

The Dogma of Post-Conceptual Art: The Role of the Aesthetic in the Art of Today*

Matilde Carrasco Barranco[†]
University of Murcia (Spain)

ABSTRACT: AS the tradition that foregrounds art's intellectual content over its form, Conceptualism can be considered the critical attitude which represents the core of most current neo-avantgarde practices, particularly in visual art. A common view of today's art is then that of an art against or, at least, beyond aesthetics. Through the confrontation of some recent reviews of the interrelationship between art and the aesthetic, this paper argues that the essential thesis for conceptualism is the idea that the sensuous appearance of the artwork, being ineliminable, is irrelevant. The paper will also contest this thesis in order to argue for the relevance of the aesthetic for the criticism and value of the art of today.

1. Introduction

Strictly speaking, as most people locate it in the history of art, Conceptual Art names the artistic production that became prominent in the latter half of the 1960s not going much beyond the early 1970s. But in spite of this very short historical framework, there is a broader use of the label "Conceptual Art", both as a historical and as a descriptive term, that refers it to "the tradition that, broadly speaking, foregrounds art's intellectual

* This paper is part of my work as a member of two Research Projects, financed by MICINN(Ref. FFI2011-23362) and Fundación Séneca-Agencia de Ciencia y Tecnología de la Región de Murcia (Ref. 08694/PHCS/08).

[†] Email: matildec@um.es

content, and the thought processes associated with that content over its form”.¹

Certainly, that art of the *mind*, instead of the *senses*, was largely a rejection of the aesthetic theory of art defended by the very influential art critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg connected his conception of aesthetics to his modernist theory of art. He applied Kant’s account of pure aesthetic judgement to works of art emphasising thereby the formal (non-cognitive) content of their aesthetic experience. This formalism underwrote a theory of artistic value according to which the best modern art (understood as the result of a gradual reduction to the essence of each art through a self-reflexive investigation of the constraints of every specific medium) aimed to produce a disinterested and reflexive pleasant aesthetic experience. While Greenbergian formalism linked artistic value to aesthetic experience as contemplation of the “aesthetic” object (whose significance lies in just what strikes the eye), the new artworks’ aim was not to be aesthetically pleasing, but drawing attention to their meaning, and to their lack of formal interest.² Hoping to give back to art some of its critical potential too, Conceptual Art repudiated the aesthetic theory as an adequate basis for understanding artistic value or significance.

Therefore, Conceptual Art attacked the aesthetic definition of art in Greenbergian terms, rejected taste and aesthetic quality in art, and in doing so provoked a major crisis in the definition and appreciation of art too, but particularly set up an anti-aesthetic mainstream that still persists today. Without doubt, Conceptualism can be considered the critical attitude towards artistic representation, the nature and the function of art, which represents the core of most current neo-avantgarde practices, particularly in visual art. Now, conceptual art has been declared anti or an-aesthetic, since it renders irrelevant the sensuous appearance of the artwork. Thus, these two thesis or two dogmas³ seem to encourage the

¹ Costello (2007: 93). Costello’s use of the term matches the “weak” or “inclusive” Conceptualism that Peter Osborne distinguishes from the “strong” or “exclusive” version represented by Joseph Kosuth and the Art & Language group. The term can also include the artistic production (particularly Marcel Duchamp’s *readymades* and its followers) that had worked on the same basis making it possible for Conceptual Art to arise as such.

² See Harrison and Wood (1993).

³ My paper addresses these “two dogmas of Conceptualism” pointed out by Nae (2011)

common view that most of the art of today is against or, at least, beyond aesthetics. However, during recent decades, various theoretical accounts have reviewed the interrelationship between art and the aesthetic, offering, I think, different standpoints from where to reconsider those dogmas. In particular, this paper will focus on the accounts given by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Peter Osborne, and Arthur Danto.⁴ Through the confrontation of their very distinct views on the matter, the paper will try to achieve two main goals. First, it will try to show that, while the first dogma would have been redefined and in a certain sense even abolished, the second one seems to be more essential to Conceptualism. Secondly, it will contest this second dogma in order to argue for the relevance of the aesthetic for art today.

