

The Ontology of Art: Physicality, Non-Physicality and the Process of Art

Where is 'art' actually located in poetry, painting, music, literature, sculpture and film? Each form of expression is different physically and experientially. Nevertheless, they are all grouped together under the rubric of art and create specific roles for those who participate in art. Why is this? Or, as Richard Wollheim asks, "What is distinctively 'art' in a work of art?"¹

There are three conflicting ontological theories regarding the location in which art resides. The Physical-Object Theory states that art resides in the physical object. The Ideal Theory states that art resides in the artist's mental process and intention. The Presentational Theory states that art resides in the spectator's mental process and intention.² Upon closer examination, however, such narrowly defined locations seem inadequate. There cannot be the physical object without the non-physical intention and vice versa. There cannot be a spectator without the artist and vice versa. I propose that rather than being mutually exclusive, these competing locations necessarily depend on one another and must work together in a *process* for art to exist at all. It is this interdependence that makes art distinctively 'art.' Herein, I will refer to this process as 'the ontological process of art'. I will discuss the inherent faults found in the three traditional theories, then analyze the purpose of art, in order to show how the ontological process of art functions as the necessary symbiotic relationship in which art resides.

The inherent fault of the Physical-Object Theory lies in the problem of identification and of seeing a physical object *as* a concept. It is easy to say that the physical materials that a painting or work of art is composed of is what is distinctively art. But when discussing a work of art, conceptual and animate terms are used in identifying its artistic qualities. Inanimate, non-living materials such as paint or clay cannot be moving and alive. This is an error in identification. According to Leibniz's Law³ two entities can be identical if and only if both entities have exactly the same properties. Thus, a piece of inanimate material cannot be identified as something that moves and something that is moving cannot be identified as something inanimate. They are simply not the same things.

¹ Wollheim, Richard. *Art and its Object*. Cambridge University Press, 1980.

² These titles are given by Wollheim in *Art and its Objects* to define each theory.

³ Leibniz, Wilhelm Gottfried. *Discourse on Metaphysics*.

This leads us to the problem of seeing-as. One sees the painting *as* something that is moving, but the painting does not actually move. The concept one sees a work of art *as* is commonly described as what is distinctively art. The painting is art because it seems sad or because of its sense of movement. If this seeing-as concept is identified as the art, then the art cannot reside in the physical object.⁴

When art is treated as only a concept the ontological location of art lacks physical form. The non-physical Ideal and Presentational Theories are problematic because each theory seems to ignore the significance of the other. If we reduce art to the artist's intent, as the Idealists do, we can account for the first-person experience of art but we lack the spectator's third-person experience. And if we accept the Presentationalist theory and reduce art to the spectator's intent, we have an account of the third-person experience but we lack the first-person experience. Art cannot be art with either one of these intentional states missing. The artist's intent is necessary for the concept found in the assemblage of physical materials. Yet the spectator is equally as important. This was addressed by the influential early 20th century conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp, who stated: "All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."⁵ Although each theory describes part of the necessary process of art, a holistic theory takes both of these theories into account. The existence of art depends on the intent of both the artist and the spectator and thus the art must reside in both places.

To further investigate the location of art we must have an understanding of art's purpose. The purpose of art, as seen throughout history, is to represent a specific interpretation of the world and to share that interpretation with others. An artist interprets the world visually, emotionally, politically or conceptually in some way and then signifies this through a particular medium so that the spectator will understand it. Humans constantly observe the world through what Nelson Goodman describes as "prejudiced eyes"⁶. We assess the world in relation to our complex pasts, opinions and tastes. When one wants to *express* a particular view to other people the procession of art begins. We express things because we want other people to understand how

⁴ Music and literature presents further difficulties because they are difficult to conceive of as physical objects.

⁵ From *Salt Seller*, ed. by Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, 1973.

⁶ Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1981.

we see the world. Thus a second party is necessary for expression to exist at all. For example, the intention of the Byzantine artist and the purpose of their painting was to teach the viewer religious lessons. Therefore the images were clear and easily understood. Without the religious audience, the paintings would have had no purpose. The artist signified faith and religious concepts through icons, colors and odd perspectives so the viewer would have a deep religious experience. Or, for example, an artist's view of the world could be that blue is the most magnificent of all the colors. The artist wants the spectator to understand this concept and so he must clearly signify this view through a medium in some way. It could be through language, paint or music. He may incorporate a blue object into the piece, or just allude to the concept of blue. No matter how it is carried out the purpose of art is to express the artist's viewpoint to other individuals.

In order to teach or share a concept, four things are necessary: a teacher, a pupil, materials, and a concept. The teacher must have a concept to teach, material to teach with and a pupil to teach it to. In the same way, four things are necessary in the ontological process of art: the artist, the artist's concept, the physical object and the spectator. But how can art reside in all of these places at the same time? It is difficult to understand that something can be located in several different places at once. And it is because of this difficulty that the traditional theories are so disjunctive. Yet, as we have seen, it is also inaccurate to say that art resides in only one place. Art depends on the non-physical concept being 'passed through' each individual location for it to be taught to or understood by the spectator. Thus, what is distinctively art is the fulfillment of the ontological process of art.

In order to explicitly understand how ontological process of art functions I will explain each location and how it operates. It begins with the artist's first-person experience of the concept, however the artist interprets the world. The artist must have a concept, a specific viewpoint that they wish to express to others. Next the artist must properly signify the concept. This involves understanding all of the materials he is using and controlling the presentation of the physical object as much as possible. The physical object must properly signify the initial concept as precisely as possible. The context and presentation of the physical object must also be taken into serious consideration because this, just as much as the physical object itself, can determine how the spectator views the initial concept. Context can be provided through an introduction, review, gallery setting, curation or the like. Ideally the artist would provide the

context in order to have complete control over how the spectator experiences the work of art. Although, in the contemporary world the context in which a work of art is presented is effect by many other people. Thus the concept can easily be mis-signified and change. Finally, the spectator must take into account the intent of the artist and be open to experiencing and transcribing the initial concept from the physical object. This is not to say that the viewer *must* accept the artist's concept or viewpoint but it is necessary that the viewer should be open to interpret it.

Thus, it is easy to see how there are many ways in which art can often be misunderstood. Inaccurate signification, muddled presentation, or biased interpretation can interfere with the success of the ontological process of art. An artist may not have mastered his materials or signified his concept clearly. Context can confuse the concept in many ways, misinforming and misguiding the viewer. Moreover, the viewer may have a conceptual bias, and be unable to give a pure reading of the object. This occurs quite frequently with contemporary art when the viewer comes to the work with a preconceived bias against "pretentious" contemporary art. The specific roles and locations found within the art world are important and must be taken seriously to find what is distinctively art in a work of art. The ontological process of art takes each of these roles and locations to be necessary parts of what is distinctively 'art' in a work of art. The artist, physical object, and spectator depend on one another and work symbiotically to express and share a specific concept, an interpretation of the world we live in.