

Short review

# On the Esthetic Value of Works of Art

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## Abstract

The study of the processes involved in the creation of a work of art has been the focus of numerous complex theories which continue to find new interpretations in an attempt to reflect the emerging innovative forms of visual arts. Theory and history of art are an ever-changing field of ideas and interpretations of the processes of art creation and discussions about the definition of what constitutes a „work of art“. Works of art have a special social significance as they are an integral part of the culture of a society. They reflect the esthetic and artistic values of the time in which they were created, and the style and changes it undergoes in time. The interpretation of a work of art has always been a kind of improvisation, which however requires esthetic empirical evidence and professional expertise in the respective type of art.

**Keywords:** *esthetic, visual arts, value in arts.*

In his work, *Philosophy of Art* Schelling described the creation of a work of art using the term 'construction'. For him to produce a piece of art does not mean to create a real work of art, but to understand an already existing work of art and its place in the Absolute. Schelling's Absolute is the supreme and most worthy form of knowledge which is to be differentiated from the study of art history, art itself and its empiric representation as well as from the analysis of the parts and elements of a work of art, and the technicalities involved in its creation; in other words, from all that was known in the antiquity as *arspoetica* (Schelling 1989).

Georg Sulzer (1720-1779), the author of the published back in 1779 *General Theory of the Fine Arts* defined the work of art as a 'work of taste', and explained that *an object which has a beneficial effect on our imagination and our inclinations creates a vivid impression. Therefore, a work of taste is made up of two things: material or story, which is inherently valuable, and its vivid image* (Sulzer & Koch, 1995).

Goethe, in his work *Maxims and reflections*, discussing the problem of the relationship between art and nature, gave a proverbial definition of what work of art is: *"what an ignorant man considers nature in a work of art is not nature (from the outside) but man (nature from the inside)"* (Goethe, 2005).

To create a work of art does not mean to give priority and express a certain idea, but rather to find ways in which efficiently to convey this idea. Artists have their prerogatives in defining the nature and the shape of a work of art, since they hold the key to its interpretation. Therefore, artists' prerogatives create the prerequisites for defining the physical

and esthetic parameters and qualities of a work of art.

In terms of esthetics, there are numerous (corresponding to established esthetic theories and ideas) and sometimes contradictory definitions and interpretations of what constitutes a work of art. In his book *Estetika na avangarda* (2007) Angelov presents some of the definitions of work of art, such as: *inexhaustible ambiguity* (Kant), *sublimation of libido* (Freud), *organic unity achieved in multitude* (Harold Osborne), *a leap into the otherness* (Andre Malraux), *a black hole* (Lyotard), *epiphany of the truth about being* (Heidegger). *It is not only different viewpoints, but also the historical dynamics of art that contributes to this chaotic variety.* (*epiphany*, from ancient Greek *epiphaneia*, means appearance, divine manifestation- author's remark, Bl.P.).

Works of art of the same stylistic direction, irrespective of their type, follow the same, typical of the respective time period, esthetic norm. In the history of art, it is not infrequent to have relatively long periods when compliance with the norm prevails over its violation. However, it is not unusual for the same works of art to violate or ignore the dominant esthetic norm in one way or another. When such work of art is presented to the audience, only those aspects of deviation from esthetic norm attract the observers' attention. (Thus, for example, when Edouard Manet's *Breakfast on the grass* was exhibited for the first time, it caused great indignation among critics and audience). Later though in such cases, existing links with the preceding esthetic norms come to the fore.

There are different viewpoints in the studies and definitions of what work of art is and, while most of them are complementary, there are also some new approaches. Thus, for Pavel Florenski the work of art *has some meaning, which is expressed by some means, which work in unison* (2006). According to Vasily Kandinski solving the problem with shape and colour in the composition is at the heart of a work of art (Sadler, 2008). Commenting on the perception of *Brillo boxes* by Andy Warhol, Arthur Danto claims that *...it's all about art theories, which at a certain time constitute the 'artworld' by creating the theoretical background and criteria against which works of art are evaluated and defined as such* (Danto, 2006). In George Dickie's theory, in order to receive their *status*, works of art should receive the status assigned by the authorized for this purpose institutions.

