

# Art, Philosophy and the Spirit of Objectivity

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great honour for me to be invited to address this very special audience at Jonsered Manor, a place noted for once being an Art Gallery with a long tradition of hosting discussions on philosophical and artistic issues. I come from Vilnius, which is not a remote place in a geographical sense. To reach you I have travelled more than 900 kilometers by plane but it only took me a couple of hours, a journey only a little bit longer than if one came from Umeå. But the question that may be interesting to ask through the topic of 'Art & Philosophy', is whether I am coming from a remote place *in a cultural sense*? In a certain way, this curiosity amounts to a rather old question: Is philosophy a truly universal language or is it just a 'Greek invention'? Is *Art* a truly universal language? What is the relationship between the two in different cultures? Is the relationship between art and philosophy 'natural' and 'obvious' or 'forced' and 'artificial'? What is the relationship of the two with the now predominant mode of scientific rationality?

Can we, in the context of the growing awareness of the *global character* of many questions of crucial importance (but, at the same time, with an increasing level of specialisation and thus *heterogeneous character* of any particular society), somehow address these issues in any kind of *objective* terms? Can we find some 'ordering principle'?

I believe this task could be made easier by turning ‘art’ and ‘philosophy’ into museum objects. This could become a museum of immense size! Imagine all of the officially acknowledged links between art and philosophy turned into showpieces and assembled in one place. This visual display would start with the most famous one of them all – “Plato banishes the artists from his Republic as imitators of third rank”; then the visitor would see a large group of human figures in white marble called “Leonardo as Everybody: an artist, a scientist, a philosopher, an engineer, an anatomist, etc.” [The Danish philosopher Harald Höffding in his *History of Modern Philosophy* features Leonardo da Vinci as one of the key figures at the outset of modern philosophy]. One would also have the disinterested pleasure of observing the elegant figure of Kant tasting Canary wine and then barely avoid stumbling upon a huge ‘Hegelian wheel’ with the Spirit as its axis. The visitor will pass an eleven-metre high polychrome ‘Nietzsche as a Superman’, and see a life-size casting of Heidegger with a pair of peasant shoes and further on, a life-size casting of Derrida sitting at the table observing a small model of Heidegger observing a pair of shoes. One of the last halls would perhaps be a large pavilion called ‘Jean Baudrillard discovering the conspiracy of Art at the Venice Biennale’.

What a collection! We will inevitably have to peek into this museum, but before we do, let us linger for a while in the realm of everyday life. For a start, please allow me to offer you a scandalous story.

This scandal is a very recent one and it still resonates in the heads of my colleagues back in Vilnius. It originated in the Department X of the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts. It is not that the Department X was not noted for scandals before, but this time it was a mega- and a meta- scandal. What did it consist of? Nearly all the professors of the Department X decided they couldn’t arrive at a *unanimous* evaluation of the art students’ works at their department.

Thus, against all the laws and regulations valid in the country and in the Academy, they made a collective agreement *not to evaluate* their students’ works anymore. Instead of the ten-grade system, they decided on a pass/fail model, confirmed this with a self-made document, and put it into action. “We are all so different, with so many different ideas about art”, explained the professors of Department X. “One is teaching Fluxus, another prefers Bauhaus, and still another is for the New Figurative. How can we judge works so different within this one system? Moreover, many other art schools in Europe have stopped doing this long ago.”

The power of judging art was dissolved in the face of incompatible differences and International evidence. For better or worse, this decision was cancelled and the revolutionaries punished. The ten-grade system was re-established. “You are professionals within the same area!”, the punishers shamed them, “How in the world can you not be able to judge which artwork is *stronger* than the other?! This is the end of the Idea of Academic teaching of Art!”

The topic of ‘Art and Philosophy’ is a vast one. Therefore the audience will have to forgive me for trying to frame this topic, by placing it within the confines of a concrete social structure: the Academy (as I have come from the Academy to the Academy). It is not very difficult to notice that in this seemingly very usual academic conflict, we are faced with a classical epistemological problem: the ability to make judgements about the outside world, and the underlying conviction that in making these judgements ‘others are more or less like us’.

This is to say, that provided we have found some correct underlying principle these judgements are more than merely subjective.

In Department X we see this effort to translate *aesthetic judgements* into a more abstract, but collectively accepted, system of marks ending in failure. It is also important here that this concern of 'including an artwork into an evaluation system' is not a matter of abstract philosophical concern, but one, though philosophical in its nature, which arises within the artistic environment itself. For being able to name what is strong in art and what is professional in art, we have to at least agree on an experimental and tentative definition of art. I have mentioned 'aesthetic judgement', but a majority (even without the help of Mr. Duchamp or Mr. Warhol) would agree that this term is no longer of full relevance, even within the context of an art gallery or an art academy. The judgement of what is 'strong' or 'professional' in art is no longer based on mere aesthetic judgement. Remember Kant with a glass of Canary wine in his hand: he says art is not something like wine. However free the 'free play of imagination' is, it inevitably includes some kind of intellectual activity, some kind of 'the reason why', the 'idea behind', the 'about'. And the Academy, as a provider of knowledge, is a proper *locus* for this. Next, I would like to contrast two theoretical or quasi-theoretical models of trying to measure a degree of 'strength', 'professionalism', or whatever other name for *ranking* excellence in arts we may find.