2. *The Autonomy of Art and Aesthetics*

Jean-Marie Schaeffer has joined the debate about the relationship between art and the aesthetic, which he places mostly in the context of a crisis of criticism that is part of what he describes as a wider “legitimation crisis” in contemporary art.⁵ According to Schaeffer, the crisis provoked in the aesthetic definition and appreciation of art in the twentieth century had to lead necessarily to a redefinition of the relationship between art and the aesthetic. But he suspects that many of the discourses about art in this recent debate still look for the rehabilitation of the cultural authority of philosophy, practising what he calls “aesthetics as philosophical doctrine”.⁶ On the contrary, Schaeffer thinks that art gets along very well on its own and doesn’t need any legitimating discourse to defend itself. So following his argument, we should say a final “good bye” to this way of understanding aesthetics and start seeing it “naturally”, that is, as a discipline whose task is nothing else but to identify and understand the nature of aesthetic responses. In this perspective, he describes our aesthetic behaviour fundamentally, and whatever its object might be, as a feedback relation

where he contests them from a different approach.

⁴ Schaeffer (2000); Osborne (2004); Danto (2003).

⁵ Schaeffer (1992: 3).

⁶ “Aesthetics as philosophical doctrine” authorizes philosophy to judge the validity and legitimacy of aesthetic behaviours and artistic acts. Schaeffer (2000: 14-19).

between a cognitive and an affective component. Schaeffer argues then to follow a Kantian line when says that, in the aesthetic relation, the cognitive discrimination of the object is accompanied by some satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, according to which it is valued.

From this point of view, any artwork may be aesthetic in the sense that it may be part of an aesthetic relation. In fact, Schaeffer admits that in most cultures there are “extremely narrow bonds” between aesthetic behaviour and artistic creation. Nonetheless, – as he continues his argument – our culture developed a strong opposition between the utilitarian and the aesthetic function in artworks, which consequently carried out a maximization of the cognitive attention. Therefore, – he concludes – the term “aesthetic” didn’t refer only to reception but also to a specific creative intention of producing an object whose reception will raise a cognitive attention that will also be a source of pleasure.⁷ But now Schaeffer wants to point out that aesthetic relation and aesthetic value are not to be found only in connection with artworks. On the other hand, an artwork’s “aestheticity” is not exhaustive of its properties and functions as a whole: an artwork (like any other artefact) has other qualitative dimensions, which may be studied as such in their own right and, in fact, other functions than the aesthetic one, such as religious, political, moral or entertainment, which have been, and still would be, more important. In conclusion, the fields of the aesthetic and that of art are just different, and the relationship between art and the aesthetic should be thoroughly redefined on the basis of their respective autonomy.⁸

This is why, together with a “naturalization” of aesthetics, Schaeffer proposes a philosophical “de-sacralization” of art. He argues that the practice of “aesthetics as a philosophical doctrine” that would have contaminated the relationship between art and aesthetics has been due not only to the ambition of philosophy, but also to the Romantic Religion of Art. This turned art into a way of accessing a kind of truth capable of satisfying the existentialist necessities of human beings. Identifying Art as a sort of Philosophy, what Schaeffer calls “the speculative tradition” (which runs from Jena Romanticism to Heidegger) would have misunderstood art from

⁷ Ibid. 72-73.

⁸ See also Kyndrupp (2009).

the outset and helped philosophers to think that they had the right to legitimise art and justify its practice. For Schaeffer, the legitimation crisis of contemporary art is the delayed effect of art's philosophical sacralization by Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century. Therefore, Schaeffer's solution is to break with the speculative tradition that tied art to philosophy. Considering that Art has had the most diverse functions, not just the aesthetic one, but also utilitarian, magical, religious, political, and so on, Schaeffer insists in differentiating art from aesthetics and in defending "laicism" against the Romantic religiosity, claiming that artistic pleasure, not revelation, is the source of the value of art.⁹

3. Conceptual Art and Post-Conceptual Art

Although agreeing with Schaeffer in the aetiology of the historical identification between art and aesthetics, and in some of its negative consequences, Peter Osborne doesn't share Schaeffer's view. Actually, Osborne brands him a "positivist" because the fact that the "artistic act" may indeed be "irreducible to the way it legitimates itself", doesn't mean that it is either non-discursive, nor that the discourses from which it draws its resources are necessarily non-philosophical.¹⁰ Conceptual art would have made this clear. Naturally, contrary to Schaeffer, Osborne is someone who vindicates the philosophy of art of Jena Romanticism and so "the speculative tradition", or – as Osborne himself calls it – the tradition of "art as ontology", which sees "art as an ontologically distinct object of experience – specifically, the site of an autonomous production of meaning and a distinctive modality of truth".¹¹ Therefore, Osborne cannot think about

⁹ This is how Jacques Aumont resumes Schaeffer's view, adding this significant quotation of *Art of the Modern Age*: [...] art [...] can serve religious revelation, [but] cannot replace it; even when it can expound, illustrate, or defend metaphysical doctrines [...] it cannot replace their philosophical elaboration [...] And those who love arts don't have any reason to regret this, because arts are by themselves [...] such a source of pleasure and intelligence for them, that they don't feel any temptation at all to sell them off cheap, at the price of a religion or a philosophy". Aumont (1998:130-131, my translation into English).

