Following Forms,
Following Functions

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Practices and Disciplines in Dialogue

Edited by

Federica Pau and Luca Vargiu

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INTRODUCTION

SALVATORE TEDESCO

The relationship between the concepts of form and function goes through the history of western thinking and continues to be a stimulus and a theoretical constraint of great significance. This volume allows us to rethink this topic in a highly innovative perspective, focusing on the aesthetic dimension of contemporary research, and extensively investigating a variety of research approaches, from the history of art and its foundations up to anthropology, from the study of ancient and modern material culture, up to design and architecture.

Along with the numerous theoretical acquisitions and the significant disciplinary results achieved by the individual contributions, which the reader can directly experience in the following pages, there are, however, some considerations of a more general nature which may be useful to expose and summarize in this introductory phase, before returning the reader to the direct comparison with the thematic works collected here.

Far from being related in an occasional and instrumental way, form and function are rather a conceptual couple whose usefulness in the investigation of philosophy—and aesthetic thinking particularly—emerges in a peculiar way in their interaction, which allows from time to time to test situations, motives, uses and contexts of the different theoretical configurations, which would otherwise remain silent in a unilateral investigation.

Searching for a conceptual tool that allows us to properly address the implications of the relation between form and function, we can briefly refer to the modern debate on life sciences, and specifically to the elaboration, in Goethe's morphological tradition, of an articulated system of models of similarity, which finds its decisive moment in the distinction and connection between the concept of analogy (established on a functional basis) and the *structural* one of homology, which is rather about recognizing an identity that (according to the fortunate definition by Richard Owen, 1843: 379) is maintained "under every variety of form and function."

Where, in fact, the principle of analogy ultimately traces the similarity between two phenomena back to the *same function* (Owen, 1843: 374) which they exercise in different contexts, homology rather entails an

identity (and not merely a similarity) capable of remaining despite any variations in formal configurations and functional investments in different contexts.

It is, therefore, a concept that is superior to the distinction between form and function and able to regulate the relationship by investigating systemically mutual relations.

By pointing to the question of the meaning of the systemic relation, the reference to homology enables the problem of the relationship between the concepts to be set on an innovative basis. First and foremost, it is the concept of function itself to be called into question,[1] and this for the simple reason that its restriction to the field of functional adaptation does not seem sufficient to account for interactions between the phenomena that I would call "environmental" and that are beyond the traditional division between subjects and objects. Arno Wouters (2003, 2005) has rightly enucleated four different meanings of *function* in life sciences, distinguishing among *activity*, *causal role* (understood as contribution to an ability), *fitness advantage*, and finally *selected effect* (Wouters, 2003: 649), which corresponds to the concept of functional adaptation, prevalent in the neo–darwinian debate.[2]

In a contribution of great philosophical importance, Alan Love (2007) asked which of these meanings may be appropriate to understand the nature of relationships to which homology considered according to its systemic *Bedeutung* gives rise. Moreover, Love seeks out how to speak of a *homology of function* without becoming stuck in an insoluble contradiction with the concept of homology, on one hand, and providing, on the other hand, a useful heuristic tool for understanding system relationships between phenomena.

This will obviously mean, in the spirit of Richard Owen's (1843) definition, to not undermine any further possible functional investment in any direction while at the same time giving an actively constructive value to the recognized *primacy* of homology. Only an interpretation in the sense of *mere activity*,[3] the way of working in general (Love, 2007: 695),

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1 See Love, 2007; Pigliucci and Kaplan, 2006, cap. 6; Griffiths, 2006; Wouters, 2005; Wouters, 2003; Lewens, 2000.
2 Wouters (2003: 636–651) appropriately exemplifies the four meanings with reference to the human heart. Rhythmic contraction is activity, promoting blood circulation the biological role, allowing the transport of oxygen the benefit to the fitness of the organism, and finally «the 'proper' [i.e. adaptive] function of the heart is to propel the blood, if and only if propagating of blood is what hearts did that caused them to be favored by past natural selection» (651).
3 See Wouters, 2003: 635: «What an organism, part, organ, or substance by itself

«accents the 'function' itself, apart from its specific contribution to a systemic capacity and position in a larger context. Therefore, the appropriate meaning for 'homology of function' is activity not causal role, since activity can remain constant 'under every variety of form and function'». If the functional sense exclusively binds a particular trait to a specific operational purpose, the concept of activity rather leads to emphasize the mode and relationships. The homology of function will therefore be definable (Love, 2007: 696) as *the same activity–function [...] under every variety of form and use–function*.

The primacy therefore lies in consideration of the overall unit of organization, not of the individual functions and forms it gives rise to, first and foremost in the sense that, as Love (2007: 696) says, «multiple activities might underlie a particular use and one activity may be in the service of multiple uses; the terms do not have equivalent extensions». Such an organizational understanding of the concept of homology will thus greatly enhance the multiple possibilities of hierarchical interactions, that is, those present at the same descriptive level and those between different levels.

In a direction, very close to that indicated by these acquisitions in the debate of life sciences, we also have the recent work of Italian philosopher Paolo Virno who, using a lexicon heavily influenced by Kant and Wittgenstein, speaks of a notion of *use* prior to the actual specification of the different operating and investigative modes, and constituting in a somewhat Kantian way the *condition of possibility*.

