The Object and its Status as an Artwork

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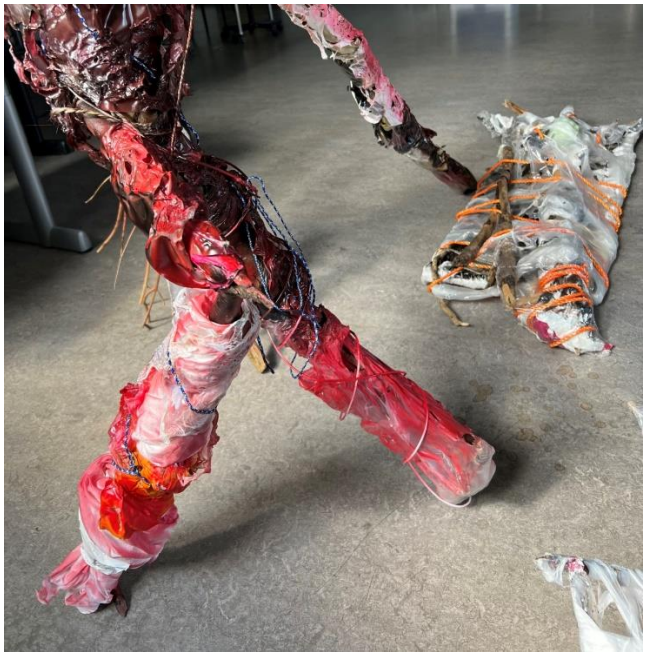
Preface

Last year, I graduated from the Willem de Kooning Academy. I started my project by imagining an alternative, non-human perception of the world. By researching how insects and other entities perceive their surroundings, I used imagination and AI image-making to sketch a different way of seeing. As the project progressed, I wanted to explore alternative methods of conducting an artistic practice, which led me to commit to repeating specific tasks every day. These tasks included walking alone and with others, meditative writing, and collecting materials. The materials I gathered over time were assembled into a series of sculptures. None of these materials were purchased; they were all discovered during my daily walks through various landscapes.

The sculptures play with the dichotomy between what we perceive as natural and unnatural, even though these materials were often found together on the same sites. These sculptures lie useless before us, challenging the viewer with functionless objects that can no longer be used. In this thesis, I ground my fascination with what we classify as artificial and natural by examining our perceptions of objects and their functions through philosophical analysis. It has allowed me to deepen my understanding of what gives an object a status of an artwork. As a result, the thesis completes the circle of long-standing endeavours.



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Introduction

Imagine walking through a forest. Trees, leaves, and branches surround you. As you continue, you come across a wooden picnic table. You are inclined to say that the table is not a part of the natural landscape, as human hands clearly crafted it. This consensus classifies objects according to their origins: the picnic table results from human craftsmanship, while the trees are products of natural processes. This distinction separates objects with a history of natural evolution from those that result from deliberate human intervention.

While this differentiation between natural and artificial objects initially appears uncontroversial, it becomes problematic upon closer examination. The picnic table is constructed from wood, a material derived from trees. The table, therefore, possesses a material born of natural processes. However, the wood's transformation into a table through human intervention raises questions about its classification. Manufacturing a table involves interrupting the natural cycle of tree growth, resulting in an artificial object made from a natural material. However, the distinction between natural and artificial appears incomplete. If planting the table back in the earth will not produce a new tree, the table's wood will naturally decompose, unlike a parallel experiment in which we plant a plastic table into the earth. So, form and function distinguished the tree from the wooden table, but the constitutive material distinguishes the wooden table from the plastic table.

We need to think critically about classifying objects according to their intended function. For instance, a spoon is designed for the practical purpose of eating, but its meaning changes when displayed in a museum. In this new context, it is no longer just a functional object; it gains a new status. However, it is difficult to identify precisely what this status is, for even if the spoon exhibited in the museum is no longer used as a spoon, the reason it is in the museum is because it is a spoon - a special spoon. It is the nature of that special status that we shall investigate here by wondering what transformation is involved when an object of use is no longer being used but rather considered as an object of art exhibited in a museum.

Understanding what exactly gives an object the status of an artwork is complex. This thesis will explore what defines an object's status as an artwork and how this status has been challenged and redefined across different historical periods, addressing the research question: What gives an object the status of an artwork? To answer our research question, we must first understand objects themselves. This inquiry begins with a metaphysical approach to uncover the underlying principles that elevate an object to the status of an artwork. Understanding what an object is

requires examining the relationship between objects and subject. Therefore, the first chapter will explore whether objects are independent of or dependent on the subject's perception. We will reflect on Kant's notion of phenomena as dependent on the perceiver and consider if we can go beyond this notion of one-way dependence. We will explore a different scenario where the subject is removed from the relationship between object and subject, which we term the ecological viewpoint. We use "eco" in its etymological sense, bringing together every constituent of nature to show their interdependence, in which every constituent belongs to one interconnected system or 'household' as in the Greek 'oikos,' i.e., house. Explaining the ecological point of view is crucial to understanding why we ultimately prioritize the human perspective over an equalizing perspective. Once we recognize that we cannot address all objects equally, we must distinguish between different types of objects.

Art resists the categorization applied to other objects. In the second chapter, we will address the status of art objects based on the definitions established in Chapter 1, asking whether art objects are dependent or independent. Our discussion on object independence and dependence will help us understand that appreciation is an external factor in art. If we draw our conclusion here, we say that art must have an independent value. This conclusion leads us to explore an artwork's representation, interpretation, and immediacy, focusing on the truth an artwork may convey. We will discuss the artist's integrity and then consider Plato's critique, which destroys all possibility for an artwork to tell the truth. However, Merleau-Ponty offers a middle-ground, which allows for a notion of the truth of a subjective interpretation. We will conclude by embracing artistic representations for their ability to express subjective universal experiences and offer new ways of seeing the world.

