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Beyond Duchamp and Warhol - Reclaiming Meaning and Value in Art

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that the seminal artists Duchamp and Warhol creatively changed the trajectory of art but also caused great harm to art and offer little in the way of world-bettering. However, one can extract a positive consequence of such innovations: Duchamp and Dadaism led to an open ontological definition of art while Warhol and pop art is an instance of “what not to do”. The result is a new paradigm

where I argue for the moral value in art and the open call to express such value in various modalities which one may or may not call art, it matters not. This circumvents both the cannon of art theory and history as well as practice which includes the power mongering within the institutions of art and in their “marriage” to other larger institutions - political, economic, and so on.

Keywords: Duchamp, Dadaism, Warhol, Pop Art, A New Paradigm, Morality

1. Introduction

Three momentous shifts in the direction of art theory and practice, that is, art, was Duchamp’s redefining of art and Warhol’s nihilism. I will analyze these two “moments” and in particular draw out their negative consequences for the direction and function of art today (sections 2 and 3). Then, in section 4, I offer an alternative definition and practice of art, one that is not susceptible to the criticism I shall level at these pioneers and the ensuing direction of art. My intention is simply to make aware the conditioning within art itself which has purged it of value in the true sense. Thus, a reappraisal and a reassessment of the definition and function of art ought to be the order of the day – herein is one possible solution.

2. Duchamp’s Paradigm Shift

Duchamp did two ingenious things. He poked fun at the institution of art itself. Secondly, he introduced the concept of the “declared” work of art. This latter “move” at once made an aesthetic judgement confused (i.e. formalism), it reduced any expressive function, but most significantly, the ontological existence or definition of art ceased to exist. Not only was there an aesthetic and philosophical jarring, but there is also the impossible task of knowing what art is. This audacious practice, and the Dadaist shenanigans of Duchamp, also questioned in turn the very institutions that held art to be sacred and of great monetary value.

Yet this was over one hundred years ago. In its wake it has spawned a definition of art so broad, so as to include performance art, new media and video art and installation art now also amongst other variants. In theory, there is the aesthetics of the everyday and one strand of the argument put forward by Dowling (2010)^[4], namely the “weak version”, is that art may be the paradigm case of aesthetic experience, but it is diffused in everyday activities such as sport for example and so art is not simply the fine arts as such.

Moreover, the institutional theory of art absorbs Duchamp’s ploys and in fact Dadaism and so on is completely accepted as integral to the history of art. In fact, it lends a clear path toward post modern and deconstructionism which is the fashion of the day in academic and institutional circles. It embraces Duchamp’s “anything goes” and at the same time undermines those who oppose such looseness, a contradiction in terms as in order for there to be consistency, contemporary woke culture is masking a hatred of certain identities by pretending there are no identities *and* there are only identities at the same time, an untenable contradiction.

Duchamp’s ontological threat to a stable definition of art, namely the traditional fine arts, opened a pandoras box from which there is no return. On the one hand, it is liberating in that it means an open and creative realm of possibilities in the very form, medium and meaning in art. On the other hand, it means the lack of any sacred value accorded art (and here I do not wish to equate the sacred with either monetary value or religious function necessarily). In effect, Duchamp’s “chess” move meant that

since art cannot be defined, it loses sense and hence we get all the current mass of thought about art that the ordinary person has come to believe about it, namely:

- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder (this predated Duchamp in the realm of aesthetics, but even Kant would admit a kind of universal assent).
- Art need not emanate from an inner depth of self and so much sophisticated art today is simply witty or concerned with worldly social issues or simply a rehashing of the masterpiece and the heritage of various cultures with admiration attending form and function.

What is missing in such an equation is the ability to discuss art discursively, for now it is elusive or simply descriptive or impervious to criticism in the case of the great artist venerated by tradition. Thus, even though Duchamp questioned this very tradition, his co-option meant a counter chess move: The return to the banal, meaningless, relative, purely aesthetic while upholding the institutions that enable it, artistic and otherwise, whether in the guise of a veneration for the past or a self-righteous deconstruction of it.

Essentially Duchamp dismantled the traditional notion of art, but his subsequent subsuming or canonization within art (theory and practice) has meant that art itself has lost both definition and thence sense.

3. Warhol's Pop Art

Warhol's threat to art or shall I rather dub it paradigm shift as was the case with Duchamp, lies in his reduction to aesthetic hedonism; emptiness; commercialism and ultimately the defeat then of Abstract Expressionism that is said to proceed it in the cannon of art history.

Aesthetic hedonism: In Warhol's practice he would make various portraits or scenes of famous people or horrific events and repeat them in variations, usually prints. Now, this exercise expunged the image of content; they were reduced to "pretty playthings" with no content save their formal beauty. On a more theoretical level such a strategy coveted the notion of the sacred image, the boon of art for thousands of years (even where false or simply idolatry) and instead offered an idol that has no meaning, no connection, no stability, and no value. The value he accorded it, in his next strategic move, was the vary banality of commercial interest, cultural capital (he was quite the pop star) and academic thought that spawned woke culture, by which I mean the belief that there is no "fact" of the matter, no moral imperative and in the name of identity politics have actually created more bigotry and not less.