Virno (2015: 158) speaks of use as of the «common premise» of *poiesis* and *praxis*, emphasizing how in using or, even better, «in the way of being of usable things», another traditional distinction of philosophical discourse is overcome: «The one between power and act». The use, Virno (2015: 155) furthermore suggests, «has nothing to do with anything that is in front, i.e. with an object in the strict sense, opposed to the ego [...]. What you use is adjacent, collateral, capable of friction. The used thing acts back on the living being who uses it, transforming his behavior».

So much as the *strong* notion of "systemic homology" as the notions—nominally competing among themselves, but in fact largely compatible—of "activity–function" (Love) and "use" (Virno) lead us to the same theoretical consequences: the conceptual pair form/function constitutes a polarity that maintains its pertinence both in living forms and in the forms of aesthetic behaviors and human symbolic productions, contributing powerfully to understanding the internal logic of movement, construction

does or is capable of doing».

and transformation of phenomena.

Let me also point out that here is no evolutionary (even less in the adaptive sense) discourse about the "origin" of aesthetic attitudes and artistic practices. It is not in this direction that the argument will be developed in the contributions that follow, and that is not even the theoretical framework of this brief introduction; rather, if the discourse drawn up in the field of life sciences leads first of all to investigating the systemic relationships in which the relationship between form and function is revealed, thus rethinking the structure of phenomena as well as the reciprocal interactions between the phenomena themselves and with the reference environment, the notion of use in the sense elaborated by Virno further emphasizes the value of "environmental relations" in which forms and their (functional) activity emerge, by questioning any essentialist concept and highlighting the practices of "handling" in which, from time to time, certain forms and functions find their operating arrangements.

The image—which in the plurality of its manifestations and acceptions constitutes the specific object of the research of this volume sets—itself from time to time as a propulsive element in a system of relationships and transformations in which the forms and functions are determined. The notion of *general use* that precedes such an actual determination will therefore materially fall into the use of images as an inexhaustible «reality of the possible» (Virno, 2015: 158) relevant to them.

These are indications strongly present in the works that follow, which encourage us, I believe, to understand how the ability to rethink the forms in the light of the functional multiplicity they contain leads to highlighting the *material constraints of form*, this formulation meaning the relevance of the material (physically intended) for determining the form and its potential functional investments, and the relevance of the "material contents" of technical and technological, ethnographic and cultural type.

It should first be noted that the comparison and the connection between form and function—a subject that extends widely throughout the Western philosophical tradition from the Greek world to the present—has recently been particularly lively in the fields of analytical philosophy and aesthetics, which have made the debate on the definition of art a salient point of reflection on mutual exclusion or possible interconnection between functionalist and formalist themes; Filippo Focosi's essay, which opens the volume, effectively traces this debate, working on what the author calls "a unified account of the aesthetic definition of art," capable of integrating functionalist and formalist tendencies in the direction of a wider understanding of the aesthetic/artistic object.

Almost in the form of an ideal counterpoint to the issues raised by the

recent analytical tradition, Massimo Lumini's contribution, which closes the volume, surveys and investigates a variety of aspects of contemporary research in between architecture and design, showing the "formal exuberance" that leads to a tight and imaginative dialogue with the productivity of natural shapes. The label of a "Digital Neo–Rococo," in this sense, is well represented by the proposed hybridization between art, nature and technology, particularly pertinent, in the opinion of the author himself, "within the urban, ecological and technology debate of the *smart–city* and *interactive design.*"

Returning at this point to the theoretical questions that have been put in the previous pages, an extremely instructive example from both the historical and the theoretical point of view is provided by Luca Vargiu, who retraces, after more than thirty years, the experience of *Funkkolleg Kunst*, the radiophonic art history course aired in Germany in the mid–1980s. The course was led by a whole generation of then–young scholars, destined to become the head of the German–speaking historical–artistic debate of our day.

Criticism of the most popular historiographic methodologies (history of style, iconology, structuralism), coupled with the questioning of the traditional concept of art, leads to a vigorous option for studying the functions that from time to time artistic products and images are called upon to play in different historical, social and theoretical contexts. It is significant to us that, in the context of the listing of some of the main historical functions ("religious, aesthetic, political and illustrative functions"), all that theoretical season did not in fact call for further terminology themes, to insist on the historically "dynamic character of the concept of function" and to characterize it generically as "a role played in a given context" (Werner Busch), in the conviction—that, as Vargiu reminds us, would be expressed some years later in a particularly clear way by another of the exponents of *Funkkolleg Kunst*, Hans Belting—that the images "reveal their meaning best by their use," according to a conception, says Vargiu, which sees "the meaning of a work of art as something connected to its use, if not something that is generated by its usage." Words that in my opinion gain all their relevance if they are now read—far beyond the functionalist beliefs of the beginning of that debate—according to the theoretical key first identified on the basis of Paolo Virno's reflection.

As noted in the margin of the debate engendered by *Funkkolleg* both by Willibald Sauerländer and Busch, the promised survey was intended to understand how "the change of the functions influenced the artwork structure, thus producing new forms and fostering new communicative

strategies." Any change of function, in this sense, Vargiu reiterates, appears to be readable as "connected to the change of a norm." It can be further wondered whether this "norm" should be referred—as it certainly appears in the 1980s German debate—to the assumption of a primacy of function or whether the interplay of relations between functional and structural changes does not require a wider systemic consideration.[4]

Albeit in accord to different theoretical approaches, it seems to me that this is the direction in which the contribution of Federica Pau, devoted to the morphological hypothesis carried out with rare consistency in the studies of Colin Rowe, and that of Alberto Virdis, devoted to the role of painting in the definition of architectural spaces in medieval art, both move.

