

## ART AND INTERPRETATION; A QUALITATIVE THEORY OF ART

### ABSTRACT

After the art forms of the second half of the 20th century it is not possible to define art based on the aesthetic in the traditional sense. Thus, the whole discipline has fallen into a trap, a cul-de-sac, from which there is no escape. Therefore, the aesthetic has to be redefined. This essay is an attempt to find a way out. This article analyzes the possibility of finding a definition of art and the work of art, especially the so called modern art, concentrating on visual art and specifically on painting. First, I briefly analyze some previous attempts and suggest a novel approach that would make it possible to define art as a special form of brainwork. To be able to do this, terms like beauty, aesthetic, and art and their mutual relations are first redefined, concentrating especially on the nature of aesthetic experience as the fundamental aspect of all life in general. Next, I suggest a distinction between craft and art and, based on this distinction, provide a definition of art in the traditional sense of the word, such as art was seen from prehistoric times to 19th century Europe. Thereafter, I suggest a definition of a work art as the realized intention of the artist in non-conceptual form. Finally, I analyze the possibility of interpretation of art according to this theory, concluding that while it is possible to interpret works of art, it is not possible to interpret art because art is the quality of the artwork, and that can only be experienced, not conceptually understood.

### Introduction

Art seems to be universal; dancing, singing, storytelling, and pictorial representation exist in some form in all known cultures. This has led many evolutionary aestheticians to believe that art is an evolutionary adaptation<sup>1</sup> while some of them believe that it is a by-product (S. Davies)<sup>2</sup> or even so-called spandrel (Stephen Jay Gould).<sup>3</sup> I will return to this discussion later, but it seems undeniable that there is an evolutionary basis for the above-mentioned activities, and it seems reasonable that this can explain much artistic behavior of humans. In this article, I try to find a definition of art concentrating mainly on the art of pictorial representation.

For thousands of years, the art of pictorial representation has been used to idealize different values magical, religious, or political, in addition to practical decorative and descriptive needs, art actually meaning "skill." However there was a fundamental change in Western art beginning somewhere in the 19th century where the focus of art moved to the investigation of man's perceptual qualifications and the use of art as a medium for meaningful messages. To use the words of Arthur Danto, "According to it, the artists in question were to be understood not as unsuccessfully imitating real forms but as successfully creating new ones, quite as real as the forms which the older art had been thought, in its best examples, to be creditably imitating."<sup>4</sup> Or in the words of Lyotard, "To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible: this is what is at stake in modern painting."<sup>5</sup> To put it another way, citing the words of Chatterjee, "I suspect that art, as we experience it, has outpaced our adapted brains."<sup>6</sup> This can be seen as a new kind of "artworld," using this term of Danto; as S. Davies puts it: "But there is more than one Artworld, more than one tradition of making art works."<sup>7</sup> Of course, this change did not take place overnight; the best artists have been doing precisely this for

centuries. In any case, this means that modern art forms a specific artworld with its own values and rules, and it is art in this sense, as “capital-A Art,”<sup>8</sup> that this paper examines.

From the present perspective, defining art before the advent of modernism seems to have been a relatively easy undertaking. Art was seen to be very much equal with beauty, and even after Baumgarten, the focus could simply be moved onto the aesthetic instead of mere beauty. However, Duchamp’s “Fountain” in 1917 started a new era in art that can no longer be explained in terms of beauty or aesthetic. The events of the 1960s and ‘70s manifested by Warhol’s Brillo boxes witnessed the outburst of the so called conceptual art that forms a very hard case for art theory. This has led most scholars to believe that it is not possible to find a definition of art that would cover all art forms across all times. Arthur Danto disagrees and considers himself to be an essentialist, claiming that there is no definition of art because philosophers stopped looking.<sup>9</sup>

The problem with most contemporary attempts to define works of art is that these definitions are based on certain intrinsic properties of the works themselves, as if they were born out of nothing. This is not to deny the usefulness of this kind of investigation in general; it is just meant to pay attention to the fact that artworks can only be understood as the product of the mind of the artist. The definitions presented so far can be roughly divided into three main groups: ontological, sociological, and psychological. The first group includes all theories based on the inherent aspects of the artwork, be they imitational, representational, expressive, or different formalist theories, such as Bell’s significant form.<sup>10</sup> Later examples include the so-called cluster definitions of some scholars.<sup>11</sup> These kinds of definitions are referred to as functional by Stecker.<sup>12</sup> It is obvious by now that these definitions can never be conclusive because as soon as such a theory is represented, an artist will inevitably create an artwork that defies this definition. This is inherent in the very nature of modern art as a discipline: constantly searching for new paths to conquer.

The best-known sociological theory is the institutional art theory supported mainly by Dickie.<sup>13</sup> “A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.”<sup>14</sup> This theory is, of course, correct as such. However, there is at least some circularity in it even in its modified form. Besides, it does not even attempt to give any kind of definition of the artwork itself; it only describes a commonly accepted practical behavior of the “artworld.” Therefore, it is no substitute for a true definition for art.

Danto, on the other hand, sees the artworld mainly as a historical phenomenon that develops along with changing ideals throughout history. “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.”<sup>15</sup> He describes art as the “transfiguration of the commonplace.”<sup>16</sup> He claims that what makes an object a work of art is embodied meaning and that it is the invisible characteristics that make something art.<sup>17</sup> Danto also claims that the definition of art has to capture the universal “artness” of artworks, irrespective of when they were made or will be made.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, he defines artworks as “wakeful dreams.”<sup>19</sup> I am sympathetic with Danto’s definition, but still, I think it is more a description than a true definition.

The best-known psychological art theory presented so far is the infection theory of Leo Tolstoy.<sup>20</sup> Personally, I believe that going into the mind of humans is the only possible direction where we can search for a conclusive art theory. The most prominent brain investigators seem to agree that the secret of art is to be found in the function of our brains.<sup>21</sup> However, Tolstoy’s theory is certainly not satisfactory as such. Tolstoy claims that the artist is knowingly and deliberately infecting the reader with a feeling he is feeling himself, thus representing the artist as a conscious manipulator of the

human mind. I think this is both an under- and overstatement about the position and meaning of the artist.

