

Experience or Reflection? The Question of Modern Art

Modern art has often been understood as reflective art. According to this understanding, art begins at the latest in the modern era to be continuously concerned with itself: Modern art opens up and engages in a self-reflective process in which its own status as art is constantly questioned and determined anew. As Theodore Adorno states in this vein at the beginning of his *Aesthetic Theory*: “It is now taken for granted that nothing concerning art can be taken for granted anymore: neither art itself, nor art in its relation to the world, nor even the right of art to exist.” Adorno’s claim is that art has entered the stage of its permanent self-reflection in modernity. Artworks like Marcel Duchamp’s “ready-mades” (*objets trouvés*) exemplify this stance concerning the nature of art, for works such as these fundamentally call into question their very status as artworks.

These brief remarks give us the starting point of this talk, which concerns the sense in which modern art has often been understood as reflective art. In order to prevent misunderstanding, one qualification should be kept in mind regarding my discussion today: I do not understand all contemporary art in the first instance as “modern art”, but primarily the works of art of classical aesthetic modernity (e.g., Malevitch’s *Black Square*, Schoenberg’s twelve-tone music, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, etc.). With this qualification in place, I would like to raise the following question: Is the reflective art of modernity an art whose significance is no longer accessible through our experience of artworks but rather through our intellectual confrontation with them? Does reflective art draw a stark alternative between experience and reflection? Once art becomes reflective, is it detachable from aesthetic experience or does it show, more radically, that one cannot as a matter of principle understand the aesthetic in terms of experience? I believe that the answers to these questions are decisive for adequately understanding the idea of aesthetic experience. This central concept of the philosophy of art is at stake if we seek to define modern art as constitutively reflective.

My examination of these issues will be articulated in relation to two paradigmatic positions in the philosophy of art: namely, that of Hegel on the one hand and that of Danto on the other. First, I will discuss Hegel’s conception of the romantic form of art and then Danto’s conception of artworks as interpretive constructs. In the course of this discussion, I will argue *contra* Hegel and Danto that aesthetic reflection cannot be understood apart from aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, it will also become clear that aesthetic experience always involves reflective aspects. In my reflections on the question of modern art, then, I aim to develop, at

least in outline form, a conception of aesthetic reflection that is constitutively tied to experience. My claim is that modern art shows something that characterizes the fundamental nature of art in general.

1. Hegel: From sensuous externality to reflective inwardness

Hegel presents an important model for the critique of the concept of aesthetic experience. He develops and sets into motion a position that has often been characterized as an aesthetics of content. According to Hegel, art is a medium through which spirit (*Geist*) becomes self-conscious of itself. On his view, one cannot understand this medium in a purely formal way because it has a constitutively contentful side. Hegel's conception of the ideal of art derives from this fundamental determination. We can initially adumbrate this ideal in terms of a very schematic formulation: Art is an ideal unity of sensuous shape and historical-cultural (*geistige*) content. Artworks are shapings of sensuously accessible materials. But these shapings are made in such a way that the essential features of a historical-cultural situation are sensuously comprehended in these shapings. Sculptures for this reason are the paradigm of art for Hegel: They show the historical-cultural formation of the human being in a sensuous way.

Hegel assumes that this ideal could only be realized at a definite period in the history of the West. Deficient forms of art existed according to him prior to the realization of this ideal, and art has strayed again from this ideal after a period of its realization. For Hegel art becomes modern when it exceeds the classical Greek ideal of art. He characterizes this aspect of modernity in terms of the concept of the romantic form of art.

This concept can be understood as an initial determination of modern art in the following way: In modern art (as the romantic form of art) its historical-cultural contents exceed their sensuous shapings. That is, art is determined in such a way that the sensuous-material shapes of artworks can no longer capture their historical-cultural contents. Hegel speaks in this sense of an art of inwardness because of the ascendance of historical-cultural determinations, for this art concerns the inwardness of the reflecting subject. According to this view, the perspective of a subject takes priority over the sensuous-material shape in the sense that this shape points to something beyond itself. A good example of a modern artwork in this sense is Velasquez's *Las Meninas*. I cannot elaborate its details here in the way that a sufficient appreciation of this artwork demands. But what I can do is to briefly highlight the fact that this artwork emphasizes the complex relations of visual perspective and pictorial representation. These relations cannot be directly captured in terms of sensuous-material shapings. They must be retraced by means of a reflective movement in confrontation with the picture.

In summary, the conception of modern art that Hegel attains for us is determined on the basis of a development from sensuous externality to reflective inwardness. I have sketched this development in terms of two theses of Hegel's:

(1) Artworks realize a unity of sensuous shape and historical-cultural content (and in this sense also a reconciliation of nature and spirit).

(2) Modern art is reflective art in the sense that what is characteristic of modern artworks is the ascendance of historical-cultural contents over sensuous shapes.

