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Artistic Research as Boundary Work¹

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*Das ist eben die große Frage:
Wo steht die Kunst?
Welchen Ort hat sie?
Heidegger*

The difference between art and artistic research

Asking how artistic research differs from art is a corollary of a broader question: How does the domain of art differ from the domain of science? Or where does art stand in relation to science, or to politics and morality, to the economy or to everyday life?

How art relates to science may seem obvious at first glance. Just as there is an obvious difference between playing sports and studying them in sport sciences, or between politics and political science, the distinction between art practice and artistic research would seem as clear as day. Yet drawing boundaries like these is not always easy. Consider the domain of the courts as compared to the legal sciences, or that of religion in comparison to theology. And the recent financial crisis has made us painfully aware that the distinction between the economy and economics is highly relative.

The attempt to distinguish what belongs to art practice from what belongs to artistic research is reminiscent of what in the philosophy of science is known as the demarcation problem. It involves delimiting what can be considered part of science from what cannot, or distinguishing what qualifies as science from mere pseudoscience. Karl Popper's influential views on this question are well known; he argued that openness to falsification was the quality that distinguished science from pseudoscience.

Demarcating our subject matter would amount to formulating one or more principles that distinguish art from pseudo-art—or rather, that distinguish art from non-art. Arthur C. Danto is

¹ This Essay will be published in German in *Kunst und künstlerische Forschung. Jahrbuch Zürcher Hochschule der Künste*, Band 6 (2009)

one writer who has expressed views on this. One of his insights is worth highlighting in our context: no essentialist definition is possible of what art is. The distinction between art and non-art is a construed one, and it depends on what is recognized as such in the “art world” (the totality of artists, art criticism, art theory, and art industry) at a particular point in time.² Such constructivism, which we also encounter in post-Popperian philosophy and sociology of science in thinkers like Paul Feyerabend, Pierre Bourdieu, and Bruno Latour, radically qualifies the problem of demarcation. And this should be a lesson to us as we examine the difference between art and artistic research.

We are interested here not so much in the difference between art and non-art as we are in demarcating the domain of art practice from the domain of science or research, or the domain of morality, or that of daily life. Here, too, demarcations, dichotomies, definitions, and identities are problematic—an insight also celebrated in post-structuralism. The issue of the essence of art has been supplanted by that of the dynamics of the art world, where different life domains may meet and interpenetrate one another. Attempts to address this question may be labeled as “boundary work”³. In trying to fathom something of the dynamics of the art world, one cannot assume a stable concept of art; the presumed boundaries of that world are the subject of constant debate.

Artistic research also qualifies as such boundary work—and in two different directions. Artistic research is an activity undertaken in the borderland between the art world and the academic world. The topics, the questions, as well as the results of such research are judged, and have meaning, both in the art world and in academia. And in this respect artistic research appears to differ from more traditional academic research, whose relevance and validity is determined primarily within the community of peers, within the walls of academia, within the world of the universities.

At least that was the image many people had of academic research until recently. That image is now substantially altered. The international debate on the relevance and valorization of academic research, the advent of transdisciplinary research programs, and the recognition of non-traditional forms of knowledge production (such as Mode 2⁴) have all shown that the context of justification of academic research lies in both academia and society. The quality of the research is determined by an extended peer group in which

² Cf. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York 1986

³ Thomas F. Gieryn, “Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science”, *American Sociological Review* 48 (Dezember 1983). pp 781-795.

⁴ Gibbons, Michael et al., *The New Production of Knowledge – The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London 1994

stakeholders from the context of application also have a voice. I say “also” because the basis on which research is judged, as well as the final word over that judgment, still resides in the academic community of peers.

Intermezzo 1: On peer review

The peer review system may be regarded as a sign of the independence and maturity of the domain of science. Within that domain, the forum of peers is the first to decide what is relevant and what the quality standards will be. Mutual peer assessment of quality and validity is also required in the case of newer forms of knowledge production, preferably in an open and blind assessment process in accepted academic channels.

So how, then, is the relevance and the quality of art and artistic research assessed? When asked which people judge the quality of artistic research, the head of a prestigious postgraduate art institute in the Netherlands recently replied “artists and experts.” By “experts” he meant curators, critics, theoreticians...