All theories of art suggested thus far have been based on the attempt to create a definition of art that would include all art forms and all forms of artistic behavior since prehistory to the present day in all known human cultures. While this kind of pursuit certainly has its merits, it is also true that in our time, the concept of art has become so diversified and multifaceted that definitions that include all conceivable art forms must by necessity be too general to be informative even when successful. Therefore, an alternative approach is tested in this paper. According to this approach, we try to understand the art of our own time by first trying to define art in the traditional sense, as it has been practiced in different cultures across the world for thousands of years, and thereafter trying to find out in what way our modern Western art differs from this traditional concept of art. It appears to be, after all, impossible to find a definition of art that would be able to equally explain both the traditional sense of art and the conceptual art of the 1960s. To cite Berleant, "Art and appreciation have been re-cast, and aesthetic theory must be renewed to accommodate them."<sup>22</sup>

Before further exploring this problem, it is necessary to clarify some basic conceptions related to analyzing the phenomenon of art and its meaning to the human experience. The most important conceptions are beauty, aesthetic, and art, and their relations to one another. Traditionally beauty has been seen as very much equal to art. Long after Baumgarten, art was understood in terms of the aesthetic, and some scholars still support this notion. However, after the "Fountain" of Duchamp in 1917 and especially the so-called "conceptual art" of the 1960s and '70s, this has become very problematic. Duchamp himself certainly chose his ready-mades without any aesthetic concerns, and the same is obviously true of many works of conceptual art, although not all. This has, consequently, made defining art very difficult. However, most scholars now agree that the aesthetic is not sufficient for explaining the essence of art.<sup>23,24</sup> Therefore, at least for the needs of this paper, I would like to give these terms somewhat more definite meanings. First, however, I would like to make a certain limitation. For reasons that will become clear later, I exclude literary theory outside this treaty entirely, and I concentrate fully on the sensory forms of art, specifically visual art.

### **Redefining the aesthetic**

When reading accounts about aesthetics, it is hard to avoid the impression that the whole discipline is skittering about as fish in a fish-trap in search for a way out of the trap set up for it by the conceptual art of the 1960s, according to which everything can be art and everyone can be an artist, which simply is not true. Dickie's and Danto's versions of the institutional theory are perhaps examples of the more successful attempts, but even they cannot shed light on the very central problem: what exactly is art? However, they do a whole lot to clarify what is regarded as art and why in certain periods in history.

This means that I will try to present a theory of art that can accommodate even the "hard cases" of the last half of the 20th century. I think there could, in principle, be two distinct ways to approach this. The first would be to discard the notion of the aesthetic altogether and try to define art starting from something entirely different. The second possibility is to redefine the aesthetic to fit the contemporary conception of art. It is the latter account that I will be testing in this essay.

In 1750, Baumgarten introduced the term aesthetic as *scientia cognitionis sensitivae*, study of sensitive knowledge, or the science of the knowledge we acquire by means of the senses.<sup>25</sup> The term aesthetics is a transliteration of the Greek “aisthēsis,” which means aesthetic perception by the senses.<sup>26</sup> This original definition is certainly much more extensive than its present meaning, and this is where I want to start. In the decades following Baumgarten the meaning of the aesthetic has been concentrated more on the “aesthetic” (in a narrow sense) properties such as beauty and related concepts, thus narrowing the original meaning considerably.

Arnold Berleant has been developing a more extended view of the aesthetic, and he concentrates on the nature of aesthetic experience.<sup>27</sup> He wants to expand the scope of aesthetics beyond the arts to the world, the natural environment, the built environment, community, and personal relations,<sup>28</sup> extending the scope of aesthetics to negative experiences, as well.<sup>29</sup> Thus, he sees aesthetics in a more extensive meaning than the generally accepted narrow view, according to which aesthetics is concerned with the aesthetic qualities of phenomena, and when talking about art, specifically with beauty and related qualities.

Thus, there are two ways to approach the essence of the aesthetic. It can be seen as a continuum from beautiful to ugly (or any other aesthetic quality). This could be described as the narrow meaning of the aesthetics, which is not an adequate term to describe the “hard cases” of art as the conceptual art of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Alternatively, following Berleant’s suggestion, the aesthetic could mean all pleasant and unpleasant phenomena or merely meaningful appreciative perceptual or cognitive stimuli that take place in a non-conceptual mode of perception.<sup>30</sup> However, Berleant focuses on the aesthetic experience; the artwork and the artist are secondary in his account. He sees art as very much equal to an aesthetic experience.<sup>31</sup> He has even explicitly maintained that art is non-definable.<sup>32</sup> However, if, as stated above, humans actually experience everything aesthetically,<sup>33</sup> we would have to accept that everything can be considered art, and we are in a sense back where we started. Berleant’s account is therefore not entirely satisfactory for the purpose of trying to find a definition of art.

