

The Subject on Perceiving (Conceptual) Art

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the role of the subject in the relationship with artworks, in particular with conceptual art. The aim is to make a comparison between two approaches coming from different traditions: an aspect of Peter Lamarque's *Work and Object* theory and Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenology of the aesthetic object. The central question is to understand whether the intentional properties possessed by artworks are sufficient by themselves to elicit a proper aesthetic response or experience, and so to distinguish common objects from works of art. To answer this question, according to phenomenological aesthetics, one has to look also at the subject involved. In the end, the core of the aesthetic experience, but also the definition of what an artwork properly is, has to be sought in the encounter between work and spectator. In the light of this, one can read anew Dufrenne's idea of the spectator not just as a simple accessory of an artwork, but even as a "performer" and a "witness".

The issue of conceptual art is, and always will be, particularly challenging. Given his philosophical tradition and references, I was particularly impressed by the perceptual approach Peter Lamarque proposed, especially at the end of his *Work and Object*. So, in this short dissertation, I'd like to read some of the elements elaborated by Lamarque about perceiving conceptual art in dialogue with a phenomenological perspective, with particular reference to some aspects of Mikel Dufrenne's theory of aesthetic experience. This will be an opportunity to take the first steps in between two traditions, analytic philosophy and phenomenology, giving rise to difficult questions more than good answers.

Lamarque's *Empiricist Principle* states: "If there is a difference between a work and a 'mere real thing' or object (including a text) then that difference must yield, or be realizable in, a difference in experience."¹ In a nutshell, we may infer that the way in which the object is presented, the fact that it has been labelled with a title, that it has some properties, and above all the fact that someone, namely the artist, has picked up this object intentionally for dis-

¹ P. Lamarque, *Work and object: exploration in the metaphysics of arts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 229.

playing it to a public, all of these reasons – all contributing to the fact that that artwork is a *work* – make the object look different, while inviting the observer to a specific experience. The challenge is to pinpoint this “difference” in experience.

In the case of conceptual art, where the ideal aspect seems the paramount element of the artwork, the difference between object and work seems unstable, so to disclose the difference one has to refer to the intentional and phenomenological content of the experience. So as Lamarque suggests: “[...] If they [objects] are to succeed in becoming *works* distinct from the things themselves, must invite a kind of perception which makes salient particular aspects and suggests significance for them. If they fail to generate this kind of experience they have failed as art [...].”²

First of all, I would like to focus on the expression “must invite”. I’m totally on board with the charming wording, but at the same time it poses a high-priority question: how is actually possible that an artwork, perceptually identical to a common object, can lead the subject to a specific attitude. In fact, the expression “must invite” suggests a sort of intentionality present in the work. This point is very close to the phenomenology perspective proposed by Dufrenne. In his *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, he writes: “The work imposes itself to the spectator”, as if the object of my experience as work cannot be avoided; or “I am in the service of the work, which seems [...] to ‘posit’ me. The work therefore has the initiative”.³ Moreover, in this last sentence, the fact that it requires a specific attitude seems even to “pose” the subject, that is to assign him a task, again to force him to assume a specific outlook.

Nevertheless, although on the one hand the artwork would require a specific attitude, or at least a special level of attention, one cannot state properly that it’s the artwork to ask for it. Our experience always starts from the perceptual, from the visible side of the world, where the intentional and relation properties of artworks are not something really perceivable, even if they have to be considered constitutive aspects of the works themselves. The case of conceptual art adds even more awkwardness to the issue: how could a

² Ivi, p. 231.

³ M. Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973 (original work published 1953), p. 59. Dufrenne at the end of the volume “Aesthetic Object”, the first part of his *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience* (1953), defines the work of art as a “quasi-subject”, to make the work closer to the way in which is conceived the subject more than a mere object. He confers to the work this intermedium status halfway between a person and a thing, making even more evident the complexity behind the creation as well as the fruition. See M. Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, cit., pp.146; 196; 241-2; 329.

work, perceptually indiscernible from a “mere real thing”, induce a certain outlook at first glance? We may consider the question of the context, both spatial and cultural, so in its wider significance, as Eddie Zemach says: “Out of that context [Duchamp’s] *Fountain* cannot exist”⁴. But, again, is it enough to provoke a specific aesthetic experience, which –according to Lamarque – if doesn’t occur, determinates the work failure as piece of art?

