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I declare that I have elaborated the Bachelor's/Master's thesis or doctoral dissertation entitled

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independently, under the expert supervision of my thesis/dissertation supervisor, and using only the literature and sources cited therein, and that the thesis/dissertation was not used within the scope of a different university programme of study or to obtain the same degree or a different degree. I consent to the publication of the thesis/dissertation in accordance with legislation and with AMU internal regulations.

Prague,

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Raphael Prata Taterka

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Abstract

In this bachelor's thesis, my goal has been to pursue a more complete understanding of art. To do so, I start by introducing the disciplines of Philosophy of Art and Sociology of Art separately, followed by an investigation of how they have historically interacted with each other, guided by the book "Aesthetics and Sociology of Art" by sociologist Janet Wolff.

After this first part, I proceed to present my view on the matter. Following the same line of questions which guided me throughout my studies, I begin with how we can identify and understand art around us. This leads me to explain the premise that art is a label, discuss my opinions, and highlight the questions which arise from the validation of an instinct I'd had from my first year at FAMU. By means of personal pragmatic observation, I then argue my opinions related to the phenomenon we call art.

This exploration concludes with the defense of the multidisciplinary approaches to questions related to human experience with an emphasis on the relative aspect of art. Though ultimately incapable of forming a definitive answer for the question I pose at the beginning of this thesis, I acknowledge that we all have our own individual experience of art. Through the process and research dedicated to the creation of this academic paper, I have developed the tools to better understand my own experience.

Abstract

V této bakalářské práci jsem se snažila o komplexnější pochopení umění. Abych toho dosáhla, začínám představením disciplín Filosofie umění a Sociologie umění odděleně a následným zkoumáním jejich vzájemné historické interakce, přičemž se řídím knihou "Estetika a sociologie umění" od socioložky Janet Wolffové.

Po této první polovině přistoupím k prezentaci svého pohledu na věc. V návaznosti na stejnou linii otázek, která mě provázela celým studiem, začínám tím, jak můžeme identifikovat a chápat umění kolem nás. To mě vede k vysvětlení premisy, že umění je označení, k diskusi o mých názorech a k zdůraznění otázek, které vyplývají z potvrzení instinktu, který jsem měla od prvního ročníku FAMU. Prostřednictvím osobního pragmatického pozorování pak argumentuji své názory související s fenoménem, kterému říkáme umění.

Toto zkoumání uzavírám obhajobou multidisciplinárních přístupů k otázkám souvisejícím s lidskou zkušeností s důrazem na relativní aspekt umění. Ačkoli nakonec nejsem schopen vytvořit definitivní odpověď na otázku, kterou jsem položil na začátku této práce, uznávám, že každý z nás má s uměním svou vlastní individuální zkušenost. Díky procesu a výzkumu věnovanému tvorbě této akademické práce jsem si vytvořil nástroje k lepšímu pochopení vlastní zkušenosti.

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Introduction

When I was in high school, I always believed I would pursue natural sciences or engineering as my future studies and eventual career. By the time I graduated, I realized the reason behind that belief was not simply that I liked those subjects, but that I liked them because they were easy to me (at least in comparison to disciplines of humanities). After a quick attempt at architecture school, I decided to study photography. This choice did not necessarily come from a desire to work in this field, but from a desire to learn more about this medium which I had learned to love.

Recently I've been joking with my friends, saying that I "came to art school by accident." When I imagined myself studying photography, I expected a major, if not total, focus on the technical and objective aspects of it. Not even a semester had passed since I came to FAMU when I began to realize that I was not really in *photography* school, but in *art* school.

Throughout my time in art school, there has been one question that often came back to me: what is *art*? I was never able to come up with a clear answer. I began to ask others as well, and the fact that I would receive different answers depending on who and when I would ask is something that fascinated yet annoyed me at the same time. Sometimes the answers would be relative and subjective, at others quite objective and absolute. Between the confusing, broad, and sometimes even contradicting responses, my curiosity grew.

In this paper, I will go through some of the history of defining art as well as how different academic disciplines see and understand this complex phenomenon. I will focus specifically on analyzing the fields of Philosophy of Art (Aesthetics) and Sociology of Art, how each of them perceives art as well as how they relate to each other. I believe that understanding these ideas and how to interpret them can give us a more whole view of what art is and/or can be. The main question I want to try to answer is *how can we identify and understand art in our world/life?*

My plan is to first go through each discipline individually to then be able to analyze their interactions. My intention is not to try to give a complete view of fields, but rather to present their general aspects, from points of convergence between authors, how they usually approach their topics, to specific questions and focuses they possess as well as any other information I see relevant for their general understanding. To achieve this goal, I will use concepts and quotes from different authors to introduce the disciplines separately, as well as using one book as my main guide when looking at them together, "Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art" by Janet Wolff. Lastly, I will present how I see these ideas manifest in our world/life and what that means to me.

1. Introduction to the disciplines

1.1. Aesthetics

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word *aesthetic* is an adjective “relating to the enjoyment or study of beauty”, and as noun “a set of principles used in a particular artistic movement (i.e. a group of artists with the same ideas or style)”. Aesthetics is also a branch of philosophy concerned with matters relating the meaning of the word in its adjective sense, focusing mostly on art. According to Janet Wolff, its origin as a distinct discipline can be traced back to

“[...]the eighteenth century, particularly in the work of German philosophers and writers (Baumgarten, Kant, Schiller) [...] This is not to deny, of course, that it is possible to go back further, and discover the 'aesthetic theory' of Plato or Longinus. It is to emphasize that it was only in the eighteenth century that aesthetics came to be constituted as a distinct discipline, focused solely on art, its objects and their appreciation; within philosophy, these questions were separated from questions of morality and politics, for example.” (Wolff, 1993, 12-13)

Some consider aesthetics as a synonym to philosophy of art, while others point that the former does not need to necessarily study solely works of art. Here, however, we will use it as a synonym.

Philosophers often tried to encapsulate art by trying to describe its essence. The field of aesthetics has traditionally focused on matters such as the nature of art, aesthetic experience, judgment, and value. This search for the essence of art is often considered an essentialist approach. Throughout history, there have been numerous attempts at defining art, to the point that we even have classifications for the different types of definitions. In *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, philosopher Stephen Davies summarizes some of these efforts while analyzing if they work as ‘essential’ or ‘real’ definitions. “In other words, a (real) definition of X characterizes what all Xs and only Xs have in common” (Davies, 2005, 169). To understand some of the history of aesthetics and how it viewed/views art, we will briefly go through his classifications.