¹⁰ Osborne (2004: 653-654).

¹¹ Ibid. 665. With Romanticism, the conception of aesthetic experience which Schaeffer defines as the maximization of cognitive attention in our deal with art and which he links to the speculative tradition would change, in the sense that, what is at stake would

the philosophical “de-sacralization” of art proposed by Schaeffer but as a “metaphysical disinvestment”.¹² However, he would agree with Schaeffer about the ineliminability of the aesthetic dimension of the artwork as the registration of the necessary sensuousness of its presentation. The principle of the ineliminability of the aesthetic dimension of the artwork would have been, in fact – according to Osborne – the ironic historical achievement of the failure of the strong programme of “analytical” or “pure” conceptual art, namely, the failure of an absolute anti-aesthetic conceptual art.¹³ But through the failure of its attempt at its elimination, conceptual art was able “to bring to light, in a more decisive way, the necessary conceptuality of the work, which had been buried by the aesthetic ideology of formalist modernism”.¹⁴

Both, formalist modernism and Conceptual Art would be then the representatives of the two main philosophical discourses about art that, since they were established at the end of the eighteenth century, raised two different traditions in art criticism, which would have developed historically parallel and in competition: art as “aesthetic” and art as “ontology”.¹⁵ Osborne stresses that the first one followed the Kantian model of disinterested aesthetic judgement. And, in Kant’s thought – Osborne points out – art becomes aesthetically pure only when it appears “as if it were a product of mere nature”. The problem here would be the consequent principled indifference to the character of the objects that occasion judgement, in particular, its principled indifference to the cognitive, relational, historical

not be a sort of intellectual pleasure which, on close examination, is the (reflective) pleasure that the subject take in her activity as Kant puts it, but – Osborne would say – any pleasure (which Osborne won’t call then “aesthetic”) would be an aspect of a transcendent truth to which the work is seen essentially incomplete (a fragment). According to this romantic conception, art represents a specific (allegoric) way of producing meaning and you can’t experience art as such without the mediation of a critical discourse.

¹² Ibid. 654

¹³ Associated for a brief period (1968 – 72) with both Joseph Kosuth and Art & Language

¹⁴ Osborne (2004: 664).

¹⁵ Osborne reminds us also that the first tradition runs from Kant through nineteenth-century aestheticism (Baudelaire, Pater, Wilde), through Fry and Bell, to Greenberg. And the second one, that appeared a bit later in time, runs from philosophical Romanticism through Hegel, Duchamp, surrealism and constructivism to Conceptual Art and its consequences in what Rosalind Krauss calls the ‘post-medium condition’. Ibid. 662.

and world-disclosive dimensions of works of art.¹⁶ So, rested upon Kant's conception of "aesthetic art", the nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition of "art as aesthetic" – artistic aestheticism – would have sealed and legitimated the exclusion of art's other aspects perpetuated by the very term "aesthetics".¹⁷ On the other hand, the contribution of Jena Romanticism would have been to mark the difference of art from nature, by its metaphysical, cognitive, and politico-ideological functions.¹⁸

Now, coming back to the present times, we would be living in the time of post-conceptual art. Instead of the conventional periodization of the art of the past fifty years in terms of a transition from "Modernism" (in the Greenbergian sense) to "Postmodernism", Osborne proposes an alternative periodization of art that privileges the sequence Modernism/Conceptual Art/Post-Conceptual Art. Now, post-conceptual art – he explains – is not a concept at the level of either medium, form or style but a critical category that expresses the condition of possibility of contemporary art based on the critical legacy of conceptual art. And once the ineliminability of the aesthetic dimension of the artwork is admitted as part of this legacy, we should see that "the autonomous work of art" is "as historical and 'aesthetic' in its mode of appearance" as it is "irreducibly conceptual – and metaphysical – in its philosophical structure".¹⁹ In other words, even being ineliminable, the aesthetic dimension of the artwork would still be rad-

¹⁶ This is the problem for Osborne, in spite of the fact that he acknowledges that Kant's *Third Critique* extended the range of 'aesthetic' beyond the sensible (spatial and temporal) to embrace the feelings accompanying the relations of reflection constitutive of the internal *cognitive* structure of subjectivity itself. Doing so, Kant would have gone beyond a dualistic rationalism and shown that human sensibility is irreducibly judgmental. Ibid. 659.