Berleant’s more extensive meaning for the aesthetic means replacing the Kantian disinterestedness with “aesthetic engagement,” seeing the aesthetic experience as an active process that integrates sensible data with discriminating intelligence.<sup>34</sup> Aesthetic engagement thus rejects the dualism inherent in customary accounts of aesthetic appreciation, which treats aesthetic experience as the subjective appreciation of a beautiful object. Instead, aesthetic engagement emphasizes the holistic, contextual character of aesthetic appreciation, the primacy of sensible experience, and active participation.<sup>35</sup> For Berleant, aesthetics is fundamentally a theory of sensible experience,<sup>36</sup> thus coming closer to the original meaning of the term. In Kantian terms, this could be seen to mean taking a step back from the meaning of the aesthetic of the third critique closer to the meaning of the first where Kant states:

“But no one ought, on this account, to overlook the difference of the elements contributed by each; we have rather great reason carefully to separate and distinguish them. We therefore distinguish the science of the laws of sensibility, that is, aesthetic, from the science of the laws of the understanding, that is, logic.”<sup>37</sup>

However, I do not think this broadening of the meaning of the aesthetic is entirely sufficient to make art comprehensible. Grasping the essence of the aesthetic and art requires deepening the meaning of the aesthetic as well as broadening it by starting from the human mind and asking, how in general we are able to form any meaningful perception at all of the chaotic sensory data entering

our brains through the five senses? There must be some sort of innate proclivity in the human mind that gathers these impressions into an understandable totality of any kind. According to Pinker, perceived information about an object is scattered across many parts of the cerebral cortex. Therefore, information access requires a mechanism that binds together geographically separated data.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, when visual sense data enters the brain, it is processed there to form a mental picture of the situation, giving us the necessary guidance we need to survive, thus performing, as Pinker says, an unsolvable task.<sup>39</sup> According to Francis Crick and Christof Koch:

“In other words, it remains to be explained how we can perceive the world not through different and separate sensations, but through a unitary conscious scene made up of various sensory inputs, feelings and emotions, needs an explanation. Thus, the fundamental issue regarding consciousness appears to be how the brain is able to bind together in a consistent fashion the different streams of information elaborated by neuronal networks which respond to different aspects of the perceived objects.”<sup>40</sup>

The brain creates an interpretation of the received sensory data, and this interpretation is a meaningful representation of reality, which helps us orientate to our surroundings.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the mind is so constituted that we are capable of comprehending meaning in sensory perception. This is what philosophers of mind call “the binding problem,” or the problem of how different brain patterns which codify for different aspects of a scene can merge in order to produce a consistent and unitary picture of the world.<sup>42</sup> This is even more mysterious when taking into consideration the fact that the brain has a modular organization, meaning that different pieces of the brain specialize in carrying out specific operations. Therefore, natural and artificial objects, places, landscapes, faces, forms of human bodies, motion, shape, movement, color, and contrast are all processed in different parts of the brain.<sup>43</sup>

To proceed, I would like to start from the very basics of the human mind: the problem of consciousness. David J. Chalmers has famously divided this problem into some “easy” and “the hard problem,” which he defines as conscious experience.<sup>44</sup> According to Chalmers, everything else in consciousness can be explained as performance of functions, but the hard question remains: why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?<sup>45</sup> He claims that experience cannot be explained reductively. Instead, he proposes that we should be ready to accept experience as a fundamental in the same sense as we see matter as a fundamental, calling his position “naturalistic dualism.”<sup>46</sup> However, I believe the phenomenon of experience can and should be connected to our evolutionary history. The evolutionary function of experience can only be promoting the capability of producing pertinent response to external (and, eventually, along with the development of consciousness, internal) stimuli. In its very basic form, this proclivity is present even in the most primitive life forms, not only animals and plants, but even in cells’ and microbes’ ability to react to environmental stimuli. This means that they can form a meaningful interpretation of this stimulus to be able to respond accordingly. Katya Mandoki has said: “Not only Beethoven and Rembrandt have sensibility, dragonflies and bacteria also do.”<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, non-conscious mental processing occurs before conscious experience.<sup>48</sup> This indicates that consciousness has been developed during evolution on a proclivity of automatic response to perceptual stimuli. Thus, even the lowest animals and plants that certainly do not have consciousness are able to react to perceptual stimuli. This means that, in a sense, they can grasp meaning in sensory perception. It may be possible to conclude that sensual perception and even experience of meaning is more fundamental for the living organisms than is consciousness.

This capability seems to be an essential part of life itself. Of course, the “experience” of meaning in sensory perception in lower life forms is not conscious, but it could still be seen as the aboriginal basis of all experience. Consciousness and experience, according to this account, would be evolutionary adaptations that developed gradually along the ascent of the evolutionary ladder, present in some forms and to different degrees in all living creatures. Even today, much of our perceptual processing takes place unconsciously, without experience. It is this concept of experience, and more specifically meaningful experience that is the basic factor in trying to make sense of the aesthetic.

What should we call this most fundamental feature of the human mind? Giving this proclivity a name such as “general intelligence,” will not solve the problem because this capability is in some form common to all life forms. In my view, it might not be too much of an exaggeration to regard it as the sixth sense. It could even be seen as a “super sense,” uniting perceptions from different senses into a unified meaningful experience.

It is my suggestion that we call this proclivity the aesthetic sense because it is with the help of this sense that we acquire information about our outside world. Thus, the aesthetic would mean the capability of experiencing meaning in sensory perception. When trying to understand art, this aesthetic sense could mean the capability of grasping *qualitative* meanings in sensory perception. This is similar to what Baumgarten originally meant by his “aesthetic,” or *the science of sensual cognition*. In fact, the aesthetic can be seen as the fundamental principle guiding evolution. To cite Berleant:

“Aesthetics is unlike any other field in the central place it gives perceptual experience, experience that is never surpassed or transcended. Since this is where any inquiry must start, I consider aesthetics a foundational discipline, perhaps the foundational discipline, not logically or ontologically but temporally and heuristically. This is a powerful claim, but I assert it to recognize how important those normative experiences we call aesthetic are.”<sup>49</sup>

Further, Berleant defines the aesthetic sensibility as consisting of seven different aspects among which perceptual meaning comes last and is, in my view, the most important: “Appreciation is not a cognitive act but often involves embodied meaning. Meanings that are bound up in perception, meanings *that are experienced*, do not replace perception but may reinforce and enhance it.”<sup>50</sup> Berleant sees the aesthetic “as the fundamental understanding of direct perceptual experience and refining aesthetics as the theory of sensibility.”<sup>51</sup>

Considering both the extensive sense of the aesthetic suggested by Berleant and the deepening of it suggested above as the basic factor of the human mind in general, we can thus define the aesthetic experience to mean any qualitative sensory perception embodied with meaning. Thus, aesthetic sense would mean experiencing meaning in sensory perception in non-conceptual form. This meaning must be non-conceptual for the simple reason that it is much older in human evolutionary history than conceptual thinking and speech. In what follows, the aesthetic is understood in the aforementioned extensive sense of the word and, when talking about art, in a somewhat more limited sense as experiencing qualitative meaning in sensual perception.