The first category we are introduced to are the early definitions of art, the examples we are given, successively referring to Plato, Tolstoy, Croce, and Bell, are: “as imitation or representation, as a medium for the transmission of feelings, as intuitive expression, and as significant form” (Ibid.). Davies discards these as “real” definitions rather quickly as they do not meet his requirements of one. However, he recognizes an important factor about them:

“[...]their views were offered not so much as attempts to characterize an essence that all and only art works display but, instead, either as recommending what art works

should be like, or as isolating and drawing attention to distinctive, thematic, prominent, important, and/or valuable features of art works or art forms.” (Ibid., 170)

We are then presented with Morris Weitz’s view on the matter, which is that “art works are united by a web of family resemblances, not by the kind of essence sought by a real definition” (Ibid., 170-171). Weitz justifies his idea by defending that art is an open concept (susceptible to change) and therefore cannot be defined. Anti-essentialist theories have not been formally defeated; for that to happen, we would need to succeed at achieving an essential definition, which has not happened yet and very well may never happen.

Arriving at more recent theories (after the 1960s), a convenient distinction is made between functional and procedural definitions. Functionalists defend that art has a function, and something is only art if it achieves, or has the intention of achieving, such function. Proceduralists, on the other hand, argue that something can only be art if it is made in accordance with a process or formula. “[...] functionalism makes the value of art central to its nature, proceduralists’ definitions are purely descriptive and non-evaluative” (Ibid., 171). Some of the most well-known authors for each line of thought are Monroe C. Beardsley and George Dickie, that respectively defined art as:

“[...]an art work is either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an aesthetic experience valuable for its marked aesthetic character, or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangement that is typically intended to have this capacity.” (Ibid.)

And Dickie's famous Institutional Theory:

“[...]first, an artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of an art work; second, a work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an Artworld public; third, a public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them; fourth, the Artworld is the totality of all Artworld systems; and finally, an Artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an Artworld public.” (Ibid., 172)

Before continuing to investigate the definitions themselves, we should try and clarify what is meant by the term "Artworld", which will be appearing often from now on. Like the concept of art itself, Artworld doesn't have only one defined and real meaning. In Dickie's theory, it basically means art as an institution, the grouping of everyone that makes the art experience possible, from the artist all the way to the viewer, and in all its systems (painting, film, and so on). For Davies:

“The “Artworld” is the historical and social setting constituted by the changing practices and conventions of art, the heritage of works, the intentions of artists, the writings of critics, and so forth.” (Ibid.)

The following category we are introduced to are the historically reflexive definitions. These definitions hold as central the relation that an art work has to its forebears (art works). "That is, art_{now} is defined through its relation to art_{past}" (Ibid., 173). Such definitions brought something interesting and new to the table, the idea that achieving the status of art is dependent on the historical context in which the work is produced and presented.

The last classification we are given is called hybrid definitions, which are basically a combination of the previous ones: functionalism, proceduralism, and historical reflexiveness. The results tend to be superior definitions once "they can combine the advantages of several theoretical perspectives while avoiding the weaknesses that plague each taken in isolation" (Ibid., 175). An example of a hybrid definition given by Robert Stecker is:

"[...]an item is an art work if and only if it is in one of the central art forms at the time of its creation and is intended to fulfill a function art has at that time, or it is an artifact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function." (Ibid., 176)

Although mainly functional, this definition presents traces of both proceduralism and historical reflexiveness. The former can be seen in the idea that the intention to fulfill a function might be enough, the latter in the statement that it should be "in the one of the central art forms at the time of its creation," and then in a third sense, that this function can change with time, which makes it relate to art that came before through the "function art has at that time." Although hybrid definitions can be seen as quite complete, to Davies' eyes they are still flawed, once they make art dependent on an Artworld but do not analyze its nature.

In sum, Aesthetic theories have often tried to pin down where the essence of art lies. As we have seen through the definitions previously presented, this search for the essence has gone through many important aspects of art, such as its function, or at least intended function, the process through which it is created, its position within art history, and even the possibility of its indefinability. Aesthetics usually places the thing which is being called art and the experience it generates at the center of its focus. It also mentions and describes other elements that are important to the research and understanding of this topic (art), such as the people who are directly connected to it, like as the artist, the viewer, and the artworld. However, if we examine how aesthetics traditionally approaches these other elements, we can see that they are not often used as research material as much as missing pieces to complete the puzzle of defining art. In other words, the field has used these human characters to complete its understanding of art, but without a deep investigation of them. As we will see later on, this is commonly seen by scholars outside philosophy of art as a form of disconnecting art from the real world, a discourse which separates the artistic/aesthetic realm from ours.

1.2. Sociology of art

Sociology of art is a fairly new sub discipline of sociology. It began to separate itself from sociology of culture around the 1960s, and through the following decades, it matured as its own focus in various countries (Quemin, 2017, 293). Its main purpose is the study of art's social context. In other words, it analyzes the relations between art and society and how one affects the other, using central questions like how and why certain things are classified as art. I will use the book "Sociology of Art: Ways of Seeing" (Inglis & John Hughson, 2005) as my main source for this chapter because it provides a great introduction to the field.

One of the principles adopted by most scholars of sociology of art is the idea that

"no object has intrinsically 'artistic' qualities. Instead, sociologists tend to see the 'artistic' nature of an 'artwork' not as an intrinsic inalienable property of the object, but rather as a label put onto it by certain interested parties, members of social groups whose interests are augmented by the object being defined as 'art'" (Becker, 1984, as cited in Quemin, 2017)

This labeling process is seen connected to the social/political/economical context in which it takes place. It might occur either consciously or unconsciously, but its effect will never be neutral. There are always certain groups of people gaining or losing in some way, depending on the acceptance or denial of something as art (Inglis, 2005, 12). According to many sociologists, especially those influenced by Marxist ideas, the dominant class preferences will be expressed as the dominant ideas about art. A society that divides its members in groups of higher and lower (classes) tends to also divide its culture within those terms, what is produced/consumed by the 'top' will be understood as art/high art, while what is produced/consumed by the bottom will be seen as low art (popular culture/ mass culture/ commercial art/ kitsch/ craft) (Inglis, 2005, 14).

Another important point raised by sociologists is that the term art as we know it is a *historical invention*. According to them (sociologists), it appeared in the West a few centuries ago. Before that time, cultural items had other specific purposes. Great examples of this claim are the religious items produced in the past, for example medieval times, which have been used to decorate religious spaces and evidently bring a feeling of the presence of the divine closer to their goers. A lot of these items, both from within and from outside western culture, have gone through a reinterpretation process which lead to their categorization as art. From the sociological perspective, this reinterpretation is seen as an anachronic use of the word "art" done by certain interested groups "who act as professional custodians of 'art', to appropriate the past and claim professional expertise and control over it" (Inglis, 2005, 12/13).

Two of the most influential contributors to the field are the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and American sociologist Howard S. Becker. Bourdieu's influence can be found in many other scholars that came after. Concepts introduced by him like *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* are still used and built on until today. "Bourdieu's notion of the 'art world' as a 'field', structured

around and by opposed forces of artistic orthodoxy and rebellion, has proven to be a very useful tool for many sociologists" (Inglis & John Hughson, 2005, 4), furthermore, his work has often surrounded matters related to class struggle. Becker unveiled "the collective dimension that underlies all artistic activities" (Quemin, 2017, 296), which was a major contribution to the understanding of the artworld, as to the artist's social position.

