

Art as Document

Maurizio Ferraris

“A common family of arguments, inspired by Wittgenstein's famous remarks about games, has it that the phenomena of art are, by their nature, too diverse to admit of the unification that a satisfactory definition strives for, or that a definition of art, were there to be such a thing, would exert a stifling influence on artistic creativity.” Thus spoke the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ad vocem “The Definition of Art”. In what follows, I will try to show that it is not uneasy at all to find not the definition of art, but the definition of the kind of game played by art. This game is the game of *documents*¹, and artwork is a kind of document. But let's begin from the beginning.

It seems very easy to understand an art work as a thing, given that merely saying so seems a banality. But after all it is not quite so easy, if we recall that there is a strong pull to say that there is an ontological leap from a mere thing to an art work². Even the esthetic theories that have emphasized the way that an art work is a thing have often concentrated on avant-garde productions³, as if the thingness of art works were a recent discovery. And we should not forget that these thing-esthetics have generally focused primarily on the visual arts, which is a limitation of the claims they make. What I want to show is that thingness holds of all art works and that the passage from the thing to the art work depends on an increase in inscription in line with the second part of my theory regarding the relationship between art works and documents.

How to avoid frustration in art

Frustration is one of the most common experiences in the face of contemporary art. Gallery owners are perfectly aware of this and, by way of consolation, they put on their exhibitions in very elegant galleries and accompany the shows with white wine and nibbles. One of the most common explanations of this is that, being part of a market system in which the mass media play a decisive role, contemporary art goes in search of provocation and paradox. This seems to be a necessary

¹ I present a whole theory of document as a basis of social reality in my *Documentalità. Perché è necessario lasciar tracce*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009, english transl. Forthcoming, Fordham University Press, New York; for a short presentation see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentality>

² M. Heidegger, “On the Origin of the Work of Art” (1935) in *Off the Beaten Track* (1960) trans. J. Young and K. Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 1-55.

³ A.C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1981.

explanation; but it is not sufficient because it runs the risk of making us lose contact with the essence of contemporary art, and indeed of art in general. So it is this false impression that I wish to correct with two consolations and one constructive suggestion.

The first consolation is that we should not assume that we understand or really like classical or beautiful art. When we see the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre through a thicket of Japanese tourists, we are often disappointed. It may be that we are tired, that our feet hurt or that we want to sit down; but the fundamental point is that the pleasure we expected does not happen or, at best, it is exactly what we get from a postcard of the painting. The truth is that the fact that the *Mona Lisa* represents a lady's face does not make it any more understandable than a work by Duchamp or Francis Bacon. It is just that we are ashamed to admit it.

The second consolation is that, even though "contemporary art" is often used to mean avant-garde visual art, this is by no means the most typical sort. For sure, it is the sort that is most difficult to understand but, happily, there a mass of other art that is pleasing and comprehensible as well as being, I add, equally esthetically worthy. I have in mind pop art and things like novels, entertainment movies and rock concerts. In short, it is just not true that visual art is the only paradigm of modernity. Pop in all its manifestations is another paradigm and is not in the least incomprehensible, and sometimes it is all too comprehensible.

The constructive suggestion is the question: are we really sure that contemporary art is incomprehensible? After all, they are objects like any other and, as such, have a lot to learn from design, which has itself shuffled the line between instruments for use and art works. We would do well to abandon the superstitious distinction between everyday things and these slightly sacred and slightly vain objects that are art works. We would do well to look at the works not just of contemporary art but also at those of more traditional art as if they were coffee makers or iPads. We would probably understand them much better than if we went in some frustrating search for a secret meaning.

Ready makes

In this connection, it is perhaps not an accident that the consecration of Pop Art was Andy Warhol's 1964 exhibition in a New York gallery of a set of supermarket products: Kellogg's Corn Flakes, Del Monte peaches in syrup, Campbell's tomato soup, Heinz ketchup. But the laurels went to the box of Brillo pads, which was decked out in the elegant design of the abstract expressionist James Harvey who was making honest money out of commercial art.