Federica Pau shows how Colin Rowe's historical–artistic analyses, particularly in the case of the 1947 *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa*, and of the late *The Architecture of Good Intentions* (1994), in their reference to the eye, understood in the wake of Konrad Fiedler as the principal instrument of the investigation, re–elaborate the tradition of aesthetic platonism as a response to the theoretical shortcomings of a season—that of the Modern Movement—from which the British architect believed he had to keep his distance, and provide the scholar and the architect significant methods of analysis and search categories.

If Colin Rowe's geometric speculation evokes in many ways—as Pau illustrates in her brilliant work—the invention of the photographic technique of *composite portraiture* by Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's eccentric and controversial cousin,[5] and the search of a "formal matrix" which is not detectable as such in any individual but nevertheless underlying all variations, a decisive and chronologically far more modern reference on the path of elaborating a morphological perspective in the natural sense returns in Virdis' contribution, which moves in fact from the famous work of Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, dedicated to *The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm* (1979).

Gould and Lewontin used the reference to images that decorate the *spandrels* of the San Marco dome in Venice—images even centuries more recent than the architectural structure itself—to show the fallacy of the functionalist/adaptionist hypothesis, which claims to be able to move in each case from a primacy of function (which in this case would be decorative), and therefore to be able to explain form and structure only in

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4 It may be useful to observe how, in the life sciences debate, the theme of functional change (*Funktionswandel*) has been assumed within a morphological systemic perspective by an author such as Viktor von Weizsäcker (1940).
5 See Gould, 2002: Chapter V.

relation to functional investments. The relationship between form and function, according to Gould and Lewontin, is rather subject to constant redefinition and develops in a multiplicity of problematic models,[6] for which the reference to the Goethe–inspired tradition of morphological studies continues to be significant.[7]

Virdis, for his part, shows us—on the basis of some innovative case–studies proposed—how images are able not only to "ex–apt" to new functions earlier architectural structures and aesthetic functions, showing us rather how "a decoration system can create a new, imaginary space overlapping the existing one," and, more generally, "mural paintings play a fundamental role in the definition of architectural spaces [...]. They deeply interact with the architecture by simulating spaces not existing in the physical reality and by suggesting mental and spiritual spaces thanks to the allusive function of the images."

But the multiplication and almost dissemination of the game of relationships between the forms and functions thus proposed obtains its proper perspective, we believe, only if framed as Virdis does in the context of the researches inaugurated, among others, by the "thing theory" of Bill Brown (2001), and brought to fruition for the scope of studies considered here by Jérôme Baschet (2008), who speaks of *image–objet*: a notion that, Virdis observes, "can be fully understood only by relinquishing any attempt of a functionalist approach: prominent features of medieval *images–objets* are their materiality and their being inseparably both object and image, beyond any constraint of form and function."

Here, then, a systemic view of the image can be unified with the theorization of materiality as the *real constraint of possibility* that precedes the determination of form and function.

The *constraint of possibility* of *usable things* —to return to Paolo Virno's terminology—is first and foremost an anthropological constraint, meaning with this expression a constraint in which over the determination of the relationship that connects organisms and environments prevails tendentially the *indeterminacy*, and thus *determinability*, which finds *articulation* in the game of changes which forms and functions encounter in a manifold manner, and electively finds *expression* in expressive facts, that is, in the ineliminable emotional and pathic components of experience.

Without anticipating the actual contents of the works, it is possible to look for such an anthropological key both in Elisabetta Pala's study on the

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6 See Gould and Vrba, 1982.
7 Exemplarily Remane, 1952; Riedl, 1975.

iconography of vessel shapes in Athenian pottery and in the contribution of Susanna Paulis on the functions and language of folk art.

Pala's work integrates traditional research strategies, aiming respectively to understand pots as objects and to study the communicative strategy of images in pottery, with the study of a phenomenon particularly relevant from a semiotic point of view: the so–called *mise en abîme*, that is, the reduplication of the real pot with the vase depicted on it, capable of showing its uses in the various public and cultural contexts—thus conveying the different rituals, social and ideological significance and values—and acting as a singular advertising strategy for the producer.

Finally, Paulis' anthropological investigation, devoted to folk art, with particular reference to the traditional context of Sardinia, starts by emphasizing the distance between the bourgeois art model of full modernity, deliberately devoid of extra–aesthetic purposes and features, and folk art, which vice versa finds its own space in the rich articulation and variation of operative rules and functions. "Artistic work"— emphasizes the author—"is carried out in complete harmony with utilitarian purposes." These purposes can also be traced in the case of decorations that would only erroneously be read as directed to the production of purely hedonistic beauty. The particular attention paid to the "functional nature of folk art" also shows the context of origin of a series of artistic practices that are now rather difficult to decipher in the light of our contemporaneity.

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CHAPTER ONE

FORM AND FUNCTION IN ART DEFINITION

FILIPPO FOCOSI

If it is by referring to the acknowledged masterpieces of a given historical period that we can assess its artistic level, it is quite logical to say that our artworld, at least that of the visual arts, finds itself in a critical, if not dangerous, situation. We run the risk that the present epoch will be remembered as that in which the best instances of artistic creativity were such poor specimens (in terms of the formal imagination employed and, as a consequence, of the conveyed meaning) as Marina Abramović's performances, Tracey Emin's unmade bed, Jeffrey Koons' balloon dogs or Felix Gonzales Torres' piles of candies, as they are featured in the most important exhibitions and sold at crazy prices. The effort that the vast majority of art critics and philosophers have made was to describe and explain this situation in terms of changed criteria of artistic creation and evaluation. I would like to do quite the opposite: to change this state of things by means of philosophical inquiry into the criteria of artisticity as employed in the traditional as well as in the latest aesthetic definitions of art, which rely either on form or function as the central core of artistic practices.