By now, an important aspect of sociology of art should be highlighted. It is not the study of art as an object in search of certain artistic essence, but the study of art as a label, with focus on why, how, and by whom this labeling process takes place. From this point of view, when we analyze someone's statement about the artistic value of a certain object, we are not learning about characteristics of the work itself, but about the preferences and ideologies of the person doing the labeling or the social group which they represent (Inglis, 2005, 14). Sociology of art has a very critical nature; it tries to not accept things at face value, but rather question their meaning, their reason, their origin and consequences, or any other relevant aspect of it. Sociologists are specifically skeptical about what is deemed as natural, as well as classifications that separate aspects/items of culture between high and low, good and bad.

2. Sociology of art and Aesthetics

2.1. Interactions between the fields

2.1.1. The sociological critique of aesthetics

Now having gone through the basics of each discipline separately, we can then look at how these two fields and their scholars interacted with each other in the past, and how a combination of Aesthetics and Sociology of Art might provide a more whole understanding of what art is. For this chapter, I'll be primarily focusing on the book "Aesthetics and Sociology of Art" by British author and professor Janet Wolff. This publication does a great job at presenting us with the interactions that have happened between the two fields, raising important points related to this discussion, as well as pointing us towards what the author suggests to be the right path to follow.

The sociological critique of aesthetics can be seen as the beginning of the interactions between the fields. The critique itself basically refers to the acknowledgement of the importance of the social aspects and social history of art. Although this may seem simple, it generates challenges to traditional aesthetics, art history and art criticism (Wolff, 1993, 11). Numerous scholars have convincingly revealed deep connections between art and the social context in which it emerges, Wolff provided us with a few examples:

"By now, many social historians of art and literature have shown how art, literature and the modern conception of the artist/author developed in Western capitalist society. Hauser (1968) traces the rise of 'the artist' (the inspired genius, the sole producer or creator of a work, as opposed to the craftsperson or collective worker), and the separation of art from craft from the fifteenth century in Europe. Raymond Williams has looked at the history of drama, in relation to the changing social relationships and practices within which it has occurred, demonstrating that our contemporary notion of drama (with the particular conventions of theatre, role of the individual actor, and the insulation of the dramatic form from, for example, religious practices) is historically contingent (Williams, 1981, ch. 6; see also Williams, 1965, pt 2, ch. 6). Drama, however, is one of the oldest cultural-forms, its various transformations over two thousand years or so linked, as Williams shows, to changes in social relations, modifying rather than constituting the institution. (Similarly, music, another ancient art, has been shown to have changed its form and its conditions of practice in relation to its wider social and political situation; see Weber, 1975). Literature, on the other hand, is a relatively recent cultural form, constituted as distinct from, for example, letter-writing, essays and drama. As Williams says (1977, p. 46), the concept of 'literature' only emerged in the eighteenth century, and was only fully developed in the nineteenth century. In an important article Tony Davies locates the 'fixing' of literature as a clearly, and narrowly, defined institution, comprising 'an ideologically constructed canon or corpus of texts', in England in the 1860s and 1870s. His argument is that the separation of 'literature' from the multiplicity of written texts was closely connected with the contemporary history and ideology of education, and that both operated in the (fictional) construction of a national unity, which obscured real class antagonisms (Davies, 1978)." (Wolff, 1993, 13-14)

When questioning art and aesthetics “apparently suprahistorical status” (Wolff, 1993, 14), social history of art shows us

“[...] first, that it is accidental [not solely because of its essence or value] that certain types of artefact are constituted as 'art' (purely for non-functional purposes, and as distinct, say, from crafts). Secondly, it forces us to question distinctions traditionally made between art and non-art (popular culture, mass culture, kitsch, crafts, and so on), for it is clear that there is nothing in the nature of the work or of the activity which distinguishes it from other work and activities with which it may have a good deal in common.” (Wolff, 1993, 14)

Acknowledging the social context of art means accepting the important role of extra-aesthetic factors in the aesthetic experience and judgment, as well as in history of art and art criticism. These extra-aesthetic factors relate to the ideology of the person (or group) which is being analyzed, according to Wolff:

“Criticism, and the history of art and literature, then, are ideological, both in the sense that they originate and are practised in particular social conditions, and bear the mark of those conditions, and in the sense that they systematically obscure and deny these very determinants and origins. It is for this reason that aesthetics can take no reassurance from criticism that 'the great tradition' really is great. The great tradition (in literature, art and any other cultural form) is the product of the history of art, the history of art history, and the history of art criticism, each of which, in its turn, is the social history of groups, power relations, institutions and established practices and conventions (see Wolff, 1981).” (Wolff, 1993, 16)

While we should accept that ideological aspects have historically taken (and still take) part in the making of what we know as art and aesthetics, we should be careful not to totally reduce the latter to the former. Sociological reductionism is the denomination given to the total translation of art into ideology. “Too often the critique of art as ideology seems to have resulted in the disappearance of art as anything *but* ideology, and there are many reasons why this kind of reduction will not do” (Wolff, 1993, 23). Wolff gives us three reasons why sociological reductionism should not be accepted. First, certain works might still appeal even when observed from outside their original ideological context, for example “why Greek art still appealed to nineteenth-century audiences” (Wolff, 1993, 23). Secondly, in some works it can be really hard to conclusively find ideology expressed in it. “[...] many kinds of work do not seem amenable to sociological analysis (chamber music and abstract art, for instance), except in the sense of examining the social conditions of their appearance and success” (Wolff, 1993, 23). Thirdly, even works which have ideologies that we consider as wrong or unsound, can be “found to be enjoyable, technically excellent, or in some other way 'aesthetically' good” (Wolff, 1993, 24). All these reasons, among others, serve to show us how aesthetic value cannot be fully reduced into ideological value.

2.1.2. Aesthetic responses to the critique

Having had this overview on the sociological critique/challenge, we will now go through the **aesthetic responses** that come as a consequence. Wolff gives us four possible types of reaction which we will briefly go through.

The first is the “conservative defence of aesthetics, based on a denial of the importance or relevance of the sociology of art” (Wolff, 1993, 27). In this case, philosophers of art would simply continue the aesthetic project without any disturbance in relation to the issues raised by sociology of art. Wolff points out that few philosophers did accept the challenge, but only to reject its relevance to aesthetics. This takes the form of claiming that the sociological project is either misconceived or trying to act beyond the limits of its competence (Wolff, 1993, 28). In other words:

“Authors will thus acknowledge that art is a social product, and that sociological analysis can illuminate some interesting things about it. But they deny that this sort of knowledge can affect the central core of aesthetics, that is, the question of aesthetic value or experience.” (Wolff, 1993, 28)

Wolff also points out that this type of response can be a consequence of a misconceived idea of what the sociological project really is. Usually as understanding the sociological critique as a form of sociological reductionism (Wolff, 1993, 28-29).