1. Classification and Categorization of Objects

1.1. Perception of Objects

One way of thinking about object is to oppose it from the term subject. This section aims to analyse the relationship between these terms. The object-subject relation is a question of their dependence on one another. This relation is grounded on the intuition that the subject perceives the object. Therefore, this section explores the dependency of objects on human perception. It highlights the subjective nature of perception and its implications for understanding the phenomenal world. It questions if there can be another way for the subject to relate to the object other than through perception.

Consider two identical diamonds, one natural and the other artificial. Our perception alone struggles to differentiate them, revealing the fallibility of perception in making distinctions. This fallibility challenges our understanding of the "real" world through perception. We seem to rather attribute greater value to the naturally formed one through establishing its history and authenticity. Therefore, perception might not be reliable when understanding different kind of objects. We need other factors, such as history and authenticity, to distinguish between the artificial and the naturally formed diamond, as our perception would tell us they are the same thing.

In contemplating the role of perception, we question whether it merely shapes or also creates the object itself. Can the object truly exist independently from the subject? Our perception serves as the lens through which we interact with the world, yet it also introduces uncertainty into our understanding. There are moments when we find ourselves unable to rely on perception; indeed, perception itself is contingent upon the act of perceiving. In the darkness, objects fade from view, putting in doubt their existence. However, this is not a satisfying conclusion: we then have no idea what the real world is and what objects really are. Perhaps there is more to objects than what meets the eye.

Immanuel Kant contemplated the role of perception in his Critique of Pure Reason. Kant acknowledges the importance of scepticism regarding our senses while rejecting outright scepticism about knowledge. Instead, he presents an alternative view that emphasizes understanding. Our perceptions do not merely reflect the objects outside us; rather, they actively shape our experience of those objects.[1]

Kant's transcendental aesthetic emphasizes the distinct roles of perception, sensibility, and understanding in shaping our comprehension of the world. Kant says that objects are not simply given to us by our senses but are instead constructed by our cognitive faculties through predetermined categories.[2] These categories serve as the framework through which we organize and interpret sensory data. Kant's insights reveal that our perceptions are not dictated by external objects but rather by our internal forms of intuition. This shift in perspective

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A20/B34

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A51/B75

underscores the subjective conditions that underlie our empirical intuitions, rendering them accessible and comprehensible. Kant hereby helps us detach ourselves from the subject, giving us a degree of independence from reliance on perception alone.

In the Kantian view, the phenomenal world, the world as we experience it, is mind-dependent in that its organization and characteristics only make sense in relation to our minds.[3] For instance, when we see a cloud over a mountain, the way we understand their relationship, such as their spatial positioning, is mind-dependent. That means that our perception of the cloud above the mountain is shaped by how our minds interpret these spatial relations. However, the actual situation of the cloud hovering over the mountain is not mind-dependent; it does not rely on anyone's act of seeing or thinking about it. The cloud's position over the mountain exists outside our perceptions and thoughts and thus is mind-independent.

In Kant's view, the concept of an object is formed through an opposition between what we perceive and how we perceive it. This opposition defines two poles: the subject and the object, in which the subject constructs the understanding of the object through mental categories. Kant's framework implies a vertical or hierarchical relationship between the subject and the object, where the object is dependent on the subject.

We have established previously that perception alone can be fallible. Therefore, Kant is important in our discussion of the perception of objects, because he offers another way for the subject to relate to the object other than through perception alone. When we examine the notion of dependence in Kant, we find that it is rooted in the subject: the perceiver. According to Kant, our perception of objects depends on how we interpret them, emphasizing the subject's role in shaping our understanding of the phenomenal world. This perspective highlights a form of dependence that originates from the subject. Yet, we may question whether this perspective captures the full scope of dependence between subject and object.

1.2. Ecological Perspective as Interdependence

As we have shown above, Kant understands the relation between objects and subjects through an ontological priority of the subject. While Kant’s perspective is valuable, it requires us to

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A22–3/B37

explore beyond the idea of the superiority of the subject. We suggest changing the initial configuration and proposing a scenario in which subject is on equal footing as objects. We consider a different type of dependency that removes the priority subject from the relation between object and subject. In such a scenario, there are, just objects with mutual dependencies. We refer to this scenario as ecological, a basic level of interdependence between objects.

To explore this scenario, we will first look at reciprocal dependence between two objects. E.J. Lowe presents a schema of reciprocal dependence between objects.[4] This means that two objects can rely on each other when they are defined partly in terms of their relationship to one another. For instance, being connected through relation R1 is an essential characteristic of object x with respect to object y, and similarly, being connected through relation R2 is an essential characteristic of object y with respect to object x. If these relations are fundamental to their identities, then x is (partly) dependent on y, and y is (partly) dependent on x.[5] Here, we have a schema in which objects are interdependent without the ontological priority of the subject.

We find an illustration of Lowe's schema of reciprocal dependence in Anna Tsing's book "The Mushroom at the End of the World", in which she removes the ontological priority of the subject. We will apply this to our metaphysical analysis. She explores ecological interdependence through the story of the matsutake mushroom. This rare mushroom, harvested seasonally in the forest, symbolizes the interconnectedness of life and heritage.[6] Tsing's analysis of matsutake mushrooms shows that the mushroom is dependent on its relationships with its natural environment, trees, and that humans depend on it too. Matsutake mushroom can only flourish in Japan through the orchard method, an intervention where pine forests are revitalized. Human intervention, therefore, is necessary to maintain the health of these ecosystems.[7] In their turn, the Japanese and Chinese community are devoted to matsutake, as the mushroom holds

[4] E. J. Lowe, "Ontological Dependency," *Philosophical Papers* 23, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 31–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/05568649409506409, 35. See also Hiller; Avrum Hiller, "Object-Dependence," *Essays in Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (January 31, 2013): 33–55, https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1454, 35. See also Wolff; Johanna Wolff, "Do Objects Depend on Structures?," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 63, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 607–25, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjps/axr041, 619

[5] Ibid.

