as the modernistic example. Artists left art behind them or –which has the same result– assumed everything they make or do is art, as noted by Rosenberg in early 1970s. Painting, sculpture, theater, music entered in the phase of their own de-definition. The nature of art became uncertain, ambiguous. No one could with any degree of certainty say what a work of art is or, something even more important, what isn't a work of art. The object of art, wherever it survived as a discernible object, became

“an anxious object, an object that does not know whether it's a masterpiece or trash”  
(Rosenberg: 12).

Furthermore, during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to our days, the need to secure a place in the new reality drove a large portion of contemporary art production to strive for maximum proximity with the current aesthetics of production, transmission and reproduction of fluid, changing images (as in all these kinds of the so-called New Media Art: video art, computer art, animation, internet and cyber art, digital art, satellite art etc). From the modernistic defense for absolute autonomy, art passed into a situation of inflationary multiplication of copies (simulacra), putting thus even more emphatically the question as to where the limits between art and non-art, between a work of art and a common object are. The condition of constant questioning and high uncertainty, created by the art de-definition process, created the urgent need for historians, theoreticians and philosophers to restate the issue as to how do we recognize something as art or art work.

### **Is it Necessary to Define Art?**

Traditionally works of art did not share any characteristics with common objects and every attempt to define the character of an art work in terms of material or phenomenological properties of its non-artistic counterpart was considered impossible. From the moment ready-mades entered the art scene this conviction was doubted. Nothing was left from the traditional distinction between works of art and non artistic products when it was accepted that objects sharing the same material and perceptual properties with their counterparts are works of art. Following the invasion of these indiscernibilia in the world of art, can we still argue that a work of art is an object with fixed perceptual properties, same as with a mere real thing –in Danto's terms–, or a natural object, or should we accept that it's the subject of an interpretation–identification process that defines it as such?

Arthur Danto for example talks about identifying some objects as works of art not through terms of perception but through an interpretation process. Only interpretation can explain

<sup>3</sup> Harold Rosenberg claims that art, as well as the personality of the artist, becomes, - in the de-defining process – an event without predefined limits (see Rosenberg).

the *transformation* of a common object into a work of art. How, for example, Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes can be perceived as art objects? What makes an otherwise common object into a work of art since the differences it may have from the original are indiscernible or even non-existent? The answer, according to Danto, is found in the fact that the structure of an art work is not necessarily something that has to do with line arrangement, forms or colors but rather with a transformational process. Since between Warhol's Brillo boxes and the original Brillo cartons there are no sensorily discerned or 'aesthetic' differences, what transforms the former into works of art is an interpretative process, a non-spontaneous or instinctive response but rather something that requires knowledge and some sort of participation in the atmosphere, in that special "climate" created by the "world of art." The interpretation of a work of art becomes possible through the context of a specific social-historical environment and requires knowledge of the terms under which the *institution* of the world of art is shaped and can be conceived. We could thus say that a work of art is a product of knowledge and interpretation. Besides, for Danto, who, elaborating further on his thoughts, suggests a definition for artwork as an embodied meaning, the interpretative process is the process allowing us to grasp the thought of the work—as he puts it—the meaning expressed by the work in non-explicit terms (Danto, 2003: 139). Margolis also suggests that we approach artworks as "physically embodied cultural emergent entities", which are not fixed and which are constantly restructured in the perpetual process of interpretation (See Margolis: chapter 3).

From a different viewpoint but similar disposition Nelson Goodman refrains from defining an artwork based on the material properties of its physical counterpart. He too believes that an ontological definition of art and artworks is not possible and looks for a functionalistic approach recommending to substitute the question "what is art?" with "when is art?", and replies to the latter by stating that art is when an object functions symbolically as artwork. Thus art, for Goodman, does not exist per se but only when some characteristic symbols prevail and are interpreted as such. An object is considered artwork when it functions aesthetically, that is when it displays certain aesthetic symptoms, such as density, repleteness, exemplification, multiplicity and complexity of reference. In other words, it constitutes a symbolic system calling for constant attention and interpretation (see Goodman, 1968: chapter VI and Goodman, 1978: chapter IV).

With the introduction of concepts like transformation of the commonplace, institution or symbolic function and more generally with the adoption of recent anti-ontological tendencies, the argument about art is not articulated in terms of perception, it breaks free from any obligation to define the art's Being and leads to an endless expansion of the field of art through interpretative processes.