The second type of response contrasts entirely with the first one. It refers to the total acceptance of the sociological critique to the extent of it becoming sociological reductionism. Wolff tells us that there are variations of sociological reductionism, but they have in common

“[...]the fact that they believe the problems of aesthetics have been solved, once we see that the production, reception and assessment of art are always socio-historical events. 'Aesthetics' is simply an existing, historically specific discipline; 'aesthetic experience' is explicable in terms of ideology and political values; and 'aesthetic evaluation' is nothing but a function of one's class or other interests.” (Wolff, 1993, 31)

An example given by the author is reception aesthetics. “Reception aesthetics here includes hermeneutics and semiotics, as well as the approach that explicitly labels itself 'reception aesthetic'” (Wolff, 1993, 33). The fundament of this sort of approach is the “argument that the text (or painting, or any cultural work) has no fixed meaning, but that meaning is produced by the viewer/reader with every act of reception” (Wolff, 1993, 33). This type of theory might become reductionist depending on what factors are believed to take part in the reception of works.

The third response to the sociological challenge is to acknowledge the social and ideological construction of art but then defend that “art, or 'good' art, transcends its conditions of production. The dilemma of choosing between an uncritical idealist aesthetics and

sociological reductionism is avoided by opting for some notion of the particular exemption of art in certain circumstances” (Wolff, 1993, 38).

The fourth and last type of response presented by Wolff is one that moves towards what she calls “sociological aesthetics.” The principles of such an approach are to acknowledge and accept the sociological and ideological aspects of art and aesthetics, but without falling into sociological reductionism. “Materialist approaches to the specificity of art are examples of this work, for they take cognisance of the social production and reception of art, but also attempt to account for the particular nature of art” (Wolff, 1993, 46).

What we have seen so far is a summary of the sociological critique and the aesthetic responses to it. The central point that Wolff is proposing through this is that

“Although it is essential to analyse the ideological components both of the text [or paintings, songs, pictures, or any kind of cultural production] and of its appreciation, there remain the questions of whether there are certain specifically 'aesthetic' qualities to texts, and certain peculiarly 'aesthetic' criteria of evaluation of those texts. The suggestion that value resides, in however complex a way, in ideology - that it is wholly reducible to ideology - is an inadequate and unsatisfactory solution to the problem.” (Wolff, 1993, 33)

Although this can be seen as the core of her book, “the dual purpose of this book has been to insist on the relevance of sociology for aesthetics, and to defend aesthetics from sociological reductionism” (Wolff, 1993, 105). It is only the first two out of six chapters, throughout the following ones the author focused on clarifying the distinction between aesthetic and political value, analyzing the nature of the aesthetic, investigating what she calls specificity of art, and insisting on the relevance of a sociological aesthetics. In the following pages, we will go through some of the points raised by Wolff which are also important for our enterprise of better understanding what is art.

2.2. Other relevant remarks from her book

2.2.1. Complexity of objectivity

After presenting us with the aesthetic responses to the sociological challenge, the author begins the next chapter by showing us another type of criticism which was directed at art and aesthetics institutions around the time she first wrote her book (around 1980s). This critique relates to matters of objectivity (or lack of) around aesthetic judgment and evaluation. In other words,

“[...]the notion of aesthetic value has been undergoing something of a crisis recently. It appears to have become more and more difficult to justify or defend any belief in

'objective standards' in the assessment of works of art. The traditional guardians of aesthetic quality have come under attack for biased policies and practices, even from within the arts." (Wolff, 1993, 48)

Wolff provides us with a few examples of such criticism:

"[...]the recent controversy about the buying policies of the Tate Gallery, in which the director of the gallery was accused, initially by David Hockney (1979), of favouring non-representational art has raised some important issues about the basis for assessment. (See also the reply by Norman Reid, 1979, and letters in the *Observer* of 18 March 1979.) The art critic Andrew Brighton (1977) has also criticised the Tate for presenting as official art what is ultimately the arbitrary choice of a select group of people. Similar criticisms have been mounted of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (see Wallach and Duncan, 1978)." (Wolff, 1993, 48)

Another indicator of this crisis is:

"a conference organised in 1980 by the journal, *New Universities Quarterly* (the proceedings of which are now published as volume 35, no. 1, Winter 1980/1) [which] took as its theme 'Excellence and standards in the arts'. The papers represent a variety of points of view, ranging from criticism of the avant-garde through the defence of objective standards in evaluation to the criticism of cliques and coteries in the world of the arts." (Wolff, 1993, 50)

Wolff is skeptical towards this conference; she points out a "pragmatic faith in objectivity" (Ibid. 50), despite various "analytical positions from which one might establish standards" (Ibid.) being presented. There is also a "relatively unproblematic belief that such standards do exist or can be established" (Ibid.), as well as the actual absence of said described or defined standards, "at least in the necessary analytic terms which would take issue with the specifically aesthetic criteria employed, [...] and which would at the same time acknowledge the social production, reception *and* evaluation of art, and take seriously the possible relevance of these contingencies" (Wolff, 1993, 51).

Following her comments on the conference, Wolff makes a small yet important digression from the topics of art and aesthetics to better understand the complexity of the term's value, objectivity, and fact. She does so by turning to academic theories and debates focused on knowledge and related terms:

"The critique of positivist methodology and theory, both by the interpretive sociologies like phenomenology, ethnomethodology and hermeneutics, and by the critical sociologies like Marxism and the sociology of knowledge, appears to have rejected definitively the notion that we can always or unproblematically separate facts from values, or that we can know something apart from our own perspective and interests in that knowledge." (Wolff, 1993, 52)

After some dense pages showing some of the debates that led to the claim quoted above, Wolff concludes this digression by expressing that "from the point of view of the sociology of art, we simply need to observe the problematic nature of all claims to objectivity" (Wolff, 58). Matters of objectivity are particularly relevant for aesthetics when discussing aesthetic

evaluation. As we have seen through the conference about *Excellence and standards in the arts*, the value assigned to works of art is often justified and defended (or at least an attempt is made) through the claim of objective standards. The points that the author is raising with this discussion are first, that “evaluation is inseparable from empirical and factual aspects of its object. Values cannot be ‘fact-free’” (Wolff, 1993, 59), and second, that these same facts (that have to be used to justify the value) “themselves both constitute and comprise values” (Wolff, 1993, 59). As Wolff argues:

“The reasons we may give for approving a work of art, though based on empirical information about that work (its colours, use of language, musical harmonies, sculptural line) are value-laden in their very choice of such empirical criteria, in the language in which they are formulated and in the numerous extrinsic (biographical, sociological, political) factors which necessarily intrude into those reasons. This is not to beg the question by assuming that all such judgements are merely ideological or political, for I think it is already clear that this is not the case. It is to suggest that they are, among other things, ideological. For, as we have seen, all evaluations involve a certain factual defence; and facts are always value-laden. Aesthetic values, then, necessarily involve other, extra-aesthetic values.” (Wolff, 1993, 59)

2.2.2. Aesthetic and political value

With the “foregoing comments on the limits to objectivity and the invariably ideological aspect of aesthetic judgement” (Wolff, 1993, 62) in mind, Wolff turns the relations between political and aesthetic value to examine the possibility of non-reductionist theory of art.