¹⁷ Ibid. 660.

¹⁸ Ibid. This shows clearly – in Osborne's view – that "Kant's work cannot, in principle, provide the conceptual ground for an account of the autonomy of the art work, as it has no account of (nor interest in) the ontological distinctiveness of the work of art". Costello (2007) has contested a view similar to that expressed by Osborne. According to Costello, the general antipathy that Kant's aesthetics still provokes in many artists and theorists come from the distortion of Kantian thought that Greenberg's formalist modernism entails. He examines whether the aesthetics of Conceptual art could be approached from Kant's account of the "aesthetic ideas" that, as stated in the *Third Critique*, artworks express.

¹⁹ Osborne (2004: 664).

ically insufficient or minimally conditional. Moreover, in Osborne's view, conceptual art thereby established the need for art actively to counter aesthetic misrecognition within the work, through the constructive or strategic artistic use of aesthetic materials. From this perspective, Osborne reaches the conclusion of that "the victory of the 'aesthetic remainder' over strong conceptualism was thus ultimately a Pyrrhic one",²⁰ and also that only the tradition of art as ontology offers the conceptual resources to understand the nature of contemporary art and provides the conceptual basis for its criticism.

Finally, the characterization of post-conceptual or contemporary art given by Osborne shows that the essential thesis for conceptualism is not so much the definition of Conceptual Art as anti or an-aesthetic, as the idea of that the sensuous appearance of the artwork, being ineliminable, is irrelevant. This idea would have been reinforced by the transition to post-conceptual art, showing it as the true dogma. And so, Osborne can claim that "there is no *critically relevant* aesthetics of contemporary art, because contemporary art *is not an aesthetic art*, in any *philosophically significant* sense of the term".²¹

In Osborne's view, the final lesson of Conceptual Art would have been the demonstration of the necessary conceptuality of the artwork. The also necessary sensuousness of its presentation might make art part of an aesthetic relation – in Schaeffer's terms – but, while Schaeffer argues that the "aestheticity" is neither primordial nor exhaustive of the properties or function of the artwork, Osborne goes further and declares its radical insufficiency and the critical requirement of the strategically anti-aesthetic use of aesthetic materials. Certainly, art hasn't got rid of its aesthetic wrapping even when declaring itself anti-aesthetic. The question now is if the function we can assign to the aesthetic in the art of today is the one claimed by Schaeffer, namely, that that impregnates with affection the cognitive attention to the work expressing our (dis)pleasure, or the merely constructive or strategic role, "anti-aesthetic", in the sense defended by Osborne. In spite of having contrary conceptions of art, neither of them will finally concede that the aesthetic dimension of the artworks

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 653, my emphasis.

could play a deeper role in their meaning and the meaning of art itself. But this is a possibility that could be explored looking at some of Arthur Danto's recent publications.

4. The Pragmatic View of Aesthetic Qualities

Certainly, the role of the aesthetic in the art of today is a question that Arthur Danto addresses in his book *The Abuse of Beauty*. Here, Danto reconsiders the relation between aesthetics (and beauty as a privileged instance of the aesthetic) and the art of our time. For a long time, Danto has notably defended a philosophical definition of art detached from aesthetics. Contrary to Schaeffer, and closer to Osborne, Danto would belong to "the speculative tradition" that affirms the essential conceptuality of art and, like Osborne too, would have contested the tradition of artistic aestheticism. Nonetheless, in that book, he admits that his previous philosophy of art was itself a product of the historical artworld of the 1960s avant-garde, that of the backlash of the formalist modernism, from which it derived. Against modernism, Danto believed that what was visually discernible about works of art no longer enabled one to distinguish between works of art and other objects.²² Aesthetic properties, beauty and the like, were part of a concept of art that disappeared at that time, and that would explain why until recently Danto hasn't considered analysing their role in art.²³ But he does it now because, even if that historical time urged to find a definition of art away from aesthetics, it is the time "to return to aesthetics with an enhanced understanding".²⁴

²² Famously, Danto was particularly overwhelmed by the 1964 Stable Gallery exhibition in which Andy Warhol displayed a large number of wooden boxes painted to resemble the cartons in which Brillo pads were packed and sent to the stores in which they were sold. Then, Danto argued that the properties available to perception undetermined the difference between art and non-art, showing that aesthetics was irrelevant to what made *Brillo Box* art. Danto's major work in the issue is (1981).