Finally, instead of questioning the object for something regarding the spectator and his attitude, namely the aesthetic experience, one needs first to focus on the person who is invited to perceive: the subject himself. Then, we can state that saying the work “must invite” means the object makes the subject capable of having an experience, by which he can grasp given particulars. It represents a sort of “condition of possibility”, but at the end the responsibility to carry out the aesthetic experience is on the subject. The subject in front of an artwork is already informed of the cultural contest: he assumes the object is a work, namely that it has some relational and intentional properties. Starting with this certainty, since he wants to grasp the specifics of the work, he adopts a specific attitude. We may say that in front of a certain kind of objects, in a certain context, we have learnt to pay a precise attention in spite of an ordinary perception: by this way some aspects of the object are able to become more vivid or they can even surface for the first time, due to the fact the gaze doesn’t fly over the object, but it rests and studies the details, the colour blending, the little imperfections.

Involving the subject in this discussion could be seen as an easy way out an or old-fashion scheme, but actually it is not. According to Lamarque’s perspective, we can’t determinate what a work is without considering the subject and his attitude. In a phenomenological view, the determination of what an aesthetic object is, is always a fact *in between* the subject and the object. Besides determining which properties an object must satisfy to be a work, we have also to consider the crucial experience of the subject.

The case of the ready-mades particularly sheds light on this issue. As Lamarque states: “The objects literally *seem* in appearance to be different from what they are”⁵. It’s all about that “seem” in italics. *Perceptually*, works are exactly what they are, mere objects: bottles, branches... It’s not totally correct to state that the subject is acting “as if” they were different, because it is not the object in front of me that is changed, neither it’s me pretending this object is different: the bottle is just a bottle, but as artwork I really look at

⁴ E. Zemach, *Real Beauty*, Penn State University Press, University Park 1997, p. 160.

⁵ P. Lamarque, *Work and Object*, cit., p. 231.

it, probably – as in the case of Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm* – having a so intimate and private experience of the object for the first time. All the proprieties it has, as the cultural object it is, make it worthy of a particular kind of attention, but finally it is the beholder’s intentionality what makes the object a work. Even though the work “must invite” the spectator, it is in the encounter with the observer that it is actually recognised as a work. The example taken by Dufrenne makes the point very clear: “The painting on my wall is a thing for the mover but an aesthetic object for the art lover; it is both, but alternately, for the expert who cleans it.”⁶ Without going into the question about what an aesthetic object is to Dufrenne, it’s evident how the approach of the three named by the French philosopher (the mover, the art lover and the restorer) is different. The object is the same, it is always that work of art, but subjects adopt different attitudes. In the mover’s case, the perceiving subject, let’s say, “fails” in experiencing the work of art, because he doesn’t adopt a proper attitude in front of it. That is to say, the moment in which there is no aesthetic experience is when – using Lamarque’s language – the spectator doesn’t recognize that object as a work, but simply as an object, again: bottles, branches... etc. This example can be applied not just to conceptual art, but it must be referred also to artworks in general. Conceptual art makes evident the boundary between work and object, which is always in act in every artwork: as Lamarque demonstrates, the objective substrate is not the work of art. However, in front of a more traditional artwork, the spectator is more inclined to recognize that object as a work, but in the case in which the artist’s activity is less evident, or is not evident at all, he refuses to adopt the same aesthetic attitude he had, for instance, towards a Van Gogh’s painting.

But what happens to a work which is not recognised as such? We could even question if it is still a work. In fact, in the case of the mover, or more simply of somebody without a correct aesthetic approach, we could go so far as to say that the *work* goes back to be an *object*. This statement doesn’t contradict Lamarque’s definition of what a work is: “Works (of art) are *real*, not ideal, entities (they do not exist only in the mind of those who contemplate them); they are *public* and *perceivable* [...]; they possess their properties objectively, some essential, some inessential.”⁷ The *work* is still out there, real, perceivable, public. However, it is in coming face to face with the observer that the common object is recognised as a work of art every time. On second thought, that’s not so far from the doomsday

⁶ M. Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, cit. p. LXV.

⁷ P. Lamarque, *Work and Object*, cit., p. 60.

scenario depicted by Lamarque in the third chapter of this book, where the works have gone but the material objects remain. If nobody is capable of recognising the intentional and relational properties of the works, the works vanish: and that's what happens not just in a possible post-apocalyptic world where there are no men at all, but also every time people ignore objects as works.