[6] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 220

[7] Ibid.

an important place in their heritage.[8] In this example, the mushroom's dependency on the trees and the human intervention and the human's dependency on the mushroom for their culinary heritage demonstrate a reciprocal relationship. In this interdependency, each object contributes to the survival and flourishing of the other. There is no ontological priority of the subject, where the object is of a lower ranking.

This cyclical relationship of reciprocal dependence highlights the etymological sense of ecology: bringing together every constituent of nature to show their interdependence, in which every constituent belongs to one interconnected system or 'household' as in the Greek 'oikos,' i.e., house. Each entity, whether a plant, animal, or human, relies on the others for survival and well-being, much like household members depend on one another.[9] The notion of a household drives home the dependence theory of objects by illustrating all its members' interconnectedness and mutual reliance. Just as household members depend on each other for survival and well-being, entities in an ecosystem rely on each other within a network of mutual dependencies. No object can exist in isolation, emphasizing the shared environment and collaborative survival essential for the health and functioning of the entire system.

Tsing provides a re-motivation of the world eco in which the existence and health of each entity are intertwined. Tsing's ecological viewpoint illustrates that no ontological priority exists in nature—no single entity comes before another. There is a clear dependence where the existence and well-being of the mushroom and humans are intertwined with the other's. In Tsing's analysis, the human is not depicted as superior to the mushroom. As one does not come before the others in existence, there is a sense that species are equal in their objecthood. The main idea of the metaphysical relationship I call ecological is to reduce the belief that one species is more important than another. However, it acknowledges that not all objects are the same. When we consider objects only in terms of their relationships to each other, we overlook humans' unique abilities, like perception and cognition. For example, humans can see and create art, but mushrooms cannot. We argue that we should not have a total ontological priority for the subject and not set them on an equal footing but still create space for the unique capability of human perception and cognition.

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[8] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 101

[9] Amy Kulper, "Ecology without the Oikos: Banham, Dallegret and the Morphological Context of Environmental Architecture," *Field* 4, no. 1 (2011): 67–84, https://www.field-journal.org/article/id/44/, 68

Humans are unique. Tsing and Lowe help shift the view from Kant's vertical perspective to a less angled one. If we accept Kant, this means that we are part of the phenomenal world, and when we construct it, the phenomenal world is dependent on us as well. The hierarchy we propose is that despite interdependence, humans have other capacities, and mushrooms have different capacities even though humans depend on them. Instead of placing humans at the top, this perspective sees humans as part of a broader context. Humans create objects, but they are not in a god-like position over them.

The object-interdependence view allows for a slightly more precise knowledge of what the thing-in-itself could be or its right to be. We try to give some status to the objects themselves that are not dependent on the subject. We can move forward and try to get closer to the individual status of an object, even though we never fully can get to their status, as with Kant. There is some independence, but objects are never completely independent of humans. We seek a balance between the ecological and Kant's perspectives by acknowledging the distinctiveness of human perception and activity without making everything dependent solely on humans.

1.3. Object Distinctions

After exploring the object-interdependence view, we acknowledge that we do need a hierarchy because not all objects are the same. They vary in origins, purposes, and functionalities, ranging from natural formations to human-made objects, with some made purely for aesthetic purposes. Their relations are also not equal: we, as humans, can choose which objects we formulate a dependence on and create new objects on which we depend.

Humans can create novel objects that rely on us for their existence. However, we also rely on objects such as tables and chairs. Humans, then, are creators of our relationships and interdependencies, revealing the interdependence between humans and the phenomenal world. From prehistoric humans crafting bowls to contemporary societies constructing furniture, the functionality of objects has been a necessity for human life. However, other animals, such as chimpanzees, also utilize tools. In addition, animals also make objects, such as beavers making dams. The beaver dam and the prehistoric person who created bowls or the contemporary person making furniture are different. How do we differentiate between these examples?

The beaver and its dam exemplify a dependence based solely on functionality. There is no aesthetic judgment: no one dares to judge if the dam is beautiful, as it is purely mechanistic: one object depends on the other, the beaver depends on the dam, and the dam depends on the beaver. A beaver dam provides a safe habitat and ensures access to food. Survival needs mostly dictate its functionality. In contrast, the functionality of human-made objects like bowls or furniture encompasses a broader range of purposes, from functionality to cultural expressions. Early humans crafted bowls not just for practical use in eating or storing food but also as an expression of skill and creativity: they have an aesthetic purpose. Works of art possess a certain peculiarity: they are both subjective and objective. They are creations of humans intended to be recognized as works of art by other humans. They embody both subjective artistic expression and an objective metaphysical status as artistic objects. While being a physical object, every artwork stands apart from other objects. Even if an artwork looks exactly like other objects, its value differs. To exemplify, the artwork Bathtub[10] by Joseph Beuys presents a damaged bath for children. He put cotton bandages over the holes. You cannot use it, but it is placed in a museum.

Joseph Beuys, *Bathtub*, 1977, Mixed Media

Artworks such as *Bathtub* challenge us to recognize objects beyond their functional value. Unlike other objects whose worth is often tied to their functional use, the value, the untouchable, absolute sense of the object, of an artwork lies elsewhere. The work becomes defunctional and untouchable; it acquires an absolute value. The object cannot be exchanged for anything else, acquiring a quality of being invaluable. It is now unique. This is what the object displayed in a museum acquires. Artwork is meant to be appreciated for its own sake. Humans are capable of aesthetic appreciation and can perceive and appreciate objects. This perception and appreciation of objects is not just about raw perception but the ability to form judgments and appreciate beauty, uniquely human qualities. Aesthetic judgment can represent the middle ground between the ecological and Kantian perspectives: humans can take a distance and appreciate an object as a neutral, aesthetic object. The aesthetic judgment depends not on perception but on an individual point of view.