²³ Danto (2003: xix)

²⁴ Ibid. 58-59. He also confesses to having come to think that "aesthetics did have a certain role to play" (what led him to focus on *Brillo Box* rather than in any other boxes shown on that occasion were its dramatic visual qualities) Ibid. 3. I will come back to this point later, in the conclusion (see footnote 48).

It is basic for such understanding to distinguish between beauty and the aesthetic. Beauty is certainly a special case because, different from the countless other aesthetic qualities, it is the only one that has a claim to be a value, like truth or goodness. Due to its moral weight in the aesthetic tradition, beauty, earlier prime for the definition of art, was dethroned by the “intractable” avant-garde, paradigmatically represented by Dada, who made its abuse become a device for dissociating the artists from the society they held in contempt, turning “beautifiers” into “collaborationists”. Through this attack, the intractable avant-garde not only opened a logical space between art and beauty, but also purged the concept of beauty of its previous moral authority, attaching a stigma to beauty that turned it into something shameful. This, and not so much purging the concept of art of aesthetic qualities, is – for Danto – the real conceptual revolution of that avant-garde.²⁵ It is such that Danto comments Jean Clair’s thesis according to which in contemporary art we have passed on from taste to disgust. But disgust will be still aesthetic. So, this exaggeration will help to demonstrate that when beauty doesn’t belong neither to the essence nor the definition of art, “that doesn’t mean that *aesthetics* belongs neither to the essence nor the definition of art. What had happened was that aesthetics had become narrowly identified with beauty”.²⁶

Rejecting this fallacy,²⁷ Danto is in a position to take a new look at art’s aesthetic possibilities, which are so many that it was distorting to think of them as being only one. Now, Danto calls aesthetic properties “pragmatic” (to contrast with the “semantical” properties) and are those “intended to dispose an audience to have feelings of one sort or another toward what the artwork represents”.²⁸ Beauty can inspire love, sublime awe, disgust revulsion, ludicrousness contempt, lubricity erotic feelings, and so on –

²⁵ Ibid. 28.

²⁶ Ibid. 59.

²⁷ In other parts of the book Danto shows though a residual tendency to equate aesthetics with beauty and finally suggests that aesthetics remains nonetheless external to art’s definition. These are a sample of the many tensions that we can find between Danto’s earlier theory of art and the new account of the relationships between art and aesthetics opened with *The Abuse of Beauty*; a reconsideration of those relationships, as he confesses from the beginning of the book, which Danto has continued in later work (see Danto, 2007) and which is my focus here.

²⁸ Danto (2003: xv).

Danto reminds us – ; it is what in earlier times was called “rhetoric”. This characterization will point out the affective dimension of aesthetic qualities that should be related to cognition in some way and the way in which Danto puts it seems very close to the description of the aesthetic relation as cognitive-affective defended by Schaeffer. But there are differences between them. On the one hand, Schaeffer claims to defend a Kantian line according to which the aesthetic behaviour involves a specific use of the cognitive attention that causes (in)satisfaction depending on our finding (in)desirable the properties of a certain object. So, in spite of defining aesthetic relation as a link of internal interdependence between cognitive attention and (in)satisfaction²⁹, the latter is for Schaeffer a matter of subjective affection and evaluation and that can be separated from the more objective cognitive representation of the object.³⁰

Schaeffer’s view finally underlines the expresivist nature of the aesthetic. Besides, when dealing with artworks – as said about Schaeffer above – the aesthetic (in)satisfaction won’t be particularly relevant to their human value compared to the diverse and changing functions that artworks carry out.³¹ On the other hand, Danto contests an emotivist theory according to which aesthetic terms are used merely to express feelings of pleasure or displeasure. As a confessed Hegelian and against Kant, Danto argues for the necessary differentiation between natural and artistic beauty.³² The latter, being an intellectual product, “born of the Spirit”, does more than gratify the senses, and opens the door for an account that shows how the aesthetic qualities could contribute to the meaning of the work that possesses them and to the meaning of art.

