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DOES ART WORK HAVE TO BE BEAUTIFUL?

Sister Mary Benedicta Maier, RSM

1. Introduction

What is art? What is beauty? These questions are relevant not only because of the existence of art works that pose problems for the philosophy of art. The questions are pertinent to the philosophy of art's fundamental problem of disagreement about terms. Although contemporary philosophy generally argues for a broad definition of art, which often disregards the beautiful, I will argue that beauty is a necessary condition for art work. I will look at the art form of sculpture, which entails a human artist's intelligent action of forming a material into an object that represents and elevates the ordered world.

2. Beauty: The Modern Context

Contemporary philosophy builds upon modern thought, of which the beginning within the field of aesthetics typically is agreed to be with David Hume.¹ His 'standard of taste' argument contributed to a shift in focus from the object to the subject in evaluating art work. Because individual tastes differ, we look for a general consensus of judgment, or a standard of taste, according to Hume.² Critics, who possess specific attributes, and are in agreement with what Hume considers characteristics of beauty, are the persons to whom we look to tell us what is in the art work and what is in our head, or our subjective judgment.³ Depending on critics and our own evaluations, this process satisfies us to some degree, and we arrive at a standard of taste.⁴ The problem is that a standard of taste, if there is one, is still quite tenuous. Tastes, even if collectively standardized, are incontestable, since tastes are subjective. Collectivizing subjects in agreement with an elitist standard does not overcome the subjective reality of taste.⁵

¹ Crispin Sartwell, "Beauty." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Spring 2014 ed.), 1, ed. Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/beauty/>.

² David Hume. *Of The Standard Of Taste*. (South Bend: Infomotions, Inc., 2001), 1.

³ Hume, *Standard*, 6.

⁴ Hume, *Standard*, 6-7.

⁵ "... (F)ew are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play...". Hume, *Standard*, 10.

The argument that beauty exists only in the mind, as Hume partially argued, is difficult to reconcile with the reality of such universal agreement about particular art forms across cultures, countries, and ages. Additionally, the standard of taste does not respond adequately to the innate human reaction of delight to some art pieces. Immanuel Kant, in response to Hume's empiricism, reasoned that judgments of the aesthetic are, indeed, based upon the person's feelings or liking, when contemplating the art work.⁶ The judgments are free from all conceptual constraints, since beauty is not a concept.⁷ However, Kant's judgment of the aesthetic does argue that the standard of taste is more universal than held in Hume's argument because, when the person's judgement feels that something is beautiful, he says that this judgment is seen "as necessary for everyone," in that everyone should see it as beautiful.⁸ Hence, Kant attempts to solve the problems in Hume's argument by justifying a type of universality to the judgment of a standard of taste that something is beautiful as present in the form of the object. After Kant, in our postmodern world, the concept of universality in contemporary philosophy is argued more broadly, in that the universality of art is defined through the subject, whether that subject be the producer of the work or the audience, or the one who puts the work on display.

3. Beauty: The Contemporary Context

Contemporary philosophers, looking at the cultural and historical realities that demonstrate that art forms vary and new ones emerge, are weary of accepting a limiting or constraining definition.⁹ In order to include a vast array of works, they generally argue for a broad definition, which often can both intentionally or accidentally marginalize the beautiful. They range in focus from criterion of significant form¹⁰ to aesthetic experience.¹¹ Definitions focus on art as a work that embodies a particular emotion.¹² Others define art to be an

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. trans. Werner S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), 212.

⁷ Kant, *Judgement*, 77.

⁸ Kant, *Judgement*, 77.

⁹ Defining art work is very controversial as Thomas Adajian articulates. Some philosophers see a definition as unnecessary while others see it as limiting new fields of art. Thomas Adajian, "The Definition of Art." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2012 ed.), 3-6, ed. Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/art-definition/>.

¹⁰ Clive Bell according to Robert Stecker, "The Definition of Art." In *Oxford Handbooks Online*, ed. Jerrold Levinson. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

¹¹ George Schlesinger according to Stecker, "Definition", 5.