After going through the ways art can be explicitly about politics (with political intention from the artist or with political subjects depicted in the work for example), the author then reminds us that “works will often have more than one set of political meanings. As semiotics and hermeneutics have conclusively shown, cultural products admit of multiple ‘readings’” (Wolff, 1993, 64). Wolff exemplifies:

“A potentially critical aesthetic-political ideology does not necessarily produce a critical reading, for this depends on the position of the reader.” (Wolff, 1993, 64)

Her conclusions regarding the relations between art and politics and the differentiation of aesthetic and political values are:

“The central point is still that all works of art, being produced in political-historical moments by particular, located people using socially established forms of representation cannot fail to be, however, implicitly, about politics.” (Wolff, 1993, 64) “[...] it is certainly true that aesthetics and politics are inseparable, for the social history and sociology of art demonstrate the political nature of all cultural products. However, it does not follow that aesthetics and politics are the same thing, nor that art is merely politics represented in symbolic form. Neither, as far as aesthetic evaluation is

concerned, does it mean that aesthetic judgement follows from political assessment.” (Wolff, 1993, 65)

2.2.3. The nature of the aesthetic

In this chapter, Wolff continues investigating the aesthetic value of art (apart from the already discussed political/ideological value). She does so by first summarizing some common aspects of aesthetic theories, such as the following frequently asked questions:

“Among these questions are: (i) what is art? (ii) what is the nature of aesthetic experience? (iii) what is (the nature of) beauty? (iv) what are the criteria for aesthetic judgement? (v) what is aesthetic value or merit?” (Wolff, 1993, 68)

As well as what theorists have often believed to be the essential aesthetic aspects of works of art:

“In contemporary aesthetics, some writers have continued to propound theories of art which depend on the analysis of the properties of works of art (see, for example, Hungerland, 1972). For some, the essentially aesthetic aspects of works are emotive (Langer, 1962); for some, expressive (Elliott, 1972); for some, imaginative (Scruton, 1974; see also Collingwood, 1963); and for some, cognitive (Goodman, 1976; Hess, 1975; also Scruton, 1974, p. 4). In some cases, these features are related more to the mental activities of the artist (Goodman, 1976, p. 258), in others to those of the audience or viewer (Scruton, 1974), and occasionally to both (for example, Morawski, 1974, p. 115).” (Wolff, 1993, 71)

The author then presents us with theories of the aesthetic attitude, which analyze the attitude a person has when seeing art or seeing something as art. These theories are “as old as aesthetics itself, going back to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, and continuing to influence one strand of the philosophy of art through neo-Kantian and, later, phenomenological approaches.” One of the core aspects of such theories is the differentiation of the attitude taken in perceiving art (or something as art) in relation to other attitudes of everyday life:

“Aesthetic experience is characterised in terms of its own 'intentionality', based on the 'bracketing' of this experience separately from other, outside experience. The phenomenological reduction makes it possible for the philosopher to isolate the aesthetic from all other types of attitude and, in particular, from the attitude of everyday life.” (Wolff, 1993, 74)

With phenomenological approaches it should also be noted that this separation does not imply going back to a non-sociological aesthetics, although the types of attitude are seen as distinct from one another, they all derive from the natural attitude, therefore carrying extra-aesthetic factors:

“The natural attitude, however, is the paramount reality, and Schutz [philosopher and social phenomenologist] maintains that all the other provinces of meaning may be

considered as its modifications (ibid., p. 233; see also Schutz, 1967b, pp. 341-3).” (Wolff, 1993, 76)

Although Wolff sees a lot of potential in phenomenological aesthetics, particularly because these retain the particularity of aesthetic value while also acknowledging the social extra-aesthetic factors (Wolff, 1993, 77), she argues that they do not in fact tell us what art is:

“In any case, the argument that there is a peculiarly aesthetic attitude which may be applied to paintings, sunsets, or even functional objects is, while unexceptionable, of very limited use. On the one hand it does describe what occurs in choosing to look at something as art or as an aesthetic object but on the other, it is not, in the end, an answer to the question ‘What is art?’. We may be prepared to define as art any object, even with original practical intention, so long as it is presented or perceived aesthetically, but a sunset does not thereby become art.” (Wolff, 1993, 74)

Following this discussion, Wolff concisely presents us with Institutional theories of art. As we have seen before, such theories attempt to answer the question “what is art?” based on the process through which something goes through in order to be categorized as art, therefore using that which has already been labeled art as evidence. “The institutional theory of art defines art by reference to those objects and practices which are given the status of art by the society in which they exist” (Wolff, 1993, 78).

The author raises several points when comparing phenomenological aesthetics with institutional theories of art. First, that both theories are able to deal with problems which the other cannot. The aesthetic attitude explains how anything may be perceived in the aesthetic mode, while institutional theories “offer the possibility of explaining why certain works or groups of works are considered appropriate objects for aesthetic attention” (Wolff, 1993, 79). Secondly, Wolff shows us how both these theories have abandoned the field of pure philosophy when they incorporate sociological aspects into them. Some phenomenological approaches have this social aspect present in its relation to everyday attitude, while institutional theories have it evident when using the social position of people as part of its definition.

Wolff ends this chapter by pointing out how the two distinct disciplines which we have been analyzing began to converge in their attempt to explain what art is:

“From the point of view of the philosophy of art, then, the social co-ordinates of the aesthetic are becoming increasingly apparent. From the point of view of the sociology of art, the valuable contribution of much work in aesthetics is achieving some recognition, for it provides a vocabulary and an orientation which enables us to approach the question of the specificity of the aesthetic. In the belief that the experience and evaluation of art are socially and ideologically situated and constructed, and at the same time irreducible to the social or the ideological.” (Wolff, 1993, 84)

2.2.4. The Specificity of Art

In this chapter, Wolff wants to investigate the “specificity of art” which has been mentioned throughout her book (usually referring to what is left of the aesthetic when separated from the extra-aesthetic). She begins by informing us that different writers meant different things when using the term:

“The growing agreement among sociologists of art that it is essential to pay attention to the specificity of art disguises the fact that different people mean different things by this phrase.” (Wolff, 1993, 85)

Wolff suggests that there are at least three different senses in which the term “specificity of art” is used, we will briefly go through them in her own words.