[10] Beuys, Joseph. *Bathtub*. 1977. Mixed media. WikiArt, accessed June 10, 2024, https://www.wikiart.org/en/joseph-beuys/bathtub-1977.

This echoes Kant's problem in the Critique of the Power of Judgement.[11] Kant writes about the world of phenomena and arrives at the question of beauty: we perceive objects of beauty differently; they are not phenomena like other objects. Art resists the categorization applied to other objects. When distinguishing between objects, we arrive at a real problem when analysing objects of art because we cannot reduce it to what the subject can objectify or know, making art something that the subject experiences on its ground. Our inquiry into art objects reveals a challenge: it is not found in Kant or ecological creations: what is this object of art?

2. The Object of Art

2.1. Definitions of the Art Object

As we have established in the previous chapter, even if an artwork looks like an ordinary object, it is unique. In the second chapter, we will consider the essence of art objects and their relationship to human interaction to understand the object of art. When are objects classified as artistic objects? Are objects dependent or independent of human engagement?

2.1.1. Dependence

Art objects often require human engagement for their interpretation and appreciation, suggesting a form of dependence. A painting relies on the materials and intent of its creator for existence. In addition, its interpretation and value depend on the observer's knowledge, cultural background, personal experiences, and the space in which the work of art is exhibited. Jean Baudrillard points out in The Systems of Objects that when an object's practical use is removed, it takes on a subjective status and becomes part of a collection.[12] It is no longer just a bowl, a table, or a decorative item but a "beautiful object" to be collected. Take Joseph Beuys' Bathtub. By placing it in a museum, the bathtub's functionality is removed. Its placement in a museum requires us to change how we relate to the Bathtub. Its use is stripped away, forcing us to think about the object defunctionalized: a bathtub without using a bathtub. However, Beuys' Bathtub did not transition directly from the bathroom to the museum; a transformation occurred in between. The fact that Beuys put bandages on the Bathtub challenges even the Bathtub's appreciation for its own sake. The artist's placing bandages on the broken parts of the Bathtub

[11] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), B232-16
[12] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), 85.

gives way to the question of how art can function beyond its objecthood. The action of trying to fix an object inadequately itself becomes art.

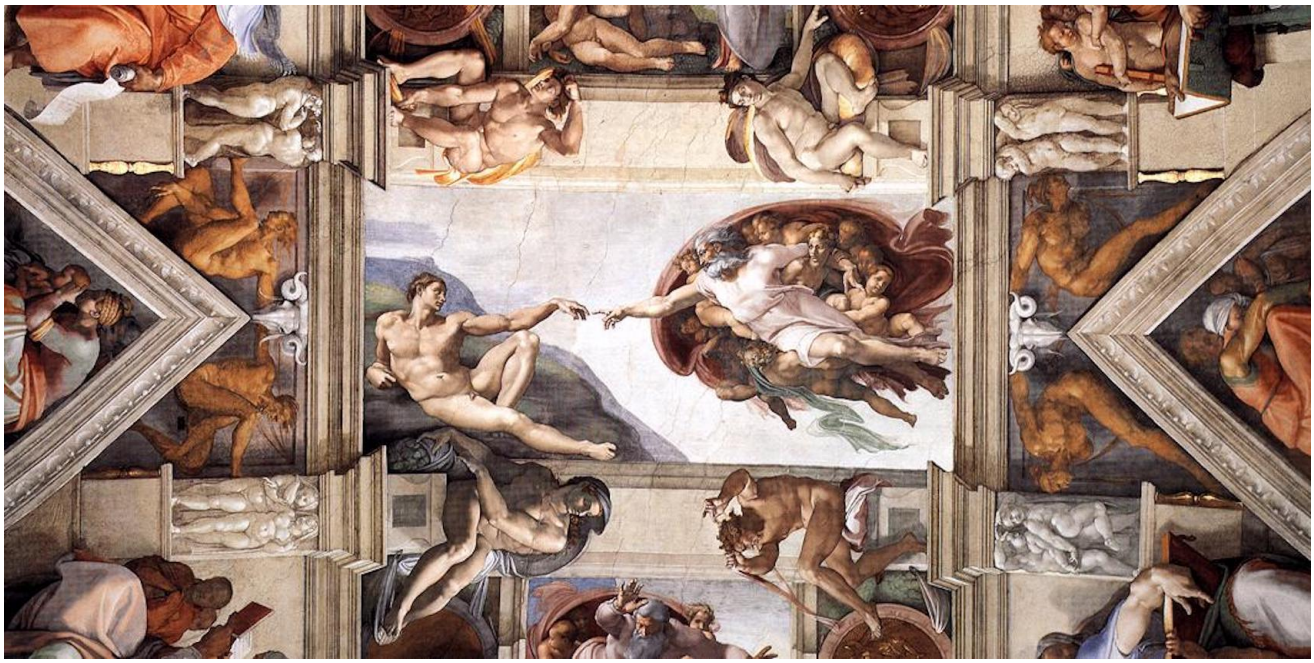
We observe that what makes the Bathtub a work of art is not only dependent on the defunctionalisation of the Bathtub. What does it depend on that we suddenly say an object can be art for other reasons than its beauty? Is this transformation about a personal shift in our perception of the object? Was it the artist's intention, the critic's interpretation, or a combination? Furthermore, what inherent qualities in the object enable it to be perceived as art, granting it its status as an artwork?