I will take the dichotomy facts/values as the guiding light of my defense of an aesthetic definition of art. Indeed, each of the definitions of art which have been offered over the twentieth and twenty–first centuries took some acknowledged—and of special significance—facts about art history as their starting point. These facts, which concerned either some paradigmatic artistic movements or some fundamental aspects in the historical development of artistic traditions, strongly influenced the art–defining conditions that philosophers identified. The first requirement that a definition of art should possess is the extensional adequacy, that is, the capacity of accommodating the vast majority of existent artworks. Moreover, a reliable definition should be able to: (1) identify the components of the artworld—i.e. the subjects who enter in the making,

promoting and appreciating activities directed to artworks—and (2) point
out what kind of values such subjects are going to search for in artworks.
The most influential theories of art, from neo–Wittgensteinian to historical
ones, while focusing on a specific set of aspects central to the artistic
practices, all provide us with some theoretical tools to better understand
how the activities of art creation, development, classification, promotion
and judgment operate and interact with each other. However, along with
this descriptive, explanatory and normative capacity, a definition of art
could be evaluated also in virtue of having what Richard Shusterman
(1992: 58–59) has labelled "transformative power." Indeed, every kind of
art definition influences the artworld we inhabit, if only in the form of a
corroboration; but only a few of them have the force for changing the state
we are in, that is, for "remedying certain painful" situations in the art's
system and for "redirecting" the practice of artistic creation and
appreciation according to what have been recognized as its distinguishing
values (ibid.). I'll try to show that a syncretic version of the aesthetic
definition of art is best suited for this purpose, insofar as it aptly combines
art's formal, intentional and experiential components. But its virtues will
be clearer after analysis of its most famous contenders.

1. From Scepticism to Institutional Definitions

Fixing some criteria—be it imitation, expression or beauty—is, in
itself, a limiting condition for artistic creativity, according to the so–called
neo–Wittgensteinian philosophers such as Morris Weitz and Richard
Kennick, who maintained that the most fundamental fact about art practice
is that art is in a state of constant change as regards its basic means and
ends. This entails that art is an open concept, and so cannot be defined in
terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Nonetheless, we can establish
if a certain object or performance is an artwork by following the method of
"family resemblances": if we compare an object with a set of acknowledged
artworks, look closely, and find some "strands of similarities" between
them, then we can decide to call the object in question an artwork (Weitz,
1956). What might we say, however, about the resulting art world? Plainly,
it looks like a very pluralistic one: even if the subjects who take the final
decisions are mainly art critics, they are free to choose whatever
similarity—between paradigmatic artworks and newcomers—they
suppose to be relevant to decide if the latter deserve to be classified as art,
so widening the world of artworks so that it might include almost
everything, given that we can nearly always find some feature that two
different objects have in common (a Mondrian painting and one's jacket

may exhibit a similar grid structure, but that hardly makes the latter an artwork). But maybe there is a sort of hierarchy within the artistic realm, since among the different values artists are free to pursue, innovation and originality seem to be the most important of all.

However, Weitz and his colleagues ignored the fact that, as Maurice Mandelbaum rightly noted, even if no common exhibited feature can be found among all artworks, we can still search for some relational attribute connecting an artwork with something which is not directly perceivable or observable (Mandelbaum, 1965). What ties together the first strand of relational theories of art is that they identified the art–defining condition in the relation between an item and something beyond itself: the "artworld." Arthur Danto intended it as a cultural/historical entity: "to see something as art requires something that the eye cannot descry: an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (Danto, 1964: 209). Some years later, George Dickie characterized the artworld in social terms, i.e., as a human institution which consists of a variety of roles (artist, gallery owner, audience, professional critic, museum director, exhibitions curator, and so on) engaged in an established activity or practice. In the case of the visual arts system, this activity involves the creation of an artefact (broadly conceived) by the artist; the presentation to an invited audience of the artefact in question in the context of an art gallery or museum exhibition, introduced and supported by a critical review or a documented catalogue; a broad promotion through specialized magazines. When such conditions are satisfied, the artefact in question acquires "the status of a candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)" (Dickie, 1974: 34), and so becomes an artwork. Such theories were conceived to account for the fact that a lot of artworks, from Duchamp's *Fountain* up to Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, were indiscernible from their ordinary counterparts: this implied that what defined them as artistic had to be something outside the realm of the aesthetical or of the purely perceptual. In the case of Dickie's theory, there was also the increasing awareness of the fact that, in the field of visual arts, aesthetic value was losing part of its appeal in favor of the artworks' institutional frame. People were—and, for the most part, are—more interested in being actors of the event of the public presentation of a work, rather than a mere audience simply trying, through all their sensibility, perceptual ability and imaginative promptness, to get into the world's work.

