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Guest Editors:

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and Vincenzo Santarcangelo*

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The Artistic Disenfranchisement of Reality

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Speaking of his art, Robert Barry used to say: “We are not really destroying the object, but just expanding the definition, that’s all”. In fact, Barry’s expression effectively sums up the work of most philosophers concerned with the issue of defining the concepts of art and work of art. Between the lines of his sentence, and especially in the second half, Barry refers to what I call “the space between art and reality.” It is a particular idea: and yet it is exactly this space that both philosophers and artists refer to, when they work on the problems posed by the definition of art. To revise or expand the definition means precisely to reflect on the ways in which art belongs to reality.

In this context, I will argue that the work done by artists in the last century has led to a systematic attempt at an artistic disenfranchisement of reality. In other words, artists have tried to dismiss reality through art, expanding the domain of art to the point of making it ideally coincide with that of reality. Finally, I will argue that this attempt (which, as we shall see, had disastrous outcomes) was far deeper and more systematic

than the other, much more famous attempt: the philosophical disenfranchisement of art.

The latter was the topic of the eponymous 1986 essay by Arthur Danto, who is explicitly inspired by Hegel. As is well known, Hegel regards art as a step in the path of human reason, engaged in the process of formation of self-consciousness. In this progressive self-determination of conscious life, which corresponds to a gradual clarification of personal identity, reason goes through three stages: religion, art and philosophy. Art, religion and philosophy lead to the knowledge of the same truth from different points of view and with different degrees of perfection. Religion provides a representation of truth, while philosophy leads to a complete conceptual understanding of it.

In the space between religion and philosophy, Hegel puts art: unlike the first two, art expresses the awareness that the spirit has of itself and it does so neither through the representations of faith nor through the pure concepts of philosophy, but using objects that belong to the outside world and that have been created specifically to meet this purpose. To express ourselves in terms that are not properly Hegelian, but that certainly reflect Hegel’s influence, artworks embody reason in a material body, which is the *medium* of the work.

The perfect embodiment, the one in which reason unfolds without residues and in a total way, is the embodiment of reason in philosophy. Hence the well-known thesis by Hegel according to which art culminates in philosophy: that is, in fact, “the end of art.” The thesis brought forward by Hegel

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expresses a position that belongs together with the philosophy of art and the philosophy of history.

The version of the thesis of the end of art formulated by Danto, probably one of the best-known re-enactments of the Hegelian thesis, stands clearly in the footsteps of Hegel; however, it intends to move from the sphere of philosophy of history to that of descriptive metaphysics. Danto outlines conclusions similar to those reached by Hegel (philosophy disenfranchises art), but he does so by supporting his argument with an observation and a theoretical consideration. The observation is based on the historical and critical revision of the role played by Abstract Expressionism – that is, by the artistic movement that has carried out a radical paradigm shift within the modes of production of traditional arts.

Ever since Abstract Expressionism, and then in Pop Art, Fluxus, Conceptual Art and Minimalism, art (which has been excellently explained for centuries by the Vasari paradigm) has been completed, or more precisely, resolved in philosophy. The Dantian argument also provides for a reconsideration of the contributions that aesthetics has made to the understanding of art. Since he considers aesthetics as the science of sensory knowledge, Danto believes that it has little to say about artworks, objects that have a very important semantic component.

Both Hegel and Danto thus believe that philosophy has the possibility to disenfranchise art, taking the place of its practices and solving the needs that lead to artistic production in the most effective way. But while

Hegel casts his insight into the horizon of the philosophy of history, Danto believes to be in the exact historical moment in which it is possible to transform Hegel's prediction into the mere description of a state of affairs. I will not go into the details of the two versions of the disenfranchisement argument, which in my opinion show important differences; what I would rather draw the reader's attention to is the "other disenfranchisement," that operated by art over reality.