²⁹ The point is – Schaeffer insists – that for the relation to be aesthetic, it is *necessary* that the (in)satisfaction felt by a subject is ruling the cognition as much as it is necessary that the cognition is being the source of the (in)satisfaction felt by the subject. Schaeffer (2000: 37).

³⁰ Ibid. 51.

³¹ Ibid. 85.

³² In this point, Danto is close to Osborne’s view, although Danto (2007) has reconsidered to an extent this interpretation of Kant, which is anyway a matter of debate (see footnote 19).

5. Aesthetics and Artistic Meaning

According to Danto's pragmatic view of aesthetic properties, these properties are "inflectors", because they are intended to "inflect" or – with Frege – to "color" the meaning of a work of art. This certainly means that there is an endless range of possibilities employed rhetorically to dispose the viewers to see the meaning of an artwork in a particular light. And so, it goes against the usual identification of aesthetic value exclusively with beauty and pleasure. As part of the intractable avant-garde's legacy for visual art, the belief that in some way beauty trivializes that that possesses it extended to the aesthetic and provoked that the stigma of beauty extended to the aesthetic in general as if it were a sort of incompatibility between the aesthetic dimension of a work and treating seriously certain socio-economical issues. It seemed then that the old dogma that commanded that *art had to be beautiful* was substituted by that prescribing that *it didn't have to be aesthetic*. However, even those most politically or socially committed artists would never have disregarded the rhetorical role of aesthetic qualities,³³ and the tendency continues in the art of today where – according to Danto's description – "the official artistic culture" is "Dada through and through".³⁴

Peter Osborne also acknowledges, for example, that the strategic use of the aesthetic material accounts for "the privileged status of the photographic practice within contemporary art".³⁵ The (critical) artistic use of the aesthetic would be paradoxically anti-aesthetic, because it is aimed at the special kind of production of meaning that art is. Osborne opposes then "the radical emptiness or blankness of the aesthetic in itself", as a support of the artwork to its (otherwise essential) meaning.³⁶ He understands the aesthetic though as the purely sensuous, non-cognitive response to visual stimuli sustained by the tradition of "art as aesthetic" that led to formalist modernism. Along with the conceptual essence of artworks,

³³ Harrison and Wood say about the "committed" art of the 1970s: "Work of this kind clearly operates with a different sense of the task of art than aesthetic contemplation, which is not to say that compositional devices are not knowingly deployed as means to the end in question". Harrison and Wood (1993: 239).

³⁴ Danto (2003: 58).

³⁵ Osborne (2004: 664).

³⁶ Ibid.

Danto has also shared this view of the aesthetic, which it seems that his new pragmatic view nonetheless would have started to change.

Artworks are – for Danto – *embodied* meanings. Employing the Fregean notion of “color” (*Farbung*), Danto assumes that understanding an artwork involves capturing the attitudes toward the subject that the artist tries to provoke in the viewer. To do that, both the artist and the viewer must be able to identify certain qualities as significant, based on a shared cultural background, a time, a place, etc. So, calling “aesthetic” those features and effects that depend on a certain stock of beliefs or a context will mean to broaden the narrow limits of the formalist view of the aesthetic as purely perceptual. Nonetheless, as Jonathan Gilmore has pointed out, “with the concept of an inflector, Danto means to distinguish between apprehending the intellectual content of a work and being disposed to respond to that content in a certain way”.³⁷ However, when we deal with artworks it wouldn’t be so easy to separate one thing from the other. The degree of coordination between the artist and the viewers required for the inflectors coming into play shows that their own recognition as well as our response to them may then only be learned. Therefore, a good amount of knowledge is already built into our emotional and attitudinal responses.³⁸ What is more, the embodiment of the meaning won’t be intelligible without the expected effect in the viewer and so the mode in which the artwork is presented should contribute to its cognitive dimension.³⁹

In fact, this would be the case of Motherwell’s *Elegies for the Spanish Republic* or Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial*, examples of artworks with which Danto, vindicates the *option* of beauty in the art of today. Danto argues how those works’ artistic beauty plays a role in their meaning, being *internal* to their meaning as art. Here, Danto tries to show that beauty can be part of the experience of art as an experience richer by far than the “retinal shudder” impugned by Duchamp.⁴⁰

³⁷ Gilmore (2005: 150).