While introducing the concept of artworld as the defining condition of art, such authors also gave a first, strong characterization of the artworld itself and the values it pursues. It is plain that they gave an excellent

account of what happened in the last fifty years in the field of visual arts, where conceptual works are the most requested, appreciated, exhibited, and discussed. On the other side, they testify—in my opinion—to the impoverishment of both artists' creativity and audiences' sensibility. Within the artworld they endorse, the first rank is assigned to works whose primary aim is to shock or irritate the audience, instead of stimulating intense aesthetic experiences; and such an effect is reached, if not through the artist's loosely conceptual devices, such as bizarre titling—think of Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*—,[1] by means of a series of well–planned marketing strategies. No reason has to be produced to support the artworld–agents' decisions; what is required is only that the work conforms to the right procedures of public presentation.[2] And this in turn determines an artwork's—often disproportionate with respect to its formal beauty or semantic/expressive profundity—economical value, according to a process that is very similar to that which, as has been noted by Jean Clair (2011), caused the financial bubble to emerge in Western societies nearly ten years ago.

2. Historical Theories of Art

While still believing, *contra* Weitz & friends, that art has an essence, and that such an essence has to be found in a relational condition, the second generation of analytic philosophers involved in the art–definitional project put at the core of art–practice, considered both from the creative as well as from the receptive side, its historicity. Such a concrete approach to the art question was initiated by Jerrold Levinson, who observed that "there is deeper continuity in the development of art than is generally noted" (Levinson, 1979: 17–18). Simple as it may appear, this statement points out an undeniable fact about art history; a fact that Noël Carroll would have later clarified with the metaphor of art as a "conversation" between the artists and their predecessors, between the audience and the criteria of evaluation borrowed from past art–critique practices, and, not least, between artists and audiences themselves. In accordance with such empirical observations, Levinson (1979; 1989) proposed to define

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1 Such a title is meant to persuade us that the work, far from being nothing more than a mere tiger shark contained in a tank of formaldehyde, embodies the artist's idea of death and prompts a deep reflection on our destiny (!), as we can read in many commentaries on this work.
2 The charge of arbitrariness underlying the decisions made by the artworld–agents was first advanced in Wollheim, 1980²: 157–166.

something as art on the basis of the existence of an intentional connection with preceding art, that is, with an integral set of ways of regard appropriately accorded to some acknowledged preceding artworks. In a similar vein, Carroll (1993: 319–323) identified the method for establishing the art status of an object in the possibility of contextualizing the work within an art–historical frame by means of "accurate," "time–ordered," and truthful narratives.

The artworld that the historical theories advanced by Levinson and Carroll describe is one in which artworks do not stand as separate entities; rather, they are encapsulated within a web of connections and interrelations between former and current artworks of art genres. This can be true, as Picasso famously remarked—"good artists copy, great artists steal" is one of his most quoted sentences—, of every artistic period, but seems particularly apt to describe postmodern art, where quotations and mutual influences abound, and where the shaping of personal and innovative idioms coexists with the recovery of traditional (formal and expressive) procedures. The idea of a kind of "historical matrix" is undoubtedly useful in helping us to overcome the apparent barriers between works employing different, but equally effective, artistic strategies. But in the end, these philosophers weakened its explicative and normative power when they decided to include, among the set of backward references that make something art—i.e. amplification, repetition, juxtaposition, re–interpretation, or synthesis of prior artistic styles/functions—the act of pure repudiation of past artistic traditions, in order to account for revolutionary artworks, therefore opening the door to works of nihilistic nature, which comprise both Dadaist early revolutionary attempts at destabilizing the art–system and the many provocative performances which are nowadays very popular.[3] Moreover, there is the risk that the historical/contextual value of an artwork, as established by a persuasive narrative developed by a rhetorically–equipped art critic, overwhelms its intrinsic merits and detracts the audience's attention from its possible formal, expressive or semantic weakness.

3. From Formalism to Functionalism: The Long Run of Aesthetic Definitions

The first "official" attempt to define art in aesthetic terms was that proposed in 1914 by Clive Bell, who, as an art critic and thinker, was

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3 Daniel Wilson (2015) has recently highlighted some of the contradictions implied in Levinson's suggestions for accommodating revolutionary art.

strongly influenced and inspired by Cézanne and the generation of post–impressionist painters (for whom he even organized two exhibitions at the Grafton Galleries of London). He famously remarked that "either all works of art have some qualities in common, or when we speak of 'works of art' we gibber"; and he identified this common quality with "significant form," that is, with the whole set of relations between lines and colors that arouse in the spectator a special kind of emotion, which he labelled "aesthetic emotion" (Bell, 1914). Such a theory—that has been considered as the most paradigmatic instance of Formalism as regards the issue of art–definition—calls for an elite of percipients who are free to ignore information regarding a work's background or the ideas it is intended to convey, but must be endowed with a special and innate kind of sensitivity to all the details and relations internal to a work of art and to their pleasurable—and, in Bell's terms, "ecstatic" and otherworldly—effects.