Harvey is not much remembered today, which is a pity, but there is no doubt that it was

Andy Warhol who had the fundamental intuition in deciding to select and literally to magnify (increasing the physical dimensions) those groceries. Given that the boxes in question were in any case handsome, Warhol made one concession to the canons of traditional art, but he picked up another insight taken from Marcel Duchamp who in 1917 had put an inverted urinal on display in an art gallery. Much has been made of the provocation, of the fact that the urinal suggested that anything whatever could become a work of art, so that the ontologically constructive point has been overlooked, namely that the gesture itself showed that *a work of art is essentially a thing*.

The art world is a world of objects. And this seems to hold especially of contemporary art. In 2007 at the Venice Biennale, Sophie Calle put on her *Prenez Soins de Vous*. And it was only fair to ask: where is the work? Was it in the pavilion or in the accompanying book? For it would be wrong to call the book a “catalogue”, because it was not a reproduction, but the original. And, more radically, where were the works: in the national pavilions or in that international pavilion where they sell the catalogues, rubbers, penholders, fridge magnets, but alas no longer glass snow scenes, because they are regarded as kitsch?

This is what the ready made has taught us, and it is most startlingly confirmed not in avant-garde galleries, but in more traditional venues. After all seventeenth century aristocratic galleries, the ancestors of the modern museum, would display alongside pictures also pistols and armor in a way no different from Duchamp. And, from the point of view of the ready made, archeological museums are hyper-transgressive because they gather tombstones, sarcophagi, amphoras, buckles and what not. And then there is that variant on the ready made that is body art, given that the exhibition of bodies are art works is the norm in Egyptian museums that display mummies, not to mention Pompeii, where the show includes casts of human beings in the act of dying.

If this thought is surprising, perhaps it is because we do not reflect sufficiently on what is a “thing”, “instrument” or “art work”, on what is a “museum”, “catalog”, “library” or on the slightly opaque laws that govern the distinctions among such entities. For instance, museums only rarely contain books, the exceptions being when they are visual poetry or – and here we are back with Duchamp’s ontological intuition – destroyed books, bits of pages and a cover as in the *Mariée mise à nu*, which managed to get a book back into a museum. But the overwhelming majority of books in museums do not execute the *ergon* of the work, but rather have the role of *parergon*, of something that surrounds the work, as a frame surrounds a picture. We find them in the museum bookstore along with postcards, jute bags, diaries, rubbers and pencils: they are *parerga* that nevertheless have a role to play in the experience of art works, of the *ergon*, just like the white wine and nibbles at the *vernissage*.

Sizes

To show that recourse to ready-mades does not mean that anything whatever can be a work of art we may note that, contrary to the conventionalist claim, there are objects fairly close to hand that *cannot* become art works for various reasons, including mere considerations of size. For instance, a statue that is more than twenty kilometers tall cannot become a “work”, and perhaps one that is a mere two kilometers tall is already too big. It is true that nano-art exists, with very interesting artifacts that can only be seen with a microscope, but the fact remains that the work in such a case is the ensemble of the nano-object and the microscope that makes it visible, just as Christo’s wrapping of the Great Wall of China really finds its expression in the catalogs that document the “performance”.

The size criterion shows that art works share some features with things in common use, including the fact of fitting, by way of dimension and duration, into a human environment. As Aby Warburg might have said, the good God is in the sizes: in the end, we are used to supposing that the question of dimension is extrinsic to art, but when a work cannot be seen all at once with the naked eye or calls for, for instance a trip to an orbiting space station, then we are outside the realm of works proper, while to say that a city is “on the human scale” is to praise it.

This holds not only for space, but also for time. At a certain time, people want to go to sleep, and I suppose that Aristotle had this in mind when he proposed that a tragedy should observe unities of time, place and action. Let us imagine a novel that is a million pages long. Who would have the courage to launch themselves, at the age of fifty, on such an enterprise? And would even a youngster begin reading it, given that he has to plan on doing something else with his life? The duration of a work has to fit in with human live: we cannot imagine a symphony that lasts a thousand years; and if it calls for a certain stamina to listen to the more than eighteen hours of piano music that make up Erik Satie’s *Vexations*, superhuman endurance is required by John Cages’ *As Slow As Possible*, which would last seven hundred and thirty-three years. Time makes quite a difference. Andy Warhol’s *Empire*, which is twenty-four hours of the Empire State Building taken from a single angle tried the patience of cinema-lovers and even Wagner’s *Ring* runs into serious production problems.

