

The intuitive idea of an artwork and the
pragmatic contexts artworks are involved in

Autor: Dr. phil. Hubertus Breuer

Adresse: 291 Park Place, Apt. 4
Brooklyn, NY 11238, USA

Email: hubertusbreuer@yahoo.com

Dissertation: <http://www.der-andere-verlag.de/buecher/kkk.html>

Kurzvita: Geboren 1967, Promotion 1998 bei Franz von Kutschera
an der Universität Regensburg über die Kontextualität von
Kunst; Journalist in New York, vor allem für den Spiegel
und die Zeit.

When we talk about art we have a vague but persistent idea of what we refer to. Being asked, most of us would give examples, such as paintings, poems, sculpture, music, drama, all these somehow fulfill intuitive requirements for art. These are all "entities" in a broad sense. Once we take into account the context in which these entities are presented, the certainty of what is art becomes slightly fuzzy. A painting in an advertisement, a motorbike in a museum, a sculpture as part of a religious ritual - in these cases our intuition about what constitutes an artwork usually is not as strong. As of the late twentieth century, philosophers confronted this question giving primacy to context over the artwork itself, namely in the institutional theory of art (George Dickie). They theorized that any institutionalized space for the purpose of presenting artworks makes any object within this context count as an artwork. But we usually still hesitate to admit that everything displayed within an art-space actually is a full-fledged artworks. Why? Here, I propose to take the definition of artworks to a more flexible and intuitively accessible level. What we consider to be artworks, I suggest, are entities embedded in specific actions. The types of actions that artworks can be a part of circumscribe a system in which we can locate them and realize how, depending on the different position of an entity within this system, we think of it as being an artwork or not.

The types of actions artworks are involved in can be classified into three categories, with each action possibly, though not necessarily, sharing aspects of the other two categories. They are: emotional, accounting for the subjective reaction one has towards dealing with an artwork. Further cognitive, in case we understand the artwork as part of an action. And finally social, in so far as any action involving an artwork can count as a social action within a specific social context (just as shaking hands counts as a greeting).

With these three categories (reminding one of Jürgen Habermas's three classes of speech-acts), one can describe the actions artworks are involved in. For example, when Greek Orthodox Christians cross themselves in front of an icon during mass, they mainly perform a social action, honoring Christ. Now, this action also has a cognitive aspect: by recognizing the icon, they honor Christ. It possibly also has an emotional component, as a person performing this social

action will feel one way or another, such as reverent. This model can be applied in similar ways to any action involving artworks, e.g. singing in a choir, playing a pianoconcerto, and contemplating a painting.

However, to have a conceptual framework for locating artworks within pragmatic contexts (contexts which make use of an artwork) is not enough. It only answers part of the question of how our idea of an artwork is construed. I want to propose we can see our idea of artworks as coming from a specific context of actions and for any entity that works successfully within such a context we are willing to call it an artwork.

The action we traditionally consider an artwork as being part of is aesthetic contemplation - an action that comprises both emotional and cognitive aspects of experiencing an entity. Certainly anything can be contemplated aesthetically - and not anything experienced this way counts intuitively as an artwork, e.g. a tree, a car or a Hamburger. To count as an artwork in our intuitive sense, the object has to be selected and presented by someone as an artwork for aesthetic contemplation. This can happen by making it clear via contextual circumstances (as in a museum) or by simply pointing us towards an object that we should experience something as an artwork. In Hamlet, the audience in the mousetrap scene is explicitly prepared that they are going to see a play: "For us and for our tragedy, here stooping to your clemency, We beg your hearing patiently".

The to be the object of aesthetic contemplation and to be directed towards it, is yet not enough to pin down what we mean by artworks. In addition, it makes sense to assume that those entities being presented as artworks are being presented to us as meaningful. The meaning of an artwork can be broadly defined as the way the artwork presents itself to the receiver music performances, abstract paintings, novels, etc. It can also be specified. Meaning is being ascribed to an entity in the simplest way as being a sign. Signs generally denote an object, either something different from themselves (a photograph), or not different from themselves (a fabric swatch). But artworks are special kinds of signs. Their meaning does not consist in what they denote,

but in the way a sign conceives of the denoted object - so not what it refers to is important, but how the referential object is present in the sign. Signs of this kind I'd like to call "symbols" (this concept derives from Gottlob Frege's differentiation between "sense" and "meaning").