Now, important as they are, the formal aspects of a work of art do not cover its entire import, which in many cases includes a representational, expressive or symbolic content, whose role cannot be reduced to that of "a hint as to the nature of" an artwork's organization, or to that of a "means to the perception of formal relations" (Bell, 1914: 224–225). Furthermore, the concept of form itself, when applied to the aesthetic field, needs a further clarification. As regards the latter issue, a first attempt was made by Thomas Munro in his paper of 1943, *Form in the Arts*, where he defines artistic form as the orderly arrangement of presented (e.g., shapes, colors, etc.) or suggested (images, ideas, emotions) elements, effected through the employment of some modes of composition—which can be of the utilitarian, expository, representative and decorative/thematic kind—according to their designed end. Munro further adds that these modes can in turn operate as factors in a particular work of art, according to how they are individually developed or mutually integrated, thus suggesting the existence of a higher order of formal organization within artistic activity. It is not clear, however, at what stage the *aesthetic* factor comes to the fore, since Munro aptly specifies the *qualitative* component of an artwork's formal organization, whose effectiveness seems to rely mainly on the degree of complexity—which is determined by the whole set of interrelations between, e.g. the decorative, functional, or representational modes/elements—achieved. To fill these ontological gaps we must go back to Dewey's *Art as Experience* (first published in 1934), where he sharply differentiates between mere configuration (which he calls "shape or figure") and aesthetic form, the latter implying the "interfusion of all properties of the medium," so that a material (sensuous as well as intellectual) becomes adequately ("completely and coherently") formed,

and "an experience" of an unusual and remarkable level of immediacy, vitality and intensity (i.e., an aesthetic experience) is produced (Dewey, 1980: 106–133). Thus, the form of a work is aesthetic insofar as we judge it—from a normative point of view, by way of the exercise of our sensitivity and imagination—to be a *good* structure/configuration, i.e., an *organic* interconnectedness of the artworks' parts/elements, where these can be also of the semantic or expressive order.[4] Think of how the introduction of landscapes and figures in a painting—along with the affective, evocative or symbolic imports that such characters or sceneries bring with themselves—represent additional sources for the artist to achieve a higher order of coherence and completeness in the overall design of the work.

In a similar vein, Beardsley (1961) later talked of a special sense of "form," as applying to those aesthetic objects that are highly organized and self–sufficient, i.e., "coherent" (every part or internal relation being closely connected with each other by way of, e.g., continuity of movement, textural or structural similarities, thematic unity, and so on) and "complete" (no other part or relation being needed to satisfy the item's underlying purpose). Here Beardsley still doesn't offer a real definition of art; he rather presents the two features of coherence and completeness as necessary conditions for being a work of art, since they occur—at least to "some minimal degree"—in any instance of musical composition, literature, poetry, or visual arts. At the same time, he seems to suggest what an additional condition—whose presence, in conjunction with the two aforementioned properties, would suffice for a work to be classified as art—could consist of, when he points at the existence of a "third property" in order to account for the remarkable completeness of a genuine *haiku*, i.e. for its power to hold "a small world" inside itself (Beardsley, 1961: 182–183). Beardsley describes this additional property as a "thickness of meaning," or as a "semantical depth" which provides the poem with a "second level of emergent symbolic meaning," thus implicitly admitting, as I read him, that the aesthetic value of an artwork, albeit formally unified and well–conceived, cannot be independent of what an item's coherence and completeness make it possible to achieve on a not strictly formal/structural level. Indeed, artworks, as is widely acknowledged, are

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4 To be honest, Bell was not far from making this point, where he clarified the concept of "significant form" by equating it with that of "Design" i.e. of a "significant whole"—"the value of the parts combined into a whole" being "far greater than the value of the sum of the parts"—, and by further adding that a "*good* design" must possess a certain degree of internal "cohesion" (Bell, 1914: 228–231; my Italics).

praised also—and sometimes mainly: think of narrative arts—for their content, e.g., by virtue of having remarkable expressive, semantic or symbolic qualities. To account for this fact, nearly two decades later Richard Eldridge indicated, as the primary condition for something to be classified as art, the possession of a "complex aesthetic quality," namely, the "satisfying appropriateness to one another of a thing's form and content" (Eldridge, 1985: 246). This aesthetic definition, while not being, admittedly, a novel one—some antecedents can be traced back to Wordsworth and Hegel—has the virtue of explaining, according to Eldridge, both the rationale for art–evolution—as long as culture develops, "new contents emerge and require new forms of artistic expression"—and the multifaceted task of receptive/critical activity, as long as it involves not only the analysis of a work's formal structures, but also the interpretation of its intended meaning and, even most importantly, the evaluation of the degree of their mutual appropriateness. Moreover, the theory gives an account of why art matters to us, insofar as artists, by creating forms suitable to express emotional, moral, political or even metaphysical contents, try to "make sense of the world" we inhabit.

Nonetheless, something more can be said to clarify what such a feeling of appropriateness consists in, from a phenomenological point of view. Indeed, the vast majority of the aesthetic definitions which sprung up in the last forty years were concerned not so much with the objective formal features of works of art but rather with the subjective, i.e., experiential, responses that they are intended to elicit. We can group the definitions proposed by such diverse authors as Monroe Beardsley, Richard Lind, Nick Zangwill, Richard Shusterman, and Alan Goldman, under the label of "functionalism," insofar as they identify the common feature of works of art in their being intended to fulfil a specific function. According to Beardsley (1983), the function an artwork is designed to serve is that of satisfying an "aesthetic interest," which he defines as the interest we take "in the aesthetic character of the experience we hope to gain" from the artwork itself. The main difference with respect to his paper of 1961 is that now Beardsley focuses primarily on the process of artistic production, instead of on its tangible outcomes, i.e., the aesthetic objects, which comprised also unintentional products. The history of the activities of art–making and art–creating, Beardsley maintains, testifies to the existence of a sort of "aesthetic impulse," i.e., a natural and shared tendency to make something capable of eliciting an experience with a marked aesthetic character. Such experience is taken to be inherently valuable, insofar as its distinguishing characters—"sense of freedom" from practical concerns, an intense and "detached" affect, "the exhilarating sense of exercising powers

of discovery," and "integration of the self"—are all desirable from the point of view of a "genuine human interest." By saying that the artistic intention amounts to the combination of the desire to produce an aesthetically satisfying object with the belief that the object will have the capacity to produce an aesthetic experience, independent of the degree of satisfaction that will be so reached, Beardsley leaves room for borderline cases such as that of a painter who believes that closing an art gallery and placing a sign on it "might provide aesthetic experience." But then it becomes difficult to understand on what grounds Duchamp's *Fountain* should be discarded—as Beardsley boldly and, in my opinion, rightly states—since they both appear to be the outcomes of a similar act of de–contextualization, which the French artist himself launched as one the main artistic practice of the XX century.