“In its first sense, the specificity of art refers to the historical separation of artistic activity from other areas of social life, and the concomitant specialisation of aesthetic modes of perception.” (Wolff, 1993, 86)

In this sense, specificity of art refers to the creation of the artistic realm separated from the social realm. As we have seen before this was a historical process exercised by those who acted as the professional guardians of art.

“However, the second kind of emphasis on specificity takes up the quite different question of the independence of art in relation to social or economic factors. Here the concepts of 'specificity' and 'relative autonomy' are more or less interchangeable. This line of argument, also important and representing a valuable development in the recent sociology of art, maintains that although art is a social product [...] it is not simply a reflection of its social origins.” (Wolff, 1993, 88)

In this sense, the term refers to the irreducibility of art into ideology or politics. We have seen this both when we were presented with sociological reductionism as when Wolff investigated aesthetic and political value.

The third sense of “specificity of art” the author presents to us (also the one she claims to be concerned about) refers to the “specific characteristics of art” (Wolff, 1993, 90). Although this might sound as an essentialist approach, Wolff argues

“[...]that the project itself need not necessarily be an essentialist one - that is, it need not be a search for universal aesthetic qualities. Bennett's [sociologist] insistence that aesthetics must be historicised may also apply to the theory of the specificity of art in the present sense. As we shall see, for some authors the aesthetic is a historical category; for others it is a trans-historical, human universal.” (Wolff, 1993, 90)

Following this, Wolff tells us that there are “three major contenders for a theory of aesthetics within a sociological or materialist framework [at the time she wrote her book]. These are *discourse theory*, *the philosophical anthropology of art*, and *psychoanalytic theories of art* (Wolff, 1993, 90). She also mentions that a possible fourth contender would be an attempt at locating the specific features of the aesthetic while also grounding this analysis “within a

materialist history of art and society” (Wolff, 1993, 90). Although the author sees potential in different aspects of each of these theories (while also pointing out their weaknesses), I’ll refrain from going through them for two reasons: first, because these theories heavily based on other disciplines which are not our focus here, and second, my lack of knowledge on these other fields and their terms prevented me from fully grasping the length of their propositions.

All that we have seen so far has been parts of the discussion surrounding the question “what is art?” from the perspective of philosophy and sociology of art. I extensively used quotations to avoid accidentally changing the meaning of what was said by the authors. As we have seen through the term “specificity of art,” even academic texts are vulnerable to being interpreted differently than the original intention of their author. With that said, in the next chapter I’ll finally present my opinions and points of view on the matters discussed.

3. My opinions, feelings, and any other relevant remarks

I would like to start by saying a few remarks related to the relevance of what I'll say from here on out. Most of the publications I previously referenced are relatively old. Wolff's book had its second edition released in 1993, and the main sources used when presenting the disciplines separately are from the first decade of this century. Although thirty years does not seem so long ago, and in many aspects it is not. I believe it is evident that with the exponential growth in globalization and advancements in technology, the processes through which information and knowledge are created, shared, and acquired, must have also been accelerated. This is not to contest in any way the relevance of works produced in the past, or to say they are outdated. It is to point out that several developments in the discussions must have already happened by now. Therefore, we can presume that a lot, if not all, the ideas I'll be presenting must have definitely already been thought and proposed by other people, which in its turn does not invalidate in any way this discussion here.

Art has no unified definition and it might never have one, but we do have certain consensuses and conventions about it (that vary throughout different cultures or individuals) which are a consequence of debates, and at the same time, vulnerable to change through the same debates. What I will present from here on is in no way a claim at total truth or facts about art. I'll present my opinions on the matter, formulated, and transformed during my past three years in art school. I would also like to point out that I will be using a few of my own experiences as examples, which are obviously of a singular and partial point of view. However, it is a view I can claim a certain level of truth or veracity over since they are my experiences. Emphasis on the "certain level", because even our own experiences probably cannot be fully grasped by ourselves due to our partial perspective.

After reflecting on the thoughts I want to present, I realized they could correspond with some sociological aesthetics insisted by Wolff. I believe that there are some semi-essentialist, phenomenological, interpretative and sociological aspects to my approach to the question "*what is art?*". I mean semi-essentialist in the sense that I'll present what I see as the essence of art, while acknowledging and highlighting that this is my partial, and open to change, view on the matter. The phenomenological, interpretative, and sociological aspects present in the factors I believe to be the essence of art, and how I examine said factors. I believe that art is created through what I will call the artistic experience; this is the encounter between someone (subject) with some knowledge about art, with something (object) which comes to be labeled as art by that individual.

In order to explain my thoughts, I'll first follow the question *how can we identify art?*, which for me often accompanied the main question itself: *what is art?* I should note that I will follow the sociological premise that art is a label, while also emphasizing that this premise does

not intend to question the value of art, but rather to simplify this exact discussion in terms of how a subject assigns some sort of value to an object (not necessarily physical), consciously or not, through the act of labeling it.

3.1. Identifying art, the labels

As it is noted by sociology of art, the belief that an institution or its representatives are the authorities over deciding what is art is a historically manufactured partial discourse which should not be taken at face value. The question that arises then is *who is the authority to decide?* I believe that all of us who have heard the term "art" have some sort of personal knowledge about it, ranging from a weird thing/classification which is not really understood or cared about, all the way to the belief of a "complete" understanding of it. I do not see this knowledge as allowing us the possibility of deciding what is art, but rather as composed by that which we empirically, individually, consciously or not, classify as art. In other words, personal knowledge of art can be understood as the grouping of all what a person understands as art and the related thoughts that derive from it. This personal knowledge both shapes and is shaped by the everyday experience.

I would like to propose that there are at least two scales of authorities (subjects) which can and do label things (objects) as art: an institutional authority, and an individual authority. I arrived at this conclusion through a pragmatic observation of the labels (and the subjects behind them) that surround us. By pragmatic observation I mean identification and analyses of labels "art," not in a sense that we also identify or understand that as art, but in one that we recognize something is being labeled as art by someone or something. This observation led me to always trace the subject to be either in an institutional scale, which categorizes through a representative of itself (for example an art museum or art gallery), or to be in an individual scale, basically a specific person claiming that something is art or good art. Following this logic, I would then like to propose that there are at least three types of the label art: an institutional type, an individual type, and an artist's/representative's type, which is located somewhere in between the first two. With this distinction presented, I'll now analyze each type of label.

3.1.1. Institutional label

Firstly, I would like to note that when using the term "institutional" or "institution" we can think of both a specifically identifiable one, as an all-including theoretical one.

I believe that the institutional label of art can be well related to the institutional theories presented in the previous chapters. It consists of some institution/organization labeling certain

things as art, usually through the argument that that is a consensus of the society (which is actually the consensus of a portion of said society) or through the claim that the institution possesses an expertise over what is art (a claim that sociology of art showed to be at best partial). In other words, the institutional label is the portrayal of certain individual labels with a certain kind of certificate of value assigned to them.