It is obviously redundant to point out that art and artworks are part of reality; however, in terms of epistemology, it is perhaps more interesting to dwell on one point: the open space inhabited by art is a particular space in which rules and semantics apply that ordinary reality cannot afford. More than the majority of human activities, artistic practice constantly plays with reality, expanding and shrinking the space in which to enforce the rules of ordinary reality. A not-too-hidden aspiration of contemporary art has been, so to speak, that to dismiss ordinary reality, consuming its borders, for the benefit of artistic reality. The more the boundaries of art expanded the more, ideally, the boundaries of the ordinary would withdraw, thus realizing the old romantic dream of transforming reality into art. The significance of artistic practice is therefore in many ways enclosed within the confines that art itself sets and that separate it from ordinary reality.

During the twentieth century, the disenfranchisement project reached a programmatic consistency: often artists have thus expanded the boundaries of art to the point of

making them coincide with reality. This has effectively led to the same risk noted by Luis Borges in *A Universal History of Infamy*, when reflecting on the titanic vocation that lies behind the desire of the total representation. If the Empire decides to create a perfect representation of the territory enclosed by its borders, making its cartographers draw a 1:1 map, the realization of the map – as well shown by Umberto Eco¹ – will come up against a double impossibility: the size of the map and its staticity. The map would be so extensive that – provided that it cannot be located in a different place from the Empire it represents – it would cover it. This fact should therefore be indicated on the map, in a virtually infinite process. In addition, the map would not be upgradeable: in the 1:1 map every variation of the Empire should be instantly shown on the map.

I think the example of Borges is useful to understand the problems posed by art in its relation with meta-conceptual issues. Provided that art is representation, rather than mimesis, what margin must the artists allow between art and ordinary reality for the latter not to dissolve in the former? In other words, what margin must they leave for art not to destitute reality, trying to impose itself as “*the reality*”?

This second type of disenfranchisement includes many artists and a few philosophers. Among the latter, the most significant is certainly Friedrich Nietzsche: in *The Birth of Tragedy* he explores the origins of the

choir, which is one of the distinctive elements of Attic tragedy. Nietzsche examines three hypotheses that literature, at that point in history, considered credible: according to the first, the choir had a so-called “political” function; for the second, however, it was a piece of reality put into the work. Finally, the third considered the choir as a boundary element, a kind of separator that stands between the work and the other-than-itself, i.e. the reality that the work is not.

Discussing these assumptions, Nietzsche focuses in particular on the second, made by August Wilhelm von Schlegel, who proposes a realist interpretation of the choir and considers it a piece of reality brought into the very heart of the tragedy. The choir would therefore be a kind of ideal spectator who has the function of representing the viewers who normally watch the tragedy. Nietzsche critiques this hypothesis by citing two arguments: the first is commonsensical, the second is substantial. The former sounds like this: not even the most daring of idealizations would lead to exchange the audience with the choir, as there is too much difference between reality and idealization. The theoretical argument, as it is formulated and for issues it tackles, deserves a few more words. The Schlegelian thesis in the words of Nietzsche sounds like this: “For we had always thought that the proper spectator, whoever he might be, must always remain conscious that he has a work of art in front of him, not an empirical reality; whereas, the tragic chorus of the Greeks is required to

¹ Eco: 1992.

recognize the shapes on the stage as living, existing people.”²

Nietzsche’s objection is clear: if the function of the chorus were to reproduce the mechanisms of “spectatorship” by bringing the audience into the tragedy, something in the construction of the artistic mechanism would not work. To use Nietzsche’s words: a spectator without a spectacle is an absurd notion. For the viewer to grasp the spectacle, she must be aware of the fact that what she is watching is, in fact, a spectacle. She must know that it is something *about* some aspect of reality, but not ordinary reality pure and simple.