This skill is the basis of all aesthetic behavior; without it no evaluations of any kind would be possible. In the distant past, humans had to be able to orientate without conceptualization. They had to be able to make quick vital decisions based directly on perceptual experiences; without this capability, they would never have been able to survive. It has always been an important part of humans’ survival arsenal, and this is precisely why it still can provide profound mental experiences.

We still use this capability to orientate in our everyday lives without paying attention to it. In this sense of the term aesthetic, we experience everything primarily aesthetically. I argue that this capability is the psychological basis of experiencing art; although it is not sufficient to explain art as a phenomenon, it gives us a way to understand the nature of the aesthetic experience, as well as the art experience. Furthermore, this means that the aesthetic sense is an evolutionary adaptation present in some form and to different degrees in all life forms.

## Beauty

Although I do not believe that beauty is of central significance to the understanding of art in general, at least in its contemporary form, it is true that beauty has played a central role in much of traditional art. Beauty is undeniably of central importance in the works of artists such as Modigliani, Joan Miro, Paul Klee, or Alphonso Mucha. In contrast, when standing in front of the huge painting of Guernica in Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, one will be inclined to describe it with attributes such as impressive, expressive, meaningful, overwhelming, powerful, or tragic, but calling it beautiful would somehow undermine the work. Thus, beauty is only one possible quality of art. However, because of its significance in most forms of traditional art, it is logical to make a few short notes on beauty. I believe there are three distinct kinds of beauty, but I want to stress that I understand beauty in a very broad sense, comprising all positive perceptual qualities, commonly understood as “aesthetic.”

First, there is what I would call functional beauty; we encounter it most prominently in nature. Its meaning is closely connected to the function of the object in question, be it a natural phenomenon or a living creature. The latter kind of beauty was emphasized by Darwin in his *“Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex”* as aesthetic evolution by mate choice. Richard O. Prum has developed Darwin’s ideas further, calling aesthetic mate choice *coevolution* where both sexes affect the evolution of one another, the male competing for the females and the females being selective.<sup>52</sup>

It has been wondered why the peacock’s tail is beautiful although it must be a hindrance to flying.<sup>53</sup> The answer is, of course, that the main function of the peacock is not to fly but to procreate, as is true of all living creatures. Some scholars have introduced the term “costly signal” to describe the reason for female selection.<sup>54</sup> This may certainly be the evolutionary rationale of the peahen’s choice, but in practical terms, the peahen is only having a simple “wow experience,” and that is all she needs. Some scholars have maintained that this is not an aesthetic choice,<sup>55</sup> but according to the definition of the aesthetic as experiencing meaning in sensual perception, it is, of course, precisely that.

Furthermore, why is the peacock’s tail beautiful to us? The answer is that this is partly accidental and partly because we share a common niche with birds including multicolor vision. Following Dan Bruiger: “Color vision occurs in some fishes, reptiles, insects and birds. Human beings have color vision because they are primates, which evolved it to occupy a common niche with birds.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, there is the question of why people experience beauty in a peacock’s tail but not in a pig’s snout.<sup>57</sup> The snout of the pig is not evolutionarily designed to be beautiful for us but for another pig, and we do not share a common niche with pigs. Following Katya Mandoki: “We admire magnificent designs in birds, fish, flowers and beetles because we are a bit flower, bird, fish and beetle.”<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, humans are flexible, and acculturation may cause differences in people’s attitudes towards different animals.

Another type of functional beauty consists of natural beauty of the inanimate nature. Why do we experience so many features of nature to be beautiful although they are not directly beneficial to us? Evolutionary aestheticians commonly present theories such as the “savanna hypothesis”<sup>59,60</sup> as explanations, meaning that our Pleistocene ancestors found this kind of environment safe and inviting. However, this does not explain why humans experience so many natural phenomena to be beautiful in general. I think the answer lies in the fact that we share common evolutionary history with many earlier life forms. Those life forms have adapted to their surroundings and the rules of nature and consequently have come to experience their surroundings in a positive manner.<sup>61</sup> I agree with Katya Mandoki that we carry in our minds this evolutionary past of millions of years and continue to positively experience those features of our surroundings that have been beneficial to some of our ancestral life forms.<sup>62</sup> There is no absolute beauty; what we experience as beautiful is only our natural reaction to the environment because we are an integral part of it. Because of that, we have developed a flexible adaptability to different environments.<sup>63</sup> A third kind of functional beauty we encounter in man-made handicraft. We will return to this shortly.

Second, there is beauty that is irrelevant to any function at all; it could be described to be below functional beauty. Thus, it is not connected to any meanings at all. It is meaningless decoration or embellishment, and therefore we call it kitsch. Being meaningless, it could even be described as non-aesthetic.

Third, beauty ascending above the merely functional in any way is the kind of beauty we most commonly encounter in art, but to be able to distinguish it, we must first be able to make a distinction between art and craft. Many scholars seem to be willing to leave useful objects outside art. It is certainly true that most art is basically useless. However, accepting this as a rule would mean having to regard architecture entirely as non-art. As an architect myself, I am not willing to accept this despite the fact that most buildings regarded as architecture do not qualify as art and, consequently, I support the line of thought that the difference between art and craft does not lie in the usefulness of the object. Accordingly, this difference must lie in a qualitative distinction between two useful objects, one of which belongs to the category of craft and the other of which belongs to the category of art.