It is true that what art is is not determined by artists alone, but is “defined” in the “art world” (to follow Danto and Howard Becker), in the “field of cultural production” (to follow Pierre Bourdieu), in the “network of actors” (to follow Bruno Latour). Yet the question remains: who are the experts? Who are the peers? Wouldn’t it attest to the maturity of artistic research if the dominant influence of curators and other “secondary” actors were to come to an end? Or, more cautiously perhaps, shouldn’t the artist-researchers themselves accede to the forum of peers that determines what has relevance and quality? Fortunately, we now see the phenomenon of the artist-curator popping up here and there. Emphasizing the importance of the artist-researcher as part of the community of peers would greatly benefit the emerging field of artistic research.

The idea of art as an autonomous sphere (and the story of its eighteenth-century emancipation)

The following tale may be told of the relationship between art and the domains of science and morality. Once upon a time, in Greek antiquity, thinkers like Plato emphasized the unity of beauty, truth, and goodness. But over the course of history, the life spheres of art, science, and morality grew apart, until, in the eighteenth century, they became not only institutionally, but also theoretically, autonomous. This differentiation between aesthetics, epistemology, and ethics—which Kant provided with an impressive foundation in his *Critiques*—still persists

today, although “the unity of reason in the diversity of its voices”⁵ was also emphasized from Kant onwards.

The birth of the autonomous spheres of Art and Aesthetics (duly capitalized) in the eighteenth century was signaled by two publications: Charles Batteux’s *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (*The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*) from 1748 and Alexander G. Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* from 1750. Batteux’s work raised three issues. First, the system of fine arts constitutes an autonomous sphere (for Batteux, it comprised painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and dance). Second, these arts converge on a single principle. Third, that principle is the subject matter of philosophical aesthetics. Here ends our little history of Art’s emancipation in the eighteenth century.

That history has especially made itself felt since Paul O. Kristeller published his two-part article “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics” in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1951 and 1952. This study, which traces the history of the system of arts from Greek antiquity to the twentieth century, is still broadly authoritative in art history circles today. It often also figures as an implicit assumption in the broader discourse on art. Kristeller’s system of arts, by the way, consists of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry, with dance relegated to the second rank (with engraving, gardening, theater, opera, and prose).⁶

Very recently (in the spring of 2009), a remarkable article by James I. Porter appeared in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* entitled “Is Art Modern? Kristeller’s ‘Modern System of the Arts’ Reconsidered.”⁷ It presents a radical challenge to Kristeller’s “system.” Porter claims first of all that “the system of the arts” is a historical construction—and more likely an invention of Kristeller than an accurate description from the historical sources. He then argues that the bond between the presumed autonomous spheres of the arts and of philosophical aesthetics was not as tight as Kristeller claims, and that aesthetic formalism was a twentieth-century aberration. Finally, he attempts to show that the arts are always, and have always been, linked in one way or another to intellectual or moral content. Interestingly, he supports this with evidence from the likes of Clement Greenberg, who, in his well known appeal for materialistic objectivity, flatness, and physical quality, refers to the eighteenth century,

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Die Einheit der Vernunft in der Vielheit ihrer Stimmen“, *Kritik der Vernunft* (Philosophische Texte Band 5), Frankfurt am Main 2009, pp. 117-155.

⁶ Paul O. Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics”, Part I and Part II, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 no 4 (October 1951), pp. 496-527, and 13, no 1 (January 1952, pp 17-16.

⁷ James I. Porter, “Is Art Modern? Kristeller’s ‘Modern System of the Arts’ Reconsidered”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no 1 (Janary 2009), pp 1-24.

claiming that the arts concealed their “mediality” at that time by focusing on literature—that is, on intellectual and moral content and meaning.⁸

Intermezzo 2: The end of art (or how art connects to other life domains)

In the discourse on art, the issue of “the end of art” crops up from time to time, for instance in the work of Danto. In the transition from Greenbergian modernist abstraction to postmodernist art that began in the mid-1960s, Danto saw a rupture that signaled the end of the immanent developmental history of art. Post-historical art had become conceptual; assessing it was based not primarily on sensory perception, but on intellectual consideration (whereby Danto assumes that the two are fundamentally separate). This brought the history of the narrative, pictorial tradition to an end.⁹

Danto varies a theme that has accompanied the “project of the modern” since Georg W.F. Hegel. But the distance to Hegel has grown rather wide. Here is Hegel’s voice in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* in the 1820s:

... Art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone....¹⁰

... Art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation, something past.¹¹

For us, art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself.¹²

Those “spiritual needs,” “highest vocation,” and “truth” have certainly slipped away from us in the course of history. Or at least, few people would venture to utter such grand terms today. But Hegel’s “end of art” does not mean that art is not to develop further. Here is Hegel again:

We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit.¹³

Here, “the end of art” is the end of art’s ability to give appropriate expression to the Absolute Spirit. It is a farewell to transcendence, to a glorification of art which had been so celebrated by early-Romantic philosophizing intellectuals but a short time previously.