Things that pretend to be persons

The continuity between things and works allows us to formulate an ontology of art works under six heads.

First, art is the class of the works. The common denominator of the practices that make use of different media and different materials at various times with the most various purposes is the fact that they end up with works that have the feature of “poiesis”. This is a very broad but not infinite class. As we have seen, the fact of ready-mades does not mean that anything can be an art work. Rather, a work of art is in the first instance a thing with definite physical features as regards size, duration and perceptibility by the senses.

Second, despite the aspirations of conceptual art and those of the postmodernists who talk of art and reality as complementary fictions, works are above all physical objects. It is not a mere opinion that art has to do with *aisthesis*, but rather a fact that can be established by anyone who tries to replace a concert with a written account of a concert, an exhibition with a review of it, a novel with a summary or a poem with paraphrase.

Third, works are social objects. It is senseless to talk of works without referring to human beings who share our or a similar culture. We can easily imagine societies that do not create things like art works, and indeed there are cultures in which the realm of art is not distinguished from that of religion or of folklore; but we cannot imagine that there would be art works for a man left alone in the world. Like promises, bets, honorific titles, art works exist only in a society, even one made up of only two persons.

Fourth, art works produce knowledge only accidentally. While there are forms of art, such as narrative and portrait painting, that do transmit knowledge, there are some civilizations of which we remain only artistic productions, which have thus become the only knowledge we have of them. But this does not at all mean that knowledge is the primary function of art. It is possible to learn something about Ireland by reading James Joyce, but it is much easier and more efficient to buy a guidebook or a history.

Fifth, art works necessarily stimulate some sentiment. What we expect from works are sentiments and emotions, which are the same things that documents produce in us, except that they are generalizable and disinterested, where documents, such as a fine or a lottery win, are individual and interested.

Sixth, art works are things that pretend to be persons. The judgments we pass on art works are very similar to those that we formulate about persons. To say that a person leaves us indifferent is the same sort of negative comment that could be used of an art work, while to say that a screwdriver or a telephone, considered from the instrumental point of view, leaves us indifferent is not a criticism, but just an odd thing to say.

Art work as document

Question: what turns a thing into an art work? Answer: inscription, which confirms the continuity between art works. On these grounds, I believe that the best way of explaining that peculiar kind of object that is an art work is *Work = Inscribed Act*, and this formula should be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition: for there to be a work, an inscribed act is needed but it is obvious that there are many inscribed act that are not works.

Let us see how this works. The work is the result of an act that involves at least one author and one addressee: even a person who writes “for himself” at least postulates a reader. On this understanding, works present themselves as a peculiar type of document, that is, as inscriptions that register social acts. In some cases, more often than with normal social objects, the object coincides physically with the inscription, as in the case of a painting or a novel, but not in that of a symphony.

The specific reason why I think that the rule *Work = Inscribed Act* is preferable to the formula “X counts as Y in C” is that it applies to all forms of art, where Searle’s version is applicable only to ready-mades⁴. Francis Ford Coppola did not just take a load of celluloid and baptize it *Apocalypse Now*: if he had done so, perhaps a better title would have been *Laocoön*; but he didn’t: what he did was compose the script, meet bankers to whom he explained his project, asked for permissions, signed contracts with the actors and distribution houses, and so on; and what he filmed, registering on celluloid, depended directly on those acts and the inscriptions that followed from them. The same goes for old art works: Botticelli did not take a wooden board with colors painted on it and baptize it *The Birth of Venus*; rather he planned a painting as such, did some preparatory sketches and then applied paint within the context of commissions and cultural codes.

So, on the one hand, artwork is an object that sits atop the hierarchy that runs from things to works passing through instruments. It is in this respect that I have insisted on the way that ready-mades have a certain paradigmatic character: works share with things the medium size and the presence within the human world, and there is nothing surprising about the way that things and instruments can become works under certain conditions. But what determines this passage is what we might call the “increase in inscription”. Trivially, it is enough for a weapon or a buckle to be placed in a showcase in a museum accompanied by an explanatory caption, which is a central factor whose significance is easily overlooked. This fact shows the central role played by inscription in the transfiguration of the ready-made. On the other hand, it is not surprising that there are works, such as literary and musical ones, that are inscriptions from the very start. In this sense, the law *Work = Inscribed Act* is a more general theory of which “X counts as Y in C” is just a particular instance.