Emptiness: While emptiness may be a virtue when defining it as the space that has the potential to hold something, the meaning here is that this kind of emptiness holds nothing, not in a mystical sense, but rather than it signifies a lack of soul or heart. His famous "Campbell Soup Cans" underscores the point: Warhol repeated images; incorporated everyday objects as images or as illusory replicas of actual objects such as the soup cans. His art makes no comment, offers no intellectual stimuli or questions, it simply appeals to the eye aesthetically, yet such a beauty is empty or vacuous, and offers nothing of the self and certainly nothing by way of a vision for a better world.

Commercialism: Warhol welcomed commercialism and the attention that fame brought. He may have used it to express loneliness and meaninglessness as his diaries and visual arts

confirm, but the artistic oeuvre does not indicate a desire to express a positive image, that is to say, a beauty whose form is not simply about churning out objects, his "factory" as a studio, but rather ought to be directed from an inner meaning. Instead, there is no such center and only a desire to sell these objects, to be famous as he promised the masses (and he is right in the world of social media and complete abandon in communication with no barriers) and the result of the creative act is simply a monetary one – all in the name of culture.

Defeat of Abstract Expressionism: Abstract Expressionism in my opinion represented a unique and wonderful correlation or correspondence - a sort of mathematical function - where form reflected deep content, the extra aesthetic and it did so in a way that transcended literal descriptions of such beauty or meaning, combining at the same time both affective and cognitive dimensions. It was produced on a grand scale, large paintings that did not seek institutional support or monetary gain, though obviously it has gained as such as it too has been canonized as pivotal in art history and practice. The upshot is such that it represents ideals in art: Expression; metaphysical content; new artistic techniques for the purposes of such meaning (not abstract art for the sake of it) and stands of the shoulders of the early modern pioneers of abstract painting (art). The defeat of this movement in art meant the death of such metaphysical content irrespective of its formal innovations.

4. A New Paradigm: Giving art purpose and value outside the canon with its power-mongering, and Institutions

Rather than decry Duchamp as having meant the end of a clear ontological definition of art and the subsequent Institutional cooption of "anything goes" and Dadaist non-sensical irrationality as necessarily problematic, we might see this as a liberation of the constraints of the tradition of art. Yet such a position only works if at the same time, a broader definition of art comes into practice as a "way of life", and not simply as falling within the tradition of fine arts even in contemporary new media and the like.

What I have in mind is the definition of art as a concept of aesthetic and moral living which may be expressed variously, the arts simply being one offshoot (much like Tolstoy may have advocated). One can thus call anything art if indeed it is aesthetic and moral. The difficulty with such a position is that this simply adds to the long line of art theory, aesthetics and criticism that have argued in favor of a moral imperative in art and thus excluded certain kinds of art, and thence we are back to square one, where Dadaism is just coopted, or in which case ideology plays itself out – who is to decide what is proper and moral in art, in life? Etc. Plato for example was clear that most art is not so ideal and that most art thus does not qualify as being art and as forming a useful or necessary part of society.

In contradistinction to current culture, I maintain that there are absolute moral truths. I further maintain that art ought to be an expression of these more refined ideas of being human and of how to treat one another and that other activities may satisfy the same call, and one could call it art if one so chooses. Painting flowers, though not original and deep or swimming or talking nicely to one's child and so on and so forth – all these are instances of moral behavior, and all these may be classified as art accordingly. So, Duchamp may have opened the way to seeing art in a new light,

apparently destroying it, only to elevate (a good) life (as art).

What of the second attack - that of Warhol? I would argue that once one has such a definition of art, then pop art will be seen for what it is: Meaningless. In other words, once the level of consciousness is one that searches for meaning; for coherence (and here I do not just mean aesthetic harmony for Warhol is a master artist in that sense); for right living - to borrow from a Buddhist notion -and to seek and create art (in whatever form) as an expression of an idea and especially where wisdom and understanding motivate behaviors that are not counter to life and basic moral truths. A denial of such values is the true end of art. Thus it is precisely where pop art is victorious over abstract expressionism, that a fight back needs to occur, a fight whereby meaning; thinking (arguing); aesthetics linked to an idea, a warm heart - and it is with such purpose that perhaps Abstract Expressionism may mount a posthumous assault on pop art.. This does not mean mandating the form, though yes certain forms - to recall the great Judaic revelation and prohibition of idolatry and the need for modesty – ought to be common culture.

Contemporary culture appears to be light years from this and there seems to be no way back (though this is the incorrect turn of phrase for all ages know of war and violence and moral breakdown, no age is innocent. Yet the idea of Adam and Eve in the garden is not simply myth of fairy tale, but reminds one of the purity and innocence and sanctity of being human, of divine nature and of communion with the divine, where consciousness was on a higher level, where mind and the senses functioned with much greater clarity and joy.

5. Conclusion

This brief essay outlined the pitfalls of two pioneers of art in accordance with the narrative of art (history). I argued for the poverty of both such approaches, namely the “play” of Duchamp and the “work” of Warhol. In the ensuing argumentation, I made the point that an alternative is required to restore art as truly valuable for the individual and society. I offered “a new paradigm” and resurrected calls for a moral imperative, and instead of countering Duchamp and Warhol, used *their* energy as it were, to argue that the former could be seen as a forerunner of a broader definition of art and the latter can be seen as an important example of “what not to do”. This may not be politically correct, which is tantamount to saying that this vies against current orthodoxy, an orthodoxy at once meaningless and without moral rectitude or intellectual purpose and direction in the arts and other domains of human expression, that is to say, in life proper.

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