Ready-made art signifies satire, which is achieved by placing ordinary objects in art settings to challenge their usual aesthetic and functional perceptions. These artists use satire to question and critique the norms of the art world. This satire is not just for entertainment; it serves as a form of social critique, leading us to reconsider how art is defined and valued. Ready-made art forces us to see everyday objects in a new light, making us realize we can have an aesthetic experience with something previously seen as purely functional. The shock value of ready-made art combines social critique with aesthetic judgment.

Ready-made art represents a shift in art discourse because it involves less traditional artistry: no particular skills are necessary to put an urinal in a museum, unlike the time it would take to learn a skill to paint a painting like the Mona Lisa. However, the impact and public reaction to ready-made art are similar to classic artworks from art history like the Mona Lisa or the Sistine Chapel. Both ready-made art and the Sistine Chapel have challenged the norms of their time and engage our aesthetic judgment.

Art has always been in between collective expectations, social critique, the artist's provocative intent, and aesthetic value. For example, to create the Sistine Chapel, the pope hired the greatest artist of the time to convey a political message. The Catholic Church needed to demonstrate to millions of followers that God's power is absolute and that they should remain faithful. The paintings served as a social critique by illustrating the consequences of not being Catholic. How does the church make sure illiterate workers are believers? By creating the most beautiful ceiling imaginable and saying that this is what is what awaits humans in the afterlife: the Last Judgment. The fresco is beautiful, but first and foremost, it is terrifying. The beauty is derivative of its message. This provocation of fear can be paralleled with the effect of horror movies. In a horror film, viewers are often so engrossed in the narrative that they momentarily lose their

sense of reality and experience genuine fear. We get scared because we get so involved that we think we are there. The same principle applies to the Sistine Chapel: the vivid and dramatic scenes are so captivating that viewers are overwhelmed by the possibility that these divine judgments could happen to them. This injection of fear into the viewer and the fresco's beauty make it powerful, bringing us back to Kant's ideas. The Sistine Chapel evokes a sudden sense of aesthetic appreciation and fear in its viewer. Without any a priori aesthetic judgment, viewers may be overwhelmed by the aesthetic power of Michelangelo's work. It triggers something universal in us that makes us recognize its beauty. Is this aesthetic judgment natural in human beings or something else?



Michelangelo, *The Sistine Chapel*, 1508-1512, fresco[13]

2.1.2. Independence

We are moving on from the Sistine Chapel and will now direct our analysis to Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. The painting initially was commissioned by a wealthy nobleman from Florence who wanted a portrait of his wife. However, the commissioner refused to accept the painting after Leonardo completed it. Instead of discarding the work, Leonardo decided to keep it with him for the rest of his life. This situation is intriguing because the original reason for creating the Mona Lisa is subverted. This universal aesthetic judgment of the Mona Lisa is

[13] Michelangelo, *The Sistine Chapel*, 1508-1512, fresco, Vatican City, accessed June 10, 2024, https://www.magiscenter.com/blog/the-sistine-chapel.

exemplified by how her androgynous face and enigmatic expression continue to provoke and engage its viewers until today. The enduring appeal of the Mona Lisa makes us wonder whether something inherent in it that appeals to an a priori sense of beauty that everyone can recognize. Leonardo recognized its universal appeal and decided to keep it, even after being rejected. This universal appeal indicates that the artwork has an independent value, separate from its original function or context. What is this independent value?

When the commissioner of the Mona Lisa received the picture, he rejected it because it did not meet his expectations or fit the social norms of the time. At the time, many portraits idealized their subjects, while Leonardo portrayed the Mona Lisa and the background realistically with a direct gaze. Leonardo understood the institutional norms and intentionally provoked them. If the work is not performing its official social role, what is then function of the portrait? Then, the aesthetic judgment is engaged, and social and political norms are no longer as significant.

Leonardo understood that he touched something universal, a universal aesthetic judgment, as Kant would suggest. Otherwise, he would not have walked to France with the Mona Lisa under his arm when exiled. As Alan Goldman[14] discusses, there is a normative aspect to how we describe art. When we call a work "powerful," it is not merely a personal reaction; we also invite others to agree. This agreement suggests a standard of evaluation that is expected to be applied across different people, artworks, and even genres. However, simultaneously, there is a conflict of aesthetic judgments. Today, its spectators might agree that it is an example of pure aesthetic judgment, but the husband of Mona Lisa did not find any pleasure in the painting. His social norms are offended. This complexity has been a longstanding challenge in aesthetics, and, at this point, things get complicated for Kant as well. What is aesthetic pleasure, and what defines an aesthetic object then?

The definition of art has always been balanced between collective expectations, social critique, the artist's provocative appeal, and aesthetic value. Leonardo recognized the masterpiece in the Mona Lisa, while his contemporaries disagreed. We see a difference between the historical appreciation of the value given to the work of art and the intrinsic aesthetic value of the work of art. The appreciation of a work of art is balanced between a three-way conversation between

[14] Alan Goldman, "Evaluating Art," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 97

the critic, the perceiver, and public opinion. We are looking for a middle part where they all overlap and agree on a definition of art.

A critic looks at a work of art differently than a passer-by and has authority over the ultimate status of an artwork. According to Goldman[15], critics, who are often seen as ideal judges of art, tend to have a deeper understanding of the art's background, are more skilled at identifying complex relationships within the artwork, and are more attuned to the aesthetic values it may offer. They have extensive knowledge of art history. However, this argument can be challenged. Throughout history, critics have disagreed on what constitutes art. For centuries, artists like Georges de La Tour and Botticelli were ignored by critics and only later celebrated as great artists. This suggests that critics alone cannot have absolute authority since their judgments are subjective.