## **The Hard Question and Art Education**

What does that mean for art education? If the nature of art changes, if new theories about art emerge and the artworld is changing and expanding constantly, shouldn't art education change as well? Shouldn't we reposition art education's content, and if so, to what direction? How can we redraw the map of art education's content in this uncharted era of art after—as some say—the end of art? And what this new map should include? Should we include, in this new art education content, all these objects and actions of contemporary art that seem so elusive, uncontrollable and unpredictable? Shouldn't that pose the risk to open the field

of art education (same as the art world's) to such a degree that its boundaries become indistinct and its structure imperceptible? "What if it were not possible to draw a map of the content of our field?" as Brent Wilson wonders (Wilson: 214)

And yet, in this climate of concern and contemplation, art educators and art theoreticians continue to defend the value of study and the involvement with arts drawing attention to the fact that arts constitute a vital and distinct area within the cultural map<sup>4</sup>. Although they can't but wonder how can one continue to do this (see for example: Eisner, 2001; Efland; Dorn; Wilson). Not long ago, the purpose of art education was defined by the hold on particular objects; objects with unique or special character, which were created by conscientious use of the imagination intending to produce objects that could be exhibited in art galleries and museums—and which would be clearly different, distinct from common things. Today though, as the differences between these and other objects are almost lost from view, what criteria do we have to define objects suitable for art education and what method do we choose to introduce arts in school? Obviously, not as something given, unilaterally designated and unvarying, but, in any case, as something that differs from other educational fields and proposes its own ever-changing territory, in line with the constant fluctuations of modern and contemporary art.

Accordingly, it seems that there is only one answer to the question posed higher up in the previous page: we have to draw a new content map for art education; a map which could include all these new objects and continuing advances of contemporary art. As Eisner emphatically declared already at the 70s, art education needs to stop ignoring the emerging contemporary art (see Eisner, 1972) and we could add that it would be better not only not to ignore it but to see it as an opportunity to move beyond established academic structures and at the same time be involved "with ideas and issues that have the potential to teach us the most about our lives in the contemporary world" (Wilson: 226).

In any case, drafting this new map requires us to look into this vast new landscape called world of art and find orientation points and guiding coordinates.

### **What, After All, Is Art?**<sup>5</sup>

Consequently the question 'what is art?' is of paramount importance and it should be transformed into the key that will allow us to study the diversity and wealth of the art phenomenon, restated as follows: can we still talk about art as a proper name, despite the variable character of its multiple expressions and different historical appearances? Likewise, can we identify what is art in this unfixated cultural landscape of our days and use it as a foundation for our teaching choices? Or should we finally accept as satisfactory the answer—just because it's non binding—which not only recognizes multiplicity but declares the unlimited expansion of the art field subscribing to the view that "anything can be art"? Can this be the answer that will free us from the pressure to define the disobedient phenomenon we have to deal with in the context of art education? What, accepting such an omni-possibility condition, would mean? Could it be that we asked the question only to invalidate it on principle? For if we accept that "anything is possible" and under the same token "anything visible can be

<sup>4</sup> Danto, discussing the cultural landscape seen as a map divided in zones (the world of art, mass media and popular culture) notes that the borders that used to keep these zones apart are almost gone or in the process of elimination.

<sup>5</sup> We paraphrase here the title of one of Margolis' lectures (included in his book under the same title) "What, After All, Is a Work of Art?" (see Margolis: chapter 3).

visual work” (Danto 1997: 198), then there is no need to ask questions about what is art and artworks. Art, or the entire artistic field, becomes infinite and the concept of art indifferent, cancelled out by its own abuse. Pluralism, in the world of art, reached the point where it threatens its independence to the point where art is in danger to be absorbed by the ever expanding sphere of visual culture.

To what degree something like this can stand and in any case «what does it mean to live in a world where anything can be a work of art?” as Danto wonders (Danto, 2000: xxix) or, something of immediate concern to educators, to teach in a school where anything visible can be seen as artwork suitable to student’s art education, where anything can be art education? Danto, answering his own question, talks about re-enchantment of the world and he associates it with the transfiguration of all kinds of objects –even the most common ones– into artworks through their meaningful use. This answer, promising a world flooded by meaningful objects, may appeal as a possible return to a world endowed with semantic plenitude but it is problematic both ontologically and from the point of art education. If anything can be art then how are we going to help students understand what art is?