¹² Robin G. Collingwood according to Stecker, "Definition", 3.

expression while meeting other conditions.¹³ Philosophers' exhaustive definitions, or lack of definitions, for art work often bow down to the existence of objects that are deemed, and therefore, institutionalized, as art. Besides their setting, these pieces characteristically have indistinguishable dimensions from factory or supermarket products.¹⁴ This limited distinction diminishes the artist's creative intelligibility, minimizing beauty for another good or purpose.

4. Philosophy of Art and the Good of Beauty

The present world of art and the divisions among philosophers incite questions. Are there rules in the subfield of philosophy of art or aesthetics as there are in other types of philosophy such as ethics or metaphysics?¹⁵ Do we suppose that all ethicists examine the good to be that which is the right? Do we suppose that all metaphysicians study the good to be that which is true?¹⁶ Similarly, is it correct reasoning that the focus of philosophers of art is the good of beauty?¹⁷ A philosopher of art may judge beauty as an "accident" to art work. Similarly, an ethicist may make a judgment favouring a lesser good; then he is still making a choice in the sphere of rightness, even if nearly void of the right. If what is deemed to be art work aims to be shockingly ugly, its aim still resides in the good of beauty, even if beauty is lacking, or practically absent.¹⁸ Jacques Maritain argues:

"Like the one, the true and the good, the beautiful is *being* itself considered from a certain aspect; it is a property of being. It is not an accident superadded to being, it adds to being only a relation of reason: it is being considered as delighting, by the mere intuition of it, an intellectual nature. Thus everything is beautiful, just as everything is good, at least in a certain relation."¹⁹

The good of beauty is necessary to the field of the philosophy of art as the good of the right is to the field of ethics. One could conclude that a philosopher of art, and an artist who is a practitioner of art work, aim for the fullness of the good in their realm – that which is full of beauty.

¹³ Arthur Danto according to Robert Stecker, "Definition" 7.

¹⁴ There may be virtue in asking the question: Are there other institutions than art galleries that approach their definitions in a similar deconstructive manner? Perhaps a perfect parallel does not exist.

¹⁵ Robert Anderson, "Aesthetics" (lecture, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney, NSW, May 12, 2015).

¹⁶ Anderson, "Aesthetics"

¹⁷ Anderson, "Aesthetics"

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain. *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*. Translated by Joseph W. Evans. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 30.

¹⁹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 30.

Philosophers and artists see beauty in varying degrees of metaphysical reality; therefore, they highly contest its essentiality to art work. Those who fundamentally see “beauty only in the eye of the beholder,” conceive of it as a perception of the subject’s mind. However, this position does not easily pass muster on an empirical account; nor does Hume’s attempt to look for a standard of taste - in that humans possess a universal wonder at natural beauty, such as the ocean tide. Human nature delights in the beauty that is in the world and does not need justification surrounding a standard of subjective perception to explain itself. Art work, though a type of creation, needs further definition of its relation to beauty because it is not creation as in nature, but is a work that encapsulates creation through human intelligence.²⁰ Beauty, as the property that speaks for the art work, irradiates from the object as much as the object embraces such characteristics of beauty. These qualities include unity, harmony, proportion, clarity, wholeness, and completeness. It is in the transcendental of beauty that the artist and the spectator communicate.²¹ The beauty in art work excites an intelligible delight that is apprehended in and through the sensible part of the person’s soul.²² The spectator’s work in a beautiful art work is not initially known to take deliberate effort because the immediate delight overwhelms the person. Art work that is void of this quality misses the necessary transcendental property of its very essence.

5. Sculpture

Sculpture is an example of an art form, of which technique in itself shows how art characteristically elevates a particular material by forming it into a creative work, all the while capturing the beauty of creation. Participating in representationalism,²³ sculpting the material is so delicate that the artist’s intentionality and vision are distinctively directed towards

²⁰ Saying that “...beauty is *the splendor of the form on the proportioned parts of matter* is to say that it is a flashing of intelligence on a matter intelligibly arranged. The intelligence delights in the beautiful because in the beautiful it finds itself again and recognizes itself, and makes contact with its own light.” The italicized portion of the quote is from “*Opusc. de Pulchro at Bono*, attributed to Albert the Great and sometimes to Saint Thomas” as quoted by Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 25.

²¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 63.