Moreover, critics might label Jeff Koons a fraud, yet he remains one of the most popular contemporary artists. His exhibitions draw large crowds, demonstrating the influence of public opinion and institutional support. Their opinion is not strong enough to prevent Koons from being considered a great contemporary artist, taking power away from the critics. Besides criticism and institutional recognition, art history involves public opinion. Individual conceptions of what constitutes art vary widely among people. Therefore, asserting that art can achieve a singular independent status that applies universally is problematic. Art appears to be a question about the perceiver after all: the person you are, the education you have, the character, which is in dialect with the work in that one sees it as art, and the other does not. The battle of the critics and the constant refutation of the critics throughout history are challenges to Kant's idea of a universal sense of beauty; there is no universal sense of beauty as this constantly changes.

To exemplify further, Vincent van Gogh was never appreciated during his lifetime, but now he is one of the most celebrated artists. If one day a critic says that a work of art is terrible, and then a later concludes that it is good, what does it say about the person and the work? If an appreciation of a work goes up and down drastically, going from 0 to cost millions, it has nothing to do with the essence of the work. These are accidents in metaphysics: accidents of time and place and say nothing about the necessary assets of the work of art. Therefore,

[15] Alan Goldman, "Evaluating Art," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 99-100

appreciation must be an external factor in the artwork. If we draw our conclusion here, we are inclined to say that there must be an independent value of art.

Van Gogh focused on capturing the essence of beauty in his paintings, regardless of what people thought. When Van Gogh first introduced his works, people did not did not value them. However, he continued, seemingly believing in something essential about his work independent of public or critical appreciation. This core belief in the intrinsic value of his art is central to what makes it impactful. Artists like Van Gogh seemingly believed in the intrinsic value of their art, focusing on something essential that did not rely on public opinion. What did Van Gogh believe was so fundamental about his work? What made him put it out in the world? Does it represent something fundamental Van Gogh could see in his time but his perceivers could not? So far, our discussion of independence and dependence has led us to decide that appreciation is an external factor in art. We are moving towards the question of an artwork's representation, interpretation, and immediacy: our discussion has led us to the truth an artwork may represent.

2.2. Truth

2.2.1. The Artist's Integrity

Intriguing is the artist's belief that they have captured something fundamental about reality. Gerhard Richter explains that art does not merely represent reality. Instead art becomes a new reality through its creation. He states, "Painting no longer represents reality, but reality itself (the reality it produces)."[16] One interpretation of Richter's quote is that art is reality at a fundamental level: there is no separation between the art object and reality, meaning reality is already art. There is no more representation in art. Another interpretation is that art represents reality as it truly is, in a way that we often do not see due to habit, lack of imagination, or comprehension. This interpretation makes us presume that art reveals truths about reality that we do not immediately perceive or realize. Is Richter suggesting a shift from representation to immediacy or interpretation?

With this quotation, Richter opens up three ways to consider art's relation to reality: immediacy, representation, and interpretation. With immediacy, art reveals truths about reality that we can

[16] Gerhard Richter, quoted in Huri Kiriş Büyükgüner, "Realism in Art and the Artist's Truth," *Journal of Social, Humanities and Administrative Sciences* 66, no. 66 (January 1, 2023): 3104–11, https://doi.org/10.29228/joshas.71134, 6

directly perceive or realize. Hans Arp stated, "Representation is imitation, display, acrobatics... But art is reality, and the reality we share must reveal itself beyond all singularities."[17] Arp follows representation and immediacy: the artist's representation is not the artist's interpretation but something universal about reality. For Arp, art might capture the very essence of reality. With interpretation, an artist posits that their subjective view of reality touches on something universal about reality. The interrelation and rivalry between these concepts make the discourse about the work of art more complex. This discussion centres around the relationship of the artwork to the truth. Is the artist claiming to reveal the truth, humbly presenting a representation of it, or attempting to erase the gap between art and reality?

For Auguste Rodin, art is about revealing more profound truths about its subjects. In the context of movement, Rodin told Gsell that "it is the artist who tells the truth and photography that lies."[18] With his Balzac sculpture, he sought to express something that could not be captured in a photograph. Rodin believed that capturing the character of his subjects was more important than physical accuracy. For Rodin, art has no meaning apart from truth: art is immediacy. He assures that every movement in his figures is taken straight from nature, re-created as he sees it. Rodin believed that his art conveyed a deeper, more profound truth about its subjects, going beyond mere representation. Regarding his statue of Balzac[19], Rodin stated: "... modern sculpture must exaggerate the forms from the moral point of view."[20] For Rodin, the moral point of view is the universal point of view. With his statue of Balzac, Rodin conveyed that his impression of Balzac is Balzac in reality. He denies representation and zooms in on the question of interpretation or immediacy, which leads to a universal identity. He bridges immediacy and interpretation: he believed that his subjective interpretation of reality touched on something universal.

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[17] Hans Arp, quoted in Huri Kiriş Büyükgüner, "Realism in Art and the Artist's Truth," *Journal of Social, Humanities and Administrative Sciences* 66, no. 66 (January 1, 2023): 3104–11, https://doi.org/10.29228/joshas.71134, 5

[18] Auguste Rodin, quoted in Galen A. Johnson, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking Through Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 101.

[19] Auguste Rodin, *Balzac*, 1898, bronze, Museum of Modern Art, New York, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80862.

[20] Auguste Rodin to Charles Chincholle, May 1898, in *Rodin on Art and Artists: Conversations with Paul Gsell*, trans. Jacques de Caso and Patricia B. Sanders (New York: Dover Publications, 1983), 120.

Artists arguably can make reality universally visible as the artist has a more profound understanding than ordinary people. Getting to this more profound understanding of the artist is a complicated process. At the beginning of Rodin's process, the statue looks like Balzac, and slowly, he abstracts his form. Creating the statue of Balzac is akin to a philosopher writing a book or a mathematician solving a complex problem. Like a mathematician, it takes many stages for the artist to achieve the final work. Therefore, we should give artists the benefit of the doubt that they strive to bridge interpretation and reality. For the artist to have their integrity, it means to be fully committed to the authenticity of their interpretation of art as immediacy, as reality. This distinction can help us differentiate between great art and satirical art. For example, is Duchamp's urinal a work of integrity? Arguably not, as it mocks the very concept of artistic integrity. While some artists are deeply committed to expressing a fundamental truth, others, like Duchamp, challenge this integrity.