This certification can alter our perception of what is being labeled depending on how we understand it. Some points raised by sociology of art which we should have in mind are that this certificate tends to seem as objective and absolute, when in reality it is neither, while on the other hand, the institutional label has a very real existence. It affects and is affected by individual labels and is undeniably present in the physical world through its representatives. These representatives can range from physical or metaphysical structures, such as museums or academic disciplines, to certain individuals as art critics or even artists themselves. Although the institutional label tends to seem as the truth or fixed, it is also vulnerable and affected by pressures from inside or outside itself (dissident opinions). A good example of this phenomenon is Duchamp's Readymades, which caused a moment of confusion and contradiction throughout the institution. This can be observed when we look at the initial repercussions of opinions about such "Readymades." "At the time they were made, works of art like Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* were received with controversy. Critics called Duchamp's readymades immoral and vulgar, even plagiaristic." (MoMA), followed by the recognition of its artistic value. Duchamp's example illustrates the pressure that the institution can have from inside itself, since he was already certified/established by the institution. An example of pressure that the institution accepted from outside is the artist Banksy. As a graffiti and street artist, Banksy's work has been more readily labeled vandalism than art. In an article published in 2006, the art critic Charlie Brooker heavily criticized Banksy, scrutinizing his work as well as Banksy himself. On the other hand, the institution has undoubtedly accepted his art, and not only accepted it, but actually incorporated it. This incorporation aspect relates to the observable fact that the institutional label is independent of the creator of the work. Although Banksy was criticized by several institutionally located individuals, probably due to a positive assessment by large numbers of individuals, he was then given the institutional label. This can be clearly observed when we turn our attention to exhibitions of his work, when none is actually endorsed or distributed with the artist's consent. As it is expressed in his website:

"Members of the public should be aware there has been a recent spate of Banksy exhibitions none of which are consensual. They've been organised entirely without the artist's knowledge or involvement. Please treat them accordingly." (Banksy web)

This incorporative aspect of the institutional label can also be observed in what has been mentioned earlier as the anachronic use of the term art.

3.1.2. Individual label

The individual label can be compared to the theories of aesthetic attitude in being connected to a singular observer. Although the institutional label is also, at some point, an individual label, the difference between the two is the certified value. While the institutional label assesses and attempts to guarantee the value of works when posing them as certified, the individual label truthfully represents nothing more than that person's opinion. This does not make the individual inferior to the institutional, it makes it different. While we do not have the certificate carrying the validation of certain institutionally located people under a false notion of objective assessment (which, again, is not necessarily bad if regarded as such), we have a new kind of certificate. The certification which accompanies the individual label is one of objective assessment. I don't mean in the sense that the person is regarding (or attempting to) the work in a neutral or right way, as it has been often claimed with the institutional certificate, but in one that that object is, in fact, objectively being labeled as art by that specific person. The individual label is objective, in the sense that it is true to its subject at the given time of the labeling.

The factors behind an individual label are, as similarly described by Wolff, the artistic and extra-artistic factors. With these terms, I respectively mean the knowledge, preferences, and opinions that one has about art (what I addressed earlier as personal knowledge of art), and what can be simply described as everything else. These extra-artistic factors can also be understood as the experiences one has throughout life, from what a person goes through physically to what a person is exposed to mentally or emotionally, not limited to what is outside the person's control, but including how they react (consciously or not) to everything that they somehow encountered.

This all-inclusive aspect of extra-artistic factors is intended to avoid sociological reductionism through the expression of our individuality. What we consider as art is not, then, a reflection of our ideology, but a reflection of our singularity. What is not to say that ideology does not play a part in it; it most definitely does. Our individuality is, after all, partially shaped by ideologies. Partially because, as interpretive sciences have shown us, the interpretation or giving of meaning and/or value is particular to the observer. Which is to say, in other words, that while any ideology might be specifically defined or described on paper, that same ideology will look different when analyzed through individuals.

The personal label is bound to the artistic factor (personal knowledge of art), which in turn is created and transformed through extra-artistic factors, or in other words, someone's experience throughout life. The personal knowledge of art is primarily created through the encounter with the label. A parent taking their kid to an art museum, for example, makes it that the works the kid is encountering contain the institutional (by being presented through a

representative of it) and might contain the personal (depending on the father's acknowledgement of that as art). After being presented with the term art for the first time, that person has some knowledge of it, whether it comes from their own personal identification of art or from an external imposition. Throughout this person's life, their knowledge of art might grow and change, either through a continuous acceptance of institutional labels, or by an autonomous (to institutional labels) personal labeling.

3.1.3. Artist's / representative's label

This label exists somewhere between the individual and institutional label. It is an individual label that somehow represents the institution. This representation happens relatively autonomously to the individual's intentions, As the other labels, it is more connected to the interpreter of it. In this case, the interpreters are the ones that encounter this individual but possibly institutional label.

Take artists themselves, for example. An artist with institutional representation can be seen as what we commonly call "established artists," in other words, an artist which has been certified by a certain institution. The same can happen with other positions as well, such as art critics or art historians.

3.1.4. Label Conclusion

As we have seen, not every label of art is the same; they vary according to the subject and object. The point here is not to evaluate which label is better, but to highlight that they are different and inherently connected to each other. Consequently, they should also be interpreted accordingly. The institutional label should not be taken as the right one; it is only right according to certain specific socially located individuals, which in turn does not invalidate it. These individuals do (usually) hold a large amount of knowledge (personal/institutional knowledge), and more often than not, works which are institutionally certified do have the approval of large quantities of personal labels. So while it should be regarded carefully, the institution does in fact serve as an indicator of value.

The personal label, even though it is the most partial possible (since it is singular), it is also, in a certain way, absolute from the point of view of the subject at the moment of the labeling. Therefore, this label can give us an interesting insight about the observer. This endeavor is probably the most fruitful when we put ourselves as the observer. When analyzing

what we label(ed) as art, we might learn more about ourselves, such as our influences, preferences or even past events which we did not realize that affected us.

I would also like to note that the term “label” represents value. Although what I wanted to examine was simply the value of being considered art or not, the value of art is not a yes or no question; it is probably more of a spectrum. This does not mean that assessing the value through the term “label” is inconsistent. It just means that it is not that simple. An individual can have (as it is often the case) different types of labels within their personal knowledge of art. For example: good art, bad art, or institutional art. Some subcategories can also not necessarily be referring to the value but to a type: environmental art, modern art, abstract art, etc. But in one way or another, the term “art” always has some value assigned to it, a value that is not absolute, but relative to the interpreter.