### **Craft and art**

Making the distinction between craft and art is the crucial question of aesthetics. Many authors admit the necessity of this distinction, but few are able to shed light on this problem, especially if art is not defined strictly as capital-A art. Humans are constantly creating beauty of the functional kind, such as creating useful objects like utensils with the purpose of making them pleasant not only for use but also as objects of perception. This is known as handicraft. Art, on the other hand, did not appear out of nowhere; it was most likely developed slowly as a byproduct of craft. The intriguing question is, when does a practical utensil turn into a work of art in the hands of the maker? This definition is certainly a matter of choice, and perhaps scholars will never be completely unanimous about this. Still, it may be worth suggesting a distinction. I return to this later, but first I examine animal aesthetics.

Richard O. Prum has suggested that animals have aesthetic sense, and they make art, calling it “biotic art?”<sup>64</sup> Many authors are reluctant to accept that animals would have aesthetic sense.<sup>65</sup> According to the extensive meaning of the aesthetic suggested above, I agree with Prum (and Darwin)<sup>66</sup> that animals certainly have aesthetic sense because they are capable of comprehending



meaning in sensory perception, and they quite obviously make decisions like mate choice on aesthetic grounds.<sup>67</sup> However, this does not necessarily mean that they would make art. The bower of the Australian bower bird is often used as a prime case of animal art.<sup>68</sup> However, one can question whether the male bower bird intentionally makes the bower meaningful in any other sense than the practical purpose of persuading the female to mate, no matter how sophisticated the creation is. Based on present knowledge, I am inclined to believe it is not, and accordingly my conclusion is that although animals have aesthetic sense, and they are often skilled “craftsmen,” they do not make art. Otherwise, one would have to conclude, both that animals make art, and that there actually is no real difference between a work of art and a piece of handicraft. I find both conclusions counterintuitive and incredible although I admit that they could be defended. However, this account does not undermine the importance of the aesthetic sense as the leading principle of all life. In short, in my view, aesthetics is nature’s way.

Following this line of thought, functional beauty alone does not make art, not even in architecture, as is generally considered in the wake of the so called “functionalism” of the 1920s and ‘30s. To make a work into art requires something more. Art is always based on an aesthetic interpretation of a cultural meaning. For architecture, this means an aesthetic interpretation of the function of the building in its cultural context. This cultural meaning can be anything in human experience. However, these meanings are dependent on people’s world view, which is different in every historical era and, to some extent, even for every individual.<sup>69</sup>

This third kind of beauty is inherent in meanings that are “above” the merely functional kind, in meanings that people can only experience but not conceptually understand. Beauty in this case is always an aesthetic interpretation of some cultural meaning relevant to the object in question. This kind of beauty is encountered in the arts, although this is by no means sufficient to explain art in the modern sense.

According to Richard Anderson artworks are artifacts that possess “culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium.”<sup>70</sup> Joining this definition with our view; any material object or mental construction created by humans with the purpose of making it aesthetically meaningful in any other sense than purely practical use would qualify as a work of art in the traditional sense of the word. This encompasses every art form from Lascaux (and much earlier) to the dawn of modern European art in the 19th century, whereafter other factors must be taken into consideration. This account certainly comes very close to what Ellen Dissayanake calls “making special” although I have arrived at this conclusion using a different path.<sup>71</sup> Everything depends on what is meant by purely practical use. As long as the creative work concentrates on making the item in question effective and appearing fit for the intended use, it represents craft. However, once we go beyond that and concentrate on making the item meaningful by interpreting in its form its function or any other cultural feature connected with its meaning for the people using it, it enters the realm of art. The usefulness as such is irrelevant; the decisive factor is cultural meaning inherent in the form of the item. Thus, we can define a work of art to be an aesthetic interpretation of a cultural meaning in sensuous medium.

Berleant claims that the central issue is not the difference between art and non-art but between aesthetic and non-aesthetic.<sup>72</sup> In my view, the central issue is precisely the difference between art and non-art because according to my account everything perceptual is actually aesthetic. According to Arthur Danto, artworks are a compound of thought and matter, which means to embody a thought, have content, or express meaning, while similar looking artefacts do not.<sup>73</sup> Making the distinction between art and craft in practice is often impossible, and any definitive rule

cannot be given.<sup>74</sup> The notion of art as quality instead of a category could be very helpful in clarifying the difference between art and non-art because it would provide the allowance of degree in this definition, as I discuss in greater detail later.

To summarize this chapter, the sense of beauty and the aesthetic sense as the capability of experiencing qualitative meaning in sensory experience are evolutionary adaptations, but the status of art in this sense remains more obscure and debatable although I am inclined to see it as a byproduct. Next, I concentrate on the problem of modern art as “capital-A Art.” as was promised at the beginning. To be able to understand it we are going to begin with the creative artist and try to comprehend what kind of process is taking place in the mind of the artist when creating a work of art.

### **The creation of art**

Art is born in the brain of the artist, and this is where we have to begin. Artists are certainly trying to find a way to express something in their work, but while working, they are not aware of the nature of the meaning they want to express. The work of the artists is a process of research where they are struggling to find an expression for an intention the nature of which they do not know; they only feel an urgent need to express something that becomes clear during the process of creation. Artists are not capable of expressing their intention in words; this is precisely the reason they have to create an artwork to get their message published. When Wittgenstein said, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,” he was correct.<sup>75</sup> However, there are other ways of expression beyond conceptual language. In fact, even now most of our thinking takes place in direct images, without conceptualization. Some scholars have used the term “*mentalese*” for this kind of thinking, that is, a mental language without words.<sup>76</sup> Art is most likely the most prominent example of this. Thus, creating a work of art means communicating the uncommunicable, expressing with a work of art something that cannot be put into words. And this is precisely why artists themselves are not fully aware of this process and are unable to describe in words their goals and aspirations.