Auguste Rodin, *Balzac*, 1898, bronze

We must believe that artists like Rodin are genuinely convinced they are working towards a universal truth. If we contrast this with our earlier example of Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, we see that this work served a specific message of the church's commission. The pretention of the artist can be a moral question. Was Michelangelo genuinely committed to his view of the origins of life and the afterlife, or was he merely conveying a message from someone above him? Maybe his integrity was compromised by serving someone else's vision. However, the artist's integrity is not about morality: morality would be a further question. Even though Michelangelo experienced a religious crisis, his Catholic faith and commitment were evident. The power of his painting comes from his genuine belief in his vision of reality: that God created man in His image, symbolized by the moment of the two fingers touching. Michelangelo is trying to tell us what human nature is and what a human being really is. The impact of this artwork lies in Michelangelo's commitment to reaching out for truth. Rodin says that this is who Balzac really is: he makes a claim towards a universal truth. This claim to truth brings us to Plato, who first framed the artist's dilemma regarding interpretation and the commitment to a fundamental truth in reality.

2.2.2. Plato's Critique

From Plato onwards, art has been considered in relation to truth. In Republic Book 10, Plato argues that art is fundamentally separate from the object it depicts.[21] He explains that artistic representations are twice removed from reality.

First and foremost, there is the form. This form, the invisible truth, is perfect in its invisible state. It is the essence of Balzac, his soul that remains true for all eternity.

Second is the perspective of the artist. This is the lens through which Rodin perceives Balzac. It is the eye of Rodin, his subjective interpretation. This perspective, like an instruction manual, guides his creation, shaping the form that Rodin has made of Balzac.

Third, there is the actual object the artist creates. The statue of Balzac has already been removed from reality twice, first by Rodin's eye and secondly by the form that guided Rodin's creation. The form and the artist's perspective stand between the object and reality. What the artist produces at this stage is representation. According to Plato, art can only be a representation of reality. Plato states: "So, if he does not make that which has true being, he will not be producing the real, but something that is like the real, though not real itself."[22] This is the definition of representation. Plato believed that artists pretend to understand reality but do not teach us anything about reality because it is impossible for them to do so. Artists are physically being able to provide an immediate blueprint of reality.

According to Plato, art offers only a faint impression of the truth and serves to imitate appearances rather than reality. Art is always at the service of something else and can never fully capture the essence of the object it represents. In contrast to Rodin, there is no immediacy or interpretation of art and reality for Plato. Interpretation and immediacy can only be representations because of the medium that art consists of. Art consists of a medium; it is mediated and, therefore, cannot be immediate. Therefore, Rodin's sculpture of Balzac cannot be his soul because there is a medium, which is the stone, between Balzac's soul and what we see in the sculpture.

[21] Plato, *Republic 10*, 597A, 5-7 (trans. S. Halliwell (1988; repr., London, United Kingdom: Aris & Philips Classical Texts, 2005))
[22] Ibid.

Plato makes a valid point; it is expected that someone who sees the sculpture Balzac can now say that this has nothing to do with Balzac. However, this is also the strength of the statue. Despite Plato's critique, the work remains remarkable. The statue is like a philosophical treatise. At the same time, Rodin reflects his subjective view. We cannot get out of his interpretation of reality, even if Rodin has done the work toward depth. Plato adds that if the artist's role is to show us what beauty is, then even there, the artist fails because beauty is subjective.[23] What one person finds beautiful, another may not. Plato's argument emphasizes that art can never fully convey truth due to the limitations of human perception and the subjective nature of artistic creation. This perspective contrasts with the views of artists who believe they are capturing something fundamental about reality. He argues that artists are biased by their limited perspectives, so they cannot claim to present actual reality. Instead, artists can only offer their interpretation, which is inherently flawed and incomplete. This argument confronts the idea that art can capture objective truth, suggesting instead that it is always a personal and subjective rendition. The artist is biased because of our finitude: they cannot tell us what reality is, as it is only their reality.

2.2.3. Dependence and Externality in Plato and Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty discusses the representation of perception of objective reality in the Phenomenology of Perception. He argues that philosophers have long fallen into the' experience error.'[24] This error sees perception as a product of a world of determinate objects. There is a tendency here to assume that those features of the world that we attribute to the objective world are already present in perception, positing that perception is a subordinate form of the object. This align with Plato's view that perception is a secondary and flawed representation of the true nature of things. Merleau-Ponty accepts Plato's criticism, but corrects it by arguing that there is no such thing as objective truth beyond our perception. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that our perception of objects and the world is closely linked to our internal experiences. Our subjective responses to external objects are crucial to how we perceive the world.[25]

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[23] Plato, *Republic 10*, 601D, 4-7 (trans. S. Halliwell (1988; repr., London, United Kingdom: Aris & Philips Classical Texts, 2005))

[24] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Pietro Terzi, "Merleau-Ponty and the Intellectualist Theory of Perception," *Journal of Transcendental Philosophy* 0, no. 0 (August 22, 2023), 54, https://doi.org/10.1515/jtph-2023-0011.