²² St. Thomas Aquinas expounds upon the human person’s ability to know beauty as a good. “The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms the desire; while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms the desire, by being seen or known. Consequently those senses chiefly regard the beautiful, which are the most cognitive, viz., sight and hearing, as ministering to reason; for we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1948), Ia-IIae, Q. 27, art. 1.

²³ Eran Guter. “Sculpture.” *Aesthetics A-Z*. (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), <http://ipacez.nd.edu.au/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/ipacez.nd.edu.au/content/entry/eupaes/sculpture/0>.

working with, not against, the laws of the order of creation. Marble, granite, and other substances belonging to the art of sculpture are natural materials with their own anatomical autonomy. The materials are unforgiving to one who approaches them with unreasoned passion or an inclination that does not follow their laws. Few, if any other art forms, share sculpture's alignment in its essential form. Once an artist has sculpted part of a piece of marble or granite, if he has failed to intelligibly communicate with the natural laws of creation, he cannot easily add or change the piece of marble without changing the whole creative piece. A musician, in composing beautiful music, may replace a note or a chord without compromising the form of the final art work. A painter may mix different paints or create new layers on the canvas. A sculptor does not have this liberty. Through the careful movement of his hands, the sculptor has the tools to communicate directly with the property of beauty found in the object of the material he sets out to transform. If this is the ability of the artist, does his artistic gift require him to imprint his intelligible mark of beauty on the created matter?

5.1 *The Pietà*

In one of the most appreciated sculptures in history, Michelangelo's *Pietà* transformed a cold block of marble into a vivid representation of Mary holding the dead Christ. Philosophers of art and spectators alike delight in its beauty. In its three-dimensional structure,²⁴ the form of sculpture of the *Pietà* seems to share similar properties with the repetitive rhythm of nature's ocean tide, in that it is in sync with the norms of the creation of sculpture. However, like a spectacular ocean wave, which is still in accordance with the laws of nature while it spontaneously supersedes the previous waves, the *Pietà* majestically "superelevates" the piece of marble, communicating the beauty of life through the piece of art work.²⁵ One could add that it also superelevates art itself. Michelangelo's *Pietà* paradigmatically demonstrates the art work's necessary relation to beauty.

²⁴ Guter, "Sculpture."

²⁵ Maritain writes of how the artist's mind may be superelevated while the rules of creation remain intact. Michelangelo seems to have participated in this process in the creating of the *Pieta*. "Through the *habitus* or virtue of art superelevating his mind from within, the artist is a ruler who *uses* rules according to his ends; it is as senseless to conceive of him as the slave of the rules as to consider the worker the slave of his tools. Properly speaking, he possesses them and is not possessed by them: he is not *held* by them, it is he who *holds*—through them—matter and the real; and sometimes, in those superior moments where the working of genius resembles in art the miracles of God in nature, he will act, not against the rules, but outside of and above them, in conformity with a higher rule and a more hidden order. Let us understand in this manner the words of Pascal: 'True eloquence makes fun of eloquence, true morality makes fun of morality, to make fun of philosophy is to philosophize truly,' to which the most tyrannical and the most radical of academy heads adds this savory gloss: 'Unless you don't care a rap about painting, painting won't care a rap about you.'" (a remark of the painter David). Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 39.

5.2 Objection: Brillo Boxes

Art work, which minimizes the artist's intellectual capacity to communicate beauty, may be "sensual slush."²⁶ Relying on some of the laws of sculpture for its legitimacy, but made from synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on wood, Warhol's "Brillo Boxes" revolutionised the definition of art work. Unlike the *Pietà*, this sculpture is not beautiful because it defies several of the laws of sculpture and, therefore, cannot have the transcendental quality of beauty. It displaces the good of beauty for the common. Perhaps it touches creation in that it "creates" a new definition for contemporary art work - that art work could be essentially anything.

6. Conclusion

Beauty is the transcendental belonging to the philosophy of art, and thus, art work. While questioning beauty's place and purpose in art work is not a new practice, what is relatively new is the premise that anything is art, even if its aim is ugliness. The ability of the artist, through sculpture, to communicate beauty through his creation, magnified in Michelangelo's *Pietà*, suggests that there is a philosophical problem when art work diminishes beauty.

²⁶ "And every artist knows well that without this intellectual form ruling the matter, his art would be but sensual slush." Baudelaire as quoted by Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 38.

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