“All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is: ‘I feel . . . I don’t know what I feel.’ From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself.”<sup>77</sup>

This description of the creative process by Collingwood is not entirely satisfactory to my mind. This could maliciously be interpreted to mean that artists would create masterworks because they are feeling strong feelings because of whatever reason. However, as soon as feeling or emotion is replaced by meaningful but unconscious intention, this claim begins to make sense. Artists are, as a rule, more sensitive than the average person. Therefore, they are also responding more strongly to the meaningful phenomena of their world, whatever those may be. Of course, they are responding to these phenomena on the emotional level. However, it would be wrong to say that they are expressing this feeling; they are certainly doing their best to express the source or reason of that feeling, that is, their worry, their pleasure, their concern, their interest, or whatever else they experience to be significant in their culture, and this is what can be called meaning. These meanings can vary enormously comprising everything in human experience from the beauty of a flower to the harshness of war. However, art is never in the expression of an intention as such; it is always in the *aesthetic quality* of this expression. This qualitative excellence is what makes an intention artistic. Thus, the artistic intention of an artist is always primarily a qualitative one; he

always intends to create a masterwork. Without this adjustment, art would be a harmless, useless pastime, but viewed in this light, art might have something important to offer.

### The intentions of the artist

“Indeed, there can no longer really be a separation between the work and the intention of the artist: the work of art, in this case, is manifested intention.” (Joseph Kosuth).<sup>78</sup>

There is a great deal of discussion about the intentions of the artist and their meaning for the artwork in the process of creation. And of course artists may have an innumerable amount of intentions, some of which they may be aware of and others perhaps not. These intentions may be political, ethical, ideological, religious, economic, social, or psychological, and they may influence the resulting artwork. However, there can be only one intention that is decisive and that defines the value of the work as an artwork. This is the irresistible urge to *create an artwork*; everything else is of secondary value. I believe every artist will confirm this if asked the right question. Thus, the creative process is a process of research, and when artists find what they are searching for, they know: this is it, now I found it, and they will accept the work as a work of art by signing it. “The artist cannot imagine his art, and cannot perceive it until it is complete.”<sup>79</sup> Jung also puts it as follows: “Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him.”<sup>80</sup> Paul Crowther is defending a similar view:

“The creator has an intention to create, to produce an image addressing such and such an area of his or her experience, or imagined experience. This intention guides the creative process, but in the course of working the material, it may be changed, reinterpreted, or even totally transformed.”<sup>81</sup>

This means that in terms of intention the artwork is the *concretized intention of the artist* and perhaps much more but nothing less. This is not the same as the theory suggested by Knapp and Michaels in their “*Against Theory*,” according to which the meaning of the work would be *identical* to the intention of the artist because in my theory, there is no explicit author’s intention to compare with.<sup>82</sup> The thesis of Knapp and Michaels was mainly about literary theory, which is not my concern here but still deserves a short treatment in this context. For example, Stecker refutes this theory on the grounds that if the artist would fail to concretize his intentions, we would face the case where the artwork would mean the failed intention of the artist, which he regards as impossible.<sup>83</sup> I cannot see the logic behind this conclusion. Artist may fail in their work, and if they do, they won’t sign the work to accept it as an artwork (if they are honest). However, this work may still be a beautiful picture and may have aesthetic value although failing to be a true work of art. In Danto’s words, “Hence the painting can even be beautiful, as far as taste is concerned, but defective through lacking spirit.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, it could be suitable as a gift for a friend or a relative, as has frequently happened. Besides, my theory does not discuss any “meaning” in the conventional sense; there is meaning in the artwork in the sense of “embodied meaning” suggested by Danto,<sup>85</sup> but this meaning cannot be expressed in any other way but the one used in this precise artwork. In any case, a failure is not a work of art; it is a failure, but this distinction is for the artist alone to tell. The artist is the only one who can tell whether his intention has been realized or not. The critic, on the other hand, should concentrate on the *quality* of the work. It is the critic’s job to try to tell whether the work is good or bad art. To use the terminology of Noel Carroll, I claim that the *success value* of the work is for the artist to decide and the *reception value* for the critic<sup>86</sup> because the critic

cannot possibly have any access to the original intention of the artist. Yes, there remains the question: how can we know that the success value is even closely related to the original intention of the artist? My response is that we do not, neither are we supposed to know. All there is on offer is an experience.

Thus, we can define the artwork to be the concretized intention of the artist. On the other hand, I have earlier defined it to be an aesthetic interpretation of a cultural meaning in non-conceptual form in sensuous medium. In my view, these two definitions combined make the conclusive definition of a work of art. In modern art, the artwork is always created by someone or a group of people who are the authors of the work, whereas in traditional art the concept of an artwork was often the result of a cumulative contribution of several generations. Therefore, to understand modern art, we need the intentional definition in addition to the general definition. On the other hand, as already stated, the difference between traditional and “modern” art is not easy in practical terms. Obviously, many artists throughout centuries have been creating true artworks even in the modern sense of the word although practicing figurative art.

Now it should be clear why literary theory was left out of this thesis. Although I believe that there is a common basis in the human mind for all art forms, it is also true that in any literary art, the artwork both leaves the artist’s mind and enters the recipient’s mind in literary, that is conceptual form. Therefore, there is good reason to presuppose that there could be a more fundamental difference between what can be called sensory and conceptual forms of art than is commonly believed.