Two symbols, e.g. two portraits, can denote the very same person, but conceive the person in different ways. This explains the meaning of representational aspects of artworks in a simple way: Important is the way in which an artwork conceives its denoted object, not the object itself. It also explains non-figurative art if seen as self-referential: An abstract artwork, e.g. a piece of music, denotes itself. Its meaning as a symbol consists in the way the denoted object is presented. The audience is experiencing the way it is presented. This is a solution for the multi faceted meaning of artworks, as many artworks combine both representational and nonrepresentational aspects (just think of Rauschenberg's works).

This definition can be seen as giving the building blocks that complex meaning is made of. Not every symbol, which presents what it denotes in its own sign-specific way, is an artwork. A swatch of fabric is not an artwork. This can be excluded by pointing out that our intuitive idea of artworks only refers to symbols that are intended for aesthetic contemplation, which a swatch is not. But so many symbols made for aesthetic contemplation still fail, and oftentimes the artcommunity, including critics, consumers, and producers dismiss things being presented as artworks as not being worthwhile. The funny twist is that a badly painted icon in an Orthodox Church can still fulfill its function, whereas it might totally fail in an art-gallery (Pierre Bourdieu refers to these different contexts "fields").

Here it helps to look at the context: the art-world is an environment, which in the widest sense is made for aesthetic contemplation of symbols. Now, the function of the church is to allow a community to praise God - and that might be achieved with a simple icon, regardless of its artistic merit. The function of

contexts created for the consumption of art - which, by the way, can be even a social practice such as reading a novel - is that the aesthetic experience makes the person feel like the action of aesthetic contemplation is beneficial. Not as an end for something else, but simply as an end for creating a fulfilling experience. If not, chances are that the person might dismiss the symbol as an artwork, declaring it bad art, i.e. it does not fulfill its pragmatic function. Therefore, these symbols have to succeed emotionally and/or cognitively creating an aesthetic experience.

This is a very rough description of our intuitive idea of artworks and the pragmatic context that feeds it. In reality, many artworks are involved in more complex and different actions, certainly not just aesthetic contemplation. Within the art-world, interactive approaches have become a major force within the last decades. But the goal of this very brief statement is only to explain what presently feeds our primary intuitions about art. Once this is understood, all the different tools given above the definition of an artwork as a "symbol" as well as the categorization of the types of actions artworks can be involved in - will help to locate and analyze artworks in all different kinds of pragmatic contexts. •

R e l e v a n t l i t e r a t u r e :

- Bourdieu, Pierre: *The rules of art. Genesis and structure of the literary field.* Stanford, California, 1996.
- Danto, Arthur: *The transformation of the commonplace.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1981.
- Dickie, George: *The art circle: A theory of art.* New York, 1984.
- Felshin, Nina (Hg.): *But is it art? The spirit of art as Activism.* Seattle, 1995.
- Frege, Gottlob: *Kleine Schriften.* Hildesheim, 1990.
- Gabriel, Gottfried: *Fiktion und Wahrheit. Eine semantische Theorie der Literatur.* Stuttgart, Bad Canstatt, 1975.
- Goodman, Nelson: *Languages of art.* Indianapolis, 1976.
- Grice, Paul: *Studies in the way of words.* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1989.
- Habermas, Jürgen: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken.* Frankfurt am Main, 1988.
- Kutschera, Franz von: *Ästhetik.* Berlin, New York, 1988.
- Meggle, Georg (Hg.): *Grundlagen der Kommunikation.* Berlin, New York, 1997.
- Schmidt, Siegfried J.: *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft. Teilband 1: Der gesellschaftliche Handlungsbereich der Literatur.* Braunschweig, 1980.
- Searle, John: *Expression and meaning.* Cambridge, 1986.
- Shusterman, Richard: *Pragmatist aesthetics. Living beauty, rethinking art.* Oxford, England, Cambridge, USA, 1992.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas: *Works and worlds of art.* Oxford, 1980.