

BOUNDARIES OF ART

The problem of delineating boundaries in art is, perhaps, the most difficult and intriguing problems posed by the avant-gardists of this century for art theorists to solve. It may be (and has been repeatedly) reworded as the problem of defining a work of art. The transformation of a work of art and its "disappearance" (in the traditional sense) compels art research and aesthetics to look for and assert the subject of its studies. The fact that some avant-garde movements have refused to set forth their aesthetic goals and defy the aesthetic quality of art makes aesthetics a scholarly discipline that has no subject of its own to study. There exists voluminous literature that either shows how hopeless the situation really is, or offers some theoretical ways out of the deadlock. I am not going to attempt to discover yet another way out but I have several comments to make as my contribution to the discussion that is underway here.

Let us compare two definitions of a work of art, to start with.

In 1779 in the second edition of his famous lexicon General Theory of Fine Arts J.G. Sulzer gave this definition of "a work of taste" or of "a work of art: "... A work that ought to be called a work of art must provide us with an object whose essence exerts a useful influence on our imagination and our propensities in such a way as making a lively impression on us. Therefore, a work of taste encompasses two things: matter or a plot that has some internal value and its lively representation" (part IV, p. 442 - Russian edition). Another

sophisticated modern author who has been through G. Courbet's Burial at Ornans, P. Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, M. Duchamp's Fountain, A. Warhol's Brillo Soap Pad Box, Kosuth's Chair and whatnot else says that "If something is called art, that something is, indeed, art". This is what D. Judd says about art.

What is striking here is how the positions of a person immersed in introspective pondering, that is, a theorist, differ. An 18th century thinker contemplates fine arts flow quietly and majestically from the high ground of a priori knowledge, and the verbs "ought to" and "must" are evidence that he directs the flow in some measure. Our contemporary is right in the middle of a stream and rushes along swept by the stream; he cranes his neck and strains his eyes in an attempt to discern the banks but the best he can do is notice the banks change their shape continuously, come tumbling down into the water and vanish into thin air. While Sulzer preaches standard-setting essentialism that knows no doubts, here absolute trust is placed in things empirical, or things that have "happened", and one finds himself suspended in relativist weightlessness that forces one to recognize that art is impossible to define (L. Wittgenstein - M. Weitz). This historical opposition is not only history, for it is deposited in the synchronism of modern approaches, indicating the extreme points where they diverge from one another. Perhaps we are to look for a third way.

If we accept that the problem relating to boundaries in art is a problem of classification (and it does not matter whether



we classify activities or artefacts), then we will appear to be looking for things that do not exist. Just like other big numbers that are a subject of humanities, a great number of works of art do not have clear-cut boundaries: they are "fuzzy sets" with blurred edges. The space those numbers occupy is anything but homogeneous: its distinctive properties are best manifested in the center and grow less visible on the periphery. Besides, this is a multidimensional space that houses not only degraded forms but also converted forms, the "negatives", parodies, imitations, masques and phantoms and, in particular, chimerical shapes, or, in other words, the entire highly ramified epithenocology of art. Therefore, there is no point in delineating the boundaries of "art"'s typological set. Instead we should focus our efforts on identifying its conceptual hub, as it were, or, to be more precise, the set of properties that are most graphically and completely manifested in its central phenomena.

I believe that such a set of properties is paradoxical in its arrangement based on the unequal unity of two competing entities: the aesthetic and the functional that may be commonly denominated as representation. Otherwise self-valuable objective and emotive existence emerges combined with linguistic functioning, or with the property of "being about something" ("aboutness" according to Arthur Danto). If we interpret representation in the broad sense (according to M. Wartofsky), we will deal with the representation of something else and with the representation of oneself at the same time. On the "outskirts" of art there appear onesided shapes: objects and

artefacts that are devoid or almost devoid of a semantic halo of theirs, or, conversely, conceptualistic texts that almost incorporeal and "transparent" for interpretation". The word "outskirts" is used here in the typological sense: such phenomena may be the very center of artistic life.

I argue that H. Read's famous aphorism "Art starts where function ends" should be ~~revised~~. The function, be it signs, rituals, sacral or didactic, magic or utilitarian among others) is in conflict with the aesthetic rather than artistic value and goal in their own right; artistry is generated by the internally tense unity of the aesthetic and the functional.

But does aesthetic appreciation continue to be present in a series of avant-gardist movements? The Futurists, the Dadaists and the Surrealists made public their refusal to pursue any aesthetic objectives. Other followed suit repeatedly. Our traditional aesthetic vision has been transformed and our fresh experience has heightened our aesthetic sensitivity ad infinitum, extending it over to such areas real and made up, which have never before had any aesthetic meaning.

In essence, the revolt against aesthetics was aimed to destroy only European beauty standards which were more or less academic. But identifying only those is wrong. We continue to identify aesthetic meaning with the positive appreciation of an object. I argue that in attributing some aesthetic meaning to some object we place it within a specific aesthetic group of axiological phenomena. But any axiological property may have any sign, that is, it may be rated both positively and negatively. The ugly is an aesthetic category just as evil may not



be described without reliance upon the system of ethical categories. This is to say that the gestures that are called upon to symbolize "dropping out of the aesthetic" are deceptive themselves. What we often call the aesthetic and the antiaesthetic is two of a kind, a pair that belongs to the same world opposed by an extraaesthetic world. By subjecting increasingly new domains of reality to artistic exposure and contemplation, the avant-gardists emerge as a mechanism designed to machine the nonaesthetic into the aesthetic and they identify and unearth the aesthetic potentiality of traditionally nonaesthetic objects in the process. That does not mean that they render them "beautiful". M. Duchamp asked whether it was feasible to produce a work that would not be a work of art. In paraphrasing M. Duchamp I would like to ask whether an object devoid of aesthetic appreciation is able to perform as a work of art. In such a situation even the "nil" aesthetic potentiality is still meaningful, for it conveys dashed hopes and an ostentatious absence of something rather than nonexistence and a minus value that differs from zero infinitely. Thus everything proves related to the aesthetic field.

In concluding I would like to point out that the notion of art under discussion here only appeared in the 18th century. Even though the meaning of the notion has changed since, it still serves as a basis for the special language we use in describing, dissecting and streamlining our modern experiences and our past human activities despite the fact that past cultures had streamlined and classified themselves in a different way. Per-

haps we have reached the stage where a new language should be ushered in to describe our new reality that is called upon to substitute the world of fine arts built by 18th century thinking. In any case we should be humble in remembering that our classifications are relative and historically transient and that with the passage of time they may appear just as naive as the classifications made by Hugo of St. Victor appear to us now.