### **Experiencing art**

Next, it is in order to consider what happens in the recipient’s mind in an art experience. We perceive art in a special kind of aesthetic experience, which is of interpretative nature but in non-conceptual form. According to Berleant, this sense of understanding is especially apposite to the experience of the arts, which is the paradigmatically non-conceptual.<sup>87</sup> In a common aesthetic experience, one experiences the beauty of perception automatically without any special “aesthetic attitude,” but the experience is entirely different with art as capital-A art. For this, one certainly needs a special attitude. Berleant has used the term “aesthetic engagement” for this kind of holistic concentration as described earlier.<sup>88</sup> Then, if one has the necessary sensibility (and, perhaps, the required expertise), one may have an art experience, which will require both one’s imaginative and cognitive capacity, and which one cannot put into words any more than the artist could have while feeling forced to produce the work. The art experience can be described as a combination of aesthetic, emotional, imaginative, and intellectual experience. Consequently, the artwork can be defined as the concretized intention of the artist meant to be experienced by the beholder in an art experience in non-conceptual mode. In the words of John Dewey, “Science states meanings; art expresses them.”<sup>89</sup> “The poetic as distinct from the prosaic, esthetic art as distinct from scientific, expression as distinct from statement, does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one.”<sup>90</sup>

## Interpretation of art

“Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the song of a bird?” (Pablo Picasso)<sup>91</sup>

“Artworks are among the things commonly in need of interpretation, and we come to better understand and appreciate such works by interpreting them.” (Robert Stecker)<sup>92</sup>

The obvious conclusion from the preceding arguments would be that there is no such thing as interpretation of art, yet the artworld seems to be almost unanimous that interpretation is not only possible but in fact necessary for proper art experience. In general, interpretation seems to mean translating the “language” of art into spoken language, transcribing the meaning inherent in the work into a form that can be explicitly *understood* by all. Some scholars even think that it is not possible to have a true art experience without proper interpretation, thus placing the interpreter on the same level as the artist. Noel Carroll poses the crucial question: “Why not approach the interpretation of artworks in the same way in which we interpret our conspecifics every day?”<sup>93</sup> Several other scholars also take for granted that interpreting meanings in other fields of life guarantees the ability to do the same with art. In everyday life, people may indeed have intentions that can be interpreted by their conspecifics. However, the situation is entirely different with art because artists themselves are not fully conscious of their *artistic* intentions behind the artwork, except for the main intention to create an artwork. Furthermore, there can be only one interpretation of that intention, and it is the artwork itself; it is the ultimate interpretation, and there is no going beyond that. While one can certainly elucidate many aspects of an artwork to find answers to questions about the subject matter of the work and the artist’s motivation for and values in relation to creating it, does this really mean interpretation of art?

Most scholars speak of interpretation of art and interpretation of a work of art as if they were one and the same thing, but are they? Talking about interpretation we can divide these elucidations into four different groups. The first group can be called objective or ontological, including the objective qualities of the object perceived, such as its size, shape, material, color, and surface structure; these have also been called primary properties of the work.<sup>94</sup> The second group can be called psychological; it includes treatments of features of human perception that are common to all humans. A good example of these is Rudolf Arnheim’s book “*Art and Visual Perception*.” Another classic is “*Art and Illusion*” by E. H. Gombrich. The more recent paper by V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, “*The Science of Art, A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience and their eight laws of artistic experience*,” as well as several neuroaesthetic treatises belong to the same group.

A third group of elucidations can be called historical; most of art history belongs to this group. The fourth group is the individual level of the artists in question and the different aspects of their lives that could influence their work. An example could be de Kooning’s relation to his mother:<sup>95</sup> a psychoanalyst might explain de Kooning’s frightening huge female nudes in terms of “castration anxiety.”<sup>96</sup>

However, none of the aforementioned approaches mean *interpreting art* because art is never about what, who, when, or even why; it is always and solely about *how*. This could even be a good reason to consider art more as a *quality* than a category. This kind of thinking could make it easier to address such questions as the relation of a bad artwork and a non-artwork. By work of art, I

mean the aesthetic totality created by the artist. When talking about paintings, this means strictly the combination of forms and colors combined by the artist. Art, according to this line of thought, is the aesthetic quality of this combination. Of course, art as a category will always be there because of the modern artworld with all its components.

Many properties of the artwork mentioned above can explain its aesthetic features, but aesthetic features are only tools used by the artist to create the artwork, and as such, they do not have artistic value. Only the whole artwork as a totality can have artistic value. Artworks are not puzzles to be solved by intelligent critics or philosophers; they cannot be interpreted into words or any other conceptual form. Art is *sui generis*, and therefore it can only be experienced through an art experience. What has been said above applies to artworks as *art*. However, of course it is often possible to make interpretative statements about *works* of art. Foucault's interpretation of Velazquez's painting "Las Meninas" is often represented as an exemplary case of interpretation.<sup>97</sup> Yet, however convincing, and most likely even true, his account is, it still does not mean interpreting *art* because art is about *how* all this is expressed, and that can only be experienced, not interpreted. Further, Richard Hambleton could spend weeks painting and repainting some of his works repeatedly, searching for the final touch to make them complete. The obvious futility of trying to interpret the meaning of the last brushstrokes that for the artist made the whole difference between a failure and a work of art is powerful testimony to the non-interpretative nature of art. In a way, most of what has been written about art thus far is not about art at all but about *works* of art. To repeat the wise and often cited words of John Dewey:

"The needs of daily life have given superior practical importance to one mode of communication, that of speech. This fact has unfortunately given rise to a popular impression that the meanings expressed in architecture, sculpture, painting, and music can be translated into words with little if any loss."<sup>98</sup>

There is also a great deal of discussion among scholars about the meaning of authors' interpretations of their intention (actual intentionalism) vs. readers' or critics' interpretation of the intention of the work (hypothetical intentionalism).<sup>99</sup> After creating an artwork artists will sign their artwork, simultaneously claiming it as their work and declaring it an artwork. Commonly, they will also title the work, which is a kind of interpretation of their own work. They can, of course, go on to present any additional information about their work, but even this means interpreting the work, not art proper. The opinion of the artist should not be entirely overlooked as hypothetical intentionalism would require, but neither should it be taken as a serious interpretation of art as the actual intentionalist might want to do. In the words of Jung:

"Being essentially the instrument for his work, he is subordinate to it, and we have no reason for expecting him to interpret it for us. He has done the best that in him lies in giving it form, and he must leave the interpretation to others and to the future. A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is never unequivocal."<sup>100</sup>