⁸ Ibid, pp 4-6.

⁹ Danto 1986, pp. 81-117.

¹⁰ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: lectures on fine art*, T.M. Knox (trans.), 2 vols., Oxford 1975, p. I: 10.

¹¹ Ibid., p. I: 11

¹² Ibid., p. I: 103

¹³ Ibid., p. I: 103

But perhaps it is better to speak of a “naturalization” or “humanization” of transcendence. Here is Hegel once more:

Art ... makes Humanus its new holy of holies: i.e., the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates.¹⁴

After the end of art, art concerns itself with “Humanus.” A bond with our concrete human life now steps into the stead of art’s bond with the absolute, the infinite. The end of art means a reconfirmation of art’s bond with who we are and where we stand—a reassertion of the connectedness of art to our intellectual and moral life. Today we can endorse this, without referring to Hegel.

Naturalization of transcendence: a metaphysics of art—after its fall

Our current situation lies in the wake of the linguistic and pragmatic turns in theory. The constitutive roles of language and action have superseded “reason” and “reality,” which, in traditional epistemology and metaphysics, were the foundations on which the edifice of our knowledge rested. We find ourselves in the wake of the farewell to the *grands récits* (Lyotard)—in the wake of postmodernism, understood as a poignant, melancholic farewell to modernism, or as a cheerful inauguration of Nietzschean perspectivism. We have discarded our naive belief in meta-narratives, and have grown more modest about our potential to get a grip on physical and social reality. We are now in a time that follows the clean-up work done by deconstructivism and ordinary language philosophy. The remnants of the once stable framework of meaning, knowledge, and reality that buttressed the edifice of art, science, and morality have now been permanently abandoned on the junk heap of history.

What we now need is a metaphysics of art, after its fall. Also after Hegel’s time, naturalization of transcendence means both taking leave of overly high pretensions (which still linger today in the minds of many) as well as preserving the awareness that art has the power, or gives us the power, to critically transcend the reality in which we find ourselves and which we are. That is metaphysics as it is possible after its fall. There is a sense in which the task is to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which the task is to continue metaphysical discussion.¹⁵

Cognizant of the bond between art and our intellectual and moral life, artistic research seeks to achieve a reflective articulation of that critical transcendence. It thereby concerns and

¹⁴ Ibid., p. I: 607

¹⁵ Cf. Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*. Harvard UP 1990, p. 19.

affects our relationship to the world and to ourselves. That is what I have elsewhere called the “realism” of artistic research.

In all this, we should keep two things in mind. First, we experience more than we can say. That does not just apply to art, of course, but to our whole relationship to the world and to other people. Art has no exclusive rights here, but this pre-reflective immediacy particularly manifests itself in creative processes, in works of art, and in artistic experiences. The early-Romantic echo in this wording is no accident. Of course we can no longer fall back on an uncritical understanding of art, and of course art has become reflexive. But here, too, there is a sense in which we are now beyond the vaulting claims of early Romanticism, and a sense in which we are still the heirs of this now naturalized realm of thought. The reflexivity of art—its quality of both questioning itself and giving food for thought, and of thus also showing a “conceptual” dimension—must not be construed in *opposition* to the, in a philosophical sense, non-conceptual content that lies enclosed in it. In artistic research, we are concerned directly with that pre-reflective, non-conceptual content, as enacted in creative processes and embodied in works of art. In this way, art invites us to critically transcend what is. Artistic research is the acceptance of that invitation.

But at the same time we should bear in mind that we might be wrong in our critical transcendences. That is the fallibilism of artistic research. After all, it offers a fundamentally open perspective on what is or could be. That is the contingency of artistic research—a contingency that derives directly from the fact that the content of art cannot entirely be captured in any epistemological project whatsoever.

Metaphysics of art—after its fall, after the end of art, after postmodernism—means an understanding of art as a critical reflective practice, encompassing non-conceptual content, which sets our aesthetic, intellectual and moral life into motion. It also means an understanding of artistic research as the practice of that fundamentally unfinished critical reflection.