⁴ For instance, when Piero Manzoni signed seventy-one living sculptures, including Umberto Eco, he performed a transformation of Eco not so very different from the one carried out by the examination board of the University of Turin in 1954, when they conferred on Eco the title of Doctor of Philosophy.

Stories and texts for nothing

Thus far we have been concentrating on the analogies between art works and documents. Let us look now at the differences. Works are located in an institutional setting in that we cannot imagine a work without institutions, just as we found for documents, but they do not have the powers of documents; rather their power or prestige consists in their uselessness. The Kantian notion of “purposefulness without purpose” can be applied to this fact. Works seem to have an end or purpose, but then we discover that they do not or that, just as with persons on the Kantian understanding, they do have one, but it is in themselves or it is an internal purposefulness. Typically, when the development of firearms made armor useless, there began the esthetic contemplation of it in terms of its design and ornamentation.

Here we find a second difference between works and documents. While signatures and documents take the place of their authors, it would seem that works are much more similar to personas, and it is in light of this that they have privileged status in our culture. As we have seen, works are social objects, which exist as such and not as merely physical objects because humans think that they do, precisely as happens with those social objects that we call “documents”. On this scheme, the work is an idiomatic inscription that pretends to be a person. The work seems to address us and it seems to be the work itself and not its author that does this as if it had representations, thoughts and sentiments⁵. Unlike documents, works, which are undoubtedly objects, present themselves as quasi-subjects, as instances in which the inscription seems to promote an intention on its own account.

A further reflection on the relation between art and documents. Some philosophers maintain that the question about the ontology of art is ill-framed if it is of the form “what is art?”: rather, we should be asking “when is art?”⁶. There is no dispute about that. There are historical conditions and circumstances of exhibition that make a document become an art work or that make an art work regress (or progress, according to one’s point of view) to the status of mere document. An analysis of these conditions and circumstances does not mean, however, that there can be no ontology of art, but rather that the ontology of art does not have access to the highest level, so to speak, which

⁵ “Why do you not speak?” is a question apocryphally attributed to Michelangelo in front of his statue of Moses (if he had really said it, he would have been sick in the head); and doubtless, when Heidegger said of a painting by Van Gogh that “it was that painting that spoke”, he was speaking metaphorically (no-one could sensibly say, for instance, “it was the CD that spoke”). In *The Truth in Painting*, ((1978) trans. G. Bennington and I. MacLeod, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987), J. Derrida examined the limits of the metaphor of the painting that speaks, suggesting that has more to do with writing, in agreement with the documental theory I am proposing. Nevertheless, art works do have what Arthur C. Danto calls (in his *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, cit.) “aboutness”, which is not so very different from “telling us about”.

⁶ N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.

determines the passage of the inscription to the status of document or art work. This highest level calls for a very strong institutional input. For documents, there are parliaments and attorneys; for art works, there are publishers, museums and critics.

Thus, an art work is a social object that is founded on institutional objects. But, it might be asked, what sort of institutional object is a museum? Or a critic? What constitutes their normative value? And the answer is fairly straightforward: they depend on other inscriptions. The social world is circular, and this is no surprise⁷. From this it does not follow that a critic's *fiat* suffices to turn a tropical hurricane into an art work; it may be necessary, as we have seen in considering the thingness of works, that certain sufficient conditions of size and inscribedness be observed. But once these conditions are fulfilled, a critic may say that a given thing is a masterpiece; but that does not mean he will be believed. Let us look now at the features of artistic inscription.

Cuts

In line with the law Object = Inscribed Act, an art work is the result of an expression that involves at least two persons, such as a writer and a reader or a painter and a patron, and that is inscribed, which is to say fixed on some support such as paper, wood, stone or a computer chip or even just in the heads of the persons involved, as in the case of a performance. Just as the ready-made seemed to illustrate particularly clearly the fact that a work is a thing, I think that Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases are a perfect illustration or even the essence of the work as inscription. Reducing painting to pure inscription Fontana achieves many things: he finds the element common to all forms of art; he offers works that are in effect somewhere between sculpture, painting and literature (because after all the model of the page is omnipresent); and he reduces to a single trace both figure and signature because Fontana's slashes are immediately recognizable and idiomatic, and they cannot be confused with anything figurative like a signature, which is often an illegible scribble and not merely the reproduction of the signer's name. In light of these considerations, we are in a position to offer a phenomenology of inscriptions.