Here the difference between *being* and *being recognised* surfaces, and the more radical question whether *the being of the artwork depends on being recognised* by a spectator. So, the more structural and ontological issue and the phenomenological implications of artworks intertwine reciprocally, again. As Dufrenne states: "The work's vocation is to transcend itself toward the aesthetic object, in which alone it attains, along with its consecration, the fullness of its being"⁸. To clarify this sentence, we have to say that the aesthetic object in Dufrenne's thought is basically the work of art when is perceived. So, the work has been made to be enjoyed by a spectator, to elicit an aesthetic experience (and here we are back at the beginning of our inquiry where we say "artworks must invite"). Perhaps we can distinguish three way in which we can assume, say, a sculpture: the object, as the material substrate; the work, as the cultural object having specific properties; and finally, as an aesthetic object, when the work is recognized and consequently perceived as such. But problems in Dufrenne's claim arise in the second part when the author continues "in which [in the aesthetic object] alone it attains, along with its consecration, the fullness of its being."⁹ Apart from the question concerning the precise meaning of the expression "fullness of its being", along Dufrenne's perspective, the ontological status of the artwork seems to be strictly depending on the engagement in an aesthetic experience of a subject, otherwise the work wouldn't reach the "fullness of its being".

We have seen how much conceptual art makes the crucial role of the spectator evident, precisely because, despite the properties the object as an artwork is endowed with, is also in the encounter with him/her that the bottle rack ceases to be a mere real thing without any intentional and relational property, and instead is grasped as the cultural object it actually is. Nevertheless, can we actually affirm that the work finds its proper completeness as a work just in front of an attentive subject? Or, as Dufrenne claims, that the subject is even the "performer" of the artwork?

This perspective seems to betray the actual status of artworks. If the "fullness of their being", as Dufrenne named it, depended

⁸ M. Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, cit. p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*

also on the aesthetic experience of the subject, one should have defined what the proper experience is; that is to say, not just how it happens, which faculties are properly involved and what kind of awareness the subject can achieve (the phenomenological analysis carried out by Dufrenne); but we should determine what is the proper content of this experience, the right one capable of giving the artwork its “fullness”. Nevertheless, as Lamarque also states, the sense grasped from that experience rests internalist.

Furthermore, this position should also face the very complicated and debated problem of the public. Before questioning about the role of the public¹⁰, it's necessary to establish who the public is and, eventually, which kind of competences it should have. According to Levinson's, we need a qualified observer, that is: “who views a work correctly [...] who properly situates a work with respect to its context of origin, including its place in the artist's oeuvre, its relation to the surrounding culture, and its connection to preceding artistic traditions.”¹¹ However, even if we can establish what exactly a qualify public should be ideally, the truth is that the range of spectators, and their competence, is quite undefinable. There are different levels and shades about the fruition of artworks, which are as unpredictable as the infinite singularities of human existences. So, the baggage of knowledge with which we face the artwork is crucial, but we can't define which is the proper one, everyone has his own. Otherwise we should establish which is the proper standard for a qualified public, but art would be reduced to an elite phenomenon, at least ideally. Moreover, what if the observer doesn't possess one of these competences? What about people who enjoy exhibitions without satisfying these requirements, should we say they don't live a *complete* aesthetic experience or they don't grasp the aesthetic value of an artwork? And if so, what does it mean? Should we say that, in this case, according to Dufrenne, the work is not really completed, even from an ontological point of view?

These are too relevant questions to be answered in a short paper like this. So, coming towards the end, we can trace at least some final considerations.

First, it is not possible to comprehend the whole ontological status of artworks without considering their entire existence, embracing the creation, so when the matter or the object becomes a

¹⁰ See, for instance, the ideas of “participation” and “fruition” developed by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as make-believe. On the Foundations of Representational Arts*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1990.

¹¹ J. Levinson, *Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative force, and differences of sensibility*, in E. Brady, J. Levinson (eds.), *Aesthetic Concepts: Essay after Sibley*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 62.

brand-new artwork, as well as the fruition, in which that object of my experience is recognised as the cultural object it is. Secondly, this kind of art in particular requires a revision of our categories and methods. So, it may be limiting to speak of “fullness of being” of artworks and to state that artworks are accomplished by the spectator, as if the ontological status of artworks was a picture to be coloured, which has to be filled by the observer.

At the end, we should say that the observer is called to bring out the qualities of artworks, which are there to be grasped. So, along this perspective, we can recover at least Dufrenne’s definition of the spectator as a “witness”: “the witness penetrates the world of the work, not to take action in it or to be acted on by it, but to bear witness, so that this world may take on meaning through his presence, and the intentions of the work may be realized.”¹². Therefore, the witness is someone who affords evidence of the artwork as a work, that is to attest the richness of the artwork, its value, its properties.

In conclusion, this kind of aesthetics compels us to reconsider the question of art neither only from the analytic-objective point of view nor from a solo-subjective point of view. The question “What is art?” or “What is a (art)work?” has to embrace the still radical question “Who is art(work) for?”. The challenge is to force these two paths to confront each other and to unveil their inner and essential intertwinings.

References

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¹² M. Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience, cit.*, p. 59.