

Is There a Relationship Between Art and an Aesthetic Experience?

Kant, Schiller, and Hume say an aesthetic experience is a unique, pleasurable event. It is a moment of fused “faculties” or “drives” that bring us a new appreciation of beauty. That much is free of scrutiny here. The relation between *beauty* and *art* is not. Art has been classified by whom or what? And what precisely is this classification? Most important, what are the consequences of such a classification?

This essay addresses the title question using both an analysis of Arthur Danto’s *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (*Phil. Dis. of Art*) and an application to Marcel Duchamp’s *Apropos of Readymades*.

Arthur Danto’s approach begins with two basic assumptions: first, art does not make anything happen, as evidenced by the historical stubbornness of political will; second, art has a dangerous regard. Danto rectifies these two seemingly contradicting points with the claim that “representing art as something that in its nature can make nothing happen is not so much of a view opposed to the view that art is dangerous: it is a way of responding to the sensed danger of art by treating it metaphysically as though there were nothing to be afraid of ” (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 4). The ultimate stance is that “philosophy itself” is to blame for art’s historical deprivation (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 7).

Let us outline art's lack of utility through Kant and Plato. Danto says there are two distinct stages in the Platonic attack of describing art as a philosophical entity: present an ontological argument that the realities of things are shielded from any artistic expressions of them; then rationalize artworks so far – “bit by bit” – that one sees them as specific concepts organized together to make a specific representation (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 7). Friedrich Nietzsche speaks of the latter as responsible for the deaths of tragedy and comedy, for their irrationality was incompatible with the principle that what is beautiful must be rational. Nietzsche calls this “aesthetic socratism.” This high bar for art – set in place by Plato and continued by practitioners of philosophy since – is “treating [art] as doing what philosophy itself does, only uncouthly” (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 7).

Continuing on the topic of art's lack of utility, let us recall Kant's *disinterest* – the important attitude with which one perceives art aesthetically. This idea of Kant's is well-understood through his implication of universal judgments whereby having an interest, “some personal or social reason for caring is that something exists,” is incompatible (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 9). Danto, however, applies the Kantian concept as something that inhibits social difference or change. He says that if one must have *disinterest* in an artwork, the work's lack of social meaning and therefore change of meaning inhibits any possibility of an impact on social change. Plato, says Danto, believed the fitting role of the philosophers was the role of the king because the philosopher lacks social interests and is instead concerned with pure forms. Pure forms avert humans from the things that

inhibit *disinterested* decision-making, “money, power, sex, love,” and, most relevant, art (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 9). Both Kant and Plato would then agree that art ontologically, as some emotive agent, is a “vacation place from our defining concerns as human” (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 9). In such a way, art does not make anything happen. Danto quotes W.H. Auden who says:

I know that all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, did not save a single Jew. Those attitudes, those writings, only help oneself (2).

and Chester Kallman:

Artists and politicians would get along better at a time of crisis like the present, if the latter would only realize that the political history of the world would have been the same if not a poem had been written, nor a picture painted, nor a bar of music composed (2).

It is not history that is responsible for art’s weakness, art’s “insubstantiation... may be one of the great victories of political metaphysics,” Danto claims (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 5).

To sum up the claims made above, Danto’s sentiments lead one to believe that the relationship between art (up to the modern age) and an aesthetic experience is philosophically restricted.

Then art ended!

And there was an advent of a new paradigm of art, to the credit of Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp spoke of the aforementioned “danger of art” – which

was responsible for philosophy's ferocious, long-standing attack – as art's "aesthetic delectation" or aesthetic pleasure (*Apropos of Readymades*, 1; *Phil. Dis. of Art*, 13). With Duchamp and the withholding of aesthetic pleasure from our artistic consumption, the relationship be-



The Fountain by Marcel Duchamp (and some plumbing manufacturer)

tween art and the aesthetic experience is inevitably reformed. Danto asks rhetorically, "But then what should art be if it throws off the bondage to prettiness?" (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 13). The answer is that the essence of art should move away from surfaces, or, as I prefer, visuals. The difficulty of this new art is identifying what exactly its essence should move to. Danto's efforts to identify the transition itself are much more outlined than his identification of its destination.

Duchamp's *Fountain* is a good piece to apply this transformation and find art's new essence. Urinals represent a lot to society – and to visualize a urinal one is unable to see it *disinterestedly*. Duchamp's style of this kind is called "readymades" which, as far as exhibited pieces go, are as naturally authentic of an everyday object as possible to ensure one's interested consumption (*Apropos of Readymades*). Around the time of the exhibition, the gender exclusivity of urinals was a contentious, hot-button issue, furthering one's inability to *disinterestedly* appreciate the *Fountain's* colors, form, and composition. However,

maybe Duchamp disagreed with all this when he said, "A urinal? Who would be interested in that?" (*Phil. Dis. of Art*, 14).

To reflect personally, I find I strongly agree with the assertions of both Danto and Duchamp. Principally, I enjoy their efforts to break through historical trends using the hammer of self-referentialness. A consumer of art does not stand in front of an object of *interest* – assuming it is "supposed to be art" – without asking "Why should this be art?". The new art insists upon itself. On Dante's basis of the philosophical disenfranchisement of art's ability to make anything happen, I was convinced. I previously posited that art was capable of making tangible change in society, though my position has shifted to Dante's account. What is true to me now, is that old (non-modern) art, meant for *disinterested* consumption was a static entity that can serve its future as a souvenir and marker of its time – even socially and politically. To its contemporaries, art was unable to affect change. The artworks of old that hang in the museums of the world are historical artifacts as much as they were works of art, and in this way, they can mark social progress through history only.

In *Apropos of Readymades* Duchamp describes his intentions of limiting the production or exhibition of his readymades to "protect [them] against such contamination" of "habit-forming." My assumption is Duchamp recognized the 'potency' of his paradigm-shifting art style could dilute over time. To me, this presents an issue for the future of art. How can art progress from here if its meaning diminishes? First, I redirect to the ideas elaborated on by Danto in *The*

End of Art in which this is discussed. Alternatively, however, I do believe that social context can save the dilution of the “new” art Duchamp expressed his fear in. If we consider, for example, technological solutions of the modern age from the perspective of the entrepreneur, we learn by looking back in history that there *always* remains a problem worth solving. Society is too dynamic for the contrary to be true. In this light, new art will always have new social contexts which pave the way for artistic commentary. Though the essence of art may drift away from pure self-referentialness, art will, however, always have something to comment on. In the end, anyway, the relationship between art and the aesthetic experience has *already* been broken.