[25] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 247

While Plato presupposes that the purpose of art is to reproduce objective truth, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that art is not about imitating objective truth, but about expressing the inner experiences and perceptions of the artist added to nature. He states that "… art is not imitation … It is a process of expression —that is, to grasp the nature of what appears to us in a confused way and to place it before us as a recognizable object."[26] In their artworks, artist create a visible rendition of their personal experiences that others can visually understand. Painting has an ontological role specifically because a painting does not copy things or offer things to thought as science does. Instead, a painting presents things directly and immediately. Painting, therefore, conveys a genuine sense of the animation of the world and what it means to perceive it.[27]

While accepting Plato's critique that art does not represent immediate reality, Merleau-Ponty accommodates the idea that there is integrity in the artist's intention. Merleau-Ponty considers the subjective reality of perception as the most objective truth we can achieve. Art is not about imitation but about expressing the inner experiences and perceptions of the artist. Cézanne demonstrated that art adds a new dimension to nature: "man added to nature".[28] This quote implies that there is no separation between subject and object, self and world. Art transforms reality by integrating the artist's perspective, making us see the world differently. We cannot see reality in the same way again after seeing a Cézanne. There is no such thing as an objective reality, as we are constantly making up the way we see our world. Merleau-Ponty's point is that even though this subjective interpretation of the artist is not objective, it is the best we can achieve because there is no objective truth beyond our perception. Art becomes as objective as it can possibly get.

An artist's work does not only gain meaning by expressing something personal. It also gets meaning from the intersubjective world in which the artist is situated and it resonance with other people. A painter, namely can only construct the painting and then has to wait for it to come to life for others. When it does, the artwork unites separate lives, existing in multiple minds simultaneously. In this, Cézanne's painting is a process of expression. We have arrived

[26] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. London: Routledge, 2012, 6
[27] John J. Compton, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 282-284.
[28] Paul Cézanne, quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 6.

to the idea of art as a subjective universal experience. Here, the experience itself becomes universal rather than the specific message of the artwork.

In conclusion, Plato's and Rodin's perspectives are true simultaneously, as art encompasses shared and subjective experiences. Since we cannot resolve the dichotomy between representation and reality, we should embrace artistic representations for their ability to express subjective universal experiences and to make us see the world differently. However, this also means that a work of art cannot be completely independent of human use and interpretation; it relies on the perceiver to give it meaning. As we already touched upon in the chapter of the ecological viewpoint, we have to acknowledge the unique capabilities of human perception and conceptualization. Humans are capable of aesthetic appreciation and can create and perceive aesthetic objects.

Moreover, the artist's intention is crucial for art to resonate with its viewers, whether on a small or larger scale. The artist's integrity and unique perspective, their ability to occupy a space in the viewers' minds through their work, enable us to perceive reality in a new light. We encounter reality expressed in a particular way, resonating with our emotional world, a feat that science, with its claim to objectivity, cannot achieve. The power to express a subjective universal experience defines the object's status as an art object. Art connects with our living world and transforms it, amplifying our understanding of the world. A metaphorical reality unveils a different truth from objective truth. Mathematics, while universally true, does not speak to the human experience of life. The ability to speculate and create subjective universal experiences through art is significant, even if these experiences are not direct reflections of reality. Thus, art becomes a medium through which humans can communicate and share experiences and incite critical thinking.

Earlier, we made a distinction between great art and satirical art. Is Duchamp's urinal a work of integrity? Is Duchamp committed to the artistic depth of his work as a work of art, or does it always remain a joke? Arguably not, as it satirizes the very concept of artistic integrity. However, that does not deny that Duchamp's art is indeed art. It is a funny, satirical expression of artistic integrity. It resonates with its time. Satire is a means to express discontent, and art is a medium through which this can be expressed.

There is a question here about whether all manners of communication can be considered art. What distinguishes between art and non-art? We are not implying that every sign that goes between ourselves through the medium of an object immediately is art. No: even in this radical example of the ready-made, it is not just anything: there is an artist, an intention, a deviation of the object that distinguishes the Duchamp gesture from any other gesture. We have shown how complex it is and what it takes for an object to acquire the status of an object of art.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to analyse the question: What gives an object the status of an artwork? The answer is complex; there is no single answer as it depends on various factors and variables. Throughout this work, we have provided different analyses to explore this question.

We began by examining the distinctions between natural and artificial objects and functional and aesthetic objects. We have analysed these distinctions to show that if we merely rely on subjective perception, we cannot clearly understand different kinds of objects in the world. This realization made way for analysing how human perception and cognitive faculties shape our understanding and classification of these objects, drawing on Kant's ideas. We see that everything is dependent on the subject then. To show an alternative viewpoint where not everything depends on the subject, we transitioned to the ecological perspective, recognizing the mutual dependencies between objects. Yet, this perspective, we find, is insufficient as it fails to account for the unique capabilities of human cognition and perception, which are essential in discerning art objects from other objects. Aesthetic judgment can represent the middle ground between the ecological and Kantian perspectives, leading us to our chapter regarding the art object.

Our analysis then focused on art objects, their essence, and their relationship to human interaction in relation to subjectivity and objectivity. This discussion of the independence and the dependence of the art object gave way to the discourse on art's relation to truth, comparing the views of the artist's integrity of Plato and Merleau-Ponty according to interpretation, immediacy, and representation. We have analysed these viewpoints to show that even though art does not represent objective reality, the artist possesses a unique capacity to convey subjective universal experiences. The unique insight of the artist, when translated into the work, resonates and creates a universal subjective experience.

We have demonstrated that all these analyses are valid simultaneously. These different perspectives are not mutually exclusive but highlight the various aspects that must be considered when addressing our research question. We have shown how complex it is to define what gives an object the status of an artwork. The complexity of defining what gives an object the status of a work of art lies in the interplay of these multiple factors.

The multitude of these analyses has shown us that the definition of art is not a singular, fixed entity. It is impossible to pinpoint a single way of defining what makes something art. One or the other aspect may be more important in different contexts. It is not just a question of perspective, subjectivity, or the ontological status of objects; it is a combination of all these aspects, depending on the artist's integrity or the viewer's position.

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