Traces The trace is the basic element of the work as it is for any inscription. A trace is out there in the world, the modification of a surface. A work without trace is strictly inconceivable, as follows from what we have said about the work as a physical object. Obviously a trace is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of there being an art work: not every trace is a work, indeed

⁷ D. Hume "Of the Standard of Taste" (1741) in *Philosophical Works*, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Grose (4 vols), Longman, London 1874-5, vol. 3. On the non-conventional (because a convention is not enough) but accidental nature of the work, see S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1980.

almost all traces are not; yet there can be no work without a trace: paintings, books, symphonies, songs, performances, films and soap operas all need, in order to be realized some possibility of inscribing something even if it is only in the minds of persons. Think of a jazz jam session with no score and no recording: its only trace is in the minds of the spectators and the players. I do not think much need be added here, if not a simple thought experiment: try to imagine a work without traces; from the fact that you will *not*, you will understand that there is no work without traces.

Impression There are two dimensions to a trace. One is the fact that something physical, a sound a color, some ink, is present in the world; the other is that this event is registered in a mind (and in this case too we have an inscription that can be picked up by a brain scan). There are no traces except for the minds that observe them and register them as other traces. This follows naturally from the fact that the work is a social object, which is to say something that exists only because there are minds (not necessarily human minds) that are able to register it. Nevertheless, when a trace is in a mind, it is an impression, which is not of itself at all social, and hence is not at all artistic. I can have a childhood memory or a dream, but this is not by any means an art work. The same applies if I look at a work and do not recognize it as such: it will be simply a physical object with certain characteristics for me and this is completely different from what happens when I know, or merely suspect, that the thing is art. In that case, I contemplate it with the supposition that there exist other humans who are ready to share my sentiments; and these are the humans who make the work what it is. Here is a possible case of collective intentionality, but also a demonstration of how little that sort of intentionality can explain about the working of society and especially about how indispensable documents, in this case art works, are to bring it into being.

Expression The decisive passage towards the status of the art work lies with expression, which involves at least two people. The minimum condition for the existence of art is thus the same as what is required for the existence of a society: two persons, an addresser and an addressee, and artist and a client, a promissor and a promisee, a creditor and a debtor. At this point we have made the move from the level of impression to that of expression. I can give an order, make a bet, compose a poem in rhyming couplets, challenge someone to a duel. In all these cases, we see an essential difference between the purely psychological level of the impression and the social level of expression. If it is true that there is all the difference in the world between saying and doing, we should add that there is an even greater conceptual difference between thinking and saying, writing or showing. For the difference between thinking about giving an order and giving an order, between thinking about composing a poem in rhyming couplets and composing a poem in rhyming couplets is to intents and purposes the difference between nothing and something. The mere thought has no social importance until it is expressed, even if it comes out as a slip of the tongue or an omission.

Work If, as we have seen, an expression shares the formal features of a work, what makes an expression into a “work”? Nothing ontological, but lots of history, psychology and social reality: taste, circumstances, the coordinates of an era, just as we find with documents. Just as a document can easily not be recognized as valid, or even not be recognized as a document, in a state different from the one that issued it, just so it can happen to a masterpiece that, with the passing of just a few decades, it becomes nothing more than evidence about the period in which it was made, and then be rediscovered as a result of the unpredictable fluctuations of taste. This has happened to Italian poet Giosuè Carducci, to Liberty style, to Academic art and to many other styles, movements and works. But – and this may give pause for thought – it has never happened to ideal objects, such as numbers and theorems; nor to natural events, such as tsunamis or spring showers; nor yet to yesterday’s dreams or artists’ unexpressed thoughts. The reason for this is simply that in these case we do not have to do with inscribed acts, which are thus confirmed as the necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of an art work, as it is for the existence of any social object whatever.