“Without a discernible difference between ordinary things and works of art, there is not rational basis for deciding what to teach” (Efland: 40).

So, where is this difference? If there are no visible, perceptual properties to allow us to differentiate a work of art from other things, as Danto claims, how can we set apart one that is art from another that isn’t? Are we going to accept the dubious interpretative license taken by the ‘world of art’ which turns art into a reservoir for all kinds of objects? Should it be better to resign completely from our efforts to find a definition and look for the condition inside which anything can work as art, as Goodman suggests? If what permits us to differentiate something as art is not to be found in the objects themselves, shouldn’t we look for it in the specific way of these objects functioning? In other words, if we have no means to understand the difference between artworks and common objects ontologically then maybe we should adopt another more pragmatic approach. This is exactly what Goodman does when he shifts the question “what is art?” to “when is art?”, as we saw earlier in section 2. A shift that associates art with *how* instead of *what*, that is with a function, as Goodman suggests, since we have art when something behaves *symbolically* as art, when something is perceived as aesthetically fertile from the *point of symbolic meaning*. Of course this symbolic model can in essence aestheticize everything; every mere real thing, since it can be conceived as a symbol, it is possible to be considered as a vehicle for aesthetic meaning (in the case that is that it can present a wealth of references etc). Consequently, anything can be perceived as artwork provided it can fulfil such aesthetic symbolic function.

Yet, accepting that everything is or can work as art, instead of providing an answer to the perpetual ‘what is art’ question, circumvents the question leading to a sterile relativism (the relativism mentioned in the beginning of this work), while at the same time it presupposes, even in a unclear way, all those things it is supposed to overcome. If anything can be art then it is prerequisite that we already know, somehow, what art is so that we can identify what items can enter its realm and when the question is shifted to ‘when do we have art?’ then we still have to define the properties needed by an object to allow it to function aesthetically. In other words, there is always something that is viewed as art even if there are no



fixed characteristics or specific defining properties. There is something we are called to appreciate as art. But where and how can it be identified?

If ontological as well as anti-ontological, pragmatic or even relativist approaches fail to give a sufficient answer as to what differentiates common from art objects, then, possibly, the difference between artworks and non artworks should be sought not in the objects themselves or in their function but in the experience we have with our interaction with these objects. That is, we should look for an experience through which we could differentiate the works of art from the common objects, even if they (common objects and artworks) are phenomenologically identical (as in the case of the ready-mades or the indiscernibilia mentioned by Danto). As to what kind of an experience is this, certain remarks of Kant concerning genius and the aesthetic idea (see Kant: §49) could offer us vital clues in grasping its unique character as mental, imaginative engagement with meanings and ideas presented in sensible form.

According to Kant, artworks, indirectly presenting ideas that otherwise would remain unavailable to intuition, use their aesthetic attributes to provoke ‘more thought’ than it could be generated in a direct conceptual elaboration of these ideas and in that sense they ‘quicken’ the mind. Aesthetic ideas embodied in a work of art encourage the imagination

“to spread itself over a multitude of related representations, which let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words” (Kant: §49, Ak. 5: 315, p. 193)

raising at the same time in him a multitude of feelings (Kant: §49, Ak. 5: 316, p. 194). Thus the aesthetic experience, as it is meant here, is associated with the grasp of an aesthetically presented meaning which causes a feeling of mental vitality (or “a feeling of life”, as per Kant); it is a feeling that animates the intellect and the imagination (Kant, §49, Ak. 5: 315, p. 194) and not a mere emotional response.

Idea, thought, imagination, feeling, all are offered interwoven within the aesthetic experience, and the work of art is defined as that which facilitates and guides with complex (by stimulation of our cognitive powers) ways, the expansion of aesthetically embodied ideas. The issue thus is set forth in terms of aesthetic ideas or conception and development of embodied meanings in an aesthetic way (in a way that stimulates simultaneously the intellect, the imagination and the senses). This approach allows us to redirect the issue of artwork definition, liberating us from both the restrictions and partiality of ontological definitions and the relativism of institutional or interpretative practices. Besides, such an aesthetic approach may be the answer to the question as to how we can handle all these unsettling emergences in the world of recent art, since it offers a way to come to terms with the cognitive aspects of art after the end of art, or after modernism and its formalistic orientation (see Costello: 128-132).