I want to argue now, however, that these two theses of Hegel's are not tenable. Even if I cannot lay out my argument here extensively, I still hope to show how they are problematic in my view.

Regarding (1), Hegel's conception of the ideal of art exhibits a basic problem. It concerns his claim that the sensuous-material shape remains inherently external in relation to the historical-cultural content. Now, it may surprise you that I attribute this claim to Hegel, for I mentioned before that he conceives the ideal of art as the unity of sensuous shape and historical-cultural content. But this is only one aspect of Hegel's position. The other aspect is the following: Hegel assumes that historical-cultural contents are constituted independently of its presentations in artworks. According to Hegel, historical-cultural contents (ideas) are rooted in the particular historical-cultural situations in which they are situated. Thus, they do not depend in their constitution on the sensuous-material shape of the artwork. According to a student's notes about Hegel's lectures on art from 1826, the historical-cultural content "in-forms [*ein-gebildet*] the shape that is peculiar" to the artwork (PdK 1826, 67). In art a sensuous-material shaping is given over to a historical-cultural content. This content exists though independently from this shaping. For this reason Hegel also conceives art as an intermediate stage of spirit's movement of becoming self-conscious about itself. He is therefore committed to the claim that I have attributed to him: In art the sensuous-material shape remains inherently external to the historical-cultural content.

This is precisely the thesis that I want to challenge. The sensuous-material shaping of an artwork never has the character of being something external in relation to its (historical-cultural) content. Rather, this shaping is *the* manner in which art realizes something contentful at all. Let us imagine for example a sculpture of Rodin (as mentioned before, it is the plastic arts that "best" realize the ideal of art for Hegel). Rodin often draws attention in his sculptures to the emergence of depictions from the sensuously accessible material by presenting large pieces of raw stone in his works. Now, the depictions emerge through the differentiation of

elements in the stone. For example, an element of the body protrudes from the raw stone. It is precisely in this way that a sculpture shows something determinate. What is thus decisive for the presentation of a sculpture is the interrelation of sensuous-material elements in an artwork. What the artwork presents (its specific mode of presentation, what it is about, what it exemplifies, etc.) is constituted by the relations among such elements (e.g., different parts of the stone that has been sculpted). In other words, the presentation as such is constituted in an artwork through its sensuous-material shaping; the presentation cannot be detached from it.

Regarding (2), if one criticizes Hegel's conception of the ideal of art, it follows that one cannot accept his concept of modern art either: The sensuous-material shaping cannot turn out to be deficient for a (historical-cultural) content. On Hegel's view, modern art is distinctive because it manifests a process out of which (historical-cultural) contents (the perspectives of reflecting subjects) transcend sensuous-material shapings. The possibility of this transcendence depends, however, on the assumption that the historical-cultural contents that enter into the sensuous-material shapes of artworks are constituted independently from such shapes. If this assumption is problematic, then modern art cannot be understood by recourse to a kind of content that transcends sensuous-material shapings. The conception of an (aesthetic) "beauty that stands at the same time over and above its material [stuff]" (PhK 1826, 158) is unintelligible. Consequently, the understanding of modern art as a self-transcending art, i.e., as an art of reflection as Hegel envisages it, turns out to be untenable.

2. Danto and the question of interpretation

Danto has decidedly developed his conception of modern art on the basis of Hegel's position. He thereby follows Hegel in assuming that art transcends itself on the basis of its internal dynamic into its own philosophy, that is, that it reflectively transcends itself. But Danto also clearly diverges in his philosophy of art from Hegel with respect to his particular understanding of how art transcends itself. In particular, there is one central element in Danto's reflections on the nature of art that is responsible in my view for this divergence: namely, the concept of interpretive construct.

Danto develops the central elements of his philosophy of art in response to the question of how an identification of artworks is possible. He supports this move with reference to emblematically modern artworks like Duchamp's ready-mades and Warhol's Brillo boxes, and he articulates his reflections on the nature of art by considering a number of similar examples in the form of thought experiments. As illustration, let us imagine with Danto a uniformly red canvas. How are we able to identify this artwork? Danto's answer (among other considerations) to this sort of question is the following: If the title of the work were *The*

Decline of the Gods, this work would be different from one with the title *The Smile of the Morning Sun*. Danto infers from this difference that artworks are identified by way of their interpretations. The titles function as directions for interpretations. On this view, I can only identify the work when I know what the work is about. Danto conceives artworks in this sense as interpretive constructs. The possible relevance of the titles of artworks makes it clear that a suitable interpretation cannot be simply imposed on an artwork from the outside. The artwork draws attention as such to the relationship in which it stands to what it is about. It refers not only to something, but also always refers to *how* it refers to something. The recipient of an artwork has to understand its self-referential constitution by interpreting it.