Although I mentioned that I was going to follow the premise that art is a label, I do not see the label as the essence of art, but rather a part of it. I see the essence of art being the *artistic experience*, by which I mean what I have been referring to as “labeling,” in other words, the mental act of understanding something as art.

3.2. The artistic experience

As we have seen, the institutional label is created through the portrayal of certain individual labels with a certain certificate of value. Now we will go through how the latter comes to existence.

The artistic experience is any kind of encounter between a subject and an object, through which the subject comes to label that object as art. This can be compared to the aesthetic attitude, once it includes an individual regarding something as art. For aesthetics, seeing something as art is not enough to make it art, or as Wolff puts it, “it is not, in the end, an answer to the question ‘What is art?’” (Wolff, 1993, 74). Here I have taken as the premise for my proposals that art is a label. However, another possible answer (if taken as a second premise that this label is not absolute) could be art is that which is perceived as such.

The essential components for the artistic experience are: a subject with personal knowledge of art, an object, the encounter of the subject and the object, and the validation of the object by the subject. These can interact with one another and be relatively intricate depending on the situation. I’ll go through a few important points related to the artistic experience and its components.

The encounter is a pivotal point of the process, since it is the one to create the experience which may or may not generate the label. The experience may or may not affect and/or be affected by the subject's personal knowledge of art. A person could have different experiences from the same object depending on how this is presented to them, and how their personal knowledge of art interprets this presentation. For example, seeing something that resembles a child's drawing inside a classroom versus seeing the same inside an art gallery. On the other hand, the experience can also affect the subject's personal knowledge of art. For example, a person might think that art can only be created by those with knowledge of it, but then encounter a child's drawing containing everything this person sees as essential to art, which in turn might affect their understanding of who can make art.

The validation is the other pivotal point of the artistic experience, once this is what classifies the experience as artistic or not, in other words, is the labeling itself. This component is determined by the reaction of the subject's personal knowledge of art and the experience. As we have seen, these determinants can affect each other in a range of different ways. What controls the result are the specific details of this process, such as the specific details of the experience, which includes specific details of the object, the specific details of the subject's personal knowledge of art until the encounter, the specific details of the encounter itself, and the specific details of the subject's personal knowledge of art after the experience.

To go further, all of these specificities are vulnerable to change through time. A subject's personal knowledge of art changes through artistic experiences and the extra-artistic factors they go through. The change in how the subject sees art, then, can change how the object is interpreted; and the changes on both sides of the experience implicates a possible change in their validation as well.

3.2.1. The specificity of art

I would like to propose another sense of the term "specificity of art," apart from those presented by Wolff. This is one that relates to the label in its objective form, the individual scale. What I mean by the term is, the object's dependency on specificities for its labeling, which I also see as art's (artistic experience's) relative essence. Or in other words, that art depends. For an object to be labeled as art by a subject, that depends on the specificities of that subject's conception of art (personal knowledge of art) both before and after encountering the object, the specificities of the object, the specificity of how and what of that object is interpreted (experience), and the specific moment when the experience happened.

The point I want to make is that once we leave the theoretical grounds and try to analyze the artistic experience in reality, we can observe how that label is bound, primarily, to that very specific moment in time (of the validation). That specific moment in time is the only guarantee of the other specificities. This meaning of the specificity of art can also be explained in terms of relativity. The label art is completely relative to (dependent on) the subject, the object, and their encounter at that specific moment.

Another interesting point about this interpretation of *specificity of art*, is that it explains a common claim about original works (original in the sense of not a replica). This claim is of a different experience when seeing the same work in its original or replicated version. This is explained once the belief that that object is the original becomes a specificity of it (in the eyes of the observer), and the specificities are pragmatically what determines the experience and validation. In other words, the fact or belief that that is the original alters the observer's perception of it.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can learn a lot about art from the fields of Philosophy of Art and Sociology of Art. The fact that the disciplines have historically approached the matters of art so differently makes their sum incredibly valuable. The notion referred to by Wolff, but proposed by Georg Lukács in 1971, that “the areas of human experience and existence with which these disciplines purport to deal are not themselves segregated, but form part of a unified totality” (Wolff, 1993, 82) is extremely accurate. The belief that we can grasp matters of human experience through a single disciplinary approach is somewhat naive from this perspective.

When studying art, I believe that Aesthetics and Sociology of Art are equally important. The philosophical approach points to the many ways certain individuals have regarded and found value in art, which can serve us as good indicators of how (specificities) and where (works) one might encounter value in artistic practices. The sociological approach shows and protects us from the illusory notion that art is somehow untainted by other aspects of human experience, while also denying the possibility that any certain group of individuals can be qualified to assert, absolutely, certain objects as art. This is just an overview of what these disciplines can provide us. When going deeper into them, one can find details and reasons related to the ideas I just expressed. Another remark relating to these disciplines, is that one can notice how I avoided using the term *aesthetic*. This was a very conscious decision with the goal of making my words clearer. Personally, I find this term to be somewhat confusing at times. I have already been told to take it as a synonym of “*artistic*”, but more often than not, I find these terms to not be that interchangeable. While “*artistic*” has the ambiguity of “art” in it, “*aesthetic*” can also have it, which is worse, once it is even more ambiguous, not to mention the institutional notion that accompanies it. A few passages of Wolff’s book validated this feeling I just described, for example:

“We have already seen that Bourdieu has carefully analysed some of the mechanisms by which dominant groups retain their position of power and enhance their status, in particular by inventing the category of the 'aesthetic' as a universal, transcendent entity.” (Wolff, 1993, 83)

I do agree with Wolff that a “sociological aesthetics” might be a good way to follow for one who wants to understand more and more completely the phenomenon we call art. Although I also recognize that for this enterprise to be more fruitful, there should be at least one more discipline added to it, some discipline that has its focus on the human mind. Wolff also sees the benefit/potential in this idea, as we can see expressed when she presents us with “... three major contenders for a theory of aesthetics within a sociological or materialist framework” (Wolff, 1993, 90), which, out of the three, two include an example of the kind of discipline I mentioned. In this case, they are psychoanalysis and philosophical anthropology.

Although I did not use theories or concepts from such a third discipline (due to my lack of knowledge of it), I did, on the other hand, express some opinions about the matters which I believe would concern it, matters connected to the human mind, consciousness, influences, and other related aspects. My opinion was expressed when I advocated for human individuality, which I believe to better represent or answer some of the questions related to the topics mentioned.

In relation to the understanding of art I attempted to express, I have two remarks. First, as I mentioned earlier, these ideas (or at least similar ones) must have already been proposed, probably in much clearer ways, which leads me to my second remark. Due to this being the first time I attempted to really formulate these ideas outside my own head, it is evident to me that they did not come out as clear as I would like. Regardless, my journey to answer the question: *what is art?* however fruitful (or not) it has been, has deepened my understanding and consideration of the phenomena. While I may not have one true answer to my original question, I now have many more questions I can ask to point me in the right direction.

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