

## Art as Reflexive Practice

A central theoretical task of philosophical aesthetics is the analysis of the concept of art. Over the last years, the mainstream of German aesthetics has tried to give a definition of art by means of the concept of aesthetic experience that is based on a contemporary reading of Kant. Despite the productive challenge of the neo-wittgensteinians, the enterprise of the definition of art has become reasonable also in analytic aesthetics again. In my talk I will defend an understanding of a definition of art that differs both from the neo-kantian and the neo-wittgensteinian proposals, namely that the art can be defined as a certain kind of reflexive practice. I will thereby give a definition that is based on a certain function of art and specify the way art fulfils this function from other practices that fulfil comparable functions: The function of art can be explained with the concept of reflexivity, the way it fulfils this function with the concept of self-referentiality.

In my opinion a definition of art has to meet certain criteria to be adequate: First, the answer has to present a concept which marks informative distinctions between art and other cultural entities such as mere aesthetic objects. Secondly, the answer has to be consistent with common and paradigmatic uses of the notion of art in our practice. Otherwise, instead of clarifying our concept of art, we would just give the word “art” a new conceptual content. Thirdly, the answer has to take seriously the heterogeneity of the arts as well as the historical heterogeneity of what has been produced in one art form and the emergence of new art forms. If we, for example, say, that it is a necessary condition for something that in order to be art it has to have a narrative or that art hinges on the expression of an emotion, we do justice only to some kinds of works of art. Our general concept of art would be too narrow and too exclusive: many entities that in our practice are understood as works of art would no longer count as works of art. Finally, as a fourth point, the answer to this question has to take into account that the concept of art is somehow a normative concept. This means, we often use the notion of art in an evaluative sense. In my opinion the answer to the question has to take this normative dimension seriously, but it should not by itself become normative in a prescriptive sense: formulating a theory of art should be understood as an enlightening of our understandings, not as a judgement about the quality of different works of art. In my opinion, neither the neo-wittgensteinian accounts of art nor the neo-kantian accounts of art meet these criteria. Despite the fact, that neo-wittgensteinianism (a position most notably developed by Morris Weitz) does justice to the existing diversity of different artistic objects, media and events, this proposal among other things tends to be too inclusive and hasn't much to say about the normative dimension of the concept of art. Neo-Kantianism on the other hand produces problematic interpretations of certain artistic objects like ready-mades or literary prose and has problems to do justice to the existing diversity, because it explicates aesthetic experience as a uniform kind of experience: it tends to lose sight of the specificity of the work of art.

Concerning a positive answer to the question I will defend a view, that doesn't try to define art by means of manifest properties or a specific mode of experience it asks for, but by means of its historico-cultural function. Of course, works of art can fulfil a lot of different functions. Our interest in works of art can be diverse and sometimes also brought about only by subjective interests. But we would not declare all possible functions to be relevant to works of art as works of art. Artworks are for example lucrative assets in the art market and they can display the social status of a person. These are *external functions* of artworks. In order to understand a certain work of art we do not need to refer to these external functions. In line with the Hegelian theory of art, that tries to outline the logical place of art in the human world, I will separate these functions from an *internal function* of art. This does not imply a hierarchy between external functions and the internal function, but it implies that the concept

of art cannot be reconstructed by simply referring to external functions. The classical topos of the autonomy of art means, in fact, that art is autonomous concerning certain potential functions when being compared to another specific function. This internal function can be formulated with the characterization that art as a whole has to be understood as *reflexive practice*. The concept of reflexivity in this context means that art is a source of self-understandings: While engaged in understanding the artwork through an understanding of its use of artistic materials, media and so on, we gain understandings of the understandings that we already have as participants of a historico-cultural form of life. Thus art always concerns us and our position in the world. Artworks let us understand something about ourselves even in the configuration of the most particular objects. In understanding works of art, our understandings are also potentially transformed – a topos phrased out by Heidegger's aesthetics - because they are ultimately concerned with practical understandings: A subject who arranges his life in contact with certain types of artworks will establish new modes of seeing, hearing, thinking and acting. Of course we don't draw our self-understanding only from our experience of works of art, and we also only do it with certain works of art: Artworks are candidates towards an understanding of ourselves. Thus not every artwork fulfils this function with regard to every subject, so the status of something as an artwork is always disputable. In my opinion this characterization can do justice to the normative dimension of the concept of art without being itself normative in the wrong, i.e. prescriptive way, because it isn't saying how works of art should look like and it isn't saying what they should let us understand about ourselves – these are questions that can only be answered within interpretations of singular artworks. Of course there are a lot of cultural practices that fulfil the function of understanding ourselves. Apart from art, Hegel listed philosophy and religion. Whatever may count as a device of reflexivity, we have to ask the question how art fulfils that function specifically. We can characterize this by the term of *self-referentiality*. Self-Referentiality has thus to be understood in a broader sense than its use in the sciences of arts. Every artwork has not only to be understood as a unique configuration of elements, but has to be understood as a configuration, that – on the background of our historical practices of understanding works of art – also points out certain of its miscellaneous elements. Thus the exemplification of the colours of a painting, the variation of a musical theme and the development of camera angles can be understood as constituted via self-referentiality.