In order to overcome such difficulties and offer even more selective criteria of classification, Richard Lind (1992) thought it necessary to introduce a condition of minimal success within his own functional definition of art, according to which an object, to be classified as art, must be capable, at least to a certain degree, of satisfying the aesthetic interest it is designed to fulfil. Lind defines this aesthetic interest as a "hedonistic meta–interest," insofar as it is directed at "enjoying" the object's capacity to fulfil the "more basic" interest we take in how its "informative meaning" fuses with the formal (perceptual or intelligible) relations that shape and convey it. Indeed, it is only through "artistic fusion"—i.e., interpenetration of form and content—that "the artist's unique style, concepts, technique, point of view, and emotional attitude" are embodied in the piece and form "an integral part of the experience of the work." A similar success–condition is implicitly involved in Nick Zangwill's functionalist theory, which states that "works of art have the function of embodying or sustaining aesthetic properties" (Zangwill, 2001). Indeed, Zangwill goes on to say, "it is constitutive of something being a work of art" that it possesses "*some* aesthetic properties that it should have," thus suggesting, as I read it, that no *complete* aesthetic failure can aspire to acquire the art–*status*. Zangwill's account—in the same manner as the other aesthetic definitions—also unveils something central to our involvement with works of art, since this is grounded in the natural fascination that aesthetic properties exert on human beings, by virtue of their emergent—i.e., not–reducible and taste–demanding—character.[5] Nonetheless, Zangwill acknowledges that works of art can also have "non–

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5 On the definition of aesthetic properties as taste–concepts and on the natural use of aesthetic terms in everyday discourse, see Sibley, 1959.

aesthetic functions"—representational, political, expressive, and so on—that significantly contribute to shape their identity. Such functions, while sometimes being independently pursued, most often intermingle with aesthetic ones. In these cases, there is a "double aesthetic functionality," insofar as, on one side, non–aesthetic functions call for an "aesthetically appropriate expression or realization," and, on the other side, a "new overall aesthetic function" emerges from the blending of aesthetic and non–aesthetic functions. And this should not surprise us, since the range of the aesthetic properties that a work of art is intended to embody can extend from proto–aesthetic and formal properties (e.g., beautiful, elegant, delicate, balanced) to expressive and semantic ones (e.g., warm, passionate, sad, dramatic, profound).[6]

Aesthetic experience, while not being mentioned by Zangwill, is nonetheless implicitly invoked in his functional theory to the extent that it is also conceivable—as, e.g., Noël Carroll does—in terms of its content, i.e., as an experience "directed with understanding" to the form of an artwork's, to its aesthetic properties, and to "the interaction between these features" (Carroll, 2004a: 89). But it is through Shusterman's and Goldman's inquiries that aesthetic experience recovers a central position within the art–defining project. Indeed, they both think that if the different forms and genres of art have anything in common, this "common thread" has to be found in the function of promoting aesthetic experiences in their audiences. Such kind of experience is what we seek—and, in most cases, find—in artworks, by virtue of its uniquely "intense and meaningful" character (Goldman, 2013: 332–333). The "immediate, absorbing satisfaction" we take in aesthetic experience makes it an "intrinsic value" of artworks: a value that we pursue as "an end in itself," independently of its possible serving some other, instrumental end, be it cognitive, moral, cultural, and so on. (Shusterman, 1992: 46–47).[7]

4. In Defense of a Syncretic Version
of the Aesthetic Definition of Art

All the aesthetic theories of art that have been considered offer a lot of valuable insights about the historical practices of art–creation and art–reception, as well as on the very nature of their objects, the artworks.

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6 For a detailed analysis of the spectrum of aesthetic properties in relation to their degree of response–dependence, see Levinson, 2005.
7 Shusterman draws implications for art definition from Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience.

Moreover, they share the capacity of accounting for art's autonomous value, which reveals itself through several experiential benefits. What mainly distinguishes such definitions one from the other is their having emphasized either the objective formal unity of artworks or the experiential function they are intended to fulfil. But I think that these two conditions could be put together, since they are complementary in at least two relevant respects. Indeed, if, on one side, the coherence and completeness with which an artwork's inner and outer materials are organized are matched by the "internal integration and fulfilment" of the aesthetic experience that the artwork is designed to elicit,[8] on the other side, aesthetic experience, broadly conceived as involving "the simultaneous and harmonious interaction and engagement" of all our mental capacities—perception, cognition, imagination and emotion—, must be sustained by the work's "perfect union of form and content," i.e. by the "interpenetration of aesthetic properties" (formal, expressive, and representational) in the object (Goldman, 2013: 328–331). We may thus propose the following revised and unifying version of the aesthetic definition: an artefact (object or performance) is a work of art if and only if it possesses, by virtue of an intentional act on the part of a given agent, a sufficient degree of interpenetration of form and content so that an experience with a marked aesthetic character is prompted in the sensitive perceiver.