Among modern definitions and theories of the nature of work of art, it is worth mentioning Pierre Bourdieu's notion of „*field of art*“. Howard Becker thinks that in is not the great flow of modern art that is important, and D. Chateau looks for the truth in the tension and combining of these different options.

The work of art is a holistic entity, which has an esthetic function inherent in it. A work of art cannot exist independently of its nature (the so-called „*artifact substance*“). If the problem with the interrelation between the art content (or meaning), and the art form as perceived as the main problem in creating a work of art, then the very question of defining the notions of art content and form becomes less significant. Yet one can be sure that devising such criteria and the corresponding theoretical basis is what leads us in our critical analysis of any work of art. In this respect, knowing and using the definitions of what the nature and the role of a work of art is, and the ways in which its esthetic form is created, becomes a mere consequence.

A multitude of art works are created in a variety of art spheres. The question is whether they all are real art, and whether they correspond to our esthetic criteria and are genuine creative art. We can answer the question only if we are familiar with the system of esthetic criteria (related to ideas, style, themes, esthetics, philosophy, etc.) by means of which we analyze and evaluate a work of art.

According to the American philosopher and professor of arts and design at the Uni-

iversity of Michigan Kendall Walton, assigning esthetic values to a work of art depends on whether we consider it within the appropriate art category. And since there are lots of existing categories, the starting point in such analysis are usually the properties of the particular work of art and the features of the creative process once its affiliation with a category is decided on.

Contemporary avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art of the end of XX and the beginning of XXI century legitimates a great number of trends and ideas, which sometimes completely denounce traditional esthetic values. There are works of art in which illogical and irrational aspects are most prominent in the message these works of art send. Their message becomes incompatible with their form, which leads to a misunderstanding or complete lack of comprehension if we rely on traditional esthetic norms for their interpretation. Professor Valentin Angelov has some interesting thoughts about these contemporary misunderstandings in defining a work of art. He talks *about "a misunderstanding as a result of which a work of art, as a focus of our sensitivity, becomes a world in itself which draws us into a state of emotional and submissive hypnosis. Sensitivity overcomes reason, and as a result there is such great variety of definitions of what constitutes a work of art, which belongs completely to the realm of our senses"* (Angelov, 2007).

Contemporary avant-garde styles and trends in art, and the rapid development of digital and multimedia art creations give rise to new esthetic art interpretation issues in establishing the status and the messages sent by such works of art. Traditional (and, to some extent, modern) esthetics is somewhat puzzled and helpless in the face of the hyper-modernism of modern avant-garde works of art, and the interrelations between esthetics and art become increasingly complex in an attempt to build a theoretical foundation for defining such works of art. *Irrespective of the vision and the message of modern art, it is by all means a valuable product, born in the creative process, and „art is defined as such as a result of a consensus reached in establishing its status. Its value is established on the basis of social agreement, no matter what disagreements or doubts might have existed in its evaluation"* (Stefanov, 2006). Thus, according to the renowned French art critic Jean Baudrillard contemporary post-modern society, which communicates mainly through electronic mass-media, often creates not only original products, but also copies, or what he calls *simulacra* (from Latin - simulations). This way of familiarisation with certain works of art is by all means appealing, but it creates „.....a reality, which does not really exist, but is only virtual“ (Lane, 2009).

These processes, however, do not disturb the existing status-quo in defining the nature of art and a work of art. The massive shifts caused by avant-garde trends in different arts, the denouncement or re-interpretation of traditional norms of visualisation and perception of art on the one hand, and the advancing inter-art theories and inter-mediality between different types of arts on the other, have led to incompatibility of some foundation concepts used to guide artistic interpretation. A large number of issues which exist in contemporary theory and criticism of art originate in the fact that avant-garde arts severed the link between the notion of art and work of art. The advancement of non-traditional visual and interactive messages of avant-garde post-modern forms in contemporary arts, poses creation and interpretation challenges for modern artists.

Contemporary developments in art cannot ignore the advantages and possibilities offered by electronic visual communication, interactive installations and other innovations. Art is characterised by the inherent ability to perpetually create new norms and criteria, which give rise to more questions than definitive answers.

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