This doesn’t mean though that the burden of defining what is art and artwork is transferred to the aesthetic experience. This would include the risk of, through aesthetic reception, appointing the quality of artwork to an infinite number of objects and thus would again lead to the impasse of relativism. It means that an aesthetic experience arises when we come in contact with an object which, much more than something we derive pleasure from, becomes an instrument of the spirit because it teaches us how to see and ultimately gives us something to think about as no analytical or other work or common object can (see Merleau-Ponty, 1993b: 114).

## Towards a Redirection of Art Education

This change in viewpoint has significant implications for art education. Art education is therefore redirected to the artistic expression as emergence of meaning and looks for the ways this meaning relates with the students as viewers, the ways with which “it puts their lives in perspective” (Danto, 2003: 142). This redirection of art education is also taking a critical-reflective character, in view of the fact that it places and examines the art phenomenon in its historical and social dimensions in order to illustrate that art presents the many, as well as different, ways people may use to project the meaning of their relation with their world and culture. Within art education, art is recognized as a term indicating a meeting between an object bearing the imprint of a person from a specific time with a subject who sees, feels, reflects and lives also in a specific social and cultural context. Consequently, it is also accepted that it is impossible to prescribe the meaning of art in a universal and timelessly accepted normative way. However, this doesn’t mean that art educators should stop asking ‘what is art?’, on the contrary, they must pose the question constantly, they must enrich it and continue to revise their concerns about this vast field of human expression. In other words, they must not promote a singular approach towards art but rather an *attitude*; one of perpetual and insightful search, time and again, for the different ideas or meanings embodied in a work of art.

Artistic creation is born as a new way to perceive the world and resides within a specific social and cultural framework, already bearing the seed for its own change. No work of art is fully completed, says Merleau-Ponty, no creation is considered a permanent acquisition (Merleau-Ponty, 1993c: 149), and yet it neither exhausts itself in the instant at which it occurs. What it does is to inaugurate an order of *advent*, which is neither transcendental nor perennial but “it sketches out, it calls for, a series of successive steps.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993b: 106). This way art is presented as a perpetual conversation between expressive endeavors each of which questions and validates the other, where each one recreates all others.

Thus, to be aesthetically educated means to be able to accept the numerous viewpoints, the multitude of journeys and stops associated with artistic activity and aesthetic reception. The value of students encounter with art lays in the enhancement of their ability to ask questions, make an issue of them, share them with others, revise them, reexamine them and, most importantly, discover what they mean for their own lives, the implications within one’s self. What, at the end of this encounter, makes the student decide that he/she lived a genuine artistic experience is the sense of an ‘exceptional presence’, the fact that he or she found the work itself exceptionally present and themselves exceptionally present within the work (see Ardouin).

From this aspect, our educational intervention keeps expanding on the question “what is art?” and continues to revise it by placing the multiple accounts and practices of the organized knowledge for art, in the past and present, against an open, investigative and critical examination. This attitude places educators against a great challenge: to show first and foremost that artistic creation is an effort to articulate meaning in visual form. For Merleau-Ponty art is a primarily expressive activity giving meaning to human experience; it’s an attempt to give form to something that otherwise would remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1993a: 68). Placing the *expressive effort* in the very beginning of both artistic creation and educational intervention, provides the key to understand the

principal reason for which art transcends rules, standards, and more so stereotypes and at the same time shows that the practice of art is in itself fulfilling

“because it satisfies certain expressive needs and cultural functions through the making of objects that objectify meaning.” (Dorn: 50).

Visual arts education becomes thus significant not only as an area that simply accepts but also advances the variability and diversity as intrinsic characteristics of the artistic phenomenon and promotes the historical and cultural dimensions of the artworks. The only *constant* it recognizes is that there is an emergent expressive meaning, which in the end allows identifying an object as artwork. As Dorn puts it

“When we identify a work as being a work of art, it must be possible to determine the expressive meaning ... of the work. Meaning in this sense requires that works of art have content that can be cognitively or affectively experienced ....” (Dorn: 50).

Consequently, art education is meant as an intervention promoting the ever changing status of the notion of the artistic and the multiplicity of views and approaches. The educational value of this effort is the fact that it makes it easier for students to understand the perplexity, fluidity and mobility of artistic tradition, the dynamics of change in art and, in broader terms, the evolutionary nature of culture. In other words, art education cannot be established as a closed model; it constitutes an educational field strewn with choices, through which the encounter with this expressive effort that is art becomes possible.

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