³⁸ Ibid. 150-151. According to Gilmore, the inflectors employed by both contemporary “anti-aesthetic” art (often employing inflectors such as abjection or outrageousness) and “anesthetic” art like Duchamp’s readymades operate in a particularly cognitive way that demands very special knowledge of the subject in which they are employed.

³⁹ See Pérez-Carreño (2005:229)

⁴⁰ Danto (2003: 97).

Of course, Danto is aware that beauty can be used as something superficial and false. And he also thinks that there is probably a conflict between beauty and certain contents to which beauty would not be the appropriate answer, but action and indignation. It would be helpful then to differentiate between beauty and “beautification” (as equivalent of deception) and understand that “if beauty is internally connected to the content of a work, it can be a criticism of the work that it is beautiful when it is inappropriate for it to be so”.⁴¹ Certainly, this can make art dangerous. Danto has dealt with the issue before and, going back to Plato, explained that art is dangerous “because its methods are open to the representation of dangerous things” and “because the power of art is the power of rhetoric”.⁴² Rhetoric – he said then – aimed at the modification of attitude and belief, and that can never be innocent, and it’s real, because minds are so.⁴³ Therefore, art is dangerous because that power makes it effective and demands from the viewer a very close and critical look in order to identify which properties of the *object* belong to the *work* and how they relate to its meaning. Nevertheless, the danger of aesthetics doesn’t detract either from its relevance for art as embodied meaning, nor from what Danto concludes is art’s transformative power, namely, “an effect that art has on those who encounter it”.⁴⁴ Bigger or smaller though the effect might be, it’s now a matter of approaching art from the perspective of the role that it plays in most of our lives, where its true efficacy lies.

6. Conclusions

Decades after Conceptual Art, different reviews of the relation between art and the aesthetic have emphasized their autonomy and shown their connections. About these, the acknowledgment of an ineliminable aesthetic dimension of art in its sensuous presentation seems to be widely agreed and it would have redefined and in certain sense abolished the possibility of an anti or an-aesthetic art, strictly speaking. That idea can be better seen today as the expression of the rejection of Modernism by the

⁴¹ Ibid. 113.

⁴² Danto (1992:192, 194). See also Danto (1986).

⁴³ Ibid. 194-5.

⁴⁴ Danto (2003: 131).

artistic practices of the 60s and 70s, particularly aimed at producing an intellectual art, with no sensory gratification whatever. Nonetheless, the core of current (post-conceptual) avant-garde still rejects the aesthetic experience of the artwork in those (formalist) terms, to be the aim of art. And this conception prevails also in many theorists as the standard view of the aesthetic. That would be why the dogma of the irrelevance of the aesthetic appearance of the artwork persists.

The pragmatic account more recently given by Danto encompasses though both the affective and the cognitive dimensions of the aesthetic in our engagement with art, but also it acknowledges the pluralism of aesthetic qualities and concedes the *internal* role that they can play in artistic meaning. This perspective would show the narrow limits of the formalist conception of the aesthetic and would open a critical standpoint missed by those who – like Osborne – sustain that it is irrelevant or minimally conditional, but also by Schaeffer’s account when, trying to bring to an end “the speculative tradition” that subjects art to philosophy, overlooks the place of art in human thought (here in its concrete and sensorial form).⁴⁵

Now, although Danto has reconsidered his previous view of the aesthetic and his discourse about the relation of aesthetics and today’s art, his “aesthetic turn”⁴⁶ is not complete. In *The abuse of Beauty* he is still uncertain about the pragmatic features to be a condition for something to be considered an artwork and argues that they are not always internal to its meaning.⁴⁷ More recently Danto admits however that “the theory of art as

⁴⁵ And this, of course, doesn’t mean having to admit that an artwork can be reduced to a philosophical statement. See Aumont, regarding Schaeffer’s attempt to fight “the speculative tradition” (1998: 131).

⁴⁶ As Costello (2008) calls it.