Picasso remarked the same thing, in his own way, when he put a real label on a (drawn) bottle of Suze. An artist who creates a work with the express purpose of keeping the viewer unaware of the reality of the work ends up problematizing the basic relationship between the work and the spectator – which, as a rule, is the element that makes the enjoyment of art possible. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, stressed the importance of cognitively grasping the difference between reality and fiction for the enjoyment of art to be determined in the manner appropriate to it. This point is very clear as for what concerns the emotions we experience in the artistic relation: “Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity:

² Nietzsche: 2008, p. 27.

such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies”.³

For this relationship to exist and to be effective, so as to allow the enjoyment of art, it is a necessary condition that the viewer has some awareness of the object that is part of the relation. Otherwise it would be like a child who, riding a broom and pretending that it is a horse, thought to be riding a horse for real. The game would give way to misunderstanding. This means that, if the structure of the work does not incorporate or does not require the presence of a fictional marker, the artwork will be, all in all, a bad work. For this reason, Nietzsche shows to openly prefer the reading given by Friedrich Schiller in the *Bride of Messina*. Schiller understands the choir as a “living wall”, developing a theoretical hypothesis opposite to that of Schlegel. The choir is the fictional marker that allows one to mark with good evidence the distinction between the work, its semantic-epistemic dimension and ordinary reality (which is characterized by partly different logics and meanings).

In short, Nietzsche’s thesis is that the choir was introduced with the specific purpose of marking (and not deleting!) the distinction between art and reality. This marker also made it necessary to rethink the mimetic function of art, another aspect on which Nietzsche returns several times in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Tragedy grew up out of this foundation and, for that very reason, has, from its inception, been spared the embar-

³ *Poetics*: 48b 9-12.

raising business of counterfeiting reality. That is not to say, however, that it is a world arbitrarily fantasized somewhere between heaven and earth. It is much rather a world possessing the same reality and credibility as the world of Olympus, together with its inhabitants, had for the devout Greek".⁴

Thus, Nietzsche considers the reproduction of reality as something fundamentally embarrassing. This idea presents strong echoes of the concept of mimesis that was offered by Plato: mimesis can always hide deception, we run the risk of mistaking the real thing for the mimetic copy produced by the artist, unless the artist is not particularly careful to ensure that deception does not occur by taking the necessary precautions, so as to distinguish reality from the artwork.

In summary, therefore, we can put it this way: art has traditionally adopted, among its duties, that of representing reality. Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* puts us on track to specify the significance of artistic representation. One of the earliest forms of representation that we have knowledge of deals with the sacred: it is the idea that the tragic actor is the vehicle through which the divine is physically present, being incorporated in the actor. So the deity re-presents itself concretely in space and in time. A refinement and evolution of the practice of tragic theatre has allowed the parallel refinement of the concept and practice of representation: the god is not embedded in a living body, but rather the body of the actor refers to the

concept of divinity. And so representation, including the artistic one, creates a gap between reality and artistic fiction.

Precisely this point, caught with fine sensitivity by Nietzsche, is the one tackled by much of contemporary art, ever since Abstract Expressionism. It has been a gradual process, achieved by means of the changes introduced in artistic practice: from a refined and even mannerist use of representation, which reached its peak in Abstract Expressionism, a second stage was reached exemplified by post-historical arts (Pop art embodies the moment of transition from the first to the second phase). Through this passage, art has sought to disenfranchise reality, minimizing the space separating it from fiction and ultimately aiming to replace reality with art. All in all, it seems that art has created the perfect reversal of Plato's thought: the true reality is the one presented by art, which – after having nullified the representational component – has come to use very real and everyday objects in place of the artefacts created specially by the artists.

According to Plato, the craftsman – that is, by hypothesis, the manufacturer of beds – constructs beds that mimic the "idea of bed" and the artist, in turn, sketches something that looks like that idea. By contrast, *My Bed*, in the intentions of Tracy Emin, is a real bed that re-presents itself and the meanings embedded in the material object. The artefact, Tracy's bed, is taken and introduced in the context of art, in this case the museum, which is also a robust fictional marker. The fact that we find Emin's bed in a museum – the work was exhibited at the

⁴ Nietzsche: 2008, p. 28.

Tate Gallery in 1999 – has the effect of warning us that this is not just any bed.