Danto's conception of modern art can be understood in light of this basic conception of artworks. His thesis is plainly that the self-referential constitution of artworks becomes independent in the modern era in the sense that modern artworks refer self-referentially to their status as works of art. Accordingly, art enters in modernity a stage of reflective self-occupation. Danto thus summarizes the development of modern art in a Hegelian spirit as follows: "Art ends with the advent of its own philosophy." (PEK, 137)

As with Hegel's position, I can capture that of Danto's in terms of two theses:

(3) Artworks are interpretive constructs in the sense that they must be interpretively understood in their self-referential constitution, through which they realize meaningful presentations.

(4) The self-referential constitution of artworks – in the way envisaged in accordance with (3) – becomes independent in modern art in the sense that modern artworks refer self-referentially to their status as works of art.

These theses can be seen by all means as an emendation of Hegel's position, as I sketched the latter in the first section of this talk. Danto corrects the Hegelian thesis that in modern art the historical-cultural contents of artworks transcend their sensuous-material shapes. The combination of (3) and (4), which I have attributed to Danto, brings about this emendation. According to his view, art is in the first instance constituted through its interpretations, which must be based on the self-referential determinations of artworks. This allows for a conception of modern art according to which its distinctiveness consists in the self-referentiality of its reference to itself – it is in this sense that the self-referential constitution of modern artworks becomes independent. This promising intermediate result is spoiled, however, by the fact that both (3) and (4) are untenable as they stand. I will attempt now to justify this assessment with a few brief comments.

Regarding (3), the sensuous-material side of artworks tends to go missing in Danto's concept of interpretive construct. This becomes clear when one considers his explanations of interpretive constructs. As he writes in one of them: "*Not* to interpret the work is not to be able to speak of the structure of the work, which is what I meant by saying that to see it neutrally, say as what I have spoken of as the material counterpart of an artwork, is not to see it as art." (VdG, 185 [120, emphasis in the original]) But the concept of seeing something neutrally, on which this claim depends, is not revealing. Thus, if I see a monochrome red canvas, I do not simply see it neutrally, even when, e.g., I do not know its possible title and many of its other aspects. Rather, I see it as a definite way in which the color is applied: as painted flatly, as stamped by certain brushstrokes, as porous, or whatever. I can also see it as something that leaves me cold, that overwhelms or provokes me, etc. This reveals that I already interpretively confront the shape of the work through my sensuous perceptions of it.

A "material counterpart of an artwork" – Danto's label for the opposite pole of an interpretive construct – is unintelligible in our engagements with artworks *as such*. For this notion of a material counterpart of an artwork could only be available for someone who looks at the "artwork" from a standpoint outside aesthetic practices – that is, someone who looks at it as a member of a foreign culture or an alien species. But this way of looking at it does not correspond with our human interactions with an artwork at all. This point shows that Danto's contrast between a neutral seeing on the objective side of an artwork and the confrontation with it as an interpretive construct cannot function because this contrast cannot arise in our (human) engagements with art as such. It follows that Danto's concept of interpretive construct has to be conceived in a different way. It must take into account how the interpretation of artworks also takes place through sensuous and bodily activities.

Danto's insight here can be made fruitful by highlighting how all interpretation is oriented toward the self-referential relations that the artwork exhibits. I return here to the example of the monochrome red painting. Let us imagine that the application of elements of color in this artwork is performed in such a way that these elements cannot be differentiated from one another. In this case, the different segments of the surface of the picture mutually determine one another precisely through their non-differentiation. The sensuous material of the artwork refers in so doing to how it is manifest in a particular (in this case, undifferentiated) way. Thus, a viewer is also interpreting the work by noticing this sensuous-material self-reference. I come to the conclusion, therefore, that Danto's concept of interpretive construct is *too intellectually* conceived. We can correctly modify it by also emphasizing the sensuous-material side of artworks in their interpretation.

Regarding (4), my criticism of Danto's concept of interpretive construct has the following consequences for the concept of modern art. Danto conceives modern art's self-referentiality

in the intellectualistic way in which he characterizes artworks as interpretive constructs. Artworks self-referentially draw attention to their own status as artworks. What has emerged, however, is that this thought takes insufficiently into account the sensuous-material side of artworks. By contrast, if one does take this side into account, Danto's conception of the way in which modern artworks self-referentially refer to themselves becomes untenable. For the sensuous-material aspects of an artwork are always involved in its self-referential constitution. This means that the interpretation that originates from considering the self-referential constitution of the artwork cannot become independent in the sense that such an interpretation only deals with the artwork's status as art.