## Conceptual art

The conceptual art of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century presents a difficult case in terms of its relation to the aesthetic and interpretation because conceptual art cannot be understood aesthetically in the narrow sense of the word. Employing the approach applied throughout this paper in which the

aesthetic is understood in its extensive sense as experiencing meaning in non-conceptual form would be able to take us much further. Another useful feature of the present theory is the suggestion of separating the object of art and art as a quality instead of a category. Thus, when for instance Duchamp presented (or to be definite, attempted to present, since he was rejected) his “fountain” as a work of art, he did not transform the urinal into a work of art, as is generally considered. Art in this case consists of the *act* of deliberately presenting the most vulgar and banal item imaginable as a work of art in the cultural atmosphere of 1917. This means changing the context of the item, and consequently, its meaning. This act is a work of art that certainly has both conceptual and non-conceptual meaning. Thus, we can easily interpret the object in question to be a porcelain urinal signed by R. Mutt, or to stress things to the extreme, even the act of presenting it as art, but *art* in this case is much harder to interpret exhaustively. The large amount of “interpretative” literature published on the matter ever since is the most powerful testimony of this.

Duchamp’s Fountain was a paradigm-changing event in art and art theory. The next major event took place almost half a century later in the form of Warhol’s Brillo boxes. Getting to the root of these events requires taking a closer look at the idea of the readymade. In my view, there are two kinds of readymade artworks. The first involves cases in which artists actually find pieces of material that they consider being works of art and present them as such. In this case, they are, of course, acting as the artists of those works; the actual way of producing the work has no bearing on its value as a work of art. The second kind includes both aforementioned paradigm-changing cases in which the intention of the artist is entirely different: to be provocative, to question the nature of art or the authority of the artworld. Personally, I am inclined to regard such instances more as meta-art than art proper being commentaries on art, which they certainly are. Let me here cite Paul Crowther’s words about institutional, or in his words “Designation theories” of art:

“Rather than deal with ready-mades and the like as a marginal western activity (parasitic on expectations and display formats established by the making of representations), they redefine the entire concept of art to accommodate the ‘ready-made’, and, as a consequence, make a marginal and problematic western idiom into the arbiter of artistic meaning.”<sup>101</sup>

In Warhol’s case, the question is not about a readymade work but a copy of such. In fact, Warhol had only continued the imitative and representative tradition of art into its logical conclusion by creating a perfect or somewhat idealized copy of the original, thus in a sense surpassing the idea of the readymade. Still, it can certainly be seen as the end of the *imitative tradition* of art, not necessarily as the end of art in general. In this case, the original was a commercial soap box instead of anything of high cultural value, and this is where the real significance of the work lies. Warhol’s boxes are about celebrating the commerciality of the era. Warhol can be seen as the Rublev of our time; he fabricated the true icon of our culture, not condemning or criticizing it, but gladly and willingly accepting it as a plain positive fact, thus manifesting the highest cultural values of the Western world in his work.

The main idea of conceptual art is to occupy the mind and cognition directly without being based on sensory perception and traditional aesthetic experience. In conceptual art, we still experience meaning in non-conceptual form but commonly not necessarily in sensory perception but in more or less cognitive presentation of something. This means that conceptual art attempts to work with meanings directly without using visual form as the platform of meaning. According to Kosuth, “Conceptual art, simply put, had as its basic tenet an understanding that artists work with meaning, not with shapes, colors, or materials.”<sup>102</sup> Even deliberate lack of meaning can be experienced as

meaningful. In conclusion, if all meaning of a work can be exhaustively paraphrased, it constitutes a statement, not art, conceptual or otherwise. Thus, even conceptual art works in the mind in a similar way as conventional art, applying the same form of experience, which is based on the capability of aesthetic experience. The true difference between conventional and conceptual art forms lies in the fact that conventional art is mostly based on the aesthetic in the sense of experiencing *qualitative* meaning in sensory perception, whereas conceptual art is more interested in meanings themselves without this limitation.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, I have defined a work of art in the modern sense to be a concretized intention of the artist meant to be perceived through an art experience in non-conceptual form. On the other hand, I have defined the artwork in general to be an aesthetic interpretation of a cultural meaning in sensuous media. Based on this I suggest a conclusive qualitative definition of art: *art is the quality of an aesthetic non-conceptual interpretation of a cultural meaning in sensuous medium*. Interestingly, although having arrived to this definition by a detour, I find it fitting for traditional art, as well. Thus, the circle has closed.

Secondly, it is possible to make interpretative statements about most works of art, but it is never possible to interpret art itself because art is the artistic quality of the artwork, and that can only be experienced, not understood conceptually. I do not deny that most if not all forms of elucidation and criticism based on reason, such as those suggested by Noel Carroll, can be practiced with illuminating and perhaps even useful results.<sup>103</sup> However, I claim that none of that amounts to interpreting *art* because art is in the aesthetic quality of the work, and thus the meaning of art can only be experienced. Drawing together the arguments presented throughout this essay, I conclude that while works of art may differ enormously between different cultures and different historical epochs, art itself according to our definition is eternal and basically always the same. In the end, this account certainly comes very close to what Ernst Gombrich has said: "There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Most prominently Joseph Carroll in many of his texts about Literary Darwinism.

<sup>2</sup> Davies, Stephen, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Dutton, Denis, *The Art Instinct*, Bloomsbury Publishing, Kindle Edition, loc. 1616.

<sup>4</sup> Danto, Arthur, *The Artworld* in Ross, Stephen, *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, State University of New York Press, Kindle Edition, loc. 10028.

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<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee, Anjan, *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art* (p. 112). Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Davies, Stephen, *Definitions of Art* in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, Edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> Dissanayake, Ellen, *What Is Art For*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2002, pp. 17, 46, 173.

<sup>9</sup> Danto, Arthur C., *What Art Is* (p. 35). Yale University Press, Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Bell, Clive *Art*, The Project Gutenberg eBook.

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