In 1955 Robert Rauschenberg created the conditions for the bed-work of Emin to be possible: by hanging, literally, sheets, a blanket and a pillow on a canvas, he reassembled them in the guise of a bed, and then dirtied them with colour with the typical gesture of dripping. Rauschenberg's work is still somewhat linked to Abstract Expressionism, while anticipating Pop Art. The fictional marker in this case is embedded in the structure of the work: not only is the bed hung on a wall, but it is properly hung on a canvas, that is, a painting (so to speak). So it becomes a painting itself, and is fully brought back to the fictional space. However, Rauschenberg's idea implies that in the space of fiction, which is clear, the representation takes place through the mechanism of re-presentation of something that looks very much like the thing itself.

Ordinary reality signifies itself – this is the idea – more effectively through its representation than through its representations. This is what Emile De Antonio suggested to Andy Warhol when he asked him what he thought of two versions of a drawing of a Coca-Cola. The first was inspired by Abstract Expressionism, the second had instead a strong realistic character. De Antonio convincingly suggested that Warhol should draw the Coca-Cola realistically as it was the only way to genuinely grasp the reality of the sixties. Reality pure and simple is best rendered if it is re-presented rather than represented, that is, if the artist tries to cancel the difference between reality and fiction.

This is also the reason why *Brillo Box*, made perhaps a little more beautiful by Warhol, could be exhibited at the Stable Gallery in the famous 1964. However, while Andy Warhol and Pop Art in general were still sensitive to the aesthetic properties of the works, Tracy Emin utterly neglects them, leaving ordinary reality charged of as much reality as possible.

Now, it is important to ask two questions, the first of which brings us back to the dilemma that Plato expressed in the tenth book of the *Republic*. In those pages Plato argues that if the artist's goal is to obtain copies of ordinary reality, it would be more effective to use mirrors rather than brushes and words. Artists, for their part, seem to have followed him all too literally, since not only have they put aside their brushes, but they even started using real things, re-presenting reality as it is. Here are the questions: why regard the bed by Tracy Emin as art? And, besides, are we sure that this operation should be interpreted as a sign of a philosophical disenfranchisement of art (the same to which Hegel and Danto referred to, albeit with different emphases, when thinking about the fate of art)? I believe that the goal of post-historical arts is the revival of an old romantic goal, also picked up by Nietzsche: provided that art is infinitely richer in sense, meaning and, ultimately, being compared to ordinary reality, it would be reasonable to hope that reality ends up being completely at one with art.

The beds of Rauschenberg and Emin exemplify and pursue an old dream of the artists: to reduce the fictional space for the

benefit of art. That is, to bring ordinary reality completely back to art. This dream has its roots in the divine that Nietzsche saw as the origin of tragedy, or, to put it more secularly, in the will to power that belongs to anyone who has a strong creative instinct. The artist seemingly bends to reality by agreeing to re-present rather than imitate or represent it. However, he knows that in this game – that would have as a final result the artistic disenfranchisement of ordinary reality – he must always make sure to leave within the work, or within its space of existence, the fictional marker that avoids the ontological collapse between art and reality. Without the fictional marker – here lies the failure of the ontological project of post-historical arts – art would disappear, while reality would continue to exist as such.

Artists have used different strategies to hide the fictional marker: they've moved it, taking it away from the physical structure of the work and placing it on the outside, referring it back to the context. They have transformed it from physical marker into agentive marker, linked, for example, to the actions of performance artists. They have tried to hide it, making it visible only under certain conditions or at certain times of the life of the work. The point, though, is that no artist can delete it, because the fictional marker is a necessary condition for the work to exist. It is a necessary condition for the opening of the ontological space in which anything whatsoever may re-present or represent a different meaning, other than the usual one expressed by a given object. I think we can conclude that this project of disenfranchise-

ment has failed. If artists finally realized this, art would likely go back to doing what it does best: embodying meanings in objects capable of expressing them in exemplary ways.

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