The first one comes from social psychology. I was quite surprised to learn about the experiments in so called 'transcultural aesthetics' carried out by American and Japanese social psychologists back in the 1960's (and reported in the series of articles in *Journal of Social Psychology*, for example in the article *Some Transcultural Comparisons of Aesthetic Judgement*, 68 (1966): 19-26). I learned about this from Vytautas Kavolis, a Lithuanian-American sociologist and culture theorist, back in 1994 while translating his text "The Paradigms of Order: Nature, Factory, Art". (He passed away in 1996, when I was studying art in Japan and remember his trans-cultural lessons).

The experiment mainly consisted of assembling a collection of art-pieces of various degrees of value (the experts selected the works from what they thought to be highly valuable to complete kitsch), and showing them internationally to groups of people professionally engaged in art practices, be it African sculpture carvers, Japanese potters or French painters. These artists were asked to rank the artworks according to their own taste. Surprisingly, these worldwide judgements and the order of ranking were *very similar*. From this experiment, Kavolis infers some major aspects of his definition of art, one of which is its *transcultural and transhistorical validity*. It is because of its ability to 'transcend' the limits of one particular social group or one stylistic language, says Kavolis, that the quality of the work of art is recognisable beyond any particular socio-historical setting.

Probably this definition (as all others) arouses some suspicion (it has four other elements in it), but I think International exhibitions or concerts would not have any relevance if there were no grain of truth in it. And our entrance exams would be nothing but a series of complete misunderstandings. It is also what many philosophers say in their writings: "The essence of Art", says Schopenhauer, "is that its one case applies to thousands". In a similar way, Gadamer believes that art reveals itself as its own absolute timeless presence free of historical or social settings in which it has originated. Though we might have some difficulties with these definitions, it is quite easy to grasp what

Kavolis, Schopenhauer and Gadamer have in mind. For the meantime we can accept this definition, at least to an extent that it is not enough if my Mom says I'm a great artist, or even my group-mates who observe me toiling every day in the studio and see how serious my efforts are.

But let us return to the idea of shaping one's perception by a certain common practice and common experience into a condition to judge. But is mere ranking *judging*? Shouldn't we also at least give reasons 'why' in the Academy? Aristotle has an interesting passage related to this problem in his 'Metaphysics':

*But yet we think that knowledge and understanding belong to art rather than to experience, and we suppose artists to be wiser than men of experience (which implies that Wisdom depends in all cases rather on knowledge); and this because the former know the cause, but the latter do not. For men of experience know that the thing is so, but do not know why, while the others know the 'why' and the cause. Hence we think also that the masterworkers in each craft are more honourable and know in a truer sense and are wiser than the manual workers, because they know the causes of the things that are done (we think the manual workers are like certain lifeless things which act indeed, but act without knowing what they do, as fire burns, but while the lifeless things perform each of their functions by a natural tendency, the labourers perform them through habit); thus we view them as being wiser not in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and knowing the causes. And in general it is a sign of the man who knows and of the man who does not know, that the former can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is; for artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot.*

I cannot resist the temptation to immediately present another quotation (borrowed from Sir Ernst Gombrich), a quotation from a letter of Mozart to his father in which he talks about three piano concertos he had just completed (1782): "They are exactly between too hard and too easy. Very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, naturally without lapsing into emptiness, here and there only connoisseurs will find satisfaction, but in such a way that even non-connoisseurs must feel content without knowing why".

So there are those who have certain experience and knowledge and can judge, the connoisseurs, the 'knowers-why'. Yes, it works quite well if we limit ourselves to certain handy examples that support the proof. But what happens if we don't? And it was the case even with the class for the first-year students: while the crowd of 249 students seemed to be OK with my transcultural aesthetics example of practicing artists being able to make the right judgements, one student asked a question which pointed to a very uncomfortable exception in my experiment-based 'grand theory': "How about the Impressionists?", she asked. "If people from *Academia* had the same practice of painting as their own experience, why did the Impressionists have to suffer and be ridiculed?" "This is a very good point indeed", was my answer. I decided not to mention the 'paradigm shift', no – not for the first-year students.