From the point of view of extensional adequacy, such a syncretic version of the aesthetic definition of art has the virtue of accommodating the vast majority of past and current artworks; the desire and the capacity to imagine and realize forms suitable to express personal emotions, visions, and ideas being what have always, in all traditions, prompted and sustained the activity of artists, as they steadily face up to cultural and social mutations or to their own growth as individuals. The formal innovations introduced in the twentieth and twenty–first centuries by avant–garde and post–modern artists—such as juxtaposition, fragmentation, eclecticism, and so on—are all legitimate to the extent that they give rise to powerful and rewarding aesthetic experiences. At the same time, the definition proves to be sufficiently selective: if it is intentionality, art being a typical human activity, that excludes from the artistic domain the products of random or natural events, even aesthetically appreciable ones, it is the notable overall aesthetic quality of a work of art and of the experience it produces—which in turn signals special attention to those aspects by the creator—that marks its peculiarity in contrast to other kinds of intentional artefacts, even well–crafted and aesthetically pleasing ones.

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8 See Dewey, 1980: 40. See also Beardsley, 1958.

From the perspective of normative judgements, the definition highlights what undoubtedly are among art's most enduring and esteemed values: on the objective side, the coherence and completeness that human beings are naturally disposed to seek out and to appreciate in an artwork, both in themselves and as emotional or symbolic vehicles; on the subjective side, the resulting aesthetic experience that one undergoes and that is cherished for its absorbing intensity as well as for the enhancing effects it exerts upon human beings.[9] Grasping and enjoying an artwork's integration of (formal and semantic) parts and relations are not easy tasks: they require, on the part of the artworld's actors, a complex interplay of perceptual, affective, imaginative and intellectual abilities. The pursuit and the cultivation of works of art that are capable of prompting such an active engagement, as well as the refinement of perceivers' taste, are what mostly occupy the art–community in this aesthetically–oriented artworld.

5. The problem of conceptual art

We can summarize the results of our examination of the most influential and debated definitions of art proposed over the twentieth and twenty–first centuries through the following scheme:

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9 As for the affirmative, cooperating, liberating, self–integrating and intellectually stimulating value of aesthetic experiences, see Dewey, 1934; Beardsley, 1958; and Goldman, 2013.

Table 1.1: The facts/values dichotomy in art definitions

THEORIES/ AUTHORS	FACTS	CRITERIA OF IDENTIFICATION/DEFINITION	RESULTING ARTWORLD (ACTORS/AGENTS)	VALUE (TO BE SEARCHED IN ARTWORKS)
Bell (formalist definition of art)	Post–impressionist art	Significant form	Elitist	Formal
Neo–Wittgensteinian theories	Constant flux of artistic practices	Family resemblances	Pluralistic	Innovation
Institutional theories	Conceptual art	Cultural/ institutional procedures	Arbitrary	Economical
Historical theories	Continuity of art history	Historical connections with prior artworks	Conversational	Contextual/ historical
Aesthetic definition (syncretic version)	Aesthetic impulse/interest	Interpenetration of form and content	Sensitive, informed and selective	Experiential

Source: Author.

Each of these definitions, or group of definitions, while focusing on a specific set of aspects central to the artistic practices, has a considerable degree of extensional adequacy as well as of explanatory power. The aesthetic definition, in the revised version defended here, seems nonetheless to have considerable advantages over its rivals, since it is able to account for some essential aspects of making and treating art that the other theories overlook, as well as of the peculiar value that artworks possess, i.e., the value inherent to the aesthetic experience they are conceived and produced to supply. Furthermore, it has the pragmatic/transformative power invoked at the beginning of the paper, i.e., the capacity of preserving and enhancing such a value—with respect to which other kinds of value such as economical or historical ones, while not being neglected, are relegated to a lower level—and of working towards a better artworld inhabited by informed, sensitive and demanding connoisseurs and aficionados.

The main problem, from a classificatory point of view, that a theory that aims at defining art by means of formalist–functionalist aesthetic criteria has to face, is represented by the anti–aesthetic art of the twentieth and twenty–first centuries, a category that we can broadly label conceptual and that comprises, according to Dominic Lopes (2014), works that are the products of practices involving unusual combinations of language, actions and ideas (including ideas about art). Under that label we can therefore group genres as diverse as Duchamp's ready–mades, Joseph Kosuth's tautological instructions, Michelangelo Pistoletto's environmental performances, and Tracey Emin's and Damien Hirst's installations. The solutions that have been offered by some of the proponents of a functional–aesthetic definition of art strike are, as I read them, plainly inadequate. Whereas Beardsley and Lind contradictorily accord the artistic status to works whose primary intent was plainly not that of producing an aesthetic experience or of communicating an aesthetic object, Zangwill treats them as "marginal cases" that "need not greatly concern us" (Zangwill, 2001: 147–148). But the recent history of visual art testifies to the fact that conceptual works of art, since their first manifestations within the art–system—which can be traced back to Duchamp's early ready–mades—ceaselessly spread and multiplied, and occupy a large segment of today's artistic milieu.

We cannot ignore the challenge of conceptual art. This doesn't mean, however, that we have to modify or misinterpret our art–defining conditions in order to account for this art form. Instead, we should look deeper into some of the most important instances of conceptual art and see if they satisfy such conditions, at least to a sufficient degree. Now, if we consider works such as Duchamp's most famous ready–mades—such as