⁴⁷ Danto (2003: xix). In the case of the *Brillo Box*, even accepting that they were more visually engaging than the others, Danto claims that the aesthetic qualities of the cartons had no bearing on the *Brillo Box* as art. It will be a case of *external* beauty, not relevant to the work’s meaning, incidental rather than constitutive. However, Gilmore questions if it is ever possible for a work of art to be beautiful without that beauty being internal. While it is possible for an artist to intend that her work be only incidentally beautiful, being so is still part of the work’s meaning, a form of internal beauty. Hence, – Gilmore explains – even the anaesthetic quality of Duchamp’s readymades implies that beauty was excluded and, in that sense, included as a dimension of the work’s meaning; it was taking beauty as a relevant criterion of art how that should be viewed. Gilmore (2005: 148-149; 152). Costello (2004: 431-432) contests also the *Brillo Box* case using the pragmatic account of

embodied meanings...makes it clear how aesthetic qualities can contribute to the meaning of the work that possesses them”.⁴⁸ His doubts could be proof of how strong the dogma of post-conceptual art is. But, in spite of all of that, for Danto, the victory of the “aesthetic remainder” is clearly far from being as Pyrrhic as it is for Osborne, and also because “aesthetics may itself explain why we have art in the first place. We have it in order that our feelings be enlisted toward what art is about.”⁴⁹ The different aesthetic modes connect feelings with the thoughts that animate works of art, helping to explain why art is important in human life. Danto doesn’t think, like Hegel, that art has been superseded by philosophy, especially in dealing with the large human issues.⁵⁰ Thus, we still need contemporary art to address these questions; we still need thoughts presented to human sensibility in art, probably because of the way we are. Hegel was right though in thinking that philosophy is the changing consciousness of history. Aesthetic qualities suddenly became irrelevant, but they had played an overwhelming part in the art of the past, held to give an answer to the question of what the point of art is, in the case, of course – Danto specifies – that “were anyone to ask it”. To think about them seems nowadays more than justified if to “consider what after all makes art so meaningful in human life” is – for Danto, for many, I think – “the current agenda”.⁵¹

References

- Aumont, J. (1998) *De l'esthétique au présent*, (Bruxelles-Paris: De Boeck et Larcier) – transl. into Spanish by M.A. Galmarini. *La estética hoy*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2001.
- Costello, D. (2004) “On Late Style: Arthur Danto’s *The abuse of Beauty*”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 44:4, 424-439.
- “Kant after LeWitt: Towards an Aesthetics of Conceptual Art” In P. Goldie and E. Schellekens (eds.) *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Oxford:

aesthetics.

⁴⁸ Danto (2007:128)

⁴⁹ Danto (2003: 59).

⁵⁰ Ibid. 137.

⁵¹ Danto (2003: xix).

- Oxford University Press, pp. 92-115.
- (2008) ‘Kant and Danto, Together at Last?’ In K. Stock and K. Thomson-Jones (eds.) *New Waves in Aesthetics*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, pp. 244-266.
- Danto, A.C. (1981) *The transfiguration of the commonplace: a philosophy of art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- (1986) *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- (1992) *Beyond the Brillo Box: the visual arts in post-historical perspective*. New York: The Noonday Press.
- (2003) *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court.
- (2007) “Embodied Meanings, Isotypes, and Aesthetical Ideas”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65: 1, 121-129.
- Gilmore, J. (2005) “Internal Beauty”, *Inquire*, 48:2, 145-154.
- Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (1993) “Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered”, in P. Wood, F. Frascina, J. Harris and C. Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute. Art since the Forties*. London: The Open University and Yale University Press, pp. 170-256.
- Kyndrupp, M. (2009), “Aesthetics and its Future: Problems and Perspectives”. In F. Dorsch, F. (ed.) *Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics*, vol.I: 1-16; <http://proceedings.eurosa.org/1/kyndrup.pdf>.
- Nae, C. (2011) “Two dogmas of conceptualism. Aesthetic experience and communication in and after conceptual art”. In Subdirección General de Publicaciones, Información y Documentación del Ministerio de Cultura (ed.) *Sociedades en Crisis. Europa y el Concepto de Estética*. Madrid: Secretaría General Técnica del MEC, pp. 221-225.
- Osborne, P. (2004) “Art beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art”, *Art History* 27/ 4: 651- 670.
- Pérez-Carreño, F. (2005) “Símbolo Encarnado: del cuerpo al efecto”, in F. Pérez Carreño (ed.) *Estética después del fin del arte. Ensayos sobre Arthur Danto*. Madrid: Antonio Machado, 2005, pp. 209-232.

- Schaeffer, J-M. (1992), *L'Art de l'âge moderne* (Paris: Gallimard) – transl. into English by S. Rendall. *Art of the Modern Age. Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.
- (2000) *Adieu à l'esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard) – transl. into Spanish by J. Hernández . *Adiós a la estética*. Madrid: Antonio Machado Libros, 2005.