But the paradigm shift matters. It is exactly the Impressionist movement that Pierre Bourdieu uses as an example when, in his *Rules of Art*, he speaks about the "social construction of the autonomous fields of production" that go

hand in hand with “the construction of *specific principles of perception* and appreciation of the natural and social world [and of the ... artistic representations of the world]...” He says the symbolic revolution initiated by Manet helped in the struggle to conquer artists’ autonomy from Academia, and fostered the process which led to the universe of artists ceasing to function as an *apparatus* with a hierarchy and controlled by a corps. And the situation in which no one can claim to be absolute master and possessor of *nomos* (of the principle of vision and of legitimate division). This revolution abolishes the very possibility of reference to an ultimate authority, of a tribunal of last appeal, capable of ruling on litigation in matters of art. The monotheism of the central nomothete (incarnated, for a long time, in Academia) gives way to *competition among multiple uncertain gods*.

Competition among multiple uncertain gods brings me back to the scandalous story in Department X of the *Academia* (Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, *the only* institution of higher learning in Lithuania producing artists). We know that the uncertain gods of Department X were unable to rank artworks within their own field. They had similar materials, but very different *ideas* about art. And this situation emerged after a certain paradigm shift, a very fast one in Lithuania’s case.

If you will allow me a short historical reference, I would dare say that ‘materials’ and ‘pure play with form’ were a kind of hide-away for the artists in the Soviet system. This was called a semi-non-conformist art later on, or a movement of Silent Modernism. Why silent? Because ‘pure play with form’ aroused less fury of the *Nomenklatura* than, for instance, a painting depicting Brezhnev as a clown or even long rows of people standing at the door of the food stores waiting for goods. In the same way physics was a scientific area much safer than, for instance, history.

This play of forms stood, for this generation, as real art (in contrast to the ideological art of Social Realism). So the return of the idea in art in the form of Western conceptualism took this generation of artists by surprise, arousing despair in some, and fury in others. Nobody, with the exception of several people belonging to the Soviet *Nomenklatura* with better access to information and allowed to travel freely, was able to imagine that in Visual Arts the *idea* can be more important than form, or even *replace* form! But obviously they wouldn’t tell us. And then it all began!... There was no introduction, no time to prepare, no transition period. The stream of performances, installations, actions, conceptual statements, radical manifestoes fell on the heads of Academy’s professors like a hurricane. In the early Nineties, despite the severe economical hardship, people started travelling and brought back home very strange news. “The time for developing technical skills in art is over”, they said. “They no longer do this in the West. It is all about creative ideas”. As the news, as a rule, came in complete isolation from any knowledge of the context in which it originated, the more mystical overtones it had, the more resonant it was.

But post-Soviet artists were not alone in finding the paradigm shift in art puzzling. Arthur Danto, one of the most brilliant contemporary philosophers of Art, acknowledges that it is the exhibition of Andy Warhol’s *Brillo boxes* back in 1964 that virtually sucked him into the realm of the philosophy of Art. He confesses that “the Warhol show raised a question which was intoxicating and immediately philosophical, namely: why were his boxes works of art while the almost indistinguishable utilitarian cartons were merely containers for soap

pads? Certainly the minor observable differences could not ground so grand a distinction as that between Art and Reality!”

“It cannot be forgotten”, says Danto, “that when philosophy first noticed art, it was in connection with the possibility of deception.” (Plato’s Republic without artists-imitators!) In the present day, the philosophy of art has deep questions to consider, questions of representation and reality, of structure, truth, and meaning. In considering these things, it moves from the periphery to the centre of philosophy, and in so doing it curiously incorporates the two things that give rise to it. For when art attains the level of self-consciousness it has come to attain in our era, the distinction between art and philosophy becomes as problematic as the distinction between reality and art. And the degree to which the appreciation of art becomes a matter of applied philosophy can hardly be overestimated”.

Danto wrote these words more than twenty years ago, but I do not think it is a dated problem. Age-old dichotomies of art and reality, craft and concept, idea and form, body and soul keep on re-emerging in our discussions, and haunt us every time we strive at making decisions *objectively*. Our modern passion for objectivity most probably comes from science. No doubt, scientific ways of reasoning dominates contemporary reality even if we are not always consciously aware of this. Jean Baudrillard, the last casting in our museum of Art and Philosophy, goes as far as saying that the whole realm of Art has been corrupted by the spirit of scientific objectivity - the drive towards analysing, dismembering and explaining in objective terms. It might have started with the rather innocent experiments of the Impressionists, but with Abstraction we “chained the object to the hidden structure” (a stricter, more radical objectivity than the objectivity of resemblance). This adventure, says Baudrillard, is over. The only reality of Art now is its operation in real time and its confusion with this reality. It no longer transcends itself into the past or the future. Art is simply what is discussed in the art world, in the artistic community, that frantically stares at itself. Art ends in non-exhibition of non-works in non-galleries – the apotheosis of art as a non-event. The consumer moves through it all to test his or her non-enjoyment of works. If this claim has any validity, all of the above-mentioned arguments and discussions do not make any sense, and our Art and Philosophy Museum pieces are doomed to be covered with increasingly thick layers of dust.

But..., is it really the only remaining way to approach art? Fortunately, this presentation is not aiming at answering this question. It only remains to hope you have non-enjoyed it.