3. Aesthetic reflexivity and aesthetic experience

In the previous sections I have separately criticized two influential conceptions of modern art. Allow me now to integrate these criticisms. Recall that Hegel's thesis of the reflexivity of modern art is that historical-cultural contents in modern artworks take priority over sensuous-material shapes by transcending them. I argued that this thesis assumes an untenable determination of the relations between sensuous-material shapes and the contents that artworks present. Danto's conception of how the self-referential constitution of artworks becomes independent corrects this. But the concept of interpretive construct that underpins his account of modern art turns out to be too intellectualistically conceived. If we take a step back from my specific criticisms of Hegel and Danto, they express a more general criticism of an unsatisfactory understanding of aesthetic reflexivity on their part. Both Hegel's thesis of the transcendence of sensuous-material shapes and Danto's thesis of how the self-referential constitution of artworks becomes independent are in my view symptoms of an understanding of reflexivity that fails to capture this reflexivity as a *happening* in artworks. In this way one does not attain in my view an understanding of reflexivity as aesthetic reflexivity.

Nevertheless, I too assume that the determination of modern art requires a conception of aesthetic reflexivity. How can we now attain such a conception given my criticisms of Hegel and Danto? I believe that we can achieve this by taking up aspects of Hegel's and Danto's positions that my foregoing examination has revealed. It has become clear that aesthetic reflection must be conceived as something that begins from the sensuous-material shape of an artwork. An artwork is a nexus of sensuous-material elements that mutually determine one another and attains in so doing a dimension of content (presentation, aboutness, exemplification, etc.). On the basis of this determination of the nature of artworks, we arrive at the following thought: An artwork does not merely amount to a mutual determination of elements. Such a determination is always connected to how certain relations are accentuated, e.g., that certain elements in an artwork stand out while others remain in the background, etc.

In this manner, for example, a certain pattern like a definite rhythmic structure of syllables becomes conspicuous in a poem, the particular application of brushstrokes becomes discernible, certain motifs emerge in an artwork, etc. We therefore come to understand the constitution of an artwork only by understanding how the relations and elements of an artwork determine one another self-referentially. An artwork refers to the distinctive aspects through which it constitutes itself. It is not formed simply by relations among the elements, but by reflection on the relations among the relevant elements. In this way, reflection is an indispensable aspect of the constitution of artworks.

But this kind of reflection cannot transcend the sensuous-material shape of an artwork, nor can it become independent from it. Reflection is a dimension of the sensuous-material shape of an artwork. This is what is precisely characteristic of one's confrontation with an artwork. One begins to appreciate an artwork when one can understand the self-referential determination of the relations and elements in it; one must comprehend the accentuations and stabilized structures of an artwork. This happens in the perceptions and movements of a recipient of an artwork, as well as in her discussion of its connections with other aspects of this artwork. In this respect a moment of experience always belongs to the confrontation with the reflective structure of artworks. Aesthetic experiences correspond to the self-referential structure of an artwork in a definite sense: A recipient of an artwork must, so to speak, "play through" or immerse herself in this structure if she wants to confront herself with an artwork. She has to pursue the relations among the relevant elements, and this manner of pursuing has a playful character in the sense that Hans-Georg Gadamer highlights.

I arrive finally at the following conclusion: Aesthetic reflection is inherently connected with experience. Such a reflection is effected only when the confrontation with an artwork contains a moment of experience. Aesthetic experience is thereby primarily conceived as the *perceptual, bodily, and conceptual play* into which a recipient is drawn through the shaping of an artwork. Thus, aesthetic experience cannot merely be a passive happening: It includes constitutively the activities of a recipient. The recipient explores the various connections among the elements of an artwork. She pursues the shaping of this artwork through her own activities.

What follows from these reflections, then, about the concept of modern art? First, as just emphasized, aesthetic reflection is also intrinsically connected with experience in the case of modern art. Second and more decisively, modern art cannot be distinguished by the criterion of reflection. Reflection is a fundamental characteristic of art in general, not only of modern art. What distinguishes modern art is only that the reflective constitution of art as such is *exhibited*. That means, for example, that the nexus between reflection and experience is highlighted as one that is fraught with tension. I believe that this precisely characterizes the

classical works of aesthetic modernity. But reflection in art does not transcend experience, nor does it become independent of experience. Rather, such reflection shows itself to be at work precisely in how it is constitutively intertwined with moments of experience.

Kant in his analytic of the beautiful develops the thesis that confrontation with a beautiful object leads to a special kind of pleasure, namely, aesthetic pleasure. According to him the experience of this kind of pleasure expresses the state of the subject, who in so doing experiences the harmonic functioning of the capacities of the understanding (in his sense of understanding). In light of my foregoing remarks, I can provide a different reason for why the confrontation with an artwork is pleasurable: It is pleasurable to let oneself be guided by the self-referential structures of an artwork in a certain way. The myriad experiences of artworks are pleasurable because artworks engage and ensnarl us through their self-referential structures. We can devote ourselves to such reflections in the course of such experiences – indeed, we can even indulge and abandon ourselves to them – maybe especially in confrontation with modern art.